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Fools on the Hill: Trump and Congress

By Jeffrey St. Clair
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As I watched Trump recite, in his halting manner, the pasteurized prose scrolling across his teleprompter in the House chamber on Tuesday night, I felt a little twitch of pity for the beast. The wild child of American politics had been caged. For more than an hour, Trump resembled a man on electronic detention, going cautiously through the motions, careful not to violate the terms of his invitation: no freelancing or potshots, no vulgarisms or mad gesticulations. For the most part, his big speech, in both substance and tone, could have been given by Jeb Bush or Hillary Clinton. It was pure political boilerplate.

This was Trump's way—or Reince Preibus's, I suppose—of showing the world (and especially NATO allies) that he isn't what we all know him to be: a bigoted berserker. The tedious speech, etched with ornate filigrees of “dreaming” and “unity,” was the first act in Trump's 12-step program toward becoming *presidential*.

Trump drew bi-partisan plaudits for showing fidelity to the collegial template of past congressional addresses. Starting with a nod to Black History Month and a condemnation of anti-Semitism, Trump stomped through a litany of reassurances meant to comfort anxious elites from defense contractors to the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board, the Koch Brothers to K Street lobbyists. He almost sounded contrite.

This is, of course, precisely the kind of Trump his critics have been waiting to see. The “mature” Trump. A man humbled by the “sanctity” of his office. The Beltway press always loves to write a dramatic “reappraisal” of a battered politician. Remember when Bob Woodward reassessed Dan Quayle as a “deep thinker?” Of course, that took 8 years—not 5 weeks! To wit, one of Woodward’s protégés at the *Post*, Philip Rucker: “This is the best morning of Donald Trump’s presidency. He is basking in positive pundit reviews. All that tumult feels like yesteryear.”

Even Van Jones fell under Trump’s spell, swooning for one of the oldest melodramatic tricks in the book, a tribute to the family of slain soldiers. These made-for-TV moments originated with Ronald Reagan’s first State of the Union in 1982. But Trump turned this unseemly ritual into a kind of Grand Guignol, with his garish and tawdry tribute to Ryan Owens, the Navy SEAL killed in the botched raid in Yemen, which left nine children dead. Trump’s exploitation of Owens’s grief-stricken wife, Carryn, was a revolting spectacle, abetted by a lapdog press, which helped the president morph a war crime into an act of prime-time heroism.

Of course, all of these breathless encomiums for the rationality and lucidity of Trump’s speech came on the very same day that the president suggested the vandalism of Jewish cemeteries might be a “false flag” operation.

One of the quirks of Trumponics is that the President often speaks like a human highlight pen, repeating for emphasis certain phrases that seem to have surprised him with their importance on his initial reading. Such as: “We will work with our allies, including our friends and allies in the Muslim world, to extinguish this vile enemy from our planet...and they are a vile enemy aren’t they?” In other words, Trump doesn’t really need a courtier press. He serves as his own echo chamber. But he’ll preen in the praise of the “enemy of the people” whenever they throw it his way. In this case, Trump might do well to press the pause button on his narcissistic instincts and consider from whence the praise comes and why.

When reading from a teleprompter, Trump’s voice downshifts into a soft purr, almost feminine in tone. In this diminutive mode, Trump’s neutered cadences help to safely import some of his most odious ideas (a national crime blotter for immigrants) into the mainstream. Which, I guess, is what “sounding presidential” is all about.

Trump is a figure from another time and he seems intent on transporting us back with him, by force if necessary. But then so are Trump’s nominal opponents, the Democrats, a party that remains encased in the fatal amber of their neoliberalism. Nothing symbolized this political archaism more sharply than the rebuttal speech delivered in a Bluegrass drawl by Steve Beshear, the 72-year old former governor of Kentucky. Speaking from a chair in a Lexington diner amid skeptical-looking Democrats and Republicans, Beshear meandered through a cheat sheet of

Third Way politics talking points (including a couple of gratuitous shots at the Russian Menace) with all the passion and energy of Al Gore on an off night. It was hard to square Beshear's hackneyed homilies with the Democrats' shrill mantra that Trump represents the gravest internal threat to American democracy since Squeaky Fromme.

One can never overestimate the cognitive dissonance afflicting American liberals. It is one of their identifying characteristics in the field guide to American politics. Take the female members of Congress who showed up swaddled in white, allegedly as homage to the suffragettes. They sat quietly in two long rows through Trump's speech like novitiates awaiting their final consecration. Yet these women were not powerless outsiders, but prominent politicians, many of them millionaires. None of them walked out on the speech. None of them had the temerity of Rep. Joe Wilson (who denounced Obama as "a liar") to interrupt or jeer the Master of Mendacity's speech, even when he ludicrously pledged his intention to "protect women's health." Their protest plumbed new depths of passivity. Instead of honoring the suffragettes, they demeaned their legacy before a national audience.

The only real amusement of the night was provided by the gyrations of Senator Joe Manchin, the Carboncrat from West Virginia. Manchin burned more calories than anyone in the chamber, except Mike Pence. Like a Pavlovian pop-up doll, Manchin sprang to his feet at every mention of coal, energy, oil, mines, regulations (as in gutting), pipelines, miners and gas, natural or otherwise. There's speculation that Manchin may soon jump ship and join the Republican caucus. No huge loss. Any self-respecting party would have expelled him years ago.

All such presidential speeches before Congress are, in essence, acts of political supplication, if not a kind surrender to the decisive role the legislative branch plays in setting budgetary policy. Trump briefly invoked, and rather placidly to my ear, the "rebelliousness" of his campaign and election. But it was all writ in the past tense, as if the forces of revolt had already been defused and routinized. Not once did Trump threaten to activate his riffraff legions to ramrod his feral ideology down the throat of a recalcitrant Congress. How long will the growling mobs remain sedate without getting any raw morsels from their Overlord (not buried in a footnote of the tax code)?

On this night, Trump turned his incendiary populist agenda over to the hands of the professional sausage-makers, Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan, where policy aspirations, even deviant ones, are ground up into political mush. Trump's welcome plans to inject a trillion dollars into new infrastructure spending and to slash billions from the morbidly bloated budget of the State Department have already been declared "dead on arrival" by McConnell. Meanwhile, Ryan smirked cynically from behind Trump as he declared Social Security and Medicare immune from cuts. The real resistance to Trumpism will soon emerge either from the powerbrokers of his own party or the virulent movement he birthed, not the obsequious trolling of the Democrats.