

# A Subdued Trump: But Still Some Dog Whistles



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**“All politicians lie. If they don’t, they don’t get elected. And, if they manage to slip through once, they don’t get re-elected.”**

Those were the words of Dr. Fred Blevens, Professor of Communications at Florida International University, at an ethics seminar produced by the Public Relations Society of America–Miami chapter–and the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce last November.

So, it’s not surprising that President Donald Trump would do a bit of fact manipulation during his State of the Union message Tuesday night. After all, the Washington Post says he continues to set new records as a truth-slayer and has averaged 5 ½ lies per day since taking office. Moreover, he’s far from the first president to inflate or misrepresent his accomplishments during this annual talk. Less than fully justified boasting is par for the course in these talks.

But what was really different Tuesday night was his tone and demeanor. While he



*Photo source: Twitter*

conveyed little warmth (that's too much to expect), his overall delivery was much improved over previous outings. He generally stayed on script, mostly avoiding those annoying little "crutch" thrown-ins such as "I have to tell you," "believe me," and "sad," or drifting off to unscripted areas that have often caused him to contradict his own positions on an issue in a matter of minutes.

White House officials had said the president intended this to be a unifying speech but, if so, it missed the mark. While he called on Democrats to work with him and the Republican Congress, he did not extend the loyal opposition a warm hand, offer even the slightest complimentary word to Democratic leaders, or give any specifics on how he might be willing to meet them half way. The tone was, "Let's collaborate; just sign off on my programs." As a result, Democrats—their input clearly unsought—sat on their hands, neither applauding nor rising on his applause lines. Thus, any opportunity for bridge-building was lost. Compliments and credit sharing are

in rare supply in Trump's tool chest.

Republicans cheered lustily, of course, and the president frequently gave himself a vote of approval by applauding his own comments. It was obvious that Listener Trump thought Speaker Trump was doing a great job.

While the chief executive avoided his customary cheap shots and name calling ("Little Rocket Man," etc.), he offered plenty of dog whistles, flag-waving, and "we did it" messages to his base including:

- "Veterans deserve our total and unwavering support; that's why we proudly STAND for the national anthem."
- "...taking historic action to protect our religious liberty"
- "We've ended the war on beautiful, clean coal."

The speech, reportedly written by committee, was surprisingly pretty good. Somebody did some solid work in sewing together the various pieces penned by assorted White House officials. And the president often showed some good interpretive skills.

Trump gestured little at first, which I assume reflects his advisors' efforts to get him away from his customary moves, which are among the worst of any speaker on the present scene. Trump's gestures don't reach out to the audience and they are not commanding. He mostly uses two: the open hand with splayed fingers (it looks like he's waving to someone) and the thumb to forefinger as if he's holding a tiny item (which comes off as a trifle precious.) He needs to junk both in favor of ones that are more welcoming, firm, and authoritative.

For the president, this speech was a big step forward. Now he has to avoid a previous pattern of upending and upstaging a moment of success with an ill-considered tweet. Will whoever copped his cell phone please continue to hold onto it.

**About the Author:** Often referred to as “The Dean of Media Trainers,” Virgil is considered one of the world’s foremost communication experts. In a 30-year career that has covered 26 countries on five continents, he has provided coaching and counsel to heads of some of the world’s largest corporations and government leaders. Virgil is a prolific writer and speaker. His book, *World Class Communication: how great CEOs win with the public, shareholders, employees, and the media*, written with his son Ken, was named one of the 25 best business books of 2012. His column, *In the C-Suite*, appears in every quarterly issue of the *Public Relations Strategist* and is read by leaders of major public relations agencies and global heads of public relations of large companies. He has written or been featured in articles that have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *Reuters*, *Investors Business Daily*, and numerous professional publications. Two of his speeches have been reprinted in the prestigious *Vital Speeches of the Day*. Prior to founding Virgil Scudder & Associates in 1990, Virgil headed the media training units of two of the world’s largest public relations firms, Hill & Knowlton and Carl Byoir & Associates. Earlier, he was an award-winning news broadcaster at major radio and television networks and stations in New York City. He was a first-night Broadway drama critic for six years during that period, broadcasting reviews on NBC’s all-news radio network and all-news WINS radio.