

**THE BLOG**

State of the State of the Union

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Is there a bigger crock than the State of the Union speech?

It's a classic pseudo-event, a circus act in the divert-the-masses tradition of bread-and-circuses, a night of theater-of-the-absurd promoted and covered with unbearable sanctimony. The politicians and the media are locked in a *folie-a-deux*, a mutual hallucination that this is a Meaningful Moment in our civic religion. There is high blather about Setting National Priorities; there is splendor worthy of *Duck Soup's* Freedonia in the pageantry of the costumed Supreme Court Justices and the military brass; there is the insipid suspense about what iconic guests awaiting their ovation closeups will surround the First Lady; there are the predictable camera cutaways to reaction shots by Supporters and Opponents who've been spending the week looking in the mirror to perfect their butter-wouldn't-melt and respectful-but-unmoved and I'm-with-you-Big-Guy masks.

Ignore the Beltway talk about how this speech forces the bureaucracies across the agencies to break logjams; that can be done very nicely by the budget process on its own, thank you very much, and what actually appears in the speech has no obligation to reflect a reality more authentic than the Potemkin self-image of the political handlers who inhabit the offices adjacent to the Oval. Forget the "one-of-the-most-important-of-his-Presidency" punditry. There are few speeches more forgettable than these. The most memorable State of the Union moment in recent times is Bush's 16-word-long lie about yellowcake from Niger; it stays with us to remind us how excessively generous these occasions make us with our reverence and credulousness, how gullible we are, what suckers for political theater these *ersatz* rituals reveal us to be.

Let's go back to the tradition of Presidents submitting written accounts of the Union's state to the Congress. I don't care whether it's a Democrat or a Republican. These nights don't make our democracy stronger; more voting, and more reliable voting machines, would make a zillion times more of a difference to the robustness of our Republic and the credibility of those who govern us than these media-beast-feeding narcissistic nights.

What's the State of our Union? Reality television.

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