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State of the Union Watch Parties

Isn't that a contradiction in terms?

By John Dickerson
Posted Monday, Jan. 30, 2006, at 7:08 PM ET

I have never really enjoyed going to Super Bowl or Oscar watch parties. They are attended by people who don't care what's happening on the television or people who care too much. Half the room talks while the other half tells them to be quiet.

This dynamic seems perfect, though, for the State of the Union watch parties that will be taking place across the nation as President Bush gives his big speech on Tuesday night. The feelings in the living rooms will mirror the tension in the chamber of the House of Representatives. Democrats will pay surly partial attention to the president's show, while their colleagues across the aisle listen rapturously. Neutrals will be few, and not many of the affairs will be bipartisan.


But wait, you say, what kind of loser goes to a State of the Union watch party? If that's your attitude, we don't want you anyway. The glib and frivolous—those usually in highest demand at parties—are not welcome. State of the Union parties are for the earnest, thoughtful, and hopelessly wonkish—people like the [church-group](#) members who will evaluate how the speech and Democratic response fit into their faith tradition, or members of the Columbia [political union](#) who are weirdly obsessed with politics—possibly just with Wolf Blitzer.

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Guests at the Family Research Council [watch party](#) will hear from Dr. James Dobson before the president speaks and enjoy nonalcoholic beverages while mingling with representatives from the White House liaison's office and other conservative activists. At the [Center for Global Development](#) party, participants will play "SOTU bingo" listening for references to "HIV/AIDS," "trade," and "Africa" in the speech. Each time Bush says one of those phrases, players mark the box on their card, screaming "Bingo!" if they get a full plate. (They win mugs and T-shirts). Given how little Bush talks about those issues, [the cards](#) also have boxes with filler words like "peace," "freedom," and "democracy" that are more likely to be mentioned. The CGD party sold out in two hours, which suggests either that Washington, D.C., is the dullest town in the world or that Angelina Jolie isn't the only hottie with a [thing about development](#).

The political committees are happy to have the most desperately earnest attendees at their watch parties. These are the people who talk about Diebold voting machines during baptisms or name their children Rush. For both [Republicans](#) and [Democrats](#), these evenings are an important organizing tool. Anyone willing to show up nine months before an off-year election is the kind of motivated activist they want for the grass-roots organizing that is so important to winning elections. These kinds of hard-core partisans won't be satisfied just stuffing envelopes. They'll walk their precincts in a hailstorm to knock on doors and register voters, or turn out the faithful on Election Day.

The political parties are both constantly testing their organizations, using events like the State of the Union to find out how many people will respond to their appeals and with what level of intensity. The hope is also that by bringing like-minded activists together, they will create bonds of friendship and solidarity among their shock troops. Party officials describe these events using phrases like "ladder of relationships" that make them sound like Amway robots or Scientologists.

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Once people get to the Party parties, they're given homework to keep them involved. At Republican parties, hosts are sent a list of unregistered Republicans in the immediate area. (Never you mind how they know they're Republican but not registered; the NSA program is perfectly legal.) If anyone at the party knows a name on the list, they are supposed to fill out one of the RNC-provided postcards with a personal message about why the unregistered person who has told party door-knockers they share party positions should join the rolls. After Democrats are through listening to the speech and throwing soft objects at the television, they can dial in to listen to a conference call with Howard Dean and Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid.

Of course, not every State of the Union party is so serious. Some will gather to play [drinking games](#) based on the predictable lines in the president's speech. As for me, I'll be commentating on the BBC before the speech, where I'm hoping they'll be drinking already.

*John Dickerson is **Slate's** chief political correspondent. He can be reached at .*

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