

Good and bad things I heard last night

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Sen. Marco Rubio's [rebuttal to State of the Union](#) last night was notable mostly for what it didn't do: spend more than a hot second on the subject of immigration. I've been impressed to see the Florida Republican working to convince conservatives that it's time for immigration reform. Sure, his urgency may be as electoral as it is moral. But that doesn't make him wrong.

Still, despite Rubio's considerable gifts—and despite the low bar set by a thankless speaking gig—he sounded pretty out of touch. He led with the myth that Americans have singular access to social mobility, [a line that runaway inequality makes less true than ever](#). Soon he was bashing big-government tax-and-spenders. Was he watching a different SOTU than I was?

Of course, Rubio's speech was written before Obama entered the House chamber; it wasn't really a direct rebuttal. Still, he probably could have guessed that SOTU was being written by a team of presidential speechwriters, not liberal straw men. And the facts about the size of the federal government—low taxes in historical perspective, [shrinking deficits](#)—are readily available.

As for the SOTU the rest of us were watching, I'll start with what I didn't like:

- The implied urgency of the deficit problem. I know that Obama gets that deficits are a problem for later, not now. (Deep down, [practically everyone in Washington does](#).) And I appreciate his bit about “not deficits alone.” But at the risk of sounding a little *West Wing*-y, I wish the administration would stop saying economic things that sound intuitive but are demonstrably bad policy. People can be pretty smart if you treat them that way.
- I'd like to hear more about how we're going to get serious about clean energy—[serious like Germany](#)—and less about [how great Mr. Gas is](#).

- Like a lot of Democrats, Obama likes to suggest that education is a panacea. [It isn't](#). And I'm neither surprised nor pleased to hear him talking up public-private efforts to give high schools a more narrowly vocational, all-math-and-science focus. We haven't gone far enough in this direction already?
- "We will stand steadfast with Israel in pursuit of security and a lasting peace." Hmm, isn't there another major stakeholder in these goals? So why don't we stand with them, too?
- On counterterrorism: "Our values" demand "a durable legal and policy framework." Not sure who the "we" is behind "our," but *my* values demand more than [a memo explaining why the feds can kill whomever they want to](#).

Here's what I was glad to hear:

- "The 12 hottest years on record have all come in the last 15."
- "Made in America." It's been great to see a president [prioritizing domestic manufacturing again](#).
- His pitch for immigration reform included only the things he and the [bipartisan Senate group](#) already agree on. Not a moment that screams boldness, but likely what he needs to be doing to make sure reform actually happens—unlike in 2007, when an alliance between President Bush and the late Sen. Ted Kennedy wasn't enough to get it done.
- Responsible fatherhood. I think this is in general (not in every detail) one of Bush's positive legacies—and one that Obama lent some support to as a senator.
- Thing three that Bush was also good on: "the promise of an AIDS-free generation."
- "The right to vote."
- "Countless other communities ripped open by gun violence" deserve a vote on gun control. That is, not just the sites of mass shootings, but also places like Chicago, where Hadiya Pendleton is just one of way too many

victims of gun homicide.

- “By the end of next year, our war in Afghanistan will be over.” Good, though sooner would be better.
- “Every dollar we invest in high-quality early education can save more than seven dollars later on.” And if we care about outcomes for kids, [not just the role of government](#), we should support these highly effective programs.

Most importantly: five substantive uses of “poor” or “poverty.” Last year we got two passing references; in 2011, Obama didn’t utter either word. Sadly, in order to remember the poor, we often need to be literally reminded that they exist. And ultimately SOTU isn’t much more than a prime-time bully pulpit—so I was heartened to see the president use it to lift up the poor.