

Obama's Speech

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 31, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

I admit it ? I hate Oval Office speeches. I hate the inevitable references to ?limitless possibilities,? especially at the end of a decade that showed the very obvious limits to our possibilities, both at home and abroad. I understand that the President needs to be a cheerleader for the nation, but I don?t have to like it.

The President?s opening and closing were especially strong. The speech was the first time, in a long time, that he painted a ?big picture,? saying how his many policies fit together, remaking the social compact at home and our priorities abroad, and the relationship between the two. He called on all citizens to emulate our veterans in coming together to pursue the common good, and praised the men and women of the Armed Forces in appropriately fulsome language. He pointed out that we spent a trillion dollars in Iraq, none of it paid for at the time, or even budgeted, making it at least a bit more difficult for Republicans to complain about his stimulus spending in Boston when they just spent so much in Baghdad.

President Obama was gracious to President Bush, and his reference to his predecessor may have been the strongest part of the speech. Obama acknowledged both their policy differences and the common patriotism and commitment to the nation?s security. It would be nice to see Obama?s critics make a similar point in the days ahead but, alas, a new poll out today shows that only 7 percent of Republicans said it was ?definitely not true? that the President is in cahoots with Islamic terrorists. Nonetheless, it is vital to the country that the leaders of both parties move on. I just heard Rachel Maddow complain that the Bush administration who supported the Iraq War are ?getting off easy? but her complaint, though real, is best left to the historians at this point.

The President did not spend much time discussing Afghanistan, at least not as much as I anticipated. Perhaps with his view on the need to get Democratic voters fired up for the midterms, he knew his decision to send more trips to Afghanistan is wildly unpopular with the base of his own party. He did not back off from his policy there, and he praised Gen. David Petraeus?s leadership and the on-going efforts of our military.

President Obama?s speech was, what speechwriters call, ?workman-like.? The influence of the administration?s policy wonks was evident and the Oval Office is not designed for the kind of soaring oratory we came to expect from candidate Obama in 2008. But, the president is well advised to find a venue that does permit those flights of oratory. No one, tonight, was moved to tears or goose bumps or shivers down their legs. It was that ability to impress us with his command of words and wisdom that first made many of us notice Obama and then support him. We miss it. And if he wants to help his party hold on to either house of Congress, he needs to bring it back.

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