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David Brooks and the Republicans' 'rampant hyperindividualism'

Tom Gallagher | Sep. 4, 2012 NCR Today

My colleague, Michael Sean Winters, the award-winning blogger of *NCR*'s Distinctly Catholic blog [1], has offered some excellent Republican convention analysis.

Since the announcement of Cong. Paul Ryan as the Republican VP pick, I have highlighted *The New York Times* ' op-ed writer Paul Krugman's unveiling of Ryan as unserious and as one who is offering a budget that actually increases the federal deficit, not decreases it. And Medicare will be voucherized. Some commenters simply don't like Paul Krugman and his analysis.

Meanwhile, President Ronald Reagan's own budget director, David Stockman, penned a blistering essay [2] about Ryan's budget, calling it a "fairly tale."

On Friday, conservative pro-Republican David Brooks, also a New York *Times* op-ed writer, neatly summed up today's tea party-led Republican Party in a sobering essay [3].

Here is the heart of Brooks' essay:

> But there is a flaw in the vision the Republicans offered in Tampa. It is contained in its rampant hyperindividualism. Speaker after speaker celebrated the solitary and heroic individual. There was almost no talk of community and compassionate conservatism. There was certainly no conservatism as Edmund Burke understood it, in which individuals are embedded in webs of customs, traditions, habits and governing institutions.
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> Today's Republicans strongly believe that individuals determine their own fates. In a Pew Research Center poll, for example, 57 percent of Republicans believe people are poor because they don't work hard. Only 28 percent believe people are poor because of circumstances beyond their control. These Republicans believe that if only government gets out of the way, then people's innate qualities will enable them to flourish.
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> But there's a problem. I see what the G.O.P. is offering the engineering major from Purdue or the business major from Arizona State. The party is offering skilled people the freedom to run their race. I don't see what the party is offering the waitress with two kids, or the warehouse worker whose wages have stagnated for a decade, or the factory worker whose skills are now obsolete.
> The fact is our destinies are shaped by social forces much more than the current G.O.P. is willing to admit. The skills that enable people to flourish are not innate but constructed by circumstances.
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> Government does not always undermine initiative. Some government programs, like the G.I. Bill, inflame ambition. Others depress it. What matters is not whether a program is public or private but its effect on character. Today's Republicans, who see every government program as a step on the road to serfdom, are often blind to that. They celebrate the race to success but don't know how to give everyone access to that race.

The wisest speech departed from the prevailing story line. It was delivered by Condoleezza Rice. It echoed an older, less libertarian conservatism, which harkens back to Washington, Tocqueville and Lincoln. The powerful words in her speech were not "I" and "me" -- the heroic individual. They were "we" and "us" -- citizens who emerge out of and exist as participants in a great national project.

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic
[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/14/opinion/paul-ryans-fairy-tale-budget-plan.html
[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/31/opinion/party-of-strivers.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20120831