

The Right Tone for the State of the Union

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For President Obama, the path to victory in 2012 appeared to become more evident in recent weeks. Since last November's shellacking, Obama has done two things that could strengthen his reelection chances in 22 months. First, he has begun to successfully portray himself as charting a middle course between extremists in both parties. By forging compromises that have angered both the left of his Democratic Party and the far right of the Republican Party, Obama has contributed to this image. The lengthy list of legislative accomplishments, in spite of a confoundingly difficult political environment, to which he can point also contributes to this perception. Second, Obama has, for one of the few times since taking office, regained some of the communication skills that he demonstrated as a candidate. This was most apparent during his speech in Arizona following the tragic shooting in Tucson.

The problem with narrative is that it isn't relevant, and it will not become relevant unless the economy turns around in a way that is meaningful for the millions of Americans who are unemployed, underemployed, deeply in debt, scared of losing their home, frightened about the future or some combination of these things. If the economy is still in this shape in November 2012, voters will continue to be oblivious to Obama's lists of accomplishments or his reinvigorated communication skills and attempts to stress these things will be viewed as merely spin and in some cases acutely insensitive spin. This is not good news for the president or his party. If, however, the economy begins to turn around by the election, Obama's other strengths will reinforce his candidacy, making him a very difficult candidate to defeat.

Accordingly, Obama again finds himself facing a strategic and governance-related decision on the eve of his State of the Union address. The president, and his advisers, might be tempted to continue to cultivate the image of Obama as a centrist and an island of maturity in Washington with regards to both politics and legislation and to give a State of the Union address that reflects this. The past month or so must have felt like a respite for an Obama White House, where most people believe they have been under attack from all sides for the better part of two years, but it is a respite that cannot last. A speech that stresses compromise and bipartisanship would satisfy most of the media and weaken the most acute Republican attacks, but ultimately accomplish little more than putting off the inevitable decline in the president's popularity, which will come with continued economic realities that are bad for ordinary Americans.

The dilemma facing Obama is further compounded by the political reality that the chances of passing any bold and progressive legislation of the kind really needed to get

the economy going is almost zero in post-November 2010 Washington. Moreover, seeking to do this would end in failure, making the president look weak, so using the State of the Union to lay out an activist progressive agenda would probably also accomplish very little. There are, therefore, no easy options open to President Obama, but the State of the Union remains an important speech because it is his first address of this kind to a Congress that his party controls, and it comes on the heels of what might have been his best eight weeks in office.

The best thing Obama can do in this speech is to reassert his relevance by speaking frankly about the economy, stressing his awareness of the problems more than the bills he has passed since becoming president. He also can use this speech not as an opportunity to, yet again, recommit himself to reaching across the aisle and working with the Republicans, but to remind the Congress and the country that Obama is the one nationally-elected official and that he remains more popular than either party in congress. He can do this by challenging the Republican Party, not to support Obama's agenda, but to work with him in putting partisan interests aside in favor of doing what is good for the country. The president needs to demonstrate to the American people and to Congress that he is a leader and is going to act like one. President Obama can do this best not through listing accomplishments or proposals, but by striking a tone that indicates both an understanding of the problems and fierce urgency of addressing them rather than backing down after the shellacking. This approach will require some political courage and will come with some short-term consequences, but the easy option is to play nice and sink into political irrelevance.