



SOTU 2014: A GOP State of the Union would Still be Off Message

By Lloyd Green

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There's a gap between what the GOP likes to say and what the country wants to hear which is why the State of the Union Address that the Republicans would likely deliver on Tuesday, had they won, is not the speech that needs to be heard.

In the predictable speech, the Republicans would call for lower taxes and entitlement reform, while bashing Obamacare. The speech might even inject a dollop of the American Dream, as it told America that the State of the Union was poor or fragile.

GOP donors would smile at the predictable speech. Republican ideologues would like it, too, because it would affirm their verities. Yet, what the predictable speech *wouldn't* do is offer anything new, or resonate on Main Street and in Middle America.

So why the gap? For starters, people are increasingly disaffected from both parties; fewer than three in ten Americans approve of the Republican Party, while Congress' approval rating is below 14 percent.

There is also a growing gap between the Republicans' rural and religious voting base and the party's financial patrons. The latter can be readily found on Wall Street and in New York City's bedroom communities. Great for cash, but for votes? Not so much.

However, even though many wealthy Americans vote Republican, the Republican Party is not the Party of the rich. To illustrate, [in 2008 wealthier Americans voted for Barack Obama](#), and appear ready to do so [again for Hillary Clinton in 2016](#).

Rather, the GOP is now the presumed home of middle income and white working class Americans. But you would never know it if you listened to what the current crop of party leaders was offering as inspirational fare.

Republicans still talk like they are the party of the rich, and still offer policies aimed at the rich, such as lower tax rates and entitlement cuts. Yet, in reality, the GOP is in the odd position of offering benefits -- in the form of tax cuts -- to high-end Democrats -- and then, on the other side of the political ledger, offering to cut entitlements -- in the form of cuts to Social Security -- that effectively target the Republicans' base.

Against this backdrop, a Republican SOTU should try something different. It should try to sound Republican, like the Republicans of the age when Republicans won big political victories. Yes, a Republican speech should fuse the tonalities of Lincoln, TR and Ike.

The speech should connect citizenry and government through reciprocal duties and obligations. It should give voice and primacy to the expectations of Main Street, and its hearth-and-home patriots. It should remind Americans that citizenship is ultimately a privilege.

In other words, less Gordon Gecko, and more Rough Rider and Honest Abe. Back in the day Roosevelt observed that: "The things that will destroy America are prosperity at any price, peace at any price, safety first instead of duty first and love of soft living and the get-rich-quick theory of life." Name any contemporary candidate in either party who would dare say what TR said.

Or take immigration. Nowadays, Republicans either favor self-deportation or open borders. Citizenship is little more than an end in itself. Reciprocity has disappeared from the discussion. Diversity trumps assimilation.

But looking back, Roosevelt said that "We should insist that if the immigrant who comes here in good faith becomes an American and assimilates himself to us, he shall be treated on an exact equality with everyone else, for it is an outrage to discriminate against any such man because of creed, or birthplace, or origin."

And when it came to earned entitlements, Ike got it right. In a November 1954 letter to his brother Ed, President Eisenhower upbraided those who would abolish Social Security or eliminate government programs that were premised on toil: "Should any political party attempt to abolish social security unemployment insurance and eliminate labor laws and farm programs you would not hear of that party again in our political history." Eisenhower counted the number of such folks as "negligible," and labeled them as "stupid."

Yet calls for "reform" of Social Security are now de rigueur for Republican aspirants, and even for Barack Obama. In 2011, Texas Governor Rick Perry branded [Social Security a Ponzi](#)

[scheme](#), while Mitt Romney called for lower benefits for future seniors, except for the elderly poor.

Meanwhile, even in the midst of “Bridgagate,” embattled New Jersey Governor Chris Christie answered “Absolutely,” when asked whether Social Security and other [entitlement programs should be means-tested](#). As for Obama, he has “proposed nearly \$1 trillion in spending cuts in his budget, including a [switch to using the Chained Consumer Price Index](#), which liberal policy experts estimate could cost seniors thousands of dollars in benefits over their lifetimes,” according to *The Hill*.

Practically speaking, means-testing is horrible politics for Republicans, as it rewards the lower rungs of the Democratic base at the expense of the Republican core. In fact, a majority of Republicans oppose cuts to Social Security and Medicare.

Essentially, Democratic and Republican elites have internalized the wants of their donors. Yet, unlike the Democrats who repeatedly win presidential elections and then attempt to govern with an Upstairs-Downstairs Coalition, the results of the Republicans’ strategy has led to winning the popular vote only once in the last six presidential elections.

A Republican State of the Union should be about jobs, infrastructure and growth. It should reassure working Americans that the benefits tied to work will be there for them when they need them.

The GOP should remind everyone that America is not just a place, but remains an ideal -- an ideal of work, thrift, and family, not just tax cuts for the rich, subsidies to big business, or props for institutions too big to fail.

The Republican Party I’m talking about is not the party of the Cato Institute, the Club for Growth and Jim DeMint? It’s the party of Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Eisenhower. The old GOP was a better party; it also won more elections.