
State of the Union

By Tom L. Kelly / Jan 21, 2015

The State of the Union, though not mandated, is an opportunity for the President personally to brief Congress on his/her agenda. This year, like many before, was no different and Barack Obama made his case to both Congress and the American people. But what did he really say? And how did mid-term election losses by Democrats have an impact?

The President's message was populist, optimistic, and reflected positively over the past six years. He spoke at length about the middle class, the need for all to share in a growing economy, favorable energy costs, standing against extremists, and the benefits of millions more Americans having health insurance. The President seemed boastful of what he and his administration has accomplished. And he should be: as was stated, the economy is growing at the fastest pace since 1999; the unemployment rate has lowered; more people are graduating from college than ever before; and American is less dependent on foreign oil than it has been during the last 50 years.

However, there were undertones of the speech, that of defiance and aggravation over partisan squabble. Despite the mid-term losses, and the fact that he said his policies were on the ballot, President Obama showed resolve, and assured Congress that not only would he march forward, but also veto legislation that attempted to unravel what has already been done; such as attacks on the Affordable Care Act. He also stood tall on climate change and Guantanamo; themes we have heard in prior years. Moreover, the President proposed new sweeping policies, though lacking details, on paid maternity and sick leave, universal day care and free community college for middle-class Americans. Overall, the President sounded like a victor, not the leader of a party which must regroup, and despite Republicans taking control of both Houses of Congress, he argued that the next two years would, if nothing else, foster constructive debate on his agenda: policies that strengthen the middle-class, promote equal pay, advance STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) training, protect the environment and ensure that American values are expressed through leadership abroad.

Frustration over partisanship was also highlighted throughout the speech by issues like failing infrastructure, where Congress must soon address a surface transportation bill and shortfalls to the Highway Trust Fund. The President called on Congress here to find common ground, table petty debates and drop divisive projects like the Keystone Pipeline to move infrastructure funding along. Furthermore, he challenged Congress to "try and raise a family on \$15,000 a year," arguing that a minimum wage hike was imperative and should, for the sake of working Americans, find widespread support. There was also a suggestion that many loopholes could be eliminated to further decrease budget deficits, and that Democrats and Republicans were more likeminded on the issues than most assume. Most of all, however, the President was adamant about ending the practice of demonizing the opposition, and using "gotcha" moments to drive debate. He thinks "we are better than this."

In summary, the President highlighted the good, argued that more work has to be done, especially for the middle-class, called out Congress for being dysfunctional, touted an end to combat in Afghanistan, but assured that we will stand against extremists, culminating in an ask for authority to use force against ISIL, chastised those who doubt climate change and pleaded to give every American a fighting chance. This was the President's most upbeat State of the Union.

This speech should not have taken anyone by surprise. These are the same policies and ideas rolled out in prior addresses to Congress and the President shows no sign of wavering on his progressive agenda. Additionally, they're consistent with recent Executive Orders advanced by the White House and expand upon themes President Obama has spoken about during the weeks leading up to January 20th. You may not support his agenda, or even the tactics used to move it along, but one thing most can agree on is that Barack Obama stays on message. This State of the Union showed the President true to form.