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Obama Gets a "B"

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Distinctly Catholic

I had hoped the President would break the mold for State of the Union speeches a bit more than he did last night. Shorter would have been good. And, the coherent moral argument I was looking for did not appear. Yes, as the President said, we want America to "win" but "win" is, like "hope" and "change" a little too vague and amorphous for my tastes, to say nothing of the political demands of the moment.

Through much of the debate, the president side-stepped the essential differences between his party and his opponents. When he says that "we must innovate" there is some discussion about to whom the "we" refers. The Republicans think that government is not a partner with the private sector in the effort to innovate, or educate, or create jobs, or anything else, but a hindrance to the private sector. Perhaps, Obama's use of the word "we" with such imprecision touched the moderate chord he sought but I am not so sure. At the end of the day, elections are about choices and the person who defines those choices best tends to win.

The president needs to recast the political debate he lost so badly in the autumn and I am not sure he accomplished that last night. He invoked a cancer patient who now has health care coverage because of the reforms passed last year, a man who was sitting in the First Lady's box, but he did not stop, as Reagan would have, and ask the man to take a bow. Would Republicans have stood? After all, it is a central argument in their opposition to health care reform that they should not have to pay for other people's health care. That always sounds a bit churlish to me, but with a person reprieved from the death sentence of brain cancer, it is downright cruel. Let the Republican members "and the nation" see the human face of health care reform.

The President mentioned that he remained opposed to extending tax cuts for the super-rich beyond the two year extension to which he just agreed. I wish he had been a bit clearer on the issue. I wish he had

said, "I would love to see tax cuts for everybody. We all love tax cuts. But, tax rates on the super-rich are at historic lows. In Eisenhower's day, the top tax bracket was 90 percent. And, if you think we should slash Social Security or turn Medicare into a voucher program as a way of cutting the deficit, but are unwilling to raise taxes on the super-rich, I am going to dig in and speak up on behalf of all those people who need their Medicare and Social Security." Let the Republicans explain why Warren Buffett needs his tax cut.

I wonder why the President does not seem to grasp how frightened people get at some of the policy ideas being suggested by the Republicans. In part, of course, it is because the Republicans have been a little vague themselves. Congressman Paul Ryan, who delivered the GOP's response last night and delivered the best SOTU response I can remember was not precise about his Roadmap for a Balanced Budget. Last year, Republicans were afraid to embrace Ryan's proposals and did not campaign on them at all.

Still, GOP vagueness is not the only cause of Obama's inability to connect with blue collar workers and their concerns. He and his advisors can see the upside of trade agreements, but for many blue collar workers, trade agreements have not been a blessing but a curse. He and his advisors can talk about the importance of education and re-training, but out-of-work blue collar workers have heard all that before. The part of the President's speech where he talked about America building things again, that was the time to make an emotional appeal to blue collar workers and to defend his bailout of Detroit. To make sure that, while Joe the Plumber may be lost, Joe the Plumber's friends understand that government is on their side.

So, I give the President a "B." His speech was upbeat, capturing a blossoming optimism among the electorate. He was gracious to the Republicans, especially to Speaker of the House John Boehner. But, last night's speech was not a game changer. Maybe it is the better part of political wisdom to let the GOP lead the debate on deficit reduction, but it is not the better part of leadership.

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