

Donald Trump's address heavy on trauma but light on policy

A divided nation prepares to hear Trump's State of the Union

by Jonathan Bernstein

This was a long, long, long State of the Union speech. It was heavy on traumatic stories of guests in the gallery, and light - in most cases, extremely light - on the policies that would turn words into action.

[As a piece of rhetoric, Trump's speech was dull, albeit no duller than most State of the Union speeches.](#) Presidents usually struggle to rise above this annual occasion even if they are good at soaring - and soaring is not Trump's strength as a public speaker. It stood out mostly for the repeated invocation of grim stories about Trump's guests in the gallery. I took it to be mawkish attempts to recapture a memorable moment from his first speech to Congress.

To be fair, this is probably a matter of taste. Presidents have steadily escalated this sort of thing ever since Ronald Reagan blazed the trail, though his approach was smaller in scale and far more uplifting way.



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As far as the speech's substance? After all, the process of creating and delivering the speech usually plays a crucial role in the policy-making process across the executive branch.

[With the exception of immigration, there wasn't much beyond the promises and proposals.](#) Perhaps the best example was on opioids. He committed himself to, well, "do something about it" and to "get much tougher on drug dealers and pushers", whatever that means in practice. Here's that section of the speech:

"These reforms will also support our response to the terrible crisis of opioid and drug addiction. Never before has it been like it is now. It is terrible. We have to do something about it. "In 2016, we lost 64,000 Americans to drug overdoses: 174 deaths per day. Seven per hour. We must get much tougher on drug dealers and pushers if we are going to succeed in stopping this scourge. "My administration is committed to fighting the drug epidemic and helping get treatment for those in need. For those who have been so terribly hurt. The struggle will be long and difficult - but, as Americans always do, we will succeed, we will prevail."

This isn't a lack of details; it's an absence of policy. And in an area that Trump himself is declaring urgent.

The same can be said of lowering prescription drug prices, which he called "one of my greatest priorities". On that one, he pledged . . . to get to work on it sooner or later. "I have directed my administration to make fixing the injustice of high drug prices one of my top priorities for the year." That's not a plan - it's a punt.

He had a bit more on infrastructure, but that, too, is more of a work in progress than a real proposal. He retained a bit of his belligerent attitude on trade, but scurried away from the topic quickly without indicating anything about what he actually intends to do in 2018.

The one area that Trump sounded like a president commanding his resources towards a policy goal was immigration. The problem there? Since rolling out [his proposal to give legalisation for "Dreamers" in exchange for border enforcement and deep cuts in legal immigration](#), Trump has found few allies on either side of the debate.

Most likely, Congress will work something out without him - eventually. Trump certainly didn't help himself get to a deal by stigmatising immigrants and by botching his description of the current legal immigration law, which he's consistently mis-stated in recent weeks.

As usual, Trump's grasp of facts was unusually weak for a presidential address, a genre not known at the best of times for scrupulous adherence to the truth. Even his claims about the strengthening economy were exaggerated. No, Mr President, it's not exactly new for a foreign auto manufacturer to plan to open a new factory in the US.

My sense was that Trump was more self-congratulatory than most presidents, certainly those with little to sell in terms of policy accomplishments. That, of course, is a choice he's entitled to make. But presidents have only so many ways to signal future priorities, and Trump really didn't do much of that tonight. State of the Union speeches don't change the president's popularity, even for those (Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton) who knew how to fully exploit the setting. They aren't memorable, for the most part.

With very few exceptions, famous presidential speeches aren't made to joint sessions of Congress, and most of those rare exceptions are single-topic occasions, such as George W Bush's September 2011 effort. What really can matter is the process that leads to making decisions on policy. All signs last week suggested Trump was wasting the opportunity. For the most part, the speech confirmed it.

Jonathan Bernstein is a Bloomberg View columnist. He taught political science at the University of Texas at San Antonio and DePauw University and wrote A Plain Blog About Politics. This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg and its owners.

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