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Hard-Knock (Hardly Acknowledged) Life

By CHARLES M. BLOW

President Obama made history on Tuesday.

It was only the second time since Harry S. Truman's State of the Union address in 1948 that such a speech by a Democratic president did not include a single mention of poverty or the plight of the poor.

The closest Obama got to a mention was his confirmation for "Americans who've seen their paychecks dwindle or their jobs disappear" that, indeed, "the world has changed. The competition for jobs is real." I'm sure they appreciated that.

The only other Democrat not to mention poverty in the speech was Jimmy Carter in 1980, but even he was able to squeeze in one reference to at least a portion of the poor and disenfranchised, stressing the continuation of jobs programs to "provide training and work for our young people, especially minority youth." (Carter did mention the poor in a written version that he submitted to Congress.)

John F. Kennedy didn't say the specific words "poor" or "poverty" in his first State of the Union, but he talked at length about providing "more food for the families of the unemployed, and to aid their needy children," securing "more purchasing power for our lowest-paid workers by raising and expanding the minimum wage" and of a new housing program to address the problem of "cities being engulfed in squalor."

So how is it that this Democratic president has the temerity to deliver a State of the Union address that completely neglects any explicit mention of the calamitous conditions now afflicting his staunchest supporters: the poor?

(In 2008, Obama won 73 percent of the vote of those earning less than \$15,000 a year, 60 percent of those earning between \$15,000 and \$30,000 and 55 percent of the vote of those earning \$30,000 to \$50,000. Those were his widest margins of victory of any **income group** and helped to propel him to victory.)

He talked at length about education (the most inspiring part of the speech) and about civility and his repackaged bromides of global competitiveness and investments in the future. And, of course, there were cautious mentions of programs that benefit seniors and the need to protect and secure them. Can't forget the plea to the old people.

Protecting programs for seniors strikes the right chord morally and politically, but the data show that seniors are not the ones feeling the majority of the pain these days.

According to **data from the Census Bureau**, the percent of people ages 18 to 64 who were living in poverty in 2009 was higher than it had been in any year since 1959, while the percent of seniors living in poverty was lower than it had been in any year since at least 1959.

(By the way, voters over 65 were the only age group that Obama lost in 2008.)

I, for one, refuse to believe that this is an either-or proposition. We can make smart choices about protecting seniors and supporting younger Americans in need at the same time. We don't have to ignore the Annies among us to court the Miss Daisys.

For the poor, this is the Obama Conundrum. He was obviously the best choice in 2008. And judging by the current cast of Republican presidential contenders, he could well be the best choice in 2012. But does that give him license to obviate his moral responsibility to his electoral devotees? Can and should

they take his snubs as a necessary consequence of political warfare as he makes every effort to tack back to the middle and reconnect with those whose opinion of him vacillates between contempt on a bad day and sufferance on a good one? Does keeping him in the White House dictate keeping them in the shadows?

And things could get even worse for the poor if the president feels the need to cut too many deals with the new Republican-led House in order to appear more centrist.

According to Brian Miller, the executive director of the nonpartisan and Boston-based group United for a Fair Economy and co-author of [the group's report](#) entitled "State of the Dream 2011: Austerity for Whom?" released earlier this month, "austerity measures based on the conservative tenets of less government and lower taxes will ratchet down the standard of living for all Americans, while simultaneously widening our nation's racial and economic divide."

As Miller put it, deficits that tax cuts for the rich helped to create "are being used to justify a host of austerity measures that will harm Americans of all races but will hit blacks and Latinos the hardest."

According to Miller, "With 42 percent of blacks and 37 percent of Latinos lacking the funds to meet minimal household expenses for even three months should they become unemployed, cutting public assistance programs will have devastating impacts on black and Latino workers."

(Obama won 95 percent of the black vote and 67 percent of the Hispanic vote in 2008.)

Even as my respect for this president as a shrewd politician has begun to rebound, my faith in him as a fervent crusader for the poor and disenfranchised has taken yet another nose dive. One's tone-deafness — or blatant indifference — to the poor has to be at Black American Express status to brag that "the stock market has come roaring back" and "corporate profits are up" and not even mention the unemployment rate or the continuing foreclosure crisis.

I want to believe that President Obama's speech omissions were oversights, not acts of arrogance. But I'm not sure.

President Truman wrote in 1953 that, “ultimately, no President can master his responsibilities, save as his fellow citizens — indeed, the whole people — comprehend the challenge of our times and move, with him, to meet it.” But, it is sometimes hard to follow — indeed, to chase — a president who appears to be moving, often at a full sprint, away from the people who once carried him.

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