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Office of the Press Secretary

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Remarks by the President on America's College PromisePellissippi State Community College
Knoxville, Tennessee

2:05 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Hello, everybody! (Applause.) Hey! Thank you! (Applause.) Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat. Please have a seat. Well, it is good to be back in Tennessee. I hope you guys aren't getting tired of me. I've been coming around a lot lately, because there's a lot of good stuff happening here.

I want to begin by thanking Joe and Jill Biden. They're not just good friends and good partners, but they really believe in the power of education and they really believe in creating those kinds of ladders of opportunity that gave all three of us and Michelle the chances, the incredible opportunities that we've had today. And they understand the promise of America's community colleges. Well, Jill really understands it, and Joe -- (laughter) -- he doesn't really have a choice.

Before I get into the reason that I'm here today, I want to begin by saying just a few words about the tragic events that we've watched unfold in France over the last several hours and days. And because events have been fast-moving this morning, I wanted to make sure to comment on them.

I just spoke to my counterterrorism advisor. We have been in close touch with the French government throughout this tragedy. The moment that the outrageous attack took place, we directed all of our law enforcement and counterintelligence operations to provide whatever support that our ally needs in confronting this challenge. We're hopeful that the immediate threat is now resolved, thanks to the courage and professionalism of the French personnel on the ground.

But the French government continues to face the threat of terrorism and has to remain vigilant. The situation is fluid. President Hollande has made it clear that they're going to do whatever is necessary to protect their people. And I think it's important for us to understand: France is our oldest ally. I want the people of France to know that the United States stands with you today, stands with you tomorrow. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families who have been directly impacted. We grieve with you. We fight alongside you to uphold our values, the values that we share -- universal values that bind us together as friends and as allies.

And in the streets of Paris, the world has seen once again what terrorists stand for. They have nothing to offer but hatred and human suffering. And we stand for freedom and hope and the dignity of all human beings. And that's what the city of Paris represents to the world, and that spirit will endure forever -- long after the scourge of terrorism is banished from this world. (Applause.)

Now, I'm in Knoxville not only because I just like Knoxville, but I'm here today because one of my resolutions is to make sure that folks across this great country feel like they are coming back. And there is no doubt: Thanks to the steps we took early on to rescue our economy and to rebuild it on a new foundation, America is coming back. (Applause.)

Now, I'm not running for office anymore, so let me just present the facts. I promised that 2014 would be a breakthrough year for America. This morning, we got more evidence to back that up. In December, our businesses created 240,000 new jobs. Our unemployment rate fell to 5.6 percent, which is the lowest in six and a half years. What that means is, 2014 was the strongest year for job growth since the 1990s. (Applause.) Unemployment fell in 2014 faster than any year since 1984. Now, think about that. It's been 30 years since unemployment fell as fast as it did last year. And most importantly, we're seeing faster job growth in industries that provide good-paying jobs, traditionally middle-class jobs, than anything else.

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Since 2010, the United States of America has create more jobs than Europe, Japan, and every other advanced economy combined. (Applause.) American manufacturing is in its best stretch of job growth since the 1990s. We're actually seeing companies insourcing instead of outsourcing. They're realizing, we want to be here with American workers making American products. America is now the world's number-one producer in oil, gas. We've doubled the production of clean energy. And, by the way, you're saving about a buck-ten a gallon at the pump over this time last year. (Applause.)

Although I keep on reminding folks, gas prices, they go up and they come down and then they go up. (Laughter.) So I just want everybody to know that you should enjoy this. Take the money you're saving, pay off the credit card or go get a new appliance, or buy a fuel-efficient car -- (laughter) -- so that when prices go back up, you're still well-positioned.

Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, about 10 million Americans have gained health insurance over the past year. (Applause.) And, by the way, we've done this while cutting our deficits by about two-thirds. Everybody thinks that -- (applause) -- they did a survey -- in every survey, they ask, is the deficit going up or going down? And 70 percent of Americans say that the deficit is going up. The deficit has come down by two-thirds since I took office. (Applause.)

Meanwhile, thanks to the hard work of students and educators, dropout rates are down, graduation rates are up. And after 13 long years, our war in Afghanistan has come to a responsible end, and we've got more troops that were home this holiday season. (Applause.)

So I say all this because these six years have demanded a lot of hard work and a lot of sacrifice on everybody's part. And as a country, we've got every right to be proud of what we've got to show for it. America's resurgence is real. And now that we've seen calmer waters economically, if we all do our part, if we all pitch in, then we can start making sure that all boats are actually lifted again, and wages and incomes start rising again. And we can make sure that the middle class is the engine that powers America's prosperity just as it always has.

So that's going to be the focus of my State of the Union address in a couple weeks. I wanted to give you a little preview. Don't tell anybody I said this. (Laughter.) I'm giving you the inside scoop. That's going to be the essence of my message: How do we build on the progress that we've made? And I figured, why wait for the State of the Union? Why stand on formalities; let's get the ball rolling right now.

Two days ago, I visited Michigan, where workers have brought the auto industry roaring back. And we talked about what else we can do around advanced manufacturing. Yesterday, I was in Arizona, where I announced new actions to make the dream of homeownership a reality for more middle-class families. Later today, Joe and I are going to head to a company in Clinton to take action that will develop high-tech industry even further here in Tennessee. And right here, right now, at Pellissippi State, I'm going to announce one of my most important State of the Union proposals, and that's helping every American afford a higher education. (Applause.)

Now, part of the reason I wanted to come here was because Tennessee is at the forefront of doing some really smart stuff. (Applause.) And we've got some proud Tennesseans who can take some credit for the great work that's been done. First, your Governor, Bill Haslam, who's here. (Applause.) Your two very fine senators, -- you've got Bob Corker -- (applause) -- and your senior Senator, Lamar Alexander, who's a former Secretary of Education himself, so he knows a little bit about this. (Applause.) You've got Congressman John Duncan. (Applause.) Your Mayor, Madeline Rogero. (Applause.) And we've got Pellissippi's president, Anthony Wise. (Applause.) Hey! And we've got all of you. (Laughter.)

Now, Joe and Jill both already touched on these themes, but let me just amplify them a little bit. Here in America we don't guarantee equal outcomes. Some folks work harder; some folks don't. Some folks take advantage of opportunities; some folks don't. Some people have good luck; some people have bad luck and things don't always work out where everything is perfectly equal. But we do expect that everybody gets an equal shot. We do expect everybody can go as far as their dreams and hard work will take them.

We don't expect anybody to be bound by the circumstances of their birth. If they were, I wouldn't be here, and neither would Joe. Jill -- she's so accomplished she would have succeeded no matter what. (Laughter.) But we expect everybody to get a fair shot. And in exchange, we do our fair share. That's the basic bargain at the heart of this country: If you work hard, you can get ahead. It shouldn't matter what your last name is, or what we look like, or what family we were born into, or how we worship. What matters is effort and merit. That's the promise of America.

And the way we deliver on that is making sure that our education system works on behalf of every person who lives here. America thrived in the 20th century in large part because we made high school the norm, and then we sent a generation to college on the GI Bill -- including my grandfather. Then we dedicated ourselves to cultivating the most educated workforce in the world and we invested in what's one of the crown jewels of this country, and that's our higher education system. And dating back to Abraham Lincoln, we invested in land-grant colleges. We understood that this was a hallmark of America, this investment in education.

But eventually, the world caught on and the world caught up. And that's why we have to lead the world in education

again. That's why my administration is working to make high-quality early childhood education available to all of our kids. (Applause.) We know if we invest in them early, that it pays dividends on the backend.

That's why we're working to bring high-speed broadband to 99 percent of America's students within the next four years. We want to make sure every child is plugged in. That's why we're recruiting more highly trained math and science teachers. That's why we're working to raise standards and invest more in our elementary and middle and high schools, so that every young person is prepared for a competitive world.

And this work is not easy. Sometimes it's controversial. It's not going to be the same in every state. But in places like Tennessee, we're seeing incredible strides as a consequence of these efforts. Over the past few years, Tennessee students have improved their reading scores and math scores more than any other state in the country. (Applause.) That's a credit to their hard work, their teachers' hard work, to Governor Haslam's hard work, leaders from both parties. It's been a bipartisan effort. Every Tennessean should be proud of that.

And today, in a 21st century economy, where your most valuable asset is your knowledge, the single most important way to get ahead is not just to get a high school education, you've got to get some higher education. That's why all of you are here.

Now, the value of an education is not purely instrumental. Education helps us be better people. It helps us be better citizens. You came to college to learn about the world and to engage with new ideas and to discover the things you're passionate about -- and maybe have a little fun. (Laughter.) And to expand your horizons. That's terrific -- that's a huge part of what college has to offer.

But you're also here, now more than ever, because a college degree is the surest ticket to the middle class. It is the key to getting a good job that pays a good income -- and to provide you the security where even if you don't have the same job for 30 years, you're so adaptable and you have a skill set and the capacity to learn new skills, it ensures you're always employable.

And that is the key not just for individual Americans, that's the key for this whole country's ability to compete in the global economy. In the new economy, jobs and businesses will go wherever the most skilled, best-educated workforce resides. Because businesses are mobile now. Technology means they can locate anywhere. And where they have the most educated, most adaptable, most nimble workforce, that's where they're going to locate. And I want them to look no further than the United States of America. I want them coming right here. I want those businesses here, and I want the American people to be able to get those businesses -- or get those jobs that those businesses create.

So that's why we've increased grants and took on a student loan system that was funneling billions of taxpayer dollars through big banks, and said let's cut out the middleman, let's give them directly to students instead, we can help more students.

We've increased scholarships. We've cut taxes for people paying tuition. We've let students cap their federal student loan payments at 10 percent of income so that they can borrow with confidence, particularly if you're going into a job like nursing or teaching that may not pay a huge salary but that's where your passions are.

We're creating a new college ratings system that will give parents and students the kind of clear, concise information you need to shop around for a school with the best value for you -- and gives us the capacity to recognize schools that offer a great education at a reasonable price.

On the flight over here, Lamar and I were talking about how we can do more to simplify the application process for federal student loans, which is still too complicated. (Applause.)

So we've done a lot of good work over the last six years; we're going to keep at it. But today, I want to focus on a centerpiece of my education agenda -- and that's the community colleges, like this one.

For millions of Americans, community colleges are essential pathways to the middle class because they're local, they're flexible. They work for people who work full-time. They work for parents who have to raise kids full-time. They work for folks who have gone as far as their skills will take them and want to earn new ones, but don't have the capacity to just suddenly go study for four years and not work. Community colleges work for veterans transitioning back into civilian life. Whether you're the first in your family to go to college, or coming back to school after many years away, community colleges find a place for you. And you can get a great education.

Now, Jill has been teaching English at community colleges for 20 years. She started when she was like 15. (Laughter.) And she's still full-time today. And she sees -- I talk to her and she talks about her students, and she can see the excitement and the promise, and sometimes the fear of being a 32-year-old mom who's going back to school and never finished the degree that she had started, and life got in the way and now she's coming back and suddenly getting a whole new skills set and seeing a whole range of career options opening up to her. It's exciting.

And that's what community colleges are all about -- the idea that no one with drive and discipline should be left out,

should be locked out of opportunity, and certainly that nobody with that drive and discipline should be denied a college education just because they don't have the money. Every American, whether they're young or just young at heart, should be able to earn the skills and education necessary to compete and win in the 21st century economy.

So today I'm announcing an ambitious new plan to bring down the cost of community college tuition in America. I want to bring it down to zero. (Applause.) We're going to -- I want to make it free. (Applause.) I want to make it free. Community colleges should be free for those willing to work for it -- because in America, a quality education cannot be a privilege that is reserved for a few. I think it's a right for everybody who's willing to work for it.

Now, the good news is, you already do something like this in Tennessee. You call it Tennessee Promise. (Applause.) So you call it Tennessee Promise, and we thought why not just build on what works. So we're going to call it "America's College Promise." (Applause.)

And the concept is simple: America's College Promise will make two years of community college free to responsible students who are willing to work for it. Now, I want to underscore that last clause -- everybody who's working hard for it. There are no free rides in America. You would have to earn it. Students would have to do their part by keeping their grades up. Colleges would have to do their part by offering high-quality academics and helping students actually graduate. States would have to do their part too. This isn't a blank check. It's not a free lunch. But for those willing to do the work, and for states and local communities that want to be a part of this, it can be a game-changer.

Think about it: Students who started at community colleges during those two years, and then go on to a four-year institution, they essentially get the first half of their bachelor's degree for free. People who enroll for skills training will graduate already ready to work, and they won't have a pile of student debt. Two years of college will become as free and universal as high school is today.

Now, we're also taking another page out of Tennessee's playbook and making investments to expand technical training programs at community colleges, much like you do through your 27 Colleges of Applied Technology. (Applause.) Joe did a terrific job running a task force that we put together just to look at the job training and technical training systems all around the country. And at a time when jobs are changing, and higher wages call for higher skills, we've got to make sure workers have a chance to get those skills.

We want young people to graduate with real-world training that leads directly to good jobs, and we want older workers to get retrained so they can compete. And we want more women and minorities to get jobs in fields that traditionally they've been left out of, like science and technology, and engineering and math. And we want to connect community colleges with employers, because when that's done right, these partnerships pay off for everybody: Students learn on the job, employers get access to talent, colleges get help designing courses that actually prepare people for the workplace, all of which creates better pathways to today's middle class. So we're going to find the programs that work and we're going to help them grow.

Now, in a few weeks, I'm going to send to Congress my plan for free community college. I hope that Congress will come together to support it, because opening the doors of higher education shouldn't be a Democratic issue or a Republican issue. This is an American issue. (Applause.)

Governor Haslam is a Republican. And thanks to his leadership, last year Democrats and Republicans came together and made Tennessee the first state in decades to offer free community college to its students. Meanwhile, up in my hometown of Chicago, Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who is a Democrat, is now offering free community college, and they're pairing students with growing sectors of the economy so they graduate with good jobs. So if a state with Republican leadership is doing this and a city with Democratic leadership is doing this, then how about we all do it? Let's do it for our future. (Applause.)

And as I said before, there are a bunch of good bipartisan ideas out there. A few days ago, Senator Alexander joined forces with a Democratic Senator, Michael Bennet, to introduce the legislation that would make financial aid forms simpler. I noticed a lot of people applauded, because it's been a while since I filled it out -- (laughter) -- but I understand there's more than 100 questions on it. It just shouldn't be that hard to apply for aid for college. And so I've committed to working with Senator Alexander. Let's shrink it down. Let's make life a little easier for millions of families. The point is, we're not going to agree on everything. But simplifying that form, that's something we should be able to agree on. Let's get that done this year. (Applause.)

Because in the end, nothing is more important to our country than you, our people. That's our asset. We've got very nice real estate here. We've got this incredible bounty, the God-given resources that we enjoy in this country. But our greatest resources are people.

And I want to say to the students here and the staff and faculty how proud I am of what you guys are doing. A lot of students here, I know you had to overcome some obstacles to get here. Many of you are the first in your families to go to college. Some of you are working full time while you're going to school. But you're making this investment in you, and by doing that, you're making an investment in this country's future.

And I just want to use one person's story as an example, Caitlin McLawhorn. Where's Caitlin? Where is she? Is she here? I thought she was here a second ago, but I'm going to tell her story anyway.

She was raised by a single mom. She helped make ends meet, getting her first job almost the minute she could, two days after her 16th birthday. When it came time for college, the money wasn't there. But Caitlin lives in Tennessee, so she knew she had a great, free option. She completed two years at this institution. Now she's a senior at Maryville College. She's working full-time, just like she has since her first day of college. And Caitlin says, "A lot of people like me got discouraged. I get discouraged. But I can look back and say, you've made it so far. I've learned that things aren't always what you want, but you can make them what you want." That's wisdom.

"Things aren't always what you want, but you can make them what you want." That's what America is about. We can make of our lives what we will. And there are going to be bumps, and there are going to be challenges. And we've come through some very hard times. Things aren't always what we wanted, but we have overcome discouragement and we have overcome division and, sometimes, some discord. And we don't give up. We get up, we fight back, we come back stronger than before.

Thanks to the hard work of the American people, the United States of America is coming back. And I've never been as confident as -- in my entire life that we're going to make of our future what we want of it thanks to you.

Appreciate it, Tennessee. God bless you. God bless America. (Applause.)

END

2:38 P.M. EST