

## Obama's Prosaic State of the Union

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 13, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

President Obama delivered a curious State of the Union speech last night. I say curious because it was mostly not a typical Obama speech. The State of the Union speech is always something of a laundry list, but Obama is known for his inspirational speeches, not for his ability to deliver a laundry list.

Most of last night's speech was prosaic, not inspirational. Bill Clinton was the last president who could make a laundry list speech work, turning the recitation of policy proposals into something accessible. Clinton had the populist touch that Obama clearly lacks. Obama, when he is not shooting for the stars, sounds very professorial, which is not a bad thing in a classroom but is not such a good thing in a State of the Union.

Much of the speech really did focus on the audience that was immediately in front of him. Take this passage:

*Now is our best chance for bipartisan, comprehensive tax reform that encourages job creation and helps bring down the deficit. (Applause.) We can get this done. The American people deserve a tax code that helps small businesses spend less time filling out complicated forms, and more time expanding and hiring -- a tax code that ensures billionaires with high-powered accountants can't work the system and pay a lower rate than their hardworking secretaries; a tax code that lowers incentives to move jobs overseas, and lowers tax rates for businesses and manufacturers that are creating jobs right here in the United States of America. That's what tax reform can deliver. That's what we can do together.*

Who is the "we" in that final sentence? Congress and the President. He did not weave in a folksy story about a hard-working mom who pays a higher rate than a CEO. He mentioned the consequences for the public of a simplified tax code, to be sure, but the public remained amorphous. "We" remained the politicians instead of "we" the American people, struggling to get the economy going. When Bill Clinton said "we," you almost always knew it included you.

The same disembodied sensibility was found in this passage about the need for early childhood education:

*Study after study shows that the sooner a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road. But today, fewer than 3 in 10 four-year-olds are enrolled in a high-quality preschool program. Most middle-class parents can't afford a few hundred bucks a week for a private preschool. And for poor kids who need help the most, this lack of access to preschool education can shadow them for the rest of their lives. So tonight, I propose working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every single child in America. (Applause.) That's something we should be able to do.*

Here, you would have thought that as a dad, he might have discussed the fact that his children were privileged to have early childhood education and that such education should not be reserved to the privileged. He did not. He might have invoked the situations of parents who struggle to pay for early childhood education with an example. He did not. And, there was no call for civic involvement, no partnering with churches and other civic groups to

meet this need. At the end of the paragraph, the 'we' were the politicians in Washington and no one else.

When he spoke of raising the minimum wage, my heart was aflutter. Here is an issue that can single-handedly lift people out of poverty. Here is an issue that gets to the fundamental dignity of work. Yet, Obama had no sustained critique of a culture that treats labor like other commodities, no detailed, and sympathetic, explanation of how little \$14,500 a year goes when one has to pay rent and buy groceries and think about child care and health insurance. The idea was great but the presentation was flat.

Towards the end of the speech, the President found his wings. He spoke movingly and with evocative language, when he turned to the issues of gun control and voting rights. Why can't he muster that kind of emotive connection when discussing economic issues? It is a big question and all the answers that come to mind are troublesome.

Nonetheless, the President's proposals were not 'out of the mainstream.' If his inaugural address struck many people as a liberal call to arms, the State of the Union speech was a series of modest liberal proposals, all designed to level the playing field in a society marked by increasing disparities of wealth and opportunity. There is nothing wrong with that goal, I just wish the President could connect better when discussing it.

In his response to the State of the Union, Marco Rubio actually did display some of the populist rhetoric that the President lacked when discussing the economy. But, he looked nervous throughout the speech, touching his forehead twice, then wiping his mouth twice, finally reaching, awkwardly, for a glass of water that was just outside the frame of the camera. That moment was a metaphor for the speech because Rubio's ideas are just outside the mainstream frame of American politics. Most Americans have learned 'how could they not?' that the market does not heal all wounds, and that business executives do not always invest in their workers but instead pocket huge bonuses at the end of the year, that lower taxes at the beginning of the last decade did not result in stunning economic growth. Rubio's inability to identify and articulate any new conservative ideas for the American economy was a missed opportunity.

All in all, I found it hard to stay awake through the evening's proceedings. We have a president who cannot connect emotionally on the issue most Americans care about and a rising Republican leader who can evoke powerful emotions about economic freedom, but has no real policies to expand that freedom except to the lucky. This is American politics in 2013 and it was disheartening to have to sit through one and one-half hours of it in condensed, rhetorical form.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 07/27/2017 - 18:08):** <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/obamas-prosaic-state-union>