2016 STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

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Last night President Obama delivered his final State of the Union (SOTU) address. The address, which was promoted heavily and was expected to be different than his previous speeches, provided the President a chance to highlight the successes of his Administration’s policies while lining up priority issues for the remaining 12 months of his tenure and beyond. Although President Obama pledged not to get into specifics, he affirmed that he would not let up on significant issues such as helping students learn to write computer code, lowering college costs and protecting kids from gun violence.

Over the last few weeks, the Obama Administration has hinted at what to expect in the SOTU, indicating that the address would focus on the accomplishments of the Administration and the big issues the nation will face in the years to come. Earlier in the day, during a preview of the speech hosted by the White House Office of Public Engagement, staff stressed that President Obama would not provide specific policy proposals, although he would highlight some accomplishments of the Administration. Those included high school graduation rates reaching an all-time high; crime and incarceration rates that are on the decline; unemployment dropping nearly five percent since he took office; and dramatically increased health care coverage since enactment of the Affordable Care Act.

First Lady Michelle Obama provided her own clues about the SOTU address by releasing the guest list for her viewing box late last week. These specially selected individuals have historically represented themes to be covered in the speech. This year’s guests included two community college students; three proponents of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education including Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, who has been a leader in expanding access to STEM in K-12 classrooms; distinguished politicians active on criminal justice reform such as Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy; active duty military personnel and veterans; individuals touched by gun violence; and a vacant seat representing victims of gun violence.

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President Obama opened his address by acknowledging the election season, and pledged jokingly to keep his remarks short so that folks could return to Iowa. He noted that expectations for a productive session of Congress are low, but also shared his optimism that there are some areas of bipartisan agreement where progress could be made. He stated the goal of his speech was to focus not just on the remainder of his term, but on the next five to 10 years and beyond.
The President introduced the four major themes of his speech by posing the following questions that he challenged the nation to answer together:

- How do we give everyone a fair shot at opportunity in this economy?
- How do we make technology work for us and not against us?
- How do we make the world safe without becoming the world’s police?
- How can we make our politics reflect what’s best in us and not what’s worst?

As President Obama launched into a discussion about the economy, he made the first of many thinly veiled challenges to presidential candidate Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric when he proclaimed that the United States is the strongest economy in the world, and “anyone claiming our economy is in decline is peddling fiction.”

The President went on to outline a number of specific concepts, such as the need to provide education and training to ensure every American is afforded an opportunity to participate in the American economy. He acknowledged the passage of the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act as an “important start.” Obama also touted specific education highlights such as an increase in preschool slots, all-time high rates of high school graduation and more college graduates attaining engineering degrees; however, he also noted that pre-K should be available to all children, as well as “hands on” computer and math classes that can prepare students for jobs. Specifically, President Obama said he wants students to learn how to "write computer code.” (It should be noted that Obama became "the first president to write a line of code" by participating in Code.org's "Hour of Code" initiative last December.) He also remarked that there should be an enhanced effort to recruit and support more great teachers.

On the higher education front, the President discussed his proposal for two tuition-free years of community college as a way to ensure Americans have the opportunity to access affordable higher education. He called his proposal the “right thing to do,” and pledged to keep pushing for it this year. Continuing his discussion about the cost of college, he noted that the country has already reduced student loan payments to no more than 10 percent of a borrower’s income, but emphasized that the cost of college must also go down.

“How do we reignite innovation,” President Obama asked rhetorically, and responded that it does not come from cutting research funding. He praised Congress for increasing funding for the National Institutes of Health for Fiscal Year 2017, remarking that “the spirit of discovery is in our DNA.” He boldly challenged the country to be the first to find a cure for cancer, and asked Vice President Joe Biden to take a leadership role in that work. Cancer research is personal for both the Vice President and the President as Biden’s son died this summer of cancer and Obama’s mother died of cancer at a young age as well.

In a tone that invoked the tenor of President Obama’s 2008 campaign for president, he concluded his remarks on a hopeful note by highlighting the individual greatness of Americans, from the “Dreamer who stays up late to finish her science project and the teacher who comes in early because he knows she might someday cure a disease,” to “the American who served his time, and dreams of starting over- and the business owner who gives him that second chance.” Believing in his fellow Americans, he said, “is why I stand here confident that the State of our Union is strong.”
REPUBLICAN RESPONSE
South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley was chosen by the Republican Party to compare and contrast the ideas and ideals of her party with President Obama’s SOTU. Haley is a rising star in the party who is young, female and the daughter of Indian immigrants – a background that has led to speculation about Haley being an ideal candidate for vice president in a party seeking to represent diversity. Haley, who is the first female and first minority governor of South Carolina, rose to the national spotlight in the wake of the Charleston church shooting by securing the removal of the Confederate Flag from the State House grounds.

In her response, Haley noted that while President Obama is a great orator, his record falls short of his words. She described a weak economy and imminent threat of terrorism as pressing issues that must be addressed. Haley remarked that the end of President Obama’s term will provide the country with an opportunity to go in a new direction. With a Republican in the White House, Haley predicted there would be a renewed focus on innovation, and reform in education that would focus on students, parents and teachers rather than unions and bureaucrats in Washington. Her response also touched on national security and immigration, two areas where Republicans and Democrats are currently divided. The remarks concluded with a call to channel the values of the American forefathers to “dedicate ourselves to doing whatever it takes to keep America the greatest country in the history of man. And woman.”

CONCLUSION
The SOTU Address signals the forthcoming release of the President’s budget proposal for the upcoming fiscal year, and the White House plans to deliver its FY 2017 request to Congress on February 8th. In the interim, the President and his proxies will be talking about his proposals publicly. President Obama starts today with events scheduled in Omaha, Nebraska, while his cabinet is expected to fan across the country over the next three days, hitting roughly 30 cities to reinforce the President’s message. The text of the President’s State of the Union address is available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/sotu.