Hard Times In The Big Easy

Kean's Sour Keynote

By
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It was the moment Tom Kean, and all of New Jersey, had been waiting for: prime time, a nationwide television audience, a huge crowd of festive Republicans ready to be whipped into a frenzy by a blockbuster of a speech. For weeks, speculation in New Jersey political circles had centered on what the Garden State's moderate Governor would say in his keynote address at the Republican National Convention, and how it would go over among the decidedly more conservative throng in the New Orleans Superdome.

As Kean strode to the podium, he looked confident and comfortable — more confident than he has seemed before delivering some of his annual messages to the Legislature, almost as comfortable as he looks during press conferences in his outer office at the State House. This, to his New Jersey audience, was the old, familiar Tom Kean — smiling that shy, gap-toothed smile, waving and nodding appreciatively to the familiar faces in the New Jersey delegation (which was strategically seated close to the podium so its members could pay rapt attention to their leader, and the microphones could pick up their enthusiastic response to his applause lines), ready to demonstrate to the rest of the Republican Party how the brand of politics he practices in New Jersey can work all across the country.

That, at least, is what the folks back home expected to hear from Tom Kean. Right up to the evening of the speech, he promised that he would not engage in mindless Democrat-bashing; that his would be a more thoughtful, visionary address than that of Democratic keynoter Ann Richards, who had picked so unmercifully on George Bush; that he would concentrate on the same theme, the "politics of inclusion," that has been at the core of his speeches, and his actions, since becoming Governor of New Jersey.

And then Kean pulled out that hourglass. It was to become, in more ways than one, a fitting emblem of the speech that followed.

The hourglass was given to Kean at a meeting of the National Governors Conference by Massachusetts Governor and Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis. It was meant to serve as a friendly suggestion from Dukakis that Kean, taking his cues from some of the more long-winded speakers at the Democratic National Convention, should not make the mistake of letting his keynote address drag on too long. And Kean had accepted it in that spirit, with smiles and handshakes all around.

As he began his keynote address, however, whatever comradeship Kean might have felt earlier toward his fellow governor from the Northeast disappeared, and the jovial spirit in which the gift was given was replaced by the hostile spirit of biting, sniping partisanship. What the hourglass now symbolized, thundered keynoter Kean, was that time had run out on Michael Dukakis and his "liberal agenda" for America.

In at least one New Jersey living room — and probably many more — time ran out in the next 40 minutes or so on a few other things as well. It ran out on the national Republican Party's pretense of embracing anyone other than true believers in the dogma of Ronald Reagan conservatism. It ran out on Tom Kean's claim to be a voice of moderation in a party that plainly has no interest in listening to such a voice. And it ran out on the rich and honorable tradition of bipartisanship that Republicans were proud to carry on in the administrations of presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, and Ford, but which no self-respecting party member dares counsel in the era of President Reagan.

All keynote speeches are partisan, of course, and some rhetorical excesses are to be expected, even forgiven by the political opposition. Governor
Dukakis was probably not upset that Governor Kean seized the opportunity of his keynote address to turn the symbol of the hourglass against him; but Dukakis and other Democrats must surely have been surprised, and a little dismayed, to see it done in such a mean-spirited tone.

Nobody thought that Kean would deliver a speech devoid of criticism of the Democrats, their platform, and their candidates. But few would have predicted, before the speech began, that the same man who once voted a school-prayer bill, led the New Jersey nuclear freeze movement, supports a woman’s right to have an abortion, and favors the Equal Rights Amendment would rail against the “way-out programs” and the “politics of special interest” of the “Liberal Democrats”; that the same man who has so often espoused the rough-and-tumble world of partisan politics, expressing outright admiration for John F. Kennedy and frequently commending Democratic lawmakers for sponsoring or supporting significant pieces of legislation, would now come on like Spiro Agnew, accusing the Democrats of “patriotism” (for changing the red, white, and blue on the American flag to pink, eggshell, and azure, because “their media consultants in Atlanta didn’t think the colors looked good on television”); that the same man who, after signing into law increases in the state sales and income taxes, and precisely doubling the state’s income and sales taxes, and that New Jersey’s budget deficit has doubled from $6 billion to $12 billion since he became governor in 1982.

“In his keynote address,” The New York Times summed up, “Gov. Tom Kean of New Jersey became the most significant convention speaker to talk about urban poverty, racial unrest and environmental degradation. But even if he had to deliver, at the last second, the speeches of the Bush camp, 10 minutes of standard and, for him, uncharacteristically harsh and simple-minded Democrat-bashing.

It was almost as if we got to see, before our very eyes, the final stages of Tom Kean’s metamorphosis from the reasonable, principled pragmatist his conscience had always allowed him to be, to the preachy ideologue whose political necessity had forced him to become.

T o this credit, Kean did touch on issues and themes that showed what The Record of Hackensack called “warmth and humanity” — two commodities which have been in dangerously short supply during the Reagan years. (It is also worth noting that Kean’s speech, whose editorial page has been the bane of Kean’s existence, and the target of his enemies, was, with a regrettable shrug, his tenure as Governor, to offer the most positive assessment of his keynote address of all the major New Jersey newspapers, calling Kean the “social conscience to the GOP.”)

When the Governor finally got to the heart of his speech, he exhorted his fellow Republicans to “reach out” to the “ill-educated, ill-trained, ill-equipped, ill-housed,” to offer them “not just from prejudice, but from poverty.” He reminded his audience, “There are no more apartheid, no more black and white, no more high and mighty battles against big government, no more battle against big business, no more battle against the poor.”

His rhetoric has always been, perhaps, a little harsher. Asked by Dan Rather to compare the keynote addresses at the Democratic and Republican conventions, Sawyer described, “An interesting idea of the talk of the Democratic convention; Tom Kean’s speech may have been the talk of his family, but not much more.”

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Perhaps it merely reflected the transformation of the party of Lincoln into the party of Reagan: single-minded, self-righteous, contemptuous of dissent, and scornful of all but the “right” view of issues.

R elaxed or not, Tom Kean has never been a spellbinding speaker — he is no Mario Cuomo, or Jesse Jackson, or even Michael Dukakis, with that matter — and he may not have been able to hope for much better than mixed reviews of his keynote address. But he did manage to make a couple of tactical errors in its construction.

First, he crafted a particularly weak punch line. As Hendrik Hertzberg observed in The New Republic, any speaker at a political convention who could “con-"