

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan
February 7, 2014

The President. Hello, Spartans! Go Green!

Audience members. Go White!

The President. [*Laughter*] Oh, thank you so much. Everybody, have a seat here.

The—it's good to be at Michigan State. Thank you, Ben, for that wonderful introduction. Give Ben a big round of applause. He's got his beautiful family right here. How did Dad do? Was he pretty good? Where—yes, there he is. He did good? I thought he did great.

It is good to be in East Lansing. It's good to be with all of you here today. I'm here because I've heard about all the great things that you're doing. And I want to thank Mayor Triplett and President Simon for hosting us.

I am also here to do some scouting on my brackets. [*Laughter*] I just talked to Coach Izzo; Spartans are looking pretty good. I know things were a little wild for a while, had some injuries. But the truth is that Coach Izzo, he always paces so that you peak right at the tournament. [*Applause*] That's a fact. Then I got a chance to meet Mark Dantonio. All right. So you've already got a Rose Bowl victory. You guys are—you're greedy. [*Laughter*] You want to win everything.

But it's wonderful to be here. I love coming to Michigan. Mainly, I love coming to Michigan because of the people. But I also love coming here because there are few places in the country that better symbolize what we've been through together over these last 4, 5 years.

The American auto industry has always been the heartbeat of the Michigan economy and the heart of American manufacturing. So when that heartbeat was flatlining, we all pulled together, all of us—autoworkers who punched in on the line, management who made tough decisions to restructure, elected officials like Gary Peters and Mark Schauer who believed that—[*applause*]—folks who believed that rescuing America's most iconic industry was the right thing to do.

And today, thanks to your grit and your ingenuity and dogged determination, the American auto industry's engines are roaring again, and we are building the best cars in the world again. And some plants are running three shifts around the clock, something that nobody would have imagined just a few years ago. So—[*applause*].

I just had lunch with Detroit's new mayor, Mike Duggan. He told me if there's one thing that he wants everybody to know, it's that Detroit is open for business. And I have great confidence that he's going to provide the leadership that we need. Really proud of him. The point is, we've all had to buckle down. We've all had to work hard. We've had to fight our way back these past 5 years. And in a lot of ways, we are now better positioned for the 21st century than any other country on Earth.

This morning we learned that our businesses in the private sector created more than 140,000 jobs last month, adding up to about 8½ million new jobs over the past 4 years. Our unemployment rate is now the lowest it's been since before I was first elected. The—

companies across the country are saying they intend to hire even more folks in the months ahead. And that's why I believe this can be a breakthrough year for America.

And I've come here today to sign a bill that, hopefully, means folks in Washington feel the same way, that instead of wasting time creating crises that impede the economy, we're going to have a Congress that's ready to spend some time creating new jobs and new opportunities and positioning us for the future and making sure our young people can take advantage of that future.

And that's important, because even though our economy has been growing for 4 years now, even though we've been adding jobs for 4 years now, what's still true—something that was true before the financial crisis, it's still true today—is that those at the very top of the economic pyramid are doing better than ever, but the average American's wages, salaries, incomes haven't risen in a very long time. A lot of Americans are working harder and harder just to get by, much less get ahead, and that's been true since long before the financial crisis and the great recession.

And so we've got to reverse those trends. We've got to build an economy that works for everybody, not just a few. We've got to restore the idea of opportunity for all people, the idea that no matter who you are, what you look like, where you came from, how you started out, what your last name is, you can make it if you're willing to work hard and take responsibility. That's the idea at the heart of this country. That's what's at stake right now. That's what we've got to work on.

Now, the opportunity agenda I laid out in my State of the Union Address is going to help us do that. It's an agenda built around four parts. Number one, more new jobs in American manufacturing, American energy, American innovation, American technology. A lot of what you're doing here at Michigan State helps to spur on that innovation in all sorts of areas that can then be commercialized into new industries and to create new jobs.

Number two, training folks with the skills to fill those jobs, something this institution does very well.

Number three, guaranteeing access to a world-class education for every child, not just some. That has to be a priority. That means before they even start school, we're working on pre-K that's high quality and gets our young people prepared and then takes them all the way through college so that they can afford it, and beyond.

Number four, making sure our economy rewards honest work with wages you can live on and savings you can retire on and, yes, health insurance that is there for you when you need it.

Now, some of this opportunity agenda that I put forward will require congressional action, it's true. But as I said at the State of the Union, America does not stand still; neither will I. And that's why, over the past 2 weeks, I've taken steps without legislation—without congressional action—to expand opportunity for more families. We've created a new way for workers to start their own retirement savings. We've helped to make sure all of our students have high-speed broadband and high-tech learning tools that they need for this new economy.

But I've also said I'm eager to work with Congress wherever I can, because the truth of the matter is, is that America works better when we're working together. And Congress controls the purse strings at the Federal level, and a lot of the things that we need to do require congressional action.

And that is why I could not be prouder of our leaders who are here today. In particular, I could not be prouder of your own Debbie Stabenow, who has done just extraordinary work. So we all love Debbie for a lot of reasons. She's been a huge champion of American manufacturing, but really shepherded through this farm bill, which was a very challenging piece of business. She worked with Republican Senator Thad Cochran, who I think was very constructive in this process. We had Representatives Frank Lucas, a Republican, working with Collin Peterson, a Democrat. We had a terrific contribution from our own Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack and—who deserves a big round of applause.

And so Congress passed a bipartisan farm bill that is going to make a big difference in communities all across this country. And just so they don't feel left out, I want to recognize one of your Congressmen, who's doing an outstanding job, Dan Kildee, and somebody who was just a wonderful mentor to me when I was in the Senate and has been just a great public servant, not just for your State, but for the entire country, Carl Levin. He's always out there, especially when it comes to our men and women in uniform. We're very proud of him.

And while we're at it, we got a couple of out-of-towners: Pat Leahy from Vermont—there are a lot of dairy farms up there, so he had something to do with it; and Amy Klobuchar from Minnesota. All that cold air is blowing from Minnesota down into—[*laughter*].

Now, despite its name, the farm bill is not just about helping farmers. Secretary Vilsack calls it a jobs bill, an innovation bill, an infrastructure bill, a research bill, a conservation bill. It's like a Swiss Army knife. [*Laughter*] It's like Mike Trout; it's like—for those of you who know baseball. [*Laughter*] It's somebody who's got a lot of tools. It multitasks. It's creating more good jobs, gives more Americans a shot at opportunity. And there are two big ways in which it does so.

First, the farm bill lifts up our rural communities. Over the past 5 years, thanks to the hard work and know-how of America's farmers, the best in the world, we've had the strongest stretch of farm exports in our history. And when I'm traveling around the world, I'm promoting American agriculture. And as a consequence, we are selling more stuff to more people than ever before, supports about 1 million American jobs. What we grow here and that we sell is a huge boost to the entire economy, but particularly the rural economy.

Here at Michigan State, by the way, you are helping us to do even more. So I just got a tour of a facility where you're working with local businesses to produce renewable fuels. You're helping farmers grow crops that are healthier and more resistant to disease. Some students are even raising their own piglets on an organic farm. When I was in college, I lived in a pigsty—[*laughter*]—but I didn't work in one. That's—so I'm impressed by that. [*Laughter*] That's no joke, by the way. [*Laughter*] So your hygiene improves as you get older. [*Laughter*]

So we're seeing some big advances in American agriculture. And today, by the way, I'm directing my administration to launch a new Made in Rural America initiative to help more rural businesses expand and hire and sell more products stamped "Made in the U.S.A." to the rest of the world, because we've got great products here that need to be sold, and we can do even more to sell around the world.

But even with all this progress, too many rural Americans are still struggling. Right now 85 percent of counties experience what's called persistent poverty. Those are in rural areas. Before I was elected President, I represented Illinois, home of a couple of your Big Ten rivals, but also a big farming State. And over the years, I've seen how hard it can be to be a farmer. There are a lot of big producers who are doing really well, but there are even more small farms,

family farms, where folks are just scratching out a living and increasingly vulnerable to difficulties in financing and all the inputs involved; farmers sometimes having to work off the farm, they've got a couple of jobs outside the farm just to get health care, just to pay the bills, trying to keep it in the family; and it's very hard for young farmers to get started.

And in these rural communities, a lot of young people talk about how jobs are so scarce, even before the recession hit, that they feel like they've got to leave in order to have opportunity. They can't stay at home, they've got to leave.

So that's why this farm bill includes things like crop insurance, so that when a disaster like the record drought that we're seeing across much of the West hits our farmers, they don't lose everything they've worked so hard to build. This bill helps rural communities by investing in hospitals and schools, affordable housing, broadband infrastructure, all the things that help attract more businesses and make life easier for working families.

This bill supports businesses working to develop cutting-edge biofuels, like some of the work that's being done here at Michigan State. That has the potential to create jobs and reduce our dependence on foreign oil. It boosts conservation efforts so that our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy places like the Mississippi River Valley and Chesapeake Bay.

It supports local food by investing in things like farmers markets and organic agriculture, which is making my wife very happy. And when Michelle is happy, I don't know about everybody being happy, but I know I'm happy. [Laughter] And so it's giving smaller producers, local producers, folks like Ben, the opportunity to sell more of their products directly, without a bunch of processing and distributors and middlemen that make it harder for them to achieve. And it means that people are going to have healthier diets, which is, in turn, going to reduce incidents of childhood obesity and keep us healthier, which saves us all money.

It does all this while reforming our agricultural programs, so this bill helps to clamp down on loopholes that allowed people to receive benefits year after year, whether they were planting crops or not. And it saves taxpayers hard-earned dollars by making sure that we only support farmers when disaster strikes or prices drop. It's not just automatic.

So that's the first thing this farm bill does: It helps rural communities grow, it gives farmers some certainty, it puts in place important reforms.

The second thing this farm bill does that is huge is help make sure America's children don't go hungry. Now—[applause]—and this is where Debbie's work was really important. One study shows that more than half of all Americans will experience poverty at some point during their adult lives. Now, for most folks, that's when you're young and you're eating ramen all the time. But for a lot of families, that—it's a crisis hits, you lose your job, somebody gets sick, strains on your budget; you have a strong work ethic, but it might take you 6 months, 9 months, a year to find a job. And in the meantime, you've got families to feed.

That's why, for more than half a century, this country has helped Americans put food on the table when they hit a rough patch or when they're working hard but aren't making enough money to feed their kids. They're not looking for a handout, these folks, they're looking for a hand up, a bridge to help get them through some tough times.

And we sure don't believe that children should be punished when parents are having a tough time. As a country, we're stronger when we help hard-working Americans get back on

their feet, make sure that children are getting the nutrition that they need so that they can learn what they need in order to be contributing members of our society.

And that's the idea behind what's known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. A large majority of SNAP recipients are children or the elderly or Americans with disabilities. A lot of others are hard-working Americans who need just a little help feeding their families while they look for a job or they're trying to find a better one. And in 2012, the SNAP program kept nearly 5 million people—including more than 2 million children—out of poverty. Think about that: 5 million people.

That's why my position has always been that any farm bill I sign must include protections for vulnerable Americans, and thanks to the good work of Debbie and others, this bill does that. And by giving Americans more bang for their buck at places like farmers markets, we're making it easier for working families to eat healthy foods, and we're supporting farmers like Ben who make their living growing it. So it's creating new markets for produce farmers, and it means that people have a chance to directly buy from their farmers the kind of food that's going to keep them healthy.

And the truth is, a lot of folks go through tough times at some point in their lives. That doesn't mean they should go hungry, not in a country like America. So investing in the communities that grow our food, helping hard-working Americans put that food on the table, that's what this farm bill does, all while reducing our deficits through smart reforms.

It doesn't include everything that I'd like to see, and I know leaders on both sides of the aisle feel the same way. But it's a good sign that Democrats and Republicans in Congress were able to come through with this bill, break the cycle of shortsighted, crisis-driven, partisan decisionmaking, and actually get this stuff done. That's a good sign.

And that's the way you should expect Washington to work. That's the way Washington should continue to work. Because we've got more work to do. We've got more work to do to potentially make sure that unemployment insurance is put in place for a lot of folks out there who need it. We've got more work to do to pass a minimum wage. We've got more work to do to do immigration reform, which will help farmers like Ben.

So let's keep the momentum going here. And in the weeks ahead, while Congress is deciding what's next, I'm going to keep doing everything I can to strengthen the middle class, build ladders of opportunity in the middle class. And I sure hope Congress will join me, because I know that's what you're looking for out of your elected officials at every level.

So thank you, everybody. God bless you. I'm now going to sign this farm bill.

Hold on one second, I forgot to mention, Marcia Fudge was here. I wasn't sure whether she came to the event. I knew she flew in with me. So she does great work—[*applause*—out of the great State of Ohio. [*Laughter*]

[*At this point, the President sat down to sign the bill.*]

The President. Everybody can see?

Audience members. No.

The President. Oh-oh. Hey, guys, you got to sit down for a second so the big fancy cameras back there can—[*laughter*]. I mean, we appreciate you taking pictures, but—[*laughter*]. All right, I'm about to start signing.

[*The President signed the Agricultural Act of 2014*]

The President. This was good work. I'm going to use every pen. There you go. Hey!

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:16 p.m. in the Mary Anne McPhail Equine Performance Center. In his remarks, he referred to Ben LaCross, District 9 director, Michigan Farm Bureau Board of Directors; Tom Izzo, head coach of men's basketball, and Mark Dantonio, head football coach, Michigan State University; former Rep. Mark Schauer; and Michael N. Trout, centerfielder, Major League Baseball's Los Angeles Angels. H.R. 2642, approved February 7, was assigned Public Law No. 113-79.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Michigan State University in East Lansing, MI.

Locations: East Lansing, MI.

Names: Chochran, W. Thad; Dantonio, Mark; Duggan, Michael E.; Fudge, Marcia L.; Izzo, Tom; Kildee, Daniel T.; Klobuchar, Amy J.; LaCross, Ben; Leahy, Patrick J.; Levin, Carl; Lucas, Frank D.; Obama, Michelle; Peters, Gary C.; Peterson, Collin C.; Schauer, Mark; Simon, Lou Anna K.; Stabenow, Deborah A.; Triplett, Nathan; Trout, Michael N.; Vilsack, Thomas J.

Subjects: Agriculture : Domestic production, strengthening efforts; Agriculture : Farm subsidies; Agriculture, Department of : Rural development, loan assistance program; Agriculture, Department of : Secretary; Agriculture, Department of : Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Budget, Federal : Deficit and national debt; Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Strengthening efforts; Communications : Broadband and wireless technologies; Congress : Bipartisanship; Economy, national : Household incomes, decline; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : Postsecondary education :: Career training and continuing education; Education : Technology and innovation, expansion efforts; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: Promotion efforts; Health and medical care : Insurance coverage and access to providers; Health and medical care : Nutrition; Labor issues : Minimum wage; Legislation, enacted : Agricultural Act of 2014; Michigan : Michigan State University in East Lansing; Michigan : President's visit; Social Security and retirement : Retirement accounts :: Treasury savings account.

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