

<http://reason.com/blog/2010/12/17/you-know-what-america-really-n>

You Know What America *Really* Needs Right Now? A Better State of the Union Address

Matt Welch | December 17, 2010

It's not even Festivus yet (except in participating Orange County jails), and already we're getting pundittastic cures for what ails the body politic: A better Barack Obama State of the Union address!

David Brooks, *New York Times*:

Obama's challenge in the State of the Union address is to give voice to the inchoate longing for change, and to chart a political path through the Washington minefield so that voters and bond markets have the sense that the country is at least beginning to grapple with its problems.

William Galston, *New Republic*:

[T]he time is ripe—from both a policy and a political standpoint—to shift toward a comprehensive program of fiscal stabilization and economic growth, integrated into a narrative of American success in the twenty-first century. He should do so during next year's State of the Union address, which, if used correctly, may well be the pivotal speech of the Obama presidency.

As is typically the case in "narrative" narratives, the concrete policy details, these are not so important.

Brooks:

the president doesn't have to go out on a limb and embrace specific (and politically suicidal) hard choices.



Galston:

[Medicare] is not a problem that Obama should attempt to solve during the next two years....But at some point, the argument must end, and we must work together within some shared framework to foster coverage and quality while lowering costs.

OK, but surely there are some specifics, yes? Yes. For lefties, Brooks proposes throwing the bones of "spending more on infrastructure, research and job training," "investing in green energy," and "embracing industrial policy" (how this is different from what Obama has been doing for two years escapes me). Galston offers the left flank a National Infrastructure Bank ("The president should make it a centerpiece of his agenda"), vague hand-waving in the direction of immigration reform (his proposal is based entirely on a Michael Bloomberg quote), and this formulation: "Starting no later than 2015, all foreign combat commitments should be fully paid for, with a war surtax if necessary."

And for the right? Brooks suggests "fundamental welfare state reform," using as his one example making Medicare "a defined contribution program." Galston prescribes "modest benefit and revenue adjustments" to Social Security, and a plea for Obama to "underscore and defend" his education record (I list this under right-leaning not because Obama's education record has been anything like "reform," but because pundits like Brooks and Galston seem to think it has).

Our armchair speechwriters are on much more comfortable ground Thinking Big. Brooks:

the president will probably have to take advantage of the following paradox: bigger is easier. If he just tinkers around the edges with modest proposals, then everybody will be on familiar ground. But if he can expand the current debate, then, suddenly, everybody is on new ground.

Galston:

All of these efforts lend themselves to a single, coherent narrative. [...] Obama could say, we've faced our current challenges—and worse—throughout our history. From time to time, we've succumbed to pessimism and toyed with the possibility of national decline. We've always snapped out of it and gone on to greater things. That's America's story, and it's up to us to write the next chapter. We can do it.

Hell, let's just eliminate the middle man altogether:

I snark because I care—about our crummy governance and economy, a thousand times more than about potential POTUS optics. The grand rhetorical gesture and the vague wave of the hand are crucial parts of the *problem*, which by my admittedly libertarian lights is that government at all levels is swallowing up ever-greater portions of the productive part of the economy and running up default-courting debts, while a debased political class attempts to unify around demanding still more of our doubloons in the name of 21st Century American Exceptionalism, or some goddamned thing. Need a grand narrative? How about this: We will, at long last, live within our means, and get government out of places it does not belong.

Until anyone—politician, pundit, punter—gets serious about cutting a government we absolutely positively cannot currently afford, their calls for presidential poetry should be met with hoots of derision.

Bonus trivia: Did you know that for 112 years, the American president refused on principle to deliver the State of the Union Address in front of Congress, because of Thomas Jefferson's insight that such an exercise was too much like the British crown's "Speech From the Throne"? You would if you read, or re-read, Gene Healy's always-timely June 2008 Reason classic, "The Cult of



the Presidency."