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Obama's message is clear and bright

But will obstructionist Congress waste two years?

President Obama's well-delivered State of the Union speech Tuesday covered everything from sending an astronaut to Mars to making the Internal Revenue's tax code fairer for the middle classes and simpler for businesses.

But does his wide-ranging optimism — "the shadow of crisis has passed" — reflect the reality of America in 2015?

We believe it does. But the real question is whether partisan bickering in Congress will stymie true progress during Obama's final two years.

The 44th president was elected just as the U.S. economy tanked. In six years, Obama has presided over a remarkable recovery effort that has seen job growth, less reliance on foreign oil with more emphasis on wind and solar power, plus progress on bringing outsourced jobs back to the United States.

"We are a strong, tight-knit family who has made it through some very hard times," Obama said, quoting a hardworking Minnesota couple in the audience.

The president repeatedly noted that "middle-class economics works," but warned of the need for further actions. These include:

- closing tax loopholes that allow the super-rich to avoid paying their share;
- boosting the minimum wage to give hardworking Americans at the lowest end of the pay scale a better chance to move ahead;
- mirroring other advanced countries in guaranteeing paid maternity and sick leave;
- strengthening unions to give workers a better voice.

And — astonishing in 2015 — Obama said, "This Congress still needs to pass a law that makes sure a woman is paid the same as a man for doing the same work."

Providing affordable childcare

must be a priority, said Obama, who promised tax incentives up to \$3,000 a child to help working parents. We welcome this initiative.

"It's not a 'nice-to-have'—it's a 'must-have,'" the president said, highlighting families where two working parents are a necessity. "It's time we stop treating childcare as a side issue, or a women's issue, and treat it like the national economic priority that it is for all of us."

Repeating his pride in the value of community colleges' twin roles in educating high school graduates and workforce members seeking retraining, Obama said a free college education would allow graduates to enter the work world without the albatross of student loans.

Obama also highlighted a statistic worth repeating: 10 million Americans now have health insurance thanks to his Affordable Care Act.

It was disheartening, however, that no sooner had the president left the chamber, the cameras rolled on the GOP reply, in which tea party-backed freshman Joni Ernst pledged that now Republicans are in power they will snatch access to health care away from newly covered Americans.

To her enormous credit, Ernst is a lieutenant colonel in the Iowa Army National Guard and has served overseas. Her support for veterans — like Obama's — was commendable. But her signal that she and her cohorts plan to turn back the clock on the president's remarkable achievement in providing health insurance to so many uninsured Americans was nothing short of heartbreaking.

What role should the USA play?

Obama's priorities on the world stage went under the microscope

"The question is not whether America leads the world — but how."

He provided his own answer with eloquence. "We lead best when we combine military power with strong diplomacy, when we leverage our power with coalition building, when we don't let our fears blind us to the opportunities that this new century presents."

Obama described the breadth of U.S. global involvement.

Among highlights was his long overdue promise to close the Guantanamo Bay prison. This is a stain on our nation — and terrorists exploit its continued existence as a recruiting tool. "It is not who we are," said Obama, who has prohibited the torture that his predecessor condoned.

In a global tour of sensibly chosen priorities, Obama said the U.S. would:

- stand up to Russian excesses against the Ukraine and elsewhere;
- end the embargo against Cuba;
- continue pressure to ensure Iran doesn't develop a nuclear weapon;
- install better protections against cyberhackers;
- seek congressional approval for the use of force against the ISL terror group.

On another world topic, Obama echoed a warning that has been sounded on this page since our newspaper group examined climate change in an award-winning series in 2006.

Pointing to rising temperatures, he quoted the Pentagon warning that climate change is an *immediate* risk to our national security. "We should act like it."

"The best scientists in the world are all telling us that our activities are changing the climate, and if we do not act forcefully, we'll continue to see rising oceans, longer, hotter heat waves, dangerous droughts and floods, and massive disruptions that can trigger greater migration, conflict, and hunger around the globe."

We share his view that Congress must not endanger the health of our children by failing to act.

With the United States pledging to double the pace at which its carbon pollution is cut, even China is committing to limit its emissions.

"I am determined to make sure American leadership drives international action," Obama pledged.

Finally. The science cannot be ignored and we commend the president for taking the lead.

Guest Column

It's time for new forestry laws

By TOM BENDER

Forty-five people were poisoned in 2013 by multiple illegal sprayings of their homes — not forest lands — with aerial forestry herbicides in Curry County.

One is dead, one in intensive treatment, the rest with serious ongoing health issues. It took seven months to get any Oregon government agency to even release what poisons they were sprayed with. And that list turned out to have been falsified. There's something very wrong here.

One man told us he has buried 12 deer, two sheep, and several dogs that died around his house, from a "wasting disease." They could eat all they wanted, but couldn't absorb the food, shrank to skin and bones and died. He sighed, then added, "And I have the same wasting disease. I've lost 45 pounds, can't work, and need a cane just to get down our stairs."

A year later, no fines collected, no financial assistance for medical costs or inability to work, and local doctors refusing to treat them. And Oregon's "Right to Farm and Forest" law deprives Oregonians of our constitutional right to any legal action against timber companies in such situations. This was not just one single event. Other spraying issues have occurred at Triangle Lake, above the city of Wheeler, and poisoning of water-

ways and public water supplies in many locations. It's time for change.

Oregon allows use of dangerous herbicides banned elsewhere. It has eliminated even minimal spray setbacks from homes and schools. And there is no evidence that routine use of aerial forestry herbicide spraying is even needed. It actually reduces tree growth. Numerous, more affordable alternatives exist. Simply changing rotation length from the current 40 years to 300 years reduces herbicide "need" as well as other significant costs of timber harvesting by 85 percent. It's time for change.

We know now also that there is no minimum safe level of herbicide use — extremely low levels cause neurological damage that can even affect future generations. Oregon allows the use of herbicide mixes whose cross-impacts have never been tested. National forests have banned aerial herbicides because of high numbers of miscarriages in surrounding areas. But not Oregon. It's time for change.

Oregon ignores that the short harvest-rotations it permits, and the routine use of herbicides it allows, cut wood production in half, economic benefit of forests by 90 percent, causes siltation of streams and reduced salmon runs, and creates significant landslide hazards to surrounding communities. It allows slash-burning that is now virtually banned elsewhere, permitting its mutagenic and carcinogenic smoke



Tom Bender

to engulf our communities and the air we breathe. It's time for change.

Timber companies have no problem making a profit in other states. They just rake in big extra profit from Oregon's outdated laws. Oregon has eliminated most harvest taxes — Washington's equivalent would provide \$40 million a year to local affected counties. The past employment and income benefits from logging have dwindled to near zero. Automation and wage reductions in forestry industry have reduced timber benefits to less than 1 percent of Oregon gross domestic product. Tourism has replaced forestry in contribution to economics and employment — outdoor recreation providing five times the jobs as the timber industry. Even global warming impacts say it's time for change — carbon sequestering value alone, from letting trees grow, amounts to 20 times the income gained from logging.

It's time for major reform in Oregon forestry regulations. Now. Proposed legislative action to "notify people of spraying" is totally inadequate. It merely shifts our attention away from the enormity and seriousness of the issues. The magnitude and clarity of new science regarding these issues is already bringing strong class-action risk to all of our jurisdictions and agencies if we fail to act. And the benefit to all Oregon of making major improvements in management of our forests is huge.

Tom Bender of Sustainable Architecture and Economics in Nehalem is one of the originators of sustainable economics that shows more effective ways of doing what we do.

Oregon allows use of dangerous herbicides banned elsewhere.

From the cradle to Ivory Tower

By FRANK BRUNI

New York Times News Service

Leaving aside all of the other good arguments both for and against it, I have one big problem with the proposal for free community college that President Barack Obama recently outlined and described anew in his State of the Union address Tuesday night.

It's awfully late in the game.

I don't mean that he should have moved on it earlier in his presidency. I mean that our focus on getting kids to and through higher education cannot be separated from, or supplant, our focus on making sure that they're prepared for it. And we have a painfully long way to go in that regard.

College is somehow tidier to talk about; I talk about it quite a bit myself. It's an attractive subject for several reasons. There's a particular mythology and romance to college, a way in which it's synonymous with the passage into adulthood and with a lofty altitude of competence, knowledge and intellectual refinement.

It's totemic. And it comes with handy metrics: specifically, data showing that the acquisition of a college degree translates into various benefits over the course of a lifetime, including higher earnings. So we look to, and lean on, college as a way to increase social mobility and push back against middle-class wage stagnation.

That's important context for not only Obama's frequent invocations of college but also for a new report, "Expectations and Reality," by America Achieves, a nonprofit organization that does educational research, policy development and advocacy. I was given an advance copy.

It demonstrates, for starters, that while hope may spring eternal, it springs in error where college is concerned. Using a survey of hundreds of parents and looking at college graduation rates, the report concludes that middle-class parents who expect their kids to finish four-year



AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin

Education Secretary Arne Duncan speaks about the administration's priorities for education at Seaton Elementary in Washington, Jan. 12.

college degrees are wrong more than half the time.

The same survey, conducted by the Benenson Strategy Group for America Achieves, revealed some cold-eyed realism amid that unwarranted optimism. More than 70 percent of parents expressed the worry that their children's chances of achieving a middle-class lifestyle would be diminished if their grade-school education didn't become more challenging.

They're right. We need to raise standards. That's in fact what the Common Core is ideally about, and that's why the education secretary, Arne Duncan, under harsh attack, remains wedded to a certain amount of testing. High standards without monitoring and accountability are no standards at all.

The goal is to lift children from all income groups up — and to maximize their chances of success with higher education. Their failure to complete higher education isn't just a function of financial hardships and related stresses, though those are primary reasons. Academic readiness factors in.

Jon Schnur, the executive chairman of America Achieves, said that there's a significant difference in graduation rates between students who need remediation after they've enrolled and those who don't. The failures of elementary, middle and secondary schools persist, then.

Those failures persist, and they're demonstrated every three years when PISA tests — which compare

15-year-olds in countries around the world — are done. American kids tend to perform in the middle of the heap.

The America Achieves report, looking at PISA results from 2003 to 2012, which is when the tests were last administered, had a bit of good news. While American kids from middle-class families haven't markedly improved their international standing in math and science over recent years, kids from poorer families have done precisely that.

Poverty may well make educational advancement much harder, but doesn't prohibit it. If we take the right steps — including more aggressive recruitment and rewarding of exemplary teachers and the continued implementation of higher standards — we can help kids at every rung of the economic ladder.

"All of these need to be backed by funding," Schnur, who has advised the Obama administration on education, told me. "There are great examples of what works, such as quality preschool and early learning for low-income children."

In the State of the Union both last year and the year before it, Obama called for universal preschool (to no avail). Some studies have shown that disadvantaged children start falling behind even before that point.

The moral is this: Education is a continuous concern and must be a continuous investment, cradle to Ivory Tower. If we don't recognize and act on that, our reality will never meet our expectations.

Education is a continuous concern and must be a continuous investment.

Where to write

• **U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (D):** 2338 Rayburn HOB, Washington, D.C., 20515. Phone: 202-225-0855. Fax 202-225-9497. District office: 12725 SW Millikan Way, Suite 220, Beaverton, OR 97005.

Phone: 503-326-2901. Fax 503-326-5066. Web: bonamici.house.gov/

• **U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D):** 313 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. Phone: 202-224-3753. Web: www.merkley.senate.gov

• **State Rep. Brad Witt (D):** State Capitol, 900 Court Street N.E., H-373, Salem, OR 97301. Phone: 503-986-1431. Web: www.leg.state.or.us/witt/ Email: rep.bradwitt@state.or.us