

Coming Back Around: Casey at the Convention

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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

"Let's remember this moment," Pennsylvania's Governor Robert P. Casey told his wife Ellen, as they sat dejectedly in the bleachers of Madison Square Garden in August 1992. "One day, it's all going to come back around."

The politically prominent governor, national opponent of abortion rights, and leader of an electorally critical state, repeatedly had been denied his request to address the national convention. Who denied him was never precisely clear. Why; however, has always been perfectly clear. The passionately pro-life governor was denied permission to speak because Democratic leaders were determined to permit no opposing view to be put forward on the explosive (and for them, settled) issue of abortion.

Perhaps no governor of a major state in modern history was treated as shabbily as Casey in 1992. He was personally lampooned when a campaign button appeared featuring a picture of him dressed in the religious garb of Pope John Paul II. Then the Pennsylvania delegation itself was seated ignominiously in the rear of the convention hall. And finally the coup de grace, a GOP supporter of Casey's 1990 gubernatorial opponent was given featured status to speak in favor of the abortion plank, while Casey sat hunched in the bleachers.

So some 16 years later, the now deceased Casey is finally vindicated: it has come around as he foretold. The elder Casey's son and namesake, Senator Robert Casey, has been given a choice prime spot to speak at the convention. Ironically he will speak on the same night as Hillary Clinton, long suspected to have been more than casually connected to the senior Casey's rebuff.

Senator Casey's appearance is itself not remarkable. He and his brother Pat gave short non-primetime talks at the 2000 convention. Then the senator was seeking reelection as Pennsylvania's Auditor General, and his brother was a candidate for Congress.

But this year is different. The younger Casey is now a US Senator, prominently pro-life, a high profile public official who happens to be Catholic, and a major supporter of Barack Obama. What he will say and how he will say it are not yet known. The speech itself; however, is likely to unleash a flood of emotions and memories from 1992.

But what will it mean in the dramatically changed political world of 2008—for the impending election, for the Democratic Party struggling to win a presidential election after two bitter losses, and for the always divisive, never resolved issue of national abortion?

Part of the answer to this question may be found in the complex motivations of the elder Casey that so compelled him to address the 1992 convention. Certainly Governor Casey was driven by his personal beliefs. But why he wanted to speak and his concern about his party's position on abortion has been widely misunderstood.

Casey's personal aversion to abortion was rooted in his belief that government had a moral responsibility to protect those who were powerless and vulnerable, and "unborn children," Casey believed, were the most powerless and vulnerable of all. He viewed abortion as a repudiation of this fundamental government responsibility.

But Casey's opposition to abortion was equally driven by political calculations. He had witnessed firsthand the erosion of Democratic support in blue collar, working areas of Pennsylvania. And he was convinced that the ongoing defection of "Reagan Democrats" to Republican candidates was largely due to his party's fierce and unrelenting support of abortion rights.

Significantly, Casey's opposition to abortion rights did not extend to abortion rights advocates. Instead he had supported many pro-choice candidates in the past, most prominently pro-choice Harris Wofford whom he had appointed to the US Senate following the tragic 1991 death of John Heinz in a helicopter crash.

But, the elder Casey feared and feared correctly, as it turned out there were further defections among culturally-conservative, working class voters. These defections, he believed, were tied to the abortion issue. In Pennsylvania alone, erosions in working class support during the 1990s helped elect Tom Ridge as governor and Rick Santorum as senator. In fact, as the decade progressed, the state of Pennsylvania became virtually a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Republican Party—a trend not reversed until the current decade.

These are political concerns that Barack Obama has no trouble understanding. The groups that Casey Sr. worried about: Catholics, conservatives, family values adherents, and, of course, pro-lifers, are the voters that gave him the most problem in his primary battles with Senator Clinton. These are also the voters that now loom problematic for him as he faces off against John McCain.

But Obama, unlike Clinton in 1992, probably can't win without these voters. He needs substantial support from them, and he needs prominent abortion opponents like Senator Casey to help him get it. If these voters stay out of the race, likely the Democrats stay out of power.

Senator Casey himself discounts the notion that his support of Senator Obama has anything to do with the earlier treatment of his father at the 1992 convention. Rather he insists that he supports Obama based on their personal relationship as well as Obama's policy solutions to the problems that confront the nation. And those who know Senator Casey know he often speaks from the heart.

Nevertheless, when Bob Casey Jr. strolls to the podium in Denver to praise his friend and advocate his election, the nation will also be witnessing the passing of one era in national abortion politics and the beginning of another. Bob Casey Sr. won't be there, but his prediction made 16 years ago will resonate around the hall and across the years. Indeed it has come back around.

*Politically Uncorrected*TM is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or

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