

State of the Union: Fighting the Status Quo

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 28, 2010 NCR Today

The Washington Post ran a "tag cloud" this morning (good luck finding the graphic on the website!) that placed the words the President repeated the most often in last night's State of the Union speech in larger letters, with the words he spoke less frequently in smaller letters. These tag clouds allow one to gauge where the speech placed its emphasis. The biggest word was, unsurprisingly, "jobs," followed by "taxes," then "economy" and "energy," and in smaller letters words like "immigration," "climate," and "Afghanistan."

There was one word, actually two words, missing: "status quo." President Obama skillfully painted himself as an outsider, someone who inherited a mess he did not create, someone trying to make the forces of inertia and rigid partisanship that generally hold sway in Washington bend to the force of his political will to accomplish something. Yet, he needed to explicitly tag the Republicans as the party of the status quo. When they say "no" to proposals for health care reform, they are defending the status quo. When they object to a jobs bill, they are defending the status quo. When they oppose climate change legislation that will create good paying green jobs, they are defending the status quo. And Americans hate the status quo.

Much has been made of the surprise outcome in the special election in Massachusetts. Clearly, Sen. Scott Brown won there less because he was a Republican than because he was an outsider. When people are upset with the status quo, the thing you do not want to be is an incumbent. But, as Harry Truman proved in 1948, when you have a "do nothing" Congress, the President needs to call them out. President Obama did so last night in a variety of different ways, but the phrase that he and his fellow Democrats need to invoke as they set out their election year agenda is this: Democrats are trying to make things better and the Republicans are defending the status quo. It is the only way that the majority party can turn itself into the outsider this year, out the GOP on the defensive and stanch the bleeding.

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