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State of the Union Should Be “State of War” Presidential Address

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In troubled times, the world gets more—not less—dangerous. While the White House would prefer to focus on its chosen remedies for domestic “troubles,” it cannot forget the true dangers of the world in which we live: Foreign policy and national security concerns should be front and center in the State of the Union address. President Obama should not leave the impression that the United States is distracted or unable (or unwilling) to lead or vigorously defend its own interests. Issues that directly impact the freedom, security, prosperity, and sovereignty of America cannot be addressed as an afterthought or worse left unmentioned altogether.

Straight and Serious Speaking. When President Obama rises to address a joint session of Congress, the most pressing and imminent global challenges ought to comprise the centerpiece of his remarks. The President’s speech should state the following:

- *America is living in the margin of error for predicting when Iran may obtain a nuclear weapon.* In particular, the President should acknowledge the troubling developments over the last year. *The Times of London*, for example, reported that it had obtained a secret Iranian memo (which may have been written in 2007) describing a four-year research program to produce a nuclear trigger for an atomic bomb. In order to protect itself against threats from Iran and other rogue regimes, the United States needs robust missile defenses now. Eliminating the plan to emplace interceptors in Poland was a great mistake, and the White House’s “charm” offensive has failed.
- *Afghanistan is a war that must be won.* The President has to make clear that he puts the vital interests of the United States above an arbitrary deadline for withdrawing U.S. troops. Taking away space for the Taliban to operate in Afghanistan, coupled with a concerted effort in Pakistan to defeat the Taliban and crush the leadership of al-Qaeda, is critical to winning the Long War. Obama has to make it crystal clear to allies and enemies that the United States will not quit until the job is done.
- *Battling terrorism is Job #1.* In his address, the President should declare that the massacre at Fort Hood, the failed attempt to bomb a Detroit-bound Christmas Day flight, and the suicide bombing that murdered seven CIA officers were a clear “wake-up call” for Washington. While the United States has successfully thwarted at least 28 terrorist plots since 9/11,¹ the terrorists will continue to adapt, improvise, and innovate. The President’s recent statement that America is “at

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war” with al-Qaeda was an important statement, but it was not enough. Washington cannot be distracted from the fight against terrorism for even a minute. The President should reaffirm a commitment to using all available terror-fighting tools. For example, the legal authority for key investigative methods granted under the Patriot Act—a critical component of America’s anti-terror toolkit—will soon expire. Likewise, the President should recognize that military commissions, the detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay, and CIA-led investigations are important for holding terrorists accountable and getting the vital information needed to protect the nation.

- **Alliance maintenance needs to be a higher priority.** The last year has seen significant strains in vital long-standing alliances and threats to important emerging strategic relationships. Japan is considering trashing an agreement concerning critical U.S. bases on Okinawa—a threat to the security of both nations that would have been inconceivable a few years ago. Meanwhile, Australia has dramatically increased defense spending because, in part, it doubts America’s capacity over the long term to balance China’s power in the region. In Europe, by canceling proposals for missile defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic, the Administration undermined relations with both countries and emboldened Russian efforts to expand its influence over Eastern Europe. At the same time, the U.S. has largely failed to obtain significant additional support from NATO for Afghanistan. The United States can only revitalize these relationships by demonstrating it will vigorously protect its vital national interests and press free and independent nations to meet their obligations to support common defense needs. That effort should start with the President making an irrevocable commit-

ment to recapitalizing the U.S. military, an endeavor that would require about another \$50 billion a year for purchasing new equipment and maintaining the capabilities America’s men and women under arms need to defend this country.

- **Free trade works and is vital to growing the American economy.** America cannot defend itself and its allies if the U.S. economy is weak. For the first time since The Heritage Foundation and *The Wall Street Journal* created the global *Index of Economic Freedom*, the United States dropped from the top tier of free economies. It now ranks with countries like Belgium, Botswana, and Sweden. The U.S.’s loss of economic freedom was the worst decline among the world’s 20 major economies. A key part of revitalizing the U.S. economy and growing jobs requires that the United States reinvigorate its place as the world’s greatest and freest trading nation. The President should declare that promoting a free trade agenda, along with dropping “buy American,” cutting taxes, deregulating, and reducing government spending are essential to returning the U.S. to the ranks of the world’s freest economies.

Time for Tough Words and Real Commitments. In wartime, the President must be a war President 24/7/365. The President should leave no doubt in his State of the Union address that he accepts that responsibility. He will be able to accomplish that only by making foreign policy and national security the centerpiece of his speech and by offering solid and concrete commitments to defend the U.S., protect this nation’s liberties, and promote American prosperity.

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1. Jena Baker McNeill, “Detroit Terror Plot Makes 28 Plots Foiled Since 9/11,” Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 2741, December 26, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2741.cfm>.