

# Trump's Joint Address: The Reality Show Comes to US Congress

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*Let us tear through these Trumpland evocations, the business pitches of this show and publicity act that was the first address by the President to a joint sitting of the US Congress. There were the common themes; there were the contradictory messages; and there was plain, traditional nonsense. In the undergrowth were olive branches being offered (“The time for trivial fights is behind us”), platitudes, and a few incontestable points.*

While he swayed between themes like a confused, erratic metronome, a few could be gathered from Donald J. Trump's speech. For one, he kept insisting that he was placing the US people at the centre of his policies, the idea “that America must put its own citizens first, because only then can we truly make America great again.”

There were the populist markers and scratchings. He was intent, for instance, on draining “the swamp of government corruption by imposing a 5-year ban on lobbying by executive branch officials and a lifetime ban on becoming lobbyists for a foreign government.” (What of friendlies?) This aspiration has been neutered somewhat by his own assumption of power in the White House, but his base hardly cared.

Juicier than ever, immigration was repeatedly harked upon. Pleas “for immigration enforcement,” he claimed, had been heard. (So loudly, in fact, that traditional, nondescript Anglos like the Australian children's writer Mem Fox are being bailed up in sobbing horror at US airports.)

Dovetailing themes such as immigration and border enforcement, Trump sounded much like a recent line of Australian politicians who see both as problematic twins. On the one hand, as far as immigrants were concerned, he was happy to consider legalisation of undocumented labourers within the US through Congressional fiat.

On the other, bans and restrictions were necessary. “According to data provide by the Department of Justice, the vast majority of individuals convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related offences since 9/11 came here from outside our country.”

This, however, was quickly subsumed over more vigorous assertions about machismo. “We cannot allow a beachhead of terrorism to form inside of America” is compacted in the same mix as the immigration points system used by other states.

“Nations around the world like Canada, Australia and many others have merit based immigration systems.” Switching to such a system would have “benefits”, reaping a bountiful reward.

“We must restore integrity and the rule of law at our borders. For that reason, we will soon begin the construction of a great, great wall along our southern border.”

Indeed, the world of fighting immigrants is shady and dangerous, entailing violence, the incursion of crime, the unruliness of the uncontrollable from the terrible outside. “I have ordered the Department of Homeland Security to create an office to serve victims.”

Heavy with political symbolism, it will be termed VOICE – victims of immigration crime engagement. “We are providing a voice to those who have been ignored by our media, and silenced by special interests.” Populist fever will also be fanned by regular publications by Immigration and Customs Enforcement on what crimes “aliens” inflict on noble America.

As per the usual Trump mode of delivery, a few points of sensibility creep through. The US, having expended 6 trillion in the Middle East, did so “while our infrastructure crumbles.” As well as it is: the great curse of an empire in decline lies in enervating foreign engagements, the lure of power, and an escape from local problems.

But Trump remains an erratic businessman in continuity, his nose sniffing for the deal. Having previously rubbished the F-35 fighter, he gave himself a generous slap on the back for “bringing down the price of fantastic – and it is a fantastic – new, F-35 jet fighter”. A promised increase in defence spending, and greater profits for the Pentagon, is hardly a promise for sound civilian infrastructure and fewer potholes.

Health care was always going to figure. Repeal Obamacare, he promises, with “better health care”, a sloganeering, pro-market effort that suggests alternative simplicity to Obama complexity. Stand and clap, Republicans, for here, the Social Darwinian can stand tall in his sinecure even as the weak perish.

On that point, a stomach turning event ensued, with Trump referring to Pompe sufferer Megan Crowley, a true token of convenient celebration on this “Rare Disease Day”. For, in the president’s words, “True love for our people requires us to find common ground, to advance common good, and to cooperate on behalf of every American child who deserves a brighter future.”

Then came the whizzing sidewinders and calls for ambush for his opponents. “I am calling upon members of both parties to pass an educational bill that funds school choice for disadvantaged youth, including millions of Africa-American and Latino children.”

This is a worn but tried method: no one, and surely not the Democrats, could disagree with such a policy? Ditto the remark that, “Every American child should be able to grow in a safe community, to attend a great school, and to have access to a high-paying job.”

In substance, such a stance entails exploiting the vulnerable, but claiming to target conditions that produce vulnerability; embracing the market in its rapacious spirit while still believing in a community soul that shelters you from its effects.

Some sitting members looked terrified, a set of scrunched faces potted by pain, rueful disdain, and fear for the future. Democrats sat with bottoms super glued to the seats in initial disbelief and reproach; Republicans roared and cheered on the acid rush, the Trump wave filling their veins.

This was an America disunited, one cannibalising itself in full view. This was reality television made flesh, the grandest show, Congress turned into more than a mere Will Rogers comedy set. It was a show topped by the grieving widow Carryn Owens, wife of Chief Petty Officer William (Ryan) Owens, a Navy SEAL who fell in Trump's authorised raid in Yemen. "Ryan died as he lived, a warrior and a hero, battling against terrorism and securing our nation." Mythology, and the Military Industrial Complex, as one; illusions, united.

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