

Cruel Conservatives Throw a Masquerade Ball

By MAUREEN DOWD



MESSAGE: They care.

Republicans care deeply. They really do.

They care deeply about making us think that they care deeply.

That's why they knocked themselves out producing a convention that was a colossal hoax.

They did that for us. Because they care. With exquisite timing, they started caring last Tuesday at 7 p.m., when suddenly the party was chockablock with tender souls in rainbow colors, with strong-minded women and softhearted men, with sentimental rags-to-riches immigrant sagas.

We all know Republicans prefer riches-to-riches sagas and rounding up immigrants, if the parasitic scofflaws aren't sensitive enough to self-deport.

That's why my heart swells to think of the herculean effort the G.O.P. put into pretending its heart bleeds.

Even if it's been bleeding for only five days. Better never than late.

It was remarkable to watch Mitt Romney ignore the empty seats and airless mood and reach deep inside himself to give a speech in which he appeared genuine. It was also remarkable to see that even when he looks genuine, he still seems fake. And despite the soft quiver in his voice, and Ann's nonstop transfusions of emotion and wrenching testimonials from Mormons forced to publicly relive family tragedies simply to give Mitt a personality, the terribly erect candidate still seemed as remote as Jupiter.

It was truly thrilling to watch the blindingly white older male delegates greet their young, blue-eyed future: Paul Ryan, the 42-year-old Wisconsin congressman who turns out to be more talented than anyone had anticipated — a prodigy of prestidigitation.

In his speech Wednesday night, the altar boy altered reality, conjuring up a world so compassionate, so full of love-thy-neighbor kindness and small-town goodness, that you had to pinch yourself to remember it was a shimmering mirage, a beckoning pool of big, juicy lies. (The fitness freak may have also fibbed about running a sub-three-hour marathon in 1991; Runner's World reports that his time was 4 hours and 1 minute.)

As the writer Dermot McEvoy notes, Ryan has “the so sincere, so phony air of a gloomy Irish undertaker standing outside the funeral parlor where you’ve come to plant your mother, shaking his head consolingly and giving you that firm two-handed Irish handshake.”

Except with Ryan, it’s the safety net in the coffin.

The convention was an unparalleled triumph of mythmaking, or Mittmaking. Romney was so eager to woo Hispanic votes and join the cascade of speakers sharing immigrant family tales, from Rick Santorum to Ann Romney to Marco Rubio, that he made his father, George Romney, sound Hispanic.

“My dad had been born in Mexico,” he said, “and his family had to leave during the Mexican revolution.”

It was fitting that David Koch was the beaming financial god presiding over this Orwellian makeover of Republicans as generous communitarians who care about grandmas, cherish immigrants and defend Medicare, so movingly described by the vice presidential nominee who tried to turn Medicare into a voucher system as “an obligation we have to our parents and grandparents.”

Koch leads the Orwellian movement of oil billionaires playing grass-roots activists. The industrialist ideologue wants to use his money to shrink government the way those vacuum sealers on infomercials suck the air out of plastic bags stuffed with clothes until they’re a mere sliver — shriveling all the social services, environmental regulations and taxes on the wealthy.

Koch, who infuses gazillions to build up the Tea Party and tear down the president, was a member of the New York delegation. On Tuesday, he was in the hall, sitting in what had to be one of the most expensive single seats that anyone ever bought.

The stage show looked like America, but the convention hall did not. The crowd seemed like the sanctuary of a minority — economically wounded capitalists in shades from eggshell to ecru, cheering the man from Bain and trying to fathom why they’re not running the country anymore. The speakers ranted about an America in decline, but the audience reflected a party in decline.

We may not have learned who Mitt really is; just that he doesn’t like AC/DC and Led Zeppelin and that he does like peanut butter on his pancakes. But it’s clear that he is unlike the vast majority of Americans in every respect. Romney is counting on the fact that he’s a native alien, rather than a non-American alien, as he tried to paint the president with his recent birther crack.

But so far it isn’t working. It’s a strange moment when Americans relate less to the tall, handsome, rich prince of a famous political family than to a skinny black dude of mixed parentage who spent a lot of time in Indonesia.

Given the president’s lackluster performance and the listless economy, Romney should be killing it. But he’s an odd duck running with a dissimulating striver. Ryan’s harsh stances toward women, the old and the poor are on record, so he set a new standard for gall when he intoned, “The truest measure of any society is how it treats those who cannot defend or care for themselves.”

The convention rebranding as compassionate conservatives is encouraging in that it shows that Republicans feel they are at a disadvantage with their Ayn Rand disdain for altruism, their Kempian trickle-down economics stripped of the humanity of Jack Kemp, their worship of the wealthy as the engine of economic prosperity.

Expected to draw Catholic votes, Ryan has been forced to renounce the atheist, Russian-born Rand, but he channeled her when he talked about wanting to define his own happiness, adding, "That's freedom, and I'll take it any day over the supervision and sanctimony of the central planners."

Ryan's lies and Romney's shape-

shifting are so easy to refute that they must have decided a Hail Mary pass of artifice was better than their authentic ruthless worldview.

The Grand Old Party illusion is Romney's latest attempt to figure out how to pull ahead in a race where the rivals are mired in one tiny little margin.

"A masquerade party," scoffed David Axelrod, the president's strategist, "to cover up the final takeover of the Republican Party by the right. It was like Barry Goldwater in '64."

As I wandered the hall Tuesday night, past cowboy hats and cheeseheads, I ran into Christopher Shays, a delegate and former congressman. I asked the Connecticut moderate if he felt lonely at the conservative masquerade ball.

He laughed and then said wistfully, "Our biggest crime was trying to impeach the one president who was working with us."
