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Obama's Forebearance & the Photos

Michael Sean Winters | May. 6, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

In defending his decision not to release photographs of Osama bin Laden?s corpse, President Obama noted that there was no need to display that corpse like a trophy, that America had no need to spike the football.

The President?s forebearance is exceedingly counter-cultural. We live to spike the football in the end zone. Part of this stems from our firm conviction that we are at the center of history. We claim credit for bringing down communism, with a nod to Pope John Paul II, forgetting that it was a labor union in Poland that was the actual instrument that began kicking the final leg out from under communism, already hollow to the core because of its own internal contradictions and lies. We recall the heroism of U.S. troops who brought down Hitler, and heroic they were, but so too were the British troops and the Soviet troops heroic. And, it is always charming to read how Anglos resent the influx of Mexican immigrants and adopt an attitude of hostility to the newcomers?.in places named San Antonio, Los Angeles and Santa Fe. Who are the newcomers?

This national trait is found in other ways than in our misreading of history. Is there anything more embarrassing than being in line behind an American tourist who is shocked and upset that people do not speak English? When my turn comes I am always tempted to say that I am a Canadian! In fact, no matter how bad my command of the language of the country I am visiting, I always try to start in the native tongue as a sign of respect and, if experience is any guide, the host then comes back in the Queen?s English, but cheerfully. They don?t want to hear my broken Italian or Polish either! But, they always seem to appreciate the attempt.

The ?let?s spike the football? quality of our culture also derives from our disposition for demonstrativeness. Mind you, I am a fairly demonstrative person. But, privacy has its place. We do not all need to go on ?Oprah? to share our feelings, nor the ?Jerry Springer Show? to air our grudges. The President went to Ground Zero yesterday but he did not give a celebratory speech, which would have been woefully inappropriate at the scene of devastation. He laid a wreathe and bowed his head in prayer. All in silence. Distinctly counter-cultural.

America?s penchant for vengefulness also played a part in the differing views as to whether or not to display the photos of bin Laden. Cardinal George wrote that in a Catholic culture, some things are forbidden but everything can be forgiven. Conversely, in modern liberal culture, everything is permitted but many things are never forgiven. In bin Laden?s case, forgiveness is not the apt word. Certainly, that evil man gave no evidence of contrition. Additionally, his demise was greeted with the same kind of joy with which we would greet a cure for cancer: The removal of a scourge is always a source for joy. But, having removed the scourge, we can return to our own best standards of decency.

Finally, the President?s forebearance reflects his self-confidence. We live in a culture that is teeming with insecurities. If you have ever worked in a bureaucracy, you know that what really matters is not the achievement of common purposes, but making sure you get the office closest to the center of power. We resent the accomplishments of our colleagues and elbow them out of the way when they seek access to the powerful. The President, of course, does not need access to power: He is the President and he has plenty of power. And, among my friends in the press who interviewed him when he was a candidate for office, the first thing they all remarked upon was Obama?s supreme self-confidence. The truly confident have no need to be shrill. They have

no need to spike the football.

It was gracious ? and instructive ? that President Obama invited President George W. bush to accompany him to Ground Zero. This was a recognition that killing bin Laden was not a Democratic achievement, but an American one. It was boorish of President Bush to decline. Here was a moment to demonstrate to all the world that America stood united in pursuit of its enemies. For the life of me, I do not understand why Bush declined.

I have had my frustrations with President Obama?s handling of his high office at times. But, it is impossible not to admire the way he has conducted himself in the past week, first in his courageous decision to order the attack that killed bin Laden and, just as importantly, his unwillingness to cast that success in partisan or vainglorious terms. There is a greatness in this man that bursts forth at times and this is one such time.

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