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The News Briefly

STATE OF THE UNION

At least there was pizza



The Western New York Coalition for Progress hosted a viewing of the President's State of the Union address on Tuesday night, at J.P. Bullfeather's on Elmwood Avenue. More than 50 people attended.

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Just about a half hour into his State of the Union speech on Tuesday night, President George W. Bush looked into the cameras and said, "And tonight, let me speak directly to the citizens of Iran."

A collective groan arose from the 50 or so people gathered to watch the telecast of the address in a small upstairs banquet room at J.P. Bullfeather's on Elmwood Avenue, at the invitation of the Western New York Coalition for Progress. It was a partisan crowd, and there was plenty of moaning, eye-rolling and incredulous laughter. One older gentleman, who muttered obscenities through the entire 58-minute speech, banged his fist on the table every couple of minutes, rattling a plate stacked with chicken wing bones.

"America respects you, and we respect your country," President Bush continued, maintaining eye contact with the camera and, presumably, the people of Iran. "We respect your right to choose your own future and win your own freedom. And our nation hopes one day to be the closest of friends with a free and democratic Iran."

I was reminded at once of something an Iraqi friend, Maher, told me. From his home outside Najaf he'd watched on CNN when President Bush, in the infamous 2003 State of the Union address, spoke directly to the Iraqi people. He'd watched when President Bush addressed the people of Afghanistan directly, too, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. He'd watched Presidents Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush make earnest, televised appeals to the Iraqi people, too, and he'd noticed the warplanes streaking overhead not too long after whenever someone deployed that oratorical gambit.

"When the president of the United States addresses you directly on TV," Maher told me, "it's time to gather your valuables and hide in the basement."

The Western New York Coalition for Progress describes itself as nonpartisan,

but its members lean to the left. For six months last year the group's weekly radio show on WHLD 1270-AM, the WNY Progress Report, discussed the county's fiscal crisis, the pros and cons on the proposed Bass Pro development downtown, the Buffalo mayoral race and a host of other issues.

At Bullfeather's on Tuesday night, volunteers passed out State of the Union bingo cards—each box in the five-by-five grid contained a word the president favors in his public speeches, such as "threat," "terror/ist/ism," "safe haven," "values" and "security." When he spoke the word, you checked the box on your card and hoped to get five in a row. Just 17 minutes passed before the first person shouted out "Bingo!" and received a handsome prize. Soon it was like corn popping, one "Bingo!" after another, until, at minute 21 of the President's speech, everyone except this reporter had bingo and the prizes were all gone.

A handful of print journalists and a couple of TV cameras attended the event, no doubt drawn by the promise of free food and the possibility that drinking games would erupt. In truth there is very little news a Buffalonian can hope to gather from a State of the Union address. Maybe nobody should expect much, but Buffalonians least of all. The Clean Energy Initiative? The American Competitiveness Initiative? These don't promise any federal dollars for Buffalo. If those initiatives are funded at all.

"Well," said one woman, as the President made his way down the aisle at the speech's conclusion. "That was just so much fluff, wasn't it."

"Stick around for the Democratic response," said Alan Bedenko, president of the Western New York Coalition for Progress and author of the well-read blog Buffalo Pundit (www.buffalopundit.wnymedia.net). But the crowd was already leaking away.

—geoff kelly

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