

Clinton's State of the Union address: an exercise in deceit and self-delusion

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31 January 2000

In his State of the Union address last Thursday, President Bill Clinton depicted the United States as a nation blessed with unprecedented prosperity, looking confidently forward to the new century. But to a critical eye his speech revealed a very different picture. Try as he might to present a rose-colored view of American life, the president's own words betrayed the existence of a profound social crisis.

Clinton set the tone for his entire speech with his opening remarks: "Never before has our nation enjoyed, at once, so much prosperity and social progress with so little internal crisis and so few external threats.... My fellow Americans, the state of our union is the strongest it has ever been."

Next came the by-now standard recital of economic triumphs: 20 million new jobs, the fastest economic growth in more than 30 years, the lowest unemployment rates in 30 years, the first back-to-back budget surpluses in 42 years, the longest period of economic growth in US history.

Then the president assured corporate America that his administration's repudiation of liberal reformism was irreversible. This was expressed in the language of euphemism: "We restored the vital center, replacing outmoded ideologies ..."

Later in his address, Clinton provided another, inadvertent, testimony to the Democratic Party's repudiation of its liberal past. He became visibly rattled when, intending to say "livable," he misspoke and talked of making communities more "liberal." That the term "liberal," which designated the dominant outlook of the Washington establishment for much of the twentieth century, is today a political epithet says a great deal about the rightward shift of American politics over the past two decades.

Clinton went on to declare that America had to "dream big dreams" and "set great goals." As it turned out, the biggest dream and the greatest goal—and the line which received the loudest applause from the assembled dignitaries—was the pledge: "We will pay off our national debt for the first time since 1835."

When he got down to listing specific proposals, Clinton sought to reassure big business that his talk of "big dreams" and "great goals" was not to be interpreted too literally. Such grand words applied to the realm of abstraction. When it came to actual policies and programs, he proposed the far more comforting byword: "step by step." In any event, as he and his audience were well aware, there was virtually no chance that Congress would pass even the most modest social measures.

Notwithstanding his opening boasts of prosperity and social progress, as soon as Clinton began to touch on such issues as education, health care, the elderly, crime, etc., a radically different

picture emerged. One needed only to cut through the rhetoric and, so to speak, decipher his speech to perceive the grim reality that underlay Clinton's idealized characterization of social conditions in the US.

On the issue of education, for example, Clinton spoke of the need for pre-school and after-school programs, and properly trained teachers. This was an allusion to the critical shortage of qualified and accredited public school teachers, and the lack of facilities for tens of millions of children who live in families where both parents are forced to work, often holding down multiple jobs.

Clinton noted that "a third of all our schools are in serious disrepair," with "walls and wires so old, they're too old for the Internet." He called for getting students "out of trailers" and into classrooms. As for higher education, he acknowledged that "millions of families still strain to pay college tuition."

Against the backdrop of the profound crisis indicated by his own words, Clinton's education initiatives—which he declared his top social priority—were at best token measures. Their total cost would be \$4 billion, a mere 0.2 percent of the federal budget. Moreover, Clinton combined proposals for hiring teachers and renovating schools with reactionary calls to close "failing" schools and nearly double the number of quasi-private charter schools.

On health care, Clinton admitted that the ranks of uninsured Americans had grown since he took office seven years ago, surpassing the staggering figure of 40 million. He proposed initiatives that would at best cover 10 million uninsured people, timid measures which he gamely sought to magnify: "Think of this—together with our children's initiative, this action would enable us to cover nearly a quarter of all the uninsured people in America."

As with every other aspect of social conditions in America, Clinton glided rapidly over the state of elderly Americans. Nevertheless, his words provided a glimpse of a harsh reality. "Yet more than three in five of our seniors now lack dependable drug coverage.... Millions of older Americans who need prescription drugs the most pay the highest prices for them.... Record numbers of Americans are providing for aging or ailing loved ones at home. It's a loving, but a difficult and often very expensive choice."

To deal with this crisis, he proposed modest tax cuts for individuals and tax incentives for businesses. His retirement savings account for low-income individuals, for example, amounted to a government grant of a mere \$100 to match the first \$100 contributed by each enrollee.

His proposals for easing the financial burden on working families were of the same order. "Many working parents spend up to a quarter—a quarter—of their income on child care," he declared. There was, however, no suggestion that the government should ensure the right of all parents to affordable child care. Instead he proposed a

timid package of tax relief for families and tax breaks for employers.

“Tens of millions of Americans live from paycheck to paycheck,” he noted. “As hard as they work, they still don’t have the opportunity to save.” Clinton’s most ambitious proposal to counter the decline in living standards for millions of working people was to “implore” Congress to raise the minimum wage from its present semi-starvation level of \$5.15.

Of childhood poverty, Clinton said, “Nearly one in three American children grow up without a father. These children are five times more likely to live in poverty than children with both parents at home.” Clinton’s solution: to crack down harder on delinquent fathers.

He pointed to areas of the most pervasive poverty—the inner cities, poor rural areas, the Mississippi Delta and Native American reservations—areas which, taken together, constitute a substantial part of the country. Typically, his anti-poverty plan was to expand tax incentives and other handouts to encourage businesses to exploit these “new markets.”

“There’s another part of our American community in trouble tonight,” he declared. “Our family farmers ... droughts, floods and historically low prices have made these times very bad for the farmers.” But there was no suggestion that the government should restore the system of farm price supports and subsidies that his administration had eliminated.

Clinton touched on the shooting rampages and hate crimes that have become almost weekly phenomena in the US. He introduced the father of a 15-year-old killed in the shooting spree at Columbine High School, one of a dozen or more school shootings over the past several years. He mentioned the racially-motivated murder of a black man in Texas, the killing of a young gay student in Wyoming, and the shooting of blacks, Asian Americans and Jewish children in Chicago, Los Angeles and other cities.

“Listen to this—listen to this,” he said. “The accidental gun death rate of children under 15 in the United States is nine times higher than in the other 25 industrialized countries combined.”

Clinton’s answer to the social trauma that underlies mass shootings was more police and more gun control measures. It never occurred to him—nor to the droves of media commentators and newspaper reporters who provided postmortems of the speech—that such levels of wanton violence make a mockery of the idyllic picture of prosperity and social progress with which the president began his address. If life is so wonderful in the US, why have shooting rampages in schools, churches and work places become an almost routine feature of American society?

Such contradictions abounded in Clinton’s speech. Here is another: if the US faces, as Clinton declared, fewer external threats than ever before, why in the current budget did he propose the biggest increase in military spending since the Reagan era, and why in his State of the Union address did he call for tens of billions more to be spent on the development of a missile defense system?

Neither Clinton, nor his Republican opponents, nor the pundits could perceive the mass of contradictions and absurdities in the State of the Union address because they are all, no matter how violent their personal and partisan antagonisms, part of the same social and political elite. None of them have any desire to peer beneath the veneer of economic boom and examine the explosive class contradictions that lie just below the surface. In the spectacle of Clinton’s speech there was, besides the element of mass deception, a large measure of self-delusion.

That American politics all but exclude an honest discussion of the

great political and social issues of the day is not new. But especially over the past two decades, beginning with the Reagan administration, media manipulation, histrionics and empty rhetoric have come to dominate what passes for political life.

With the advent of Clinton, the element of affectation has grown in proportion to the rightward trajectory of both big business parties. The annual State of the Union address has become a barometer of the growing decadence and dishonesty of official politics.

Clinton’s performance last week provided a graphic demonstration of the process by which political functions are transformed into rituals. Every aspect of the event was contrived and false. There were the obligatory gestures to what are considered important interest groups—environmentalists, feminists, minority groups, the military—highlighted by the careful placement of various individuals in the gallery. Much time and thought went into deciding who was to sit beside the First Lady, who was to be acknowledged by the president and asked to stand up. There was even Clinton’s well-rehearsed “I love you,” silently mouthed to a beaming Hillary.

If there was an art to the speech, it was the challenge of reassuring Wall Street that nothing would be done to alter the economic climate that has fostered the greatest bull market in history, while creating the impression, for the benefit of the mass audience, that the president was addressing public education, the problems of the elderly and other social questions.

The gross distortions of reality, the recourse to cant and cheap theatrics are symptoms of a political system that has become insulated and entirely detached from the masses of people. The chasm that separates the political system from the general population is, in turn, rooted in the staggering growth of social inequality in the United States.

Stripped of all its mannerisms, Clinton’s speech was a paean to two decades of record prosperity for the top 10 or 15 percent of the population, at the direct expense of the vast majority of the country. This is something which corporate executives, bankers, media moguls, millionaire pundits, big investors and all of their political servants, Democratic and Republican alike, can celebrate.

The relentless assault on the living standards of the working class has found its consummate expression in the dizzying rise of share values on Wall Street. The social policies of both parties, backed by the courts and championed by the media, have for 20 years been concentrated on the single-minded goal of boosting the stock market, and thereby piling ever greater riches on the most privileged layers of society. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that to the dignitaries who assembled to hear Clinton hold forth last Thursday, the state of the stock market *is* the State of the Union.

But the decadence and blindness on display in Washington simply mean that the inevitable day of reckoning will be that much more convulsive. One need only pose the question: if America is gripped by so many profound social problems at the height of its prosperity, what will the country look like once the speculative bubble on Wall Street finally bursts, as, sooner or later, it must?



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