

# Political Dog Whistles and Messaging Very Clear at State of the Union but Calls for Unity Were Smothered by Partisan Communications

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So much controversy, such a polarized nation and everyone who watched or heard President Trump's historically long State of the Union Speech was no doubt riveted by the gravity of the moment and parsing each gesture and word. The the primary theme the White House communications team prepared us for was that the speech would be Trump's attempt at bringing us together as a people and a nation ... unity.

The president clearly called for unity early on. That messaging, and his delivery, were toned down but sharp and clear. Then he segued to his campaign dog whistles on partisan issues, and the tone and temper in the room began to noticeably change. Of note, President Trump was much less visually bombastic than he is at his rallies, sans most of the arguably distracting random hand gestures, a kind of theatre which his supporters, however, do appreciate and which bonds them closer to their hero. That understated and different delivery at the SOTU helped the president's credibility as a serious leader, it drew in the viewer and congressional audience until an oddly placed threat to stop legislation unless the Congress stops anti-Trump investigations, created cognitive dissidence and seemed to foster more partisan reaction to the rest of the president's oratory.

VP Mike Pence and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi were

bracketed behind the president, as is customary, and were not really very demonstrative until the “investigation” comments were made by President Trump. Up to that point, Pence was smiling and nodding his head in time with the president’s points while Pelosi was pretty still, lips pursed, stoic. That changed when the president began referencing his signature issues – build the wall, keep us safe from Hispanic violent criminals, no late-term abortion, and also a point where the president announced the U.S. would probably be at war with North Korea now if he wasn’t elected.

After those Make America Great Again references and others, Pence smiled more broadly and nodded more emphatically in agreement and Pelosi more than once began leading her Democratic congressional contingent like a concert conductor instead of a politician. She even began shuffling papers as the president spoke, obviously dismissive of what was being said by the leader just a few feet in front of her or she deliberately flourished her papers like a baton, leading her caucus.

To his credit, the president didn’t react much to distractions or change his unusually measured delivery unless he smiled and even ad-libbed when recognizing the special guests seated near the First lady in the balcony – bi-partisan crowd pleasers, any audience appreciates seemingly authentic reaction. The biggest applause lines came when the president acknowledged the success of women in the workforce including those newly elected to Congress, and then cutely commented on the bi-partisan laughter.

There were indeed times of a unified reaction from all of the Congress when President Trump squeezed patriotic triggers: applauded a critically ill and brave child cancer survivor, commended Holocaust survivors, valiant soldiers and a life-saving officer who rescued victims during the bigotry-fueled mass murder at a Pittsburgh synagogue last year. The president was also very effective when delivering another call for bi-

partisan unity at the end of the speech; tying in the same message at the beginning and end of a speech, a technique that strengthens content and leaves audiences feeling they have a better understanding of the key points of a presentation.

On balance, Mr. Trump's speech probably got some points for an attempt at unifying rhetoric, and no doubt accomplished his partisan goals. He clearly voiced his pet positions and underlined his primary messages with restrained body language and delivery made more interesting with well-placed humanizing reactions, supportive gestures and repetitive messaging that were not lost in partisan translation.



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