

Reflections on the Al Smith Dinner

My hunch is that we all watched the Al Smith dinner tonight, with the presentations by Romney and Obama. I've said elsewhere, and will say it again in a day or two, at more length, that I won't be voting for Obama - though I do hope he wins. But let me hold that discussion. For now I want to reflect on what must be the inner pain Obama has suffered. Let us leave to one side all the politically correct points those of us on the left have about what Obama has failed to do, or the things he has done that he ought not to do.

Mitt did OK tonight. But it was Obama's smooth performance that left me wondering what it must have been like for him and for Michelle these past four years. One part of me does understand that the hostility to Obama is racist at its core - yet that is almost too simple, since the same Tea Party folks who have challenged Obama's place of birth, his religion, etc., were happy to cheer on, at one point in the GOP Primary, "Mr. 9-9-9", Herman Cain, "blacker" by far, in skin tone and language, than Obama.

I know from correspondence with Tea Party folks that they emphatically deny being racist. Yet I cannot understand how it was possible for Mitch McConnell, to say, as the nation faced such a terrible economic crisis, that the primary job of the GOP was to make sure Obama was a one term President. As one who is actually a socialist, who ran for President twice on the Socialist Party ticket, I have never grasped what Obama did to merit the blind rage of the Tea Party folks, or why they thought he was a socialist.

Most of all, I reflected tonight on the inner turmoil that must, at points, rage through Obama. In public it is imperative he be cool. He is not "black" in the usual sense - he is as much white as black, he is as much Euro-American as African American. Yet in this society he is black, and he cannot have gone through his decades of childhood and youth and manhood without the confusion of all African Americans, who must "behave" in public, yet who must surely - in the simple name of their own sanity - want to rage against the racism that has been vented against them. I remember - though it was an earlier time - the late Bayard Rustin telling me that any black who didn't struggle with the problem of hating whites was not fully sane.

What did Obama think tonight, on the stage with the Cardinal, with Mitt Romney, with a crowd reeking of privilege and power? Was there not, surely, both some sense of contempt for that crowd, and also a sense of how essential it was to hide that? I know Mitt Romney has his own devils - we all suffer from our private devils, the rich as well as the poor. But Obama has suffered from four years of unrelenting hatred. The only time when we saw an equal hatred was during the New Deal, when FDR was the object of such hatred, in equal measure. But FDR could fall back, knowing how secure his own background was. He came, after all, from the very ruling class and the very race which was venting its spleen on him.

It is perhaps a measure of Obama's private greatness that, supported by his wife, he has been able to reach so far beyond his "black base" to stand on the verge of possible re-election. That those who have been so vitriolic in their attacks are smaller, more diminished people, does not make it easier for the President to joke with the princes of the system, and hold onto his own sanity.