

The Scouting Report: Obama's Speech to Congress
Live Web Chat with Brookings Senior Fellow William Galston and *Politico*
Senior Editor Fred Barbash
February 25, 2009

12:32 Fred Barbash-Moderator:

A former policy advisor to President Clinton and presidential candidates, Bill Galston is an expert on domestic policy, political campaigns, and elections. His current research focuses on designing a new social contract and the implications of political polarization. Today, the topic is President Obama's address to Congress last night. Welcome Bill.

Let me start by asking whether you thought the President adequately connected the dots of his multi-faceted and ambitious agenda, that is, did he make it sufficiently plain to the public?

12:34 William Galston:

While the president tried to explain how we ended up where we are, it's not clear that he went far enough. Nor is it clear that he explained how it all adds up.

12:34 [Comment From Jim]

What do you think the president was trying to achieve with this speech – and did he do it?

12:35 William Galston:

It was a bold speech. The president is trying to capitalize on his popularity to build support for his ambitious agenda among the public and in Congress – stabilizing the economy, reducing the deficit, investing in health care and education, addressing energy and the environment. He's going for broke, betting that people's desire for purposeful leadership will overcome entrenched political obstacles. Only time will tell.

12:36 [Comment From Harold (DC)]

Were there any surprises in the speech?

12:37 William Galston:

I don't know if this was surprising, but the President rejected the pundits' advice to postpone expensive, politically difficult challenging initiatives such as universal health care and cap-and-trade legislation to deal with climate change. It was a straightforwardly liberal speech. He rejected the idea that government has no role in solving problems or creating prosperity. He emphasized the role of the national government in restarting the engine of economic growth, and he invoked the history of successful government programs of the past, such as the interstate highway and space programs.

12:38 [Comment From Derek]

Opposition to the bailouts seems to be growing – people are wondering why the auto industry and people who bought houses they couldn't afford should get help, while people who acted prudently foot the bill. Can he sustain his program?

12:38 William Galston:

The President took that on forcefully, acknowledging the growing populist ire against the banks, the auto industry and defaulters, but making the case that bailouts will be beneficial to the people as a whole. It's a case he must make in order to rally public support – and congressional support – behind his agenda.

12:39 [Comment From Sean from Richmond, VA]

I was really looking forward to seeing Bobby Jindal, but I thought he fell incredibly flat. Strategically, I wasn't sure why he spent so much of his time on universal platitudes, along the lines of "America is great." Why waste your breath, and my ears, on this night of all nights, on things that any politician can say on any day? What did the Republicans gain?

12:39 William Galston:

You're not alone! Jindal's speech was almost universally panned. It won't help him launch his campaign for president.

12:40 [Comment From mila]

Economic experts say the American public will hear more bad news before they begin hearing good news about our weakening economy. Do prime-time speeches like these help Obama win public approval for his plans? Can they back-fire?

12:42 William Galston:

History suggests that forceful primetime speeches, such as last night's, can build public support for the president's program. But because the agenda that the president announced is so bold and politically difficult there is a risk that he may not be able to get it done, which could produce a negative public reaction in the long term.

12:42 [Comment From Raul]

if the president were to just say to everybody that "everything is fine," do you think markets would turn around? basic economic studies talk about "self-fulfilling prophecies." don't we just need a dose of optimism?

12:43 William Galston:

Good question! Markets don't usually respond to "happy talk." They're responding to current economic realities and to their assessment of the impact of the president's proposals.

12:43 William Galston:

Optimism helps, but it's not enough unless backed by facts and solid plans.

12:44 [Comment From Nancy (NY)]

This really sounded like a campaign speech. Doesn't he need to start sounding more like a president and less like a candidate?

12:44 William Galston:

I beg to differ. While the themes and policy emphases were consistent with his campaign, Mr. Obama spoke as a president, with more elevated rhetoric, less overt partisanship, and an evident sense of responsibility for the governance of the nation.

12:45 [Comment From Jason]

Often when the Democrats jumped up to applaud, the Republicans stayed in their seats. Is opposing Obama a winning strategy for the GOP? If Obama can't get bipartisan support on the Hill, who pays the political price in the long run?

12:46 William Galston:

I noted with interest that Eric Cantor, an aggressively conservative and very intelligent young Republican leader, turned the other cheek after the speech, emphasizing areas of agreement before proceeding to the differences. The Republicans must be reading the polls, which are not encouraging so far. The president is getting pretty high marks for trying to reach out, while the people see the Republicans as spurning his outstretched hand.

12:46 William Galston:

In the long run, however, everything depends on whether the president's economic recovery program works. If it does, as Reagan's did in the mid-1980s, he will be strong toward the end of his first term, with reelection the near-certain consequence. If it doesn't, as the president has acknowledged, his fate could resemble Jimmy Carter's.

12:47 Fred Barbash-Moderator:

The GOP seems still reliant on a theme of small government and tax cuts. Under the circumstances, do you think they can still sell that? If you were a GOP leader in Congress, how would you be responding to the Obama administration now?

12:48 William Galston:

In my judgment the theme of small government and tax cuts has lost credibility - at least for the time being. The longer they keep repeating it the less credible they'll be.

12:49 William Galston:

If I were a GOP leader in Congress, I would acknowledge areas of agreement with the president and emphasize constructive alternatives when and where we disagree with him. Just saying "no" is not going to be a politically viable option.

12:49 [Comment From bob]

some people said Obama's speech was "churchillian." do you agree? and if so, is this good or bad?

12:51 William Galston:

Hahaha... if it were indeed "Churchillian" that would be a very good thing. Winston Churchill gave some of the most memorable speeches of the 20th century. But, I think it would be a stretch to describe last night's speech - which was well crafted and well delivered - as Churchillian.

12:51 [Comment From Joan, Raleigh, NC]

Stating what he will accomplish without any substantive detail on how we will get there is just marketing and the usual political rhetoric. I frankly am insulted by the rhetoric and feel completely disenfranchised by both parties. The fact that a spending plan of such proportions was passed into law with no time to even read the bill is unacceptable. I believe our democratic process is in jeopardy which is much more alarming than the state of the economy.

12:52 William Galston:

The president is going to be fleshing out the details in the next few days, starting tomorrow with his detailed budget. Next week, he will provide details on his housing plan. Last night's speech was a general overview and was not intended as a substitute for detailed plans.

12:53 [Comment From Susan]

The talking heads have been criticizing him for too much gloom and doom about the economy and the bailouts, and not enough "hope." Did he change his tone, and did it work?

12:54 William Galston:

Thanks for the question Susan.

There's no question he struck a much more positive tone, telling Americans that we will rebuild and recover and emerge "stronger than ever." And he was clearly trying to project an image of calm and confidence. At the same time, he did not downplay the magnitude of the challenges we face. It was a message aimed at building public confidence and support for his agenda.

12:54 [Comment From Greta from NJ]

Last time, I checked, the markets were down sharply today. Does that mean he failed in his economic message? Wasn't he trying to reassure the markets?

12:54 William Galston:

But the president was evidently interested in the people's response more than the market's. He did not use the occasion to add detail on burning short-term

issues such as the home mortgage relief, banking rescue, or auto industry bailout, and Wall Street probably did not respond favorably to that.

12:55 William Galston:

However, if the speech built public trust, he will go forward with the wind in his sails. In the short term, public reaction is likely to be favorable. If, over the long term, his reach seems to exceed his grasp, more doubt than hope may be raised.

12:55 [Comment From irene]

Why was there so little on foreign policy, Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East in the speech? Has he made the calculation that the public isn't interested, or doesn't he want to talk about foreign affairs?

12:55 William Galston:

Another good question!

The president made the judgment that he had to focus on the economy, first and foremost. Given public concern, a different focus would have appeared beside the point. He'll have many opportunities to return to foreign policy in the months ahead.

12:56 [Comment From tim]

Why wasn't this a State of the Union address? What's the difference?

12:56 William Galston:

At this point, it's a distinction without a difference. The speech had all the trappings of a State of the Union address—the same venue, audience, and protocol. The substantive difference was that the president did not feel compelled to offer a comprehensive judgment on, or account of, the state of the union. He could focus on what he most wanted to talk about.

12:58 [Comment From Jennifer, Spokane, Wash.]

I know he was trying to get Congress back his plans on the economy and health care, etc., but is there any chance the gridlock in congress will break?

12:59 William Galston:

Over the past 2 decades, a lot of polarization has built up in Washington, and the president won't be able to overcome it quickly. But he has to keep on trying and he may score some success down the road.

12:59 [Comment From lisa]

On the policy front, what aspects of Obama's speech do the Republicans applaud- if not on the issue of expanding government's role in the economy?

1:00 William Galston:

The Republicans liked the president's emphasis on education - especially reform and charter schools. And, they applauded his announcement that he and his advisors had already located 2 trillion dollars that could be cut over the next decade.

1:01 [Comment From Martha, St. Paul]

What did you think of his health care message? Isn't that a lot to ask for when we have a lot of taxpayer money going out the door for the banks and the stimulus?

1:02 William Galston:

The president will have a hard time selling his bold health care reform unless he specifies a way of paying for it. It will be interesting to see whether the budget to be released tomorrow tries to do that.

1:02 [Comment From Rick, Philly]

I only heard two places where Obama specifically asked Congress to send him legislation. The first was a cap-and-trade plan to address global warming, and the second was the Hatch-Kennedy national service bill. What about health care?

1:03 William Galston:

Good question. The president made it clear that he wanted to do comprehensive health care reform this year. That's the phrase he used. But he understands that that bill will have to be crafted in consultation with Congress and many, many interest groups.

1:04 [Comment From Lakshmi S.]

Is there any way to scale back all the applause? It's like it's a contest, and you really can't hear the speech. The rhythm is broken.

1:05 William Galston:

Lakshmi, I agree with you. I think the amount of applause has gotten ridiculous. But it's a ritual that has developed over many years and it's hard to end it.

1:05 [Comment From Locke]

I work on sustainability issues. Is it a conflict to say on the one hand, we're going to save the carmakers and build more roads and bridges, but on the other hand we're going to create green jobs and reduce carbon emissions?

1:06 William Galston:

No, I don't think so. Because, the president has explicitly committed his administration to developing the next generation of hybrid and electric vehicles. He sees no contradiction between saving the environment and saving a future oriented U.S. auto industry.

1:07 [Comment From Ralph Gette]

could this Burris stuff rear up and derail the foundation that president Obama is trying to set?

1:09 William Galston:

No one is happy with the Burris situation. The senior senator from IL has made it clear that he thinks Mr. Burris ought to resign, and just about everybody agrees - except Mr. Burris. But, this unfortunate situation, although embarrassing, will not derail the president's plans.

1:09 [Comment From Hank]

I feel like most of the economic talk centered on our domestic economy. what about the world economy? wouldn't it even benefit Obama to talk more about the fact that we're not in this alone? and reference his recent meetings with Japan and Canada?

1:10 William Galston:

Hank, I agree with you. The world economy was conspicuous by its absence from the president's remarks. I think the president missed an opportunity to explain to the American people how the world's economies are connected.

1:10 [Comment From p. montgomery]

li was amazed when they said the congressmen got their seats on the aisle at 8 a.m. just to be pictured with Obama coming in. What does that say about his popularity?

1:11 William Galston:

What it says is, is that the president is a lot more popular that most members of Congress are - especially the Republicans.

1:11 [Comment From Sean from Richmond, VA]

did you have a personal favorite line from last night? Something you think will be referenced in the days and weeks to come?

1:12 William Galston:

While there wasn't a single outstanding line, I particularly noticed the sentence in which the president declared his belief in the power of government to make a difference in our economy and society. It was his response to Ronald Reagan's line that government is the problem not the solution.

1:13 [Comment From Margaret, from S.C.]

Jindal is getting crucified for his response. I mean, he's not the president, so he's at a big disadvantage. Was it really so bad? What should he have done?

1:14 William Galston:

Margaret, I partly agree with you. The person who responds to the president is always at a disadvantage. Having said that, Jindal's presentation was stylistically

unimpressive and its content even more so. He has a reputation for being extremely smart, but that was hard to guess based on last night's remarks.

1:15 [Comment From Erin Dallas, Texas]

will last night's speech make a difference? ...in anything??

1:16 William Galston:

Yes. Because it gave the American people a clear road map to the administration's plans for the next 2 years. And also, he laid out the rationale for his economic strategy very clearly and forcefully.

1:16 [Comment From Joe]

While I personally liked the line, "Nobody messes with Joe," I didn't really get it. What do you think?

1:17 William Galston:

I think he meant that Joe Biden is a tough and very experienced public leader who is not easily fooled and not easily rolled - just the kind of guy you'd want in charge of enforcing some standards!

1:18 [Comment From E. Beckstrom, Raleigh]

The President seems to be getting pretty good marks on his speech. Is he still getting a "honeymoon" from the press? from the American public? if so, how long can it last?

1:18 William Galston:

Although the president's poll ratings have slipped somewhat in the past month, he is still getting high marks from the people for leadership and for his efforts to be bipartisan.

1:19 William Galston:

It's hard to predict how long it will last, it may be a few months before the economic plan begins to show some effect and it's anybody's guess how patient the people will be.

1:20 Fred Barbash-Moderator:

Speaking of Joe Biden, Obama seems to be bringing him along to a wide variety of events on a wide variety of subjects including some out-of-town events. In your experience, is this unusual? What does Obama gain from it?

1:23 William Galston:

Good question Fred! One possible explanation is that he sees Joe Biden as filling in some of the gaps in his own resume. Biden conveys the experience of more than 3 decades in the senate and also, his physical appearance is a counterweight to Obama's youthfulness. Biden may be reassuring to older Americans. In addition, the 2 of them have very different styles and the

president may believe that Biden's style appeals to some people who don't quite get the intellectual seriousness that the president portrays.

1:23 [Comment From Jillian P., Arlington]

Back on Bobby Jindal - does his party even have a message right now? What can he say? The Republicans have always been famous for being "on message," but do they have a message right now?

1:25 William Galston:

The only message the Republican party has right now is the one they've had for the past 30 years. Unfortunately the sell-by date on that message has expired! As I know from my own experience, it takes a long time for a political party to renew itself and to develop a compelling new message.

1:25 [Comment From Mike S.]

What's the best presidential speech you've ever heard, in person? How does Obama rank as a speaker?

1:27 William Galston:

Obama is a terrific speaker with a wonderful presence and a marvelous voice. The best presidential speech I ever heard in person was delivered by Bill Clinton in Cleveland in 1991. That was before he was elected president, so maybe it doesn't technically count!

The best presidential speech I've ever heard when I wasn't present was Ronald Reagan's acceptance speech at the 1980 Republican convention

1:28 Fred Barbash-Moderator:

Nobody asked me, but the most interesting presidential speech I've heard (not in person), was Richard Nixon's resignation speech.

On that note, I'd like to thank Bill Galston and Brookings for doing this and everyone else for participating.

1:29 William Galston:

Thanks for all the good questions everyone!