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Run, Sarah, Run

Michael Sean Winters | May. 31, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

John King, one of CNN?s star anchors, was not in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania waiting for Godot last night. He was waiting for Sarah Palin. This was intended to be the next stop on her ?One Nation? tour of the Northeast, or at least he thought so. The details were sketchy.

This is why Palin will be formidable if she enters the race for the GOP presidential nod. Instead of having a team of schedulers working out a trip like this well in advance, with a press secretary, passing exact information to reporters and trying to encourage them to cover the event, Palin?s trip appears to be of a different sort. They are announcing the stops on the tour as they go along. She is not playing by the normal rules for engaging the press.

The day before, Palin attended the ?Rolling Thunder? motorcycle ride here in Washington, D.C. The attendees of this event are very proprietary: You must either be a veteran or a child of a veteran or have some kind of immediate familial link to a veteran to participate. And, even then, you have to be careful not to be exploiting the event (and the veterans) for personal political gain. The one presidential campaign I worked on, this was not such a big difficulty for us because our candidate was four-star Gen. Wesley Clark. But, think of how, for sixteen years, the President of the United States, first Bill Clinton and then George W. Bush, had to be careful in dealing with the symbolism that surrounds the way our nation honors veterans, because of neither man distinguished himself in military service. Bush?s ?Mission Accomplished? speech is more remembered for the premature message on the banner, which at the time did not seem such a stretch. At the time, people questioned the appropriateness of his playing dress up and landing a plane on an aircraft carrier, something he studiously avoided having to do during Vietnam.

Palin? Well, her son served and served recently, but I do not think that is why the vets welcomed her with such open arms. I think the main reason is that she looks great on a bike. In fact, she looks great almost anywhere. It is not just that she is a physically beautiful woman, although she is that too. It is that she knows how to treat a camera like a human being, how to caress it, how to engage it, how to own it. There is something slightly creepy about watching a person do this in person: Their eyes dart to and fro, their head moves forward and back, and then you realize they are speaking into a machine. I always thought the Al Gore?s complete inability to treat a camera like a person spoke well of his character even while it crippled his career. Palin, like Clinton and Reagan, can engage a camera like no one else.

That is why one of CNN?s top notch anchors was waiting for Palin, wondering if she was done for the night or might emerge from her hotel, etc. That is why the television news will lead with a story about Palin while newspapers may confine the story to the inside pages. That is why I would not count her out in any race she decides to enter. She has that je ne sais quoi of a great communicator. Her lack of discipline, a trait she shares with Newt Gingrich, also plays out differently for her than for him: Palin and her followers have already created a narrative to cover any gaffes she makes: Blame the ?lame stream media.? And, because she is a woman, if she enters the race, the first candidate who attacks her on stage during a debate will see his negatives go through the roof.

Palin may not have much of a resume. But, I would not count her out. And the guessing game about her intentions is sheer speculation. One thing is clear. If she runs, she will run in her own way and on her own terms and plenty of disaffected voters will applaud her for doing so. She doesn?t have to play by the same rules as Pawlenty, who would be dying to get the coverage she is getting, or Romney, who would love to possess her ease in front of a camera. I would not count her in, but I surely would not count her out.

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