



## Obama talks plenty but says nothing

By John Robson  
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Tuesday's State of the Union address confirms that the president of the United States is a boring blatherskite. The nation will survive, but it's bad news for them and us, given the key U.S. role in preserving order and liberty in the world and the enduring appeal of his vacuous sort of style to progressives.

The speech was awful in several dimensions starting with a painful failed laugh line about oil company prosperity (the White House transcript obsequiously indicated "laughter" that their video, also available online, makes clear did not happen). You'd think someone in the White House would know what members of Congress find funny.

Or patronizing; if anyone doesn't need an undergraduate lecture on the virtues of public discussion it's them. I realize the president wasn't really talking to Congress. He was trying to go over their heads to the American people ... who just handed House Democrats the largest midterm defeat since 1938 and gave Republicans the biggest gain in state legislative seats ever.

Arguably Barack Obama was doing the only thing he knows how to do; give a campaign speech long on feel-good rhetoric and anecdotes but short on facts or logic. But couldn't he find a speech writer with more range? Especially now?

Remember, the State of the Union exists because Article II, Section 3 of the Constitution requires that the president "shall from time to time give to Congress information of the State of the Union and recommend to their consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient." Tuesday's speech contained virtually no information, a disregard of Constitutional propriety unnecessarily grating to Tea Party sensibilities.

Before Woodrow Wilson it was customary to deliver the State of the Union in written form. I'd love to see Obama try to write anything Congress would read or newspapers would cover. Almost the only solid fact he cited was that "most of the cuts and savings I've proposed only address annual domestic spending, which represents a little more than 12 per cent of our budget." And that's a humiliating admission of failure presented as if it were a great achievement. If it's not enough, why don't you suggest more? You're the president.

A five-year spending freeze is a frank admission that he has no idea what to do about the budget. Why didn't he remind congresspersons how much of federal spending goes on the big social programs then offer a statesmanlike trade-off of painful cuts in those areas for the elimination of outrageous tax loopholes?

Typically, he instead offered detailed facts about a hypothetical future while glossing blithely over to-day's difficulties. "By 2035, 80 per cent of America's electricity will come from clean energy sources" and "Within 25 years, our goal is to give 80 per cent of Americans access to high-speed rail." I like trains; I'm a country music fan. But what has this to do with America's real problems including deficits menacing to its status as a great power?

Obama simply does not think in any recognizable sense of the word. For instance he praised China for building "faster trains and newer airports" (how would you build older ones?) then later noted, with no hint of a connection, that in undemocratic countries "If the central government wants a railroad, they build a railroad, no matter how many homes get bulldozed." Ahem.

On world affairs, neo-liberal blather about beating Asian kids at math is no substitute for frank geopolitical analysis. And his model of good government seems to be putting another man on the moon, a single-minded, expensive triumph a quarter of a million miles from the unravelling Great Society half a century ago that offers no lessons on the painful trade-offs critical to restore fiscal sanity today.

Likewise his insistence that federal intrusion into education is necessary to "win the future," a line lifted from Newt Gingrich that doesn't even mean anything anyway. Since the U.S. achieved global economic, military and cultural primacy with a drastically decentralized education system, what analysis supports the notion that it can only get it back by doing the exact opposite? And where in the constitution does it say the federal government is entitled to mess with education?

Instead, Obama used some variant of "win the future" nine times and expressed a desire to "move forward" three times, as though moving sideways at a 57 degree angle was an option others might favour. Such words are plainly uttered not in service of a thought but in place of one, and the President who uttered them is manifestly a doofus.

Fortunately, in America, it doesn't matter. The electorate can and just did turn effective control over to the other party, leaving Barack Obama to model expensive suits for two more painful but probably harmless years. The Union is strong. But that speech, and the guy giving it, were embarrassingly weak.

John Robson's column appears Fridays.

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