

Edge Left: Looking Back at St. Paul

With the Republican convention well behind us there are a couple of points I felt were missed by other commentators. So some quick notes as we move toward November.

I'm not talking (much) about Sarah Palin - that hype is gone, it was McCain's Hail Mary pass, risky at best, blown away now by the unfolding economic catastrophe.

(I would observe, in passing, that I think it was true McCain wanted his friend, Joe Lieberman, as his running mate, but had that shot down. Liberals forget, in the heat of the campaign, that McCain is not now and has never been a favorite with the Republican Party's base. He has tried to bring himself into line, but he has never been forgiven for his occasional maverick streak. With his first choice blocked by his advisers, he tried to pick up the "Hillary vote" with Palin. I doubt anyone expected his pick would be so totally popular, would win back the base so completely.

(I like Sarah, there is no reason a mother with five children can't hold office - no one ever asked the Kennedy brothers if they should be disqualified because of their large families. What was shrewd was Palin's pre-emptive strike at the media. Before they had had a chance to ask anything, they were under attack from the entire Republican machine, with Sarah herself tucked under wraps in a way I've never seen before of a candidate for high office.

(Of course she is not qualified to be Vice President - a number of conservatives have admitted as much, including David Brooks, George Will, and Charles Krauthammer. But this doesn't mean she is stupid or that she hasn't made a good governor of Alaska, with its population of less than 700,000 people. I admire her decision to have a child with Down Syndrome - not a decision I'm sure I'd have made. I respect her right to make it. What does disturb me, very deeply, is that Palin would deny this same basic right of choice to other women. She is opposed to abortion even for incest or rape, and, given a chance, would legislate those views into law. So much for the "right of choice").

Being a political junkie I watched pretty much the whole convention. I sat through the hard right speech by Mitt Romney, whose politics I'd say were those of a chameleon, except that he himself strikes me as more of a snake, positioning himself to lead the legions of the faithful in 2012. I listened to Fred Thompson, who needed a cough drop, but gave a better (if bitterly right wing) presentation than he had given when seeking the nomination. Rudy Giuliani ran way over time - he was having a ball savaging Obama. (As a New Yorker, who lived under the man, I have utter contempt for him - he has no respect for the Bill of Rights and violated it so often during his time in office that it would have been a joke if it hadn't been serious. I am always amazed when I men like Romney and Thompson and Giuliani talk about the need to respect the constitution - and then show so little respect for the Bill of Rights, which is a basic part of the constitution, not imposed by 20th century liberals, but demanded by 18th century colonists recently freed from British rule). I enjoyed Huckabee, the only reactionary who sounds remotely as if he'd make a friendly neighbor.

But it was McCain whom I found fascinating - McCain and his audience. By the time McCain himself spoke, we had already heard, not once, but several times, the details of his imprisonment and torture in Hanoi. So I was surprised when McCain made this story so central part of his own speech. I found it curious that the press didn't follow up McCain's admission, in his speech, that he had, at one point during his time as a prisoner, acted less than honorably. (I admired his candor - but what was he talking about?).

Since McCain has made so much of his time in Hanoi there are two things which must be said. The first is that spending time in prison doesn't qualify you to be President. It doesn't matter whether you ended up in prison by accident, or because you were captured in war. It doesn't matter whether your time in prison was marred by torture or went smoothly. A prison term can do many things for a man or a woman. In my line of work I've met lots of people who have served hard time in federal prisons. I don't think any of them ever felt their prison time qualified them for political office. One of our greatest Americans - Eugene Victor Debs - served his time in prison while running for President in 1920, but he never claimed his prison cell made him an expert.

I do question the stories of the torture - we have only McCain's word for it. I've seen a Vietnamese video taken of McCain and fellow prisoners on the day they were released by the Vietnamese - and McCain was able to raise his right arm to a full salute. There is no question at all that McCain was badly hurt. How much of that was Vietnamese torture and how much is a result of what happens when you fall from the sky, breaking a leg and two arms, I can't say. I do know the media has taken McCain's word for the events, and not done a background check. (I do not doubt that the Vietnamese, like the Americans - witness Guantanamo - can stoop to torture. I only doubt we have had a full and accurate reporting of McCain's time there). I'd add one personal note on medical care. I was in Hanoi in 1971, as part of one of the peace delegations. I visited the main hospital in Hanoi, which was short on supplies, and could see how the rubber gloves we use once and throw away, were washed and hung to dry, to be used again. Hanoi had a great many injuries to treat - many of them from American bombs.

But taking McCain at his word, the other major problem is to ask, simply, what his plane was doing over Hanoi when it was shot down. The United States had not declared war on Vietnam, nor had the Vietnamese declared war on us, nor fired a single bullet at anyone in our fifty states. So why were we bombing the Vietnamese? That McCain was shot down is beyond question. That he was badly injured is beyond question. But none of that answers the basic question of what he was doing flying over Vietnamese air space.

It is to McCain's credit that in his time in the Senate he has done two things which few other Republicans (and not many Democrats) have done. One, he moved to normalize relations with Vietnam, including closing down the scam of the "MIA" ("Missing in Action" - no question there were Americans missing in action in Vietnam, as in Korea, and in Europe during World War II. No question, also, that the Vietnamese, for whom the bones of ancestors have far more importance in their culture than in ours, have many more "MIA's" than the Americans). The other thing he did was to take a very strong stand against torture - though he has been quiet on that of late.

I am the despair of my friends, because I do not automatically dislike the people I disagree with. I read David Brooks in the Times. I liked Barry Goldwater back in 1964. And I like John McCain. I am saddened by what has happened to his "straight talk express", which has gone off the rails, but along with most of the guys and gals in the media, I like the guy.

But I was truly stunned by his speech. Not because he gave it so badly - while he is excellent in town meetings, he is very weak when trying to work from a teleprompter. He tends to paste on an artificial smile, to say "My friends" until you finally realize he means someone else, not you. But I had expected him to say *something*. However McCain spent a full hour and said virtually nothing. Obama was criticized for giving the talking points of the Democratic Party in his acceptance speech - but that was surely the point, wasn't it? To lay out the platform on which you would run? McCain said almost nothing of substance, beyond a replay of his time in prison in Hanoi, gaining energy at the end as he called on the audience to stand up and fight.

It was a remarkably empty speech. More than that, the naked appeals to the patriotism of the nation, the chants from the crowd of "USA" "USA". Again, and again, and again, there were the appeals to the greatness of America, until the phrase that came to my mind was "Deutschland, Deutschland uber alles", which took on such sinister tones during the Nazi period. (The song didn't originate with the Nazis - it was set to music from Haydn, and adopted as the national anthem of Germany in 1922 during the Weimar Republic).

Where, in his hour long speech, was a single word about health care for Americans? Where was there any mention of the desperate need to rebuild the infrastructure of our roads, our bridges, our schools, our transit system? Where was there any recognition of some of our major problems (such as having more men and women in prison than any other nation on earth). Hard times are here again - I see it in the streets of New York, with more people begging, sleeping in darkened doorways at night. But where in McCain's speech (or any of the others, including Sarah Palin's) was there an awareness of the suffering of so much of the nation.

A suffering suddenly compounded by the dark turn of the stock market. As the convention ended, I wondered what had happened to the Republican Party of my youth, the GOP of Robert Taft, of Dwight Eisenhower, of Earl Warren. What has it become, that in the face of the reality of Guantanamo, of wars we should never have launched and cannot win, the convention so easily turned to chants of "USA" "USA"?

I had the feeling that in November we will see McCain defeated, despite the fact he is a likeable guy. Somewhat as the British, in 1945, turned Winston Churchill out of office after he had led his nation to victory. These are times which call for something more than stories of torture in a Vietnamese prison. And McCain, who has lost track of how many homes he has, is not the man who can give it to us.

David McReynolds, 10/14/09