

# Opinion: It's time to focus on the middle class

By Barack Obama

Last week, I spoke about what we need to do as a country to build a better bargain for the middle class – to make sure everyone who works hard has a chance to get ahead in the 21st century economy.

You see, over the past 4½ years, America has fought its way back from the worst recession of our lifetimes. We saved the auto industry, took on a broken health care system, invested in new American technologies to reverse our addiction to foreign oil, and changed a tax code too skewed in favor of the wealthiest at the expense of working families.



President  
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As a result, our businesses have created 7.2 million new jobs over the past 40 months. We produce more renewable energy than ever, and more natural gas than anyone. Health care costs are growing at the slowest rate in 50 years. Our deficits are falling at the fastest rate in 60 years.

Thanks to the grit and resilience of the American people, we've cleared away the rubble of crisis and begun to lay a new foundation for stronger, more durable economic growth.

But as any middle-class family will tell you, we're not where we need to be yet. Trends that have been eroding middle-class security for decades – technology that makes some jobs obsolete, global competition that makes others moveable, growing inequality and the policies that perpetuate it – still exist, and in some ways, the recession made them worse.

Reversing these trends must be Washington's highest priority. It's certainly mine. But over the past couple of years in particular, Washington has taken its eye off the ball. An endless parade of distractions, political posturing and phony scandals shift focus from what needs to be done. And as Washington prepares to enter another budget debate, the stakes could not be higher.

If we don't make the investments necessary to make America a magnet for good jobs – in education, and manufacturing, and research, and our transportation and information networks – we might as well hit the "pause" button while the rest of the world forges ahead in a global economy. And that's certainly not going to fix what ails the middle class.

Here's what will: a strategy that builds on the cornerstones of what it means to be middle class in America, and what it takes to work your way into the middle class. Good jobs that pay good wages. An education that prepares our children and our workers for the global competition they'll face. Homeownership that's based on a solid foundation, where buyers and lenders play by the same set of rules. Affordable health care that's there for you when you get sick. A secure retirement even if you're not rich. More chances for folks to earn their way into the middle class as long as they're willing to work for it.

Over the next several weeks, in towns across the country, I'll lay out my ideas in each of these areas. Reversing the forces that have conspired against the middle class for decades will require more than short-term thinking; it will require a long-

term American strategy, based on steady, persistent effort.

I know there are members of both parties who understand what's at stake, and I'm open to ideas from across the political spectrum. But I will not allow gridlock or willful indifference to get in the way of where this country needs to go. The choices that we make now will determine whether or not every American has a fighting chance in the 21st century.

We can do this if we work together. It won't be easy, but if we take a few bold steps – and if Washington is willing to shake off its complacency and set aside some of the slash-and-burn partisanship we've seen in recent years – our economy will keep getting stronger.

And as long as I have the privilege of holding this office, I will spend every minute of every day doing everything in my power to make this economy work for working Americans again, to build that better bargain for the middle class and to make sure that the American Dream is something that's achievable for everybody – not just today, but for decades to come.