

Too little, too late

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Predictably, President George W. Bush's last State of the Union address Monday night did not contain grand initiatives, though he urged Congress to pass a much-needed economic stimulus package already negotiated with the House.

Given that his other grand initiatives included remaking Social Security and invading a country without weapons of mass destruction and no involvement in the Sept. 11 attacks, the case could be made that the nation should be thankful.

But this absence of big ideas really had to do with the weakened condition of the presidency.

Yes, virtually no president in the last year of his last term is in a position to push through much of anything. However, a president who had delivered on a promise to unite rather than divide would be in a better position to persuade on matters still on any credible national priority list.

On the economy, the president pitched a stimulus package that will put extra cash into the hands of people likely to spend it and that contains business tax breaks. But the package negotiated with the House of Representatives lacks extension of unemployment benefits and more spending on food stamps, two items that will certainly stimulate the economy. The Senate must correct that.

On Iraq, the president defended the surge and cautioned against dramatic U.S. troop withdrawal, while noting that some 20,000 such troops would be home soon. But sadly, the surge has failed on its primary goal - political reconciliation. The president ought to be looking for a more certain exit.

The president vowed to veto spending bills unless they halve the amount of earmarks for pet projects. This is a worthy goal. However, he's talking about the 2009 fiscal year, which doesn't start until Oct. 1, 2008. The threat doesn't apply to recent legislation that contains earmarks totaling \$16.9 billion.

Bush proposed that Congress create a \$300 million program - described as "Pell Grants for kids" - so inner city schoolchildren can transfer to better private or public schools. We call that school choice in Milwaukee and note that \$300 million won't go very far. Milwaukee's program costs the state about \$110 million. We await details.

The president, speaking against the backdrop of a national election to choose his replacement, called for

reducing U.S. dependence on oil.

These and other items in the address are good calls, though not far-reaching enough and tardy by half. So, much as Americans could legitimately feel as Bill Clinton exited the presidency, we lament Bush's last year in this way: Oh, what might have been.

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