

Unity and Exceptionalism: Trump's State of Union Flurries

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Global Research, February 11, 2019

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"Trump is hated by everyone," [comes](#) one unnamed former official in an account to Vanity Fair, one supposedly sourced after the President's State of the Union Address. Another claimed that all was wretched in the White House: "It's total misery. People feel trapped." Off record stuff, unnamed and, as ever, doing nothing to concern a leader whose interests have always lain elsewhere. Whatever the chronic dysfunction affecting the West Wing, what mattered for Donald Trump was simply getting his State of the Union address going. And [long](#) it was too - 82 minutes, making it the third longest in history.

The address saw Trump return to what he is most comfortable with: campaign mode. Governance is less important than combat. When there are troubles, and when there is crisis, he searches for the rally, the reassurances of his formidable and, it would seem, unshakeable base still ignored on either side of the coast. The speech was [seen](#) by Susan Glasser of *The New Yorker* as "sort of gauzy" with hints of "World War II triumphalism".

The language was, in the main, thin puffery, that of the exceptional nation which had "saved freedom, transformed science" and done more than its bit to redefine "the middle class standard of living for the entire world to see." In a sense, this is true: the paradox of US living is that it supposedly reconciles middle class living with horrendous swathes of indigence and an active food stamp culture, a true glory to the distortions of Social Darwinism.

US presidential addresses tend to sound like bits of elevated shouting, the imperial figure, clutching the purple, looking down at his global subjects to lecture them about an extensive curriculum vitae thick with achievement.

"This is our future, our fate, and our choice to make. I am asking you to choose greatness."

This is the great mythology of choice, one that takes root in the experimental soils of New World optimism. It hides, or at least ignores the obvious point that greatness has often nothing to do with choice, being, as it were, a convergence of accidents, unintended steps and old fashioned stumbling. US society was not conceived as a committee's work in progress.

But for Trump, there was an exhortation framed around the language of decision and volition, peering into the future brightly.

“Together we can break decades of political stalemate. We can bridge old divisions, heal old wounds, build new coalitions, forge new solutions, and unlock the extraordinary promise of America’s future. The decision is ours to make.”

Trump’s language of deliverance is not for the future, but from it. It speaks to nostalgic tear-duct swellings, hot flushes of the past when full US employment was not an elaborate sham and US power could be seen, and in many cases felt, as an unconditional phenomenon. The future, to be understood, can only be done via the mechanism of the past. The State of the Union was no different in that sense.

“In June we marked 75 years since the start of what Gen. Dwight Eisenhower called ‘the great crusade’, the Allied liberation of Europe in World War II.”

Then there was that issue of moon travel, another act worthy of chest beating.

“In 2019, we also celebrate 50 years since brave young pilots flew a quarter of a million miles through space to plant the American flag on the face of the moon. Half a century later we are joined by one of the Apollo 11 astronauts who planted the flag: Buzz Aldrin. This year, American astronauts will go back into space on American rockets.”

The speech proved glazing in its praise of the Make America Great project. Manufacturing was up; regulations had been cut; corporations had been pacified and encouraged; taxes had been sliced; and the United States had become “the number one producer of oil and natural gas in the world.”

Then came the rather funny business of unity. Not that Trump’s period in office has been entirely absent of it: the passage of the First Step Act, a criminal justice reform measure that received a modest cheer across the aisles, will go down, in time, as a significant bipartisan measure. But Trump had his sights set elsewhere.

“As we have seen, when we are united, we can make astonishing strides for our country. Now, Republicans and Democrats must join forces again to confront an urgent national crisis.” Congress, he spoke in hectoring reminder, had “10 days left to pass a bill that will fund our Government, protect our homeland and secure our southern border.”

The Democrats remained defensive and unmoved, preferring a softer approach to dealing with illegal immigration. Nor are they likely to ease up on the investigations, which they have become inexorably linked to. It said much about the neurotic state of affairs that is Washington politics: Trump can speak to unity where it doesn’t exist, a common ground that is simply not being reached. Nor can it. Unity is precisely what the president is not, the toxic, necessary revelation of a society rent through with divisions that have turned into votes.

For the US to again fall into the fictional language of forced consensus, one manufactured in the hot houses of technocracy and the board room, would be for Trump to disappear, for his America to vanish into the illusion of agreement. That is hardly going to happen – at least

for now. The economic figures have given him leg room; his supporters have not left. Nor do the Democrats have an answer. The conspiracy of happiness has yet to return.

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