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Today

GARY W. LLOYD, Editor

© White Man, love, just as Christ has loved you!

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Why Patriotism is Better than Optimism

G.K. Chesterton gives his own "State of the Union address"

"He shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient." So enjoins Article II, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution, and you can see where Barack Obama's speech Tuesday night, the sixth of his presidency, gets its name. Technically, it is "Information" of the State of the Union, which means it invariably will be one person's perspective on the data, statistics, and anecdotes which reflect the health of the nation. How is the U.S. doing at the beginning of 2015? According to our 44th President: "Know this, the shadow of crisis has passed and the state of the union is strong."

"Union" is also a suspect word, though not that the fifty states are clamoring to dissolve their bond. Instead, it's the connotation of union which is missing today. Depending on how tight the camera shot, the only thing visible of Joe Biden and John Boehner, sitting behind the president, were their hands. Often one pair of hands clapped while the other pair did not. Then, in panning to the audience, one half of the room would occasionally rise to their feet in applause, while the other side remained in their chairs. (Why can't they mix up the seating chart for at least one evening out of the year?) But the biggest allusive sign of disunity is the opposing party's televised response afterwards. Consider this: it is not one branch of the government responding to the Executive, nor is it a governor chosen from the States to respond to the Federal. Instead a political party gets free and equal air time as if governance is never separate from campaign. On Tuesday night, a political party, employing what they thought was their best messaging strategy, decided to place in counterpoint to a

constitutionally-established president, a senator from Iowa, Joni Ernst, who had been sworn into office only two weeks earlier.

What both parties seem agreed on, in and around the State of the Union address, is an optimistic outlook. President Obama, who began with the "shadow of crisis" passing and the union "strong," concluded: "We've laid a new foundation. A brighter future is ours to write. Let's begin this new chapter -- together -- and let's start the work right now." Even Joni Ernst, obliged to be pessimistic about the current state of affairs, was nonetheless optimistic about America's future, particularly now with this "new Republican congress you elected." Ernst said, "We know America faces big challenges. But history has shown there's nothing our nation, and our people, can't accomplish."

I suppose that optimism is almost always preferable to pessimism. It is certainly advisable for any orator who wishes to sell his or her agenda. But why isn't optimism a more unifying factor? After all, both Obama and Ernst ended their remarks with a sense that "our nation, our people" would "together" write that "brighter future." It is a stated purpose of *The Liberator Today* that this publication concern itself with the question: "How is Christian love applied in the affairs of humanity—in our politics, economics, race relations, environmental stewardship, etc.?" As for love, optimism, and the State of the Union address, we find a good answer in a chapter entitled "The Flag of the World" in G.K. Chesterton's book *Orthodoxy*:

The evil of the pessimist, is, then, not that he chastises gods and men, but that he does not love what he chastises—he has not this primary and supernatural loyalty to things. What is the evil of the man commonly called an optimist? Obviously, it is felt that the optimist, wishing to defend the honor of this world, will defend the indefensible. He is the jingo of the universe; he will say, "My cosmos, right or wrong." He will

be less inclined to the reform of things; more inclined to a sort of front-bench [ruling party in the British parliament] official answer to all attacks, soothing every one with assurances. He will not wash the world, but whitewash the world.

Chesterton proposes a specific illustration: “a desperate thing—say Pimlico,” a London neighborhood that in his day had fallen into urban decay. As I quote Chesterton, let me insert [the Union] in place of Pimlico, so long as we imagine the Union in a desperate spot, as perhaps William Lloyd Garrison considered America during slavery, or as a pessimist might think of today:

If we think what is really best for [the Union] we shall find the thread of thought leads to the throne or the mystic and the arbitrary. It is not enough for a man to disapprove of [the Union]: in that case he will merely cut his throat or move to [Canada]. Nor, certainly, is it enough for a man to approve of [the Union]: for then it will remain [the Union], which would be awful. The only way out of it seems to be for somebody to love [the Union]: to love it with a transcendental tie and without any earthly reason. If there arose a man who loved [the Union], then [the Union] would rise into ivory towers and golden pinnacles; [the Union] would attire herself as a woman does when she is loved. For decoration is not given to hide horrible things: but to decorate things already adorable. . . . If men loved [the Union] as mothers love children, arbitrarily, because it is THEIRS, [the Union] in a year or two might be fairer than Florence.

Chesterton calls this love, patriotism. “My acceptance of the universe [like ours for America] is not optimism—it is more like patriotism. It is a matter of primary loyalty. . . . The point is not that this world is too sad to love or too glad not to love; the point is that when you do love a thing, its gladness is a reason for loving it, and its sadness a reason for loving it more. All optimistic thoughts about England and all pessimistic thoughts about her are alike reasons for the English patriot.”

The pessimist is not a lover. The optimist is a lover, albeit a *blind* one, and Chesterton argues, “Love is not blind; that is the last thing that it is. Love is *bound*; and the more it is bound, the less it is blind.” It is not the pessimist nor the optimist, but the patriot, who by definition is the true lover. This distinction is important because the Constitution has more in mind for the State of the Union address than the giving of information: the president shall “*recommend to [Congress’s] Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.*” The pessimist is a deserter. The optimist is an excuser. The patriot, however, is a reformer. According to Chesterton, he is a reformer because his optimism—unlike the useless garden variety optimist—is irrational. Why does the patriot love

America? Just because. There is no one reason—like “liberty” or “freedom”—which the optimist must use to shout down all pessimists or competitors. The patriot loves the U.S. for being “us,” and thus is willing to confess those occasions when we haven’t valued liberty as much as we expound, or when we haven’t shared it justly throughout the population. The patriot seeks reform because he or she loves that which is in need of reform.

Mere jingo self-contentment is commonest among those who have some pedantic reason for their patriotism. The worst jingoes do not love England, but a theory of England. If we love England for being an empire, we may overrate the success with which we rule the Hindoos. But if we love it only for being a nation, we can face all events: for it would be a nation even in the Hindoos ruled us. Thus also, only those will permit their patriotism to falsify history, whose patriotism depends on history. A man who loves England for being English will not mind how she arose. But a man who loves England for being Anglo-Saxon may go against all facts for his fancy. He may end (like Carlyle and Freeman) by maintaining that the Norman Conquest was a Saxon conquest. He may end in utter unreason—because he has a reason.

And then—horror to horrors to his audience, and perhaps to our modern American one—Chesterton refers to France: “France is a good instance of the working paradox. Nowhere else is patriotism more purely abstract and arbitrary; and nowhere else is reform more drastic and sweeping. The more transcendental is your patriotism, the more practical are your politics.”

Vive l’union!

Vive la réforme!

- A.O.B

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“On January 1, 1831, without subscribers and without money, with paper procured on credit and with a borrowed press, the first issue of *The Liberator* appeared in Boston—and reappeared every Saturday for the next 35 years.” (from *The Making of an Abolitionist: William Lloyd Garrison’s Path to Publishing The Liberator*.)