

The Missing Element from the State of the Union

This last week we have witnessed what may be the story of the year or even the decade. The dramatic scenes across North Africa and especially Egypt have captured the world's attention and reminded us of the vast scale of politics. Might this be the dawning of a new moment in the Muslim world, or will the protests give way to repression or extremism?

Domestically these events have humbled all but the most partisan or idealistic. Different members of the Obama administration have issued their cautious statements, appropriately circumspect before what may be a historical moment.

Egypt has dwarfed all other events, including the administration's post-State of the Union media blitz. The State of the Union now looks rather paltry, but then so does most of our politics - when they are not sounding overwrought.

Perhaps this is as it should be in the day-to-day, but the State of the Union is not just any other day. It is one of those high holy days in politics, a national ritual that reminds us that politics deals with the profound.

Talk of the profound was largely absent from the State of the Union, which is interesting in that such talk saturated Obama's earlier speech in Tucson.

The difference, of course, was that the Tucson speech was the high point in a memorial service, while the State of the Union had to do with policy initiatives.

This speaks to a division in our politics, a separation of policy from the profound. President Obama sounded like a technocratic Ronald Reagan - optimistic that we can out-compete emerging nations.

Such an approach may be safe or smart, but it will not inspire. Indeed, if politics is to be genuinely democratic - rather than consumerist or corporate - then policy

debates must be related to the forces shaping our life and times.

The president tried to do this. He referenced Tucson, the dreams of children, economic dislocation and the ways the federal government ought to respond.

Gone, however, was his talk of broken hearts and joining with the grieving. Gone, in other words, was any real mention of the tragic, both in Tucson and around the country. There were no stories of families evicted from their homes or of lives shattered by unemployment.

And gone with the tragic was the need for redemption and the possibility of a new sense of hope, a hope that tragedy need not have the last word, that we are bound to one another and refuse to abandon our neighbors to a crazed gunman, a capricious housing market or ruthless global traders.

In failing to speak to the tragic and the hope of redemption, much of the power of the American dream was drained away. When Obama spoke of it expansively - anything is possible - it sounded hollow. On the whole, however, it was hard to not come away with the sense that the American dream simply meant the pursuit of wealth, power or even a job.

Missing was a strong sense that our lives matter, and that society should empower us to chase our dreams, to fulfill our purpose and to hearken to a higher calling - not simply to out-compete the Chinese.

In politics, talk of the tragic and transcendent must bear fruit in action, action in the form of policy initiatives that secure and expand the goods of our society and indeed the entire world. The goods are not just better economic skills or capacities, but also social and natural gifts, like families and the good earth.

Each of us is situated and shaped by these goods and by circumstances beyond our control. The American dream is that these goods include the freedom to become who we are and what we are called to be.

This is a politics worth caring about, a politics worth struggling for, a politics of

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the profound.

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