Obama puts 'focus on the future' in State of the Union address

US President Barack Obama vigorously defended his legacy while striking an optimistic tone for the future in his final State of the Union address.

He pushed back against the negative tone of the current presidential race, arguing the US has the “strongest, most durable economy in the world”.

“Anyone claiming that America’s economy is in decline is peddling fiction,” Mr Obama told lawmakers.

The speech to Congress highlighted his accomplishments such as health reform.

However, his focus was on cementing his legacy rather than unveiling new policies.

“For my final address to this chamber, I don’t want to talk just about the next year,” he said. “I want to focus on our future.”



Both houses of Congress attended Mr Obama’s annual address

Mr Obama focused on tackling income inequity, using technology to combat climate change and how to maintain national security while not becoming mired in far-flung conflicts.

Finally, he talked at length about improving the state of politics and debate.

“Democracy does require basic bonds of trust between its citizens,” he said.

He called on voters and members of Congress to change the divisive tone of politics and to “change the system to reflect our better selves”.

Mr Obama said a major regret of his presidency is that Republicans and Democrats have become more divided.

Mr Obama took indirect aim to Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump who has been criticised for his comments about Muslims and immigrants.

“When politicians insult Muslims, when a mosque is vandalized, or a kid bullied, that doesn’t make us safer,” Mr Obama said.

“That’s not telling it like it is. It’s just wrong. … And it betrays who we are as a country.”

In the year ahead, Mr Obama said he wants to:

- close the Guantanamo Bay prison
- achieve meaningful criminal justice reform
- address rising tide of prescription drug abuse
- authorise the use of military force against IS
- lift the embargo on Cuba

He also announced a new national cancer research initiative that Vice President Joe Biden will be leading.

He only mentioned guns briefly, despite a recent policy push for executive actions on gun control, though a chair was left empty in the chamber to symbolise victims of gun violence.

South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, delivering the Republican response to the address, said Mr Obama “spoke eloquently about grand things,” but that his “record has fallen short of his soaring words”.

“During anxious times, it can be tempting to follow the siren call of the angriest voices. We must resist that temptation,” she said, likely referring to Mr Trump but not mentioning him by name.

She said Republicans must recognise their role in the declining trust in government in the US.

“We have big decisions to make. Our country is being tested,” she said. “But we’ve been tested in the past, and our people have always risen to the challenge.”

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