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## *Tales From the Crypt*



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With his customary bravado Donald Trump boasted that the TV audience for his first State of the Union address was the largest in history. This extravagant assertion was soon swatted down by none other than Fox News, which cited at least five other SOTUs speeches with bigger ratings since 1992, including Obama's final bland monologue in 2016.

Even so, Trump drew a respectable viewership, many of whom, no doubt, were hoping to watch a live train wreck in the well of the House. They were a little premature. The live train wreck would take place the following day in Crozet, Virginia, when an Amtrak metroliner carrying the Republican leadership rammed a stalled truck. But don't change

that channel, the injured politicians will likely get a guest-starring role in next year's State of the Union address.

By most accounts, Trump's big speech fell flat. There's nothing more deflating than tuning in expecting a Trump spectacle and hearing a meandering stream of florid platitudes that could have been written by Peggy Noonan. Most of the fun from watching Trump speak comes from his brusque improvisations. Like many a pitchman, Trump relies punchy one-liners, pungent putdowns and inscrutable maledictions. Yet, he gets lost reading compound sentences on a teleprompter, skidding to a halt at commas and running over periods.

Still Trump has already learned one of the cardinal rules of executive politics: the easiest path to being lauded as presidential is to promise to bomb some peasants and kowtow to global bankers. Hence, the Noonanesque rhetorical flourishes on Tuesday night, threatening to blitz North Korea and unchain Wall Street from even the most gossamer-like regulatory restraints. The president was clapping so fervently at his own best lines all night that he almost blew out the microphone, even if someone else wrote them. Of course, Trump should beware. What appeals to the pundit class alienates the electorate.

If Trump's audience wasn't the largest on record, those who stuck around to the end could claim credit for having endured a speech of almost Castrovian length. Trump rambled on for more than 90 minutes, in a speech which rivaled in time and tedium those given by the president that Trump most tends to emulate in terms of political bombast and moral refinement, Bill Clinton.

At one point, Trump pledged his "unwavering" support for law enforcement, even as details of systemic corruption in the Baltimore Police Department burned across the headlines in the nation's capital. The FBI, of course, was exempted from this oath of presidential loyalty. Perhaps next year, TSA and ATF will also fall from Trumpian favor. Yes, I still naively cling to the audacity of hope.

Trump's lone surprise announcement earned robust cheers from the Republican torture caucus. Before stepping into his limo, Trump signed an executive order keeping open the Guantanamo Prison that Obama promised to close but didn't. Thanks, Barack. Of course, there hasn't been a new detainee interned in Gitmo since 2008, but much of Trump's base long to see those cells ringing once again with the screams of hooded prisoners.

Meanwhile, the Democratic power trio of Pelosi, Hoyer, and Clyburn squirmed impassively in their seats throughout Trump's speech, as if they were getting spinal fluid transfusions through slow-drip IVs.

Of course, all eyes eventually focused on the First Lady's box. She had broken with tradition by refusing to ride down Pennsylvania Avenue to Capitol Hill with her husband, who she has kept at an icy distance since word of his affair with the voluptuous porn queen, Stormy Daniels. What would Melania be wearing? Would she be escorted by the same strapping Marine, who she fondly remembered on the anniversary of her husband's inauguration?

Melania descended to her seat adorned with an enigmatic smile and an angelic white pantsuit, which was a more stylish version of the one Hillary Clinton often wore during the 2016 campaign. In what was perhaps yet another subliminal couture message, it should be recalled that last year many women members of congress wore white in solidarity with victims of sexual assault. Melania played the part of the Madonna of the Victimized, surrounding herself with featured players in her husband's catalogue of American carnage. Trump did an excellent job of using his invited guests as human shields for odious policies. Viewers who stumbled across the speech during one of these maudlin interludes might be forgiven for thinking they were watching an episode of Tales From the Crypt. There was the cop from Albuquerque, who heard God tell him to adopt the baby of a heroin addict. What happened to the mother, we weren't told, probably jailed, which seems to be the thrust of Trump's plan to combat the opioid crisis. There were the weeping black parents of a teenage girl killed by an alleged member of the MS-13 gang, who became something of stand-in for the potential criminality of all young immigrants. There was the young boy from Washington state, whose campaign to place American flags on the graves of veterans was twisted into an attack on black athletes protesting police brutality. Then there was Ji Seong-ho, North Korea's version of Tiny Tim who, in keeping with the evening's DIY theme, brought his own crutches to wave as Trump edged closer to ordering a preemptive strike against the Kim regime. All of this theater recalls the similar cast of victims dressed up by the PR hacks at Hill & Knowlton and paraded as presidential props to justify two wars against Iraq. So, it looks like there will be blood on the Korean peninsula and a veritable wasteland of crutches.

Trump deftly avoided the fraught issue of the day: Russia. The morning's papers were frantic over the fact that Trump had judiciously declined to impose a new round of sanctions on Russia, recently mandated by Congress. MSDNC and other Russia-crazed outlets had seized on the fact that the Trump administration surreptitiously replaced the Treasury Department list of "evil Russians" with a Forbes magazine list of the richest

Russian oligarchs. I don't know why this is a surprise. Didn't Stormy Daniels tell us that Trump preferred to be spanked with a rolled-up copy of Forbes?

One of the few “must-see-TV” moments from the SOTU came as Trump took a triumphant stroll down the aisle after his speech, glad-handing GOP politicians and scrawling his signature on books, though presumably not copies of [Fire and Fury](#). South Carolina congressman Jeff Duncan pumped Trump's hand and implored the president to “Just release the memo!” The memo in question was prepared by staffers of the flighty Devin Nunes and apparently lays out how the FBI abused a FISA warrant to snoop on Trump campaign aide Carter Page. Trump flicked his hand at Duncan and said reassuringly, “Oh, yeah, well, 100 percent.”

The hysteria of the Democrats over the Nunes Memo is almost certainly proportional its ultimate banality. ([It turned out to be pretty much of a dud.](#)) History tells us that they only get really upset over inconsequential matters. Of course, the Republicans were really serious about exposing domestic spying abuses by the FBI, they would have released the Nunes Memo *before* voting to expand warrantless spying under FISA.

The memo itself is a useful distraction for both parties from the real issue: the abuse of FISA warrants. Trump has it in his power to declassify and release the Page warrant and expose just how thoroughly the surveillance apparatus has intruded on civil liberties. He should but he won't, because such an act of real transparency would represent a fatal transgression of the boundaries of the Deep State. The issue isn't whether FISA warrants were abused in the case of Carter Page. But that FISA is itself an abuse of Constitutional rights. There are no “good” FISA warrants.

How surreal is the Nunes Affair? One of the FBI agents targeted by Trump and the Republican ultras as a covert Clintonoid is Peter Strzok, who sent his lover, a former FBI lawyer, the following text: “FBI agent Strzok said he might vote for Trump because Trump was “calling for death for @Snowden ...I'm a single-issue voter.... Espionage Machine Party.”

What about the opposition? Those political insomniacs who stayed up late were treated to Joe Kennedy the Third's spasmodic sermon from the Diman Vocational School in Fall River, Massachusetts. Kennedy literally seemed to be foaming at the mouth, in an inverted reprise of the 1960 Kennedy/Nixon debate with the young Kennedy now transformed into the role of the soggy Nixon. Kennedy's hyper-active presentation lacked any real substance or plan for action. What would you expect from a Big Pharma loyalist in the House, who opposes single-payer and medical marijuana, while stuffing his coffers with

political gratuities from Goldman Sachs? Trump didn't mention climate change, liberals cried. Well, neither did Joe V. 3.

So it came down to Bernie, who is reportedly already putting together a team for his 2020 run for the White House. Followers of Sanders' Twitter feed found the socialist Senator from Vermont in full Cold Warrior mode, bravely tweeting: "How can Trump not talk about the reality that Russia, through cyberwarfare, interfered in our election in 2016, is interfering in democratic elections all over the world, and according to his own CIA director will likely interfere in the 2018 midterm elections?" So much for Our Revolution™, *campesinos*.

It turns out that much of Trump's speech was drafted by former investment banker Gary Cohn, now Director of Trump's National Economic Council. So, Hillary gave speeches to Goldman Sachs and Goldman Sachs gave speeches to Trump to read. *Plus ça change*.