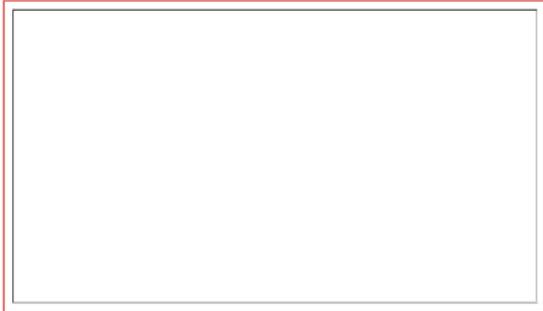


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## Obama's State of the Union Address



Obama has presented us with a very "American" State of the Union address, in which he has clearly appealed to core values of our society. Moreover,

Obama's concluding remarks about the kind of change he wants is the sort of vision that we have come to expect from him. Although an obligatory part of the State of the Union, Obama's celebration of citizens—by discussing the personal conversations and experiences that drove him to run for office, campaign for health care reform and, in general, to not quit—was more than the typical "this is what America stands for"; His telling of these experiences uses the memory of his campaign (he even notes the campaign slogan, "change we can believe in") as a way of inviting an emotional connection from the audience, asking them to recognize how he is doing "big things."

Yet, when it comes to the particulars of those "things," there were a few contradictions worth noting.

First, there's the issue of blaming. Obama's discussion of the "tone" of politics in the United States is a welcome addition that moves beyond typical bipartisanship pandering to a focus on the goals and purposes of Congressional officials, namely what it takes for leadership. Near the end of his speech, Obama (possibly in an attempt to moderate critiques that he has not fulfilled his promises) was critical of those "in public office" who "[play] it safe and avoid telling hard truths and [point] fingers." Yet, as one might have expected, Obama pointed his finger multiple times at Bush: he noted early in

the speech that the problems plaguing America were there when he took office; later in the speech he explained the deficit in place "before [he] walked in the door" of the White House; and, in explaining the bank bailout that "we all hated," he slipped into the speech, almost unnoticed, how this was not his idea but rather that he "supported the last administration's efforts to create the financial rescue program." If we cannot direct our hatred towards him, where does it go?

Second, there's the issue of the bandwagon, of justifying conclusions on popularity alone. In justifying his bank bailout, Obama claims he will not do what is popular but what is necessary. The bailout, he argues, slowed the meltdown that would have exacerbated the economic crisis, illustrating it was warranted. Yet his appeals to unity throughout the speech suggest that agreement, for the sake of unity, is paramount. Moreover, his particular justification for health care reform was based solely on the popularity of that policy: "I want everyone to take another look at the plan we've proposed. There's a reason why many doctors, nurses, and health care experts who know our system best consider this approach a vast improvement over the status quo." Mr. President, if you wanted people to understand what's necessary and not what's popular, you should tell us what that reason *is*. Why is your health care reform bill the best (rather than simply something experts like)?

Finally, there's the issue of diplomacy. Obama's foreign policy has been controversial, to say the least. For this reason, it seems surprising that his speech spent so little time discussing it. The omission of his efforts at reaching out to the Muslim world through his Cairo speech and his winning the Nobel Peace Prize are, in my mind, quite conspicuous. This is even more troubling when one considers the standards that he *does* invite the audience to use in judging his foreign policy. In a part of the speech that seemed like a relic of the Bush era, Obama touted the power rather than partnership efforts of the United States. Consider, for instance, the point that the number of terrorists that "have been captured or killed" in 2009 is "far more than in 2008." That's how you want us to measure your foreign policy success? What happened to the platitudes in your Cairo address that focused on mutual responsibility and trust? I appreciate the two paragraphs about engagement abroad but even those are used as part of a realist game to isolate North Korea and Iran.

The contradiction here is not internal to the speech but rather external, to the kind of vision in foreign policy that Obama professed on the campaign trail and demonstrated during his major foreign policy actions. Even the machismo about America as number one, evident in his new "new deal" with its focus on "building the infrastructure of tomorrow" (why should China or Europe have faster trains than us?), maps onto narratives about American progress and manifest destiny that have encouraged other nations to view us with suspicion.

I'm being a bit hard on him, I know, but it is largely because his promises have set the standards by which he will be judged. He recognizes this in the speech when he notes that people have told him his agenda is "too ambitious." Yet the question he poses to those critics—"How long should America put its future on hold"—does a good job moving the speech into the more widespread reforms apart from the economy. There are other things to praise in this speech as well. His use of personal anecdote continues a powerful means of support that the audience can't really disprove. Moreover, his argument that energy efficiency should be pursued regardless of what one believes about climate change was a great way to transcend the debate and provide an alternative rationale for independence in this area. Overall, I thought he did a good job outlining an agenda that rises above partisan lines but he needs to figure out a way to walk the tightrope without getting tangled up in contradictions.

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