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January 28, 2014

**Obama’s 2014 State of the Union Address: Excerpts Related to Wealth Gap**

**Covered Topics: Education, Politics, Standard of Living, Pursuit of Happiness**

In the coming months, let’s see where else we can make progress together.  Let’s make this a year of action.  That’s what most Americans want – for all of us in this chamber to focus on their lives, their hopes, their aspirations.  And what I believe unites the people of this nation, regardless of race or region or party, young or old, rich or poor, is the simple, profound belief in opportunity for all – the notion that if you work hard and take responsibility, you can get ahead.

Let’s face it: that belief has suffered some serious blows.  Over more than three decades, even before the Great Recession hit, massive shifts in technology and global competition had eliminated a lot of good, middle-class jobs, and weakened the economic foundations that families depend on.

Today, after four years of economic growth, corporate profits and stock prices have rarely been higher, and those at the top have never done better.  But average wages have barely budged.  Inequality has deepened.  Upward mobility has stalled.  The cold, hard fact is that even in the midst of recovery, too many Americans are working more than ever just to get by – let alone get ahead.  And too many still aren’t working at all.

Our job is to reverse these trends.  It won’t happen right away, and we won’t agree on everything.  But what I offer tonight is a set of concrete, practical proposals to speed up growth, strengthen the middle class, and build new ladders of opportunity into the middle class.  Some require Congressional action, and I’m eager to work with all of you.  But America does not stand still – and neither will I.  So wherever and whenever I can take steps without legislation to expand opportunity for more American families, that’s what I’m going to do.

As usual, our First Lady sets a good example.  Michelle’s Let’s Move partnership with schools, businesses, and local leaders has helped bring down childhood obesity rates for the first time in thirty years – an achievement that will improve lives and reduce health care costs for decades to come.  The Joining Forces alliance that Michelle and Jill Biden launched has already encouraged employers to hire or train nearly 400,000 veterans and military spouses.  Taking a page from that playbook, the White House just organized a College Opportunity Summit where already, 150 universities, businesses, and nonprofits have made concrete commitments to reduce inequality in access to higher education – and help every hardworking kid go to college and succeed when they get to campus.  Across the country, we’re partnering with mayors, governors, and state legislatures on issues from homelessness to marriage equality.

The point is, there are millions of Americans outside Washington who are tired of stale political arguments, and are moving this country forward.  They believe, and I believe, that here in America, our success should depend not on accident of birth, but the strength of our work ethic and the scope of our dreams.  That’s what drew our forebears here.  It’s how the daughter of a factory worker is CEO of America’s largest automaker; how the son of a barkeeper is Speaker of the House; how the son of a single mom can be President of the greatest nation on Earth.

Opportunity is who we are.  And the defining project of our generation is to restore that promise.

We know where to start: the best measure of opportunity is access to a good job.  With the economy picking up speed, companies say they intend to hire more people this year.  And over half of big manufacturers say they’re thinking of insourcing jobs from abroad.

So let’s make that decision easier for more companies.  Both Democrats and Republicans have argued that our tax code is riddled with wasteful, complicated loopholes that punish businesses investing here, and reward companies that keep profits abroad.  Let’s flip that equation.  Let’s work together to close those loopholes, end those incentives to ship jobs overseas, and lower tax rates for businesses that create jobs here at home.

Moreover, we can take the money we save with this transition to tax reform to create jobs rebuilding our roads, upgrading our ports, unclogging our commutes – because in today’s global economy, first-class jobs gravitate to first-class infrastructure.  We’ll need Congress to protect more than three million jobs by finishing transportation and waterways bills this summer.  But I will act on my own to slash bureaucracy and streamline the permitting process for key projects, so we can get more construction workers on the job as fast as possible.

We also have the chance, right now, to beat other countries in the race for the next wave of high-tech manufacturing jobs.  My administration has launched two hubs for high-tech manufacturing in Raleigh and Youngstown, where we’ve connected businesses to research universities that can help America lead the world in advanced technologies.  Tonight, I’m announcing we’ll launch six more this year.  Bipartisan bills in both houses could double the number of these hubs and the jobs they create.  So get those bills to my desk and put more Americans back to work.

Let’s do more to help the entrepreneurs and small business owners who create most new jobs in America.  Over the past five years, my administration has made more loans to small business owners than any other.  And when ninety-eight percent of our exporters are small businesses, new trade partnerships with Europe and the Asia-Pacific will help them create more jobs.  We need to work together on tools like bipartisan trade promotion authority to protect our workers, protect our environment, and open new markets to new goods stamped “Made in the USA.”  China and Europe aren’t standing on the sidelines.  Neither should we.

We know that the nation that goes all-in on innovation today will own the global economy tomorrow.  This is an edge America cannot surrender.  Federally-funded research helped lead to the ideas and inventions behind Google and smartphones.  That’s why Congress should undo the damage done by last year’s cuts to basic research so we can unleash the next great American discovery – whether it’s vaccines that stay ahead of drug-resistant bacteria, or paper-thin material that’s stronger than steel.

I’m also convinced we can help Americans return to the workforce faster by reforming unemployment insurance so that it’s more effective in today’s economy.  But first, this Congress needs to restore the unemployment insurance you just let expire for 1.6 million people.

Let me tell you why.

Misty DeMars is a mother of two young boys. She’d been steadily employed since she was a teenager.  She put herself through college.  She’d never collected unemployment benefits.  In May, she and her husband used their life savings to buy their first home.  A week later, budget cuts claimed the job she loved.  Last month, when their unemployment insurance was cut off, she sat down and wrote me a letter – the kind I get every day.  “We are the face of the unemployment crisis,” she wrote.  “I am not dependent on the government…Our country depends on people like us who build careers, contribute to society…care about our neighbors…I am confident that in time I will find a job…I will pay my taxes, and we will raise our children in their own home in the community we love.  Please give us this chance.”

Congress, give these hardworking, responsible Americans that chance.  They need our help, but more important, this country needs them in the game.  That’s why I’ve been asking CEOs to give more long-term unemployed workers a fair shot at that new job and new chance to support their families; this week, many will come to the White House to make that commitment real.  Tonight, I ask every business leader in America to join us and to do the same – because we are stronger when America fields a full team.

Of course, it’s not enough to train today’s workforce.  We also have to prepare tomorrow’s workforce, by guaranteeing every child access to a world-class education.

Estiven Rodriguez couldn’t speak a word of English when he moved to New York City at age nine.  But last month, thanks to the support of great teachers and an innovative tutoring program, he led a march of his classmates – through a crowd of cheering parents and neighbors – from their high school to the post office, where they mailed off their college applications.  And this son of a factory worker just found out he’s going to college this fall.

Five years ago, we set out to change the odds for all our kids.  We worked with lenders to reform student loans, and today, more young people are earning college degrees than ever before.  Race to the Top, with the help of governors from both parties, has helped states raise expectations and performance.  Teachers and principals in schools from Tennessee to Washington, D.C. are making big strides in preparing students with skills for the new economy – problem solving, critical thinking, science, technology, engineering, and math.  Some of this change is hard.  It requires everything from more challenging curriculums and more demanding parents to better support for teachers and new ways to measure how well our kids think, not how well they can fill in a bubble on a test.  But it’s worth it – and it’s working.

The problem is we’re still not reaching enough kids, and we’re not reaching them in time.  That has to change.

Research shows that one of the best investments we can make in a child’s life is high-quality early education.  Last year, I asked this Congress to help states make high-quality pre-K available to every four year-old.  As a parent as well as a President, I repeat that request tonight. But in the meantime, thirty states have raised pre-k funding on their own.  They know we can’t wait.  So just as we worked with states to reform our schools, this year, we’ll invest in new partnerships with states and communities across the country in a race to the top for our youngest children.  And as Congress decides what it’s going to do, I’m going to pull together a coalition of elected officials, business leaders, and philanthropists willing to help more kids access the high-quality pre-K they need.

Last year, I also pledged to connect 99 percent of our students to high-speed broadband over the next four years.  Tonight, I can announce that with the support of the FCC and companies like Apple, Microsoft, Sprint, and Verizon, we’ve got a down payment to start connecting more than 15,000 schools and twenty million students over the next two years, without adding a dime to the deficit.

We’re working to redesign high schools and partner them with colleges and employers that offer the real-world education and hands-on training that can lead directly to a job and career.  We’re shaking up our system of higher education to give parents more information, and colleges more incentives to offer better value, so that no middle-class kid is priced out of a college education.  We’re offering millions the opportunity to cap their monthly student loan payments to ten percent of their income, and I want to work with Congress to see how we can help even more Americans who feel trapped by student loan debt.  And I’m reaching out to some of America’s leading foundations and corporations on a new initiative to help more young men of color facing tough odds stay on track and reach their full potential.

The bottom line is, Michelle and I want every child to have the same chance this country gave us.  But we know our opportunity agenda won’t be complete – and too many young people entering the workforce today will see the American Dream as an empty promise – unless we do more to make sure our economy honors the dignity of work, and hard work pays off for every single American.

Today, women make up about half our workforce.  But they still make 77 cents for every dollar a man earns.  That is wrong, and in 2014, it’s an embarrassment. A woman deserves equal pay for equal work.  She deserves to have a baby without sacrificing her job.  A mother deserves a day off to care for a sick child or sick parent without running into hardship – and you know what, a father does, too.  It’s time to do away with workplace policies that belong in a “Mad Men” episode.  This year, let’s all come together – Congress, the White House, and businesses from Wall Street to Main Street – to give every woman the opportunity she deserves.  Because I firmly believe when women succeed, America succeeds.

Now, women hold a majority of lower-wage jobs – but they’re not the only ones stifled by stagnant wages.  Americans understand that some people will earn more than others, and we don’t resent those who, by virtue of their efforts, achieve incredible success.  But Americans overwhelmingly agree that no one who works full time should ever have to raise a family in poverty.

In the year since I asked this Congress to raise the minimum wage, five states have passed laws to raise theirs.  Many businesses have done it on their own.  Nick Chute is here tonight with his boss, John Soranno.  John’s an owner of Punch Pizza in Minneapolis, and Nick helps make the dough.  Only now he makes more of it: John just gave his employees a raise, to ten bucks an hour – a decision that eased their financial stress and boosted their morale.

Tonight, I ask more of America’s business leaders to follow John’s lead and do what you can to raise your employees’ wages.  To every mayor, governor, and state legislator in America, I say, you don’t have to wait for Congress to act; Americans will support you if you take this on.  And as a chief executive, I intend to lead by example. Profitable corporations like Costco see higher wages as the smart way to boost productivity and reduce turnover. We should too.  In the coming weeks, I will issue an Executive Order requiring federal contractors to pay their federally-funded employees a fair wage of at least $10.10 an hour – because if you cook our troops’ meals or wash their dishes, you shouldn’t have to live in poverty.

Of course, to reach millions more, Congress needs to get on board. Today, the federal minimum wage is worth about twenty percent less than it was when Ronald Reagan first stood here.  Tom Harkin and George Miller have a bill to fix that by lifting the minimum wage to $10.10.  This will help families.  It will give businesses customers with more money to spend.  It doesn’t involve any new bureaucratic program.  So join the rest of the country.  Say yes.  Give America a raise.

There are other steps we can take to help families make ends meet, and few are more effective at reducing inequality and helping families pull themselves up through hard work than the Earned Income Tax Credit.  Right now, it helps about half of all parents at some point.  But I agree with Republicans like Senator Rubio that it doesn’t do enough for single workers who don’t have kids.  So let’s work together to strengthen the credit, reward work, and help more Americans get ahead.

Let’s do more to help Americans save for retirement. Today, most workers don’t have a pension.  A Social Security check often isn’t enough on its own.  And while the stock market has doubled over the last five years, that doesn’t help folks who don’t have 401ks.  That’s why, tomorrow, I will direct the Treasury to create a new way for working Americans to start their own retirement savings: MyRA. It’s a new savings bond that encourages folks to build a nest egg.  MyRA guarantees a decent return with no risk of losing what you put in.  And if this Congress wants to help, work with me to fix an upside-down tax code that gives big tax breaks to help the wealthy save, but does little to nothing for middle-class Americans.  Offer every American access to an automatic IRA on the job, so they can save at work just like everyone in this chamber can.  And since the most important investment many families make is their home, send me legislation that protects taxpayers from footing the bill for a housing crisis ever again, and keeps the dream of homeownership alive for future generations of Americans.

<http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/blogsoutofcontext/57463282-64/government-americans-families-inequality.html.csp>

January 28, 2014

**Senator Mike Lee’s Tea Party Response to the State of the Union**

**Excerpts Related to Inequality:**

In the few minutes I have tonight - I'd like to speak especially to those Americans who may feel they have been forgotten by both political parties:

Those individuals and families who work hard, play by the rules, balance their budgets, honor the Golden Rule ... and don't understand why their government in Washington can't do the same.

Today, Americans know in their hearts that something is wrong. Much of what is wrong relates to the sense that the "American Dream" is falling out of reach for far too many of us. We are facing an inequality crisis - one to which the President has paid lip-service, but seems uninterested in truly confronting or correcting. All of these proposals within this new conservative reform agenda, along with many more to come, mark the road to Philadelphia. These principles and these policies will work - and will put Americans back to work.

Not just by cutting big government, but by fixing broken government. Not just by making government smaller but by promoting bigger citizens, stronger families and more heroic communities. Our goal should be an America where everyone has a fair chance to pursue happiness - and find it. That's what it looks like when protest grows into reform.

So if you're one of those Americans that big government is leaving behind... if you work hard, play by the rules and teach your kids to do the same, I want you to know that your family will not be forgotten anymore.

This new generation of reformers still has a long way to go to win over our Party in Washington, and even further to go to earn your trust.

I am confident that our best days as a nation are ahead of us - not because of government, but because within America's diverse society of individuals and families, neighborhoods and churches, businesses and communities, freedom doesn't mean you're on your own. Freedom means we're all in this together.

I invite you to join us on the road to a more prosperous America - together we can create the kind of government we do want and the kind of nation our children and grandchildren deserve.

Thank you very much for your time. Good night, and God bless