

# Obama: Washington Took Its Eye Off Economic Ball

Darlene Superville, Associated Press

GALESBURG, Ill. (AP) — President Barack Obama said Wednesday that Washington has "taken its eye off the ball" as he pledged a stronger second-term commitment to tackling the economic woes that strain many in the middle class nearly five years after the country plunged into a recession.

Obama returned to the college campus where he gave his first major economic address as a U.S. senator, and he chided Congress for being less concerned about the economy and more about "an endless parade of distractions, political posturing and phony scandals."

"I am here to say this needs to stop," Obama said in a speech at Knox College. "This moment does not require short term thinking. It does not require having the same old stale debates."

The president's attempt to refocus on the economy comes amid some hopeful signs of improvement, with the unemployment rate falling and consumer confidence on the rise. But looming spending and budget deadlines this fall could upend that progress if Washington spirals into contentious fiscal fights like those that plagued Obama's first term.

"I believe there are members of both parties who understand what's at stake," Obama said. "But I will not allow gridlock, inaction or willful indifference to get in our way."

Even before the president spoke, Republicans panned his pivot back to the economy as little more than vague, empty promises.

"It's a hollow shell, it's an Easter Egg with no candy in it," said House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio.

The president announced no fresh policy proposals, though he promised new ideas in a series of speeches he plans in the coming weeks. They will focus on manufacturing, education, housing, retirement security and health care.

On education, the president promised to outline "an aggressive strategy to shake up the system, tackle rising costs, and improve value for middle-class students and their families." He renewed his call for increasing the minimum wage.

Despite pressing public concerns over jobs and economic security, the economy has taken a back seat in Washington to other issues in the first six months of Obama's second term. That's in part due to the White House's decision to focus on other

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agenda items following Obama's re-election, most notably stricter gun control measures and immigration.

Some distractions also have thrown the White House off balance, including revelations that the Internal Revenue Service targeted political groups and the Justice Department's seizure of journalists' phone records. Foreign policy crises, particularly in the Middle East, have competed for Obama's attention, too.

The president said that while he will continue to press for his other agenda items, there will be few resources and little resolve for solving other problems without a strong economy.

Perhaps more than any other issue, the economy will also be central to Obama's legacy as president. The deep economic troubles that accompanied his first inauguration have eased and the stock market has soared. But at 7.6 percent, the nationwide unemployment rate remains high and millions more Americans are underemployed or have seen their wages stagnate.

"This growing inequality isn't just morally wrong. It's bad economics," Obama said. "When the rungs on the ladder of opportunity grow farther apart, it undermines the very essence of this country."

The economic themes Obama spoke of Wednesday were strikingly similar to address at Knox College eight years ago as a young Illinois senator. White House advisers say Obama has frequently harkened back to that speech throughout his two runs for the White House and nearly five years as president.

The economy in the surrounding Galesburg, Ill., community reflects much of the underlying economic concerns facing Americans. A Maytag plant in the town shuttered its doors in 2004, leaving hundreds of people unemployed. Today, the factory still sits vacant. Galesburg's unemployment rate is just under 8 percent and nearly one-quarter of its population lives in poverty.

"Those old days aren't coming back," Obama conceded. He said the proposals he will outline in speeches later this summer will be aimed at adapting the U.S. economy to an increasingly competitive and interconnected world.

Among the initiatives Obama will tout in the coming weeks is pre-school for all 4-year-olds and training tailored to the jobs of the future, along with a strategy to tackle the rising cost of higher education.

The president also promised steps to encourage homeownership, make it easier for people to save for retirement and to continue to put in place the elements of his unpopular health care law in the face of efforts by Republicans in Congress to repeal, delay or eliminate funding for its various parts.

He also pledged new efforts to help manufacturers bring jobs back to America and to create jobs in the energy sectors of wind, solar and natural gas.

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From Galesburg, Obama planned to travel to neighboring Missouri for a similar economic speech. He was also scheduled to visit a port Jacksonville, Fla., on Thursday to call for increased spending on infrastructure.

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