

POLITICAL DISPATCH

FROM THE PUBLIC POLICY COMMITTEE



The articles below are commentary on current events, intended to encourage further reflection and debate. Except for official Board statements, the viewpoints expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the Woman's National Democratic Club.

President Obama's Voice Soars in Final State of the Union Address

President Obama's seventh and final State of the Union speech on January 12, 2016, was, in effect, also his farewell address.

When President Obama was sworn into office January 19, 2009, our country was suffering the deepest recession since the Great Depression of 1939. Millions of Americans had lost their jobs, their homes, and their savings and had no access to medical care. We were at full-scale war in both Afghanistan and Iraq, financed by deficit spending, and marriage was illegal for same-sex couples.

Much progress has been made to improve our society since 2009.

President Obama called up his moral voice to review initiatives that have been made since he took office and to renew his vision for continued change to improve our individual and national lives. He recaptured the soaring inspiration in his Democratic Convention speech of 2003, which catapulted him to national notice. He reminded us that reason rather than bigotry or anger and fear should drive our national policies and international relations. The following commentary reflects the voices of some of the task forces of the Public Policy Committee.

Karen Pataky
Vice President for Public Policy and Political Action

Big Ideas to Frame Social and Economic Justice Reform

President Obama approached his last State of the Union unconventionally, framing the major challenges we will face over the next several decades. He quickly cited traditional Democratic presidential priorities that received far more attention a year ago.

Then he focused the four questions of how to promote: worker security and opportunity, the harnessing of technology for good, an effective and just foreign policy, and good political values. He also sought to clarify misconceptions: that Wall Street, not food stamp recipients, and corporate boardrooms instead of immigrants are to blame for stagnant wages—and climate change deniers are in a lonely place. He cited his major wins for diplomacy and called for a move to renewables, the closing down of Guantanamo, and making it easier to vote.

Discussions about such issues are all too rare, as further shown by the limited mainstream media coverage the next day. He is to be applauded for the framing and much of the content of his speech. But in coming days, he should go farther in promoting social and economic justice, which relate to many of our most urgent priorities.

Climate change is an overriding issue. Current global commitments take us to about 3.5 degree rise (vs. 1.5 to 2 degrees targeted in the Paris climate agreement.) We'll need more financing globally and cuts in emissions. Critically, he and other leaders must start discussing how the world will keep the 2/3 of the identified fossil fuel reserves in the ground, as needed to meet the 2-degree goals (a greater challenge for the president given the budget lifts the ban on crude oil exports.) Climate will frame every aspect of our political affairs and deserves this focus.

So too should President Obama openly champion the rebuilding of the labor movement and the restructuring of work and/or government benefits to ensure affordable healthcare, a good work-life balance, and a living wage. The universal basic income is a deserving idea gaining popularity worldwide.

So, too, must he focus on voting restrictions. With a heavily corporate-influenced mainstream media, companies and rich funding elections, and gerrymandering do the Republicans still need to steal elections? And so too must he step away from the TPP, which will provide extremely limited growth at best for American workers while undermining progress towards a more sustainable and just country. Executive action on climate chaos and other topics, the implementation of laws, and the vision for a socially just land of opportunity should be important priorities for his last year.

*Veena Trehan, Chair
Social and Economic Justice Task Force*

President Issues Challenges on the Environment

The President set out an encouraging picture of the present, describing how the U.S. has reduced its carbon footprint, but also issued a challenge to move ahead faster and better. His goal of ending fossil fuel subsidies is a necessary first step, but we must push the goal of keeping at least 70 percent of known fossil fuel reserves in the ground if we are to avoid the worst consequences of climate disruption. The President was right to state that climate change is a national security issue requiring us to work together with the rest of the world, a point to be emphasized in our advocacy going forward. However, we also need to talk about other important environmental issues (e.g., air and water pollution, ruinous agricultural practices, clear-cutting forests) and their impact on the poor. Further, we must keep before the public the environmental costs of war, when Republicans—and some Democrats—push for more military adventures in the Middle East and elsewhere.

*Jean Stewart
Environment and Energy Task Force*

Global Women's Multifaceted Challenges

Though we rarely comment on the response to the State of the Union, it's worth noting it was delivered by South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley. While her vision fundamentally differs from that of the Democrats, a significant portion of it was devoted to avoiding divisiveness and hate by not "[following] the siren call of the angriest voices." As such, it echoed Obama's speech with its theme of cooperation and respect.

How is her approach relevant to global women? Today we see major (and potentially worsening) suffering of women worldwide. Regarding international response to this suffering, the world must decide whether to embrace a spirit of responsibility and cooperation or retreat into tribalism that often rationalizes and minimizes such suffering. The choice will make a tremendous difference to the people of our planet.

There are 20 million refugees today, with 60 million forcibly displaced. Now 86 percent of them reside in developing countries. These refugees include many women who face unique vulnerabilities during travel and in camps. Refusal to adequately fund Syrian and other refugees—who are often concentrated in countries where we fought wars—irreparably harms many women and the next generation of children.

Climate change is wreaking catastrophe with women with less financial security and greater responsibility for food, energy, and children. Climate change also contributes to war (see "Big Ideas," above). Our increasingly glaring wealth disparity remains a major concern, especially to women. Trade agreements must protect the environment, working conditions directly, and promote security of healthy available food. Austerity hurts, but the increasingly popular universal basic income could help.

*Veena Trehan, Chair
Global Women Task Force*

State of the Union Reflects the Importance of Education

In the State of the Union address, President Obama spoke about the important role played by education in our country. During his administration, there have been several key initiatives pertaining to education and youth and several reforms as yet to be accomplished. Here are some of the highlights:

Criminal Justice Reform

A bipartisan bill currently before Congress would decrease mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent drug offenses, make some of these reductions retroactive, and set limitations for juvenile solitary confinement. A coalition of bipartisan interest groups has been working on this bill, and its passage would mean a potential victory for all. As Senator Dick Durbin commented, "we are political odd couples... but we found common ground."

The impact of criminal justice reform could be very positive for youth of color, who are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. African American youth are 4.6 times more likely than their white peers to be incarcerated than their white peers; Hispanic youth are 1.8 times more likely to be incarcerated. The bill would retroactively apply a 2010 bill that reduces the disparity in sentencing between crack and powder cocaine, perhaps allowing up to 6,500 crack cocaine offenders to seek new sentences.

Expansion of Pre-K

President Obama has asked Congress to make high-quality pre-school available to all 4-year-olds in the country. Research continues to show the importance of high quality early education in a child's life. To date, about 30 states have funded pre-K programs on their own. The president's program provides for a cost-sharing between the federal government and the states to expand high quality pre-school. High quality programs would have to meet certain standards such as hiring teachers with bachelor's degrees in early childhood education, providing small class sizes, and low adult-to-child ratios.

Every Student Succeeds Act

A bipartisan bill passed in December 2015 fixes some of the outdated policies associated with the No Child Left Behind law. States now have more flexibility in developing programs to close achievement gaps, improve the quality of teaching, and develop their own assessment for what does and does not work for their specific school system. School systems in the DC metropolitan area are evaluating how to make adjustments in their accountability systems and are no longer being limited to a one-size-fits-all approach.

Affordable College Education Act:

President Obama wants to combat rising college costs (250 percent increase in the last 30 years) and make college affordable to all potential students. A Georgetown University study estimates that by 2020, two-thirds of jobs will require a higher education degree. The president's plan will measure college performance through a new rating system and ensure that students and families have the information to select schools that provide the best value for their needs. The plan seeks to (1) promote innovation and competition, (2) ensure student debt is affordable, (3) pay for college and student performance (4) engage states with a race to the top of higher education that has higher value and lower cost, (4) reward colleges for results with a Pell bonus, and demand that students be responsible for academic performance.

The affordable College Education Act would also make all community Colleges free to those students who maintain 2.5 average score throughout high school.

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President Stresses “Obamacare” Strengths

The Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”), signed into law March 23, 2010, played a key role in the State of the Union address.

Its passage culminated a half-century effort by our government to barter, cajole, and negotiate a consensus among the American people and the powerful medical industrial complex (insurance companies, pharmaceutical and medical device cartels, AMA hospital corporations) on how to provide medical care for all of our citizens.

President Obama stressed that the ACA retains the insurance-based system but has important restrictions that forbid denial of care for preexisting conditions (including pregnancy), forbids lifetime caps on coverage of medical conditions, forbids discriminatory pricing that allowed companies to charge higher rates for women. And young adults may remain on their parent’s insurance policies until 26 years old.

Special subsidized systems (Medicaid) are in place for low-income or adult citizens with disabilities and for low-income children whose parents are without health insurance (Children’s Health Insurance Plan or “CHIP”). Another 19 million Americans now have access to medical care, and the portion of those still uninsured is down from 19 percent to 11 percent.

The president reviewed additional new initiatives to prevent illnesses and deaths: executive actions to decrease gun deaths, support of unions to keep workplaces safe, increased environmental protections, increased funding for NIH research, mandates for paid sick leave, increased funding for veteran’s care, increased funding for mental health services.

Although our United States still have a long road ahead to provide medical care for all citizens, President Obama has led the first steps of the journey.

*Karen J. Pataky, NPC,
Chair, Health Care Task Force*

President Reserved on Gun Violence

Just one week after announcing that he will take executive action to address gun violence by clarifying the definition of “gun dealer,” increasing spending on mental illness, and hiring additional agents to conduct background checks, President Obama was surprisingly reserved on the topic of gun violence. Included in a cursory list of priorities he intends to pursue in the remainder of his term, the President alluded simply to “protecting our kids from gun violence.” A seat next to First Lady Michelle Obama was left empty to symbolize lives lost to the gun violence plaguing the country.

*Gail Gottlieb
Public Policy Committee*