

Web Writing

Obama to nation: Yes, we did, but...

On January 10, the most beloved American president since John F. Kennedy delivered his final address to the nation. Barack Obama leaves his office later this month after eight years of inspiration, cooperation and hope.

Obama's speech in front of 18,000 people at Chicago's McCormick Place was a triumphant reminder that the United States is much better off than it was when he took office in 2009, but that we the people must pick up where he has left off and continue to push for positive change.

The speech was not just a farewell; it was a call to action. Yes, we have made changes. But no, we can't stop now.

Below are some of the key messages American citizens should heed from the speech:

Challenges to democracy

It is obvious that political views are more divided than they've ever been. Social media now allows citizens from every corner of the country to voice their opinions with little fear of consequences. This threatens the peaceful, democratic process. President Obama cautioned that arguments *should* be had to decide how to solve problems, but that without listening to our neighbours, compromise will be impossible.

He spoke about five threats to our democracy:

1. Perceived inequality to economic opportunity
2. Race relations
3. Disagreement on basic facts
4. Fear of personal differences
5. Taking the democratic system for granted

"America first"

Donald Trump may not recognize it, but President Obama put America first his whole eight years in office. The president didn't brag during his speech, but his list of accomplishments is pretty darn impressive.

He helped bring the economy out of a recession. The stock market, wages, income, home values and retirement accounts are rising while poverty is falling. The unemployment rate is near a ten-year low and people want to invest in America.

Twenty million more Americans now have health insurance thanks to the Affordable Care Act.

Race relations are more positive, which can be seen in "the attitudes of young Americans across the political spectrum."

Regarding climate change, dependence on foreign oil has been halved; renewable energy has been doubled; and the Climate Action Plan was created, finally bringing the U.S. on par with the rest of the developed world.

No foreign terrorist organization successfully planned and executed an attack on United States soil while Obama was in power. Osama Bin Laden was neutralized under Obama's order.

Right side of history

"Immigrants – we get the job done!" – Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton*

President Obama pointed out that the current fear of middle eastern immigration isn't a new phenomenon.

"The stereotypes about immigrants today were said, almost word for word, about the Irish, Italians and Poles," he said. "America wasn't weakened by the presences of these newcomers; they embraced this nation's creed, and it was strengthened."

Although he did not mention other examples of being on the right side of history in his address, President Obama also took forward-thinking stances on civil rights, women's rights, LGBT rights and Indigenous rights during his time in office.

Yes we can

President Obama suggested many ways we the people can continue his work. Some are literal and some are symbolic, but all are important.

- Guarantee our children proper education
- Update our social safety net
- Invest in the children of immigrants
- Learn to understand the struggles of your neighbours
- Guard against a weakening of the values that make us who we are
- Be vigilant, but not afraid
- Believe in your own ability to bring about change

And above all,

DEFEND OUR CONSTITUTION.

He stated: "We all share the same, proud title: Citizen." And we must continue to stand up for the principles which our founding fathers gave us.

Inspiration personified

What makes Obama such a compelling speaker is his intelligence and authenticity. He's thoughtful, well-spoken and (Harvard) educated. That intelligence may never be matched by another president.

The president rarely, if ever, referred to notes to when speaking (in any speech he gave over his presidency). He spoke from the heart and reached millions, many of whom were in the audience on Tuesday chanting "four more years!"

Alas, four more years is one thing he can't do.