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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