

## SOTU Response -- Full Text

Contributed by Jim Webb

Good evening.

I'm Senator Jim Webb, from Virginia, where this year we will celebrate the 400th anniversary of the settlement of Jamestown - an event that marked the first step in the long journey that has made us the greatest and most prosperous nation on earth.

It would not be possible in this short amount of time to actually rebut the President's message, nor would it be useful. Let me simply say that we in the Democratic Party hope that this administration is serious about improving education and healthcare for all Americans, and addressing such domestic priorities as restoring the vitality of New Orleans.

Further, this is the seventh time the President has mentioned energy independence in his state of the union message, but for the first time this exchange is taking place in a Congress led by the Democratic Party. We are looking for affirmative solutions that will strengthen our nation by freeing us from our dependence on foreign oil, and spurring a wave of entrepreneurial growth in the form of alternate energy programs. We look forward to working with the President and his party to bring about these changes.

There are two areas where our respective parties have largely stood in contradiction, and I want to take a few minutes to address them tonight. The first relates to how we see the health of our economy - how we measure it, and how we ensure that its benefits are properly shared among all Americans. The second regards our foreign policy - how we might bring the war in Iraq to a proper conclusion that will also allow us to continue to fight the war against international terrorism, and to address other strategic concerns that our country faces around the world.

When one looks at the health of our economy, it's almost as if we are living in two different countries. Some say that things have never been better. The stock market is at an all-time high, and so are corporate profits. But these benefits are not being fairly shared. When I graduated from college, the average corporate CEO made 20 times what the average worker did; today, it's nearly 400 times. In other words, it takes the average worker more than a year to make the money that his or her boss makes in one day.

Wages and salaries for our workers are at all-time lows as a percentage of national wealth, even though the productivity of American workers is the highest in the world. Medical costs have skyrocketed. College tuition rates are off the charts. Our manufacturing base is being dismantled and sent overseas. Good American jobs are being sent along with them.

In short, the middle class of this country, our historic backbone and our best hope for a strong society in the future, is losing its place at the table. Our workers know this, through painful experience. Our white-collar professionals are beginning to understand it, as their jobs start disappearing also. And they expect, rightly, that in this age of globalization, their government has a duty to insist that their concerns be dealt with fairly in the international marketplace.

In the early days of our republic, President Andrew Jackson established an important principle of American-style democracy - that we should measure the health of our society not at its apex, but at its base. Not with the numbers that come out of Wall Street, but with the living conditions that exist on Main Street. We must recapture that spirit today.

And under the leadership of the new Democratic Congress, we are on our way to doing so. The House just passed a minimum wage increase, the first in ten years, and the Senate will soon follow. We've introduced a broad legislative package designed to regain the trust of the American people. We've established a tone of cooperation and consensus that extends beyond party lines. We're working to get the right things done, for the right people and for the right reasons.

With respect to foreign policy, this country has patiently endured a mismanaged war for nearly four years. Many, including myself, warned even before the war began that it was unnecessary, that it would take our energy and attention away from the larger war against terrorism, and that invading and occupying Iraq would leave us strategically vulnerable in the most violent and turbulent corner of the world.

I want to share with all of you a picture that I have carried with me for more than 50 years. This is my father, when he was a young Air Force captain, flying cargo planes during the Berlin Airlift. He sent us the picture from Germany, as we waited for him, back here at home. When I was a small boy, I used to take the picture to bed with me every night, because for more than three years my father was deployed, unable to live with us full-time, serving overseas or in bases where there was no family housing. I still keep it, to remind me of the sacrifices that my mother and others had to make, over and over again, as my father gladly served our country. I was proud to follow in his footsteps, serving as a Marine in Vietnam. My brother did as well, serving as a Marine helicopter pilot. My son has joined the tradition, now serving as an infantry Marine in Iraq.

Like so many other Americans, today and throughout our history, we serve and have served, not for political reasons, but because we love our country. On the political issues - those matters of war and peace, and in some cases of life and death - we trusted the judgment of our national leaders. We hoped that they would be right, that they would measure with accuracy the value of our lives against the enormity of the national interest that might call upon us to go into harm's way.

We owed them our loyalty, as Americans, and we gave it. But they owed us - sound judgment, clear thinking, concern for our welfare, a guarantee that the threat to our country was equal to the price we might be called upon to pay in defending it.

The President took us into this war recklessly. He disregarded warnings from the national security adviser during the first Gulf War, the chief of staff of the army, two former commanding generals of the Central Command, whose jurisdiction includes Iraq, the director of operations on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and many, many others with great integrity and long experience in national security affairs. We are now, as a nation, held hostage to the predictable - and predicted - disarray that has followed.

The war's costs to our nation have been staggering. Financially. The damage to our reputation around the world. The lost opportunities to defeat the forces of international terrorism. And especially the precious blood of our citizens who have

stepped forward to serve.

The majority of the nation no longer supports the way this war is being fought; nor does the majority of our military. We need a new direction. Not one step back from the war against international terrorism. Not a precipitous withdrawal that ignores the possibility of further chaos. But an immediate shift toward strong regionally-based diplomacy, a policy that takes our soldiers off the streets of Iraq's cities, and a formula that will in short order allow our combat forces to leave Iraq.

On both of these vital issues, our economy and our national security, it falls upon those of us in elected office to take action.

Regarding the economic imbalance in our country, I am reminded of the situation President Theodore Roosevelt faced in the early days of the 20th century. America was then, as now, drifting apart along class lines. The so-called robber barons were unapologetically raking in a huge percentage of the national wealth. The dispossessed workers at the bottom were threatening revolt.

Roosevelt spoke strongly against these divisions. He told his fellow Republicans that they must set themselves "as resolutely against improper corporate influence on the one hand as against demagoguery and mob rule on the other." And he did something about it.

As I look at Iraq, I recall the words of former general and soon-to-be President Dwight Eisenhower during the dark days of the Korean War, which had fallen into a bloody stalemate. "When comes the end?" asked the General who had commanded our forces in Europe during World War Two. And as soon as he became President, he brought the Korean War to an end.

These Presidents took the right kind of action, for the benefit of the American people and for the health of our relations around the world. Tonight we are calling on this President to take similar action, in both areas. If he does, we will join him. If he does not, we will be showing him the way.

Thank you for listening. And God bless America.