

Remarks at the University of Nebraska Omaha in Omaha, Nebraska
January 13, 2016

The President. Hello, Omaha! Thank you! Oh! Thank you. Thank you. Well, thank you so much. Thank you, Omaha. That's so nice, thank you. Well, thank you so much. Go Mavericks! This is quite a place you got here. It's still got the new arena smell. *[Laughter]* A perfect spot for your hockey team to stage another run to the Frozen Four.

I want to start off by thanking Lisa for the wonderful introduction and her hospitality in her living room. Give her a big round of applause. She did a great job. Before I came here I stopped over at Lisa's place, with her husband and her 1-year-old. And he was fired up and ready to go. *[Laughter]* He was bouncing around, and I was getting tired just watching him. *[Laughter]*

I also want to thank Dr. Hank Bounds, the President of the University of Nebraska; Dr. John Christensen, Chancellor here at UNO. We've got Lieutenant Governor Mike Foley here; your former Senator, Ben Nelson; your Congressman, Brad Ashford. And all of you are here. This is a pretty good crowd!

Audience member. Love you!

The President. I love you back. I do. I do. I do. This is so nice. What a wonderful welcome. Those of you who have seats, though, feel free to sit down. It's okay. *[Laughter]* But if you want to stay standing, that's fine too.

Last night I gave my final State of the Union Address. And I promised that it was going to be shorter, and then it ended up just being, like, I think, a minute shorter. *[Laughter]* So, technically, it was shorter, but it wasn't, like, as short as I was planning. But today I'm definitely going to be shorter.

Audience members. No!

The President. Yes. No, the—*[laughter]*. But whenever I give a State of the Union, I want to get out of Washington and talk to people out in the country. And so the first place I decided to visit was Omaha. Part of the reason I wanted to come here is I've got a lot of friends, like Brad and others, and I had not been here in a while. So the last time I was here for an event in Omaha was 2008. And that year, in the primary, I won the Nebraska caucus. And there were people—I saw some signs—who called the city "Obamaha."

And then, in November of 2008, Joe Biden and I won one electoral vote here, which was—I was pretty excited about. And then, 4 years later, I got whupped all across this State. *[Laughter]* It was not pretty. It was not pretty. But I love Nebraska anyway. There's something about the Midwest and its people and the way that folks pull together and the degree to which, in this State, the kind of politics I talked about last night has always been there. There's a civility and people treating each other with respect.

And so that's part of the reason why I wanted to come back here today, because as I said last night, America is at its best when we see each other as one people: not Democrat first, not Republican first, but Americans first. That's our priority.

And that's harder to do during political season. I understand that. And you hear a bunch of folks right across the river—[*laughter*—and I don't know if the TV ads drift over here—[*laughter*—but they're kind of depressing. [*Laughter*] I mean, I was—I like talking about hope and all the good stuff that was going on, and then you look at some of these ads, and it's some doom and some gloom. [*Laughter*]

Audience member. Four more years!

The President. It's like everybody is running around and saying America is in decline, and everything is scary, and let's find somebody to blame. And the point I wanted to make, the core thing I wanted to say last night was, that's not the spirit that brought America so far. That's not how we traveled so far. And it's not what I see every day. That's not what I see in communities and neighborhoods all across this country.

Now, what's true is, we're all living through a time of extraordinary change, and that's always a little bit unsettling. And that's what Lisa wrote to me about—at 4:00 a.m., which I wanted to tell Lisa, you should get some sleep. [*Laughter*] But when you have a 1-year-old, that's what happens. [*Laughter*] But you heard Lisa talk about, she was wondering whether the world she grew up in would be just as prosperous and secure for her new baby as it was for her.

But I want everybody to remember, America has been through big changes before. And each time, we overcame our fears, and we overcame our challenges. Each time, we made change work for us. And each time, we emerged stronger and better than we were before. That's what we do as Americans. I mean, we go through war and depression and all kinds of social and economic changes, but each time, we've ended up better than we were before.

Now, here's the thing, progress is not inevitable. You've got to work for it—somebody is stealing my lines up here. [*Laughter*] It's the result of the choices that we have to make together. And we've got to make some choices. Do we respond to these changes with fear and do we turn on each other, or do we face the future with confidence in who we are and what we stand for and all the incredible things we can get done together?

So I just want to repeat the four big questions that I think we have to answer as a country. And this is true whether you're a Democrat, whether you're Republican. You should think about—and we have to have good answers for—these four questions, regardless of who's President, regardless of who controls Congress.

Number one, how do we make sure that this new economy works for everybody and not just some people? That's question number one. Number two, a related question: How do we make sure that the spirit of innovation is used to solve some of our biggest challenges? Number three, how do we keep America safe and lead the world without becoming the world's policeman? Number four, and maybe most important, is how do we have a politics that reflects the best in us and not the worst?

So, on the economy, the first thing I try to remind people is, is think about where we were 7 years ago. We were—because people forget, and some of you were in grade school, and I had no gray hair. [*Laughter*] So just to refresh your memory here for a second, we were in the worst economic crisis of our lifetimes. I was going back to look at my first State of the Union Address, where I had to basically remind everybody that the money in their banks were safe. I had to tell folks that that was—that it was going to be okay. That's how fragile things were.

But to paraphrase something that a friend of mine—who, I guess, people know around here—named Warren Buffett once said, no one ever benefited by betting against America.

And because of the grit and the resilience of the American people, because of hard work, because businesses got going, and because, frankly, we made some pretty good policy decisions, we now have the strongest, most durable economy in the world.

We're in the midst of the longest streak of private sector job creation in history: 14 million new jobs, around 40,000 right here in Omaha and the surrounding areas. Our national unemployment rate has been cut in half; it's down to 5 percent. It's below 3 percent here in Nebraska. So our starting point has to be, things are not terrible if your unemployment rate is at 5, and here in Omaha, it's below 3.

Now, that does not mean that things haven't been changing in profound ways. And that's also what I had to talk about. Look, it's changed to the point where even folks who have jobs, and even when the economy is growing, it's harder for hard-working families to pull themselves out of poverty. It's harder for young people to start out on their careers, especially if they've got too much student loan debt. It's tougher for workers to retire when they want to. And there's more inequality, and upward mobility has stalled. And that offends our fundamental American belief that anybody who works hard can get ahead.

So people agree that real opportunity in the new economy requires everybody gets a great education and the training they need to land a good job. And we've been working on that. Over the past 7 years, we've increased early childhood education; we've boosted high school graduation rates. We've—we're training and graduating more engineers and folks in other fields that we need to grow the economy. And—but we've got to build on that progress.

We've got to create opportunity for every child, which means pre-K for everybody. It means hands-on computer classes and math classes for the jobs of the future. It means we should recruit and support and lift up great teachers who are doing great things for our kids. And it means that no student should be priced out of a college education or loaded up with crippling debt.

So one of the things—I didn't try to list all the proposals I would like to see happen this year. That's why you go to the website: whitehouse.gov—[laughter]—which now works, I promise. [Laughter] But we should guarantee 2 years of community college at no cost for every responsible student. That's what real opportunity looks like in the new economy.

And then, once we've made sure everybody has a great education, as folks move throughout their lives, we've got to pair real opportunity with real security. Basic benefits should be just as mobile as everything else is today.

I was talking to Lisa's dad and mom. They were there, and mostly they just wanted to talk about their adorable 1-year-old grandson. [Laughter] But they've been married for 44 years. And dad had worked at a company that produces cement and ships it around the country, and he had worked there for 40 years, and he's still working there. And mom had been a nurse, and she'd retired. But that kind of career path, where somebody is at one place for that long, with good benefits, that—pension, health care—that's not going to be the pattern for most of the young people who are here today.

And so the idea is, how do we make sure that even if you're in this new economy where you're changing jobs, you're retraining, you're starting your own business, you have some basic security? And that's what the Affordable Care Act, by the way, is all about. That's what it's all about. The goal wasn't to replace employer-based care. If you've got health care on the job, that's great. But if you lose your job or you have to go back to school or you want to start a new

business or you're starting a new job and you've got a preexisting condition, you should have health care options. You should have health care options.

The same is true for some of the other programs that we have that haven't been adapted to this new economy. So I mentioned unemployment insurance right now. When folks lose their jobs, unemployment insurance right now is not available for a lot of folks who had been working part time or were temporary workers. And if you take a job that doesn't pay as much, sometimes, you get penalized. There should be a system of wage insurance so that you can still pay the bills and make up some of the difference as you transition into a new career.

And if we update the unemployment insurance system, that will encourage more folks to retrain for new, better paying jobs. And when they change jobs, you should be able to save for your retirement even though you didn't stay in one job for 30 years. There should be a way for you to take your retirement savings with you.

So, now, having said all that, somebody here said folks need bigger paychecks. And part of what's happened in this new economy is workers, frankly, just have less leverage, because companies move more. It means that they can offshore, they can move to a new State. It means that a lot of times they're under more severe competition. And that gets a lot of folks frustrated.

But part of what I've been concerned about as I've been listening to some of the political rhetoric is, let's make sure that we don't blame people who had nothing to do with the fact that wages aren't growing. Let's try to solve the problem, but not misidentify the problem.

So, for example, let's agree that working families will not get a bigger paycheck by us eliminating all the reforms that we made on Wall Street or by letting Big Oil and hedge funds make their own rules. That's not going to help working families.

Now, as I said last night, families on food stamps did not cause the financial crisis. We've got to reform our broken immigration system, but immigrants are not the reason wages haven't gone up. Those decisions were made in boardrooms around the country. You guys aren't the ones who were—I don't think you've got offshore accounts that allow you to dodge paying your taxes. [Laughter] If you do, then the IRS wants to talk about you. Might want to—[laughter].

But in this new economy, I believe workers, startups, small businesses, they need more of a voice, more of a say, not less. The rules should work for working Americans. And I'm going to spend some of the time this year lifting up a lot of companies who figured out if they pay good wages, provide good benefits, treat their customers well, are environmentally responsible, they can also make really good profits. And it's good for everybody. It's good for their shareholders and customers and communities.

And a lot of our best corporate citizens are our most creative. Which brings me to the second question that I raised yesterday: How do we make sure that we continue to be an innovation economy, and how do we use innovation to meet some of our biggest challenges?

Some of you heard me talk about our space program. Sixty years ago, the Russians beat us to space. And how did we respond? We didn't go, "Oh, my God, America is in decline, and we're doomed." [Laughter] We didn't say, "Ah, that's not actually a spaceship up there, that's a comet." [Laughter] We didn't argue about the science, we didn't shrink our R&D budget. We built a space program almost overnight. Twelve years later, we were walking on the Moon. Right?

I think my favorite movie last year was "The Martian." And I like space, but there was one line Matt Damon delivered where he said, I'm just going to science the heck out of this. [Laughter] He didn't say "heck," but you get the point. [Laughter] But that's the American spirit, right? "Okay, let's solve the problem." Sometimes, they're tough problems, but we can figure this out. We can figure this out.

That's the spirit we need today. That's why I put Joe Biden in charge of us figuring out how to cure cancer. He's working with scientists and doctors, and obviously, with families who've been affected, because he knows what they've gone through.

That's why we've got to make sure that American businesses produce and sell the energy of the future. We should keep pressing forward with the clean energies that's going to be creating new jobs for decades to come and transition from dirty energy. We shouldn't be subsidizing the past, we should invest in the future. That puts us ahead of the curve.

And that's how we're going to keep leading the world to combat climate change and protect this planet, Lisa's son, your kids, and your grandkids. There's nothing more important than making sure that future generations are able to enjoy the incredible bounty that God's given us.

Third question: How do we keep America safe and strong without either isolating ourselves or trying to nation-build all over the world?

Audience member. Keeping you as President!

The President. Oh, well, I can't do that. I can't do that because of the Constitution. And I can't do that because Michelle would kill me. [Laughter]

But look, just as all this talk about how the American economy is terrible is just not true, it's also not true when you hear folks talking about how America is so weak. We aren't just the strongest economy in the world, we are far and away the most powerful nation on the planet. Nobody can match our troops. Nobody can match what we can do to mobilize to solve problems around the world.

And when I said that, by the way, last night, it was strange that some in the Chamber didn't agree and applaud with that. I mean, that's kind of a weird thing. I didn't say that it's the strongest in the world because of me. I mean, I understand why they wouldn't want to give me credit for it—which is true. [Laughter] It's because the United States of America, for 250, you know, years—[laughter]—has been working to make us the strongest.

But that should not be a controversial statement, right? I mean, we can all clap about that. But that's how crazy our politics has gotten sometimes. Right? That's how crazy our politics has gotten, where we now feel obliged to not root for America doing good.

So when you hear people peddling this fiction about our enemies getting stronger, America getting weaker; when you hear folks say we can solve challenges just by looking meaner and talking tougher or carpet bombing wherever we want—that's just hot air. It's bluster. It's not serious. [Applause] It's not serious. There's another word for it that starts with a "B"—it's baloney. [Laughter]

Now, because we're the strongest nation, we've got choices to make about how we use our power. Priority number one is protecting the American people and going after terrorist networks. That's what we're doing with ISIL. And for more than a year, America has led a coalition of more than 60 countries. We're cutting off their financing. We're disrupting their

plots. We're stopping the flow of terrorist fighters. We're stamping out their ideology. We've had 10,000 airstrikes. We're taking out their leadership, their oil, their training camps, their weapons. And they will learn the same lesson that terrorists before them have learned, which is when you come after Americans, we go after you. And it may take time, but our reach has no limits, and we will get you. *[Applause]* We'll get you.

But our foreign policy has to also have judgment and wisdom. And we can't try to take over and rebuild every country that falls into a crisis. So what I suggested last night is, we have to have a patient and disciplined strategy. It's got to use every element of our national power. It says America will always act, alone if necessary, to protect our people and our allies. But on a lot of world problems, from climate change to Ebola to Iran trying to get a nuclear weapon, we'll mobilize the world to work with us, and we make sure other countries pull their own weight so we're not ending up sending our troops and spending our money every time there's a problem around the world. That's not a lack of leadership, that's common sense.

That's how we led 200 nations to forge the most ambitious agreement in history to fight climate change. That's how we've gotten Iran to roll back its nuclear program. They're shipping out their nuclear materials right now.

That's how we dealt with the Ebola crisis. Our troops, our doctors, our development workers—all outstanding, great courage—they set up the logistics in West Africa so that other countries could then come in. You had Chinese planes who couldn't land before, because of our military setting up the landing strip, could then come in and support the effort to stamp out the spread of Ebola.

And we couldn't be prouder of the doctors and nurses, including here at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, who heroically treated and cared for patients. They saved lives not just here, but their courage saved lives around the world, because they showed that, you know what, we can deal with this. It's a problem; it's serious. We're going to "science the heck out of it." *[Laughter]* And as a consequence, hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of people's lives were saved. That's how America leads. That's the strength of our values. That's the power of our example.

And that's why we have to reject any politics—any politics—that targets people because of their race or their religion. That we have to reject. *[Applause]* That we have to reject. That we've got no room for.

And I want to be clear about this. This is not about being politically correct. Now, since I'm on a college campus, I'll tell you, sometimes, I understand the argument about political correctness. There are times where folks don't want to hear something and they just shut things down. If somebody doesn't agree with affirmative action, that's a legitimate policy difference. That doesn't mean they're racist. If somebody has a disagreement about my economic policies, we can have a discussion about that. There should never be a situation on college campuses, for example, where people can't speak at all. Right? The First Amendment is important. The First Amendment is valuable. So we do have to be cautious about suggesting that anytime somebody says something, we shut them down.

But let me say this. That doesn't mean that you go around insulting people and thinking that that is clever, or that is being honest, or telling it straight. No, that's just being offensive. And that's feeding some of our worst impulses. And that does not make us strong. That doesn't make us strong. And that doesn't help us fight terrorism, by the way.

When politicians insult Muslims, including Muslim Americans—including Muslim Americans who are in uniform, fighting on our behalf—when a mosque is vandalized or a kid is bullied, that doesn't make us safer. It doesn't make us safer. The overwhelming majority of Muslim Americans and Muslims around the world, they're our greatest allies in fighting this scourge of terrorism. So it doesn't make us stronger. It doesn't help the effort. It is wrong. And it betrays who we are as a country: one people, who rise and fall together.

And that is—and when I think back to the arc of my entire political career, that's one thing that I believe more firmly than anything: the fact that we are in this together. That's what makes America great.

Brad—on the flight over here, Brad was telling me about his grandfather. So his grandfather was from Sweden. And there—here in the Midwest, we've got some folks of Swedish extraction. [*Laughter*] And he was telling me about how his grandfather helped to set up an organization that was pretty well known at the time, back in the thirties and forties, that was critical in fighting anti-Semitism and helping to bring Jews who were escaping Hitler and Nazi Germany. And I thought about Brad's grandfather as just one example of all the stories in the history of this country that have made us the envy of the world, that have made us that "shining city on a hill."

It's not just that we've got a big military. It's not just that we've got a great economy. It's that, in fits and starts, we figured out that if you treat everybody with respect and you give everybody a shot and everybody is working together, everybody is better off, everybody is stronger, everybody's religion is protected. Everybody's point of view is heard. And that's what we have to remember.

And that's the last question that we have to answer and the most important one: How do we infuse those principles into our politics? And I said this yesterday, and I meant it. I have really enjoyed being President, and I'm going to squeeze every last thing I can get out of it over this next year. But look, probably my only big regret is that our parties are even more polarized, our politics are even more rancorous than they were 7 years ago. Now, I'm going to keep on trying to do better to see if I can help break the fever here. But it's not going to happen unless the American people send a clear message to their elected officials that that's not the kind of politics we want.

And there are some—and I can—[*applause*]. Look, I can say this as somebody who is never going to be on the ballot again—[*laughter*]*—there are some institutional things we've got to fix. I think we have to end political gerrymandering, so that Congressmen aren't choosing their own voters. Because that divides people. If you've got a congressional district that's 80 percent Democrat or 80 percent Republican, then you don't feel obliged to talk to people who don't agree with you, and that's a problem.*

I think we have to end the just crazy amounts of money, much of it hidden, that is in our political system right now.

I believe that there should not be a single State in which we're making it harder for people to vote instead of easier. That doesn't make any sense. I—we're not supposed to be a nation in which we discourage people from participating. This country works by encouraging people to have a voice in their government, which means that one of the things that I'm going to do over the course of this year is talk about why is it that we should have a single mom who's got—a nurse, let's say, just like Lisa's mom was—she might have to take public transportation, get up early, go to her job, fix breakfast, now she's got to pick up the kid or drop off the kid, come

home. And she's got to vote on a Tuesday. Why wouldn't we want to make it so that she's got a little more time to vote? Why are we making it impossible for her?

And a lot of States are doing it. A lot of States are doing it. But that's how it should be in every State. Because none of these things that I just talked about can happen just by a President saying so—any President. Whoever replaces me is not going to be able to get all that done unless the American people demand it; when we as citizens demand it.

That's what I said back in 2008. I didn't say, "Yes, I can," I said "Yes, we can." I asked you not to believe in my ability to bring about change, I asked to believe in your ability to bring about change.

And as I said last night, I know it's hard. Sometimes, it's frustrating. But if we don't accept that responsibility and that privilege of citizenship and we accept the cynicism that says, ah, change can't happen, and politics is pointless, and our voices and our actions don't matter, then we're going to forsake a better future, and the void will be filled by folks with money and power and special interests. And they're going to gain more and more control over decisions about whether young people are being sent to war. They will be unfettered in pursuing policies that might lead to another economic crisis. They might roll back rights that generations of American fought to secure.

And then, when people get more and more frustrated because things don't change, you start hearing voices that urge us to fall back into our respective tribes and start scapegoating our fellow citizens: people who don't look like us or pray like us or vote like we do or share the same background. We can't go down that path.

So, Omaha, whatever you believe—whether you are a Democrat or a Republican or you don't believe in political parties, whether you supported me or you didn't—our collective future depends on your willingness to uphold your obligation as citizens: to vote and to speak out and to stand up for others, especially those who are vulnerable, especially those who need help, knowing that we are only here because somebody else did that for us. That's how all of us are here.

And when we do that, we will see the goodness and the decency and the optimism of people like Lisa reflecting itself in Washington. That's what we're fighting for.

And I know it's there because I see it in the American people every day. I see it every day. I see it in all the students—first-generation college students—working hard and scrimping and saving and eating ramen—*[laughter]*—and then eating some more ramen, just to get ahead. And you've got teachers like Lisa, who come in early and are helping young people cultivate a passion or master a new skill that can change their lives. And then, you've got parents who are volunteering at local schools, not just to help out their own kids, but to help out their neighborhood's kids. And folks coaching Little League. And businesses who are doing the right thing by their employees. And folks who are fighting on our behalf halfway around the world and their families who are sacrificing alongside them. And folks working to help our veterans after they've been served. Big-hearted, optimistic people, they're everywhere: in coffee shops and churches all across Nebraska and in Louisiana and in New York and in Arizona and every place else. Folks whose spirit has built America.

That's why I'm hopeful about our future: because of you, the American people. Because of folks like all of you, I am absolutely confident that we're going to get to where we need to go and America will remain the greatest country on Earth.

Thank you, everybody. God bless you. God bless Nebraska.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:32 p.m. in Baxter Arena. In his remarks, he referred to Papillion, NE, resident Lisa Martin, her husband Jeff Martin, their son Cooper, and her parents Ora and Rebecca Hutchinson; and Warren E. Buffett, chief executive officer and chairman, Berkshire Hathaway Inc. He also referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization.

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