

Obama, The Moderate Republican

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At 9 p.m. Eastern time Jan. 25 President Barack Obama launched his 2012 campaign for reelection as a Democratic President running with a center-right political program reminiscent of what used to be called “moderate Republicanism.”

The occasion was Obama’s second State of the Union address, in which he assured millions of Americans watching on television that what’s “at stake right now is not who wins the next election.”

Winning in 2012 is precisely what’s at stake, and the presidential speech was the vehicle for candidate Obama to emerge as a hopefully winning combination of two former Presidents. Ronald Reagan of the political right and Bill Clinton of the center, the optimistic Great Communicator and the opportunist Great Triangler all in one. In foreign affairs, add a third predecessor, G. H. W. Bush, a conservative ³realist² in international matters.

Given the deep split in the Republican Party between the old line right wing, which controls the majority of the obstructionist GOP caucus in the Senate and House, and the hard line Tea Party far right extremists, Obama evidently thinks that “rational conservatism” — once associated with GOP moderates before they became extinct — is his ticket to win the next election.

But judging by the political content of Obama’s speech — his soaring nationalist oratory about the superiority of America and its people, and glittering generalities about what he intends to accomplish in the next six years — the only serious winners in 2012, as in 2008, will be big business, big finance and big military.

The White House team obviously decided that in these troubled economic and political times Obama’s most productive approach to the State of the Union message would be a sanguine recitation of the good news, ignoring most of the bad news, and focusing on national unity, a bright future at home, and America’s continued world leadership — if only we pull together.

Despite the economic travail still visited upon scores of millions of Americans, Obama praised “our free enterprise system” and declared: “We are poised for progress. Two years after the worst recession most of U.S. have ever known, the stock market has come roaring back. Corporate profits are up. The economy is growing again... These steps we’ve taken over the last two years may have broken the back of this recession, but to win the future, we’ll need to take on challenges that have been decades in the making.”

The theme of the one-hour election speech was “Winning The Future” — a slogan with about as much content as the vacuous “Change We Can Believe In,” and “Yes We Can.” Obama

reiterated the phrase eight times as he called upon the American electorate to join him in overcoming economic challenges, reducing the deficit, reforming government, encouraging innovation, improving education, rebuilding America, creating Democratic-Republican unity in Congress, and especially doing what he actually termed “big things.”

The New York Times noted with understatement that “The speech was light on new policy proposals.” Indeed, light as a feather. The president did not seem to possess specific plans, or the hint of adequate financing, or the political backing to attain any of these objectives.

How could most of them possibly succeed under such conditions, especially when the government has just entered its third year with an annual deficit of nearly 10% of GDP while tax breaks for the super rich have just been extended, and neither of the two ruling parties has the fortitude to raise taxes?

Given this conundrum, the U.S. edition of the influential Economist magazine (Jan. 27) concluded succinctly that President Obama delivered “a strikingly unadacious speech [that] failed to address America’s problems.”

At the same time, the component states of the union are going broke, though that never made it into the State of the Union address. For instance, New York State Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced Feb. 1 that his state was “functionally bankrupt” as he proposed draconian cuts in the education and Medicaid budgets.

Most of the states and the Federal government seem to be largely compensating for the Great Recession — brought about by the bankers, financiers and their political enablers — by slashing services for the working and middle classes and the poor.

In addition to these problems, of course, there’s also dangerously high unemployment, millions of foreclosed homes, increasing poverty, an educational system in decline, a decaying infrastructure, tattered social safety nets, an expanding war in Afghanistan, a Pentagon and national security budget of over a trillion dollars a year, and increasing environmental destruction exacerbated by impending climate change.

It is possible to resolve this perfect storm of difficulties over time through planning, sacrifice, boldness and a commitment to rebuild America as a more egalitarian, anti-militarist and non-hegemonic society, but only in Reagan’s mythical Shining City Upon a Hill can it be done through rhetoric alone. A perfect example of such empty rhetoric is contained in this uplifting passage from President Obama’s speech:

“We need to out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world. (Applause.) We have to make America the best place on Earth to do business. We need to take responsibility for our deficit and reform our government. That’s how our people will prosper. That’s how we’ll win the future. (Applause) The first step in winning the future is encouraging American innovation.”

In only one instance did Obama proffer the semblance of a concrete plan, and enthusiastic Republican votes will make it possible: “I am proposing,” Obama told the assemblage, “that starting this year we freeze annual domestic spending for the next five years. (Applause.) Now, this would reduce the deficit by more than \$400 billion over the next decade (sic), and will bring discretionary spending to the lowest share of our economy since Dwight Eisenhower was President. This freeze will require painful cuts.” The pain assuredly will not

be felt by the rich.

The main focus of Obama's address was on jobs, which he mentioned 26 times without once uttering the word "unemployment" or "jobless." Officially, unemployment in February is 9% but when part-time workers who need full-time jobs are included, along with "discouraged" workers who have been seeking employment so long they have given up, the real total is double that figure.

The President spoke with sympathy about workers unable to find employment and spent time explaining some of the factors behind the lack of jobs, including international competition, the need for more sophisticated skills, high technology innovation, and American capitalism's switch from manufacturing to more profitable service industries. He did not mention the accelerated class war declared over 30 years ago by big business and its political supporters against American workers and the union movement that resulted in the stagnant wages, diminished benefits, weakened pensions, and job insecurity that made the sudden impact of the Great Recession much worse for many working people.

For all the words devoted to jobs, Obama managed not to put forward a jobs program. Since the White House will not propose another economic stimulus, much less consider a crash federal jobs program to directly hire the unemployed, he seems satisfied to provide additional tax incentives for businesses to begin hiring again, coupled with the promise of an impressive future infrastructure building program that probably won't get off the ground.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka — clinging to the Democratic Party as a drowning man to a life preserver, even though the party's center-right leadership ignores the needs of the working class — almost, but not entirely, appeared to be taking Obama's oratory at face value: "We strongly support the President's vision on infrastructure to create good jobs and succeed in a global economy, and working people are ready to work with him and hold him to his promises," said Trumka. He complained mildly about "corporations that outsource American jobs" and said "we should not be cutting government spending when the economy is so weak."

Most U.S. businesses are doing quite well. Profits in the third-quarter of last year increased at an annual rate of \$1,659 billion, said to be "the steepest annual surge since officials began tracking such matters 60 years ago." Nationwide profits have increased 12% in the last three years. The Dow cracked 12,000 in January, partly in response to Obama's State of the Union promise to overhaul the corporate tax system, which corporations believe will enhance their profits.

Yet, many American companies remain very slow to hire additional workers. Why?

"One obvious possibility," wrote David Leonhardt in the Jan. 19 New York Times, "is the balance of power between employers and employees.... American employers operate with few restraints. Unions have withered, at least in the private sector, and courts have grown friendlier to business. Many companies can now come much closer to setting the terms of their relationship with employees, letting them go when they become a drag on profits and relying on remaining workers or temporary ones when business picks up."

Leonhardt continued: "For corporate America, the Great Recession is over. For the American worker it's not." He doesn't expect unemployment will drop below 6% for at least five more

years.

The President's address was perhaps more important for what he left out than what was included.

Obama omitted any mention of global warming, though it was a repeated theme in the 2008 campaign and was included in last year's State of the Union. True, the antediluvian climate-change deniers in Congress and Republican voters get apoplexy when it is mentioned — but that's no reason to cave in. It is all the more reason why he should use his bully pulpit to enlighten the American people about the scientific argument regarding climate change. Significantly fewer people today believe climate change is a danger compared to five years ago, according to the polls.

President Obama mentioned Rep. Gabrielle Giffords — who was shot in Tucson two weeks earlier in a massacre that left six dead, including a 9-year-old girl, and 14 wounded — at the beginning of his speech. He also said “the dreams of a little girl in Tucson are not so different than those of our own children, and that they all deserve the chance to be fulfilled.” But he refused to say a word about tightening gun laws, though that, too, was one of his election issues. Commented Paul Helmke, president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence: “How can President Obama tell us [about the child] without talking about the gun violence that destroyed those dreams?” He evidently doesn't wish to aggravate the gun lobby and Republican voters.

A major omission was mention of the historic gap not simply between rich and poor but between the rich and the great majority of American families. It's one of the principal characteristics of our society that explains what is wrong with America, but there's nothing to quote from the State of the Union. Instead we will quote a recent statement by independent Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, the only self-described socialist in Congress:

“The billionaires are on the warpath. They want more, more, more. The top 1% now controls more wealth [cash and assets] than the bottom 90% combined. Not enough! In 2007, the top 1% of U.S. income earners made 23.5% of all income — more than the bottom 50% combined. Not enough! The share of income going to the top 1% has nearly tripled since the mid-1970s. Not enough! Eighty percent of all new income earned from 1980 to 2005 has gone to the top 1%. Not enough!”

Obama also left out such words as “poverty,” “hunger,” or “homelessness” to reference the nearly 50 million poor Americans, or the word “foreclosures,” lest it would remind his audience that the administration's foreclosure program is a shambles.

On the other hand, the President did mention and justly took a bow for overturning the Don't Ask, Don't Tell regulation in the Armed Forces. “Starting this year,” he said, “no American will be forbidden from serving the country they love because of who they love.” (Applause.) As usual, however, he balanced a liberal gesture with a conservative one, when he immediately followed with: “And with that change, I call on all our college campuses to open their doors to our military recruiters and ROTC. It is time to leave behind the divisive battles of the past. It is time to move forward as one nation.” (Applause.) “One nation,” evidently, has no room for dissent or opposition to militarism.

A good part of Obama's talk concerned education and the need for individuals to obtain greater learning to compete for jobs and for the U.S. to compete economically with other

countries. His vehicle for enhancing education is the administration's "Race to the Top" education program. He commented: "To all 50 states, we said, 'If you show us the most innovative plans to improve teacher quality and student achievement, we'll show you the money.'"

The money involved amounts to \$1.35 billion this year if it is all given out. In the past only 10 of some 45 states who applied for grants received them. In this connection it is worthwhile to note that Gov. Cuomo is requesting a cut of \$2.45 billion in the New York State education budget this year, \$1.10 billion more than the entire "Race" funding. Scores of other states and cities are cutting school budgets as well. Only 2% of every Federal tax dollar goes to education, as opposed to well over 50% for the Pentagon and other national security expenses.

New York University Professor Diane Ravitch is one of Race to the Top's critics, referring to the program as Bush's third term in education" In an article a few months ago titled Obama's Race to the Top Will Not Improve Education, she noted:

"Mr. Obama was unfazed by the scathing critique of the 'Race' by the nation's leading civil rights organizations, who insisted that access to federal funding should be based on need, not competition.... President Obama and [Education] Secretary Duncan need to stop and think. They are heading in the wrong direction. On their present course, they will end up demoralizing teachers, closing schools that are struggling to improve, dismantling the teaching profession, destabilizing communities, and harming public education." [1]

The troubled American infrastructure was an important point in the address. The president said: "Our infrastructure used to be the best, but our lead has slipped.... We have to do better.... We'll make sure this is fully paid for, attract private investment, and pick projects based [on] what's best for the economy, not politicians." This will be interesting to watch at a time of fiscal austerity, when the bulk of funding goes to needless wars. Here's how the infrastructure situation looks according to the National Priorities Project:

"The President noted that 'our own engineers graded our nation's infrastructure, they gave us a D.' In fact, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers, 26% of our bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, 33% of our major roads are in poor or mediocre condition, and the water systems that serve 10% of the U.S. population are in serious need of repair. President Obama proposed '[putting] more Americans to work repairing crumbling roads and bridges. We'll make sure this is fully paid for.' Yet the President did not specify how this work would be funded. ASCE estimates that the total cost to meet our infrastructure needs is \$2.2 trillion and that federal stimulus funding will cover only 8% of the cost."

Although he ignored climate change, President Obama devoted some remarks to energy. He said: "Some folks want wind and solar. Others want nuclear, clean coal and natural gas. To meet this goal, we will need them all — and I urge Democrats and Republicans to work together to make it happen." (Applause.)

Aside from the fact that the Federal government is investing far too few dollars and effort into reducing dependency on fossil fuels there is considerable debate within the environmentally-conscious community about the use of nuclear, clean coal and natural gas. Nuclear because a safe way of disposing of deadly wastes remains elusive and also because of the danger of an explosion. Coal because "clean" coal isn't clean. Natural gas, because

while it burns cleaner than oil, it remains a significant source of CO₂ in the atmosphere, and also because extracting it will require extremely dangerous fracking (hydraulic fracturing) to meet demand.

According to the New York Times “He called for an end to subsidies for oil companies and set a goal of reducing dependence on polluting fuels over the next quarter-century, but without any mechanism to enforce it.” If the subsidies end for these richest companies in the world it will amount to about \$4 billion a year for five years. This is out of a projected 2011 budget deficit of \$1.5 trillion, and higher in future years — helpful, but a drop in the proverbial bucket.

Obama noted that “The Secretary of Defense has also agreed to cut tens of billions of dollars in spending that he and his generals believe our military can do without.”(Applause.) This should not be construed to mean the Pentagon budget will shrink. For years many members of Congress have supported constituent war manufacturer projects that the Pentagon said it didn’t need but which were approved anyway. But with the huge deficit, Congress may okay elimination of unnecessary weapons costing some \$78 billion over the next five years. This comes to some \$15.6 billion a year, but new “needed” weapons and the other accouterments of war will continue to increase defense spending.

The president informed the American people that their “paychecks are a little bigger today... thanks to the tax cuts we passed.” He didn’t follow up by specifying that the paychecks of the millionaire class got “a lot bigger,” due to his administration’s capitulation to the right wing demand to continue Bush’s millionaire tax cuts.

President Obama hardly spoke of foreign affairs. But he framed much of his speech around the need to “sustain the leadership that has made America not just a place on a map, but the light to the world.” This is a principal goal of Obama Administration policy: the retention of Washington’s unipolar dominion over worldly affairs at a time when U.S. economic and political power is in decline while other nations, particularly from the global “south,” are rising.

Most of his brief foreign remarks referred to America’s propensity for warring against poor countries. “We must defeat determined enemies, wherever they are,” he declared, continuing George W. Bush’s mantra that there are potential terrorists lurking behind every tree.

The president lauded the freedom fighters in Tunisia, “where the will of the people proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator. And tonight, let us be clear: The United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people.”

This evidently was not the time to mention that the United States, and the Obama Administration until a few days earlier, supported the dictatorial regime politically and financially. Soon after the speech, the Egyptian people rose up against another dictator that the U.S. defended and financed for decades. When it looked like the masses might win, the U.S. started to change its tune. Both these incidents, and there are more to come, will continue to facilitate the decline of world’s remaining superpower.

The Obama Administration is hardly unique in being guided by expediency instead of principle in foreign affairs, and the same rule obtains about what is put in and what is left

out of State of the Union messages. It's an election document, not an honest appraisal, and 2012 is around the corner. Enter Mr. Moderate Republican, all geared up to lead America in doing "big things" once again.

Note

[1] Ravich's full article on education is at www.huffingtonpost.com/.../obamas-race-to-the-top-wi_b_666598.html. An excellent analysis of the Race to the Top Program appears in the Spring 2010 issue of Rethinking Schools, http://www.rethinkingschools.org/restrict.asp?path=archive/24_03/24_03_NCLBstan.shtml

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