NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The weakened Obama presidency

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 29, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Last night's State of the Union was not the best or the worst such speech. And it reflected the political realities of the day. Gone is the aspiration to change the way Washington works. Gone is most of the hope and change. The agenda has shrunk in the five years of Barack Obama's presidency.

I do not fault primarily the president for the breakdown in political comity in Washington, although, as former Defense Secretary Bob Gates noted in his recent book, both President Obama and his predecessor, President George W. Bush, should be faulted for spending precious little time investing in relationships with world and congressional leaders upon whom they rely to achieve their own political ambitions. And one of last night's finest moments was Obama's shout out to Speaker of the House John Boehner as the son of a barkeep. While it would be a good idea if the president were to invite Boehner over for lunch once every few weeks, who knows if it would do any good? The divisions in Washington reflect the divisions within the country, competing narratives about how American society can and should work.

The president did an able job reciting the facts last night. One of his strongest sections was his rigorous defense of the Affordable Care Act, although he might have conceded the difficulties faced, and largely overcome, with the plan's rollout. Still, when he cited the number of people now covered who were not previously and put a face on that coverage in the person of a woman in the first lady's box with a pre-existing condition who acquired health insurance Jan. 1, had an operation Jan. 6, and was not bankrupted by the ordeal. And he was right to chide the Republicans for their seeming addiction to voting to repeal the ACA -- "40 [votes] was enough."

In addressing income inequality, the president again set forth the facts in a compelling manner:

Today, after four years of economic growth, corporate profits and stock prices have rarely been higher, and those at the top have never done better. But average wages have barely budged. Inequality has deepened. Upward mobility has stalled. The cold, hard fact is that even in the midst of recovery, too many Americans are working more than ever just to get by -- let alone get ahead. And too many still aren't working at all.

This set the stage for a moral argument. He could have recalled those moments in history when, for example, Teddy Roosevelt broke up the trusts, or Franklin Roosevelt and Congress enacted the New Deal. He could have cited from the Good Book any one of a number of passages, but especially the 25th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew. He could have quoted Pope Francis. Instead, the next sentence was: "Our job is to reverse these tides." He acknowledged that he and those sitting in the chamber would not always agree about how to address the issue of income inequality, but he offered no one a compelling moral case for his own approach. President Obama, not for the first time, displayed one of his most limiting characteristics: his evident conviction that his own policies are self-evidently the best.

There was a lot of self in the speech last night, as there is a lot of self in this administration generally. As Dana Milbank noted this morning, [1] the pronoun "I" was conspicuous last night: "I'll cut" and "I'll use" and "I directed" and "I will act." I always cringe when I hear President Obama refer to "my secretary of defense" and, worse, "my attorney general." To be clear, the attorney general of the United States belongs to the nation, not to

the president. Attorney General Eric Holder is not "his," although, as I write those words I find myself thinking -- OK, you can have him. It was telling that the president spoke very little about immigration reform last night compared to, say, energy or education, in part because he knows that the more immigration reform is identified as his policy objective, the less likely it is to pass the GOP House. If you want to assess how weakened this presidency is, there you have it.

The president's commitment to using executive orders is another sign of weakness, even though the president tried to portray it as a sign of rigor. Congressional Democrats, who also have been frustrated with GOP intransigence on Capitol Hill, applaud these newfound executive branch actions, even though they deplored them when President Bush did the same. But as a matter of politics, in an election year, I fear this could backfire. Yes, almost all Democrats and a majority of Independents will applaud executive action on the minimum wage, but as Scott Wilson comments in this morning's *Post* [2], "in some of the conservative states where Democrats need to do well in November, the perception of a presidential end run around Congress could do more harm than good." Indeed, it makes the case to voters that they should guarantee Republican control of Congress, to serve as a check on a president whose ambitions are so pronounced.

I confess I think the State of the Union speech serves no useful purpose. I would love to see Obama use his remaining time in office to really shake things up next year and go to the well of the House chamber with few prepared remarks and then invite questions, the way a British prime minister takes questions once a week. If the GOP responses to last night's speech are any indication, they are not exactly sure on their feet! Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers did not have to stop mid-speech and reach for water. She did not bomb as Gov. Bobby Jindal did a few years back. But her response was platitudinous in the extreme. The assignment is deadly, to be sure. And it is not helped by the fact that so many Republicans now wish to respond. Sen. Mike Lee and Sen. Rand Paul both delivered speeches that were re-treads of old themes. If, as Charles Krauthammer observed on Fox, the president's speech was filled with "old chestnuts," the GOP responses were a forest of chestnut trees.

President Obama may still inspire the Democratic base. He did nothing to really persuade this disillusioned former supporter. I do not see last night's speech galvanizing the electorate. His poll numbers will stay in the low 40s until he has a major achievement or confronts a crisis with determination or his opponents step on a banana peel. The Democrats may applaud what they saw as fresh rigor in the president's determination to govern by executive order, but it may turn out to be sign of rigor mortis.

Source URL (retrieved on *02/12/2016 - 13:47*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/weakened-obama-presidency

Links:
[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/in-president-obamas-state-of-the-union-ambition-goes-missing/2014/01/28/6548d8fe-8894-11e3-a5bd-844629433ba3_story.html
[2] http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-prepared-to-avoid-congress-go-it-alone-on-carrying-out-modest-initiatives/2014/01/28/61b68280-8845-11e3-a5bd-844629433ba3_story.html?hpid=z3