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Day 2 in Tampa

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 30, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

The ideological diversity of the Republican Party was on display at their national convention yesterday, but the GOP?s central case ? that ?we have to stop spending money we don?t have? ? as Veep candidate Paul Ryan put it, suffered from two difficulties. First, many speakers, including Ryan, surrounded this argument with mendacity as well as some well-crafted lines, but more importantly, the GOP convention had to battle with another story, Hurricane Isaac, in which the newly built, government-paid for levees kept New Orleans from turning into a nightmare. If you live in New Orleans or one of the surrounding parishes, my guess is you are pretty keen on some government spending, and government services also.

The first speaker I heard was Senator Rand Paul who is undoubtedly the most comfortable ideologue in the party today. ?The great and abiding lesson of American history, especially the Cold War, is that the engine of capitalism ? the individual ? is mightier than any collective,? he said near the beginning of his speech. One does not hear the word ?collective? much these days, but in Senator Paul?s world, it still looms large. Now, I believe in the individual dignity of the human person as much as the next Tea Partyer, although I get squeamish when that dignity is so clearly tied (shackled?) to an economic system premised on competition and greed. But, this little history lesson shows what is scary about ideologues: They make the facts fit their narrative. I think another great and abiding lesson from the Cold War is that organizations that are communal or ?collective? in nature, such as the Roman Catholic Church and labor unions in Poland, with a great deal of help from the AFL-CIO I might add, were able to expose the lies at the heart of Soviet-style communism and, working together, expose its most fearsome myth, that the individual was powerless before the state. That myth was the key to the police state mentality and that myth was not killed by any individual, but by people realizing they could come together and resist, that they had friends and allies beyond their borders who felt the call of solidarity with them, and in very prosaic ways, learned how to disseminate information with old Xerox machines sent by the AFL-CIO and to organize gatherings when Pope John Paul II came to visit.

The other grace note of Paul?s speech ? and indeed a constant theme of most convention speakers, even the otherwise sophisticated and refreshing Condi Rice ? was American exceptionalism. ?No other country has a Dream so inextricably associated with the spirit of its people,? the Senator said. Lucky for him, the convention organizers did not play Parry?s setting of Blake?s ?Jerusalem? as Paul made his way toward the podium. And, while the senator is undoubtedly smart, perhaps he is unfamiliar with the Iliad or the Odyssey or the great myths that animated pre-Colombian cultures in the Americas. Perhaps he has never looked at Delacroix?s paintings. Other countries do have great dreams associated with their spirit and some of those dreams aspire higher than more money, more consumer choice, and looser gun laws. This jingoism just makes me nuts.

Sen. John McCain made the case for increased U.S. military involvement in the world, a case with which I am sometimes in agreement, as in Syria, where it is shocking we are not doing more to assist the rebels. But, McCain, uncharacteristically I think, contrasted President Obama?s foreign leadership with everything that went before, saying that previous American presidents, both Democrats and Republicans, had always stood with those fighting for their freedom. Always? Despite his blustery talk about ?rolling back? communism in the 1950s, and his insinuation that FDR had ?lost? Eastern Europe at Yalta, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles

did not do much for the freedom fights in Hungary in 1956. Ditto Czechoslovakia in 1968. It turns out the U.S. cannot always and everywhere intervene on behalf of freedom because there are limits to our power and, as well, limits to our ability to translate even the best intentions into practical achievements for people whose cultures we may not understand and whose societies may resent being occupied by the Marines. Certainly, I do not think Ronald Reagan was fighting just for freedom in Central America during the 1980s. Certainly, in Vietnam, in which a case could be made that at first we were supporting freedom, our involvement did not turn out so well for them or for us. And, we are still paying for our decision to arm the freedom fighters in Afghanistan. And, then there is Iraq: The people of that country were undoubtedly unfree, but the chaos that has followed has left them differently enslaved, but enslaved nonetheless. McCain is free to agree or disagree with how Obama has handled foreign policy, but painting that policy as somehow at odds with previous presidencies is less than the truth.

Mike Huckabee was surprisingly toned down. I was wondering if he would defend his pal, Missouri Congressman Todd Akin. I wondered if he would speak more forcefully on the social issues that matter most to evangelical voters, especially after Mitt Romney?s sister unhelpfully told National Journal that her brother would never try to make abortion illegal. ?He?s not going to touch any of that,? Jane Romney said. ?It?s not his focus.? But, Huckabee was the loyal Republican and did not point out that the man his party is nominating has been all over the map, and never seemed particularly concerned, about the issues that most motivate the evangelical base of the party.

As mentioned, Condi Rice gave a great speech. Poised, unsurprisingly articulate, delivered with vigor, she moved as easily on domestic turf as she did on foreign affairs, and her call for education reform was not only heartfelt but necessary. She was especially effective in admitting that unless we guarantee a quality education to all our children, all the Horatio Alger stories in the world will not suffice to make the American Dream a reality. One line, though, seemed out of place last night: ?Ours has never been a narrative of grievance and entitlement?We have not been envious of one another and jealous of each others? success,? Rice said in front of a party that has turned the art of resentment into a high art form as witnessed by the still-playing, mendacious ads, about Obama gutting the work requirement from welfare. Still, Rice is a star and that star shined brightly.

Rice?s star needed to shine brightly because when Susana Martinez took the stage, it was easy to forget about anything before or after. She stole the show with her folksy speech, delivered with a panache that more seasoned politicians could only hope to have. Her tale of being a lifelong Democrat, and going to lunch with her husband and a couple of friends who were trying to recruit her to the GOP was hilarious in itself, but when she concluded by saying she got into the car, looked at her husband and said, ?Well, I?ll be damned. We?re Republicans!? it brought the house down. And, if the GOP ever decides it wants to shed its churlish anti-immigrant stance, here is someone who can help them do so.

But, the night was Paul Ryan?s. How did he do? His speech started slowly but gained momentum as he went on. It was filled with good lines ? the line about ?fading Obama posters? was brilliant. Ryan is able to deliver an attack line without sounding mean, which is a very valuable skill in a Vice Presidential candidate. And, his easy way of speaking about his wife and his Mom will help to give the lie to the idea that Republicans are engaged in a war on women. Ryan also has an ability to introduce numbers and data into a narrative, and to do so with authority: At the end of one of his speeches, and last night was no exception, you come away impressed that this young man is very smart indeed.

Unfortunately, a closer looks at his claims make one suspicious that Ryan?s brand of sincerity is the kind that simply believes its own propaganda. You could sum up Ryan?s political mantra in one sentence: ?They [the Democrats] have no answer to this simple reality: We need to stop spending money we don?t have.? This from a man who voted for the unfunded Prescription Drug benefit, who voted for the unfunded wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, who voted for the auto bailout, who voted for the TARP legislation which, though necessary, was a

pretty direct, big government intervention in the economy, how did this man become the darling of Tea Party fiscal conservatives? He condemned President Obama for not acting on the recommendations of Simpson-Bowles, but Ryan voted against that plan too. He repeated the canard about President Obama raiding Medicare to pay for the Affordable Care Act, but the $716 billion in reductions to Medicare providers were negotiated with those providers who will no longer be saddled with picking up the cost of treating the uninsured, and Ryan is too smart not to know that he should not be accusing Obama of using scare tactics about Medicare when his rhetoric is built upon a simple lie. And, when he tried to put the blame for the downgrading of the government?s credit rating on President Obama, when it was congressional Republicans who began and continued the game of budgetary chicken over the debt limit last summer, well, if it be true that there are lies, damned lies, and statistics, Ryan?s speech was filled with claims that were all three.

Ryan mostly stayed away from any bold ideological claims. He did not hand out copies of Ayn Rand?s ?The Fountainhead? or ?Atlas Shrugged? and urge the delegates to read them. Only once did his libertarian sensibilities shine through when, towards the end of the speech, he said, ?When I was waiting tables, washing dishes, or mowing lawns for money, I never thought of myself as stuck in some station in life. I was on my own path, my own journey, an American journey where I could think for myself, decide for myself, define happiness for myself. That?s what we do in this country. That?s the American Dream. That?s freedom, and I?ll take it any day over the supervision and sanctimony of the central planners.? The words ?central planners,? like Sen. Paul?s use of the word ?collective,? seem seriously outdated and contain more than a whiff of Ayn Randian sensibilities. But it was the phrase ?define happiness for myself? that jumped out at me. This sounded shockingly like the famous line from the Supreme Court case Planned Parenthood v. Casey: ?At the heart of liberty is the right to define one?s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.? Actually, I believe that we do not define happiness for ourselves, we discern happiness both in human nature and, most especially, in the self-revelation of Jesus Christ. (cf. Gaudium et Spes #22.) What I admire about conservatism, classic conservatism, is that it understands that truth and meaning and happiness are not so much manufactured as they are discerned and discovered. The positivism of today?s so-called conservatives is scary, not least because it is never offset or balanced by considerations of the common good in contemporary conservative thought and politics.

Ryan did well but it was no home run. And there is much in his speech that should give those Catholics who want to support him great pause. I still can?t figure out whether he really wants to be the Randian ideologue cutting back the size of government or the big spender his record discloses. I know that last summer, during the debt negotiations, the House GOP responded favorably to the request of the U.S. Catholic bishops not to allow funding for programs that assist the poor to be part of the sequestration process they enacted. This ?Circle of Protection? agreement last summer may have convinced the USCCB that whatever Ryan and Romney say about budget cutting, a call from the cardinals to protect those programs that assist the poor, and give huge chunks of funding to Catholic Charities, will set everything right. But, last summer, the House GOP was also negotiating with a Democrat in the White House. If the Republicans control both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, I worry about what will happen to food stamps and Medicaid and other programs, and those bishops who like to say nice things about Mr. Ryan should be mindful of the danger they are courting.

The word that seems to hover over the proceedings in Tampa is nostalgia. Everyone wants to go back to the days when an Irish immigrant can end up in Wisconsin and make a life for his family. Everyone wants a less intrusive government, but seems unwilling to acknowledge a less intrusive government is also a less involved government. 100 years ago, when hurricanes hit, people simply accepted their fate. Then, we learned to build levees. 100 years ago, the federal government was smaller, but there were no airports to run, no expensive medical procedures to pay for, no military bases abroad, and women stayed at home to care for young children and older relatives. Concern about the size of government, and especially about the federal budget, is a legitimate concern to be sure, but I don?t think nostalgia is a helpful, or honest, starting point and that seems to be all the GOP has to offer. This whole convention feels like the secular equivalent of an EWTN rerun and

when the GOP leaders speak of the future, the future they paint is scary. At a time when my loyalty to the Democratic Party is being sorely tested, I am not finding anything in the GOP gathered at Tampa that makes me think there is a home there for me either.

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