

Did the 2016 Republican Primary Season Begin Last Night?

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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The State of the Union is one of those moments in political life where the backstory and positioning are much more significant than the event itself. President Obama's speech last night was a good speech in that he presented a solid vision of his priorities and goals for the next months and years. It was not, however, groundbreaking or significant. Many of the ideas in the speech had either been previously raised in the president's recent second inaugural address, or were restatements of Democratic Party principles and goals of the last several decades.

The president's State of the Union was not a bad speech, it was just not compelling one. Moreover, although there is some value in laying out a vision and a program, albeit for more or less the second time in less than a month, the real question facing the president is whether or not he will be able to turn his ideas into laws. This will be particularly difficult given that the Republican Party, which still controls the House of Representatives, will oppose him at every turn.

The two Republican speeches in response to President Obama's speech were more interesting, because they offered a preview of some of the divisions and debates that will inform Republican Party politics between now and the 2016 election. The lasting image from Marco Rubio's speech will likely be one of him awkwardly reaching for a bottle of water to slake his suddenly devastating thirst, but the speech was also an attempt to present Rubio as the new face of the Republican Party. Rubio's speech was characterized by the same tired, and unsuccessful, attacks on the president that the Republicans have been making since Obama became president. Rubio's speech was not meant to present a new Republican philosophy, but a new Republican face and backstory. Rubio's appeal is that he is comfortably in the new far right Republican mainstream while coming from humble immigrant origins, and that as a Cuban American he can help the Republican Party win more support from a diverse Latino population. In this respect, Rubio has Mitt Romney's politics, but without Romney's wealth and upper class affect.

Rubio's speech was the official response to Obama's State of the Union, but it was not the only response. Rand Paul, another Republican senator who may run for president in 2016, gave the Tea Party response to the State of the Union. This helps preserve the increasingly less apparent notion that there is a distinction between the Tea Party and the rest of the Republican Party, but more importantly, it highlighted some differences between Paul and Rubio, or more precisely Paul and the mainstream of the Republican Party, and to a large extent the Tea Party as well.

Paul's political views are reasonably well known, and not all that different from those of his father, Ron Paul, who unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination for president in both 2008 and 2012. Paul shares Rubio's obsession with the debt, but unlike Rubio seemed more willing so spread the blame to both parties, citing, for example, Republican unwillingness to cut

defense spending as part of the problem. Paul's view of shrinking government syncs with that of Rubio but extends to social issues where most anti-government Republicans often have a blind spot.

Rubio and Paul do not differ on everything. They share a reluctance to regulate guns, harness government resources and energy to address concerns around climate change or use government programs to help the most needy among us. Nonetheless, they do have real differences which, to some extent, represent the core of crossroads at which the Party now finds itself.

If Paul and Rubio's speeches are any indication of where the Republican Party is heading, it looks like the 2016 nominating season will be more substantive than 2012. In 2012, only one candidate raised enough money and built a strong enough organization to run a real campaign thus precluding debate over positions or issues. Paul and Rubio are both sitting U.S. senators with national name recognition, so it is certainly possible that they can both build real campaigns. If that happens, Paul's views, which are obviously unsettling to many Republicans, including many inside of the Tea Party, will be tested against Rubio who brings few new or interesting ideas while reflecting the mainstream of the Party, but whose personal story is more compelling.

It was a strange decision by the Republican Party to use the president's State of the Union address to kick off their own nominating season, but that is what the speeches by Paul and Rubio seemed to suggest. The symbolism is hard to miss. The president was talking about governance and the Republicans were thinking about the next election.