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Gene Healy: Tuning out the State of the Union

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Tomorrow night, an embattled President Obama will deliver his 2010 State of the Union. He originally wanted to give it on Feb. 2, but -- adding to a string of recent indignities -- had to yield after irate "Lost" fans made clear they wouldn't put up with their season premiere getting pre-empted by a lousy presidential speech.

"Lost" is a silly show -- a six-year-long "Twilight Zone" episode doomed to end in disappointment. But you can hardly blame Americans for preferring it to the SOTU, a dull and tacky spectacle that celebrates our retreat from limited, constitutional government.

The Constitution requires that the president "from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union." But it doesn't mandate the modern pageant of pomp, circumstance, and phony promises we suffer through every year.

In fact, for most of the Republic's first century, the SOTU was a modest, informational affair. Presidents sent the written address to Congress, to be read aloud by a clerk. That was thanks to President Jefferson, who thought delivering the speech before Congress assembled smacked too much of a king's "Speech from the Throne."

When the power-hungry Woodrow Wilson overturned the Jeffersonian tradition in 1913, one senator cursed the revival of "the old Federalistic custom of speeches from the throne," calling it a "cheap and tawdry imitation of English royalty."

The speech only got worse from there, especially after the advent of television and LBJ's decision to move the address to prime time. That sealed the SOTU's transformation into the modern ritual, in which the president stands at the front of the House chamber making exorbitant promises that would shame a carny barker, while congresscritters stand and clap like members of the Supreme Soviet cheering a Brezhnev speech.

Ronald Reagan introduced the unfortunate custom of pointing to "Lenny Skutniks:" ordinary citizens in the SOTU audience who help the president hammer home his theme. Skutnik himself was a hero who dove into the icy Potomac to rescue a plane-crash survivor, but lately, presidents tend to bring along "victim Skutniks" who can serve as living arguments for federal activism. In his 2000 SOTU, Bill Clinton acknowledged a Columbine parent and anti-gun advocate, and in last year's address, Barack Obama saluted a young girl trying

to learn in a dilapidated school.

Political scientist Elvin T. Lim finds that the modern SOTU has grown increasingly "compassionate and emotive," its content more "egalitarian and redistributive." References to the Constitution, quite common in our first century, have declined, replaced by "an increasing lack of humility" on the part of the president.

After the apparent failure of President Obama's hubristic attempt to take over the health care sector, it's little wonder so many plan to tune out on Wednesday.

When Richard Nixon gave a prime-time address in 1971, more than half of the viewing public watched. In 2003, George W. Bush could do no better than 21 percent.

When Obama had to make way for "Lost," some lamented the fact that many Americans preferred trash TV over presidential enlightenment. But the public's lack of interest in the SOTU is actually a sign of political health.

When all eyes turn to the president, demanding he cure whatever ails us, the result is a dangerous concentration of federal power. Thus, it's good that our national talk-show host suffers from declining Nielsens.


Early indications are that tomorrow, a chastened Obama may retreat into "small-ball," with a passel of tax credits and microprograms. Must-see TV this ain't, but a lessening of presidential ambition would be very good news.

Jimmy Carter was the last president to mail in his SOTU, in 1981. It's unlikely that Carter did that out of respect for Jeffersonian principles -- he was a lame duck, worried that nobody wanted to hear him. Obama should keep that option in mind for next year.

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