News

President Joe Biden delivers the State of the Union address at the U.S. Capitol in Washington

President Joe Biden delivers the State of the Union address at the U.S. Capitol in Washington March 1, 2022. (CNS photo/Saul Loeb, Pool via Reuters)



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WASHINGTON — In his first State of the Union address March 1, President Joe Biden emphasized the crucial need to come together as a nation while facing challenges of the continuing pandemic, rising inflation and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

"Let's stop seeing each other as enemies and start seeing each other for who we are: fellow Americans," he said.

In his speech, which took just over an hour, the president vowed to fight inflation, offered proposals to lower the cost of child care and prescription drugs, and asked Congress to confirm his nominee for the Supreme Court.

But the main emphasis overshadowing most of his speech was the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which the president addressed immediately. Some in attendance wore blue and yellow, the colors of the Ukrainian flag and some even waved a small Ukrainian flag during remarks highlighting the country's current struggle and bravery.

Biden drew bipartisan standing ovations when he voiced support for Ukraine and later in his speech when he said the police should receive more funding.

He pointed out, to sustained applause, and another standing ovation, that Ukrainian Ambassador to the U.S. Oksana Markarova was with first lady Jill Biden in the House gallery.

Watching on television, Father Andriy Chornopyski, of the Ukrainian Catholic National Shrine of the Holy Family in Washington, smiled when Markarova acknowledged the crowd's support.

The priest, interviewed by NBC News Washington the night of Biden's address, came to this country last year. His parents have remained there and he is worried for their safety.

He said he felt welcomed in the U.S. and urged Americans to continue to pray for peace.

Although Biden focused on the situation across the globe, he also highlighted issues at home including the need for Congress to pass immigration reform. He noted that providing a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers, temporary status recipients, farmworkers and essential workers could help ease labor shortages and continue the nation's tradition of welcoming immigrants.

"Dreamers" are the beneficiaries of DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.

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"Revise our laws," Biden urged members of Congress, "so businesses have the workers they need and families don't wait decades to reunite. It's not only the right thing to do -- it's the economically smart thing to do."

Some immigration advocates said Biden's message fell short.

Joan Rosenhauer, executive director of Jesuit Refugee Service, called the president's address "a missed opportunity" to present his administration's plans to "address the challenges faced by a weakened U.S. asylum system."

"As the president expressed his solidarity with Ukraine and Ukrainians, we are disappointed he did not express solidarity with all people who flee from violence and persecution," she said in a March 1 statement.

Rosenhauer said that although the president advocated for immigration reform, his administration "has the ability to make a change immediately by rescinding Title 42, a Trump-era policy that has turned away more than 1 million people seeking safety from violence and persecution since the start of the pandemic."

She also said the Biden administration should make every effort to oppose reinstatement of the Migrant Protection Protocols, known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy.

The Missionary Society of St. Columban faulted Biden's speech for failing to recognize the urgency in addressing root causes of migration.

"The United States can only stay true to its ideals of freedom and justice when it ensures that every person has the right to thrive in their home country and, if they cannot do so, to migrate safely and with dignity," it said.

For this to happen, the group said the U.S. should promote sustainable development, debt elimination, just trade, climate action and reforms to international financial institutions allowing Latin America and the Caribbean to thrive.

"If these issues are not addressed, we will continue to hear the cry of families and children escaping violence and poverty, reaching out to us at our southern border asking for help," the group said in a statement.

In his speech, the president also brought up abortion legislation, without saying the word "abortion," and was criticized from those on both sides of the debate for what he said or for not saying enough.

Biden said that "advancing liberty and justice also requires protecting the rights of women" and noted that the constitutional right affirmed in the court's Roe v. Wade

decision "is under attack as never before."

"If we want to go forward -- not backward -- we must protect access to health care. Preserve a woman's right to choose. And let's continue to advance maternal health care for all Americans," he said.

Carol Tobias, president of National Right to Life, said it was ironic Biden "talked about preserving maternal health care in the same breath as advocating for the destruction of a mother's unborn baby."

She added that this was not surprising, describing the president's first year in office as "an all-out assault on unborn children and their mothers."

Biden also called for more domestic manufacturing to fight inflation and unveiled a new plan in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic saying he would be asking Congress for money to make sure the country has necessary tests and masks.

He stressed his hope the nation was returning to normal after two years of COVID-19 and urged Americans to "use this moment to reset."

"Stop looking at COVID-19 as a partisan dividing line. See it for what it is: a God-awful disease," he said.

The president ended his speech with a call for hope and firm resolve, saying he believed that in the current moment Americans would "meet the test to protect freedom and liberty, to expand fairness and opportunity."

"As hard as these times have been," he said, he is more optimistic than ever.

He said the U.S. has always turned every crisis into an opportunity and now it has another chance to do just that.

Reiterating his theme of unity, he said the nation will meet the current difficulties "as one people, one America."