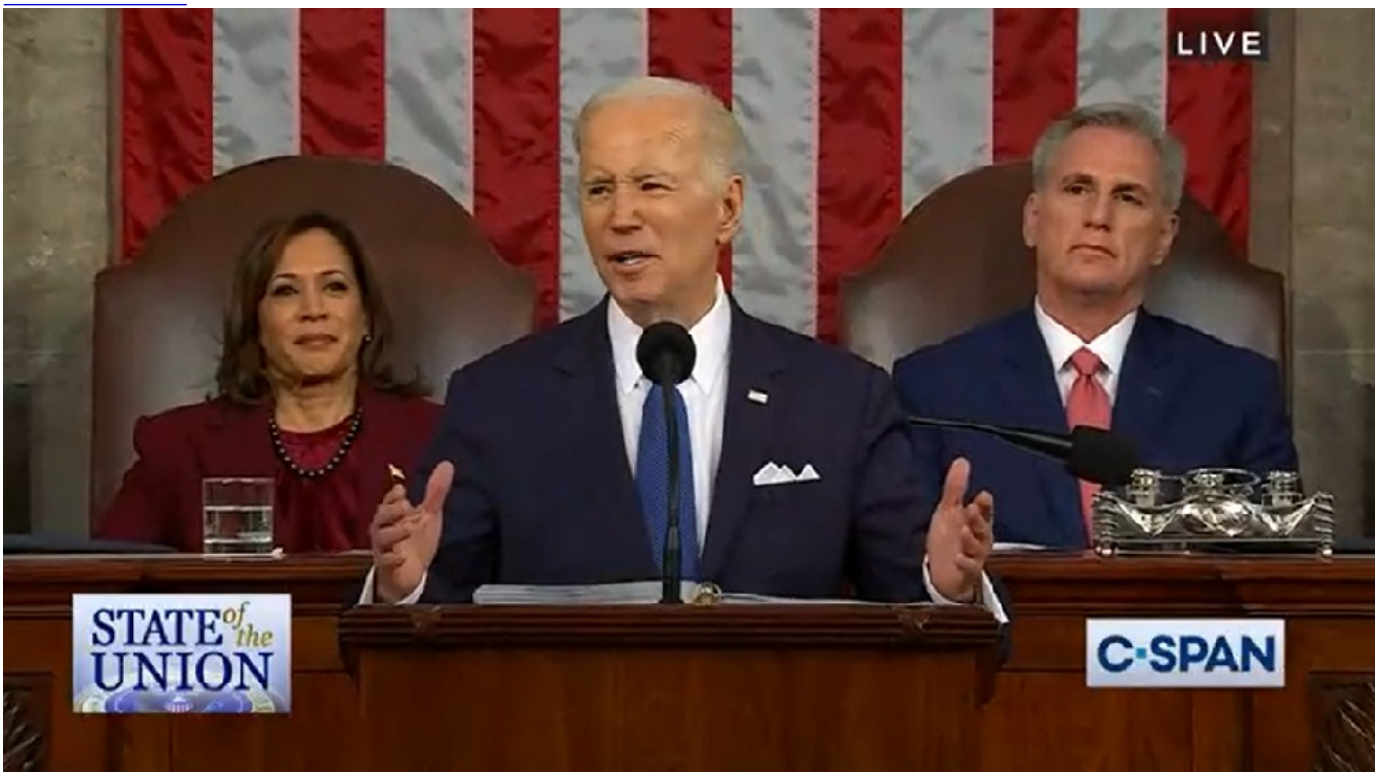
Opinion
NCR Voices



President Joe Biden speaks to the nation during the State of the Union address Feb. 7, 2023. (Screenshot of CSPAN)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

February 7, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

President Joe Biden did pretty well in his State of the Union speech last night, considering the fact that he could speak the truth: The country is polarized, the economic future is profoundly uncertain, and one chamber of Congress is in the hands of a party unwilling to confront its complicity in an attempt to overturn an election while the other party, his own, is beset by ideological confusion. Other than that, the country is doing just fine.

Biden started out strong, congratulating House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. But the political challenge was demonstrated moments later when Biden said, "Today, though bruised, our democracy remains unbowed and unbroken," and McCarthy did not clap and did not stand. Wow. Just wow.

The president's look back at the progress that has been made on the economy on his watch fell somewhat flat because most people do not feel that the economy is improving. "Two years ago our economy was reeling," Biden said. "As I stand here tonight, we have created a record 12 million new jobs — more jobs created in two years than any president has ever created in four years." Yes, the unemployment rate is at historic lows. But that was after an historic high due to COVID-19, and people know it.

More importantly, inflation and rising interest rates have many millions of Americans — more than 12 million — on edge. Mortgage payments are up. Credit card rates are up. The cost of energy and food is up. 401(k) accounts are down. The president has to hope that those numbers are all moving in different directions by 2024 if he hopes to win reelection.

Biden's message was strongest when he looked at the shape of the economy. "My economic plan is about investing in places and people that have been forgotten," Biden said. "Amid the economic upheaval of the past four decades too many people have been left behind or treated like they're invisible. Maybe that's you watching at home."

That was Joe from Scranton speaking, admitting that the past 40 years, under presidents of both parties, the economy was shaped by neoliberal economic policies that forgot places like Scranton — and Youngstown, and Flint, and Duluth. The people in those communities need to feel their economic circumstances changing if the Biden approach, so much more consistent with Catholic social teaching, is to become a winner at the ballot box.

Biden's economic policies are the most progressive we have seen since Lyndon Johnson was president. As the economy recovers, the playing field will be more level, people's access to health care will be less at risk, those at the economic margins will be able to breathe a little easier. I wish there had been more talk about economic justice and fairness in this speech. I would have given my eye teeth for him to have quoted Pope Francis as Franklin Roosevelt once quoted Pope Pius XI!

Advertisement

Social issues did not dominate the speech, as they did not dominate Biden's campaign and have mostly not dominated his tenure. Touching on neuralgic issues like abortion are always tricky in a State of the Union speech and Biden handled it well, mentioning the issue in the last half of the speech, but not dwelling on it. He promised to veto pro-life legislation but no such legislation will ever reach his desk while the Democrats control the Senate, so it was an empty promise.

Standing up for democracy in Ukraine got a better response from the Republicans than standing up for democracy in the U.S. did. We'll take it. No issue worries me more in the new Congress than the possibility that Fox News and the America First crowd will persuade the GOP to cut off funds to aid the brave people of Ukraine.

Values, rather than policies, are something that also can unite the American people and, as he has done in the past, Biden invoked his father. "As my Dad used to say, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It’s about respect. It's about being able to look your kid in the eye and say, 'Honey — it's going to be OK,' and mean it." Biden is at his best when the last word out of his mouth is "folks," and he said it often throughout the speech. The president exudes a sense of solidarity and common decency when he invokes human dignity.

One of the things that traditionally unites the American people is an experience of tragedy, and Biden mentioned the recent tragic mass shootings. Indeed, the president's empathy is one of his strongest suits. But because guns were used, any discussion of solutions to the tragic mass shootings leads to further division. His discussion of the killing of Tyre Nichols, and the respect shown to Nichols' parents, was incredibly well done. He refused to blame all police officers for the actions of those whose evil actions in Memphis took Nichols' life. Biden's handling of a delicate issue was deft.

Hell, a pandemic didn't unite the American people. Biden missed an opportunity to praise his predecessor for leading the successful effort to produce and distribute COVID-19 vaccines. The compliment would not only have been magnanimous, it would have been politically shrewd, seeing as candidate Donald Trump is now attacking Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis because "He promoted the vaccine as much as anybody in this country promoted it." The Trump-DeSantis brawl is going to be the gift that keeps on giving for columnists.

The State of the Union is, by definition, almost an impossible speech to deliver for three reasons. First, our constitutional anomaly requires the president to be a focus of national unity as head of state, yet as head of government, he is also the leader of a political party. At a time of intense polarization, bridging those two roles is nearly impossible.

Second, the demands of rhetoric and those of politics often collide. Rhetorically, a speech needs a theme and a certain poetry. Politically, every special interest group, and every office within the Old Executive Office Building, have been lobbying to have their pet cause mentioned in the speech. Laundry lists are not poetic and, in my lifetime, only Bill Clinton mastered the ability to intertwine policy proposals within an overarching narrative framework.

Third, Biden himself has been a success as president because of his ability to get things accomplished working behind the scenes, not because of his oratory. In addition, one reason many people voted for him, the reason he failed to mention when listing why he ran, was the desire for a return to normalcy, and normalcy is not poetic either.

Given all that, Biden's speech was better than I expected, too long, but balanced, determined and decent. It won't unite the country. It won't move the political needle, although when he was heckled by some Republicans, he gave it right back, showing the kind of vigor that gave the lie to the GOP argument that he is too old for the job. People who watch the analysis on Fox will be convinced it was a dud, while people watching MSNBC might think it was a home run. It was neither. But it was still a fine speech.

A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 17-March 2, 2023** print issue under the headline: State of the Union speech was strongest on economic issues.