

January 30, 2014

Peter Wehner explains his thoughts about the real good talker.

*... I'm not sure I could name a single area President Obama has been successful in—economic growth and job creation, dealing with long-term unemployment and the number of people leaving the labor market, health-care reform, the stimulus, our fiscal balance, reducing poverty and income inequality, outreach to the Arab and Islamic world, impeding Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Russian "reset," America's pivot to Asia and our relations with China, relations with our allies, transparency, reducing the influence of lobbyists and special-interest groups, decreasing political polarization and partisan divisions, and more. President Obama has been, by my lights, an across-the-board failure.*

*That said, there's no question that Mr. Obama has been a consequential president. The damage he's inflicted on our nation has been significant, comprehensive, and durable—including but not limited to the Affordable Care Act.*

*The degree to which we can unwind the disaster of the Obama era is unclear. I don't for a moment underestimate the harm America's 44th president has done to our nation. But on matters of sheer competence, I'll stick with my assessment: Barack Obama is Jimmy Carter without Camp David.*

Jonathan Tobin knows who will get the blame now from president bystander for the results of his own incompetence and intransigence.

*... Five years into the Obama presidency, it is no longer possible for the president to credibly blame, as he has done every previous year, the country's economic woes on his predecessor. Instead, he will blame Congress, specifically the Republican majority in the House of Representatives, for thwarting his agenda.*

*But the problem for the president is not just that he has never learned the art of negotiating with Republicans or even with Democrats who disagree with him. His bid to govern unilaterally through executive orders is, after all, nothing new. Even in his first two years, when he had Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, he was even more intransigent. He pushed through a health-care bill that vastly expanded the reach and power of the federal government without a single Republican vote and has since persevered in implementing this ObamaCare disaster by choosing to ignore and to suppress any criticisms of this gargantuan error rather than to try to deal with its flaws. Thus, we have already seen Obama's approach to unilateral governance, and the results are as bad as his critics expected.*

*Try as they might to change the subject, the negative impact of ObamaCare on the economy and the lives of millions of Americans will remain the single most important domestic issue in 2014. The minimum wage is economic snake oil. But so, too, is the president's feckless effort to pretend he can magically bypass Congress. Rather than breathe new life into a presidency that has gone seriously off the rails, this stunt will merely confirm that the White House is as helpless to raise the president's poll numbers as it is to improve the economy. Rhetoric may have won Barack Obama the presidency, but it cannot make up for his inability to govern.*

**Max Boot** points out one of the many glaring failures of the real good talker - the atrocities prevention scam.

*International human rights investigators have discovered evidence that “Syria has systematically tortured and executed about 11,000 detainees since the start of the uprising.” The details are horrifying, with respected experts funded by Qatar having obtained photos which showed bodies with evidence of “starvation, brutal beatings, strangulation, and other forms of torture and killing.” A news account reports: “One of the three lawyers who authored the report — Sir Desmond de Silva, the former chief prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone — likened the images to those of Holocaust survivors.”*

*Seems like a perfect case for the Obama administration’s much ballyhooed Atrocities Prevention Board, announced by the president in 2012 at the Holocaust Museum. Only the administration is largely silent in the face of these atrocities beyond ritual words of condemnation.*

*If there has been any attempt to indict Bashar Assad and his goons for war crimes, I’ve missed it. If, in fact, the administration has done anything substantive to overthrow Assad and bring the fighting to an end, I’m not aware of it.*

*If you want a good laugh you can read this press release put out by the White House last year to mark the one-year anniversary of the Atrocities Prevention Board. It claims grandiosely:*

*“One year later, the U.S. Government has done much to keep faith with this commitment. At the President’s direction, we have stood up an interagency Atrocities Prevention Board, which monitors emerging threats, focuses U.S. Government efforts, and develops new tools and capabilities. In January 2013, the President signed expanded war crimes rewards legislation, giving the State Department a new tool to promote accountability for the worst crimes known to humankind. Earlier this month, the United States supported the U.N. General Assembly’s adoption of an Arms Trade Treaty with robust safeguards against export of weapons for use in genocide, crimes against humanity, and other enumerated atrocities.”*

*Yup, if windy speeches and high-minded resolutions and endless meetings are sufficient to stop atrocities, then the administration has done all that anyone can expect. But if measured by real-world results in Syria, the administration has singularly failed to live up to its commitment. The only wonder is that there is not more outrage at this abysmal failure, which recalls the horrors of Rwanda and Srebrenica. Once again, Obama seems to be getting a pass because he talks a good game even if he does little to back it up.*

Speaking of the atrocities board, turns out its first head, Samantha Power, is as much of a poser as the president. **Jennifer Rubin** posts after a tweet from Powers.

*... That brings us to her tweet this week:*

*“BREAKING: Justin Bieber gets a DUI. In other news: Syria, South Sudan, Iran, Central African Republic . . . ”*

*Hmm. What **about** other news from these fronts, or from Egypt, Ukraine and China for that matter?*

*In Syria, even in the face of mass atrocities, the president refused to take decisive (or even “targeted”) military action against Bashar al-Assad. The latter now has free rein to slaughter civilians by conventional means. Perhaps as many as 200,000 Syrians are dead. There are*

millions of refugees. Polio is back in Syria. The president, Power coos, is deeply concerned about all this. But, alas, he does nothing.

Iran? There, the president had his opportunity to be the heroic human rights figure for whom Power pined. Instead, he snubbed the Green Revolution, choosing to “engage” the mullahs in the dream that he could induce the largest state sponsor of terror to join the “community of nations.” It is not the right forum to bring up disappearance and torture of dissidents, however. We’ll put that on the back burner for now. What — you want to offend these people?! Have them walk out of talks? War-monger, harrumph.

In Egypt, we’ve sided again and again with whoever could grab power — Hosni Mubarak, Mohamed Morsi, the army. As for China, the uptick in human rights abuses has not dimmed the secretary of state’s hopes for a “special relationship” with the regime.

It is no surprise then that it has been a rotten time for democracy dissidents, religious and ethnic minorities and freedom advocates. ...

... So, Ambassador Power, it is not enough to tweet your disapproval of celebrity journalism. The administration in which you serve is the most indifferent to human rights of any in memory. You’ve been part of it, defending and excusing its moral sloth. In a better world, you’d resign, give back the Pulitzer and do something more constructive. Write a sequel, perhaps, about the age of genocide. You’ve been there, every step of the way.

Which brings us to Kevin Williamson's thoughts about another "nauseating spectacle" - the state of the union address.

The annual State of the Union pageant is a hideous, dispiriting, ugly, monotonous, un-American, un-republican, anti-democratic, dreary, backward, monarchical, retch-inducing, depressing, shameful, crypto-imperial display of official self-aggrandizement and piteous toadying, a black Mass during which every unholy order of teacup totalitarian and cringing courtier gathers under the towering dome of a faux-Roman temple to listen to a speech with no content given by a man with no content, to rise and to be seated as is called for by the order of worship — it is a wonder they have not started genuflecting — with one wretched representative of their number squirreled away in some well-upholstered Washington hidey-hole in order to preserve the illusion that those gathered constitute a special class of humanity without whom we could not live.

It’s the most nauseating display in American public life — and I write that as someone who has just returned from a pornographers’ convention.

It’s worse than the Oscars.

The national self-debasement begins well before the speech is under way. Members of Congress — supposedly free men and women serving as the elected representatives of the citizens of a self-governing republic — arrive hours early, camping out like spotty-faced adolescents waiting for Justin Bieber tickets, in the hope of staking out some prime center-aisle real estate that they might be seen on television, if only for a second or two, being greeted by the national pontifex maximus as he makes his stately procession into the chamber. ...

... It will come as no surprise that the imperial model was reinstated by Woodrow Wilson, Princeton’s answer to Benito Mussolini and the most dangerous man ever elected to the American

*presidency, a would-be dictator who attempted to criminalize the act of criticizing the state, dismissed the very idea of individual rights as “a lot of nonsense,” and described his vision of the presidency as effectively unlimited (“The President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can”). A big man needs a big show, and it is to Wilson’s totalitarian tastes that we owe the modern pageant. ...*

*... The State of the Union is only one example of the deepening, terrifying cult of the state that has taken root here. Many heads of state — and some royals, for that matter — fly on commercial aircraft. Presidents of the Swiss federation and members of the federal council receive . . . an unlimited train pass. They have occasional access to a Cessna maintained by the air force, but are known to use mass transit — just like the people they are elected to represent. An American president stages a Roman triumph every time he heads out for a round of golf. The president’s household costs well more than \$1 billion annually to operate. The president’s visage is more ubiquitous than was Vladimir Lenin’s in his prime, his reach Alexandrian, his sense of immortality (they call it “legacy”) pharaonic. Washington has become a deeply weird and alien place, a Renaissance court with armored sedans and hundred-million-dollar paydays.*

*It’s expensive maintaining an imperial class, but money isn’t really the object here, and neither is the current occupant of the White House, unlikeable as he is. Whether it’s Barack Obama or some subsequent pathological megalomaniac, Republican or Democrat, the increasingly ceremonial and quasi-religious aspect of the presidency is unseemly. It is profane. It is unbecoming of us as a people, and it has transformed the presidency into an office that can be truly attractive only to men who are unfit to hold it.*

*George Washington showed the world that men do not need a king. We, his heirs, have allowed the coronation of something much worse.*

**Andrew Malcolm** has similar thoughts.

*A survey arrived from the Obama crowd Monday. It asked what we most wanted to hear from the recovering smoker’s State of the Union address this evening.*

*That’s a trick, of course, to collect more emails and donations. The speech has been in the works for weeks with policies vetted by departments and key phrases poll-tested. It won’t surprise you after tonight that “income inequality” tested well.*

*Our answer to what we most want to hear tonight is: “Thank you very much and may God bless America.”*

*The Founding Fathers had it mostly right. President George Washington, he who disdained handshakes as beneath the office, spoke to a joint session of Congress in New York. But Thomas Jefferson, who helped pen the nation’s earliest documents, discarded the practice as too regal, reminiscent of the Brits’ Speech from the Throne. ...*

**Jonathan Tobin** tries to balance the fawning obits of Pete Seeger.

*... It should be understood that his youthful infatuation with Stalinism was neither superficial nor a passing fancy. To his shame, he toured the country singing protest songs from 1939 to 1941. But he was not protesting the Nazis nor did he support those fighting them. Rather, he was part of the CP campaign conducted at Moscow’s behest that sought to combat any effort to involve the United*

*States in World War Two. The Hitler-Stalin Pact had made the Soviets Germany's ally until the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union brought them into the war. Seeger remained a party member until the 1950s and even long after he abandoned it, he continued to refer to himself as a communist with a small "c" rather than an upper-case one.*

*To many liberals as well as the stalwarts of the old left, this is nothing for which he should apologize. Liberal revisionism has transformed the vicious Communism of this era from an anti-American and anti-democratic conspiracy into a romantic expression of support for human rights. As such, Seeger and many of his comrades were able to bask in the applause of subsequent generations rather than having to atone for having been a proud apologist for one of the worst criminals in history as well as for the mass murder and anti-Semitism that was integral to Soviet communism. While isolationists like Charles Lindbergh and other apologists for Hitler never lived down that association, Stalinists like Seeger had a rough time in the 1950s but were ultimately honored for their disgraceful behavior.*

*That is infuriating, and for many conservatives like Pajama Media's Ed Driscoll, unforgivable. The honors showered on the elderly Seeger serve only to deepen the bitterness of those who not unreasonably believe the adamant refusal to tell the truth about this chapter of Seeger's life—both in the news media and in documentary films about him—undermines our ability to take a full measure of the man, and is an insult to all those who take seriously the eternal struggle against the enemies of freedom.*

*And yet there is more to Seeger than these two inconsistent narratives. ...*

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## **Contentions**

### **Obama Both Incompetent and Consequential**

by Peter Wehner

I have a high regard for Paul Mirengoff, who writes for Powerlineblog.com. In a [recent post](#), Mirengoff, in responding to something [I had written](#), said the following:

Peter Wehner calls President Obama "Jimmy Carter without Camp David." It's a great line, and one I'd like to subscribe to. But is it apt?

If we are to make the analogy, then Jimmy Carter can be cast as Barack Obama without Obamacare. And if Republicans cooperate with Democrats to enact amnesty-style immigration reform, Carter will be Obama without Obamacare and amnesty.

Obamacare (assuming no repeal) and significant pro-illegal immigrant reform would be enough to make Obama's presidency of more than average consequence. Carter's presidency, even with Camp David, was inconsequential except to the extent that it paved the way for Reagan's.

I'll take this opportunity to clarify what I was saying. My point about President Obama being Jimmy Carter without Camp David has to do with Mr. Obama being incompetent; I wasn't arguing that he's inconsequential.

To take these two categories in order. I'm not sure I could name a single area President Obama has been successful in—economic growth and job creation, dealing with long-term unemployment and the number of people leaving the labor market, health-care reform, the stimulus, our fiscal balance, reducing poverty and income inequality, outreach to the Arab and Islamic world, impeding Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Russian "reset," America's pivot to Asia and our relations with China, relations with our allies, transparency, reducing the influence of lobbyists and special-interest groups, decreasing political polarization and partisan divisions, and more. President Obama has been, by my lights, an across-the-board failure.

That said, there's no question that Mr. Obama has been a consequential president. The damage he's inflicted on our nation has been significant, comprehensive, and durable—including but not limited to the Affordable Care Act.

The degree to which we can unwind the disaster of the Obama era is unclear. I don't for a moment underestimate the harm America's 44th president has done to our nation. But on matters of sheer competence, I'll stick with my assessment: Barack Obama is Jimmy Carter without Camp David.

## Contentions

### [Obama Has Already Proved He Can't Govern](#)

by Jonathan S. Tobin

One of the highlights of President Obama's State of the Union speech tonight is [his announcement of an executive order](#) raising the minimum wage for those working for contractors doing business with the federal government. The measure is a political trifecta for the president: he gets to bypass Congress, play to the populist grandstand, and inject some life into a moribund presidency with three years left before it officially expires. Tonight's event and the speaking tour on which the president embarks tomorrow is designed to send the less-than-credible message that he is very much in charge of the government, has the political juice to beat the Republicans while raising his poor favorability ratings, thus reassuring himself, if no one else, that he is no lame duck.

The union that the president will claim tonight is still strong, though it is not a dictatorship. While the commander in chief has the power to make foreign policy and wage war and—thanks to the courts—can impose environmental regulations, the Constitution set up impassable obstacles to prevent a president from ruling without the consent of Congress. The notion that Obama can govern by executive order is just as much an illusion as the idea that imposing higher minimum wages will improve the economy and create more jobs rather than lose them.

But while Obama will garner some partisan applause by unilaterally raising the wages of some workers to \$10.10 from \$7.25, the impact of this measure is as much trickery as is Obama's belief that he can govern alone bypassing Congress. The president's frustration at his inability to get his liberal laundry passed by Congress may be understandable. But freelancing from the Oval Office isn't the answer to divided government. Good-faith negotiations and deal making—practices to which this aloof president has always disdained—are the answer.

The actual number of workers affected by the wage increase he will impose on federal contractors will be small. But even so, it shows just how great the disconnect between the president's rhetoric and the reality of job creation has become. Nowhere in the speech or in the campaign-style pep he'll give later this week is there any specificity about where the money to pay the higher wages will come from or what the government will do to help the workers who may lose their jobs

altogether as a result of cutbacks that companies will be forced to endure as a result of this transparent grandstanding.

The point of the president's entirely disingenuous focus on the minimum wage is to preview the Democrats' intention to play the populist card this year with their bogus concerns about income inequality. Although the measure polls well, the increase will do more to help middle-class teenagers rather than to help the working poor who understand that minimum-wage positions are intended, to be gateway jobs, not a way to permanently support families. Indeed, most Americans understand that this is, at best, a sideshow intended, like so much else in the liberal repertory, to divert them from the larger issue of a still weak economy.

Five years into the Obama presidency, it is no longer possible for the president to credibly blame, as he has done every previous year, the country's economic woes on his predecessor. Instead, he will blame Congress, specifically the Republican majority in the House of Representatives, for thwarting his agenda.

But the problem for the president is not just that he has never learned the art of negotiating with Republicans or even with Democrats who disagree with him. His bid to govern unilaterally through executive orders is, after all, nothing new. Even in his first two years, when he had Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, he was even more intransigent. He pushed through a health-care bill that vastly expanded the reach and power of the federal government without a single Republican vote and has since persevered in implementing this ObamaCare disaster by choosing to ignore and to suppress any criticisms of this gargantuan error rather than to try to deal with its flaws. Thus, we have already seen Obama's approach to unilateral governance, and the results are as bad as his critics expected.

Try as they might to change the subject, the negative impact of ObamaCare on the economy and the lives of millions of Americans will remain the single most important domestic issue in 2014. The minimum wage is economic snake oil. But so, too, is the president's feckless effort to pretend he can magically bypass Congress. Rather than breathe new life into a presidency that has gone seriously off the rails, this stunt will merely confirm that the White House is as helpless to raise the president's poll numbers as it is to improve the economy. Rhetoric may have won Barack Obama the presidency, but it cannot make up for his inability to govern.

## Contentions

### [Atrocities Prevention Board: Just Words](#)

by Max Boot

International human rights investigators have discovered [evidence](#) that "Syria has systematically tortured and executed about 11,000 detainees since the start of the uprising." The details are horrifying, with respected experts funded by Qatar having obtained photos which showed bodies with evidence of "starvation, brutal beatings, strangulation, and other forms of torture and killing." A news account [reports](#): "One of the three lawyers who authored the report — Sir Desmond de Silva, the former chief prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone — likened the images to those of Holocaust survivors."

Seems like a perfect case for the Obama administration's much ballyhooed Atrocities Prevention Board, announced by the president in 2012 at the Holocaust Museum. Only the administration is largely silent in the face of these atrocities beyond ritual words of condemnation.

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If you want a good laugh you can read [this](#) press release put out by the White House last year to mark the one-year anniversary of the Atrocities Prevention Board. It claims grandiosely:

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Yup, if windy speeches and high-minded resolutions and endless meetings are sufficient to stop atrocities, then the administration has done all that anyone can expect. But if measured by real-world results in Syria, the administration has singularly failed to live up to its commitment. The only wonder is that there is not more outrage at this abysmal failure, which recalls the horrors of Rwanda and Srebrenica. Once again, Obama seems to be getting a pass because he talks a good game even if he does little to back it up.

## Right Turn

### [You got some nerve, Madame Ambassador](#)

by Jennifer Rubin



*Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power*

Samantha Power rose to prominence and snagged a Pulitzer on her way in propounding a brand of liberal interventionism in which human rights takes center stage. She was appalled by the Clinton administration's (Susan Rice, center stage) [indifference to genocide in Rwanda](#):



Why did the United States not do more for the Rwandans at the time of the killings? Did the President really not know about the genocide, as his marginalia suggested? Who were the people in his Administration who made the life-and-death decisions that dictated U.S. policy? Why did they decide (or decide not to decide) as they did? Were any voices inside or outside the U.S. government demanding that the United States do more? If so, why weren't they heeded? And most crucial, what could the United States have done to save lives?

That was Power in 2001. In 2003, she won the Pulitzer for her book, "[A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide](#)." Human rights, she intoned, must be a central focus in foreign policy, and the United States and other Western nations need not have alternative security concerns before taking military action; mass murder was enough to justify action by the West. In her first round in the Obama administration, she headed the Atrocities Prevention Board, which prevented no atrocities. (Unfortunately, the true atrocities prevention agency, the U.S. military, is under the tutelage of the dull-witted and indifferent Chuck Hagel, who wasn't prepared in his confirmation hearing to quibble with Iran's characterization of its "elections" as "democratic.") After a brief stint away, she returned as ambassador to the United Nations.

Alas, unlike the great ambassadors to that hotbed of hypocrisy and anti-Semitism, she has not shamed the world's despots. She cheerily presided over the U.S.-Russia arrangement — with no enforcement mechanism — to take away Assad's chemical weapons but leave him firmly ensconced in power. She now [cheerleads](#) for the administration, making excuses for its inaction.

That brings us to her tweet this week:

"BREAKING: Justin Bieber gets a DUI. In other news: Syria, South Sudan, Iran, Central African Republic . . ."

Hmm. What **about** other news from these fronts, or from Egypt, Ukraine and China for that matter?

In Syria, even in the face of mass atrocities, the president refused to take decisive (or even "targeted") military action against Bashar al-Assad. The latter now has free rein to slaughter civilians by conventional means. Perhaps as many as 200,000 Syrians are dead. There are millions of refugees. Polio is back in Syria. The president, Power coos, is deeply concerned about all this. But, alas, he does nothing.

Iran? There, the president had his opportunity to be the heroic human rights figure for whom Power pined. Instead, he snubbed the Green Revolution, choosing to "engage" the mullahs in the dream that he could induce the largest state sponsor of terror to join the "community of nations." It is not the right forum to bring up disappearance and torture of dissidents, however. We'll put that on the back burner for now. *What — you want to offend these people?! Have them walk out of talks? War-monger, harrumph.*

In Egypt, we've sided again and again with whoever could grab power — Hosni Mubarak, Mohamed Morsi, the army. As for China, the uptick in [human rights abuses](#) has not dimmed the secretary of state's hopes for a "[special relationship](#)" with the regime.

It is no surprise then that it has been a rotten time for democracy dissidents, religious and ethnic minorities and freedom advocates. Liberty is in decline around the world, [Freedom House reports](#). We suffer from a leadership gap:

As the year 2013 neared its end, the world stepped back from ordinary affairs of state to signal its deep respect for a true giant of the freedom struggle, Nelson Mandela. Praise for Mandela's

qualities as dissident, statesman, and humanitarian came from every part of the globe and from people of all stations in life. Former U.S. president Bill Clinton tellingly described Mandela as “a man of uncommon grace and compassion, for whom abandoning bitterness and embracing adversaries was not just a political strategy but a way of life.”

But the praise bestowed on the father of post-apartheid South Africa was often delivered with more than a note of wistfulness. For it was apparent to many that the defining convictions of Mandela’s career—commitment to the rule of law and democratic choice, rejection of score settling and vengeance seeking, recognition that regarding politics as a zero-sum game was an invitation to authoritarianism and civil strife — are in decidedly short supply among today’s roster of political leaders.

The report continues: “In an earlier period, it was the United States and its allies that were the guarantors of political change in the world. Self-assured and optimistic, they provided the material resources and diplomatic muscle that tipped the balance in favor of freedom movements and struggling new democracies. . . . Unfortunately, the American government has failed to recognize the historic moment that presents itself in the region. It is true that there have been setbacks, that democratic forces have made mistakes, and that rigid geostrategic priorities sometimes conflict with the goals of democratic change. But there is a real danger that policymakers will become locked into a defeatist loop, seeing validation for their inaction in the very problems it produces.”

It’s the sort of attitude that manifests itself in President Obama’s blithe retort that he couldn’t imagine having done anything different in Syria. At least Bill Clinton had the decency to articulate regret for his failure to act in Rwanda.

So, Ambassador Power, it is not enough to tweet your disapproval of celebrity journalism. The administration in which you serve is the most indifferent to human rights of any in memory. You’ve been part of it, defending and excusing its moral sloth. In a better world, you’d resign, give back the Pulitzer and do something more constructive. Write a sequel, perhaps, about the age of genocide. You’ve been there, every step of the way.

## **National Review**

### **Great Caesar’s Ghost**

#### ***On the nauseating spectacle that is the State of the Union address***

by Kevin Williamson

The annual State of the Union pageant is a hideous, dispiriting, ugly, monotonous, un-American, un-republican, anti-democratic, dreary, backward, monarchical, retch-inducing, depressing, shameful, crypto-imperial display of official self-aggrandizement and piteous toadying, a black Mass during which every unholy order of teacup totalitarian and cringing courtier gathers under the towering dome of a faux-Roman temple to listen to a speech with no content given by a man with no content, to rise and to be seated as is called for by the order of worship — it is a wonder they have not started genuflecting — with one wretched representative of their number squirreled away in some well-upholstered Washington hidey-hole in order to preserve the illusion that those gathered constitute a special class of humanity without whom we could not live.

It’s the most nauseating display in American public life — and I write that as someone who has just returned from a pornographers’ convention.

It's worse than the Oscars.

The national self-debasement begins well before the speech is under way. Members of Congress — supposedly free men and women serving as the elected representatives of the citizens of a self-governing republic — arrive hours early, camping out like spotty-faced adolescents waiting for Justin Bieber tickets, in the hope of staking out some prime center-aisle real estate that they might be seen on television, if only for a second or two, being greeted by the national pontifex maximus as he makes his stately procession into the chamber.

When the moment comes and the sergeant-at-arms utters the sacred words — “Mr. Speaker! The president of the United States!” — the chamber will erupt, as though the assembled have entirely forgotten that the mysterious entity that is the object of this curious act of national worship only a decade ago was an obscure legislator in a destitute and corrupt state, a man whose most prominent legislative accomplishment was the passage of a bill requiring police to videotape confessions in potential capital cases — in a state in which there were as a practical matter *no potential capital cases*. (Illinois had not carried out an execution during the century in which the law was passed and was on its way toward abolishing capital punishment categorically.)

But they will listen, rapt, and the media mandarins afterward will evaluate each promise with great sobriety, ignoring entirely that the central promise made during the same charlatan's first State of the Union address was subsequently labeled “Lie of the Year” by the great man's own frustrated admirers. That an entire class of people should be so enthusiastic about being lied to, serially, is perplexing.

And then there are the human props. This year's victim du jour is one Jason Collins, an aging professional basketball player boasting more than \$32 million in lifetime earnings who has publicly affirmed his homosexuality. For this act of courage/oversharing, he is to be seated in the first lady's box. That there is such a thing as the first lady's box is lamentable in and of itself. There is a royal box at London's Royal Opera, complete with a private, Victorian-style toilet. And while the antiquated royal toilet may be a perfect metaphor for the State of the Union festivities, this is a republic, not a monarchy, and honors and offices are not accrued through marriage. Michelle Obama is a currently unemployed former part-time hospital administrator and mother to two lovely daughters. That is admirable enough, but she is a figure of public importance through marriage only, which is to say, properly a figure of curiosity, not of policy. She is not a royal consort, and proximity to her in seating should not constitute a message about the direction of government. (Even Lady Macbeth was known to dispense with such pretensions when pressed: “Stand not upon the order of your going,” she advises her dinner guests.)

There will be other totems, of course: victims of the Boston Marathon bombing, the District of Columbia's teacher of the year (cf. “tallest building in Wichita”), and a kid who built an “extreme marshmallow cannon” for a White House science fair — an act of engineering that almost certainly would have gotten him kicked out of any D.C. teacher of the year's classroom, if not imprisoned.

The State of the Union has not always been a grotesque spectacle. George Washington delivered his briefing in person, but he was dealing with a self-respecting Congress that understood itself to be his equal in government. When he wanted the Senate's advice and consent for an Indian treaty, he visited the chamber personally to seek it — and was so put off by the questioning and debate to which he was subjected that he vowed never to put himself through that again. It was an excellent idea. Thomas Jefferson, ever watchful against monarchical pretensions in the federal apparatus, discontinued the practice of delivering the State of the Union in person before Congress, instead submitting a written report. For a blessed century, Jefferson's example was followed, and, despite

civil war and the occasional financial panic, the nation thrived without an ersatz Caesar to rule over it.

It will come as no surprise that the imperial model was reinstated by Woodrow Wilson, Princeton's answer to Benito Mussolini and the most dangerous man ever elected to the American presidency, a would-be dictator who attempted to criminalize the act of criticizing the state, dismissed the very idea of individual rights as "a lot of nonsense," and described his vision of the presidency as effectively unlimited ("The President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can"). A big man needs a big show, and it is to Wilson's totalitarian tastes that we owe the modern pageant.

The next Republican president should remember why his party is called the *Republican* party and put a stop to this.

The State of the Union is only one example of the deepening, terrifying cult of the state that has taken root here. Many heads of state — and some royals, for that matter — fly on commercial aircraft. Presidents of the Swiss federation and members of the federal council receive . . . an unlimited train pass. They have occasional access to a Cessna maintained by the air force, but are known to use mass transit — just like the people they are elected to represent. An American president stages a Roman triumph every time he heads out for a round of golf. The president's household costs well more than \$1 billion annually to operate. The president's visage is more ubiquitous than was Vladimir Lenin's in his prime, his reach Alexandrian, his sense of immortality (they call it "legacy") pharaonic. Washington has become a deeply weird and alien place, a Renaissance court with armored sedans and hundred-million-dollar paydays.

It's expensive maintaining an imperial class, but money isn't really the object here, and neither is the current occupant of the White House, unlikeable as he is. Whether it's Barack Obama or some subsequent pathological megalomaniac, Republican or Democrat, the increasingly ceremonial and quasi-religious aspect of the presidency is unseemly. It is profane. It is unbecoming of us as a people, and it has transformed the presidency into an office that can be truly attractive only to men who are unfit to hold it.

George Washington showed the world that men do not need a king. We, his heirs, have allowed the coronation of something much worse.

## **IBD**

### **[Obama's 6th State of the Union speech: Hear today, forgotten tomorrow](#)**

by Andrew Malcolm

A survey arrived from the Obama crowd Monday. It asked what we most wanted to hear from the recovering smoker's State of the Union address this evening.

That's a trick, of course, to collect more emails and donations. The speech has been in the works for weeks with policies vetted by departments and key phrases poll-tested. It won't surprise you after tonight that "income inequality" tested well.

Our answer to what we most want to hear tonight is: "Thank you very much and may God bless America."

The Founding Fathers had it mostly right. President George Washington, he who disdained handshakes as beneath the office, spoke to a joint session of Congress in New York. But Thomas Jefferson, who helped pen the nation's earliest documents, discarded the practice as too regal, reminiscent of the Brits' Speech from the Throne.

With quaint 18th century political incorrectness, the Constitution requires some kind of chief executive report to the equal branch of government: "He shall from time to time give to Congress information of the State of the Union and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient."

With classic American excess, from humble vagueness grew this annual media extravaganza that will consume prime-time on national TV and radio and transmission around the globe with Republican and Tea Party rebuttals and "analysis" from political has-beens on channels tuned to their slant's loyalists.

Twas not always thus. For more than a century after the first GW's retirement, his successors merely sent their quilled reports up Pennsylvania Avenue and those guys on the Hill could not read them after not reading the bills they were not passing.

Woodrow Wilson changed all that 101 years ago. As the academic he was, Wilson decided to deliver his lecture in person with the kind of overblown oratorical grandiloquence common to the podium in days before, first, radio and then television sound bites began shaping how we publicly converse.

Here, for example, is just *part* of Wilson's opening:

"I shall ask your indulgence if I venture to depart in some degree from the usual custom of setting before you in formal review the many matters which have engaged the attention and called for the action of the several departments of the Government or which look to them for early treatment in the future, because the list is long, very long, and would suffer in the abbreviation to which I should have to subject it."

Compared to such coma-inducing rhetoric, Obama could sound like his old self. His high-paid speechwriters will give him around 4,000 words arrayed in shorter sentences with a couple of laugh lines and two dozen or so applause lines, a few bipartisan. He'll point out some people props sitting with his wife.

And for the sixth time he'll outline an alleged legislative plan for the year to a nationwide TV audience as fellow Democrats bounce up and down to the politically-programmed applause lines.

Obama will offer the usual laundry list of unachievable achievements. Remember last year's State of the Union? Nobody does. His big three goals? Immigration Reform. Background Checks. Minimum Wage Hike. None of them went anywhere. Obama's a genuine lame duck now with credibility, job approval and trust numbers sliding.

The 2014 State of the Union is all about setting the agenda for the campaign, which is what Obama enjoys the most anyway. He'll start in Nashville Thursday with, of course, a speech.

The midterm election is just 280 days away. History suggests significant Democrat losses in both houses. And the political forecast calls for more severe ObamaCare storms, job losses and subscriber anger. Obama's party colleagues, who took a pasting in 2010 over ObamaCare, are grumbling again. So the leader must give them red-meat--and hope--to run on.

He must also provide qualified good news. Obama's chronic job pivots to nowhere have become laugh lines. But he'll tout new jobs. Returning troops. The need to combat income inequality, which has grown worse on Obama's watch. He'll also threaten end-runs around an uncooperative Congress, which, he won't mention, still controls the purse.

We're not where we need to be yet, Obama will declare, but we're well on the way now.

Obama isn't the first chief executive to profess false optimism about the world and rest of his term. Here's how President Wilson put it:

"The country, I am thankful to say, is at peace with all the world, and many happy manifestations multiply about us of a growing cordiality and sense of community of interest among the nations, foreshadowing an age of settled peace and good will."

Exactly 208 days later, World War I began.

## Contentions

### [Pete Seeger and the Judgment of History](#)

by Jonathan S. Tobin

How do you separate musical icons from the politics that either ennobled or besmirched their reputations? The answer is that you can't. And there's no better example of this than singer/songwriter Pete Seeger, who died yesterday at the age of 94. Seeger is being lionized in the mainstream liberal media as the troubadour of social activism whose songs were the soundtrack of the struggle for civil rights, social equality, and against the Vietnam War. Seeger had, by the time he died, ascended to the status of a secular saint and was considered great not just because of his music but because of his left-wing politics and his struggles during the McCarthy period, when he was blacklisted.

In this retelling of his story, Seeger's actual beliefs were beside the point. Any criticism of his actions and affiliations was branded as intolerant or worse, a revival of anti-Communist fear-mongering. It is this Pete Seeger that America celebrated in recent decades. Though he could often be seen at left-wing demonstrations, even showing up at the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011, the man who sang at Barack Obama's first inaugural with Bruce Springsteen was no longer controversial. If he was not quite the Rosa Parks of folk song, he had become something fairly close.

But the complete truth about Seeger is not as simple as that. Seeger wasn't merely affiliated with left-wing groups in his youth. He was an active member of the Communist Party (CP) and a loyal Stalinist who put his talent in the service of that conspiratorial and murderous movement.

So who was Pete Seeger? Was he the hero or the villain? The answer is that he was both. Or more to the point, he was a great musician who sometimes put himself on the right side of history and sometimes on the wrong one. Which is why the unalloyed tributes to Seeger being broadcast today on the networks and published in the mainstream media have it wrong. But the same judgment applies to some on the right who can't see past his sins.

It should be understood that his youthful infatuation with Stalinism was neither superficial nor a passing fancy. To his shame, he toured the country singing protest songs from 1939 to 1941. But he was not protesting the Nazis nor did he support those fighting them. Rather, he was part of the CP campaign conducted at Moscow's behest that sought to combat any effort to involve the United States in World War Two. The Hitler-Stalin Pact had made the Soviets Germany's ally until the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union brought them into the war. Seeger remained a party member until the 1950s and even long after he abandoned it, he continued to refer to himself as a communist with a small "c" rather than an upper-case one.

To many liberals as well as the stalwarts of the old left, this is nothing for which he should apologize. Liberal revisionism has transformed the vicious Communism of this era from an anti-American and anti-democratic conspiracy into a romantic expression of support for human rights. As such, Seeger and many of his comrades were able to bask in the applause of subsequent generations rather than having to atone for having been a proud apologist for one of the worst criminals in history as well as for the mass murder and anti-Semitism that was integral to Soviet communism. While isolationists like Charles Lindbergh and other apologists for Hitler never lived down that association, Stalinists like Seeger had a rough time in the 1950s but were ultimately honored for their disgraceful behavior.

That is infuriating, and for many conservatives [like Pajama Media's Ed Driscoll](#), unforgivable. The honors showered on the elderly Seeger serve only to deepen the bitterness of those who not unreasonably believe the adamant refusal to tell the truth about this chapter of Seeger's life—both in the news media and in documentary films about him—undermines our ability to take a full measure of the man, and is an insult to all those who take seriously the eternal struggle against the enemies of freedom.

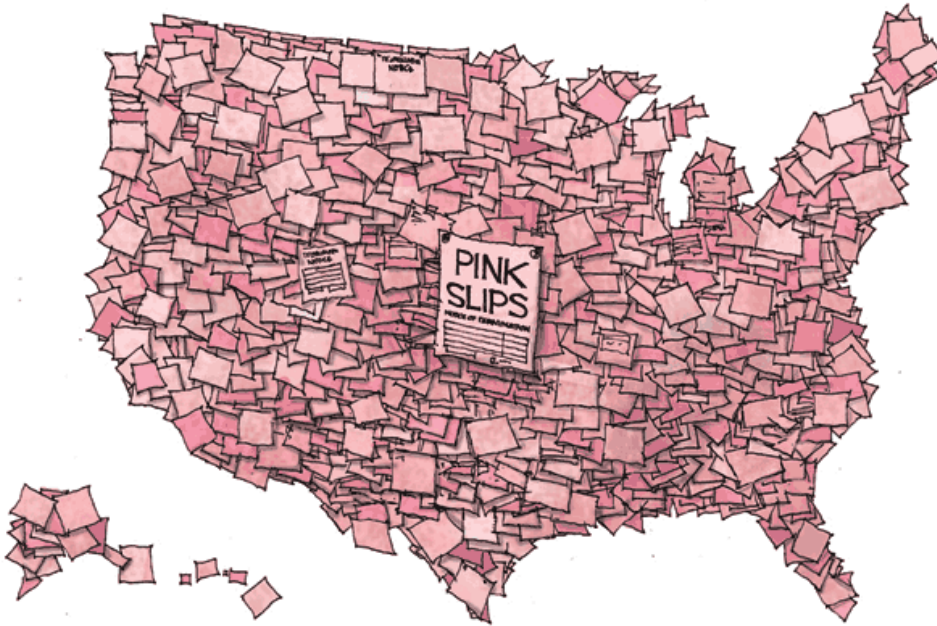
And yet there is more to Seeger than these two inconsistent narratives. As historian Ron Radosh, a former student of the singer as well as an indispensable chronicler of Communism, [movingly wrote in 2007](#) in the *New York Sun*, Seeger had, by the end of his life, finally understood the magnitude of some of his earlier errors. As Radosh wrote, Seeger admitted that he was wrong never to have protested Stalin's tyranny and atoned in part by belatedly writing a song denouncing the gulag.

Ultimately, as with all artists of every stripe, history will judge Seeger more for the quality of his music than his politics. As [Paul Berman wrote today](#) in the *New Republic*, songs like *If I Had a Hammer* or *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, not to mention *We Shall Overcome*, will deserve to be sung a hundred years from now no matter what Seeger believed about communism. His legacy is far messier than most of the tributes will admit. But to listen to his vintage recordings or those of the groundbreaking folk group "The Weavers" to which he lent his tenor voice and banjo is to hear a great artist and a genuine voice of American culture. It is that Pete Seeger, and not the sanitized liberal icon or the Stalinist front man, who will be remembered.



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says MARIJUANA is NO  
WORSE than CIGARETTES  
or ALCOHOL but studies  
show it CAUSES BRAIN  
DAMAGE.

That EXPLAINS  
his FOREIGN and  
ECONOMIC POLICIES  
and OBAMACARE.



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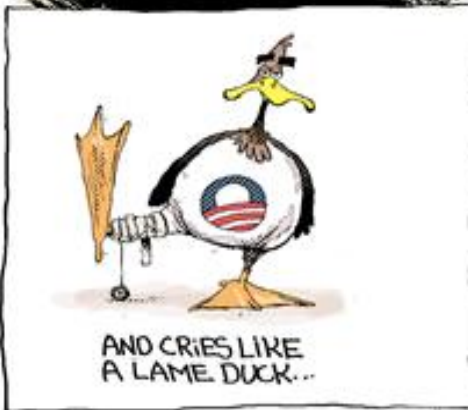
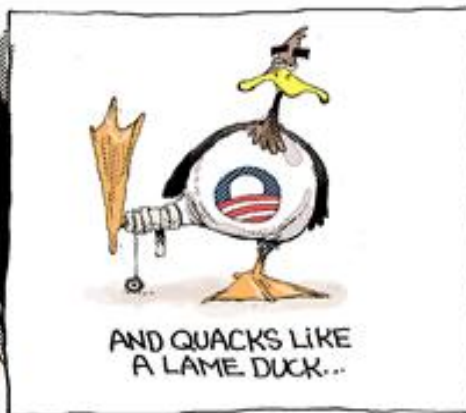
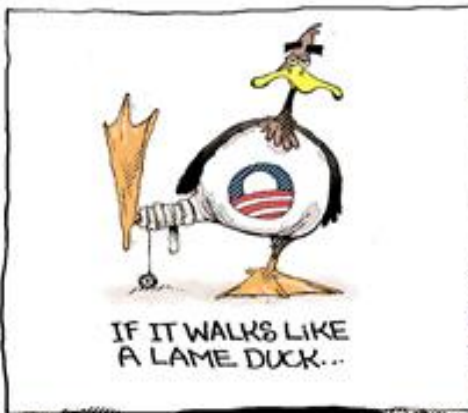
OBAMA TRASH TALK

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"REPUBLICANS AND I AGREE THAT GOVERNMENT IS TOO BIG. SO I'M ELIMINATING THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH."