

Behind The Scenes: Writing the 2012 State of the Union Address

[MUSIC]

DAVID PLOUFFE: You know, these have always been important moments for Presidents to layout where they think the country is, and where it needs to go.

GENE SPERLING: That's why it's so important to him, that's why he takes such ownership of the State of the Union, both in terms of the words and the types of policies that he wants us to develop.

CECILIA MUÑOZ: It's a pretty great moment in our democracy. This is the, you know, all three branches of government are in the same room.

JON FAVREAU: We are one week away from the State of the Union. Finished the first draft, first complete draft, last night on Monday night. And now we're going to meet with the President. He read the draft last night. He made a lot of edits because I saw his draft when I went up there this morning. And now we're going to talk to him about it hopefully within the half hour.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Bandos is not there yet?

JON FAVREAU: No.

DAVID PLOUFFE: The thing about President Obama in a speech like this is it is simply not an editing exercise. He's involved from conception through kind of the development process and then, you know, he writes a lot of the speech himself. Jon Favreau and I and certainly even the President will spend some time looking through past State of the Unions just to get a sense of those moments.

JON FAVREAU: He had lots and lots of thoughts. And gave all kinds of edits, comments like this. Cody and you are now re-writing, re-ordering, re-editing.

CODY KEENAN: You know, in a typical set of remarks we have, you know, a basic message we want to get across. In this, we have a basic message we want to get across that also incorporates every facet of the American economy, our values and our foreign policy. So it's a little more complicated.

GENE SPERLING: In a sense, you develop a lot of policies that will be in the budget and proposed. And in a sense the ones that make the State of the Union are a little bit like the players that make the all star team.

SARAH BIANCHI: It's exciting to see all of the ideas that he has chosen to put forward, all sort of in prose and to see how much new stuff and new ideas he has.

GENE SPERLING: You know, he really wanted us to focus on those types of economic policies that could have a tangible effect over these next few years in getting more Americans back into the top of high-paying, durable jobs that last.

CECILIA MUÑOZ: Part of this is going to be, I think, making real and concrete the vision that the President talked about in his speech in Kansas a few weeks ago, ways that we're going to make this a more fair society. But also make it clear what it means. How it's going to affect people in their daily lives.

The speech writing team is extremely busy this time of year. At the end of the day, their job is to kind of weave it together, according to the President's direction, but then he takes it and makes it his.

DAVID PLOUFFE: Discussions about what he thinks the structure ought to be; the types of policies he's like to be in there, you know, he's driving that process.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: We're making progress. I think the basic --

CECILIA MUÑOZ: It's exciting to see it go from, you know, a hodge-podge of interesting ideas based on a vision that the President has presented to us to something which articulates so clearly direction.

JON FAVREAU: We'll go to all of the policy folks, the economic team, folks who do energy, foreign policy, national security folks, the research department who they vigorously fact check it. Then new media folks who will do an enhanced version online. People handling who's going to be in the First Lady's box.

LAURA DEAN: We like to highlight the people who are going to be mentioned in the speech to sort of actually put a face to these policies. So the reason they get mentioned in the speech is to give reality and humanity to the policies that we're suggesting. And it's nice to have them there to make a really concrete connection. And they're sort of representative of America.

GENE SPERLING: The big things that we could get done together as a country are going to be the common sense, bipartisan things you're going to hear the President talk about with the State of the Union on manufacturing, on energy, on building skills. These are common sense, good ideas, that could help create jobs right now.

DAVID PLOUFFE: I would just humbly encourage people to listen to the ideas. Listen to the specific ideas about what we can do to build a more lasting economy, to help the middle class, to solve our deficit problem in a fair way, to rebuild our manufacturing sector, to improve education and skills. Listen to the ideas. And if you like those ideas, if you think they make sense, then lift up your voice!