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Obama offers optimism -- and warnings -- in farewell address

Popular but politically humbled, President Barack Obama said goodbye to the nation Tuesday night, declaring during his farewell address that he hasn't abandoned his vision of progressive change but warning that it now comes with a new set of caveats.

His voice at moments catching with emotion, Obama recounted a presidency that saw setbacks as well as successes. Admitting candidly that political discourse has soured under his watch, Obama demanded that Americans renew efforts at reconciliation.

"It falls to each of us to be those anxious, jealous guardians of our democracy," the President said. "To embrace the joyous task we've been given to continually try to improve this great nation of ours."

Obama also stressed solidarity despite a presidency sometimes at odds with Congress.

"Democracy does not require uniformity," Obama said. "Our founders quarreled and compromised, and expected us to do the same. But they knew that democracy does require a basic sense of solidarity -- the idea that for all our outward differences, we are all in this together; that we rise or fall as one."

Obama's farewell speech

In a concession that, for now, his brand of progressive politics is stalled in Washington, Obama admitted "for every two steps forward, it often feels we take one step back."

He implored his backers to be vigilant in protecting basic American values he warned could come under siege.

"Democracy can buckle when we give in to fear," he said. "So just as we, as citizens, must remain vigilant against external aggression, we must guard against a weakening of the values that make us who we are."

And he warned against turning inward, telling Democrats that only by involving themselves in a real political discourse could they hope to renew the hopeful vision he brought to the White House eight years ago.

"After eight years as your President, I still believe that," he went on. "And it's not just my belief. It's the beating heart of our American idea -- our bold experiment in self-government."

Donald Trump’s reign begins with Obamacare rollback

US president Donald J Trump and first lady Melania Trump dance at the Freedom Ball in Washington DC. Photograph: EPA

Donald Trump has begun his presidency with a series of seismic policy interventions, starting the repeal of Barack Obama’s healthcare policies.

He has also initiated a new US missile defence system and ushered in a new period of American protectionism.

The 45th president of the United States, who was sworn into office on Friday, began his four-year term of office with a series of executive orders that will set the tone for his government. It was, he said, a government that would “put only America first”.

Before attending a series of inaugural balls around Washington DC, the Republican sat down to sign an executive order aimed at undermining Barack Obama’s signature healthcare law, known as Obamacare.

The order notes that Mr Trump plans to seek the “prompt repeal” of the law. In the meantime, it allows the Health and Human Services Department and other federal agencies to delay implementing any piece of the law that might impose any economic cost.

Using similar orders, the new president also signed into law a new national day of patriotism and signalled plans to build a new missile defence system to protect against perceived threats from Iran and North Korea.

The Trump White House stripped the official website of all mention of Mr Obama's key policy agendas, including climate change and LGBT rights along with the civil rights history section.

The various subsections of the White House website were replaced with just six; energy, foreign policy, jobs and growth, military, law enforcement and trade deals.

Nationalistic vision

In his inaugural speech, Mr Trump put forward a nationalistic vision for the country. "The American carnage stops right here, right now," he said. "From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it's going to be only America first. America first."

He later said: "We will follow two simple rules: buy American and hire American." This caused some British politicians to wonder what kind of trade deal the UK can realistically expect.

But in an interview with the Financial Times, British Prime Minister Theresa May said: "I'm confident we can look at areas even in advance of being able to sign a formal trade deal. Perhaps we could look at barriers to trade at the moment and remove some of those barriers to open up that new trading relationship."

Putin congratulations

Although not expected to make her first official visit to the US until the spring, the prime minister is reportedly set to fly out to meet Mr Trump next week, which would make her the first foreign leader to hold talks with the new US president.

Mr Trump will have to wait a bit longer to meet Vladimir Putin. The Russian president was ready to meet Mr Trump, the Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was quoted as saying by Tass news agency, but preparations for the possible meeting may take months, not weeks.

“This will not be in coming weeks. Let’s hope for the best - that the meeting will happen in the coming months,” Mr Peskov told the BBC, according to Tass.

He said Mr Putin would call Mr Trump in the coming days to congratulate him on taking office. He also told Tass that it was impossible to resolve Syria crisis in a constructive way without US involvement.

On Saturday, hundreds of thousands of women are expected to march on Washington in a protest that looks set to comfortably outsize Mr Trump’s inaugural crowd. Millions of others will follow suit in cities across the US and across the world, including Ireland. Marches in Australia and New Zealand have already taken place.

Shortly after taking office, Trump sent his cabinet nominations to the Senate. He signed a waiver to allow the retired General James Mattis to serve as defence secretary, even though he left the military less than the required seven years ago.

Mr Mattis, whose appointment has been approved by the Senate, was later sworn in by the vice-president, Mike Pence. Mr Pence also swore in John Kelly as head of homeland security.

National day of patriotism

In a separate step on Friday, the White House chief of staff, Reince Priebus, issued a memo directing an immediate “regulatory freeze” to prevent federal agencies from issuing any new regulations.

This echoed Mr Trump’s pledge to repeal two existing regulations for new government regulation imposed by his administration. Mr Trump also signed a proclamation declaring a national day of patriotism.

At his inauguration balls, Mr Trump brought his signature style to the task of governing, sprinkling his comments at three inaugural balls with references to “phony polls”, campaign victories and social media.

“Let me ask you: should I keep the Twitter going?” he asked a cheering crowd of supporters before dancing with his wife, Melania, to My Way at the second of three inaugural balls. “The enemies keep saying: ‘Oh that’s terrible,’ but it’s a way of bypassing dishonest media.’”

Asked about his first day, Trump said: “It was busy but good - a beautiful day.’’

Mr Trump is expected to visit the CIA on Saturday, meeting members of the nation’s intelligence community. The visit may be fraught with tension.

Mr Trump has sharply criticised the nation’s top intelligence officials for their assertions about Russian hacking and leaks about his briefings in the weeks before he was sworn in.

Equipping people to stay ahead of technological change

WHEN education fails to keep pace with technology, the result is inequality. Without the skills to stay useful as innovations arrive, workers suffer—and if enough of them fall behind, society starts to fall apart. That fundamental insight seized reformers in the Industrial Revolution, heralding state-funded universal schooling. Later, automation in factories and offices called forth a surge in college graduates. The combination of education and innovation, spread over decades, led to a remarkable flowering of prosperity.

Today robotics and artificial intelligence call for another education revolution. This time, however, working lives are so lengthy and so fast-changing that simply cramming more schooling in at the start is not enough. People must also be able to acquire new skills throughout their careers.

Unfortunately, as our special report in this issue sets out, the lifelong learning that exists today mainly benefits high achievers—and is therefore more likely to exacerbate inequality than diminish it. If 21st-century economies are not to create a massive underclass, policymakers urgently need to work out how to help all their citizens learn while they earn. So far, their ambition has fallen pitifully short.

Machines or learning

The classic model of education—a burst at the start and top-ups through company training—is breaking down. One reason is the need for new, and constantly updated, skills. Manufacturing increasingly calls for brain work rather than metal-bashing. The share of the American workforce employed in routine office jobs declined from 25.5% to 21% between 1996 and 2015. The single, stable career has gone the way of the Rolodex.

Pushing people into ever-higher levels of formal education at the start of their lives is not the way to cope. Just 16% of Americans think that a four-year college degree prepares students very well for a good job. Although a vocational education promises that vital first hire, those with specialised training tend to withdraw from the labour force earlier than those with general education—perhaps because they are less adaptable.

At the same time on-the-job training is shrinking. In America and Britain it has fallen by roughly half in the past two decades. Self-employment is spreading, leaving more people to take responsibility for their own skills. Taking time out later in life to pursue a formal qualification is an option, but it costs money and most colleges are geared towards youngsters.

The market is innovating to enable workers to learn and earn in new ways. Providers from General Assembly to Pluralsight are building businesses on the promise of boosting and rebooting careers. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) have veered away from lectures on Plato or black holes in favour of courses that make their students more employable. At Udacity and Coursera self-improvers pay for cheap, short programmes that bestow “microcredentials” and “nanodegrees” in, say, self-driving cars or the Android operating system. By offering degrees online, universities are making it easier for professionals to burnish their skills. A single master’s programme from Georgia Tech could expand the annual output of computer-science master’s degrees in America by close to 10%.

Such efforts demonstrate how to interleave careers and learning. But left to its own devices, this nascent market will mainly serve those who already have advantages. It is easier to learn later in life if you enjoyed the classroom first time around: about 80% of the learners on Coursera already have degrees. Online learning requires some IT literacy, yet one in four adults in the OECD has no or limited experience of computers. Skills atrophy unless they are used, but many low-end jobs give workers little chance to practise them.

If new ways of learning are to help those who need them most, policymakers should be aiming for something far more radical. Because education is a public good whose benefits spill over to all of society, governments have a vital role to play—not just by spending more, but also by spending wisely.

Lifelong learning starts at school. As a rule, education should not be narrowly vocational. The curriculum needs to teach children how to study and think. A focus on “metacognition” will make them better at picking up skills later in life.

But the biggest change is to make adult learning routinely accessible to all. One way is for citizens to receive vouchers that they can use to pay for training. Singapore has such “individual learning accounts”; it has given money to everyone over 25 to spend on courses from 500 approved providers. So far each citizen has only a few hundred dollars, but it is early days.

Courses paid for by taxpayers risk being wasteful. But industry can help by steering people towards the skills it wants and by working with MOOCs and colleges to design courses that are relevant. Companies can also encourage their staff to learn. AT&T, a telecoms firm which wants to equip its workforce with digital skills, spends $30m a year on reimbursing employees’ tuition costs. Trade unions can play a useful role as organisers of lifelong learning, particularly for those—workers in small firms or the self-employed—for whom company-provided training is unlikely. A union-run training programme in Britain has support from political parties on the right and left.

To make all this training worthwhile, governments need to slash the licensing requirements and other barriers that make it hard for newcomers to enter occupations. Rather than asking for 300 hours’ practice to qualify to wash hair, for instance, the state of Tennessee should let hairdressers decide for themselves who is the best person to hire.

Not everyone will successfully navigate the shifting jobs market. Those most at risk of technological disruption are men in blue-collar jobs, many of whom reject taking less “masculine” roles in fast-growing areas such as health care. But to keep the numbers of those left behind to a minimum, all adults must have access to flexible, affordable training. The 19th and 20th centuries saw stunning advances in education. That should be the scale of the ambition today.

Flight MH370: Another search still possible, Australia says - BBC News

A massive search operation was launched after the plane vanished

Australia's transport minister has said the search for flight MH370 could resume in the future, but only if "credible new evidence" emerges.

Australia, Malaysia and China ended the Indian Ocean hunt on Tuesday, almost three years after the jet went missing.

Darren Chester on Wednesday said Australia did not rule out another search, but he stressed he did not want to provide false hope.

He also defended the suspension following criticism from relatives.

The plane carrying 239 people vanished on 8 March 2014 while travelling from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing.

More than 120,000 sq km (46,300 sq miles) of the Indian Ocean has been searched. Pieces of debris have been found as far away as Madagascar.

But only a handful of the fragments have been identified as definitely or highly likely to be from the Boeing 777.

There were 14 nationalities among the 227 passengers and 12 crew on board the plane. The majority - 153 people - were Chinese.

A report in November 2016 said the plane had probably made a "high and increasing rate of descent" into the Indian Ocean.

"I don't rule out a future underwater search by any stretch," Mr Chester told reporters in Melbourne, stressing that the hunt was "not a closed book".

But he said he did not want to provide false hope to the victims' families.

"We need to have credible new evidence leading to a specific location before we would be reasonably considering future search efforts," he said.

Australia, Malaysia and China flagged in July that the search would be suspended this month if no credible new evidence was found. In the nations' joint statement on Tuesday, they hoped "new information will come to light".

Mr Chester said analysis of satellite imagery and the drifting of plane debris in the ocean would continue into February while Australia remained open to help Malaysia on future requests including the examination of other aircraft fragments that may be found.

He defended the choice of the search zone, which was called into question after new analysis in December concluded MH370 was not in the area.

The report, released by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB), said it was more likely to be in a 25,000 sq km north of the current one.

"We need to understand the very limited amount of actual data our experts were dealing with... it has been the edge of science and technological endeavour in terms of pursuing this search effort," Mr Chester said.

"In future, whether through better analysis of data, if new technology becomes available or through improved equipment or something of that nature, we may have a breakthrough."

Families angered

Relatives of the victims on Tuesday criticised the decision to halt the search as "irresponsible".

Voice370, a family support group, said finding the Malaysian airliner was "an inescapable duty owed to the flying public" and the search must continue in the newly-identified area.

Media captionGrace Subathirai Nathan: "I want to know what happened to my mother"

"Stopping at this stage is nothing short of irresponsible, and betrays a shocking lack of faith in the data, tools and recommendations of an array of official experts assembled by the authorities themselves," the group said in a statement.

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said he empathised with the families, but that search officials had done the best they could under extraordinary circumstances.

"We share their deep disappointment that the plane has not been found," he said.

"It is an unprecedented search. It's been conducted with the best advice over the areas that were identified as the most likely to find the location of the airplane... and we deeply regret that the plane has not been found."

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