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President Obama: They deserve a vote

by Morna Murray

NCR Today

I have never witnessed a State of the Union address like the one President Barack Obama gave Tuesday night. I want to thank him for it. Some commentators claimed it was, in effect, two speeches: the first, long on policy recommendations, leading into the second, a finale that rose to an emotional height over gun violence in the United States. I disagree. I thought it was one speech with real genuine challenges to Congress throughout, ending with the ultimate challenge: actually doing something about the outrageous gun violence in the United States. Here is what the president said, in part:

One of those we lost was a young girl named Hadiya Pendleton. She was 15 years old. She loved Fig Newtons and lip gloss. She was a majorette. She was so good to her friends, they all thought they were her best friend. Just three weeks ago, she was here, in Washington, with her classmates, performing for her country at my inauguration. And a week later, she was shot and killed in a Chicago park after school, just a mile away from my house.

Hadiya's parents, Nate and Cleo, are in this chamber tonight, along with more than two dozen Americans whose lives have been torn apart by gun violence. They deserve a vote.

Gabby Giffords deserves a vote.

The families of Newtown deserve a vote.

The families of Aurora deserve a vote.

The families of Oak Creek, and Tucson, and Blacksburg, and the countless other communities ripped open by gun violence -- they deserve a simple vote.

Our actions will not prevent every senseless act of violence in this country. Indeed, no laws, no initiatives, no administrative acts will perfectly solve all the challenges I've outlined tonight. But we were never sent here to be perfect. We were sent here to make what difference we can, to secure this nation, expand opportunity, and uphold our ideals through the hard, often frustrating, but absolutely necessary work of self-government.

A New York *Times* editorial summed up the State of the Union as "The President's Challenge to Congress." It notes that President Obama laid out a path for the country that could cut through the stalemates over spending and taxes and the budget and endless, senseless wrangling, stating that the president's clear message was, "It doesn't have to be this way."

And an examination of the president's proposals in his speech shows clearly that it, indeed, does not have to be this way. What is missing, the *Times* editorial stated, was political will. As my former boss, Marian Wright Edelman, has said many times, "We don't have a money problem in the United States. We have a priorities problem."

The president may have ended with the challenge of passing common-sense gun laws, but along the way, his proposals were equally deserving of a vote. In part:

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- Tying the minimum wage to the cost of living so people who work full-time could actually make ends meet, pay rent, handle an unexpected doctor's bill without missing a few meals, etc. It's an idea with which Mitt Romney agreed. People working for minimum wage deserve a vote.
- Establishing universal pre-kindergarten for all 4-year-olds, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged. I could write 10 blogs on the evidence that shows early education investment pays off on a scale of about \$7 for every \$1 invested by increasing graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, reducing violent crime and increasing young people's ability to earn a living. This has been thoroughly researched and lobbied for years. Nobel Laureate James Heckman, an economist, has devoted himself to it full time. And the first piece of legislation I helped draft when I worked for Sen. Bob Casey was a pre-K bill that -- guess what? -- called for a federal-state partnership in establishing universal pre-K, particularly for children under 200 percent of the poverty level. Senator Casey introduced that bill, "Prepare All Kids," in the 110th Congress and re-introduced it in the 111th and 112th Congresses. These children deserve a vote.
- How about making it easier for people to refinance their homes so they can take advantage of today's lower interest rates? There is a bill right now in Congress that would do that, saving average homeowners \$3,000 a year. As the president said, why wouldn't we want that? Those homeowners deserve a vote.
- Creating a "Fix-it First" Program that puts people to work addressing our most serious infrastructure problems, including 70,000 unsafe bridges across the country. That proposal deserves a vote.
- Comprehensive immigration reform, combining both Democratic and Republican ideas, and acknowledging, as have many Republicans, that we cannot and should not deport 12 million illegal immigrants but rather should offer them a responsible path to citizenship. These hard-working American residents deserve a vote.

In my opinion, the president gave one of the best, if not the best, State of the Union speeches ever. It was a call to genuine action at a time of almost unspeakable inaction, when approval ratings for Congress are

in the low teens and people grow ever more cynical. It was filled with reasonable proposals that would build up the middle class, make sound investments, without increasing the deficit. These are ideas no one who is paid by taxpayers to serve the American public can possibly oppose. Or at least not reasonably oppose.

The president was calling out Congress. Now that is a State of the Union address.

It was one of many moments that Barack Obama has represented the absolute best that America can be: a country of freedom, compassion, ingenuity and problem-solving; a country that can come together in crisis and not exploit the weaknesses of the other side.

The president also pointed out the folly of sequestration cuts, the harm that such cuts would do to education, health care, defense, medical research, jobs and the recovering economy. In doing so, he acknowledged that the biggest driver of the deficit is health care costs of a growing aging population and clearly indicated he was ready to discuss Medicare reform. Another difficult issue both parties must tackle. Leaders in both parties acknowledge the sequestration cuts would be a disaster. No one admits it, but to me it is like the debt ceiling fiasco. Certain people will use it up to the last minute Feb. 28 in the height of irresponsible governing in an attempt to "get" something they want in the negotiations. But no one really intends to go through with sequestration.

Can someone get King Solomon in here and use that baby trick? Maybe then we can figure out which members of Congress really care about the well-being of the American people and send the rest on their way?

I watched former Congresswoman Gabby Giffords, her beauty restored and somehow exuding what I think may be an irrepressible spirit, and she shook her hands together because she is not yet able to clap. I watched as the parents of Hadiya Pendleton were acknowledged by the president, never losing their composure. David Brooks said, in his recurring column with Gail Collins, "The Conversation": "This was a case when seeing two people not cry was actually more powerful than if they had quite understandably broken down." It was.

All these people and proposals that serve people deserve a vote. Not a vote on "cloture" (whether to proceed on a bill). Not partisan and ideological wrangling. Actual votes on good bills -- and you might be surprised to know there are plenty of them. The public simply never gets a chance to hear about them, because they don't get a vote.

So the president laid out a plan. Now it's up to Congress. But it's also up to you and me. Call the members of your state delegation. If you don't know who they are, Google them. It's easy: Enter your ZIP code. Call those offices once a day. I can tell you those calls are documented and communicated. We can make a difference.

We don't need votes on naming post offices, no offense to the postal service. Congress is not elected to serve the least difficult issues that will never endanger their jobs. We need votes on real solutions to real problems. They deserve a vote.

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