

Mario Cuomo

Last Sunday, we went to the University of California at Davis to hear Mario Cuomo, governor of New York, speak to an audience of some 2,000 people. Besides seeing him speak several times on television, I had read his *Journal*, a first-person account of his gubernatorial campaign. I came to his lecture expecting a high level of oratory and hoping for some straight talk. I thoroughly enjoyed his two-hour presentation but found myself critiquing its content in the week that followed.

He is an intelligent, articulate, and liberal rapper who exhibits great rapport and presence with an audience. His impressive command of the English language flows from his liberal arts Catholic university education that was so prevalent in the 1950's. I would characterize his oratorical style as old-school, a style I enjoy.

The themes he presented Sunday night were “the opportunity of work” by which immigrants can make a better life for themselves and educate their children to become professionals; the “solidarity of the nation” in World War II that united us all, by race, class, and gender, in order to win the war against aggression and transform our country into the most prosperous nation in the history of the world; the economic decline of the United States caused by its becoming the world's debtor and largest importer of goods (but still the greatest nation on earth); the lack of work opportunity; the unmanageable density of our inner cities with their inherent violence, drug use, and welfare culture; and finally, children giving birth to babies (but still the greatest nation on earth).

At the end of the lecture, he answered questions and used his answers to set forth additional themes. The first was his unalterable opposition to the death penalty because of its barbarism, its inability to deter others, its bias against the poor, its periodic taking of the life of an innocent person, and the fact that it is not cost-effective. And his second theme contained an admonition to the president to tell the American people the truth about such difficult issues as the sale of assault rifles for domestic use, and our need to intervene in Somalia, Bosnia, and other countries in order to protect human rights. He argued that if the president would but level with the American people, he would be able to build consensus for new policies.

Skillfully, he developed his themes using personal examples and interesting anecdotes, posed thoughtful rhetorical questions, and spoke with a flawless delivery, good pace, and a smart sense of timing. Unfortunately, he peppered his speech with examples of solutions he had initiated in New York to solve these problems. These solutions made parts of his lecture sound like a campaign speech for as-yet-to-be-announced political office. But I witnessed this same trait in the speeches of Jerry Brown. On the one hand, he wanted his audience to treat him as a free and unencumbered public policy thinker, but on the other hand, he did not want his remarks to be used against him in some future as-yet-unannounced campaign, so he was forced to include many qualifying remarks to soften his message. He wanted to be free to speak his mind, but never was.

I felt the same was true of Cuomo's presentation at UC Davis. He kept one ear cocked to hear if his remarks might be used against him in a future political campaign. He used qualifiers to soften the impact of his position. And many of the examples he used to illustrate what "we are doing in New York" to solve these problems were pitiful when compared to the magnitude of the problem itself. For example, one of his solutions involved a grant award of \$100,000 from the Ford Foundation to assist welfare teen-age mothers. I doubt this amount of money would pay for the cost of an employee to set up the program.

But what bothered me most about his speech was his lack of integrity; he did not level with the audience. For all his rhetoric about the work ethic and the absolute need to provide jobs to people who wanted nothing more than the opportunity to work and improve their lot in life, he gave not a single example of any initiative that he proposed or supported. And while he spoke eloquently about the role of work in the immigrant history of the United States and the lack of work in our inner cities and elsewhere, he offered no vision about how work could be restored to American life.

And he did not talk straight about addiction. He hushed the audience by telling them that the chances of a teen-ager being hooked on crack after using it twice is 50%, and then rapped about how devastating drug abuse is in this country, but not a word about alcohol addiction. Alcohol abuse, and its related side-effects, is the number-one health problem in hospital emergency

rooms throughout the country. It is such a huge problem that talking about the number-two health problem is almost irrelevant.

Alcohol abuse creates so much domestic violence, which is dangerous and devastating for family members and police officers, that railing only about drug use trivializes it. The number of homicides, assaults, rapes, auto accidents, and mayhem caused by alcohol abuse as compared to drug abuse provides no meaningful statistical equation to make a rational comparison. The use of alcohol is legal, cheap, culturally acceptable, and readily available on every other street corner in America. If drugs were legalized, their effect on society would be dramatically reduced because they would be far less expensive, thereby minimizing the need to steal money and goods to pay for them.

Cuomo reported that the cost to build a prison cell in New York was \$130,000 and to maintain it costs \$32,000 a year. What he was apparently unwilling to report is that more than 50% of the inmates who inhabit these cells are there because of criminal drug violations, and that nearly 50% of their guards retire on tax-free state disability at the age of 50. He should have gone on to say that there is not enough money in the world to maintain the prisons now already built in the United States. This truth is apparently too much for the American people to hear.

Much to my amazement, Cuomo said not a single word about the need for very low cost rental housing and how to achieve it. In fact, he said nothing at all about the need for government to provide affordable housing.

As much as I respect Cuomo for his moral commitment and his political acumen, if he is the most articulate and truthful voice that Democrats have for the poor, the immigrants, and the underclass of this country, then we have little to look forward to except crime, unemployment, violence, mayhem, and generations of welfare.