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EVENT BRIEF

2017 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO JOINT SESSION OF CONGRESS

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On Tuesday, February 28, 2017, President Donald Trump delivered his first address to a joint session of Congress. The first speech of its kind by an incoming president is functionally the same as a State of the Union address, but historically is not given that title. Instead of a progress report, initial addresses to Congress are typically used as a platform for an incoming president to outline a vision for the country for the next four years and to elaborate on the priorities behind that vision. Last night's address proved true to form, and after a tumultuous first month in office, it was clear that Trump sought to give a strong, unifying, and strikingly more ceremonial touch to his image as president. The speech centered on the American middle class and themes focused on creating jobs; repealing and replacing the *Affordable Care Act*; fighting terror both domestic and foreign; reforming immigration policy; and rebuilding American infrastructure. President Trump's address was more measured in tone and had fewer grandiose moments than onlookers have come to expect, but rather seemed to focus on the concerns of his base with regard to reinvigorating the economy and safeguarding American communities. In addition to the content of the speech, the story of the night seemed to be the positive reaction of the mainstream news media that almost uniformly described Trump's demeanor as "presidential."

THE ADDRESS

President Trump began his address by noting the conclusion of Black History Month, acknowledging the recent upticks in threats to Jewish community centers and cemeteries, and condemning the recent shootings of two Indian men in a Kansas bar. Calling America a nation that "stands united in condemning hate and evil in all of its forms," Trump said the country is ready to lead and ready to begin a new "chapter of greatness, surge of national pride, and renewal of the American spirit." Throughout his address, Trump referenced the upcoming 250th anniversary of the United States' 1776 declaration of independence, calling on Congress and the citizens of the nation to consider the legacy that will be left to future generations. This nod to American history was also noted by many commentators because on the campaign trail and in past speeches Trump has made very few historical references such as this.

In a review of his first month in office, President Trump delivered a progress report that focused on his prioritization of creating and retaining American jobs and enterprise; the "draining of the swamp" by instilling 5-year lobbying bans on governmental officials; and de-regulation measures in every federal agency. He also offered examples of specific corporations he influenced, such as Chrysler and Wal-Mart, which he believes have heeded his demands to maintain jobs in America.

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Trump remained steadfast in his defense of controversial executive actions that prohibited individuals from 7 predominantly Muslim nations from entering the United States, and waxed on about his efforts to bolster the safety of the American people. It is “reckless” to continue to allow people into the United States from “places where proper vetting cannot occur,” President Trump explained, identifying “radical Islamic terrorism” as a primary driver behind the policy. (The inclusion of this term is also noteworthy as it had been well reported prior to the speech that the President’s new National Security Advisor, Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, recommended he not use this terminology noting it was “unhelpful.”) Additionally, the Department of Defense has been directed to “destroy ISIS by eliminating it from the planet,” and America must not allow itself to become a “sanctuary for extremism,” Trump said. Other accomplishments that Trump listed to the Congressional audience included a reaffirmed alliance with Israel, and the nomination of a Supreme Court Justice who retains a “deep devotion to the law,” whom Trump hopes will be quickly confirmed by the Senate.

In a call to “tap into the American spirit,” President Trump discussed his vision to “restart the engine of the American economy.” First, Trump plans to make it easier for companies to do business with the United States and to make it harder for American businesses “to leave,” identifying “massive tax cuts” as a central component. President Trump discussed a recent meeting he had with leaders of the Harley Davidson corporation as an example, sharing that they highlighted the difficulty the company has had in promoting their business internationally. “They weren’t even asking for change, but I am,” Trump said decisively. In a nod to his infrastructure aspirations, Trump said, “we’ve spent \$6 trillion in the Middle East. We could have rebuilt our country twice, maybe three times with that money if we had had people who could negotiate.”

“Protecting our workers means reforming immigration,” Trump said, going on to discuss what he believes may be a better system based on “merit”. In a surprise to many, he also said he would like to see Congress come together to work on a comprehensive immigration reform package. President Trump cautioned lawmakers, however, that any immigration reform legislation must improve jobs and wages for Americans, strengthen security, and restore respect for our laws. The “well-being of Americans” must remain at the forefront of the immigration conversation, President Trump said, once again highlighting violent crimes committed by illegal immigrants. To combat these kinds of crimes, the President proposed to create a new Victims of Immigration Crime Engagement (VOICE) Office at the Department of Homeland Security. It must be noted that a Victims of Crime office already exists within the Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs.

Unsurprisingly, healthcare featured in President Trump’s address, and repealing and replacing the *Affordable Care Act* was front and center. Trump said increased access, lowered costs, and increased quality of care should be the guiding principles Congress uses to reform healthcare. Trump envisioned a “competitive national marketplace” where Governors have the resources through Medicaid to make sure no one is left out and buyers are able to purchase insurance across state lines. “Every problem can be solved,” Trump exclaimed, “it is time to join forces and get the job done right.”

Education was not mentioned in the President’s address until he began to highlight several of his **audience guests**. To emphasize his support of school choice, Trump introduced Denisha Merriweather who was sitting in the House gallery with the First Lady. Ms. Merriweather – who has appeared as a witness at a hearing on school choice in front of the House Education and the Workforce Committee and also sat behind Secretary Betsy DeVos during her confirmation hearing in front of the Senate Health,

Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee – used a tax credit and scholarship program in her home state of Florida to attend elementary and secondary schools of her choice after failing the third grade twice. President Trump called on Congress to pass an education bill that “funds school choice” and takes into account the particular struggles of African American and Latino students. Echoing a familiar refrain in the education policy community, President Trump also called education the “civil rights issue of our time.”

It is important to note that the President did not include any details in his speech as to what form his favored school choice legislation would take. On the campaign trail, Trump put forth a new \$20 billion program that would allow federal funding to follow students to the school of their choice, including private and faith-based schools. In the past this kind of proposal has run into opposition in Congress. Another idea being floated is a tax credit scholarship similar to the one Ms. Merriweather used for her education. That would give individuals and corporations a break on their taxes, in exchange for donating to scholarship-granting organizations, now in place in more than a dozen states. Those organizations, in turn, offer money to low-income and other students to attend private schools. This idea is incorporated in legislation authored by Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Representative Todd Rokita (R-IN).

Another issue briefly mentioned by President Trump last night was a call for paid family leave stating he, “wants to work with members in both parties to make childcare accessible and affordable, to help ensure new parents have paid family leave.” This idea was first introduced by Ivanka Trump during her speech at the Republican National Convention in which she proposed using the tax code to help families cover the cost of childcare. Many experts are concerned that this proposal would not help the families most in need as it would make tax credits available to lower-income families through an expanded “earned income” credit.

Lastly, in the most emotional and powerful moments of the evening – one that will be noted for years to come – President Trump acknowledged and thanked Carryn Owens, the widow of Navy SEAL Ryan Owens who died in Yemen in Trump’s first approved military raid as President. He noted Owens’ death was not in vain (a charge Owens’ own father has stated to the press) but “part of a highly successful raid that generated large amounts of vital intelligence that will lead to many more victories in the future against our enemies. Ryan's legacy is etched into eternity.” With tears streaming down her face, a unified Congress demonstrated their support and appreciation to Ryan’s widow with a standing ovation and cheers.

Additional foreign policy priorities details were not included in the address. President Trump made a particular point to express his support of NATO, while cautioning that his job is to “represent the United States,” not the world, which some commentators called an interesting avoidance of the title of “leader of the free world,” often ascribed to the President of the United States. In perhaps the only allusion to Russia, President Trump said the United States must find “new friends and partnerships,” and praised harmony and stability in the place of war and conflict.

Trump concluded his address maintaining his presidential tone – some saying harkening back to President Reagan – with a call to patriotism praising the American people as united by one destiny, sharing the same blood, same flag and same god. “The time for small thinking is over,” said Trump, “the time for trivial fights is behind us.”

DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE

The Democratic rebuttal to President Trump's address was given by former Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear, who gave the address from a diner in Lexington, KY. Beshear provided a more optimistic picture of the world than President Trump claims he has inherited. Elected as Governor at the beginning of the global recession, Governor Beshear said "we left things better than we found them" in the subsequent years. "We turned deficits into surpluses without raising taxes," he said, and cited gains in high school graduation rates, increased access to healthcare for Kentuckians, as well as a spirit of trust and mutual respect. Partnerships and respect for differing background and opinions was paramount, Governor Beshear explained, and he took President Trump to task on his claims to represent the middle class while picking a cabinet of billionaires and Wall Street insiders and proving himself "determined to take healthcare from Americans who need it." Cautioning that folks in Kentucky expect President Trump to keep his word, Beshear called today's major issues, healthcare in particular, a matter of life and death.

On national security, Governor Beshear shared his experience as a veteran and affirmed the duty of the President to protect American citizens. The Governor questioned President Trump's actions in this arena, saying that his Administration thus far has ignored legitimate threats posed by Russia and has managed to alienate longstanding allies. "The Trump approach makes us less safe," Beshear worried, going on to say that Trump has "all but declared war on refugees. The Governor exclaimed that it is indeed possible for America to protect its citizens without abandoning defining principles and obligations to those fleeing war and persecution. Invoking President Ronald Reagan, Beshear said "our origins matter less than our destination."

Governor Beshear also discussed President Trump's disturbing responses to dissent throughout the first month of his presidency, stating people may disagree with the President but that doesn't make them his enemies, citing the intelligence community, courts, the press, and individual American citizens. "Real leaders strengthen and unify and offer real solutions," Beshear said, calling "dignity, compassion, honesty and accountability" basic American values.

SPANISH LANGUAGE RESPONSE

In addition to Governor Beshear's response, Mexican-born immigrant activist Astrid Silva delivered a response to President Trump's address to Congress in Spanish. A "Dreamer," Silva was brought to the United States illegally as a child and has been allowed to remain as a part of President Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Her remarks focused on elevating the voice of Latinos and undocumented immigrants as integral components of democracy and the embodiment of "the values and the promise of America." Silva called on President Trump and Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform that "honors our country's tradition of welcoming immigrants."

CONCLUSION

The address signals the forthcoming release of the President's Fiscal Year 2018 budget proposal, with the White House planning to deliver its budget outline, the "skinny budget" to Congress, the week of March 13. The more detailed budget will be made public in subsequent months.

For more information on President Donald Trump's address to Congress, go [here](#).