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What a Progressive President Might Say

By Melody Barnes
Special to washingtonpost.com's Think Tank Town
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Tomorrow President Bush will deliver his State of the Union address. While this speech is sure to be filled with the President's plans for moving the nation forward, it is also sure to be very different from one that a progressive would deliver. If we had a newly elected progressive President, below is the kind of State of the Union address he or she might give.

"My fellow Americans, let us tonight put aside our partisan interests and picture an America where citizens once again enjoy an open, honest, competent government. A government that turns away from reckless military adventures and concentrates on the genuine external threats we face as a nation. A government that works to ensure economic opportunity, affordable healthcare and a secure retirement for all.

The war in Iraq has turned into a tragedy of epic proportions, harming this country militarily, economically, diplomatically and politically. And while we can not withdraw our troops tomorrow, we also can not engage in an open-ended military engagement, sending more young men and women to die. I propose instead that we embark upon an immediate program of strategic redeployment, starting with a phased withdrawal of our armed forces over a period of 18 months. Under this plan, we would draw down our troops at the rate of 8,000 per month until our presence in Iraq is reduced to zero. Soldiers and Marines who remain during this interim phase will have important work to do, training Iraqi forces, rooting out terrorists, maintaining border security and helping to revive the country economically. In addition, we must finish the job in Afghanistan, eliminating al-Qaeda and the Taliban once and for all. This means increasing our troop presence there, not decreasing it.

At the same time, we will energize our diplomatic efforts by convening a peace conference, with international backing, to be attended by all of Iraq's neighbors. This means engaging Syria and Iran, who have an interest in

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making sure Iraq remains stable.

Here at home there is urgent work to do to fight the historically high -- and growing -- gap between our richest and poorest citizens. While the mean income of households on the low end of the income spectrum -- the bottom 20 percent -- is just \$10,655 a year, the income of the top twenty percent of

households averages almost \$160,000. That's 15 times as much. At the same time, according to the latest census figures, the middle class, beset with stagnant wages and mountainous debts, is shrinking. The sad fact is that one of our most cherished values as a society, namely equality of opportunity, is fading as a reality for far too many people. Economists have shown that a child born into a lower-income family has only a 1 percent chance of making it to the top of the income distribution, while children from prosperous families have a 22 percent chance. To restore fairness to our system, I will embark on a multi-faceted approach including increasing our investment in public education, promoting genuine health care reform, and backing a higher minimum wage.

Domestically, no need is more urgent than fixing our broken health care system. Today, nearly 47 million Americans have no health insurance. And those lucky enough to be insured are seeing the cost of their premiums soar. At the same time, the uninsured cannot afford screening for heart disease, diabetes, cancer, or even get a flu shot -- and our health care system as a whole places far more emphasis on treatment than it does on preventing disease in the first place. As a nation, we dedicate only three percent of our health dollars to health promotion, but over 20 percent of our health care dollars to care in the last year of life. We must guarantee affordable coverage for all Americans. At the same time, we must also overhaul our health care system so that we make wellness and disease prevention a national priority. The Wellness Trust will create incentives for health care providers, employers, schools and individuals to focus on prevention, and preventative care will be available to people outside of a doctor's office. Preventive services will be covered whether they are delivered in pharmacies, supermarkets, on the job, at senior centers, or elsewhere in the community.

Our economic security, our national security, our health, and the future of the global environment are fundamentally linked to the choices we make about energy. The technologies necessary to dramatically transform our energy future are well within our reach. The potential for the United States to pursue a course of innovation that would create good, high-wage jobs has been largely abandoned, leaving our economy dangerously vulnerable to price shocks and upheavals that dampen economic growth and burden middle-class families with unpredictable gas and utility bills. It is time to change course.

To secure a sound and sustainable energy future, I will propose a progressive energy plan that reduces greenhouse gas emissions, diversifies and expands domestic and renewable supply options, makes smarter use of the energy sources we have today, and reduces over-reliance on energy from any particular nation or source. My plan will invest in American ingenuity and actively engage the private sector to innovate and implement technologies to help create an energy system for the 21st century. Together we can reduce the threat of global climate change and transform our energy system in ways that stimulate the economy and increase our security.

In the area of science, I pledge to liberate our scientific community in its quest to improve the lives of people around the globe. As a first step, I want to overturn the restrictions on embryonic stem cell research, which holds so much promise in the treatment of diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, Parkinson's and other forms of paralysis. At the same time, I will support the creation of a regulatory structure to ensure that stem cell research proceeds along the highest ethical standards.

The American people support these goals and, working with Congress, we will make

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them a reality. Good night and God bless America."

Melody Barnes is Executive Vice President for Policy at the Center for American Progress.

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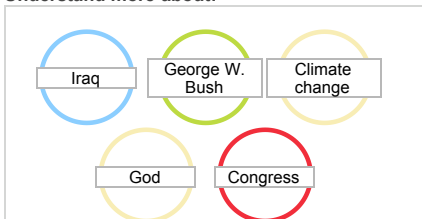


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