

Obama's odd pivot to Hope & Change 2.0

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January 20, 2015

I watched State of the Union on ABC last night. Afterwards, in the brief window of frantic punditry before the rebuttal speech, the talking heads zeroed in on the lack of a conciliatory tone from the president. The GOP flipped the Senate! Shouldn't Obama play it less arrogant and more chagrined?

I guess so, if SOTU were about a blueprint for working together. But nobody still thinks this, do they? At this point, when the Democrats occupy the White House and the Republicans run Congress, nothing much is going to get done. The Democrats do still have the presidential microphone, however, and last night Obama used it to strike a relatively combative tone. I don't think this will rally the American people to demand that Congress enact the president's agenda or anything. But nor was it a blown opportunity to improve bipartisan relations. No such opportunity existed.

Obama spoke like a president without much power to lose—or gain.

So what seemed stranger was his late shift to the whole extended Hope and Change 2.0 thing. Obama has accomplished a lot in his presidency. He absolutely has not improved our national political conversation. Maybe he tried earnestly and failed; maybe he's been part of the problem from the start. Maybe he really believed the high-minded stuff he said years ago; maybe it was deft campaigning and nothing more.

Those questions aside, it's clearer than ever that our political system's dysfunction has deep structural causes that can't be fixed by civility, pragmatism, or the best efforts of a brilliant president. The problems are much bigger than anyone's intentions or attitude. And it's hard to believe that Obama now has a fraction of the optimism he once expressed about improving this. So what's his play here?

[The Onion's take on SOTU is clever](#), a bloodless reading of a list of pipe dreams. More incisive is Ezra Klein's draft of [what Obama would have said if he were being honest](#):

You ever think about why football games are the way they are? You have all these guys hitting each other so hard they cause each other permanent brain damage. So why do they do it? Why do kids who aren't getting paid a cent do it?

It's not because they hate each other... They do it because that's how the game works. They do it because the rules are you line up in front of the other team and then you hit them as hard as you can. They do it because, for one side to win, the other has to lose. And they do it because, if they don't do it, they're off the team. Football has no place for conscientious objectors.

The honest truth is that that's how politics works, too. We've got two teams. And only one of them can win the election....

Even if our motivations are noble, the game we're playing is ugly, and more than it's ugly, it's getting dangerous. And that's because, even though we can't agree, even though the rules of the game make it career suicide for us to agree, the political system is built to require our agreement. It needs us to do the thing it makes impossible....

Only you can change the game. Only you can change the rules. But right now, you're just punishing the players.

[Read it all](#). It's a much better speech.

Some additional observations from last night:

- I can't muster the enthusiasm to make fun of Speaker Boehner on SOTU night. Yes, he's well compensated for his job, but having your reactions scrutinized as your opponent controls the mic for an hour can't be the most enjoyable part of it.
- Obama trumpeted low gas prices and our relative "free[dom] from the grip of foreign oil." The implications here are actually [pretty complex](#).
- The Democrats rarely stand up for unions anymore, but a SOTU shoutout is still nice I guess.
- The Pentagon says x threatens our national security; the president says "we should act like it"; the opposition members don't clap. Until quite recently this equation would have been unsolvable. Today, x obviously = climate change.
- Obama: it's wise to go to war only "as a last resort." But the problem isn't that we simply go to war willy nilly. It's the whole attitude that we can if we want to because we're exceptional and, in Obama's words, we "reserve the right to act unilaterally" all over the world.
- Yes, paid sick days are incredibly important—and [not just for workers but also for employers](#).

- “We are 15 years into this new century.” In other speeches, he’s talked about the new *millennium*. Which is it, Obama??