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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

DECLARATIONS | Updated August 17, 2012, 7:04 p.m. ET

Noonan: It's the Circumstances, Stupid

How the Republican ticket can suit the moment and use Clark Kent—er, Paul Ryan.



By PEGGY NOONAN

Americans are not ideologues. They think ideology is something squished down on their heads from on high, something imposed on them by big thinkers who create systems we're all supposed to conform to. Americans are more interested in philosophy, which bubbles up from human beings, from tradition and learned experience, and isn't imposed.

Lately we are hearing a bit about ideology, but the work of a great political philosopher, Edmund Burke, is more pertinent. Burke respected reality, acknowledged human nature, and appreciated political context. In "Reflections on the Revolution in France," he wrote, "Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing color and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind."

That's what Republicans and especially conservatives in this heady moment have to keep in mind: the circumstances.

Here are America's as the election unfolds: We are in economic crisis. People are afraid. Unemployment is high. Half the people in the country receive some sort of monthly check from the government—Social Security, veterans benefits, educational aid, disability, welfare. Why this is and what it portends is debate for another day. What is important now is that a lot of people don't feel they can afford to lose anything of what's coming in.

Normally, Republican candidates for national office get to be either stupid or evil. That's how the media and Democrats tag them. But they won't be able to tag Paul Ryan as either, because he's too well known as smart and decent.

So they will attempt to tag him as an ideologue, and this may take on some force. He's "extreme," "radical," his policy prescriptions are driven not by his knowledge of life as it's lived but by abstractions, by something he read in a book or saw on a flow chart. And he wants to cut everything. He's a mad-ideologue-bean counter.

Republicans know how meaningful this campaign became when Mr. Ryan was picked: He changed its subject matter just by showing up. And he is right in his central insight, which is his central political reason for being:

America, to be strong again, must get its spending and revenues more closely aligned. It is irresponsible of the Democrats to ignore and punt and play with this great challenge.

But Republicans must understand, also, that the race probably just became more of an uphill battle, because Paul Ryan has been very specific about what must and can be done. Americans will give Romney-Ryan a fair hearing, but everything has to go right now, everyone has to bring their A game.

Republicans should keep this picture in mind. There's a woman on a porch in eastern Ohio and she has a dog and likes guns and supports the NRA and sees herself as more or less conservative. She assumed she'd vote for Romney and not that big loser in the White House. But she's hearing about Ryan and she's hearing the word "cuts." She knows spending is out of control and she's worried about deficits and debt. But she's on disability and her husband's illness is being handled by Medicare, and she's wondering: "Do these guys really understand my life? Do they know how it is for us?" She's getting concerned, and not only for herself but her neighbors and friends. People are not just protective of themselves, they're loyal to others.

Ryan is associated with the word cutting. Republicans will have to make people believe the word to associate with him is "saving," that the Romney-Ryan ticket wants to save entitlement programs that aren't sustainable, that will in time collapse unless we impose ruinous taxes or continue with ruinous deficits.

Republicans have just a few weeks to get across—on the stump, at the conventions—that they're trying to save Medicare, not kill it, that they're the lifeguard, not the shark.

Advice?

Go for broke on your fidelity to the safety net and your insistence on saving it. The other guy does nothing but talk, pose and let the crisis worsen.



Martin Kozlowski

Stick together. Romney and Ryan on the stump were dynamic and drew huge crowds. They look stronger, more substantive together. Now they've split up, which is standard: You can cover twice as much ground that way. But there's nothing standard about this year. They should break precedent and campaign together. It's Ryan with Romney, Romney with Ryan. They balance, enhance and moderate each other. One is long accused of being an opportunist, the other charged with being an idealist. Keep them together, it's an interesting package.

The more you see of Paul Ryan, the more you understand and appreciate his thinking. Get him doing long interviews, not short ones—full hours on the Sunday shows, sit-downs with Bret Baier and Charlie Rose. This is high risk. He does high risk.

With all the PAC money floating around, we've entered the Golden Age of mudslinging. When Democrats run the spot where a young guy throws grandma in the wheelchair off the cliff—well, don't wait for that ad.

Republicans should do their own spot, now—one that's comic and sweet. Grandma in the wheelchair is speeding on a downward slope toward a cliff. She looks terrified. Suddenly a young guy who looks like Clark Kent—that is, like Paul Ryan—springs forward, puts his body between the wheelchair and the edge, and stops it. She looks up at him, smiles, touches his face with her hand. He smiles, turns the chair around and begins to push her back to safety. "Romney-Ryan. Trying to get things back on firm ground."

Answer the "Does he understand my life?" question head on. How many of Mr. Ryan's constituents are on some kind of benefits? They keep electing him by healthy margins. There must be a reason. Find them. "My name is Kate, I receive the Social Security I earned, and my husband receives the veteran's benefits he earned. In these hard times we rely on them to live. We would never trust things to someone who didn't have our interests at heart. We've trusted Paul 14 years. He never let us down. He won't let America down."

Republican ads have to be clever, funny or moving. A central fact of this political year is that everyone's spending billions on ads, yet campaign consultants fear no one's watching them anymore—there's too many, they're propaganda, people use them for bathroom breaks. That sound you hear after the Obama attack ad is not cheers, it's toilets flushing.

Romney-Ryan should spend some money the old-fashioned way, not only on 60-second spots but on half-hour and full-hour live, voter-in-the-round question-and-answer sessions. And, of course, speeches. In 1976, Ronald Reagan was finished in the North Carolina primary until he borrowed the money to buy a half-hour of airtime the night before the voting. He ran a taped speech that turned everything around. Speeches are powerful! And Paul Ryan was once a speechwriter. For Jack Kemp, God bless him.

Mitt Romney just threw a long ball. Fine. The GOP will have to play an audacious, longball game.

An old cliché of politics has never been truer: "They don't care what you know unless they know that you care." Or, it's the circumstances, stupid.

A version of this article appeared August 18, 2012, on page A13 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: It's the Circumstances, Stupid.

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