

Obama's 'Sputnik' Moment

By Mel Lavine

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I have to say, President Obama reminds me of a smart, young boss I once worked for in network news. We'll call him Joe. Joe was young for the job and the executive producer he replaced was an old pro. The old pro went after stories because they were (a) interesting, (b) they had something important to say, and (c) they sometimes gave notice of what was in the wind.

However, the old pro was fired because a competing broadcast on another network was making headway. Joe came in and the difference between him and the old pro was so plain. Joe studied market reports and based the pieces we did on what the market research told him people wanted to hear — not on the merits of a story or things the public needed to know. Over time, with new faces on the air, the show's ratings improved.

I liked Joe; we got on, but the shows as they were produced gave me an uneasy feeling. I feel something like that with Obama. I like Obama and want him to succeed. But this bipartisanship business smacks of too many hours spent reading surveys and polls and in-depth analyses.

In his State of the Union Address last month, the president called for another “sputnik” moment or wakeup call for America in its rivalry with China and India for high-tech supremacy. The Soviet’s Sputnik, launched in 1957, was the world’s first space satellite, and set off a costly race for supremacy in science between Soviet Russia and the U.S. for many years.

Absent in the State of the Union was any mention of climate change. It was one of Obama’s most urgent issues when he was in the senate, when he ran for president, when he was elected, when he delivered his first speech to Congress in February of 2009, when he accepted the Nobel Prize in October in the same year, and when he delivered his first State of the Union in January 2010.

As Hendrik Hertzberg cited in the New Yorker, among other words that did not show up in this year’s speech, were “unemployment,” “inequality,” “gun,” “environment,” “Israel,” “Palestine,” and “Guantanamo.”

This week, the president went out of his way to make peace with business leaders at the Chamber of Commerce. In effect, he proposed a deal: He would get rid of unnecessary regulations and simplify the tax code if they would help the economy by spending some of the

two trillion on which they're sitting to create jobs. In return, Obama promised to get rid of unnecessary regulations and simplify the tax code.

One executive called Obama's suggestion too simple. "I think it's a little outside the bounds to suggest that if we hire people we don't need, there will be more demand," he said.

In fact, American corporations may no longer need the government. It's estimated as much as half their income comes from overseas. Big business is also making an increasing number of products abroad.

Obama is not naive. With 2012 in mind, my guess is he's polishing a moderate, middle-of-the-road image, what polls say is his best bet for re-election. But is this good for the country? I raise the question because it reminded me of Joe, the bright young man I once worked for. Under him, we told people what they wanted to hear and the ratings rose. But it was at the expense of what they needed to know.

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