Trump's SOTU 'Red Meat' Speech: US Political Crisis Now Deepens

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"On Tuesday, February 4, 2020 Donald Trump delivered a State of the Union speech that revealed his election 2020 strategy, designed to roil and mobilize his political base, and to declare to the Democrats that his political war with them will now escalate further.

If anyone thinks the recent impeachment and Senate trial was the high point of the growing conflict between the two political parties, Republican (correct that: Trumpublicans now) and Democrat, they haven't seen anything yet. The worse, much worse is yet to come in the months leading up to the November 2020 elections.

The visual personification of this intensifying conflict was evident at the close of Trump's speech: He turned to vice president Pence and House of Representatives leader, Pelosi, both sitting behind him on a dais. Trump handed them his speech, as is the tradition. He then abruptly turned away from Pelosi refusing to shake her extended hand—as traditional decorum has always required. Pelosi, shocked by the snub, in turn took the written speech...and tore it up. All this was caught on national TV. The event was symbolic of the fight will now escalate and get even more vicious in the run up to November.

If Trump's speech summarized the conflict up to this point, the exchange between him and Pelosi reflected the 'gloves off' political conflict now about to begin. As the saying goes, "We ain't seen nothing yet"!

It is not difficult to understand the true meaning of Trump's SOTU. Above all, it represents a toss of 'red meat' to his radical political base. There was very little in it about what he proposes for the country in the future, as is normal for a SOTU speech. Instead, what we got was a speech designed to agitate and mobilize his political base based on themes of fear (of the immigrant) and hate (of Pelosi and the Democrats). The dish of fear/hate was sauteed with a large dose of lies and misrepresentations, and served up with a new recipe of racism designed to help Trump hold on to the swing states that delivered his electoral college majority in 2016. The speech marks what will be a significant escalation of extraordinary political attacks by Trump and his movement against his Democrat opponents in the election. And if past practice is any clue, the Democrat leadership is likely unprepared for what is to come.

The 'Red Meat' to the Base

The speech was replete with what Trump's base wants to hear, with no punches pulled. Once again, as in 2016, the immigrant is the dangerous criminal and killer. The immigrant is of course anyone of color, but especially Latinos crossing the southern US border, and anyone sympathetic in any way to them or even those already legally here. Trump wants to

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protect us from the immigrant. And according to Trump's appeal to this base: the Democrats want to embrace him, protect him with taxpayer money, and thereby identify themselves with the criminal-killer element among us.

In the same breath as he reiterated his politically successful anti-Latino racist appeal, Trump touted his "long, tall and very powerful" wall, claiming 100 miles have already been built and another 500 coming next year. More money for the wall will thus by inference be necessary. Or else we may all suffer the fate of the anecdotal killer-criminal-immigrant, who of course is Latino.
A variation on this illegal (read: Latino) 'enemy within us' theme is the Sanctuary Cities movement and, by association, the entire state of California which has declared itself a sanctuary state. Trump spent a good deal of time in his speech attacking sanctuary cities. In the past, his bete noir was a person (Hillary, Pelosi, etc.) Now it's a geography, even a state. Watch out California. Trump is about to swing his ax, far and wide, and in your direction!

Like most demagogues, Trump likes to make his case with anecdotal, emotional appeals. Thus, with a fear-mongering, melodramatic anecdotal example early in his speech he cited a criminal illegal running amuck, shooting everyone in California. That cleared the way for his proposal for legislation to go after Sanctuary Cities, in particular in California. The legislation proposed was the 'Justice for Victims of Sanctuary Cities' Act that would allow individuals to sue Sanctuary Cities. It is clearly a move to open the door for radical elements of his base to protest and engage in even more militant, perhaps even violent, action—-not unlike how anti-abortion radicals were encouraged in the past to physically attack abortion clinics and threaten and assault doctors and nurses.

Like all extreme nationalist and proto-fascist movements, there must be an 'enemy within' that is identified as the source of the country's problems—including those who might defend them.
Another 'red meat' toss to his base in his speech was his proposal for legislation to bar late term abortions. Still another dish offered up was allowing prayer in public schools, which he followed up with a pledge to increase federal funding to promote it.

Another fresh bone thrown to the base was Trump's strong endorsement of 2nd amendment gun rights. In contrast, throughout the speech not a word was said about mass killings at US schools or the fact that studies show a shooting and killing goes on in schools in America at least once every day somewhere.

His base was no doubt pleased as well with his solution to the growing climate crisis: somehow business and the public will plant 1 trillion more trees, he proposed. That would presumably create enough oxygen to prevent the oceans from acidifying, glaciers from melting, and Australia and California from burning.

There was also an attack on public schools. Trump claimed they were failing everywhere and that every parent should have the choice of sending their kid to whatever school they wanted, and receive scholarship money paid by the taxpayer to send them to a private school of their choice. Trump touted the 'Educational Freedom & Scholarship Act'. In one of at least a half dozen examples, best described as 'gallery melodrama', he turned to the gallery in the House chamber and introduced a young black girl and her mother, announcing on the spot he personally was giving her a scholarship under the Act.

One of the more disgusting examples of 'gallery melodrama', that has become ready fare

apparently in these SOTU speeches in recent years, was Trump's introduction of the right wing radical talk show pundit, Rush Limbaugh. Long an ideologue of the radical, extreme right who has dished up lies and misrepresentations on a daily basis, Limbaugh was introduced as having stage 4 lung cancer. That was to set up the sympathy appeal, of course. Trump then announced he was giving Rush the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Rush acted surprised. The person next to Rush then immediately pulled out the medal and draped it around Limbaugh's neck. We're supposed to believe it was all unrehearsed and spontaneous. Not a dry eye in the gallery. Trump's message: all you liars and hate mongers on the right out there, you too can become a hero under Trump. Just keep up the good work in the coming election year!

The New Racism Card

Democrats should take note of Trump's new racism strategy. He clearly is now appealing to the African-American voter—even as he writes off and declares the Latino as the illegal alien threat.

In at least six episodes of 'gallery melodrama', Trump's subject was a black American. In addition to the young girl and her mother, noted above, Trump introduced a black former drug user who became a businessman, enabled by Trump's 'opportunity zone' legislation—in fact a piece of legislation designed to give special tax cuts to businesses in certain cities. Then there was the black kid who wants to become an astronaut. He was introduced with his 100 year old grandfather, a former Air Force officer, Charles McGee, who served in Korea and Vietnam, next to him. Trump announced he just made McGee a brigadier general. That kills 'three birds with one stone', as they say: a kudo to senior citizens, to blacks, and to the military all in one melodrama bundle. Trump then proposed an increase in funding for black colleges.

In only one, and very brief, 'gallery melodrama' episode during the speech was a Latino introduced. Unlike all the black kids and moms, he was a Latino ICE officer. Not as much emotional sympathy appeal there.

See where this is going? Up with blacks; down with Latinos? Split the minority vote.

Why the strange pro-black strategy? A strategy launched, by the way, a few days earlier in his unprecedented election Ad in the super-bowl, where Trump took credit for the bipartisan criminal reform legislation just passed, by showing a middle aged black women crying in relief now that Trump had released her relative from prison. Trump now a defender of African-Americans? A reformed former racist? Trump the declarer that Africans lived in shithole countries?

It's not that Trump has overnight given up his racist attitude against African Americans. What he's doing is counting the electoral votes in the swing states. The new appeal to blacks is designed to provide him a margin of extra votes in those swing states, a safer margin in the red states, especially the south in places like Georgia, all to ensure he wins the electoral college votes in those states as he did in 2016. That black vote margin is needed to offset the possible loss of middle class white women in the swing states that are, according to polls, put off by Trump's aggressive and off the cuff tweets and statements.

Manipulate blacks. Mobilize white nationalists by vilifying Latinos and other peoples of color. Split the minority vote, in other words.

Trump's Lies by Commission

As heard so often from Trump, much of his SOTU speech was laden with outright lies. In the roughly one-third of it devoted to the economy, this was especially the case. (Another one third of the speech was devoted to domestic issues and another third to foreign policy).

First there was Trump's claim that the under him the US economy is "the best it has ever been" in US history. But what are the facts? Not so in terms of US GDP. Trump's roughly 2% growth rate today is not that much different from the average since 2000. Nevertheless he said "Families are flourishing". Oh? What about the more than half of families today who have less than $400 to their name for emergencies? Or the more than half in each of the last two years who say, in polls, they received no wage increase at all in either year? Or what about the tens of millions of millennials and youth indentured with $1.6 trillion in student debt and can't get homes or families even started?

In the speech, Trump claimed the unemployment rate was the lowest ever. But that's the so-called U-3 rate which covers only full time workers, whose employment ranks by the way have been declining in absolute terms. It further excludes altogether the roughly 60 million US part time, gig and temp workers. If they were accurately estimated and included in unemployment figures, the true unemployment rate would be 8%-10%.

And what about wages? In the speech Trump repeated the oft-heard statistic that wages have been rising on his watch. But behind that figure lay several deeper facts: first, there's the more than half of the labor force who acknowledge they received no wage increase at all last year or the year before. That suggests it is the top 10% of tech, professional, and other workers who are getting most of the wage gains. Moreover, the wage figures and gains noted by Trump are an average: if those at the top get more, those at the middle and below are getting less or even nothing. In addition, the numbers are for full time workers, leaving out the 60 million part time and temps. Finally, they're wages not adjusted for inflation.

The real picture is that unemployment is much higher and wages are stagnating for the vast majority or worse. But this didn't stop Trump in his SOTU speech from saying "companies are coming back to the US" and creating jobs. Or that this is a 'blue collar boom' with wages rising.

Trump also declared in his SOTU that he would protect social security and Medicare. But in his recent speech to the billionaire crowd in Davos, Switzerland he let it slip to the well-heeled in attendance he would be going after both once he won the election again. One wonders which audience he's speaking the truth of his real intentions to.

In the SOTU he also gave support to infrastructure spending. But his prior proposals define 'infrastructure investment' as tax cuts for real estate developers.

He also declared in the SOTU speech that his recent proposals would lower prescription drug prices. But by this he really meant consumers being gouged by the Pharma companies would get to see how much the various drugs were being raised, in order to choose which one that would gouge them less. Market transparency does not mean lower drug prices. Big Pharma is not a competitive market where the consumer can choose among multiple offerings.

An even more outrageous, blatant lie was Trump's declaration he was giving his "ironclad" guarantee that those with health related, pre-existing conditions would have access to health care–when in fact what he has proposed to date are various measures to roll back pre-existing conditions guarantees.

Trump's most ridiculous lie was that Medicare was socialist. Here he was obviously attacking the growing support for a Medicare for All solution to the health crisis, increasingly supported both by the public and within the ranks of the Democrats. As he put it, 180 million Americans love their private health insurance. And he promised not to let the socialists take that away, even though it's quite clear that 70% of the US population is now dissatisfied with private health insurance and want something better. And if Medicare is socialist, does that mean the 50 million seniors on Medicare and Social Security are socialists as well? Add the millennials and seniors, and America must have already gone socialist!

One of the more disgusting outright lying claims of Trump was his comment that, under his regime, 7 million on food stamps had left the program. But what he didn't mention was he and the Republicans just declared 700,000 no longer eligible for food stamp support, including single moms with kids.

Trump's SOTU: Lying by Omission

Lies may be committed by carefully not elaborating on topics. Here Trump excelled as well in his SOTU speech. For example, he boasted that the stock markets had risen in value by $12 trillion on his watch. But what he didn't say is that more than $1 trillion every year has been passed on by corporations to investors and stock holders in the form of stock buybacks and dividend payouts. That's what drove the $12 Trillion, making the 2% of the voters who own most of the stock richer than ever in history.

He then glossed over the recent signed China-US phase 1 trade deal as well as the NAFTA 2.0 USMCA trade deal. he said they were great achievements, but refused to indicate in what sense. In recent weeks he has declared China would buy $100 billion more in US goods this year as part of that deal. But the fact is China never agreed to that and most economists estimate it will be well less than $50B, and maybe not even that now that the coronavirus is undermining US-China trade.

And so far as the USMCA is concerned, Trump in the SOTU speech reported it will produce 100,000 new US jobs. But even a cursory reading of the terms of that deal show there are no measures designed to bring back jobs from Mexico to the US. In both the trade deals, there's really 'no there there', as economists are now beginning to determine. Both the China and USMCA trade deals are just old wine in new bottles, as they say, corked up with a lot of bombast, hyperbole, and factual misrepresentation.

Missing totally from the SOTU speech was any reference how Trump's multi-trillion dollar tax cuts for corporations and investors and war spending have driven the US budget deficit in excess of $1 trillion a year, with trillion dollar additional deficits for another decade! In short, unlike all Republican presidents before him, in his SOTU speech Trump said nothing about the accelerating deficit, and in turn the $23 trillion national debt, or how he proposed to address it in the coming year or beyond.

In yet another example of lying by omission, in the speech Trump claimed that low wage workers had experienced an increase of 16% in wages on his watch, but then didn't bother

to explain that most of that was due to the raising of minimum wages by governors and legislatures in the 'blue' Democratic states.

Lying by omission means taking credit for things you never did, or were done by others. That's become a norm for Trump, and he kept up that practice throughout the SOTU speech.

Foreign Policy Fantasies

Trump has had no actual foreign policy accomplishment during his entire term in office. Nothing came of the North Korea deal. He was able to get only a few token European countries, like Greece, to increase their NATO spending a little, but not much. His attempted support for a coup in Venezuela collapsed. (That didn't stop him by bringing to his speech the US selected puppet, Guido, and introducing him in the gallery). His trade deals produced very little in actual gains for the US ballooning trade deficit. He achieved nothing in Syria or Turkey except to allow Russia to increase its influence in both. And he failed to get Iran to the bargaining table to renegotiate the nuclear deal.

What he did declare in his SOTU speech as victories in foreign policy was his reversal of the Obama administration's opening to Cuba. His recent launch a new Mideast Israel-Palestine initiative that was dead on arrival. The claim he destroyed ISIS, when in fact it was mostly the Iranians, Kurds, Russians, and Turks that did it. And his declaration that peace talks in Afghanistan to end that conflict were making "tremendous progress", when in fact a deal isn't even close. And, not least, his assassination of the Iranian general, Soleimani, that almost pushed both countries over the brink of war. Not much there in foreign policy either.

The SOTU Message: Domestic Political Warfare

Where Trump has succeeded is in his domestic political war with the Democrats. As he noted in the SOTU speech, he has approved 187 new Federal Court judges and two Supreme Court judges, giving him a clear majority in the Judiciary. The US Senate has become no less myopically committed to him than his political grassroots base and media machine. Senate leader, McConnell, has proven to be one of the most obsequious Senate leaders in history. With the Judiciary and one house of Congress firmly in his pocket now he has not been reluctant to break whatever rules and norms he deems necessary.

Having outmaneuvered the Democrats in the Mueller Report and Russia interference affair, and now as well in the impeachment attempt, Trump is now even more confident no doubt that he can run roughshod over Pelosi and the Democrats in this election year. And he will.

His SOTU speech was in effect a declaration of his intent to do so. And the confrontation at the end of the speech between himself and Pelosi—-Trump refusing to shake her extended hand and Pelosi then ripping up his speech—is symbolic of the political dogfight about to come. Throughout it all, Trump's approval rating has survived in safe territory. His red state allies are intent on ensuring his electoral vote majority via both gerrymandering and voter roll suppression. His grass roots minions are itching to release more aggressive protests, demonstrations and action. His strategists are formulating a new racist appeal to split Democrats' historical minority base of support.

Meanwhile, the Democrats themselves are sliding into their own internal conflict, with the corporate wing planning to scuttle Sanders by any means necessary and replace him with Bloomberg as their candidate at the convention.

In short, Trump's SOTU speech was less about the state of the union and more about the state of Trump's re-election and the Trump strategy to win a second term in November. And it appears he may succeed in domestic politics, while having clearly failed in economics and foreign policy."

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