



Obama's first State of the Union address calls for bipartisan action to restore public trust

By Jon H. Harsch

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Washington, Jan. 27 – With the passion and inspiration his supporters had been calling for, President Barack Obama delivered his first State of the Union address Wednesday evening to a Congress which was visibly divided, with one side of the House chamber leaping up frequently to cheer its favorite lines while the other side applauded some points but more often sat still, leaving Democrats to applaud on their own.

Another sign of division came while Obama pointedly insisted that “Last week, the Supreme Court reversed a century of law to open the floodgates for special interests – including foreign corporations – to spend without limit in our elections. I don’t think American elections should be bankrolled by America’s most powerful interests, or worse, by foreign entities. They should be decided by the American people, and I’d urge Democrats as well as Republicans to pass a bill that helps to right this wrong.” Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito shook his head in obvious disagreement.

Republicans, however, stood and applauded loudly along with Democrats when the President said that with so many Americans unemployed, “jobs must be our number one focus in 2010, and that is why I am calling for a new jobs bill tonight.”

Republicans also applauded loudly when, in one of his repeated references to clean energy, Obama said “China’s not waiting to revamp its economy. Germany’s not waiting. India’s not waiting. These nations aren’t standing still . . . They are making serious investments in clean energy because they want those jobs. Well I do not accept second-place for the United States of America . . . I know that there are those who disagree with the overwhelming scientific evidence on climate change . . . even if you doubt the evidence, providing incentives for energy efficiency and clean energy are the right thing to do for our future – because the nation that leads the clean energy economy will be the nation that leads the global economy. And America must be that nation.”

Along with passionate calls for bipartisanship – and for the Senate to pass key bills which the House has already passed such as the jobs bill and the climate bill – Obama conceded that “Our administration has had some political setbacks this year.” He also voiced a tough-love message: “remember this – I never suggested that change would be easy, or

that I can do it alone. Democracy in a nation of three hundred million people can be noisy and messy and complicated. And when you try to do big things and make big changes, it stirs passions and controversy. That's just how it is."

In a speech which covered the waterfront from education, job creation and clean energy, to healthcare and financial reform, to national security, nuclear power, and gays in the military, the most persistent theme may have been Obama's call for "all of us, Democrats and Republicans, to work through our differences; to overcome the numbing weight of our politics. . . Rather than fight the same tired battles that have dominated Washington for decades, it's time for something new. Let's try common sense. Let's invest in our people without leaving them a mountain of debt. Let's meet our responsibility to the people who sent us here."

Obama issued his call for bipartisanship in the Capitol where major legislation has passed this year – and other legislation like healthcare and climate change has stalled. In both cases, the House and Senate divided repeatedly along party lines. Despite that partisanship, Obama stressed that "I have never been more hopeful about America's future than I am tonight. Despite our hardships, our union is strong. We do not give up. We do not quit. We don't allow fear or division to break our spirit."

Obama acknowledged party differences. He said "on some issues, there are simply philosophical differences that will always cause us to part ways. These disagreements, about the role of government in our lives, about our national priorities and our national security, have been taking place for over two hundred years. They are the very essence of our democracy."

Then the President lectured both parties: "We cannot wage a perpetual campaign where the only goal is to see who can get the most embarrassing headlines about their opponent – a belief that if you lose, I win. Neither party should delay or obstruct every single bill just because they can. I'm speaking to both parties now. The confirmation of well-qualified public servants should not be held hostage to the pet projects or grudges of a few individual Senators. Washington may think that saying anything about the other side, no matter how false, no matter how malicious, is just part of the game. But it is precisely such politics that has stopped either party from helping the American people. Worse yet, it is sowing further division among our citizens and further distrust in our government."

Pledging that he won't quit "trying to change the tone of our politics," Obama continued his lecture: "To Democrats, I would remind you that we still have the largest majority in decades, and the people expect us to solve some problems, not run for the hills. And if the Republican leadership is going to insist that sixty votes in the Senate are required to do any business at all in this town, then the responsibility to govern is now yours as well. Just saying no to everything may be good short-term politics, but it's not leadership. We were sent here to serve our citizens, not our ambitions."

To support his commitment to work with Republicans, Obama said he plans to "begin monthly meetings with both the Democratic and Republican leadership."

Obama listed completing healthcare reform legislation as one of his priorities for bipartisan action. He warned that otherwise, millions more Americans will lose their health insurance and "Our deficit will grow. Premiums will go up. Co-pays will go up.

Patients will be denied the care they need. Small business owners will continue to drop coverage altogether.”

Another priority that Obama listed was trade. Once again drawing applause from Republicans along with Democrats, he said that “we need to export more of our goods. Because the more products we make and sell to other countries, the more jobs we support right here in America.” He said he’s committed to doubling U.S. exports over the next five years to “support two million jobs in America.” To achieve this goal, he said the administration is launching “a National Export Initiative that will help farmers and small businesses increase their exports.” Promising an aggressive program to open new markets and enforce trade agreements, he said the administration will “continue to shape a Doha trade agreement that opens global markets” and will “strengthen our trade relations in Asia and with key partners like South Korea, Panama, and Colombia.”

For a response to the President’s address from the ethanol industry, go to: www.agri-pulse.com/uploaded/Jan2710H3.pdf. For reactions from Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin (D-SD), Sen. Kent Conrad (D-ND), and Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), go to: www.agri-pulse.com/uploaded/Jan2710H4.pdf.

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