

Lame duck's swan song makes vital points

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

In one way, President George W. Bush's final State of the Union speech had no modern analog. Other recent two-term presidents (Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, Dwight Eisenhower) gave their swan songs knowing their vice presidents were seeking to succeed them and thus would presumably defend their legacies over their final 12 months in office. But Vice President Dick Cheney long ago declared he would never seek the White House.

And so the president took the lectern Monday night to deliver a speech meant both to stake out a 2008 agenda and to burnish his reputation - but to a nation paying far more attention to the bipartisan scrum to replace him. Too bad. He will be president for 51 more weeks and thus should never be far from the spotlight.

The least appealing part of his speech was easy to spot: The call for a sweeping economic "stimulus" plan. What's being slapped together in Washington looks more like a Christmas tree every passing day. The Senate's desire to put its own imprint on a measure crafted by Bush and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., is sure to yield an unfocused mishmash that will take longer to adopt and still longer to have any effect - by which point the stimulus plan could be either unnecessary or too late to help.

Thankfully, the rest of the president's speech was much more coherent. There was a welcome boldness to his declaration that he will block funding for every earmark that has been slipped into legislation without the vetting previously required for any expenditure. His advocacy of \$300 million in scholarships for children in struggling urban schools further confirms his bona fides as an education reformer. His continuing call for comprehensive immigration reform reflected political courage.

Most welcome of all, however, was Bush's focus on national security. We are two months away from the Iraq war's fifth anniversary, yet it seems to be slipping from attention - even though it is inextricably intertwined with a vast array of issues, from the war on terrorism to how we deal with Iran to narrower but also crucial matters such as troop burnout and readiness.

The president plainly understands this. "We must do the difficult work today, so that years from now people will look back and say that this generation rose to the moment (America) will stand by our allies, and we will defend our vital interests in the Persian Gulf." We welcome this affirmation of our goals.

Millions of Americans have largely tuned out the current president to focus on who will replace him. But the full, final story of George W. Bush's White House days has yet to be written - and he very much still matters.

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