

Wednesday, January 24, 2007

The State of the Union address. You've seen it all before: the booming announcement, "Mr. Speaker, the President of the United States," the scramble and jostling of Members of Congress to shake the President's hand, the standing ovations that see-saw between Democrats and Republicans, the close-ups (some flattering, some not) of Members exuberantly nodding in agreement, scowling in disagreement and sometimes fighting off the fatigue of an hour-long speech under blistering-hot klieg lights.

Here is what you don't see when you tune into the State of the Union, from behind the scenes:

2 PM -- The House casts its final votes of the day in order to adjourn early and clear the chamber for a security sweep. The normally omnipresent security presence takes on a sense of urgency as Capitol police, Secret Service and other agencies swarm throughout the Capitol. It is ironic that the State of the Union, meant to convey an air of public accountability and transparency, is now in a hermetically-sealed security environment.

On the Floor, Members have already staked their claim to seats for the President's address -- seven hours away. They scrawl their names on pieces of paper and tape the paper on seats. Many want to be near the aisle, in order to greet the President personally. Some want to be near the exits, so that they can rush out after the speech and meet waiting reporters. I notice that one Member has slapped his name on two separate seats (it's always good to have a "Plan B"). I join the routine, claiming a seat next to former Presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich. Still, I have strong doubts that my "Reserved For S. Israel" sign will still be there when it counts. In fact, it will be a near miracle. On the other hand, I did get an actual seat on the Appropriations Committee. I thought that was a miracle.

2:30 PM -- Each Member of Congress is allowed to invite one guest to the State of the Union. I meet in my office with my guest: Fatima Haroun, who survived the genocide in Darfur. Her family lives in a refugee camp and she knows firsthand the horror of a genocide that has murdered 400,000 and displaced 3 million people. I have invited her to see what democracy looks like--and for my colleagues to see what oppression looks like. She is a slight woman with a quiet voice, but when she talks of the genocide, she glows with an inner strength.

Through the afternoon, I answer press calls about a speech I haven't heard. I am interested in two specific issues that the President is expected to address: energy independence and the genocide in Darfur. The White House has been indicating an energy initiative that will, in the words of one official, "knock your socks off." I hope it's true, but I admit I am skeptical. In the last State of the Union, President Bush promised to reduce our oil imports by 75 percent. The next day his Secretary of Energy said, "he didn't really mean it literally" and shortly after, the Administration fired workers at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory. Still, I am hopeful that the President will set a new course -- not by his speech, but by his actions.

6:00 PM -- A colleague tells me that one of the cable news networks is reporting that the Republicans are responding to the Democratic response to the State of the Union. "It's a prebuttal to the rebuttal!" he exclaims.

7:45 PM -- I leave my office for the Capitol Building across the street. A virtual army of police have saturated the Hill. They stand in well-armed groups just outside the exit of the Cannon House Office Building and on its steps, on the corners of Independence Avenue, across the Capitol Plaza and ready to defend every door. There are bomb sniffing dogs. Helicopters rumble overhead.

I enter the Floor -- nearly an hour prior to the President's arrival. Many of the placards reserving seats have been removed and replaced. I find a seat on an aisle, near my fellow New Yorkers, Reps. Bishop, Meeks and Velazquez. Other Members are scurrying in search of a seat, like commuters looking for a place on a crowded train.

As the galleries fill, an official copy of the speech is circulated. I skim through it, scrawling in the margins and underlining key statements.

8:45 PM -- It is pomp and pageantry. The arrival of the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, the Vice President, the Senate, the Supreme Court, the President's Cabinet. They parade up the center aisle, gripped by House Members on both sides. It is the biggest political reunion of the year. As we await the arrival of the President, Senators and House Members and others mill around the Floor, exchanging pleasantries. There is a considerable amount of focus on two people sitting to my left: Hillary Clinton and Barak Obama.

9:00 PM — “Madame Speaker, the President of the United States!” There is a roar for two reasons. First, because never before have the words “Madame Speaker, the President of the United States” been proclaimed in Congress. And second, because the President steps through the swinging doors to a respectful ovation. He works his way to the rostrum, hands copies of his speech to the Speaker and Vice President, and begins.

Sitting on the Floor during the President’s speech is a momentous event. I feel as if I am in the glare of the television spotlights but also in the glare of a historical spotlight. This is my sixth State of the Union, but the deal I made with myself at the very first one has not been broken. I promised myself then that if I ever took attendance at the State of the Union for granted, I wouldn’t run for re-election.

There is one other thing about sitting on the Floor for the State of the Union – and that is the standing. Both sides of the aisle feel compelled to express their enthusiasm by jumping to their feet when the President says something sensible. Sometimes the entire chamber rises, sometimes only one side. It is not only an exercise in ideology, it is sheer exercise. By the end of an hour speech, you’ve achieved a pretty good workout of your leg muscles.

As the President speaks, I grow disappointed by two things: the “knock-your-socks-off” energy initiative and his comments on Darfur.

The promise of a bold energy pronouncement falls flat. In fact, it is very much a repeat of the last State of the Union: vague goals, unfilled promises.

For example:

- 2006 State of the Union: “Breakthroughs on this and other new technologies will help us reach another great goal: to replace more than 75 percent of our oil imports from the Middle East by 2025.”

- 2007 State of the Union: “Tonight I ask Congress to join me in pursuing a great goal. Let us build on the work we have done and reduce gasoline usage in the United States by 20 percent in the next ten years – thereby cutting our total imports by the equivalent of three-quarters of all the oil we now import from the Middle East.”

On Darfur, I am similarly disappointed, and even surprised. In fact, I believe President Bush has in the past said all of the right things about Darfur. He has called it genocide. He has focused on the issue. But now, even after the United Nations has authorized a no-fly zone and the arrival of 20,000 UN Peacekeepers, the policy is sputtering. I look in the gallery at my guest, Fatima Haroun, and see the disappointment in her eyes as the President reduces the world’s greatest current genocide to these words: “And we will continue to speak out for the cause of freedom in places like Cuba, Belarus, and Burma – and continue to awaken the conscience of the world to save the people of Darfur.”

By the time the President concludes, many of my colleagues have rushed through the doors to get to Statuary Hall, where the national press is lined up with cameras, pads, pens and recorders. I step to the rostrum and shake hands with President Bush. Almost immediately my Blackberry buzzes with messages from back home: “You were just on CNN, shaking the President’s hand.”

I exit the Capitol at the exact place where the President’s car waits. Directly in front of me a car-door is held open for him, and I can see into the back seat he will soon occupy. “No thanks,” I say “I’ll walk!” The Capitol Police laugh. I’m not sure the Secret Service joined them.

I return to my office with Fatima. She tells me she was thrilled to be a witness to history and to be able to speak with Members of Congress about the genocide she left behind that still threatens her family. Still, she wishes the President had said more. And I agree.

There is something we do share with the President. The belief he expressed in the final sentence of his speech: “We have met challenges and faced dangers, and we know that more lie ahead. Yet we can go forward with confidence – because the State of our Union is strong...our cause in the world is right...and tonight that cause goes on.”

The cause goes on, as I go home for the night.