

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

THE CURRENT: Is Trump's State of the Union a roadmap for 2020?

Wednesday, February 5, 2020

PARTICIPANTS:

Host: Adrianna Pita, Office of Communications, The Brookings Institution

Guest: John Hudak, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director, Center for Effective Public Management, The Brookings Institution

(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

The night before the Senate votes on the impeachment of President Donald Trump, he delivered his third State of the Union address. With us today with an analysis of those remarks is John Hudak, senior fellow and deputy director of the Center for Effective Public Management here at Brookings. John, thanks for being here again.

HUDAK: Thanks for having me.

PITA: John, why don't we start really broadly – tell us what you thought of what we heard last night.

HUDAK: The president gave a fairly measured, I would say quite powerful speech that at many points departed from reality and facts, but laid out a clear strategy and vision that he will have moving forward into his re-election. He talked about a variety of issues. He talked about some specific policy proposals in areas like family leave and medical research and education that many of his speeches tend to be light on, but he also gave a very political speech, as many presidents do when they enter their fourth year. It signaled to Democrats, frankly, what they're up against over the next 11 months as we decide who the next president will be.

PITA: So, do you view this as a forecast of the direction his campaign is going to be taking for the rest of the campaign?

HUDAK: Absolutely. The real highlights of the speech I think are the three legs of the stool that the president is going to have in his campaign. The first is going to be to brag about the successes in the economy. By most metrics, the economy is doing extraordinarily well right now. I think there is a conversation about how much of that success is inherited, how much of those trends were already existing, but regardless, at a minimum, the president hasn't made the economy worse. He has continued what has been a fairly robust turnaround that started in the Obama administration. The next part of that is divisive rhetoric around out-groups like immigrants and focusing on how certain parts of the population or certain parts of our country should scare voters, and he's the only one who can deal with that fear and help them find solutions to that fear. The third part would be to paint Democrats as socialists, and to do that by comparing them to dictators around the world. This is sort of an extreme approach. It is an approach that will certainly connect with his base, and it's an approach that might connect with some moderate voters who don't think ideas that are associated with socialism, even social democracy, are good ideas.

PITA: I was wondering if you think that's him starting to build a hedge against if Bernie becomes his main opponent, or is this your standard Republican response to ideas like Medicare For All?

HUDAK: Any Democrat who becomes the nominee will be painted as a socialist, because regardless of that candidate's positions, the party has moved in a certain direction on a specific set of ideas. I think that language and that rhetoric and that strategy ramps up if you have a nominee like Bernie Sanders, specifically Bernie Sanders who unabashedly says that he's a democratic socialist. I think it's on firmer footing if you have someone like Elizabeth Warren, who's not quite that liberal as Bernie Sanders, but does support things like free college tuition and Medicare For All. And so this is something no Democrat is going to be able to run away from, even if they're not the most liberal person in the party.

PITA: Was it surprising at all that he didn't touch on impeachment? Or was that a standard expectation?

HUDAK: You know, that's a really interesting question. I think it is very surprising that he did not talk about impeachment, given the president's interest in hitting back whenever he's been hit, and even though it wasn't in the text of the speech, we know that the president sometimes can't help himself and begins to ad lib, and that was a topic I expected to come up. Now all that said, it would have been a mistake to bring that up. I think his speech was stronger for having ignored impeachment. If I were advising the president – which I'm not – I would tell him the last topic to talk about would have been impeachment, and his ability to stay on-message in that sense was something that made his advisors quite happy last night.

PITA: During his speech he also took great pains to highlight individuals and certain policy issues affecting many African Americans, including support for school vouchers, and HBCUs. Do you think this is also forecasting the strong push that he's going to be making during the election to try and chip away at the Democratic advantage among African American voters?

HUDAK: President Trump believes that he is uniquely qualified as a Republican to break into the Democratic stronghold over African American voters. That's a difficult sell in most areas when you look at public opinion polling. The president's approval numbers are disastrous among African Americans, but the only way to do that is to put policies out there that African Americans might support that are also palatable to Republican members of Congress, and to talk about gains that African Americans have had in the economy. That said, there are a lot of other areas where African Americans have been hurt by the president's policies and a lot of reasons why African Americans don't trust the president, so I think any Republican should try to compete for the votes in communities of color; I think the president has an overinflated idea of his ability to do that.

PITA: Certainly the xenophobic remarks that you mentioned, there were certain segments of the speech such as "senior citizens, be afraid, the illegal aliens are coming for your Medicare" – were you surprised at the balance of how much of that was that ad-libbed red meat for that side of his base versus the more measured, strong, and positive-facing side of his remarks?

HUDAK: I don't think there was anything ad-libbed about that. That is something that some of his advisors in the White House believe is fair rhetoric. It is something you hear from the president and his advisors regularly. It was some of the most incendiary language I've ever heard in a State of the Union address. It wasn't just "seniors should be afraid that illegal immigrants are coming for your Medicare," it was that seniors should be afraid that immigrants are going to rape and murder you. It was very serious. It was surprising that the president – I guess maybe not surprising – but when you think about policies and you think about statistics, it was surprising the president spent so much time talking about crimes committed by undocumented individuals in the United States while not mentioning a word about gun violence in this country and what an overwhelming epidemic that is. So, the president's fear of crime and the peddling of fear of crime that he is so good at rhetorically just tends not to match up to statistics.

PITA: Can we talk about that? How a speech like this, and this administration at large is covered? I read through the NPR version of the speech last night, and they, like many media outlets, do a lot of fact-checking throughout: here's what he said, this is what's wrong, here's what's inaccurate, here's – I

don't know where that came from. Is that sufficient? Is that fact model style coverage sufficient for an administration that, as you said, departs so frequently from fact and reality?

HUDAK: Here's what I'll say: Every president has a unique take on data. It makes their administration look good. President Obama did it, President Bush did it, President Clinton did it; every president does this. It's the prerogative of the president. Is it right? Eh, probably not. Is it dangerous? Typically, no. But fudging some numbers, or characterizing numbers in a certain way – which the president did last night – in certain areas I think was perfectly fair game, very consistent with what his predecessors have done.

But then there were areas where he was just flat-out lying. And fact-checking that happens within news organizations and on other sites like NPR, CNN, NBC News, etc., are doing an important job in terms of sorting out what is real and what is problematic. But I think where the president excels politically is that most Americans don't read fact-checking. Most Americans are not going to fact-check on their own. And so what the president is able to do is manipulate information in a way that can dupe voters.

Now typically, in a two-party system or in a multi-party system, the best guard against that is another candidate challenging the president's numbers, challenging the president's information. I think one of the biggest weaknesses within the Democratic primary right now is that Democrats aren't doing that. And what that does is it allows the president to get away with that kind of rhetoric. For the president, this is a brilliant strategy. It may be harmful to democratic norms, it may be harmful to democracy, but in terms of his own personal political interests, it's brilliant, and Democrats aren't doing anything to counter it.

PITA: For what was the official Democratic English-language rebuttal, they chose Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer to give her response. Who is she, and why did they choose her? She's not one of the bigger names amongst the party right now.

HUDAK: Gretchen Whitmer is a brand-new governor. She was elected in the 2018 Democratic wave. She is a well-accomplished individual who won handily in a state that had not had a Democratic governor in eight years. She is also someone who is more of a policy wonk, someone who comes less from the halls of politics and more from a place like Brookings, to be frank. She is someone who attacks problems with data. She has a track record of working across the aisle, and I think for Democrats most importantly, she's a successful Democratic woman from the Midwest in a state that Hillary Clinton lost and a state that Democrats absolutely need to win if they're going to beat the president. And so Gretchen Whitmer was someone who was put out as a model for what a Democratic nominee needs to do and the way that that Democratic nominee needs to talk and communicate with voters, regardless of who he or she is.

PITA: Gotcha. Great, John, thanks for being here and explaining this.

HUDAK: Thank you.