

President Obama's Speech on Libya

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 29, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Well, no one will mistake President Obama's speech last night at the National Defense University with President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address. You will recall that Kennedy pledged America to "bear any burden, pay any price" to promote freedom. President Obama, last night, spent a good deal of time discussing cost-sharing and burden-sharing. He spoke about limits as much as about possibilities.

This is all good. Lest we forget, Kennedy's remarkable rhetoric was profoundly stirring but profoundly untrue. We were not willing to pay any price nor bear any burden to promote freedom. In Korea, we reached the conclusion that the burden of continued stalemate was too great. During the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, despite the Eisenhower administration's calls for "rolling back" communism, the only thing that rolled were Soviet tanks, unanswered by America because the freedom of the Hungarians was not worth risking World War III. In Vietnam, it became obvious that the costs of winning the war were too high and we finally capitulated behind a smokescreen of negotiations. We may like the sense of purpose Kennedy's words conveyed. But, we should learn to like the moral realism Obama's words articulated.

American presidents do not explicitly invoke the Just War tradition, not least because the whole intent of that tradition is to bind the hands of lawmakers and chief executives, to restrict action when politicians like to keep their options open, and, most importantly, to raise the kind of thorny moral issues that politicians prefer to ignore. So, it was not surprising that President Obama did not quote Augustine last night. But, while it would be going too far to say that he spoke as Augustine's heir, it is not going too far to suggest the President spoke as Niebuhr's heir.

Barack Obama is a careful man, with a careful mind. He really is, in terms of personality, the opposite of George W. Bush who was all for acting from his gut. Obama's gut is kept firmly in check by his intellect. I don't know about anyone else, but while such careful, deliberative qualities may not guarantee successful outcomes or even correct decisions, I sleep better at night knowing we have a President who considers the downside of a decision before he makes it and who, unlike any President I can think of, has a profound appreciation for the limits of force.

President Obama also grasps that democracy cannot be imposed by the West. We Westerners believe that the yearning for freedom is a universal aspiration, and so it is, but it must be achieved within a specific cultural context, and it must be achieved primarily by a nation's own heroes. The U.S. and the West can play a supporting role: France helped America in our Revolutionary War, Lafayette and Rochambeau are heroes to Americans, but most of our founding heroes were Americans. Among the many painful lessons learned in Iraq is this one: a foreign occupation cannot provide fertile ground for the seeds of democracy.

What was most striking about President Obama's speech was the way it tracked with his address at Oslo when he received the Nobel Peace Prize. That speech spelled out Obama's worldview and, specifically, how America can continue as an actor on the world stage in a complicated world. There he discussed the limits of power, the dangers of cultural triumphalism, the sad necessity of war in certain circumstances, etc. It was a powerful performance, but it was only engaged with theory. Last night, the President explained how that theory was being

applied to guide his actions in Libya. You may disagree with his decision to intervene. You may think we should have stayed away or that, once in, we should go right after Gaddafi. But, no one can charge the President with inconsistency. (Although, of course, over at Fox, those two Middle East scholars Sean Hannity and Dick Morris were making precisely that charge.)

Many critics, including myself, felt the President should have given this speech before military assets were deployed. I still do, although we now know why he didn't: There were unresolved issues that had not yet been decided. For example, on Sunday, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said that the United States had not yet decided whether or not to aid the rebels. Last night, President Obama pledged such aid. Still, a President has a solemn obligation to tell the American people why he is putting our men and women in harm's way before he does so. In the event, the President has good reasons for his decision to send the troops to the shores of Tripoli. He was wrong to wait so long to share them with the rest of us, but the rest of us can take comfort, great comfort, that we have in the White House a man who will not be rushed into war.

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