'America is made stronger by immigrants – not walls'

US Democrat Stacey Abrams responds to Trump's State of the Union speech

Read this article in German.

Just a few weeks ago, I joined volunteers to distribute meals to furloughed federal workers. They waited in line for a box of food and a sliver of hope since they hadn't received a paycheck in weeks. Making their livelihoods a pawn for political games is a disgrace. The shutdown was a stunt engineered by the President of the United States, one that defied every tenet of fairness and abandoned not just our people - but our values.

For seven years, I led the Democratic Party in the Georgia House of Representatives. I didn't always agree with the Republican Speaker or Governor, but I understood that our constituents didn't care about our political parties – they cared about their lives. So, when we had to negotiate criminal justice reform or transportation or foster care improvements, the leaders of our state didn't shut down – we came together. And we kept our word.

It should be no different in our nation's capital. We may come from different sides of the political aisle; but, our joint commitment to the ideals of this nation cannot be negotiable.

Our most urgent work is to realise Americans' dreams of today and tomorrow. To carve a path to independence and prosperity that can last a lifetime. Children deserve an excellent education from cradle to career. We owe them safe schools and the highest standards, regardless of zip code.

Yet this White House responds timidly while first graders practice active shooter drills and the price of higher education grows ever steeper. From now on, our leaders must be willing to tackle gun safety measures and the crippling effect of educational loans; to support educators and invest what is necessary to unleash the power of America's greatest minds.

In Georgia and around the country, people are striving for a middle class where a salary truly equals economic security. But instead, families' hopes are being crushed by Republican leadership that ignores real life or just doesn't understand it. Under the current administration, far too many hard-working Americans are falling behind, living paycheck to paycheck, most without labour unions to protect them from even worse harm.

Let's be clear: voter suppression is real.

The Republican tax bill rigged the system against working people. Rather than bringing back jobs, plants are closing, layoffs are looming and wages struggle to keep pace with the actual cost of living.

We owe more to the millions of everyday folks who keep our economy running: like truck drivers forced to buy their own rigs, farmers caught in a trade war, small business owners in search of capital, and domestic workers serving without labour protections. Women and men who could thrive if only they had the support and freedom to do so.

We know bipartisanship could craft a 21st century immigration plan, but this administration chooses to cage children and tear families apart. Compassionate treatment at the border is not the same as open borders. President Reagan understood this. President Obama understood this. Americans understand this. And Democrats stand ready to effectively secure our ports and borders. But we must all embrace that from agriculture to healthcare to entrepreneurship, America is made stronger by the presence of immigrants – not walls.

Rather than suing to dismantle the Affordable Care Act, as Republican Attorneys General have, our leaders must protect the progress we've made and commit to expanding health care and lowering costs for everyone.

My father has battled prostate cancer for years. To help cover the costs, I found myself sinking deeper into debt – because while you can defer some payments, you can't defer cancer treatment. In this great nation, Americans are skipping blood pressure pills, forced to choose between buying medicine or paying rent. Maternal mortality rates show that mothers, especially black mothers, risk death to give birth. And in 14 states, including my home state where a majority want it, our leaders refuse to expand Medicaid, which could save rural hospitals, economies, and lives.

We can do so much more: take action on climate change. Defend individual liberties with fair-minded judges. But none of these ambitions

are possible without the bedrock guarantee of our right to vote. Let's be clear: voter suppression is real. From making it harder to register and stay on the rolls to moving and closing polling places to rejecting lawful ballots, we can no longer ignore these threats to democracy.

Our progress has always found refuge in the basic instinct of the American experiment – to do right by our people.

While I acknowledged the results of the 2018 election here in Georgia – I did not and we cannot accept efforts to undermine our right to vote. That's why I started a nonpartisan organisation called Fair Fight to advocate for voting rights.

This is the next battle for our democracy, one where all eligible citizens can have their say about the vision we want for our country. We must reject the cynicism that says allowing every eligible vote to be cast and counted is a "power grab." Americans understand that these are the values our brave men and women in uniform and our veterans risk their lives to defend. The foundation of our moral leadership around the globe is free and fair elections, where voters pick their leaders – not where politicians pick their voters.

In this time of division and crisis, we must come together and stand for, and with, one another. America has stumbled time and again on its quest towards justice and equality; but with each generation, we have revisited our fundamental truths, and where we falter, we make amends.

We fought Jim Crow with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, yet we continue to confront racism from our past and in our present – which is why we must hold everyone from the very highest offices to our own families accountable for racist words and deeds – and call racism what it is. Wrong.

America achieved a measure of reproductive justice in Roe v. Wade, but we must never forget it is immoral to allow politicians to harm women and families to advance a political agenda. We affirmed marriage equality, and yet, the LGBTQ community remains under attack.

So even as I am very disappointed by the president's approach to our problems – I still don't want him to fail. But we need him to tell the truth, and to respect his duties and the extraordinary diversity that defines America.

Our progress has always found refuge in the basic instinct of the American experiment – to do right by our people. And with a renewed commitment to social and economic justice, we will create a stronger

America, together. Because America wins by fighting for our shared values against all enemies: foreign and domestic. That is who we are – and when we do so, never wavering - the state of our union will always be strong.

This is a shortened version of Stacey Abrams' original speech.



Stacey Abrams
Georgia

Stacey Abrams is a member of the Democratic Party of the United States. She was a member of the Georgia House of Representatives from 2007 to 2017, and from 2011 she was chairwoman of the Democratic Group. In 2018 she was defeated by a small margin in the governorship election in Georgia.

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