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OUR VIEW



Building a better State of the Union

The State of the Union was another hour-long snoozer, replete with 87 applause breaks and the obligatory declaration that “the state of the union is strong.”

We’re still waiting for the president who has the guts and the vocabulary to describe the state of the union as something else — “lumpy” for instance.

The sole interesting moment of the night was the one and only line that wasn’t written down. After Republicans mockingly cheered the president when he said “I have no more campaigns to run,” Obama snapped back: “I know because I won both of them.” That was followed by what was the only truly deserved applause of the evening.

The State of the Union has become a made-for-TV political rally. There was so much pomp that even circumstance agreed the whole night was overkill. It’s a lot of airy, grandiose mush punctuated by micro-stories summing up real-life plucky Americans in a few words.

But what if the annual speech to Congress and the nation was something else entirely? What if it wasn’t a place for political grandstanding, but an opportunity to go around the country and truly investigate the state of our union, then report back?

Republicans always talk about running government like a business — tightening budgets in times of trouble and not spending more than you bring in. So what if the Constitutionally-mandated State of the Union address included the CEO president, peeking over bifocals and rifling through a stack of papers, and calling out to the honorable man or woman from Missouri? That senator would shuffle nervously to the microphone to deliver a short report,

answer a few questions about the budget and their R&D programs.

There would be civil, sober back-and-forth discussion about dollars and cents, no stories about one-legged single moms working their way through Harvard Business School.

This would require respecting the office of the president and the man who sits there, a virtue that has been noticeably lacking in the opposition to at least our past three heads of state.

Obviously this would require our elected officials to act like grownups, which seems to be asking a little too much from the current Congressional crop. In essence, the State of the Union would be a conversation, a discussion, a boardroom budget meeting where good things are praised and bad things get attention and an attempt at a cure. It would be more boring (And you thought that wasn’t possible!) but it would also be more substantive and beneficial.

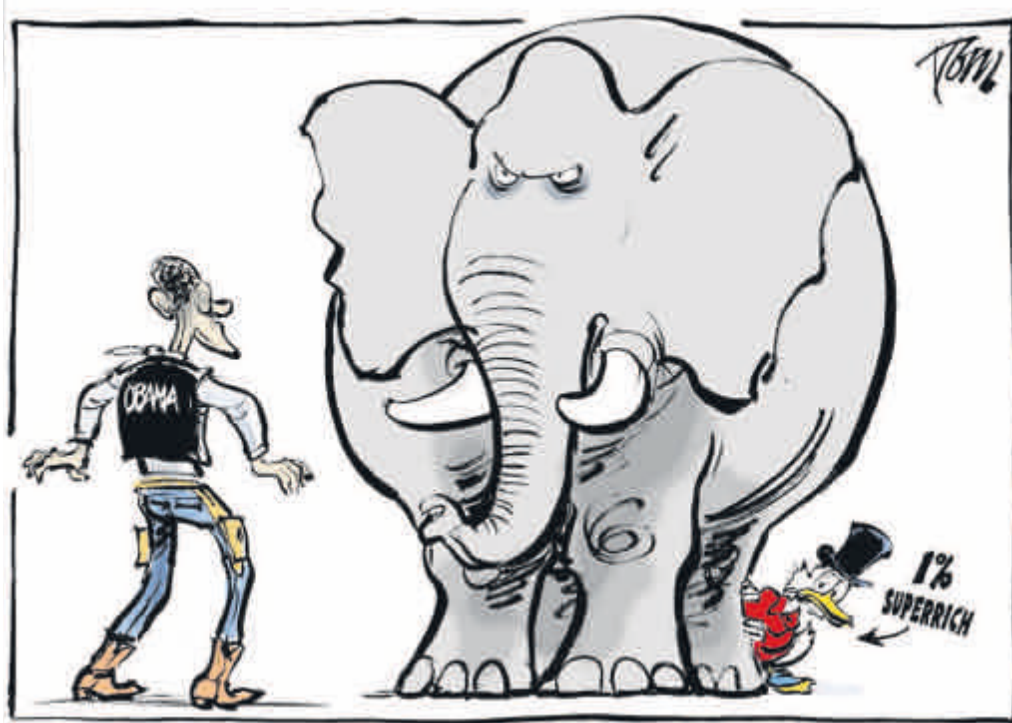
We don’t need another campaign event — that’s just about all American politics is these days. We do need the president to be informed, to keep us informed, and we need at least two of our three branches of government to be able to sit in the same building together and talk.

Though its importance is waning, the State of the Union still matters. It remains the widest audience the president will get all year; more than 30 million people watched the speech live and many more watched a replay online or a recap on television.

Yet it’s a missed opportunity. The address could make our democracy better and our union stronger, instead of being just another bipartisan clapping contest.

Less clapping, more discussion. Not another campaign speech, but a line-by-line investigation into the health of the nation.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.



OTHER VIEWS

Can’t dance around topic of radical Islam

I’ve never been a fan of global conferences to solve problems, but when I read that the Obama administration is organizing a Summit on Countering Violent Extremism for Feb. 18, in response to the Paris killings, I had a visceral reaction: Is there a box on my tax returns that I can check so my tax dollars won’t go to pay for this?

When you don’t call things by their real name, you always get in trouble. And this administration, so fearful of being accused of Islamophobia, is refusing to make any link to radical Islam from the recent explosions of violence against civilians (most of them Muslims) by Boko Haram in Nigeria, by the Taliban in Pakistan, by al-Qaida in Paris and by jihadists in Yemen and Iraq. We’ve entered the theater of the absurd.

Last week the conservative columnist Rich Lowry wrote an essay in *Politico Magazine* that contained quotes from White House spokesman Josh Earnest that I could not believe. I was sure they were made up. But I checked the transcript: 100 percent correct. I can’t say it better than Lowry did:

“The administration has lapsed into unselfconscious ridiculousness. Asked why the administration won’t say [after the Paris attacks] we are at war with radical Islam, Earnest on Tuesday explained the administration’s first concern ‘is accuracy. We want to describe exactly what happened. These are individuals who carried out an act of terrorism, and they later tried to justify that act of terrorism by invoking the religion of Islam and their own deviant view of it.’

“This makes it sound as if the Charlie Hebdo terrorists set out to commit a random act of violent extremism and only subsequently, when they realized that they needed some justification, did they reach for Islam.

“The day before, Earnest had conceded that there are lists of recent ‘examples of individuals who have cited Islam as they’ve carried out acts of violence.’ Cited Islam? According to the Earnest theory ... purposeless violent extremists rummage through the scriptures of great faiths, looking for some verses to cite to support their mayhem and often happen to settle on the holy texts of Islam.”

President Barack Obama knows better. I am all for restraint on the issue, and would never hold every Muslim accountable for the acts of a few. But it is not good for us or the Muslim world to pretend that this spreading jihadist violence isn’t coming out of their faith community. It is coming mostly, but not exclusively, from angry young men and preachers on the fringe of the Sunni Arab and Pakistani communities in the Middle East and Europe.

If Western interventions help foster violent Islamic reactions, we should reduce them. To



THOMAS FRIEDMAN
Comment

the extent that Muslim immigrants in European countries feel marginalized, they and their hosts should work harder on absorption. But both efforts will only take you so far.

Something else is also at work, and it needs to be discussed. It is the struggle within Arab and Pakistani Sunni Islam over whether and how to embrace modernity, pluralism and women’s rights. That struggle drives, and is driven by, the dysfunctionality of so many Arab states and Pakistan.

It has left these societies with too many young men who have never held a job or a girl’s hand, who then seek to overcome their humiliation at being left behind, and to find identity, by “purifying” their worlds of other Muslims who are not sufficiently pious and of Westerners whom they perceive to be putting Muslims down. But you don’t see this in the two giant Muslim communities in Indonesia or India.

Only Sunni Arabs and Pakistanis can get inside their narrative and remediate it. But reformers can only do that if they have a free, secure political space. If we’re not going to help create space for that internal dialogue, let’s just be quiet. Don’t say stupid stuff. And don’t hold airy fairy conferences that dodge the real issues, which many mainstream Muslims know and are actually starved to discuss, especially women.

The Arab journalist Diana Moukalled, writing in the London-based *Asharq Al-Awsat* last week, asked: “Don’t all these events now going on around us and committed in our name require us to break the fear barrier and begin to question our region and our societies, especially the ideas being trafficked there that have led us to this awful stage where we are tearing at one another’s throats — to mention nothing of what as a result also happens beyond our region?”

And a remarkable piece in *The Washington Post* Sunday by Asra Q. Nomani, an American Muslim born in India, called out the “honor corps” — a loose, well-funded coalition of governments and private individuals “that tries to silence debate on extremist ideology in order to protect the image of Islam.” It “throws the label of ‘Islamophobe’ on pundits, journalists and others who dare to talk about extremist ideology in the religion. ... The official and unofficial channels work in tandem, harassing, threatening and battling introspective Muslims and non-Muslims everywhere. ... The bullying often works to silence critics of Islamic extremism. ... They cause governments, writers and experts to walk on eggshells.”

I know one in particular.

Thomas L. Friedman won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for commentary, his third Pulitzer for *The New York Times*. He became the paper’s foreign-affairs Op-Ed columnist in 1995.

YOUR VIEWS

Too late to change plan and location for Requa statue

I have great respect for Mike Forrester and his family that has a long involvement with the *East Oregonian*. We are fortunate to have a local newspaper that allows us to express our opinions publicly in accordance with our First Amendment rights.

Unfortunately, Mr. Forrester should have read the minutes of the city council meeting held on October 7. The Arts Commission requested a grant for \$5,000 for the Pendleton Linebackers Club to fund a statue of Don Requa in Brownfield Park.

In order for the Linebackers Club to contract with the sculptor of the statue, it had to have \$60,000 in the bank. The \$5,000 grant would help meet that requirement. Mayor Houk stated that money from the transient room taxes could be used for community art.

Local merchant Dean Fouquette mentioned the organization’s commitment to giving scholarships and that the Linebackers Club is an avid supporter of the Pendleton High School athletic program. Local Pendleton historian and city council member at the time, Keith May, stated that he felt that city art

should express a variety of styles and interests and he supported the Requa statue. Jane Hill was also in support of the statue and its location in Brownfield Park.

The motion was passed 5-2. As a consequence of the city council’s support for the Requa bronze being located in Brownfield Park, the Linebacker Club began an aggressive fundraising campaign. Donors responded enthusiastically because they were aware that the city council was supportive of the statue and its location at Brownfield Park and that there would be no problems.

Renowned sculptor Rick Caswell now has the clay model completed and has assured the Linebackers Club that he will have the statue ready by its deadline.

Therefore, letters to the editor calling for major changes in the project at this point in time are inappropriate and a change would violate the contract that was made in good faith with Caswell.

I suggest that the detractors read the city council minutes for October 7. They are available for your convenience on the Internet or at City Hall.

Jerry Cronin
Pendleton

LETTERS POLICY

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters. Submitted letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. Send letters to Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801 or email editor@eastoregonian.com.

