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## State of the Union fact check: A look at President Obama's claims

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President Barack Obama's State of the Union address might have been his best chance to parlay his reelection triumph into momentum for the nitty-gritty of his policy agenda on jobs, immigration and gun control.

But along with the opportunity to drive a message home to lawmakers and millions of viewers watching at home comes the temptation to skew facts to get public opinion moving in his direction.

([PHOTOS: Scenes from the 2013 State of the Union](#))

Here's POLITICO's look at the facts Obama marshaled for his arguments Tuesday night and how the truth sometimes got stretched in the process.

### The climate straw man

**Obama: "I urge this Congress to pursue a bipartisan, market-based solution to climate change, like the one John McCain and Joe Lieberman worked on together a few years ago. But if Congress won't act soon to protect future generations, I will."**

Cap-and-trade legislation akin to McCain-Lieberman has been dead for some time, and Obama's one of the guilty parties.

Yes, the president helped get a climate bill through the House in 2009. But he let other priorities like health care and Wall Street reform go first in the Senate, siphoning momentum from a chamber where coal- and oil-state Democrats and reluctant Republicans like McCain were all too willing to let the issue slip away.

McCain has shown little interest since in taking the lead on global warming legislation, while Lieberman is off in retirement. So far, the only lawmakers even proposing bills that look like McCain-Lieberman are liberal lions like Sens. Barbara Boxer and Bernie Sanders, not exactly hope for bipartisan legislation. It's not clear Obama will invest any political capital to push for that or other climate change legislation.

([Also on POLITICO: Fact-checking Rubio's response](#))

Any action on the issue will likely have to come from the president alone, via executive order and regulations that will no doubt be controversial.

### Obamacare slowing health care costs?

**Obama: "Already, the Affordable Care Act is helping to slow the growth of health care costs."**

This is still, at best, an open question.

Obama made the comment in a portion of the speech devoted to Medicare, and it's true

there are signs that some experiments in the health law aimed at paying for quality instead of quantity of care are contributing to the slowdown in Medicare spending growth.

But will they slow down Medicare spending enough to make a dent in the tidal wave of spending as baby boomers retire? Too soon to know — and the doubters aren't all in the far right wing of the Republican party.

(Also on POLITICO: [GOP: Obama speech a wish list](#))

Nor can Obama declare that the health law – the new regulations, the exchanges, the push for more coverage – will bring down spending for the whole health care system. Much of the law isn't even implemented yet, and the forecasts about what will happen involve a lot of educated guesses about how people and businesses will respond. For every advocate of the law who predicts savings and efficiencies, there's a critic who foresees businesses and families drowning in mandates and regulations.

### **\$9.00 minimum wage, not so bold**

**Obama: “Let’s declare that in the wealthiest nation on Earth, no one who works full-time should have to live in poverty, and raise the federal minimum wage to \$9.00 an hour....Working folks shouldn’t have to wait year after year for the minimum wage to go up while CEO pay has never been higher.”**

Obama's proposal Tuesday night to increase the federal minimum wage to \$9 sounded bold and it was one surprise element of the address the White House managed to keep under wraps until the speech. But it turns out it's less than what Obama campaigned on four years ago.

In 2008, Obama favored raising the minimum wage to \$9.50 by 2011. However, when he became president, he did little to deliver on the pledge as the economic crisis unfolded.

### **Sequestration blame game**

**Obama: “In 2011, Congress passed a law saying that if both parties couldn’t agree on a plan to reach our deficit goal, about a trillion dollars’ worth of budget cuts would automatically go into effect this year....Now, some in this Congress have proposed preventing only the defense cuts by making even bigger cuts to things like education and job training; Medicare and Social Security benefits. That idea is even worse.”**

Obama neglected to mention a few key things about the sequester. First, he signed the Budget Control Act, which contained the automatic cuts. And according to Bob Woodward's book, “The Price of Politics,” the idea came from then-Budget Director Jack Lew.

*While the president took a swipe at Republicans on how to dodge the sequester, he didn't offer any substantive ideas to avoid the across-the-board cuts set to take effect in a few weeks, either.*

What the president recited instead are some of the same deficit reduction ideas he's been offering since the election, including some changes to entitlement programs and tax reform. Yet none of these ideas will be acted on in the short term to address the immediate question of how to stop the March 1 deadline for sequestration, which now sits

as its own issue after getting separated from fiscal battles over taxes and the debt limit extension.

And absent substantive talks between Obama and Hill leaders in the next three weeks on the sequester, the blame game will do little to resolve the impasse.

### **Is \$4 trillion in deficit reduction enough?**

**Obama:** “We are more than halfway towards the goal of \$4 trillion in deficit reduction that economists say we need to stabilize our finances.”

Some respected economists say \$4 trillion in deficit reduction over 10 years would get the debt under control and that figure has been the aim of negotiations between the White House and Congress in the past couple of years. But some of Obama’s favorite economists think that medicine is too weak.

Obama claims \$2.5 trillion in deficit reduction is already on tap and another \$1.5 trillion would be enough, but a group including former Clinton budget director Alice Rivlin, ex-Clinton National Economic Council director Laura Tyson and former Fed chairman Paul Volcker says Congress and the White House need to find another \$2.4 trillion in savings to make sure deficits actually decline.

“In our view, it is the absolute minimum necessary to ensure the debt is on a sustainable path,” the bipartisan [Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget](#) says wrote in a policy paper Monday.

Obama’s figures are more in line with those of a [liberal think tank, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities](#).

### **New interest in drone oversight**

**Obama:** “My administration has worked tirelessly to forge a durable legal and policy framework to guide our counterterrorism operations. Throughout, we have kept Congress fully informed of our efforts. I recognize that in our democracy, no one should just take my word that we’re doing things the right way.”

Obama suggested his policies on the use of armed drones to kill American terror suspects abroad have been an open book — at least to Congress. But for two years his administration refused to comply with requests from lawmakers for access to legal opinions justifying the policy.

While Congressional intelligence committees had access to information on targeting and the strikes themselves, Obama relented on the legal memos only last week when it appeared non-disclosure could stymie his nominee for CIA director, John Brennan.

Obama also said Tuesday he welcomed “check and balances” on his powers, even though his administration has — at least until now — resisted any role for judges in overseeing the executive branch’s claimed power to kill a U.S. citizen.

### **What happened to the Afghanistan surge?**

**Obama:** “Already, we have brought home 33,000 of our brave servicemen and women. ...Tonight, I can announce that over the next year, another 34,000 American

**troops will come home from Afghanistan. This drawdown will continue. And by the end of next year, our war in Afghanistan will be over. “**

Judging by this speech alone, it sounded like Obama has presided over a successful and steady withdrawal of American troops in Afghanistan. One key fact was missing: he's also the one responsible for sending over the troops he's pulling out.

When Obama took office, there were about 33,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. He allowed planned increases to continue, bringing the number of troops up to about 68,000 by the end of 2009. Then Obama went even further, authorizing a surge of another 33,000 troops in 2010.

Obama roughly tripled troop levels from those President George W. Bush had in place. And even with the drawdown plan he announced Tuesday, Obama plans to have more U.S. troops in Afghanistan through the next year than when he took office.

And when Obama talked vaguely about “the nature of our commitment” after 2014, he was referring to keeping a still-to-be-determined number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan though he never said that directly.

### **The best starting point on manufacturing**

**Obama: “After shedding jobs for more than 10 years, our manufacturers have added about 500,000 jobs over the past three.”**

Sure, that might be true over the last three. But Obama's actually been president for four years, and if you look at all four years, the record's a lot worse.

When Obama took office in January 2009, the economy had 604,000 more manufacturing jobs than it does now. As with the rest of the economy, the manufacturing sector hemorrhaged jobs during the 2008-2009 recession, as the economy contracted sharply in the wake of the housing and financial crisis; more than 2 million manufacturing jobs were lost between June of 2008 and the Jan. 2010 nadir.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the U.S. economy has added 489,000 manufacturing jobs since January of 2010 — just a shade shy of Obama's 500,000.

Picking 2010 as his starting point, instead of the start of his term a year earlier, allows the president to paint a rosier picture.

But while economists are sharply divided over whether the president's policies have helped or hurt the economic recovery, very few blame his initiatives for a recession that was already well underway when Obama took the oath of the office.

*Patrick Reis, Joanne Kenen and Kelsey Snell contributed to this report.*