
HANDOUT TWO, LESSON SIX

FAREWELL ADDRESS THEME: ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY²

That's what I want to focus on tonight: The state of our democracy. Understand, democracy does not require uniformity. Our founders argued. They quarreled. Eventually they compromised. They 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're all in this together; that we rise or fall as one.

There have been moments throughout our history that threaten that solidarity. And the beginning of this century has been one of those times. A shrinking world, growing inequality; demographic change and the specter of terrorism — these forces haven't just tested our security and our prosperity, but are testing our democracy, as well. And how we meet these challenges to our democracy will determine our ability to educate our kids, and create good jobs, and protect our homeland. In other words, it will determine our future.

To begin with, our democracy won't work without a sense that everyone has economic opportunity. And the good news is that today the economy is growing again. Wages, incomes, home values, and retirement accounts are all rising again. Poverty is falling again. The wealthy are paying a fairer share of taxes even as the stock market shatters records. The unemployment rate is near a 10-year low. The uninsured rate has never, ever been lower. Healthcare costs are rising at the slowest rate in 50 years. And I've said and I mean it — if anyone can put together a plan that is demonstrably better than the improvements we've made to our healthcare system and that covers as many people at less cost, I will publicly support it.

Because that, after all, is why we serve. Not to score points or take credit, but to make people's lives better.

But for all the real progress that we've made, we know it's not enough. Our economy doesn't work as well or grow as fast when a few prosper at the expense of a growing middle class and ladders for folks who want to get into the middle class. That's the economic argument. But stark inequality is also corrosive to our democratic ideal. While the top one percent has amassed a bigger share of wealth and income, too many families, in inner cities and in rural counties, have been left behind — the laid-off factory worker; the waitress or health care worker who's just barely getting by and struggling to pay the bills — convinced that the game is fixed against them, that their government only serves the interests of the powerful — that's a recipe for more cynicism and polarization in our politics.

But there are no quick fixes to this long-term trend. I agree, our trade should be fair and not just free. But the next wave of economic dislocations won't come from overseas. It will come from the relentless pace of automation that makes a lot of good, middle-class jobs obsolete.

And so we're going to have to forge a new social compact to guarantee all our kids the education they need to give workers the power to unionize for better wages; to update the social safety net to reflect the way we live now, and make more reforms to the tax code so corporations and individuals who reap the most from this new economy don't avoid their obligations to the country that's made their very success possible.

We can argue about how to best achieve these goals. But we can't be complacent about the goals themselves.

For if we don't create opportunity for all people, the disaffection and division that has stalled our progress will only sharpen in years to come.

²<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/farewell>