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By GEORGE E. CURRY

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On Tuesday, Sept. 13, the president traveled to Columbus, Ohio to talk about the bipartisa proposal to grow the economy and create jobs. He also visited Fort Hayes Arts and Academic High WSchool to highlight his American Jobs Act proposal to put workers back on the job by rebuilding and modernizing schools across the country.

President Obama discarded his carefully-crafted image of Compromiser-in-Chief last week by proposing a surprisingly bold American Jobs Act that calls for nearly $500 billion in federal spending and tax cuts to jolt the sagging U.S. economy.

Instead of waiting for Congress to initiate legislation, as he has often done in the past, Obama took the initiative, saying Congress should “pass this bill” eight times. He used the word “pass” a total of 18 times and said if the House and Senate fails to act, he will take this case to the public.

In a tough, plain-spoken speech Thursday night to a joint session of Congress, the president said: “The people of this country work hard to meet their responsibilities. The question is whether we’ll meet ours. The question is whether, in the face of an ongoing national crisis, we can stop the political circus and actually do something to help the economy.”

Republican leaders appear to be enjoying the political circus too much to voluntarily disembark from the Washington merry-go-round. They made it clear that while they support some of President Obama’s proposals, such as rebuilding the nation’s infrastructure, he is not likely to get anywhere near the $447 billion spending that he is requesting.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said in a floor speech hours before Obama’s address, “Now, in a two-party system like ours, it shouldn’t be surprising that there would be two very different points of view about how to solve this particular crisis. What is surprising is the president’s apparent determination to apply the same government-driven policies that have already failed.

“The definition of insanity, as Albert Einstein once famously put it, is to do the same thing over and over again and expect a different result. Frankly, I can’t think of a better description of anyone who thinks the solution to this problem is another stimulus. The first stimulus didn’t do it. Why would another one?”

Not everyone agrees that the stimulus program was a failure.

The White House said the $787 billion package created or helped save 3.5 million jobs as of last year, a figure expected to increase over the next few years. And most economists agree that the country would be in worse condition if nothing had been done.

Both the White House and GOP leaders are seeking to frame the public debate. McConnell is trying to portray the president's plan as Stimulus 2.0. Meanwhile, the president is depicting it as a common sense approach. He said, "Everything in here is the kind of proposal that's been supported by both Democrats and Republicans – including many who sit here tonight."

The political gulf was on display Thursday night when President Obama's speech was interrupted 51 times by applause. Most of the time, only Democrats were standing to cheer the president while stone-faced Republicans remained seated, only occasionally joining their Democratic colleagues in applause.

The American Jobs Act would, among other things:

• Extend unemployment insurance for 5 million Americans looking for work;

• Extend and expand the payroll tax cut, providing $1,500 to the typical family;

• Prevent up to 280,000 teacher layoffs;

• Modernize at least 35,000 schools;

• Allow more Americans to refinance their mortgages at near 4 percent interest rates;

• Provide a $4,000 credit to employers hiring the long-term unemployed;

• Give employers tax credits ranging from $5,600 to $9,600 for hiring returning veterans and

• Build or repair highways, roads, railways and aviation facilities.

After being criticized by environmentalists and others who objected to his recent decision to withdraw a clean-air regulation that would have reduced smog, President Obama sought to reassure his base that he was not abandoning them when it counts the most.

“But what we can’t do – what I will not do – is let this economic crisis be used as an excuse to wipe out the basic protections that Americans have counted on for decades,” he said as Democrats applauded. “I reject the idea that we need to ask people to choose between their jobs and their safety.”

“I reject the argument that says for the economy to grow, we have to roll back protections that ban hidden fees by credit card companies, or rules that keep our kids from being exposed to mercury, or laws that prevent the health insurance industry from shortchanging patients. I reject the idea that we have to strip away collective bargaining rights to compete in a global economy. We shouldn’t be in a race to the bottom, where we try to offer the cheapest labor and the worst pollution standards.”

While not specifically mentioning the disproportionate impact the economic downturn has had on African-Americans, many of the president's proposals, if adopted, would help Black America. His plan to assist public employees, for example, would help Blacks because African-Americans are 30 percent more likely than other workers to be employed in the public sector, according to a research brief by the University of California-Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education titled, "Black Worker and the Public Sector ."

President Obama's reference to unions should not be viewed in a vacuum. The Center also noted that in 1999, Black union members earned about 32 percent more than their non-union counterparts; the comparative rate for Whites was approximately 15 percent.

Any help for homeowners under water, a disproportionate number of whom are Black, would also help. The wealth gap between Blacks and Whites has widened during this economic crisis, in part, because Blacks are more likely to accumulate their wealth through home ownership rather than a combination of investments and owning their residence.

President Obama said too many Americans need immediate help.

"But know this: The next election is 14 months away. And people who sent us here – the people who hired us to work for them – they don't have the luxury of waiting 14 months. Some of them are living week to week, paycheck to paycheck, even day to day," he said. "They need help, and they need it now."

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