

Here's a quick quiz for you. What do George Pataki, a lithium battery, a gas mask filter and freeze-dried chicken have in common?

They all have shelf lives of about 10 years, which New York's Governor confirmed again in a stunningly dull and uninspired State of the State speech last week. Never before has 7,391 words said so little – unless you consider Pataki's other 10 annual January attempts at trying to refute the notion that he leads the nation's most dysfunctional piece of real estate.

Here's what Pataki offered in his odious opus. "Today, the storm clouds are dispersing and the sun is breaking through. As it does, it will shine ever bright on the Empire State." All that was missing was the theater curtain, pit orchestra and a curly red-headed girl named Annie.

True enough, State of the State addresses traditionally are short on meaningful specifics. But equally true is the sea in which Pataki is treading these days, a cauldron which has actually sparked at least of glimmer of reform from the legislative side with action this week on changing their voting rules. While it is far from clear, considerable and consequential change, it's a forward stroke.

Pataki barely even broad-brushed any talk of reform. It was more like a 55-gallon drum of whitewash tossed at the side of the barn. And even at that, most of it missed the mark. Of course, he could have saved everyone an hour or more of time with a two-word speech that at the very least would have gotten high marks for honesty. State of the State, George? "It stinks," would have sufficed nicely.

So much so that New Yorkers might need that filter before 2005 is done. Despite what was Pataki's assessment to the contrary, the Empire State stands in virtually the exact same spot it did 11 years ago when Mario Cuomo, after just over a decade in office five billion dollars in debt, also wore out his welcome. The only difference is Pataki's budget deficit is today roughly \$6 billion.

And while television camera's kept a largely unblinking eye on the gov, it would have been much more interesting to watch say New York Assemblyman Dan Hooker's reaction to the 69 minutes of pabulum.

Hooker, a fellow Republican from the Oneonta area, also surveyed the capitol scene last week and offered this more honest assessment about ultimately meaningful reform: "I don't think it's likely at all. I don't think that's a logical assumption," he told the *Oneonta Daily Star*. "Everyone can say we all want reform and there should be reform. (But) There's no reason for the majority party to alter the status quo."

Which on the surface is what voters everywhere believe, and deep down, what state lawmakers know. With a chance to seize the moment, like an empty old crank case George Pataki instead seized up. Where he could have thrown at the very minimum a life ring, our leader instead threw us all a bag of bricks. If it was supposed to be some stepping stone to some national platform – assuming the 2006 governor's bid doesn't work out – he just didn't fall off the log. It was a full-faced plunge into the deep end of political emptiness.

No less than 21 times did he use the word bold. Twenty five times he slipped in the word reform. Number of times he really meant it: zero. It would have taken a lot of lithium batteries to add any spark to this dreary diatribe. The countdown is on to State of the State XII; please pass the chicken.

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