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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The State of the Union Is Comatose

By [FRANK RICH](#)

HANDS down, the State of the Union's big moment was Barack Obama's [direct hit on the delicate sensibilities of the Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito](#). The president was right to blast [the 5-to-4 decision](#) giving corporate interests an even greater stranglehold over a government they already regard as a partially owned onshore subsidiary. How satisfying it was to [watch him provoke](#) Alito into a "You lie!" snit. Here was a fight we could believe in.

There was more to admire in Obama's performance as well. He did not retreat into the [bite-size initiatives](#) — V-chips, school uniforms — embraced by an emasculated Bill Clinton after his midterm pummeling of 1994. The president's big original goals — health care, economic recovery, financial reform — remained nominally intact, as did his sense of humor. In a rhetorical touch William Safire would have relished, Obama had the wit to rush the ritualistic "our union is strong" so it would not prompt the usual jingoistic ovation.

Good thing, too, since our union is not strong. It is paralyzed. Many Americans were more eagerly anticipating [Steve Jobs's address in San Francisco](#) on Wednesday morning than the president's that night because they have far more confidence in Apple than Washington to produce concrete change. One year into Obama's term we still don't know whether he has what it takes to get American governance functioning again. But we do know that no speech can do the job. The president must act. Only body blows to the legislative branch can move the country forward.

The historian [Alan Brinkley](#) has observed that we will soon enter the fourth decade in which Congress — and therefore government as a whole — has failed to deal with any major national problem, from infrastructure to education. The gridlock isn't only a function of polarized politics and special interests. There's also been a gaping leadership deficit.

In [Obama's speech](#), he kept circling back to a Senate where both parties are dysfunctional. The obstructionist Republicans, he observed, will say no to every single bill "just because they can." But no less culpable are the Democrats, who maintain "the largest majority in decades" even after losing Teddy Kennedy's seat — and yet would rather "run for the hills" than accomplish anything.

What does strong Senate leadership look like? That would be L.B.J. in the pre-Kennedy era. Operating with the narrowest of majorities and under an opposition president, he was able to transform a sleepy, seniority-hobbled, regionally polarized debating society into an often-progressive legislative factory. As Robert Caro tells the story in his book "Master of the Senate," this Senate leader had determination, "a gift for grand strategy," and a sixth sense for grabbing opportunities for action before they vanished for good. He could recognize "the key that might suddenly unlock votes that had seemed locked forever away" and turn it

quickly. The horse trading with recalcitrant senators was often crude and cynical, but the job got done. L.B.J. knew how to reward — and how to punish.

We keep hearing that they just don't make legislative giants like that anymore. In truth, the long drought has led us to forget what they look like and to define senatorial leadership down. L.B.J.'s current successor, Harry Reid, [could be found yawning](#) on camera Wednesday night. He might as well have just taken the whole nap. [Here was this leader's pronouncement](#) last week on the future of the president and his party's No. 1 priority: "We're not on health care now. We've talked a lot about it in the past." Yes, a lot of talk — a year's worth, in fact — with nothing to show for it.

If Reid can serve as the face of Democratic fecklessness in the Senate, then John McCain epitomizes the unpatriotic opposition. On Wednesday night he could be seen sneering when Obama pointed out that most of the debt vilified by Republicans happened on the watch of a Republican president and Congress that never paid for "two wars, two tax cuts, and an expensive prescription drug program." The president's indictment could have been more lacerating. Crunching Congressional Budget Office numbers, [David Leonhardt of The Times calculated](#) that of the projected \$2 trillion swing into the red between the Clinton surplus and 2012, some 33 percent could be attributed to Bush legislation and another 20 percent to Bush-initiated spending (Iraq, TARP) continued by Obama. Only 7 percent of the deficit could be credited to the Obama stimulus bill and 3 percent to his other initiatives. (The business cycle accounts for the other 37 percent.)

Perhaps McCain was sneering at Obama because of the Beltway's newest unquestioned cliché: one year after a new president takes office he is required [to stop blaming his predecessor](#) for the calamities left behind. Who dreamed up that canard — Alito? F.D.R. never followed it. In [an October 1936 speech](#), nearly four years after Hoover, Roosevelt was still railing against the "hear-nothing, see-nothing, do-nothing government" he had inherited. He reminded unemployed and destitute radio listeners that there had been "nine crazy years at the ticker" and "nine mad years of mirage" followed by three long years of bread lines and despair. F.D.R. soon won re-election in the greatest landslide the country had seen.

Obama should turn up the heat on both the G.O.P.'s record of fiscal recklessness and its mad-dog obstructionism. He should stop paying lip service to the fantasy that his Congressional opposition has serious ideas to contribute to the cleanup. Better still, he should publicize exactly what those "ideas" are.

Yes, the Republicans were correct to laugh at one of the president's own gimmicks on Wednesday night: a symbolic and pointless spending "freeze." But their own alternatives are downright hilarious. When the G.O.P. House leadership last year announced its plan to cut federal spending by \$75 billion annually, [it enumerated specific new cuts of only \\$5 billion per year](#). A tax-cut-laden "stimulus plan" [endorsed by Jim DeMint](#), the South Carolina senator and Tea Party hero, "would cost more than \$3 trillion — more than triple the cost of Obama's stimulus — over the next decade," [in the estimate of Jonathan Chait of The New Republic](#).

On State of the Union day, the Republican National Committee gathered at its winter meeting at Waikiki Beach [to battle over a measure](#) that would deny campaign funds to candidates who didn't pass a Tea Party ideological purity test. Back in Washington, other party thinkers trotted out some more brilliant ideas. Paul

Ryan, a Wisconsin congressman hailed as the Republicans' new intellectual hope, laid out a lengthy "G.O.P. Road Map for America's Future" [on The Wall Street Journal op-ed page](#) that proposed cutting taxes (disproportionately for the wealthy) and privatizing Medicare and Social Security but devoted no bullet point to creating jobs for Americans in urgent need. On the Hill that morning, [Michele Bachmann of Minnesota led House colleagues](#) in signing a "Declaration of Health Care Independence" to complement a bill that would let Americans "purchase insurance with their own tax-free money." Gee, why did no else think of that ingenious fix for a health care system that leaves [46.3 million uninsured](#) and whose runaway costs are [on track to eat up one-fifth of the American economy](#)?

It was a heartening breakthrough when Obama dismissed such idiocies repeatedly in his televised meeting [with House Republicans on Friday](#). He mocked G.O.P. legislative snake oil that promises to lower all medical costs and "won't cost anybody anything." He must keep this up — and be equally tough on the slackers in his own party who stall his agenda. And he must be less foggy on the specifics of what that agenda is. Though on Wednesday night [he asked Congress](#) to "take another look" at the health care bill, even now it's unclear what he believes that bill's bedrock provisions should be. He also said he wouldn't sign any financial regulatory bill that "does not meet the test of real reform," yet tentatively praised a House bill compromised by a banking lobby that is in bed with Democrats and Republicans alike. The Senate, of course, has yet to produce any financial reform bill.

Americans like Obama far more than they like any Congressional leader. They might even like more of his policies if he spelled them out. But none of that matters if no Democrat fears him enough to do any of his bidding and no Republican believes there's any price to be paid for always saying no.

A year in, we have learned that all the conciliatory rhetoric won't cut it. But a president with a big megaphone and large legislative majorities has more powerful strings to pull, no matter what happened in one special election in Massachusetts. If he can't get a working government, at least he can shake things up in November.

Just look at how a sharp public slap provoked Justice Alito, threw a spotlight on the court's dubious jurisprudence and sparked an embarrassing over-the-top hissy fit on the right. A do-nothing Congress, at a time when ever more Americans are losing their jobs and homes, is an even riper target than the Supreme Court — and far more politically vulnerable. Without strong medicine from Obama, we can be certain of the same result: a heedless Congress will keep doing nothing. If he steps it up, there's at least a shot that his presidency, and maybe even the country, will be pulled back from the brink.

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