President Obama's speech before Congress

by UPI

WASHINGTON - The following are remarks made Tuesday by President Barack Obama before a joint session of Congress in Washington.

Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker, Mr. Vice President, members of Congress, and the first lady of the United States who's around here somewhere.

I have come here tonight not only to address the distinguished men and women in this great chamber, but to speak frankly and directly to the men and women who sent us here.

I know that for many Americans watching right now, the state of our economy is a concern that rises above all others, and rightly so. If you haven't been personally affected by this recession, you probably know someone who has: a friend, a neighbor, a member of your family.

You don't need to hear another list of statistics to know that our economy is in crisis, because you live it every day. It's the worry you wake up with and the source of sleepless nights. It's the job you thought you'd retire from but now have lost, the business you built your dreams upon that's now hanging by a thread, the college acceptance letter your child had to put back in the envelope.

The impact of this recession is real, and it is everywhere.

But while our economy may be weakened and our confidence shaken, though we are living through difficult and uncertain times, tonight I want every American to know this: We will rebuild, we will recover, and the United States of America will emerge stronger than before.

The weight of this crisis will not determine the destiny of this nation. The answers to our problems don't lie beyond our reach. They exist in our laboratories and our universities, in our fields and our factories, in the imaginations of our entrepreneurs and the pride of the hardest-working people on Earth.

Those qualities that have made America the greatest force of progress and prosperity in human history we still

possess in ample measure. What is required now is for this country to pull together, confront boldly the challenges we face, and take responsibility for our future once more.

Now, if we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that for too long we have not always met these responsibilities, as a government or as a people. I say this not to lay blame or to look backwards, but because it is only by understanding how we arrived at this moment that we'll be able to lift ourselves out of this predicament.

The fact is, our economy did not fall into decline overnight. Nor did all of our problems begin when the housing market collapsed or the stock market sank.

We have known for decades that our survival depends on finding new sources of energy, yet we import more oil today than ever before.

The cost of health care eats up more and more of our savings each year, yet we keep delaying reform.

Our children will compete for jobs in a global economy that too many of our schools do not prepare them for.

And though all of these challenges went unsolved, we still managed to spend more money and pile up more debt, both as individuals and through our government, than ever before.

In other words, we have lived through an era where too often short-term gains were prized over long-term prosperity, where we failed to look beyond the next payment, the next quarter, or the next election.

A surplus became an excuse to transfer wealth to the wealthy instead of an opportunity to invest in our future. Regulations -- regulations were gutted for the sake of a quick profit at the expense of a healthy market. People bought homes they knew they couldn't afford from banks and lenders who pushed those bad loans anyway. And all the while, critical debates and difficult decisions were put off for some other time on some other day.

Well, that day of reckoning has arrived, and the time to take charge of our future is here.

Now is the time to act boldly and wisely, to not only revive this economy, but to build a new foundation for lasting prosperity.

Now is the time to jump-start job creation, re-start lending, and invest in areas like energy, health care, and education that will grow our economy, even as we make hard choices to bring our deficit down. That is what my economic agenda is designed to do, and that is what I'd like to talk to you about tonight.

It's an agenda that begins with jobs. As soon as I took office, I asked this Congress to send me a recovery plan by Presidents Day that would put people back to work and put money in their pockets, not because I believe in bigger government -- I don't -- not because I'm not mindful of the massive debt we've inherited -- I am.

I called for action because the failure to do so would have cost more jobs and caused more hardships. In fact, a failure to act would have worsened our long-term deficit by assuring weak economic growth for years. And that's why I pushed for quick action.

And tonight I am grateful that this Congress delivered and pleased to say that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is now law.

Over -- over the next two years, this plan will save or create 3.5 million jobs. More than 90 percent of these jobs will be in the private sector, jobs rebuilding our roads and bridges, constructing wind turbines and solar panels, laying broadband and expanding mass transit.

Because of this plan, there are teachers who can now keep their jobs and educate our kids. Health care professionals can continue caring for our sick. There are 57 police officers who are still on the streets of Minneapolis tonight because this plan prevented the layoffs their department was about to make.

Because of this plan, 95 percent of working households in America will receive a tax cut, a tax cut that you will see in your paychecks beginning on April 1st.

Because of this plan, families who are struggling to pay tuition costs will receive a $2,500 tax credit for all four years of college.

And Americans -- and Americans who have lost their jobs in this recession will be able to receive extended unemployment benefits and continued health care coverage to help them weather this storm.

Now I know there are some in this chamber and watching at home who are skeptical of whether this plan will work, and I understand that skepticism.

Here in Washington, we've all seen how quickly good intentions can turn into broken promises and wasteful spending. And with a plan of this scale comes enormous responsibility to get it right.

And that's why I've asked Vice President Biden to lead a tough, unprecedented oversight effort, because nobody messes with Joe.

I have told each of my cabinet, as well as mayors and governors across the country, that they will be held accountable by me and the American people for every dollar they spend.

I've appointed a proven and aggressive inspector general to ferret out any and all cases of waste and fraud.

And we have created a new Web site called recovery.gov so that every American can find out how and where their money is being spent.

So the recovery plan we passed is the first step in getting our economy back on track, but it is just the first step, because even if we manage this plan flawlessly, there will be no real recovery unless we clean up the credit crisis that has severely weakened our financial system.

I want to speak plainly and candidly about this issue tonight, because every American should know that it directly affects you and your family's well-being. You should also know that the money you've deposited in banks across the country is safe, your insurance is secure. You can rely on the continued operation of our financial system; that's not the source of concern.

The concern is that, if we do not re-start lending in this country, our recovery will be choked off before it even begins. You see...

You see, the flow of credit is the lifeblood of our economy. The ability to get a loan is how you finance the purchase of everything from a home to a car to a college education, how stores stock their shelves, farms buy equipment, and businesses make payroll.

But credit has stopped flowing the way it should. Too many bad loans from the housing crisis have made their way onto the books of too many banks. And with so much debt and so little confidence, these banks are now fearful of lending out any more money to households, to businesses, or even to each other.

When there's no lending, families can't afford to buy homes or cars, so businesses are forced to make layoffs. Our economy suffers even more, and credit dries up even further.

That is why this administration is moving swiftly and aggressively to break this destructive cycle, to restore confidence, and restart lending.

And we will do so in several ways. First, we are creating a new lending fund that represents the largest effort ever to help provide auto loans, college loans, and small-business loans to the consumers and entrepreneurs who keep this economy running.

Second -- second, we have launched a housing plan that will help responsible families facing the threat of foreclosure lower their monthly payments and refinance their mortgages.

It's a plan that won't help speculators or that neighbor down the street who bought a house he could never hope to afford, but it will help millions of Americans who are struggling with declining home values, Americans who will now be able to take advantage of the lower interest rates that this plan has already helped to bring about. In fact, the average family who refinances today can save nearly $2,000 per year on their mortgage.

Third, we will act with the full force of the federal government to ensure that the major banks that Americans depend on have enough confidence and enough money to lend even in more difficult times. And when we learn that a major bank has serious problems, we will hold accountable those responsible, force the necessary adjustments, provide the support to clean up their balance sheets, and assure the continuity of a strong, viable institution that can serve our people and our economy.

Now, I understand that, on any given day, Wall Street may be more comforted by an approach that gives bank bailouts with no strings attached and that holds nobody accountable for their reckless decisions, but such an approach won't solve the problem.

And our goal is to quicken the day when we restart lending to the American people and American business and end this crisis once and for all. And I intend to hold these banks fully accountable for the assistance they

receive, and this time they will have to clearly demonstrate how taxpayer dollars result in more lending for the American taxpayer.

This time -- this time, CEOs won't be able to use taxpayer money to pad their paychecks, or buy fancy drapes, or disappear on a private jet. Those days are over.

Still, this plan will require significant resources from the federal government and, yes, probably more than we've already set aside. But while the cost of action will be great, I can assure you that the cost of inaction will be far greater, for it could result in an economy that sputters along for not months or years, but perhaps a decade.

That would be worse for our deficit, worse for business, worse for you, and worse for the next generation. And I refuse to let that happen.

Now, I understand that when the last administration asked this Congress to provide assistance for struggling banks, Democrats and Republicans alike were infuriated by the mismanagement and the results that followed. So were the American taxpayers; so was I.

So I know how unpopular it is to be seen as helping banks right now, especially when everyone is suffering in part from their bad decisions. I promise you: I get it.

But I also know that, in a time of crisis, we cannot afford to govern out of anger or yield to the politics of the moment.

My job -- our job -- is to solve the problem. Our job is to govern with a sense of responsibility.

I will not send -- I will not spend a single penny for the purpose of rewarding a single Wall Street executive, but I will do whatever it takes to help the small business that can't pay its workers or the family that has saved and still can't get a mortgage.

That's what this is about. It's not about helping banks; it's about helping people.

It's not about helping banks; it's about helping people. Because when credit is available again, that young

family can finally buy a new home. And then some company will hire workers to build it. And then those workers will have money to spend. And if they can get a loan, too, maybe they'll finally buy that car or open their own business.

Investors will return to the market, and American families will see their retirement secured once more. Slowly, but surely, confidence will return, and our economy will recover.

So -- so I ask this Congress to join me in doing whatever proves necessary, because we cannot consign our nation to an open-ended recession. And to ensure that a crisis of this magnitude never happens again, I ask Congress to move quickly on legislation that will finally reform our outdated regulatory system.

It is time. It is time.

It is time to put in place tough, new commonsense rules of the road so that our financial market rewards drive and innovation and punishes shortcuts and abuse.

The recovery plan and the financial stability plan are the immediate steps we're taking to revive our economy in the short term, but the only way to fully restore America's economic strength is to make the long-term investments that will lead to new jobs, new industries, and a renewed ability to compete with the rest of the world.

The only way this century will be another American century is if we confront at last the price of our dependence on oil and the high cost of health care, the schools that aren't preparing our children and the mountain of debt they stand to inherit. That is our responsibility.

In the next few days, I will submit a budget to Congress. So often, we've come to view these documents as simply numbers on a page or a laundry list of programs.

I see this document differently. I see it as a vision for America, as a blueprint for our future.

My budget does not attempt to solve every problem or address every issue. It reflects the stark reality of what we've inherited: a trillion-dollar deficit, a financial crisis, and a costly recession.

Given these realities, everyone in this chamber -- Democrats and Republicans -- will have to sacrifice some worthy priorities for which there are no dollars, and that includes me.

But that does not mean we can afford to ignore our long-term challenges.

I reject the view that says our problems will simply take care of themselves, that says government has no role in laying the foundation for our common prosperity, for history tells a different story.

History reminds us that, at every moment of economic upheaval and transformation, this nation has responded with bold action and big ideas.

In the midst of civil war, we laid railroad tracks from one coast to another that spurred commerce and industry.

From the turmoil of the Industrial Revolution came a system of public high schools that prepared our citizens for a new age.

In the wake of war and depression, the G.I. Bill sent a generation to college and created the largest middle-class in history.

And a twilight struggle for freedom led to a nation of highways, an American on the moon, and an explosion of technology that still shapes our world.

In each case, government didn't supplant private enterprise; it catalyzed private enterprise. It created the conditions for thousands of entrepreneurs and new businesses to adapt and to thrive.

We are a nation that has seen promise amid peril and claimed opportunity from ordeal. Now we must be that nation again.

That is why, even as it cuts back on programs we don't need, the budget I submit will invest in the three areas that are absolutely critical to our economic future: energy, health care, and education.

It begins with energy.

We know the country that harnesses the power of clean, renewable energy will lead the 21st century. And yet it is China that has launched the largest effort in history to make their economy energy efficient. We invented solar technology, but we've fallen behind countries like Germany and Japan in producing it. New plug-in hybrids roll off our assembly lines, but they will run on batteries made in Korea.

Well, I do not accept a future where the jobs and industries of tomorrow take root beyond our borders, and I know you don't, either. It is time for America to lead again.

Thanks to our recovery plan, we will double this nation's supply of renewable energy in the next three years. We've also made the largest investment in basic research funding in American history, an investment that will spur not only new discoveries in energy, but breakthroughs in medicine, in science and technology.

We will soon lay down thousands of miles of power lines that can carry new energy to cities and towns across this country. And we will put Americans to work making our homes and buildings more efficient so that we can save billions of dollars on our energy bills.

But to truly transform our economy, to protect our security and save our planet from the ravages of climate change, we need to ultimately make clean, renewable energy the profitable kind of energy.

So I ask this Congress to send me legislation that places a market-based cap on carbon pollution and drives the production of more renewable energy in America. That's what we need.

And to support -- to support that innovation, we will invest $15 billion a year to develop technologies like wind power and solar power, advanced biofuels, clean coal, and more efficient cars and trucks built right here in America.

Speaking of our auto industry, everyone recognizes that years of bad decision-making and a global recession have pushed our automakers to the brink. We should not and will not protect them from their own bad practices.

But we are committed to the goal of a re-tooled, re-imagined auto industry that can compete and win. Millions of jobs depend on it; scores of communities depend on it; and I believe the nation that invented the

automobile cannot walk away from it.

Now, none of this will come without cost, nor will it be easy. But this is America. We don't do what's easy. We do what's necessary to move this country forward.

And for that same reason, we must also address the crushing cost of health care.

This is a cost that now causes a bankruptcy in America every 30 seconds. By the end of the year, it could cause 1.5 million Americans to lose their homes. In the last eight years, premiums have grown four times faster than wages. And in each of these years, 1 million more Americans have lost their health insurance.

It is one of the major reasons why small businesses close their doors and corporations ship jobs overseas. And it is one of the largest and fastest-growing parts of our budget. Given these facts, we can no longer afford to put health care reform on hold. We can't afford to do it.

It's time.

Already, we've done more to advance the cause of health care reform in the last 30 days than we've done in the last decade. When it was days old, this Congress passed a law to provide and protect health insurance for 11 million American children whose parents work full-time.

Our recovery plan will invest in electronic health records and new technology that will reduce errors, bring down costs, ensure privacy, and save lives.

It will launch a new effort to conquer a disease that has touched the life of nearly every American, including me, by seeking a cure for cancer in our time.

And -- and it makes the largest investment ever in preventive care, because that's one of the best ways to keep our people healthy and our costs under control.

This budget builds on these reforms. It includes a historic commitment to comprehensive health care reform, a down payment on the principle that we must have quality, affordable health care for every American. It's a commitment that's paid for in part by efficiencies in our system that are long overdue, and it's a step we must

take if we hope to bring down our deficit in the years to come.

Now, there will be many different opinions and ideas about how to achieve reform. That's why I'm bringing together businesses and workers, doctors and health care providers, Democrats and Republicans to begin work on this issue next week.

I suffer no illusions that this will be an easy process. Once again, it will be hard. But I also know that nearly a century after Teddy Roosevelt first called for reform, the cost of our health care has weighed down our economy and our conscience long enough.

So let there be no doubt: Health care reform cannot wait, it must not wait, and it will not wait another year.

The third challenge we must address is the urgent need to expand the promise of education in America.

In a global economy, where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity. It is a pre-requisite.

Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma, and yet just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation, and half of the students who begin college never finish.

This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow. That is why it will be the goal of this administration to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education, from the day they are born to the day they begin a career. That is a promise we have to make to the children of America.

Already, we've made a historic investment in education through the economic recovery plan. We've dramatically expanded early childhood education and will continue to improve its quality, because we know that the most formative learning comes in those first years of life.

We've made college affordable for nearly 7 million more students, 7 million and we have provided the resources necessary to prevent painful cuts and teacher layoffs that would set back our children's progress.

But we know that our schools don't just need more resources; they need more reform. And that is why...

That is why this budget creates new teachers -- new incentives for teacher performance, pathways for advancement, and rewards for success. We'll invest -- we'll invest in innovative programs that are already helping schools meet high standards and close achievement gaps. And we will expand our commitment to charter schools. It is our responsibility as lawmakers and as educators to make this system work, but it is the responsibility of every citizen to participate in it.

So tonight I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be a community college or a four-year school, vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.

And dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It's not just quitting on yourself; it's quitting on your country. And this country needs and values the talents of every American.

That's why -- that's why we will support -- we will provide the support necessary for all young Americans to complete college and meet a new goal: By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. That is a goal we can meet.

That's a goal we can meet.

Now -- now, I know that the price of tuition is higher than ever, which is why, if you are willing to volunteer in your neighborhood or give back to your community or serve your country, we will make sure that you can afford a higher education. And to encourage...

And to encourage a renewed spirit of national service for this and future generations, I ask Congress to send me the bipartisan legislation that bears the name of Senator Orrin Hatch, as well as an American who has never stopped asking what he can do for his country, Senator Edward Kennedy.

These education policies will open the doors of opportunity for our children, but it is up to us to ensure they walk through them.

In the end, there is no program or policy that can substitute for a parent, for a mother or father who will attend those parent-teacher conferences, or help with homework, or turn off the TV, put away the video games, read to their child.

I speak to you not just as a president, but as a father when I say that responsibility for our children's education must begin at home. That is not a Democratic issue or a Republican issue. That's an American issue.

And there is, of course, another responsibility we have to our children, and that's the responsibility to ensure that we do not pass on to them a debt they cannot pay. That is critical.

I agree, absolutely.

See, I know we can get some consensus in here.

With the deficit we inherited, the cost of the crisis we face, and the long-term challenges we must meet, it has never been more important to ensure that, as our economy recovers, we do what it takes to bring this deficit down. That is critical.

Now, I'm proud that we passed a recovery plan free of earmarks, and I want to pass a budget next year that ensures that each dollar we spend reflects only our most important national priorities.

And yesterday, I -- I held a fiscal summit where I pledged to cut the deficit in half by the end of my first term in office. My administration has also begun to go line by line through the federal budget in order to eliminate wasteful and ineffective programs.

As you can imagine, this is a process that will take some time, but we have already identified $2 trillion in savings over the next decade. In this budget...

In this budget, we will end education programs that don't work and end direct payments to large agribusinesses that don't need them. We'll eliminate...

We'll eliminate the no-bid contracts that have wasted billions in Iraq and -- and reform our defense budget so that we're not paying for Cold War-era weapons systems we don't use. We will root out -- we will root out the waste and fraud and abuse in our Medicare program that doesn't make our seniors any healthier. We will restore a sense of fairness and balance to our tax code by finally ending the tax

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