March 8, 2024

On Thursday, March 7, 2024, President Joe Biden delivered his annual State of the Union address to Congress. The address, which ran 67 minutes, was the President’s first after Super Tuesday, when he and former President Donald Trump unofficially confirmed their spots as November’s presidential candidates. The President’s address centered on what he considers to be historic achievements he delivered for the American people and his vision for the future. Specific achievements include the CHIPS and Science Act, investments in infrastructure, lowering health care premiums and drug prices and getting rid of junk fees. He also addressed plans to protect women’s reproductive health, curbing fentanyl, immigration policy, helping veterans, and ending cancer. The list of the First Lady’s invited guests reinforced these plans.

Speaker of the House Michael Johnson (R-LA) presided over his first SOTU address; Vice President Kamala Harris was at his side. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona was the evening’s designated survivor.

THE ADDRESS

President Biden opened his address with some historical references, saying, in part, “It’s we who face an unprecedented moment…Not since President Lincoln and the Civil War have freedom and democracy been under assault at home as they are today. What makes our moment rare is that freedom and democracy are under attack at home and overseas at the very same time.” He referred to the Russian-Ukraine war and warned his audience that Russian President Vladimir Putin “will not stop at Ukraine.” He went on to say that America must stand with Ukraine in it cause. He also pointed to the importance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and welcomed new members Finland and Sweden, acknowledging Sweden’s leader, one of the First Lady’s guests.

The President quickly turned to the topic of women’s reproductive rights and “another assault on freedom.” He referenced several guests in the galley who used IVF to conceive children, or were denied access to abortion despite health risks to the mother and the child, saying, “Like most Americans, I believe Roe v. Wade got it right.” He warned against further encroachments on women’s reproductive rights and told his audience that they would soon be reminded that women have “political and electoral power,” saying, “If you, the American people, send me a Congress that supports the right to choose, I promise you, I will restore Roe v. Wade as the law of the land again.”
President Biden reminded his audience of the four year anniversary marking the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery since, saying the economy is healthy, the vaccines that were developed are being used to combat cancer, “turning setback into comeback.” He pointed to the strength of the economy, saying, “It’s the envy of the world.” He said that there have been 15 million new jobs in three years—“a record.” Unemployment is at a 50-year low, and record numbers of Americans are starting new businesses, he said. “Wages keep going up, inflation keeps coming down.” He then referenced his commitment to “buy American” in federal projects.

As was expected, he talked about the results and promise of the CHIPS and Science Act, saying the country is investing more in research and development “than ever before.” President Biden said, “During the pandemic – a shortage of semiconductor chips drove up prices for everything – from cell phones to automobiles. Well – instead of having to import semiconductor chips – which America invented…private companies are now investing billions of dollars to build new chip factories here in America! Creating tens of thousands of jobs – many of them paying over $100,000 a year and don't require a college degree.” He also reminded his audience of the benefits of investments in clean energy and infrastructure during his Administration.

Covering several topics quickly, he touted expanded access to high-speed internet, investments in tribal communities, modernizing roads and bridges, removing hazardous lead pipes, the value and triumphs of unions, and others. The many topics built to the assertion, “When Americans get knocked down – we get back up! And it's because of you – That tonight – we can proudly say – the State of our Union is strong and getting stronger!”

Looking ahead, President Biden said he sees a future where “We all do well.” He outlined an agenda that included bringing down insulin prices and giving Medicare the power to negotiate prescription drug prices. Biden wants to see Medicare expand that power to 500 drugs over the next decade. Further, he would like to cap prescription drug costs for everyone to $2,000 annually. He also reaffirmed his commitment to the Affordable Care Act and said he’d like to expand it.

The president turned to housing costs, acknowledging high mortgage rates, saying that he’d like to provide Americans some relief and give them $400 monthly for the next two years toward a first or bigger home. He would also like to eliminate title insurance fees for federally-backed mortgages.

Turning to education, President Biden said he’d like to “give every child a good start by providing access to preschool for 3- and 4-year olds,” expand “high-quality tutoring” and summer learning time, and ensure every child learns to read by third grade. He would like to connect businesses to high schools to facilitate “good-paying jobs” and wants to “make college more affordable.” He called for increasing Pell Grants as well as “our record investments in HBCUs and Minority-Serving Institutions.” He also touts the benefits of his efforts to “reduce the burden of student debt for nearly four million Americans.”

The subject then became the federal deficit. The President detailed plans to reduce it by $3 trillion “by making big corporations and the very wealthy finally pay their fair share.” He criticized the tax cuts passed during the Trump Administration, saying it “exploded the federal deficit.” He said his plan wouldn’t raise taxes for anyone making less than $400,000 and also urged his audience to restore the Child Tax Credit to help working families and reduce child poverty. As he detailed his plans for a “fairer” tax code, he suggested that his plan would result
in the possibility to invest in affordable child care, home and elder care, and paid leave. He also voiced his commitment to protecting and strengthening Social Security.

As was expected, he addressed the border security deal that was negotiated by a bipartisan group of lawmakers. He said the result was “the toughest set of border reforms we’ve ever seen in this country.” He outlined what he considers to be the merits of the proposal, and said that former President Trump derailed its prospects for passage. He told Republicans in the chamber, “We can fight about the border, or we can fix it. I’m ready to fix it,” urging Congress to send him the bipartisan bill.

Voting rights came next in the address. He recounted the plight of those who fought for the right to vote in the Civil Rights era and asked Congress to pass the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act. He called for an end to book banning, and also asked for passage of the Equality Act, the PRO Act, and an increase in the federal minimum wage.

He discussed climate change. He plans to cut carbon emissions in half by 2030, create clean-energy jobs, and conserve the country’s lands and waters. He referenced the creation of a Climate Corps “to put 20,000 young people to work at the forefront of our clean energy future” and wants to expand that number to 60,000 this decade.

Addressing crime and gun violence, Biden noted that the year before he took office “murders went up 30 percent nationwide.” Since then, thanks to his investments in public safety, he claimed, murders and violent crime have dropped significantly, “But we have more to do.” “Help cities and towns invest in more community police officers – more mental health workers – and more community violence intervention. Give communities the tools to crack down on gun crime – retail crime – and carjacking,” he said.

Acknowledging a young guest in the galley whose sister was killed in the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, President Biden said that in the wake of that tragedy he established the Office of Gun Prevention Violence in the White House.

Noting that family members of hostages held by Hamas were in the chamber, the President lamented the state of affairs in Gaza, but underscored, “Israel has a right to go after Hamas.” He argued that Hamas could end the conflict by releasing the hostages they hold, but also cautioned that Israel has a responsibility to protect innocent civilians in Gaza. He also said his administration is working to secure a ceasefire. He pointedly stated that the only long-term solution to this conflict is a “two state solution.”

He then turned to China and said that the country’s trade deficit with China is the lowest it’s been in a decade. He said he’s revitalized partnerships in that region and protected American technologies.

In the last moments of the address, President Biden managed to call for addressing the fentanyl crisis, supporting veterans, protecting children online and fighting cancer. He referred to his age, saying that he has seen the country navigate varied circumstances, crises and conflicts, and always persevere. He closed by saying, “To lead America, the land of possibilities, you need a vision for the future of what America can and should be.
REPUBLICAN RESPONSE
Senator Katie Britt (R-AL) delivered the Republican response to the President’s address from a kitchen table. She opened her remarks by saying, “I’m worried,” for the future of her children. She characterized President Biden as a politician who “doesn’t get it.” She said the country is worse off, less secure, and more unsafe since he took office. She took aim at his border policies, saying President Trump left his successor the “most secure border of all-time” and his decisions created the current crisis, including harrowing instances of human trafficking. She said the country we know is “slipping away” and that the next generation will have fewer opportunities and less freedom. She pointed to inflation and growing national credit card debt, saying families are struggling. She argued that the United States isn’t seen as a strong ally across the globe, saying, “We’ve become a nation in retreat.” She assured her audience that brighter days ahead for the “party of hardworking parents and families,” and said it is “our moment to stand up and prove ourselves worthy of protecting the American Dream.”

CONCLUSION
President Biden’s prepared remarks are available here. The White House has posted a number of resources related to the speech and its proposals here. After the speech, President Biden and Vice President Harris are traveling to continue to tout the Administration’s achievements and outline its plans for the future.

A transcript of Senator Britt’s response is available here.