

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45:
On Trump's address to Congress

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

GALSTON: Hi, I'm Bill Galston. I'm a senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, and I'm here to talk for a few minutes about the speech that President Trump gave to the joint session of Congress.

As the president delivered his speech, I had a number of questions in mind that I expected the speech to answer, I'll list them and briefly give you my reactions. First of all, would the tone of the speech be roughly the same as his very combative first inaugural address? Or would it be discernibly different? And I think the answer is clear. The president made a decision to adopt a much more unifying tone. His basic message didn't change all that much, but a lot of the rough edges had been sanded off. I speculated, as I saw that, that this change of tone would be well-received by the American people and the early returns suggest that it was.

My second question was this. The Republican Party in Congress is tied up in knots over major elements of the president's agenda. Let me just list three: The Affordable Care Act, how to repeal and replace it; second, tax reform; and third, Mr. Trump's signature promise to increase infrastructure investment by a trillion dollars over the next decade. A lot of senior Republicans were hoping that the president would take a stand on some of the disputed policy issues in each one of those arenas. For example, what should the reform of the Affordable Care Act, or the repeal and replace, depending on how you describe it, do with the massive Medicaid expansion? There's deep disagreement among Republicans on Capitol Hill and between many Washington

Republicans on the one hand, and Republican governors in states that have expanded Medicaid on the other. Mr. Trump did not provide a lot of detail or clarity on that point. And similarly on the linchpin of House Speaker Paul Ryan's effort to reform the tax code—this famous border adjustment tax, is the president for it or against it? And he had words in his speech that could be interpreted both ways. I could go on but I think Republicans who were hoping for more detail and a resolution of these knotty issues went away disappointed.

Question number three: would the president adopt a more unifying tone and reach out to Democrats in substantive ways? And the answer is yes, up to a point. He enumerated a list of topics like paid family leave and child care, women's health, etc. that in principle are attractive to Democrats. He did that all in one sentence, and in effect invited them to join with him to do something about those issues. On some of the higher profile questions that the Congress will be dealing with in the next six months or so, I don't think he offered a lot of aid and comfort to Democrats, and we'll see how many Democrats take him up on his offer to cooperate.

And fourth, and my final question: would there be any surprises in the speech? And the answer is yes, there was one, as the president had foreshadowed in remarks with network anchors earlier on the day of the speech. He is willing to open the question of comprehensive immigration reform which has been stalled in the Congress for more than a decade. And it occurred to me as he put that on the table, that he may be the best positioned of any president since Ronald Reagan actually to bring that off, because he has enormous credibility among constituencies that historically have opposed comprehensive immigration reform, in much the same way that Richard Nixon had

enormous credibility with people who had long opposed an opening to the People's Republic of China so that Nixon could do a "Nixon goes to China" moment and get away with it. No Democrat could have.

So those are my four questions. And those are my reactions to the speech. No doubt you'll have others, but it's been fun talking with you. Bye-bye!

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