

Obama To Take On Economy In State Of Union

Erica Werner, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama is ready to reclaim the spotlight with a plea for economic fairness in a State of Union address that opposition Republicans panned in advance as a rehash of old ideas.

Obama delivers his third State of the Union address Tuesday in a capital and country shot through with politics, with his re-election campaign well under way and his potential GOP opponents lobbing attacks against him daily as they scrap for the right to take him on.

Obama's 9 p.m. EST address to a joint session of Congress and millions of television viewers will be as much as anything an argument for his re-election, the president's biggest, best chance so far to offer a vision for a second term.

Senior political adviser David Plouffe said Tuesday morning the president is "happy to have a debate" about his performance.

Bill Galston, a former Clinton administration domestic policy adviser now at the Brookings Institution, said, "Almost by definition it's going to be at least as much a political speech as a governing speech."

"The president must run on his record," Galston said, "and that means talking candidly and persuasively with the country about the very distinctive nature of the challenges the American economy faced when he took office and what has gone right for the past three years, and what needs to be done in addition."

With economic anxiety showing through everywhere, the speech will focus on a vision for restoring the middle class, with Obama facing the tricky task of persuading voters to stick with him even as joblessness remains high at 8.5 percent. Obama can point to positive signs, including continued if sluggish growth; his argument will be that he is the one to restore economic equality for middle-class voters.

Implicit in the argument, even if he never names frontrunners Gingrich and Mitt Romney, is that they are on the other side.

Obama's speech will come as Gingrich and Romney have transformed the Republican campaign into a real contest ahead of Florida's crucial primary next week. And he'll be speaking on the same day that Romney, a multimillionaire, released his tax returns, offering a vivid illustration of wealth that could play into Obama's argument about the growing divide between rich and poor.

Asked in an interview Tuesday about Romney's relatively modest tax rate in the range of 15 percent, given that he's a multi-millionaire, Plouffe said, "We need to

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change our tax system. We need to change our tax code so that everybody is doing their fair share."

Obama will frame the campaign to come as a fight for fairness for those who are struggling to keep a job, a home or college savings and losing faith in how the country works.

The speech will feature the themes of manufacturing, clean energy, education and American values. The president is expected to urge higher taxes on the wealthy, propose ways to make college more affordable, offer new steps to tackle a debilitating housing crisis and push to help U.S. manufacturers expand hiring.

Aides said the president would also outline more specifics about the so-called "Buffett Rule", which Obama has previously said would establish a minimum tax on people making \$1 million or more in income. The rule was named after billionaire Warren Buffett, who has said it is unfair that his secretary pays a higher tax rate than he does.

White House communications director Dan Pfeiffer said on Twitter Tuesday that Buffett's secretary, Debbie Bosanek, would attend the State of the Union in the first lady's box.

Even before Obama delivered his speech, Senate Minority leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky, said he already felt "a sense of disappointment."

"While we don't yet know all of the specifics, we do know the goal," he said. "Based on what the president's aides have been telling reporters, the goal isn't to conquer the nation's problems. It's to conquer Republicans. The goal isn't to prevent gridlock, but to guarantee it."

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, has called the themes of Obama's speech a "pathetic" rehash of unhelpful policies. But he said Tuesday he hoped Obama would "extend somewhat of an olive branch" to work with Republicans on the economy during his prime-time address.

For three days following his speech, Obama will promote his ideas in five states key to his re-election bid. On Wednesday he'll visit Iowa and Arizona to promote ideas to boost American manufacturing; on Thursday in Nevada and Colorado he'll discuss energy; and in Michigan Friday he'll talk about college affordability, education and training. Polling shows Americans are divided about Obama's overall job performance but unsatisfied with his handling of the economy.

The lines of argument between Obama and his rivals are already stark, with America's economic insecurity and the role of government at the center.

The president has offered signals about his speech, telling campaign supporters he wants an economy "that works for everyone, not just a wealthy few." Gingrich, on the other hand, calls Obama "the most effective food stamp president in history." Romney says Obama "wants to turn America into a European-style entitlement

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society."

Obama will make bipartisan overtures to lawmakers but will leave little doubt he will act without their help when it's necessary and possible, an approach his aides say has let him stay on offense.

The public is more concerned about domestic troubles over foreign policy than at any other time in the past 15 years, according to a new survey by the Pew Research Center. Some 81 percent want Obama to focus his speech on domestic affairs, not foreign ones; just five years ago, the view was evenly split.

On the day before Obama's speech, his campaign released a short Web ad showing monthly job losses during the end of the Bush administration and the beginning of the Obama administration, with positive job growth for nearly two Obama years. Republicans assail him for failing to achieve a lot more.

Presidential spokesman Jay Carney said Monday that Obama is not conceding the next 10 months to "campaigning alone" when people need economic help. On the goals of helping people get a fair shot, Carney said, "There's ample room within those boundaries for bipartisan cooperation and for getting this done."

Plouffe appeared on ABC's "Good Morning America" and was interviewed on NBC's "Today" show and "CBS This Morning."

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