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Convention speeches: 'The world as it should be'

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The words "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth" dissipated into the Pennsylvania air. No thunderous applause followed. No jeers; no cheers. Arguably one of the greatest speeches in American history, Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was met with muted murmur. But as the text of the speech was spread by the press of the day, the public was captivated by the simple eloquence of Lincoln's words about a nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" engaged in a test of those principles.

Two emotional speeches at the Democratic National Convention Monday Night – by an ailing Sen. Edward Kennedy and vivacious Michelle Obama – were often interrupted by applause. Camera cuts vividly pictured delegates wiping away or smiling through tears, visibly moved by the speakers. Even watching on television, one was cognizant of the emotions swirling inside the Pepsi Center.

We do not expect (although perhaps we should raise our expectations a little) that politicians today match the eloquence of a Lincoln. And one could argue that with their speeches Sen. Kennedy and Ms. Obama accomplished what Lincoln did not – reaching out and connecting very powerfully with their audience. But there is also something to be said for analyzing a speech apart from its presentation. When we do that, we come closer to understanding the appealing and appalling message of the Democratic Party.

If we can put a man on the moon …
Regardless of one's opinion of Sen. Kennedy – his person or his politics – seeing the shadow of the liberal lion roaring his challenge to America to live up to its ideals, like Santiago's dream of young lions on the beach, added poignancy to the memories of our own "happiest and hardest days." A roar is a worthy last great act of defiance.

But while the delegates, the media and the pundits are consumed by the iconic lion's roar, it behooves us to look at the man's words.

A short speech, not intended to be a statement of policy or a speech presenting and defending a point of view or specific policy, nonetheless, Kennedy's message was characterized by the appeal of hope given life, specifically, in his familiar refrain:
"And this is the cause of my life – new hope that we will break the old gridlock and guarantee that every American ... will have decent, quality health care as a fundamental right and not a privilege."

The message of "universal health care" is indeed appealing, but underlying it is the appalling reality that declaring health care a "right" for all imposes an "obligation" on some to provide it, provide it without their consent.

Besides that philosophical conundrum, the reality is we don't know how to deliver on the promise of universal access to health care without making some devastating trade-offs in quality and cost; and if we did divine some arbitrary "ideal" utilitarian trade-off among health care cost, quality and access, we could not implement it other than through government mandates – a polite way of saying some would be coerced into health care choices they freely would not make.

Kennedy anticipated criticism of such "bold endeavor," and countered it recalling his brother John's presidential challenge to put an American on the moon within a decade.

"Our people answered his call and rose to the challenge," said Kennedy, "and today an American flag still marks the surface of the moon."

If we can put a man on the moon, the implication is, we can have universal health care (and energy independence and an education system that ensures every kid is above average).

Reality, however, begs to differ. The difference between the challenges of putting a man on the moon and striking a balance among the quality, cost and access to health care is Malcolm Gladwell's distinction between a puzzle and a mystery.

Putting a man on the moon is a puzzle. It is complex, but ultimately it is a technical problem. We might not see the solution at first; it might take a long time to gather and analyze data to come up with a solution, but ultimately, there is a solution.

Managing a nationwide health care system is a mystery. There are infinite trade-offs among health care cost, quality and access. No one person, one group, or one government can ever have the information to balance those trade-offs for each individual at any given time. There is no "solution" – only trade-offs.
Paraphrasing Gladwell, "that distinction is not trivial."

Approaching a mystery as if it were a puzzle with a solution requires that whatever the "solution," it will require force to impose. That is not a future mightily to be hoped for.

**A Brave New World**

Media pundits set up a long list of "objectives" for Michelle Obama's convention speech: She had to reintroduce herself, soften her image, downplay her militant nature, play-up her family life, downplay the charge of elitism, connect with "ordinary" Americans and the like. Regardless of the list, one would be hard-pressed to say Obama failed any test.

Like Kennedy, Obama emotionally connected with her audience. That any American, regardless of politics, could not be proud of his country listening to this African-American woman standing "at the crosscurrents" of American history is hard to imagine. But there comes a morning after when one ought to read the words Obama spoke more critically than perhaps one listened to them.

The first time she heard Barack speak, Michelle Obama recalled how he talked about the "world as it is" and the "world as it should be." That theme recurred throughout her speech:

"And he urged us…to strive for the world as it should be…mold our future into the shape of our ideals…All of us driven by a simple belief that the world as it is just won't do – that we have an obligation to fight for the world as it should be."

In a broader context, Obama echoes Kennedy's appealing vision of a world without trade-offs, a world of total solutions where government really can make dreams come true. But her vision suffers the same appalling flaws as Kennedy's.

Can any group, be it right-wing, fundamentalist Christians or Democratic followers of Barack Obama, really define "the world as it should be"? Does citing either the "will of God" or the "will of the people" justify the inevitable imposition of the government force that is necessary to maintain the "world as it should be"?

A world as it should be cannot tolerate individual liberty and free choice lest choices are made that make that world less than it should be; conversely, a free society will never be perfect; individuals in a free society will always make less than perfect choices.
There is no "solution" to the inherent contradiction between liberty and perfection. Only trade-offs. Obama makes clear that her husband and his people will be deciding what those trade-offs will be.

"Millions of Americans… know that Barack understands their dreams; that Barack will fight for people like them; and that Barack will finally bring the change we need."

**The man who would be … what?**

As I wrote yesterday, Barack Obama and his GOP challenger John McCain each have an expansive view of the presidency that would be all but unrecognizable to the authors of Article II of the U.S. Constitution. Opening night at the DNC powerfully reinforced that idea.

Is it part of the job description of the president of the United States to understand the dreams of every American? Is fighting for specific groups of people with specific dreams what is meant by preserving and protecting the Constitution of the United States? Is it the job of the president of the United States to be our shepherd, to free us from want, and to make us lie down in green pastures of "the world as it should be?"

That it is indeed is the word the Democrats delivered on the first day. The idea of the "world as it should be" is appealing; the reality of how one gets there is appalling.