Trump's 'If By Whiskey' Speech

In 1952, Mississippi State Senator Noah Sweat famously [gave a speech on the subject of prohibition](), which was still highly debated in the South. Promising not to shy away from controversy, he spoke:

> *If when you say whiskey you mean the devil's brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster, that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty, yea, literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children; if you mean the evil drink that topples the Christian man and woman from the pinnacle of righteous, gracious living into the bottomless pit of degradation, and despair, and shame and helplessness, and hopelessness, then certainly I am against it.*
>
> *But, if when you say whiskey you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and laughter on their lips, and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes; if you mean Christmas cheer; if you mean the stimulating drink that puts the spring in the old gentleman's step on a frosty, crispy morning; if you mean the drink which enables a man to magnify his joy, and his happiness, and to forget, if only for a little while, life's great tragedies, and heartaches, and sorrows; if you mean that drink, the sale of which pours into our treasuries untold millions of dollars, which are used to provide tender care for our little crippled children, our blind, our deaf, our dumb, our pitiful aged and infirm; to build highways and hospitals and schools, then certainly I am for it.*
>
> *This is my stand. I will not retreat from it. I will not compromise.*

Donald Trump's speech at the Republican Convention was nearly [as remarkable](). As in the "whiskey speech," it really was two speeches melded together uneasily. Read together, it was hard to see which set of remarks represented the "real Donald Trump."

The first half, appealing to moderates, promised criminal justice reform and praised figures ranging from Reagan to FDR. In those remarks, he bragged about "historic criminal justice reform, prison reform, opportunity zones, the long-term funding of historically black colleges and universities."

In the second half, it turned to red meat for the base, condemning Biden, the rioters, and touting his tough immigration policies. "We have to give law enforcement, our police, back their power. They are afraid to act. They are afraid to lose their pension. They are afraid to lose their jobs, and by being afraid they are not able to do their jobs. And those who suffer most are the great people who they want so desperately to protect."

A Convention Full of Contradictions

Overall, the Republican National Convention had significantly better production values, entertainment, and overall positivity than Democrats demonstrated the week before. There were many impressive visuals, including the speaking hall, the presence of audiences, and the use of the White House and Fort McHenry.

The Democrats failed by incessantly focusing on Trump and using a dull Zoom-style format. Their policy agenda and a positive vision of America was [largely absent](). The Republicans put on a better show.

That said, Republican outreach efforts bordered on incoherence. One minute, speakers were talking about "backing the blue" and the scourge of violence from Antifa and Black

Lives Matter protesters. The testimony of widow Ann Dorn, whose husband was killed in rioting in St. Louis, was particularly powerful. So too was Catholic Sister Deirdre Byrne, who spoke clearly and forcefully on the abortion issue.

On the other hand, many speakers at the RNC were embracing criminal justice reform and attacking Biden for his record on the 1994 crime bill. Speakers praised the leftist BLM movement. A woman who was given a life sentence for dealing crack cocaine spoke about the "injustice of my story."

As Pedro Gonzalez has remarked, "Which way MAGA man?"

In other words, does Trump intend to pivot back to the themes of his 2016 victory? Or does this pragmatic, non-ideological, and oddly *establishment-friendly* message express his plans for the second term?

The recent past is usually the best predictor of future results. The fantasy of him "going back to America First" or "taking the gloves off" seems to be an overly hopeful one, particularly in light of the obvious rhetorical differences of his 2016 and 2020 campaigns.

Trump's Contradictions Reflect the Nation's

As a matter of pure electoral politics, maybe this all will work. As Noah Sweat reminds us, politicians have been trying to be all things to all people for a long time. Exhibiting confirmation bias, supporters tend to harp on what they want to hear, ignoring the rest as "optics" and "window dressing."

Older voters also recognize that Trump is significantly better than his Republican predecessors. He has not been saying tone-deaf stuff about "we want more millionaires" or amnesty. Older voters also know that Biden is significantly more left-leaning and hostile to anything recognizably conservative or even

patriotic. Perhaps Trump's emotional rhetoric that says "I understand you and am one of you" succeeds, not least because listeners project their own hopes and wishes to fill in the blanks.

Trump in his own way is the closest embodiment of Rousseau's "[general will](#)" in American political life. His deviations from both Democratic and Republican orthodoxy align, nearly perfectly, with what is popular with the majority, while not aligning neatly with traditional Democratic or Republican party platforms.

Trump's diverse emphases may not be traditional conservatism or even an authentic America First agenda, but it still may be *something* — a synthesis of Americans' diverse and contradictory beliefs.

To the extent Trump is contradictory and inscrutable, so is the nation itself. Americans want, at one and the same time, a generous social welfare state *and* tax cuts, an end to violent protests and criminal justice reform, and less immigration *and* a generous welcome to those who embrace our values and are productive members of society.

One overly complex explanation of all of Trump's strange twists and turns is that he is playing a game of 4D chess. This seems doubtful. Trump is a man of instinct. He is well-tuned into public opinion from his many years as a public figure and successful television shows. His contradictions evidence a simpler game: he is listening to and reacting to public opinion and husbanding his political capital. He is doing so not in the service of a grand policy agenda or some killer 4D chess move, but, rather, to secure reelection.

In spite of his reputation for toughness and political incorrectness, Trump is highly reactive to public opinion, particularly from the middle. When he does not stick to something, it is either not popular or requires a high cost to

achieve. Throughout his first term he has pursued popular, low-hanging fruit and walked back [more controversial suggestions](#).

A Mandate for What?

Trump's mixed success is also a product of his absolutely atrocious hiring. He has hired hostile Republican [NeverTrump types](#), unskilled and tone-deaf [hacks](#), and, in the case of Jared and Ivanka, relied on family members who do not share his expressed 2016 political vision.

I am not totally unsympathetic with his hiring of family, as finding people he can trust in Washington, D.C. is not easy. But we have a large nation with many passionate, talented, and capable outsiders. These people have been ignored in preference to those with more typical "swampy" résumés and agendas. Trump's disloyal and liberal subordinates have done a lot — some visible, some not — to sabotage his stated wishes.

It's hard to say for what a Trump 2020 victory will be a mandate. Will it be for getting tough on criminals or releasing them from prison? Restricting immigration or just making sure it's done legally? America First nationalism or Jared and Ivanka's cosmopolitan and vaguely liberal agenda?

With competing stands taken on both sides of dozens of important political issues, Trump has guaranteed that if he does succeed he will have maximum freedom of maneuver in his second term. It remains to be seen, however, whether another Trump term will deliver on the meaningful change he promised in 2016. Judging by his first term and the contradictory rhetoric of his speech at the convention, this seems like a false hope. Trump's second term won't be a time of America First nationalism, but at least it won't mean indulging the Democrats' impulse towards putting America last.

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