You Kids, Get Off of the Republican Party's Lawn

Clint Eastwood's rambling and at times incoherent speech at the Republican Convention was an extremely apt metaphor for the Party itself. Eastwood's speech, like the Republican Party, was filled with rancor and bitterness sprinkled with poor attempts at not entirely appropriate attempts at humor. It was also vague, focusing more on restating generalities than on offering any specifics. While Eastwood did not capture the radical hatred for President Obama that characterizes much of the Republican Party, his disdain for the President was evident. The empty chair gimmick was, like much of what the Republican Party says, fun for its base, but for many voters strange, disrespectful and not particularly logical.

Eastwood's speech reveals a lot about today's Republican Party. First, the fact that he was up on that podium in the first place raises questions about the professionalism and judgment of the operatives and strategists who planned the convention. Apparently, none of the people charged with making sure the convention presented the party and the candidate in the best light possible thought it was worth it to vet Eastwood's speech or to find out whether the octogenarian actor was up to the task of giving a speech at the convention. This is the kind of mistake that serious presidential campaign teams do not make, but today's Republican Party is rapidly losing its claim to being a serious or professional operation.

Although it may not be what the convention organizers wanted, the image of an older white man rambling often nonsensically about politics, President Obama, and, at times, nothing in particular, while responding to every heckler, and recycling lines from movies from a generation ago, is pretty fitting for today's Republican Party. Eastwood's speech underscored that the biggest problem facing the Republican Party is not Mitt Romney's obvious weakness as a candidate, Paul Ryan's tenuous relationship with the truth or even the presence of candidates like Todd Akin who offer a toxic combination of misogyny and ignorance. Rather, the biggest problem facing the Republican Party is that they are a backwards looking party in a country that has always been oriented toward the future.

The subtext of Eastwood's speech and of the whole Republican Party today is essentially "Hey you kids get off my lawn." Eastwood's angry grumbling may have captured this more colorfully and viscerally than some of the other speeches, but it is a sentiment that undergirds Republican opposition to things, like birth control, that are accepted as a part of life by most Americans but represented a big change decades ago, or marriage equality, which is increasingly a non-issue for Americans under 40 but still infuriates the Republicans older, conservative base.

Romney's decision to put Paul Ryan on the ticket indicates that many in the Party recognize this problem, but Ryan, the year of his birth notwithstanding, is hardly a forward-looking political figure. His hostility to programs like Medicare and infatuation with sophomoric mid-twentieth century political thinkers like Ayn Rand make him seem more like throwback to the time where radical conservatives with his views were marginalized in the Republican Party, rather than
somebody who is able, or even interested in, moving his party, or his country, into a brighter future.

Only a few days after the convention, it is clear that Eastwood's speech was the defining moment of the Republican Convention this year. It is likely the only thing that many ordinary Americans will remember as the convention recedes further into the past. While that is obviously unfortunate both for Eastwood and the Republican Party, it is not as if the speech overshadowed some otherwise inspiring event from the convention such as the arrival of a new national political figure or the emergence of one of the candidates into a true national leader.

While Eastwood's speech was embarrassing both for Eastwood and the Republican Party, it was only a more awkward and blunt formulation of the Republican message and sentiment that was expressed throughout the convention. Eastwood is a perfect visual reinforcement of a party that has lost touch with voters, and indeed with America. Had he not made the speech, another symbol, perhaps the demographics of the delegates themselves, would have been found.

This suggests Eastwood's speech creates a bigger problem for what it symbolizes than for what was actually said. In future conventions, the Republican Party can do their homework better and see that no speeches as incoherent as Eastwood's are made, but the party will not be able to hide its essential nature. It seems now that the best thing that happened to the Republicans during their convention was that it got shortened by a day. Unless the Republicans find a way to be in the present thinking about the future, rather than longing for the past, they may want to think of shortening their convention by another two or three days in the future.