Trump's State of the Union Speech: Long on Theater, Short on Policy

31/01/2018

In the Trump speech last night, there were no fewer than twelve such 'gallery scenes' to break up the mesmerizing stop-rise-clap-sit down nonsense.

Presidents' State of the Union speeches used to report on accomplishments of the past year and proposals for new programs and policy changes for the next. Just as the country we once knew, those days are long gone.

RELATED: [Trump to Congress: Cut Aid to 'Enemies' Opposing Jerusalem Move](#)

In the 21st century, the format is mostly theatrical: The president offers a short sentence about how wonderful America is, cuts his sentence short, and waits for applause. The Congress rises and claps longer than the spoken sentence that brought them to their feet. This goes on every 15 seconds. Sometimes less. Up and down, up and down. Turn off the volume, and it's similar to canned laughter in a TV situation comedy—with the visual effect of bouncing butts replacing the canned laughter. Except it's all more tragic than it is comedic.

A stranger viewing for the first time must conclude that something anatomically must be wrong with their backsides. Up-down, up-down. But when the incessant pattern of 'short phrase, rise and clap too long, sit down' threatens to become too

repetitive, a new theatrical effect is introduced. Now it's the president introducing staged character actors in the gallery above the floor, each introduction providing an appeal to the tv audience's emotions. In the Trump speech last night, there were no fewer than twelve such 'gallery scenes' to break up the mesmerizing stop-rise-clap-sit down nonsense.

First, there was 'Ashley, the helicopter lady,' then 'Dolberg the firefighter,' Congressman Scalise, whose only claim to fame was he got himself shot (definitely not on the level of the other 'heroes'), followed. And how about the 12-year-old 'Preston the flag boy,' with whom Trump said he had a great conversation before the speech. (I'm sure it was of comparable intellect).

RELATED: [Bernie Sanders Brutally Fact-Checks Trump's State of The Union](#)

But clever by far was the next gallery event, the four parents whose kids were killed by MS13 gang members in Long Island, NY. All four were black, apparently to blunt the racist appeal by Trump injected into the scene, suggesting that all immigrants were gang members who came here as a result of 'chained migration' family policy. I guess MS13 gangsters never killed whites.

Not surprisingly, the next gallery scene was the ICE agent, a guy named Martinez who heroically smashed the MS13 gangsters. Of course, he too was Hispanic.

Both theatrical scenes dealing with 'immigrant gangsters arriving by chained migration' provided Trump a nice segway into describing his '4 pillars' immigration bill, the only policy proposal he actually spelled out in his nearly hour and a half speech.

For a pathway to citizenship that would take 12 years for 'Dreamer' kids, Trump would have his $30 billion-plus border wall, a new immigration policy based on 'merit' (welcome Norwegians), as well as an end to family 'chained migration policy' (which somehow would also protect the nuclear family, according to Trump). The message: white folks' nuclear families good; immigrant folks' (especially Latino) extended families bad, was the suggested logic.

What it all added up to? If Democrats agreed to his pillars 2-4 right now, maybe there would be citizenship for Dreamers sometime by 2030! What a deal. But who knows, maybe the Democrats will take it, given that they retreated from their prior 'line in the sand' of pass DACA and dreamers or they'll shut down the government.

The next theater event was no less interesting than the immigration scenes in the Trump play that was the presidential State of the Union address last night. In typical Trumpian worship of the police and military, Trump (the draft dodger) introduced an Albuquerque policeman in the gallery who had talked a pregnant woman on drugs from committing suicide. Seems the woman was desperate about bringing a kid into the world she'd be unable to afford to raise. The solution by the policeman was to offer to adopt her baby if she didn't kill herself. It worked. The kid and mother were saved, and the policeman adopted the child. The policeman's wife accompanied him in the gallery—with an infant in her arms of

course. Not sure whose it was but no matter. Now that was double theater, a scene within a scene. Shakespeare would have been proud.

That impressive bit of theater, perhaps the high point of all the 'gallery effects' of the evening, was the intro to Trump's solution to the Opioid crisis in America, where 60,000 a year now die from overdoses. In his speech, Trump's solution to the opioid crisis was 'let's get tougher on drug dealers'. He failed to mention, of course, that the drug dealers in question most responsible for launching the opioid crisis were the prescription drug companies themselves who pushed their products like Fentanyl and Percoset on doctors a decade ago, telling them the drugs weren't addictive.

As for the even larger prescription drug problem in American—i.e., the runaway cost of drugs that are killing unknown thousands of Americans who can't afford them because of price gouging—Trump merely said "prices will come down substantially…just watch!" That solution echoed his press conference of several weeks ago when he publicly addressed the opioid crisis…but offered no solution specifics how. Watching Trump solve the opioid crisis will be slower than watching grass grow…in winter!

Trump's speech was not all theater. Much of it was factual—except the facts were mostly misrepresentations and outright lies.

and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan. REUTERS/Win McNamee/Pool

Like unemployment is at a record low. But not when part time, temp, contract and gig work is added to full time. More than 13 million are still officially jobless. The rate is still close to 10%. And that doesn't count the 5-10 million workers who have dropped out of the labor force altogether since 2008, leading to record lows in labor force participate rates and employment to population ratios. That rate and ratio hasn't changed under Trump.

Another lie was that wages are finally starting to rise. Whose wages? If you want to count average wages and salaries of the 30 million managers, supervisors, and self-employed, maybe so. But according to US Labor department data, real average hourly earnings for all non-farm workers in the US in 2017 rose by a whopping 4 cents!

Trump cited again his Treasury Secretary, Mnuchin's, ridiculous figure that the average family income household would realize $4,000 a year in tax cuts. But no economist I know believes that absurd claim.

Perhaps the biggest facts manipulation occurred with Trump's references to his recent tax cuts. He cited a list of so-called middle class tax cuts, leaving out wealthy individual tax cuts measures. Typical was his claim of doubling the standard deduction, worth $800 billion in tax cuts for the working poor below $24k a year in income. But he failed to mention the additional $2.1 trillion hikes on the middle class. (Or the $2 trillion in corresponding cuts for wealthiest households.) Independent studies show the middle class may get some tax cuts initially, but those end by the seventh year, and then rise rapidly thereafter by year ten. In contrast, the corporate, business, and wealthy household cuts keep going—beyond the tenth year.

What Trump conveniently left out in his speech regarding taxes also qualifies as lie by omission. He noted the corporate tax rate was reduced from 35% to 21% and the non-corporate business income deductions were increased by 20%. That was $1.5 trillion and $310 billion, respectively.

Or that the Obamacare mandate repeal saved businesses another $300 billion. And multinational corporations would reap the lion's share of $1 trillion in tax cuts, at minimum. And all that still doesn't account for accelerated depreciation under the Act. Or abolition of the corporate Alternative Minimum Tax. Or continuation of the infamous corporate loopholes, like carried interest, corporate offshore 'inversions', or gimmicks that corporate tax lawyers joke about—like the 'dutch sandwich' and 'double Irish'.

Then there were the Trump jokes. I don't mean anything actually funny.

Nonsense statements like "beautiful clean coal" (the oxymoron statement of the year). Or that US companies offshore are "roaring coming back to where the action is". And car companies are bringing jobs back (while laying off in thousands). "Americans (white) are dreamers too". Or the phony infrastructure program that's coming, where companies will be subsidized by the federal government in 'public-private partnership' deals. And his unexplained reference to 'prison reform' (really?). Perfunctory references to trade, job training, another non-starter.

Hidden between the lines were other serious references, however. Like his ominous threat to "remove government employees" who 'fail the American people' or 'undermine American trust', which sounded like a warning from Trump to the bureaucracy not to cross him or else. Or his slap at National Football League players for not saluting the flag. Or plans to expand Guantanamo and the US nuclear arsenal. Or reaffirmation of the definition of 'enemy combatants' (which may include US citizens). Trump re-established the fact of his threat to civil liberties.

On the foreign policy front it was mostly threats as well, new and old: To withhold UN funding. Renewed support for new sanctions against Cuba and Venezuela. But North Korea was left for last. Here the return to theater was among the most dramatic. The last 'gallery scene' involved a legless defector from North Korea, Seong Ho, brought all the way from So. Korea just for the speech. This was theater with props; applause was sustained as Mr. Ho raised and shook his crutches above his head after Trump's introduction.

Trump then rode the emotional wave to conclusion with his closing theme that the American people themselves are what's great about America. Too bad he doesn't mean all Americans.

So far as Trump speeches go, it was a 'safe speech', a teleprompter speech. But typically Trump. Lots of false facts. Emphasis on dividing the country. Long on Theater and emotional appeals to 'enemies within and without'. And short on policy specifics. But after all, apart from tax cuts and deregulation for corporations and the rich, and a failed Obamacare repeal, not much was achieved in 2017 for him to talk about. And so far as new ideas for 2018 are concerned, there's 'no there there' as well.