

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas

January 22, 2015

The President. Hello, Kansas! Rock Chalk! Can everybody give Alyssa a big round of applause for the great introduction? It is good to be at KU! I've got to admit, I took a moment to meet with Coach Self and the KU basketball team. I mean, we're here for other business, but while I was here—[*laughter*]—I thought I should talk to some basketball players. And it is January, so that means that the Jayhawks are at the top of the Big 12, hunting for your 11th straight conference title.

I want to thank your chancellor, Bernadette Gray-Little. I want to thank Mayor Amyx for having me. I recently heard from Bob Dole as well, who told me he's very proud of his Institute of Politics here. Any school of politics named for Bob Dole is one I'd be proud of too, because he is a great Kansan and a great American.

Now, it's good to be back in Kansas. I've got deep roots in Kansas. As you know, my mom was born in Wichita. Her mom grew up in Augusta. Her father was from El Dorado. So I'm a Kansas guy. [*Applause*] I'm a Kansas guy.

Now, that helped me in the caucus here in 2008. It didn't help me as much in the general election. [*Laughter*]

Audience member. We're sorry!

The President. Coach Self won 10 straight. I lost two straight here. [*Laughter*] But that's okay. Listen, I love you, and I might have won sections of Lawrence. That's possible. [*Laughter*] That's a possibility. [*Laughter*] But look, this is exactly why I've come back to Kansas today.

On Tuesday, I gave my State of the Union Address. And I just want you to know, today I will be shorter. [*Laughter*] But I want to begin where I finished on Tuesday, because I talked about in the State of the Union how, over a decade ago, in Boston at the Democratic Convention, I gave a speech where I said there is no liberal America or conservative America, there's a United States of America. We're all supposed to be on the same team.

And I know it can seem sometimes like our politics is more divided than ever, that in places like Kansas, the only blue stands for KU. [*Laughter*] And so because of those divisions the pundits in Washington, they hold this up as proof that any vision of a more hopeful politics must be naive or misguided. But as I pointed out, I still believe what I said back then. I still believe that we, as Americans, have more in common than not. And I have seen too much of the good, generous, big-hearted optimism of the American people over these past 6 years to believe otherwise.

I will never stop trying to make our politics work better. That's what you deserve, and that's how we move this country forward. And, Kansas, we've got some big things to do together. [*Applause*] We've got some big things to do.

Now, we start this year with some good news. Our economy is creating jobs at the fastest pace since 1999. Our deficits are shrinking. Energy production is booming. Our troops are coming home. We have risen from recession in a better position, freer to write our own future than any nation on Earth. So now we've got to choose what our future will look like. And when

I look out at this crowd, it's your generation in particular that's going to have to decide what this future looks like. Are we going to accept an economy where only a few of us do spectacularly well? Or do we commit ourselves to an economy that generates opportunity and rising incomes for everybody who's willing to work hard and make an effort? That's a choice we've got to make.

For 6 years, we've been working to rebuild our economy on a new foundation. And what I want people to know is, thanks to your hard work, thanks to your resilience, America is coming back. We believed we could reverse the tide of outsourcing and draw new jobs to our shore. And over the past 5 years, our businesses have created more than 11 million new jobs.

We believed we could reduce our dependence on foreign oil and protect our planet at the same time. And today, America is number one in oil and gas, but we're also number one in wind power. And every 3 weeks, we bring as much solar power online as we did in all of 2008. We have doubled clean power production. And thanks not just to lower gas prices, but also higher fuel standards, the typical family this year should save about 750 bucks at the pump.

We believed that we could prepare our kids for this more competitive world, a 21st-century economy. And today, our younger students have earned the highest math and reading scores on record. Our high school graduation rate has hit an alltime high. And more young people like you are finishing college than ever before.

We believed that sensible regulations should encourage fair competition and shield families from ruin and prevent the kind of crisis that we saw in 2007, 2008. So today, we've got new tools to stop taxpayer-funded bailouts. And in the past year alone, about 10 million uninsured Americans have finally gained the security of health coverage. We've gotten that done.

Now, at every step, we were told that we were misguided or too ambitious or the laws we passed would explode deficits or crush jobs or destroy the economy. I just want everybody to remember that. [*Laughter*] Roll back the tape. [*Laughter*] Roll back the tape. And instead, we've seen the fastest economic growth in over a decade. We've seen the deficits cut by two-thirds. People's 401(k)s are in better shape because the stock market has doubled. We have put ourselves in a position in which the economy potentially can grow not just for next year or the year after that, but over the next decade, and generate the kind of jobs that all of you will fill.

Audience member. Thank you!

The President. So the verdict is in: Middle class economics works. Providing opportunity for everybody works. The ruling on the field stands. [*Laughter*] And these policies are going to continue to work as long as we don't let politics get in the way, especially politics in Washington. We can't put the security of families at risk by taking away their health insurance. We're not going to get rid of the rules we put in place to check recklessness on Wall Street. If those efforts come to my desk, I will veto them, because we're moving in the right direction.

And here's what's most important. Today, because the economy is growing at a faster pace, we're starting to actually see wages tick up for the first time in a very long time. And a survey of small businesses showed, they are more likely to provide raises to their employees than any time since 2007. So we've got to make sure that all people have the tools and the support that they need to take advantage of this growing economy. It's not good enough just to not screw it up, let's build on the momentum and move it even further. Let's keep it going. Let's keep it going. That's what we've got to focus on. [*Applause*] That's what we've got to focus on.

So how do we restore this link between hard work and being able to get ahead? How do we make sure that everybody is doing their fair share, everybody has a fair shot, and everybody is playing by the same set of rules? How do we make sure that everybody not only shares in success, but also is able to contribute to the success of the United States of America? That is middle economics—middle class economics. That's our project. And that's something that, by the way, shouldn't be a Democratic or a Republican issue. That should be an American issue. All of us should want that kind of success for the middle class and everybody who's willing to work hard to try to get into the middle class.

So what does middle class economics require? Well, the first thing is trying to give people a sense of security at a time when the economy is so rapidly changing, so dynamic, that people can't rely on being in one place, in one job for 30 years, 40 years. That's not going to be the career that young people like you have. You're going to be doing a whole range of things, and it's going to be fluid. And you're going to have to be taking advantage of opportunities, and you're going to have to adapt to new circumstances.

And so part of what we have to do is to make sure that we're giving families some sense of security in the midst of all this change. And that means helping folks afford childcare. It means helping folks afford college. It means helping folks get paid leave at work. It means making sure people have health care. It means helping the first-time homebuyer. It means helping folks save for retirement—although you guys don't have to worry about that for a while. [Laughter] I see he raised his hand, "Actually, I do." [Laughter]

And so I'm sending Congress a budget, a plan, that's going to help a family with all of these issues: lowering the taxes for working families by thousands of dollars, putting it—money back into their pockets so that they can have a little bit of cushion in their lives. We can do that. And today I want to focus on one of those ideas, and that's childcare.

Now, I mentioned my grandparents were from Kansas. Well, my grandfather, Stanley Dunham, he went to Europe to fight in World War II. And while he was gone, my grandmother, she was like Rosie the Riveter—Madelyn. She worked on an assembly plant for bombers. And because it was a national priority, having women in the workforce was critical. All right? My grandmother worked at a bomber assembly line in Wichita. And by that time, my mom had already been born. So this country provided universal health—childcare because they understood that if women are working, they're going to need some help. Right? They understood that. And research shows that it was good for the kids, good for the parents. But we stopped doing it, even though almost every other advanced country on Earth continued to do it—learned from us and did it.

Now, in today's economy, when having both parents in the workforce is an economic necessity for many families, affordable, high-quality childcare and early childhood education, this—these aren't just nice-to-haves, this is a must-have. And studies show that children who get a high-quality early education earn more over their lifetimes than their peers who don't.

So think about that. You give somebody—you give parents support, and you give a child that little boost at the beginning, it lasts a lifetime, which means that the entire economy is more productive for a lifetime, for a generation. Young people who get that good early start are more likely to finish school; they're less likely to get in trouble with the law. And access to childcare can lead to higher employment and incomes for the moms, which means, the whole family is doing better.

So the point is, if we knew how to do this back in 1943 and '44, and here we are in 2015, what's the holdup? It is time that we stop treating childcare as a side issue or a quote, unquote, women's issue. This is a family issue. This is a national economic priority for all of us. We can do better than we're doing right now.

And right now, in 31 States, high-quality childcare costs more than a year of tuition at a State university. Think about that. And by the way, this is personal for me because Michelle, and I remember what it was like trying to—and we had good jobs. But trying to figure out how to manage childcare costs was extraordinary, at the same as you're paying back student loans. So this is what—this is something you have a deep interest in, all of you. Because I'm assuming some of you are going to have a little bit of school debt. *[Laughter]* Just a little. And then, you start a family, and now you want to start saving for their college education. But in the meantime, you're already paying the equivalent of college tuition just to make sure that they're okay at home. This is a strain that cuts—and by the way, Republican families feel it just as much as Democratic families. *[Laughter]* They don't—there's no distinction.

I don't want any family to face the choice between not working or leaving their children in unsafe or poor-quality childcare. We are a better country than that. *[Applause]* We're a better country than that.

So that's why my plan will make quality childcare available and affordable to every middle class and low-income family in America with young children. We're going to expand access to high-quality care for more than 1 million children, and we're going to offer a tax cut of up \$3,000 per child per year. I don't want anybody being "daycare poor."

And we're going to build on a bipartisan law that I signed last year to improve the quality of childcare options so that parents know their children are well cared for, because we also want to lift up the quality of the facilities there.

And I just had the chance to visit the Community Children's Center, which is a Head Start center here in Lawrence. Had a chance to spend time with 48 lucky kids. *[Laughter]* Because they're teachers are wonderful, not because the—although, they all say, "I know you." *[Laughter]* "I see you on TV." *[Laughter]* That's what they always say, "I seen you in—on TV." I say, yes. Yes. *[Laughter]* "You're the President." *[Laughter]*

So you have these wonderful teachers, and the light in all of these children's eyes, the sense of possibility and potential for these kids, made me just that much more determined to keep strengthening and keep promoting and expanding early childhood education: to give all of our children a strong start. I want to support expectant mothers. I want to make sure we've got universal childcare to preschool for all. It's the best investment we can make. It is the right thing to do. We can do more to help families make ends meet.

Now, even as we're doing these things, there are some other things we've got to do to help families who are middle class or working their way into the middle class. Higher wages helps, which means Congress still needs to pass a law that makes sure a woman is paid the same as a man for doing the same work. I mean, come on now, it's 2015. This should be sort of a no-brainer. Congress still needs to raise the minimum wage. Like I said on Tuesday, if there are Members of Congress who really believe that they can work full time and support a family on less than \$15,000 a year, they should try it. And if not, they should vote to give millions of hard-working people across America the raise that they deserve.

And if we're going to make sure that more and more people are earning higher wages down the road as the economy continues to transform, then we've got to help to make sure that

more Americans like all of you are in a position to upgrade your skills. That's what you're doing here. And that's the second part of middle class economics. That's why we've been working to help more young people access and afford college. That's why I took action to help millions of students cap payments on their loans at 10 percent of their income. So if you want to go into teaching or you want to go into public service or you want to go into basic research—any field that doesn't pay you a huge amount of money—you can do it.

I want to make—I want to work with Congress to make sure every student who's already burdened with loans can find a way to refinance and reduce your monthly payments. And that's why I'm sending Congress a bold, new plan to lower the cost of community college to zero. [Applause] Down to zero. In the new economy, 2 years of college should be as free and as universal as high school is today.

The third part of middle class economics means we've got to build the most competitive economy in the world, and that means building the best infrastructure, opening new markets so we can sell products around the world, and investing in research so we keep on being the creators of new products and businesses can keep creating jobs right here in Kansas and around the world—and sell them around the world.

Now, the good news is, Lawrence gets it. You're—that's why you're encouraging private companies to compete against one another to offer high-speed broadband at better prices. And now you've got networks as fast as some of the best in the world: There's Hong Kong, there's Tokyo, there's Paris, and there's Lawrence. [Laughter]

So helping families feel more secure, including helping with childcare costs and improving the quality of childcare options; making sure that you have the capacity to finance, constantly upgrading your skills; making sure that we've got a competitive economy, including not just roads and bridges and traditional infrastructure, but the new infrastructure of the 21st century—those are the things we need to do to keep the momentum going.

Now, Republicans in Congress may disagree with some of my ideas. You noticed that I didn't get as much applause from them as I was hoping. [Laughter] But the truth, is when it comes to infrastructure and research, both parties generally agree that it's important. They say that to me privately; they just can't applaud it publicly. [Laughter]

Audience member. [Inaudible]

The President. Yeah, right.

So, too often, where we get stuck is how to pay for these investments. Because these things cost money. Roads don't build themselves. Power grids and sewer lines and basic research and—those things don't pay for themselves.

And as Americans, we don't mind paying our fair share of taxes, as long as everybody else does too. The problem we've got is, we've got lobbyists that have rigged the Tax Code with loopholes that let some corporations pay nothing while others are paying full freight. We've got the super-rich getting giveaways they don't need and then middle class folks not getting the breaks that they do need for things like childcare.

So what I told Congress is, let's just close those loopholes. Let's stop rewarding companies that keep profits abroad; reward companies that are creating jobs right here in the United States. Let's close loopholes that let the top 1 percent or .01 percent avoid paying certain taxes—use that money to help more Americans pay for college and childcare. Let's have a Tax

Code that truly helps working Americans get a leg up in this new economy. It's a good investment that will ultimately be good for everybody.

So that's what I believe in: helping hard-working families make ends meet, giving everybody the tools they need to find good-paying jobs in the new economy, keeping our economy strong and competitive, making sure we've got a Tax Code that is fair so that we can get all these things done and grow the economy well into the future. That's where I think America needs to go. And that's where I believe Americans want to go. It's going to make our economy stronger not just a year from now or 10 years from now, but deep into the century ahead.

And I understand Republicans who disagree with my approach. So what I've said to them is, fine, show me your ideas to pay for things like R&D and infrastructure. Explain to me how you want to help families pay for college and for childcare.

It's perfectly fair for them to say, we've got a better way for meeting these national priorities, and then to specify what those ideas are. What you can't do is simply pretend that issues like childcare or student debt aren't out there, that they're not important. You can't pretend that there's nothing we can do to help middle class families get ahead, because I've seen how we've been able to help middle class families get ahead when we make an effort.

The answer can't just be no to everything. I don't mind hearing no to some things, but it can't be no to everything. At some point, you've got to say yes to something. I want to get to yes! Tell me what you want to do. Let's get to yes on helping more families get by. I want to get to yes on childcare. I want to get to yes on more young people going to college and not being loaded up with debt. That's what I want to get to.

I want to get to yes for folks like Steve Ozark, from right here in Lawrence. Where is Steve? I know I saw him. He was around here. There, that's—you're not Steve. *[Laughter]* There he is right there.

So last year, Steve wrote me a letter about his vision for this country: a place where every American, he said, has "a place at the table." And 25 years ago, Steve and his girlfriend, now his wife, were living paycheck to paycheck, with a baby on the way. And for a while, they turned to food stamps to get by. And then, they took out students loans so that his wife could go to college and get a job and climb the ladder of success. And today, they spend their time helping others in their community find a place at the table, because, as Steve wrote in this letter, it's "what God and Grandma taught us to do." God and Grandma, those—now, that's some good authority right there.

The point is, is that we're going to disagree on politics sometimes, but we don't have to be so viciously divided as a people. We all know what God and Grandma taught us to do. *[Laughter]* Whoever we are—Republican, Democrat, male, female, young, old, Black, White, gay, straight—we all share a common vision for our future. We want a better country for your generation and for your kids' generation, a place where, as Steve wrote, everybody has "a place at the table." I want that country to be one that shows the world what I know is still to be true, that we are still not a collection of just red States and blue States, we are still the United States of America.

So we've made it through some hard times, but we've laid a new foundation, Jayhawks. We've got a new future to write. The young people here are going to write a new future for America. Let's get started right now.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:30 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to Alyssa Cole, student, University of Kansas; former Sen. Robert J. Dole; and Julia Ozark, wife of Lawrence, KS, resident Steve Ozark.

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