

Field of dreams

Joe Biden's first official State of the Union speech was a sportscaster's dream come true and it brought back memories of a nearly forgotten baseball poem written in 1888 and set in the fictional town of Mudville, USA. Before even getting up to bat last night, Joe had a home field advantage. He was the guest of honor in the ballpark of the swamp he so dearly loves and where he spent his rookie years learning the game of politics. He also had two of his favorite cheerleaders standing behind him, the inimitable San Fran Nan Pelosi (also of the swamp) and his new Vice-nincompoop, Kamala (Kami) Harris of the Left Coast.

Joe approached the podium as if he was the self-anointed savior of the team that was losing by two runs in the last half of the ninth inning with two of his men on base. He strode to the batter's box amid the cheers of his Democrat fans. From the poem, "Then from five thousand throats and more there rose a lusty yell; it rumbled through the valley, it rattled in the dell; it knocked upon the mountain and recoiled upon the flat, for Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat. There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his place; there was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile on Casey's face. And when, responding to the cheers, he lightly doffed his hat, no stranger in the crowd could doubt 'twas Casey at the bat..."

Joe has always envisioned himself as something of a folk hero, a man destined for greatness, and standing before members of the Senate and House he was in his element though a few decades and a few million grey cells too late. His was the task of saving the Mudville team from a humiliating loss (of American confidence and growing dissatisfaction with his Administration's performance). He passed up the first two pitches right down the middle (about the economy/inflation and the Afghanistan debacle not to mention his other failings on energy and the border). Instead, he looked for an even better pitch to hit...Ukraine. Surely nobody could lay a finger on him for reaching for the outside corner of home plate to make his point about the state of our internal domestic situation by talking about another country in trouble. Not his home team supporters anyway.

Sensing he was on firm ground, he tapped the dirt off his spikes and sneered an internal sneer at his critics and an outside one by choosing to talk about a country far far away instead of focusing on Americans' problems at home. He readied his audience for the pitch. The sneer is now gone from his lip and his teeth are clenched in hate (for those dastardly Russians). He pounded his bat with intensity upon the plate. And now the speech has rolled on and the pitch has finally come. He released his grip on the Ukrainians and segued to domestic worries. The air was shattered by the force of his blow, but the blow misses its target. Instead of bringing home the winning run the Mighty Casey has struck out.

Biden, of course, didn't see his at bat and subsequent strikeout as a loss like those of us who have eyes and ears do. He and his party are so accustomed to spinning terrible decisions into victory that he boldly proceeded to make lemonade out of the sour lemons of his first year in office and tried to convince us that it was as sweet as honey on a warm summer's day.

Here's the play by play. Imagine that famous sportscaster for the Yankees, Mel Allen, teeing it up for you. Joe starts out with a swing against Covid which has kept us all apart (and it's now time to come together). Without so much as a brief pause to take a chew of Redman he does a 'wag the dog' move and brings up Vladimir Putin and his despicable attack on the peace-loving nation of the Ukraine. He recounts the many months he and his team have spent building coalitions. The unasked question is: why didn't you send the Ukrainians arms or support them while the Russians were steadily amassing troops on Ukraine's eastern border? No matter. Biden keeps going, recognizes the Ukrainian Ambassador to the U.S. for a bow and then talks about the DOJ. "They're coming for you (you oligarchs) and your ill-gotten gains" (no matter it will take months if not years in court battles and diplomatic sparring.)

Joe says, "Freedom will always triumph over tyranny" and talks about the world's other countries that have sourced 60 million barrels of reserve oil (and nothing of the 5 million barrels of crude oil and 3 million barrels of refined products we buy and use from Russia every single day). And, in a quasi-whisper, Joe leans forward and says, "Folks, we're going to be okay" and then calls the Ukrainians, 'Iranians.'

In the next *inning* Joe covers a mixture of the pandemic (which he conquered with vaccines and the American Rescue Plan) and his creation of 6.5 million jobs in 2021 *despite the failed Trump tax cut*. "Trickle down didn't work," says Joe. It's time for "build out from the middle and the bottom up" and repeats his plan to tax only the (evil) rich. Oh, and by the way, it's time to tackle climate change by passing his all-encompassing infrastructure plan AND to "Buy American" - from beginning to end with government funded-projects of which there are 4,000 in the pipeline. Fact-check, please.

Folks - It was then time to bring up a little place 20 miles east of Columbus, Ohio - the famous 'field of dreams' and to introduce the new team that would turn the tide from losing to winning the war on semi-conductors. Enter Intel's CEO who just happened to be in the gallery. Joes says thanks for investing \$10 billion in America's future...BUT "we've got to pass this bill" (Build Back Better) because that's all Intel is waiting for. Fact-checkers: get on this one, too.

And so Joe moves to that pesky inflation we've all been fighting. "I get it," he says, but basically it's the pandemic's fault. And if we're going to turn the inflation corner, it's time for American companies to "lower your costs not your wages" (a bone to the labor unions, we suppose). "We have to build a better America," says the Delaware slugger. We need to encourage those (unscrupulous) drug manufacturers to lower the cost of prescription drugs and cap them AND let Medicare negotiate the prices.

Folks - By the way, we also need to cut energy costs and give tax credits for electric vehicles (no mention of reversing his decision to deep six America's oil and gas pipelines which has created our energy crisis in the first place). Joe has faked a bunt, instead. He moves on to child care, extended home care, and no new taxes for those earning less than \$400K/year. The camera pivots to Elizabeth Warren who's wearing the look of a cross between a crazed animal and a Beatles groupie. "Folks: We need a 15% minimum corporate tax and close those loopholes - what are we waiting for? Let's get this done!"

It was time for a confession. Joe says he is a capitalist, "but a capitalist without competition is not a capitalist. We only have four meat-packing plants in the U.S. We have to crack down on overchargers. We need to improve nursing home care (pass the Paycheck Fairness Act) and pass the Pro Act (that will allow for more unionization)."

It's now top of the seventh inning. Joe's back to Covid. "We're moving back to normal - mask-free; Covid needn't control our lives (no mention of his government's authoritarian control of our lives). We're never giving up on vaccines. We're launching a 'test to treat' initiative because we must prepare for new variants (and more government crackdowns?). We'll continue vaccinating the world!"

Folks - "We've got to stop seeing each other as enemies, but as fellow Americans." Then Joe abruptly moves to safe streets for a drive-by comment about not de-funding the police. "We've got to reduce gun violence (not criminal violence) and institute universal background checks AND be able to sue gun manufacturers." Then it was voter suppression's turn. "We've got to pass the *Freedom to Vote* and the *John R. Lewis Voting Advancement Act*." This led to a "thank you for your service" to Justice Stephen Breyer and a nod to Biden's SCOTUS nominee, Ketanji Brown-Jackson.

As if it he had momentarily forgotten the topic, Joe then says we have to fix the immigration system (not by conventional means but by high-tech passive surveillance solutions). He got a bi-partisan standing ovation...until he followed up by saying that we needed a pathway to citizenship for the

'dreamers.' It was now down to the final inning and Joe checked a couple more boxes. He made his pitch to women (on a woman's right to choose...abortion) and what he called the "LGBTQ plus" community. Finally, we were approaching 50 minutes out of the hour he had set aside. Time to take on mental health, the Opiod epidemic and cure cancer, and then there were the children to think about (we needed to ban commercials targeting them) and help our vets and eliminate burn pit-related illnesses. Joe had managed to stand up and keep talking, squinting at the teleprompter for nearly an hour. It was a test of endurance and he ended his speech by saying, "Folks, I know this nation. We will save democracy. The state of the union is strong because you; the American people are strong. Go get 'em."

Unlike the mighty Casey of Ernest Thayer's poem, Joe was convinced he had hit a home run. It remains to be seen if America bought what Joe was selling last night. After all, is a home run a home run if there's no umpire around to call it?

Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of twelve books, six of which are on American politics and has written over 1,200 articles on politics, economics and social trends. He operates a political news story aggregator website, www.projectpushback.com. He can be reached at: stephan@stephanhelgesen.com