



EVENT BRIEF

2019 STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

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On Tuesday, February 5, 2019, President Donald Trump delivered his 2019 State of the Union address (SOTU). The address had originally been scheduled for January 29th, but was postponed by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). (The Speaker suggested rescheduling in the midst of the partial federal government shutdown; the White House [eventually agreed](#) to an address after the shutdown.) In the days and hours before his speech, the White House said that the theme for President Donald Trump's speech would be "Choosing Greatness" and that he would call for "unity" and bipartisan cooperation as he faced—for the first time—a divided Congress. Immigration, foreign policy, trade, the cost of prescription drugs and infrastructure projects were on the list of issues he would address, and he planned to remind his audience—in the room and across the nation—of his achievements to date. (The text of the President's SOTU, as prepared, is [here](#). Fact sheets on various issues addressed in the remarks are available [here](#).)

On Tuesday, the White House and Members of Congress sent each other signals all day. The White House said the President and First Lady's guests "represent the very best of America," and included family members of victims of crimes committed by illegal immigrants, recovering drug abusers, veterans, fighters of human trafficking, and first responders, among [others](#). The Democratic women of the House announced that they would be wearing "suffragette white" for the occasion, and Hill lawmakers [used their guest invites to send various messages](#) as well. Speaker Pelosi had union leaders, including National Education Association President Lily Eskelsen García, transgender members of the military, Chef José Andrés, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser and Democratic National Committee Chair Tom Perez on her guest list. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and President Trump traded tweets after the former delivered remarks on the Senate floor Monday questioning the White House's commitment to bipartisanship, saying, "Even more empty than his policy promises are President Trump's calls each year for unity."

THE ADDRESS

President Trump opened his remarks asserting that the country is "at a moment of unlimited potential" and that at the start of a new Congress he is "ready to work with you to achieve historic breakthroughs for all Americans." The call for unity is a familiar one in SOTU addresses, particularly when one party suffers losses in the most recent election. However, the President's remarks set the stage for the presidential race in 2020. Immigration, abortion, homegrown jobs, a strong military, limited involvement in foreign wars, fair trade deals with foreign countries and lower healthcare costs are

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among the issues that arguably got President Trump elected in 2016. This speech definitely presented as a blueprint for the issues he plans to campaign on during his re-election bid.

As President Trump began to weave his remarks around his agenda, he noted that June will mark 75 years since the Allied liberation of Europe in World War II. He described the battle of Normandy, noting that three veterans of that campaign were in the gallery. He also said this year marks 50 years since he country sent astronauts to the moon, and Buzz Aldrin was applauded by the crowd. This year, astronauts will go back to space on “American rockets,” the president said.

He went on to say, “In the 20th Century, America saved freedom, transformed science, redefined the middle class and--when you get down to it--there’s nothing anywhere in the world that can compete with America,” to thunderous applause. The country must step into the future and “create a new standard of living for the 21st Century...An amazing quality of life for all of our citizens is within reach,” he said and urged his friends and foes to cooperate toward a “common good.”

As expected, President Trump detailed the achievements of the first two years of his Administration. He pointed to economic health, tax reform legislation, regulatory reform and the creation of jobs and other successes, saying, “More people are working now than at any time in the history of our country--157 million people at work,” and, “We are just getting started.” He lauded the might of the military and the country’s new status as a “net exporter of energy” finally asserting, “Members of Congress, the State of our Union is strong,” a declaration met with chants of “USA! USA!”

“The only thing that can stop” the progress, according to President Trump, “are foolish wars, politics, or ridiculous partisan investigations.” (The last item on the list provoked widespread groans and something close to an eye roll from Speaker Pelosi.) “If there is going to be peace and legislation, there cannot be war and investigation; it just doesn’t work that way,” he said, again calling for unity. He reminded the crowd that there have been recent bipartisan wins, pointing to legislation passed in the 115th Congress, such as measures to confront the opioid crisis, the Farm Bill, Veterans Affairs reforms and accountability and criminal justice reform.

He then turned to immigration and the ongoing negotiations around the southern border wall and the prospect of another partial federal government shutdown, urging both parties to “join forces again to confront an urgent national crisis.” To audible groans from his audience (and a visible admonishment for said groans from Speaker Pelosi), President Trump asserted that “large, organized caravans are on the march to the United States.” He went on to say, “We have just heard that Mexican cities, in order to remove the illegal immigrants from their communities, are getting trucks and buses to bring them up to our country in areas where there is little border protection. I have ordered another 3,750 troops to our southern border to prepare for the tremendous onslaught.”

Voicing his strong support for legal immigration, he said, “No issue better illustrates the divide between America's working class and America's political class than illegal immigration.” According to President Trump, “wealthy politicians and donors” want “open borders while living their lives behind walls and gates and guards,” while “working class Americans are left to pay the price for mass illegal migration.” He framed the issue as a moral one, arguing that support for a strong border wall is a stand against sexual assault of women coming to the country, the abuse of emigrating children, human traffickers, American drug-related deaths, and MS-13, which “almost all come through our southern border.”

He touted his “commonsense proposal to the crisis on our southern border,” which includes “humanitarian assistance, more law enforcement, drug detection at our ports, closing loopholes that enable child smuggling, and plans for a new physical barrier, or wall, to secure the vast areas between our ports of entry.” Citing past support from both parties for a wall, he said, “I’ll get it built,” but noted that the wall would be a “see-through steel barrier -- not just a simple concrete wall,” and would be built where it is needed the most along the border.

Returning to economic gains, and presumably acknowledging the much-higher number of women in the 116th Congress, the President said, “No one has benefited more from our thriving economy than women, who have filled 58 percent of the new jobs created in the last year.” These remarks prompted the white-clad women in the audience to stand and cheer. After the interruption, the President warned the ladies not to sit down, because “you’re gonna like this,” and said, “All Americans can be proud that we have more women in the workforce than ever before -- and exactly one century after the Congress passed the Constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote, we also have more women serving in the Congress than ever before.” That remark again prompted cheers from the audience and chants of “USA! USA!”

President Trump then deftly weaved remarks around several policy issues. Investing in infrastructure and lowering the cost of healthcare and prescription drugs while protecting patients with pre-existing conditions are on his agenda. He said his FY 2020 budget request will include a proposed commitment to eliminate the HIV epidemic in the United States within 10 years. He asked for similar help in the fight against childhood cancer. “My budget will ask the Congress for \$500 million over the next 10 years” to support research that will save lives.

He touched briefly on education in his address, saying, “To help support working parents, the time has come to pass school choice for America’s children.” He also will include in his budget request “a plan for nationwide paid family leave.” This remark drew notably loud, bipartisan applause.

He then turned to the hot-button issue of abortion, being highly critical of recent debates and actions in New York and Virginia, and calling upon Congress to pass legislation to prohibit late-term abortions.

The last portion of his remarks addressed “America’s National Security.” He pointed to investments to “fully rebuild the United States Military,” and his successful insistence that other NATO nations “pay their fair share” as historic achievements. He said the US has withdrawn from a treaty with Russia because that country has not honored its agreement to limit and reduce missile capabilities. He said he will “continue our historic push for peace on the Korean Peninsula” as well, announcing a second meeting with the leader of North Korea again on February 27 and 28 in Vietnam.

Turning to Venezuela, he noted that the US has recognized Juan Guaido as its leader, saying, “We stand with the Venezuelan people in their noble quest for freedom -- and we condemn the brutality of the Maduro regime, whose socialist policies have turned that nation from being the wealthiest in South America into a state of abject poverty and despair.” He went on to say that despite “new calls to adopt socialism in our country...Tonight, we renew our resolve that America will never be a socialist country.”

“One of the most complex set of challenges we face is in the Middle East,” the President said. Pointing to the presence of troops in that region for almost 19 years, he noted that on the campaign trail he called for a new approach. He took credit for the downfall of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, saying, “Today, we have liberated virtually all of that territory from the grip of these bloodthirsty killers.” He said that the “brave warriors” that have been in Syria should come home, and that he has accelerated negotiations to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan, including talks with the Taliban. Regarding Iran, President Trump noted that the United States has withdrawn from “the disastrous Iran nuclear deal,” and imposed on the country “the toughest sanctions ever imposed on a country.”

Connecting threats of genocide to Jewish people from the Middle East to “the vile poison of anti-Semitism” he decried the deaths of 11 Jewish-Americans who were at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh last year. In the gallery was SWAT Officer Timothy Matson, who was shot seven times chasing down the killer in that attack, as was a survivor of the massacre. That survivor, Judah Samet, was also a survivor of the Holocaust.

A second Holocaust survivor was in the gallery, Joshua Kaufman, who was a prisoner at the Dachau Concentration Camp. President Trump said that Kaufman and others saw their rescue by US troops “proof that God exists.” He then connected their plight to the D-Day survivors he singled out at the start of his remarks, noting that one of them was among the rescuers at Dachau. “Almost 75 years later, Herman and Joshua are both together in the gallery tonight -- seated side-by-side, here in the home of American freedom. Herman and Joshua: your presence this evening honors and uplifts our entire Nation.” The President then cited the many triumphs of the country since World War II, building to a request of Congress to address the issues in his remarks, saying, “I am asking you to choose greatness.”

DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE

The Democratic rebuttal to President Trump’s address was delivered by Stacey Abrams, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate in Georgia’s hotly contested race last year. Abrams criticized President Trump for the recent partial government shutdown (something he did not mention at all), calling it “a stunt engineered by the President.” She was critical of the President and “Republican leadership” and warned that voter suppression is real and needs addressing. She went through a number of issues in her remarks, ranging from gun control to immigration reform to action on climate change, criticizing the current administration and contrasting the President's agenda with those of the Democratic Party. “We know bipartisanship could craft a 21st century immigration plan, but this administration chooses to cage children and tear families apart,” she said. She also commented on the country’s issues with racism, saying, “We continue to confront racism from our past and our present, which is why we must hold everyone from the highest offices to our own families accountable for racist words and deeds and call racism what it is—wrong.” Many assume that Abrams will mount a senatorial campaign in 2020.

SPANISH LANGUAGE RESPONSE

California Attorney General (AG) Xavier Becerra—the son of immigrants who has sued the Trump administration 45 times over a wide range of issues, and served in the House from 1993 until leaving to be AG in 2017—delivered the Spanish-language response to President Trump's State of the Union address. He said that President Trump has an “obsession” with building a border wall and threatened legal action if any federally appropriated disaster funds were used for the wall. He implored his audience to prepare for the 2020 elections, listing goals that they could achieve with enough votes. “Better

schools. Check. Health care for your family that politicians can't take. Check. Wages with benefits and job protections. Check.,” he said.

CONCLUSION

The government is funded through February 15th, and there have been whispers of encouraging news from the conferees working on the Homeland Security compromise bill this week. Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Ranking Member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, told reporters that there has been progress and that the group was meeting with border security experts this week and would discuss what Republicans and Democrats need to be in a would-be negotiated package. However, any genuine hope for unity or comity might disappear if there is another partial federal government shutdown or if the White House uses its authority to declare a national emergency to spend funds already designated for disaster relief and other purposes for a southern border wall.

The President's FY 2020 budget request is expected in mid-March and there is some discussion that it might be delivered in two parts. The items in the SOTU, such as investments in cancer research and efforts to cure HIV AIDS will be detailed then, as could be any school choice investments, which have not received any dollars during the Trump Administration. Regardless of what is or isn't in those budget documents, it's clear that the White House is focused on 2020 and a second term for President Trump.

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