

WSU viewers cheer on Obama's U.S.-fortifying proposals in State of the Union

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OGDEN — Cheers and applause broke out among some of the 30 people at Weber State University each time President Barack Obama delivered plans to improve education and the environment as well as strengthen the nation's middle class during a bold State of the Union address Tuesday night.

Weber State students and area residents gathered to watch Obama's address on a large projection screen in the Shepherd Union Building. The viewing party was sponsored by the Weber State Student Association's American Democracy Project.

Raegan Wheatley, a Weber State senior majoring in social work, frequently stood up during Obama's speech as the president laid out his vision for the nation's future.

"It was more fun than the Super Bowl," she said after Obama's speech.

Wheatley said she was impressed with Obama's proposal to raise the national minimum wage to \$9 an hour to balance out cost-of-living expenses and his urging that Congress debate and then vote on his gun-control proposal.

"I wanted him (Obama) to bring it, and he did," she said.

Mandi Barnes, leadership vice president of the Weber State Student Association and a Republican, said she generally supported most of Obama's proposals and is hopeful they will be accomplished.

"I hope he follows through with it," she said.

Uncompromising and politically emboldened, Obama urged a deeply divided Congress

on Tuesday night to embrace his plans to use government money to create jobs and strengthen the nation's middle class. He declared Republican ideas for reducing the deficit "even worse" than the unpalatable deals Washington had to stomach during his first term.

In his first State of the Union address since winning re-election, Obama conceded economic revival is an "unfinished task," but he claimed clear progress and said he is prepared to build on it as he embarks on four more years in office.

"We have cleared away the rubble of crisis, and we can say with renewed confidence that the state of our union is strong," Obama said in an hourlong address to a joint session of Congress and a television audience of millions.

With unemployment persistently high and consumer confidence falling, the economy remains a vulnerability for Obama and could disrupt his plans for pursuing a broader agenda, including immigration overhaul, stricter gun laws and climate change legislation.

Still, fresh off a convincing re-election win, Obama made clear in his remarks that he was determined to press his political advantage against a divided, defensive and worried Republican Party. Numerous times he urged Congress to act quickly on his priorities — but vowed to act on some issues on his own if they do not.

Obama also announced new steps to reduce the U.S. military footprint abroad, with 34,000 American troops withdrawing from Afghanistan within a year. And he had a sharp rebuke for North Korea, which launched a nuclear test just hours before his remarks, saying, "Provocations of the sort we saw last night will only isolate them further."

In specific proposals for shoring up the economy in his second term, an assertive Obama called for increased federal spending to fix the nation's roads and bridges, the first increase in the minimum wage in six years and expansion of early education to every American 4-year-old. Seeking to appeal for support from Republicans, he promised that none of his proposals would increase the deficit "by a single dime," although he didn't explain how he would pay for his programs or how much they would cost.

In the Republican response to Obama's address, rising GOP star Sen. Marco Rubio, of Florida, came right back at the president, saying his solution "to virtually every problem we face is for Washington to tax more, borrow more and spend more."

Rubio said presidents of both parties have recognized that the free enterprise system brings middle-class prosperity.

"But President Obama?" Rubio said. "He believes it's the cause of our problems."

Jobs and growth dominated Obama's address. Many elements of his economic blueprint were repacked proposals from his first term that failed to gain traction on Capitol Hill.

Standing in Obama's way now is a Congress that remains nearly as divided as it was during the final years of his first term, when Washington lurched from one crisis to another.

The president implored lawmakers to break through partisan logjams, asserting that "the greatest nation on Earth cannot keep conducting its business by drifting from one manufactured crisis to the next."

"Americans don't expect government to solve every problem," he said. "They do expect us to forge reasonable compromise where we can."

Yet Obama offered few signs of being willing to compromise himself, instead doubling down on his calls to create jobs by spending more government money and insisting that lawmakers pay down the deficit through a combination of targeted spending cuts and tax increases. But he offered few specifics on what he wanted to see cut, focusing instead on the need to protect programs that help the middle class, elderly and poor.

He did reiterate his willingness to tackle entitlement changes, particularly on Medicare, though he has ruled out increasing the eligibility age for the popular benefit program for seniors.

Republicans are ardently opposed to Obama's calls for legislating more tax revenue to reduce the deficit and offset the broad automatic spending cuts — known as the sequester — that are to take effect March 1. The president accused GOP lawmakers of

shifting the cuts from defense to programs that would help the middle class and elderly, as well as those supporting education and job training.

"That idea is even worse," he said.

Obama broke little new ground on two agenda items he has pushed vigorously since winning re-election: overhauling the nation's fractured immigration laws and enacting tougher gun control measures in the wake of the horrific massacre of school children in Newtown, Conn. Yet he pressed for urgency on both, calling on Congress to send him an immigration bill "in the next few months" and insisting lawmakers hold votes on his gun proposals.

"Each of these proposals deserves a vote in Congress," he said. "If you want to vote no, that's your choice."

Turner Bitton, secretary of the Weber County Democratic Party, said he was impressed that Obama demanded that Congress vote on gun control. "Where is the vote?" asked Bitton, echoing what Obama said in his speech.

Numerous lawmakers wore green lapel ribbons in memory of those killed in the December shootings in Connecticut. Among those watching in the House gallery: the parents of 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton, shot and killed recently in a park just a mile from the president's home in Chicago, as well as other victims of gun violence.

On the economy, Obama called for raising the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$9 by 2015. The minimum wage has been stagnant since 2007, and administration officials said the increase would strengthen purchasing power. The president also wants Congress to approve automatic increases in the wage to keep pace with inflation.

Looking for common ground anywhere he could find it, Obama framed his proposal to boost the minimum wage by pointing out that even his GOP presidential rival liked the idea. He said, "Here's an idea that Governor Romney and I actually agreed on last year: Let's tie the minimum wage to the cost of living, so that it finally becomes a wage you can live on."

Obama also renewed his calls for infrastructure spending, investments he sought repeat-

edly during his first term with little support from Republicans. He pressed lawmakers to approve a \$50 billion "fix it first" program that would address the most urgent infrastructure needs.

Education also figures in Obama's plans to boost American competitiveness in the global economy. Under his proposal, the federal government would help states provide preschool for all 4-year-olds. Officials did not provide a cost for the preschool programs but said the government would provide financial incentives to help states.

Annie Mason, who attended the State of the Union viewing party and a retired elementary school teacher, said she supports Obama's proposal for improving education.

"I liked what he said about getting children in quality education, so that we train them from Day One to get quality jobs," she said.

Jacob Thompson, president of the Weber State College Democrats, described Obama's proposal to help states provide preschool for all children as a "huge deal."

"It's great to hear him talk about equal opportunity for everyone," Thompson said.

Among the other initiatives Obama is proposing:

- A \$1 billion plan to create 15 "manufacturing institutes" that would bring together businesses, universities and the government. If Congress opposes the initiative, Obama plans to use his presidential powers to create three institutes on his own.
- Creation of an "energy security trust" that would use revenue from federal oil and gas leases to support development of clean energy technologies such as biofuels and natural gas
- Doubling of renewable energy in the U.S. from wind, solar and geothermal sources by 2020.
- Launching negotiations on a free-trade agreement between the U.S. and European Union.

U.S. Rep Rob Bishop, R-Utah, said in a prepared statement he was disappointed with

Obama's remarks.

"While I found the speech to be disappointing, I don't disagree with some of the concepts and proposals President Obama put forth," Bishop said in a prepared statement. "I liked the emphasis on families and that the President addressed the need to improve healthcare for our nation's veterans. I was also impressed that the president touched on the fact that the federal government doesn't have to solve every problem. However, in large part, the president was just playing to the crowd, telling them what they wanted to hear, and missed out on the opportunity to address some of the most immediate crises facing our country."

The Associated Press contributed to this article.