POLITICS

In State of the Union Address, Obama Vows to Act Alone on the Economy

By PETER BAKER  JAN. 28, 2014

WASHINGTON — After five years of fractious political combat, President Obama declared independence from Congress on Tuesday as he vowed to tackle economic disparity with a series of limited initiatives on jobs, wages and retirement that he will enact without legislative approval.

Promising “a year of action” as he tries to rejuvenate a presidency mired in low approval ratings and stymied by partisan stalemates, Mr. Obama used his annual State of the Union address to chart a new path forward relying on his own executive authority. But the defiant “with or without Congress” approach was more assertive than any of the individual policies he advanced.

“I’m eager to work with all of you,” a confident Mr. Obama told lawmakers of both parties in the 65-minute nationally televised speech in the House chamber. “But America does not stand still — and neither will I. So wherever and whenever I can take steps without legislation to expand opportunity for more American families, that’s what I’m going to do.”

The president’s appearance at the Capitol, with all the traditional pomp and anticipation punctuated by partisan standing ovations, came at a critical juncture as Mr. Obama seeks to define his remaining time in office. He touched on foreign policy, asserting that “American diplomacy backed by the threat of force” had forced Syria to give up chemical
weapons and that “American diplomacy backed by pressure” had brought Iran to the negotiating table. And he repeated his plan to pull troops out of Afghanistan this year and threatened again to veto sanctions on Iran that disrupt his diplomatic efforts.

The most emotional point of the evening came with the introduction of Sgt. First Class Cory Remsburg, an Army Ranger the president had met both before and after he was ravaged by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. As Sergeant Remsburg, blind in one eye and having to learn to walk again, made it to his feet in the first lady’s box, lawmakers of both parties gave him an extended ovation.

But Mr. Obama’s message centered on the wide gap between the wealthiest and other Americans as he positioned himself as a champion of those left behind in the modern economy. “Those at the top have never done better,” he said. “But average wages have barely budged. Inequality has deepened. Upward mobility has stalled.

“The cold, hard fact is that even in the midst of recovery, too many Americans are working more than ever just to get by, let alone to get ahead,” he added. “And too many still aren’t working at all. So our job is to reverse these trends.”

To do so, the president announced an executive order raising the minimum wage to $10.10 an hour for future federal contract workers and the creation of a new Treasury savings bond for workers without access to traditional retirement options. He proposed incentives for trucks running on alternative fuels and higher efficiency standards for those running on gasoline. And he announced a meeting on working families and a review of federal job training programs.

Mr. Obama was gambling that a series of ideas that seem small-bore on their own will add up to a larger collective vision of an America with expanded opportunity. But the moderate ambitions were a stark contrast to past years when Mr. Obama proposed sweeping legislation to remake the nation’s health care system, regulate Wall Street, curb climate change and restrict access to high-powered firearms.
Republicans responded by blaming Mr. Obama for the country’s economic problems, but the party’s leaders avoided the language of last year’s government shutdown and hoped to present what Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington called “a more hopeful, Republican vision” intended to appeal particularly to women in a midterm election year.

In her party’s official response, Ms. Rodgers offered a folksy, personal presentation, describing in moving terms her 6-year-old son, Cole, who was born with Down syndrome, even as she assailed Mr. Obama’s health care program, spending record and regulations. “Too many people are falling further and further behind because, right now, the president’s policies are making people’s lives harder,” she said. “Republicans have plans to close the gap.”

But in a sign of the continued divisions within the Republican Party, some of its conservative leaders offered separate responses. Senator Mike Lee of Utah delivered a speech on behalf of Tea Party activists, and Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky distributed his own remarks on Facebook, YouTube and other social media.

Mr. Lee echoed his party message by criticizing Mr. Obama’s policies, declaring that “Obamacare, all by itself, is an inequality Godzilla.” But he also noted, “My own party has been part of the problem, too often joining the Democrats to rig our economy to benefit the well-connected at the expense of the disconnected.”

Both the president and lawmakers brought guests intended to make political points. Among the Republican guests was Willie Robertson, a star of the reality show “Duck Dynasty,” whose father stirred controversy by condemning “homosexual offenders.”

Other guests in the first lady’s box with Michelle Obama were Americans who have benefited from the president’s health care program and, in a jab at Senator Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader, Gov. Steve Beshear, who has energetically carried out the program in their home state, Kentucky.
The response of members at points in the speech may have offered signals of the year to come. When Mr. Obama urged Congress to “fix our broken immigration system,” Speaker John A. Boehner and other Republicans applauded, foreshadowing an effort to find a bipartisan compromise. When Mr. Obama boasted that he had “rolled parts of” Iran’s nuclear program back, there was no applause, amid bipartisan skepticism of diplomacy with Tehran.

Despite his vow to move ahead without Capitol Hill, Mr. Obama said he was not giving up on Congress altogether and recycled calls for many past legislative priorities, like extending unemployment insurance. “Let’s see where else we can make progress together,” he said.

He said “this needs to be the year” that lawmakers clear the way to closing the prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. He called for an across-the-board increase in the minimum wage to $10.10 from $7.25. “Say yes,” he urged. “Give America a raise.” He called for expanding the earned-income tax credit for low-wage workers without children.

And he offered a vigorous defense of his embattled health care program. “Let’s not have another 40-something votes to repeal a law that’s already helping Americans,” he said.

But after a year in which most of his legislative priorities, like gun control, went nowhere, Mr. Obama has made it clear that he has restrained expectations about his ability to compromise with Republicans in the House. Mr. Obama’s minimum wage plan provided an example of the new approach he plans. Since he failed to push through legislation last year, he decided to issue his order covering federal contractors.

Still, the order also illustrated the limits of that approach. An increase in the minimum wage passed by Congress would mean a raise for 17 million Americans. Mr. Obama’s executive order, by contrast, will affect relatively few workers at first because it will apply only to new or renewed contracts. Eventually it might affect several hundred thousand workers at most, according to some estimates.

By the numbers, Mr. Obama has so far been restrained in his use of
executive power. He has signed just 168 executive orders, and the 147 he issued in his first term were the fewest of any president over a similar period going back at least a century. In their first terms, George W. Bush signed 173 executive orders, Bill Clinton 200 and Ronald Reagan 213.

But the numbers matter less than the scope of the ones that are signed. Mr. Obama has unilaterally deferred deportation of younger illegal immigrants, delayed enforcement of his health care law and declined to defend legal challenges against the Defense of Marriage Act, a law barring federal recognition of same-sex marriages.

Perhaps the most far-reaching are regulations being developed to limit carbon emissions at the nation’s power plants.

**Correction: January 30, 2014**

*Two picture credits on Wednesday with the continuation of an article about President Obama’s State of the Union address were reversed in some editions. The photograph of Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers, who gave the Republican response, was taken by Doug Mills of The New York Times; the one of a police officer and his dog was by Brendan Smialowski of Agence France-Presse — Getty Images.*

A version of this article appears in print on January 29, 2014, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Obama Taking Up Economic Issues on His Authority.