

The Administration of President Barack Obama

The First 120 Days

Remarks to Shenton College, Perth
by
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Good morning. I am delighted to be here today. As you know, there is a new administration in the White House. The election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States is a truly historic event. I'd like to talk to you a little bit today about the Obama administration and its accomplishments over its first four months. I'll talk for about 15-20 minutes, and then will be happy to take any questions you may have.

I hear from my colleagues in Washington that there is a sense of renewed optimism and enthusiasm in the air across America. I experienced it myself when I returned to Washington during Prime Minister Rudd's visit to the United States in March and the subsequent visit of Foreign Minister Smith and Defense Minister Fitzgibbon in April. There is an increased interest in participating in the American political process by the American people, in particular among groups and communities who had

previously felt alienated from the mainstream. The election and inauguration of Barack Obama was not just an electrifying event in the United States; it has stirred hope and optimism around the world.

Barack Obama came to the White House representing change. This president, to so many people in the United States and around the globe, represents a renewal of the American democratic spirit.

President Obama is someone whose background reflects the diversity that makes America great. In addition to being the first African-American president, he is one of the youngest American presidentsⁱ. Born in 1961, at the end of the baby boom generation, he is the first president to have come of age in the 1980s, after the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement.

The atmosphere in which he grew up was markedly different from the socially tumultuous 1960s that shaped the outlook of the earlier baby boomers, such as myself.

President Obama has assumed a position which many people believe is the most difficult job in the world. Let's look for a moment at what he has had to face in his first days in office.

At home, he has had to address an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions. When President Obama entered the White House, Americans were losing jobs, losing their homes, their pensions; many did not have health care. The four largest U.S. banks had lost half of their value and others were closing. Some of our oldest and most respected companies were facing bankruptcy, and the U.S. budget deficit had reached an

astonishing one trillion dollars. People were losing hope in many quarters of the country.

The new President was faced with serious problems of illegal immigration and drug violence along our southern border.

Looking further abroad, the President was confronted with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; a deteriorating security situation in

Pakistan; the long-festering issue of the Middle East conflict; the prospect of a nuclearized Iran; the challenges and opportunities

of a rising China; the threat of nuclearization on the Korean

Peninsula; even the predations of pirates off the Horn of Africa.

And added to these issues were the equally urgent challenges of global climate change, widespread poverty, migration,

transborder crime and pandemic disease.

So barely 120 days ago, this young President assumed office, with the cheers of the American people still in his ears, to face the grim challenges of a troubled world. But let us look at the first four months of this young Administration and what it has already accomplished:

--The President took office with a commitment to seek a better relationship with the world, to extend the hand of friendship to countries with which we have not had relations in decades, to repair alliances, and to build partnerships to deal with global threats and concerns. He expressed it clearly in his inaugural address when he told the American people and the world:

"America is a friend of each nation, and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity. And we are ready to lead once more."

--In his second full day in office, the President signed an executive order closing the Guantanamo Bay detention center. He also banned detention practices that were authorized under the prior administration and made clear that the United States does not torture. Trying to close Guantanamo is proving more difficult than originally thought, as most countries, like many communities in the United States, have been reluctant to accept detainees.

-- That same day, President Obama also visited the State Department to convey his "commitment to the importance of diplomacy and renewing American leadership." He said: "The inheritance of our young century demands a new era of American leadership. We must recognize that America's strength comes not just from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from our enduring values. And for the sake of

our national security and the common aspirations of people around the globe, this era has to begin now."

-- In these first 100 days, the President, along with his entire foreign policy team, have directly engaged people and leaders across the globe and demonstrated that America will rely on strength, vision, and respect in order to make progress possible.

-- The President has laid out a foreign policy vision that rejects the false choice between our values and our security; he has said that the world needs to see that we can be true to our values and ideals while advancing our interests.

-- The President is following through on a commitment to do a more effective job of reaching out, listening, and speaking to the Muslim world, with an interview on Al Arabiya, a new year's

message to the people of Iran, and a speech to the Turkish people. He expressed America's desire that our relationship with the Muslim world be based on more than our shared opposition to terrorism. We seek broader engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect.

-- We will promote progress and change first through the power of our ideas. We will seek to implement these ideas by using all elements of national power: smart diplomacy, effective development, economic leverage, and military solutions.

-- This Administration recognizes that while there are instances and individuals who can be met only by force, the United States will be prepared to listen to and talk with our adversaries in order to advance our interests.

President Obama announced a plan to end the war in Iraq responsibly and on a timeline that assures safety and stability.

He said on February 27 that he intends to withdraw most U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of August 2010, with 35,000-50,000 of the current 142,000 troops remaining to serve in training or advisory roles

--The President and his economic team rallied the world at the G-20 behind concrete steps to deal with the global financial crisis. In their planning, they made sure that those less fortunate were not ignored, and called on the Congress to double U.S. financial support for agricultural development in the developing world to more than \$1 billion in 2010.

--President Obama appointed Special Envoys and Representatives for the Middle East, South West Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Sudan, and Climate Change.

--At the NATO and EU Summits, the United States partnered with our Allies on a new strategy to address the serious challenge we face in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Our new approach focuses our efforts on confronting a common enemy that threatens the United States, our friends and our allies, and the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan who have suffered the most at the hands of violent extremists. We will pursue intensive regional diplomacy, provide more for the civilian aspects of the mission, and ensure that we have the resources to train Afghan security forces.

--Just last week, Secretary Clinton announced a new initiative to support the Pakistani people, their government and military as they respond to the humanitarian challenges that have resulted from their efforts to combat and defeat the extremists who are threatening their country.

In response to a request for assistance from the Government of Pakistan, the United States is contributing more than \$100 million in humanitarian support, and we are prepared to do more as the situation demands. As we support Pakistan's democratically elected government, we're coordinating closely with United Nations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent, and we are deploying new tools. For example, we are working with the Pakistani Government in launching a text messaging system that will alert local communities to assistance efforts and help keep family members in touch.

--When North Korea defied the international community with a provocative missile launch in April, the United States and other members of the UN Security Council unanimously condemned the action and confirmed that it violates international law and would result in real consequences for North Korea.

--Also in April, the President outlined our goal for a nuclear weapons-free world and launched a multi-pronged effort to reverse the tide of nuclear proliferation, reinvigorated our international effort to curb Iran's illicit nuclear program, and revived critical arms control talks with Russia.

--As part of an ambitious American agenda, we have engaged our neighbors in the Western Hemisphere at the Summit of the Americas and launched a new relationship based on mutual

respect and shared responsibility, and announced new policy steps toward Cuba.

-- The President realizes that one of his most crucial long-term tests will be our response to climate change. Secretary Clinton recently told key policymakers from around the globe that climate change is a “clear and present danger to our world that demands immediate attention.” Without strong action on climate change, the worst impacts will fall on those least able to deal with them. The President has set out a commitment to addressing this issue and we will act. That is why the Obama Administration is taking a leading role in pushing for a successful outcome of the UN climate negotiations later in the year in Copenhagen.

One way to do that is to get agreement to reduce emission from key nations before Copenhagen. So we are leading action

on energy and climate links through the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (MEF). This brings together the world's largest greenhouse gas emitters – including Australia – to develop plans to reduce emissions and increase use of clean energy. The Major Economies Forum is one part of the U.S. strategy to build support for a global agreement at Copenhagen. At Copenhagen, we have to secure agreement from both developed and developing economies on ways to reduce greenhouse gases and decouple economic growth from rising emissions.

We are also leading the effort to provide economic and technology assistance to help developing countries take on cleaner energy sources faster. The U.S. either leads or is a key partner in seven separate international partnerships to expand the use of newer, cleaner energy sources. These range from clean coal technology to waste methane to hydrogen to fusion.

We are joining countries like Australia by providing \$280 million for climate change adaptation in the poorest countries.

Not bad for 120 days!

These challenges remain, of course, but the American people are a confident people, and we and our friends and allies, including Australia, will not be daunted.

Let me end my talk by saying a word or two about the partnership between the United States and Australia.

The relationship between our two countries is a strong and enduring one. Prime Minister Rudd enjoyed excellent meetings in Washington, including his time with President Obama. Both leaders reaffirmed the uniquely strong relationship between our two countries. Both leaders were elected on a theme of change and new approaches to global challenges such as nuclear

disarmament, climate change, fiscal crisis and the gap between rich and poor nations. Prime Minister Rudd and President Obama expressed the commonality of their views in facing the daunting tasks ahead. We are both young and diverse nations. We have dealt with adversity together in the past and we are optimistic in facing the future. I will venture to say that as Australia and the United States proceed into the 21st century, our best days as friends and partners lay ahead.

Now, I'll be happy to take your questions.

ⁱ Inaugurated at age 47, President Obama is the fifth youngest president, behind Theodore Roosevelt (42), John F. Kennedy (43), Bill Clinton (46) and Ulysses S. Grant (46).