



EVENT BRIEF

2018 STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

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On Tuesday, January 30, 2018, President Donald Trump delivered his first State of the Union (SOTU) address, his second time addressing a joint session of Congress since his first presidential address in February 2017. For several days leading up to the speech, the White House leaked broad themes and key elements of what to expect in the SOTU, indicating the president's speech would "outline the record-setting accomplishments of his first year in office" and lay out the Administration's vision for the next 12 months. Among the policies expected to be announced were the Administration's framework for a revised immigration policy along with the long-awaited \$1 trillion infrastructure plan. Domestic programs were not expected to be featured. Following the president's speech last week at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, it was anticipated he also would reiterate a more positive message to an American audience focusing on strong economic growth along with the benefits of the recently enacted tax law.

Given what was released before the speech, the President and First Lady's 15 invited audience guests covered a lot of political issues –workers and business owners who have benefitted from the recovering economy, parents of gang-violence victims, military men and women, public servants and volunteers. Several Democratic senators and House members, including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), brought DACA recipients and other immigrants as their guests to the address. In addition, a dozen House Democrats elected not to attend the event, some because of President Trump's recent offensive remarks regarding Haiti and other African nations.

THE ADDRESS

President Trump began his address by referencing his signature campaign slogan, "We have gone forward with a clear vision and a righteous mission: to make America great again for all Americans," and acknowledged the resolve of the many volunteers during the natural disasters that occurred over the year. Followed by recognition to some of these volunteers in the gallery, the president singled out Representative Steve Scalise (R-LA) and the US Capitol Police related to the shooting earlier this year in Alexandria, VA. Referencing the American spirit, he said, "The state of the union is strong, because our people are strong."

The first major topic for Trump was the economy. He cited employment rates that have hit a 45-year low, with African-American and Hispanic unemployment at the lowest rates ever recorded (these

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assertions are disputed by others), and touted the enacted *Tax Cuts and Jobs Act* – particularly the repeal of the individual mandate of Obamacare – which was met with uproarious applause from Republicans and deafening silence from Democrats.

Tapping into the economic strength of the United States and the sweeping benefits of the new law, President Trump said college savings accounts have been thriving since the election. When enacted in December, the *Tax Cuts and Jobs Act* expanded 529 accounts to cover up to \$10,000 a year in K-12 expenses, including costs for private, religious school tuition.

Following the initial Obamacare individual mandate repeal comment, the president went on to emphasize the healthcare needs of veterans. Reiterating his promise to take care of veterans, President Trump said he has been granting veterans' choice in their healthcare decisions, and since the passage of the *VA Accountability Act*, more than 1,500 Veterans Administration (VA) employees had been removed. Expounding of his efforts to cut regulations in Washington, he went on to say, "In our drive to make Washington accountable, we have eliminated more regulations in our first year than any administration in the history of our country." He also called upon Congress to grant members of his Cabinet greater authority to remove federal employees "who undermine the public trust, or fail the American people."

In another favorable review of his own performance over the past year, the president claimed, "we have ended the war on American energy...on beautiful, clean coal." According to the president, America has resumed the role of exporter to the world. He went on to state that the automobile industry is returning to the United States to do business, citing Chrysler, Toyota, and Mazda, and that unfair trade deals that shift away jobs and wealth are being undone and replaced by fair and reciprocal relationships.

As expected, President Trump urged Congress to help "rebuild America's crumbling infrastructure". He called on Congress to invest at least \$1.5 trillion in the effort, with every federal dollar matched with state and local funds, and private funds where appropriate. Referencing the speediness at which the Empire State Building was built, he asked Congress for a streamlined approval process for this legislation, taking no more than two years to complete.

To supplement the infrastructure plan and improve workforce readiness, the president also urged Congress to invest in workforce development and job training, and to "open great vocational schools so our future workers can learn a craft and realize their full potential."

The most detailed segment of the speech dealt with immigration policies. The president called on Congress to close criminal gang loopholes and fix flawed immigration policies; he presented Congress with a detailed proposal, framed as a fair compromise, to immigration reform. The four pillars include:

- 1) Offering a pathway to citizenship for 1.8 million illegal immigrants over a 12 year period.
- 2) Securing the border by building a wall on the southern border.
- 3) Ending the visa lottery system to be replaced by a merit based system.
- 4) Ending family visa sponsorship, known as chain migration, by limiting sponsorship to spouses and minor children.

The only reference to DACA recipients or “Dreamers” occurred in this portion of the president’s speech when he said, "My duty, and the sacred duty of every elected official in this chamber, is to defend Americans — to protect their safety, their families, their communities, and their right to the American dream," the president continued. “Because Americans are dreamers, too.” This line quickly drew controversy when David Duke, a former member of the Ku Klux Klan, and other white nationalists praised this sentiment with Duke tweeting, “Americans are 'Dreamers' too.”

Following the immigration portion of his speech, the president spoke about lowering prescription drug prices and ending the ongoing opioid crisis, stating that his administration is committed to fighting the drug epidemic. However, the president did not articulate any commitments or framework to engage the crisis head-on.

On the national security front, the president proclaimed he has begun to restore America's standing abroad, followed by a plea to Congress to fully fund the military, lifting “the defense sequester.” (There was not a similar request for lifting the sequester on non-defense discretionary (NDD) spending, nor were any funding requests made in support of specific domestic programs.)

Concluding his 90-minute address with his national security priorities, the president said in response to recent provocative actions by North Korea, “we must modernize and rebuild our nuclear arsenal” to deter acts of aggression. President Trump was proud to report the liberation of nearly one hundred percent of the territory in Iraq and Syria previously occupied by ISIS and said he would sign an order to re-examine our military detention policy and keep Guantanamo Bay open, an obvious rebuke to the defense strategies of President Barack Obama. Additional foreign policy achievements mentioned in the speech included recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and admonishing the countries that voted against this decision at the United Nations. As result, he asked Congress to ensure US foreign aid only go to “the friends on America.”

DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE

The Democratic rebuttal to President Trump’s address was given by Representative Joe Kennedy III (MA-4). The grandson of Robert F. Kennedy and the son of former Representative Joseph Kennedy II, the third-term Congressman was selected as an up-and-coming leader in the Democratic Party representing the younger generation with new ideas and energy. Initially keeping a low-profile when he first came to Congress, the 37-year old Kennedy became better known this year during the healthcare debate, with some of his speeches criticizing the GOP and President Trump going viral. Speaking from Fall River, MA, at the Diman Regional Vocational Technical High School, Kennedy issued a rebuke to the political division and anxiety that his party argues is fostered by the Trump Administration without ever uttering the president’s name. Representative Kennedy stated Americans are “bombarded with one false choice after another... coal miners or single moms. Rural communities or inner cities. The coast or the heartland,” Democrats “choose both,” Kennedy said.

He also spoke in Spanish directly to DACA recipients stating, “We will fight for you.” “We will not walk away.” Echoing the “Stronger Together” theme seen during the 2016 election cycle, Representative Kennedy denigrated the lasting effect of the Trump Administration's policies stating, "Bullies may land a punch. They might leave a mark. But they have never, not once, in the history of our United States, managed to match the strength and spirit of a people united in defense of their future.”

SPANISH LANGUAGE RESPONSE

In addition to Representative Kennedy’s rebuttal, Virginia House Delegate Elizabeth Guzman delivered the Spanish-language response to President Trump’s address. In scathing remarks, Delegate Guzman was most irate about the Trump Administration’s immigration policy. “He has demeaned communities of color – launching a mass deportation agenda, and insulting the heritage of anyone who doesn’t look like him.” Delegate Guzman is a Peruvian immigrant and social worker. In 2017, she became the first Latina elected to the Virginia House of Delegates.

CONCLUSION

With the government only funded through February 8th and the deadline set for March 5th for Congress to act on DACA, the coming weeks should see much dialogue between Congress and the Administration to reach a budget deal to keep the federal government open and to address a bipartisan immigration plan. Following the address, President Trump plans to tour the country to reinforce his proposed policy initiatives, though specific travel plans have yet to be announced. (That’s a departure from the tradition of the president and his proxies traveling the day after the Address to “sell” policy plans to the American people.)

More information on President Donald Trump’s State of the Union address is available [here](#).