

FACT CHECK: Obama and the 'hatchet' job

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WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama, who once considered government spending freezes a hatchet job, told Americans on Wednesday it's now part of his solution to the exploding deficit. He didn't explain what had changed.

His State of the Union speech skipped over a variety of complex realities in laying out a "common-sense" call to action.

A look at some of his claims and how they compare with the facts:

OBAMA: "Starting in 2011, we are prepared to freeze government spending for three years. Spending related to our national security, Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security will not be affected. But all other discretionary government programs will. Like any cash-strapped family, we will work within a budget to invest in what we need and sacrifice what we don't."

THE FACTS: The anticipated savings from this proposal would amount to less than one percent of the deficit — and that's if the president can persuade Congress to go along.

Obama is a convert to the cause of broad spending freezes. In the presidential campaign, he criticized Republican opponent John McCain for suggesting one. "The problem with a spending freeze is you're using a hatchet where you need a scalpel," he said a month before the election. Now, Obama wants domestic spending held steady in most areas where the government can control year to year costs. The proposal is similar to McCain's.

OBAMA: "I've called for a bipartisan fiscal commission, modeled on a proposal by Republican Judd Gregg and Democrat Kent Conrad. This can't be one of those Washington gimmicks that lets us pretend we solved a problem. The commission will have to provide a specific set of solutions by a certain deadline. Yesterday, the Senate blocked a bill that would have created this commission. So I will issue an executive order that will allow us to go forward, because I refuse to pass this problem on to another generation of Americans."

THE FACTS: Any commission that Obama creates would be a weak substitute for what he really wanted — a commission created by Congress that could force lawmakers to consider unpopular remedies to reduce the debt, including curbing politically sensitive entitlements like Social Security and Medicare. That idea crashed in the Senate this week, defeated by equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans. Any commission set up by Obama alone would lack authority to force its recommendations before Congress, and would stand almost no chance of success.

OBAMA: Discussing his health care initiative, he said: "Our approach would preserve the right of Americans who have insurance to keep their doctor and their plan."

THE FACTS: The Democratic legislation now hanging in limbo on Capitol Hill aims to keep people with employer-sponsored coverage — the majority of Americans under age 65 — in the plans they already have. But Obama can't guarantee people won't see higher rates or fewer benefits in their existing plans. Because of elements such as new taxes on insurance companies, insurers could change what they offer or how much it costs. Moreover, Democrats have proposed a series of changes to the Medicare program for people 65 and older that would certainly pinch benefits enjoyed by some seniors. The Congressional Budget Office has predicted cuts for those enrolled in private Medicare Advantage plans.

OBAMA: The president issued a populist broadside against lobbyists, saying they have "outsized influence" over the government. He said his administration has "excluded lobbyists from policymaking jobs." He also said it's time to "require lobbyists to disclose each contact they make on behalf of a client with my administration or Congress" and "to put strict limits on the contributions that lobbyists give to candidates for federal office."

THE FACTS: Obama has limited the hiring of lobbyists for administration jobs, but the ban isn't absolute; seven waivers from the ban have been granted to White House officials alone. Getting lobbyists to report every contact they make with the federal government would be difficult at best; Congress would have to change the law, and that's unlikely to happen. And lobbyists already are subject to strict limits on political giving. Just like every other American, they're limited to giving \$2,400 per election to federal candidates, with an overall ceiling of \$115,500 every two years.

OBAMA: "Because of the steps we took, there are about 2 million Americans working right now who would otherwise be unemployed. ... And we are on track to add another one and a half million jobs to this total by the end of the year."

THE FACTS: The success of the Obama-pushed economic stimulus that Congress approved early last year has been an ongoing point of contention for the president. In December, the administration reported that recipients of direct assistance from the government created or saved about 650,000 jobs. The number was based on self-reporting by recipients and some of the calculations were shown to be in error.

The Congressional Budget Office has been much more guarded than Obama in characterizing the success of the stimulus plan. In November, it reported that the stimulus increased the number of people employed by between 600,000 and 1.6 million "compared with what those values would have been otherwise." It said the ranges "reflect the uncertainty of such estimates." And it added: "It is impossible to determine how many of the reported jobs would have existed in the absence of the stimulus package."

OBAMA: He called for action by the White House and Congress "to do our work openly, and to give our people the government they deserve."

THE FACTS: Obama skipped past a broken promise from his campaign — to have the negotiations for health care legislation broadcast on C-SPAN "so that people can see who is making arguments on behalf of their constituents, and who are making arguments on behalf of the drug companies or the insurance companies." Instead, Democrats in the White House and Congress have conducted the usual private negotiations, making multibillion-dollar deals with hospitals, pharmaceutical companies and other stakeholders behind closed doors. Nor has Obama lived up consistently to his pledge to ensure that legislation is posted online for five days before it's acted upon.

OBAMA: "We will continue to go through the budget line by line to eliminate programs that we can't afford and don't work. We've already identified \$20 billion in savings for next year."

THE FACTS: Identifying savings is far from achieving them. If the past is any guide, little will result from this exercise because Congress routinely rejects the White House's suggested spending cuts.

OBAMA: "The United States and Russia are completing negotiations on the farthest-reaching arms control treaty in nearly two decades."

THE FACTS: Despite insisting early last year that they would complete the negotiations in time to avoid expiration of the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in early December, the U.S. and Russia failed to do so. And while officials say they think a deal on a new treaty is within reach, there has been no breakthrough. A new round of talks is set to start Monday. One important sticking point: disagreement over including missile defense issues in a new accord. If completed, the new deal may arguably be the farthest-reaching arms control treaty since the original 1991 agreement. An interim deal reached in 2002 did not include its own rules on verifying nuclear reductions.

OBAMA: Drawing on classified information, he claimed more success than his predecessor at killing terrorists: "And in the last year, hundreds of al-Qaida's fighters and affiliates, including many senior leaders, have been captured or killed — far more than in 2008."

THE FACTS: It is an impossible claim to verify. Neither the Bush nor the Obama administration has published enemy body counts, particularly those targeted by armed drones in the Pakistan-Afghan border region. The pace of drone attacks has increased dramatically in the last 18 months, according to congressional officials briefed on the secret program.

Associated Press writers Jim Kuhnhehn, Jim Drinkard, Erica Werner, Robert Burns and Pamela Hess contributed to this report.

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