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The State of the Union: What Obama Must Say

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Distinctly Catholic

The early prognostications indicate that President Obama will forego the traditional laundry list approach to the State of the Union tonight, which makes sense. The center of the electorate worries that Obama is trying to have government do too much already, and reciting a laundry list of new things for Congress to enact would only add fuel to that fire. But, if not a laundry list, then what?

It is critical that Obama deliver a morally coherent defense of where he would like to lead the nation. During the election of 2008, the dissatisfaction with George W. Bush was so great, it was enough for candidate Obama to invoke contentless nouns, like "change" and "hope," that are ingrained in our national character. Tonight, he must add some content when he sketches his vision and he must explain and defend that content in explicitly moral terms. And, unlike his wonderful speech in Tucson, when it was appropriate to avoid politics, a State of the Union address is inherently political: He cannot try to "rise above the political fray" tonight, he must define and dominate that fray.

For example, Republican efforts to overturn the health care reform law have already begun. Among those in the First Lady's box tonight will be James Howard of Katy, Texas, who was diagnosed with brain cancer last year and, having no insurance, thought his days were numbered. But, as a result of the new law, he was able to buy into the pre-existing condition pool set up by the new law. I would prefer to see a five year-old with a pre-existing condition in the First Lady's box, but at least Mr. Howard's inclusion shows the administration understands they need to start putting a human face on their program.

For another example, the President must use this occasion to address his critics on the left, who think we should leave Afghanistan tomorrow (or yesterday!). He must give voice to the abhorrence of war felt by his base, he must recall how the nation took its eye off the ball in Afghanistan for years and acknowledge that this has affected people's attitudes towards the conflict, but then, if he believes it is in our national

security interest to stay there a few more years, he must say so clearly and unequivocally. But, only after acknowledging that war is always a last resort and that Americans must still, as John F. Kennedy said, be willing to "bear any burden" at times to defend liberty. It is unclear to many that "liberty" is what is being fought over in the mountains outside Kabul, of course, but the President must make that case.

Most importantly, the President needs to start educating the American people about the choices ahead. Everyone, Democrat and Republican alike, is agreed that we must address the federal deficit and debt sooner rather than later. But, the cleavage comes when you start looking at proposals to solve these fiscal problems, and the more significant cleavage is not between Democrats and Republicans but between Washington and Wall Street policymakers and the blue collar workers of the heartland. Among policymakers, discussions about raising the retirement age or cutting entitlement benefits are discussed with all the detachment and disinterestedness one could want from an analyst, but Presidents are not analysts. The President must draw a line in the sand on Social Security, be seen to be defending Main Street, and he must begin to paint the contrast on which the 2012 election will be fought: Let that election be a choice between the GOP's prescription of raising the retirement age, ending Medicaid, and cutting Social Security benefits versus higher taxes on the super-rich. Next year, put Warren Buffet and Bill Gates in the First Lady's box so they can be seen nodding when the President calls on higher taxes on the super-rich to help the country face the demographic bump entitlement programs face. FICA taxes, which fund Social Security, remain the most regressive in the country. Until Social Security is funded by a tax on all incomes, not just wages under \$100,000, no one should be discussing a raise the retirement age.

The State of the Union is a chance for the President to define the nation's promises and challenges in moral terms. The Democratic losses in the large Midwestern states Obama will need to win in 2012 were directly the result of economic problems. The President must not only point a way forward for the economy in the near term, he must make it clear that the nation's long term difficulties will not be placed on the backs of blue collar workers who have been hit hard enough in past decades. He must, in short, begin to reconstruct the New Deal coalition that kept the Democratic Party in power for years. He must identify himself as the champion of those who have been left out and left behind and of those who struggle to make ends meet. That is the only way to unite his base with the disenchanting center of the electorate that feels, oftentimes rightly, that no one in Washington cares about them

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