

# Rhetoric

human capital **debt** **safety net** **reform** **trade-off**  
**deficit** **GDP** **priorities** **spending** **Medicare**  
**mandatory** **budget** **Social Security** **revenue** **health care**  
**governance** **discretionary** **baby boomers** **economic growth**  
**infrastructure**

## ESSENTIAL DILEMMA

**Is it convincing facts or effective rhetoric that determines what the public thinks about the debt and the deficit?**

## INTRODUCTION

When you look at the budget, you'll see \$1.9 trillion worth of new tax revenue and \$1.5 trillion worth of more spending.

—Former House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio), February 15, 2012 (Kessler, 2012)

The president's budget has \$1 of revenue for every \$2½ of spending cuts.

— Former White House Chief of Staff Jack Lew, February 12, 2012 (Kessler, 2012)

In his article, "A Guide to Dueling Claims About the Obama Budget," Glenn Kessler asks, "Are these guys even talking about the same document?" Kessler continues:

All presidential budgets are political documents—and it is easy to play politics with numbers. That's why such a gap in the rhetoric is even possible. Each side can make a case for their spin, though much of it is dubious. . . .

First of all, notice that Boehner and Lew are only speaking about one side of the ledger—either spending increases or spending cuts. The Republicans then emphasize the tax increases, while the White House deemphasizes them. We also are working with 10-year budget forecasts, even though the budget is rewritten every year, which increases the chance for mischief. (Kessler, 2012)

Plato believed that rhetoric was the art of ruling the minds of men. Though modern politicians may not seek to "rule men's minds," they certainly use specific language to convince the voting public to support their cause, as demonstrated in the preceding example. A significant part of this process is crafting their

## CIVICS/GOVERNMENT | Lesson 2.5

message or political platform and then delivering that message to the American public. Politicians are sometimes gifted orators who can galvanize the public, convincing large groups of individuals to support their party or ideals.

In many cases, a skilled rhetorician can persuade the public to see the error of its ways and begin to address some national issue or social ill. Other times, however, rhetoric can cloud the issues and distract the public from an important problem that deserves attention.

In this lesson, students will learn the definition and purpose of rhetoric and be able to recognize when and how it is used to shape public opinion about the national debt and deficit. As a result, students will be better prepared to logically evaluate the pros and cons of economic issues rather than becoming distracted by rhetorical technique or political spin.

### KEY TERMS

The following terms and concepts are used in this lesson and appear in the online glossary:

**Debt, Deficit, Rhetoric**

### STUDENTS WILL UNDERSTAND

- Identical facts about the economy can have multiple meanings when rhetoric is used to influence the listener or reader.

### STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO

- Assess the substance of differing public policy proposals, independent of the rhetoric used to advocate them.

### RELATED CURRICULUM STANDARDS

#### Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative<sup>1</sup>

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.6** Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7.** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.6.** Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

1. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. *Common Core State Standards*. Washington, DC. Copyright 2010.

### The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards<sup>2</sup>

**D2.Eco.2.9-12.** Use marginal benefits and marginal costs to construct an argument for or against an approach or solution to an economic issue.

**D2.Eco.13.9-12.** Explain why advancements in technology and investments in capital goods and human capital increase economic growth and standards of living.

### NCSS's National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies<sup>3</sup>

**6. Power, Authority, and Governance.** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create, interact with, and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

### Council for Economic Education's Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics<sup>4</sup>

**Content Standard 16: Role of Government and Market Failure.** There is an economic role for government in a market economy whenever the benefits of a government policy outweigh its costs. Governments often provide for national defense, address environmental concerns, define and protect property rights, and attempt to make markets more competitive. Most government policies also have direct or indirect effects on people's incomes.

### Center for Civic Education's National Standards for Civics and Government<sup>5</sup>

**I.A. What Are Civic Life, Politics, and Government?** Why are government and politics necessary? What purposes should government serve?

**II.D. What Are the Foundations of the American Political System?** What values and principles are basic to American constitutional democracy?

**III.E. How Does the Government Established by the Constitution Embody the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?** How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation?

## LIST OF LESSON RESOURCES

The following resources are used in this lesson and can be downloaded online:

1. Cartoon: "Green Hot Air"
2. Excerpt from the State of the Union Address, 2016
3. Excerpt from the Republican Address to the Nation, 2016

2. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*. Silver Spring, MD. Copyright 2013.

3. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*. Silver Spring, MD. Copyright 2010.

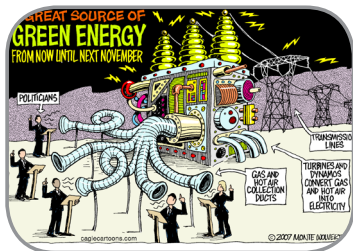
4. Council for Economic Education. *Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics*. New York, NY. Copyright 2010.

5. Directed by the Center for Civic Education. *National Standards for Civics and Government*. Copyright 1994, Center for Civic Education.

DAY 1 of 2

ENTRY

Begin by presenting students with the cartoon “Green Hot Air” (**Resource 1**), and ask them to consider its meaning. After students have studied the cartoon for several minutes, ask what they notice, drawing them out on the details of what they see. If students jump to an interpretation of the cartoon, ask them



See Resource 1 online

for the basis of the interpretation and ask other students if they agree or disagree.

If students are having difficulty getting into the cartoon, ask them more directed questions, such as:

- ▶ What is the purpose of the machine in the image?

*[The caption explains that the machine converts gas and hot air into electricity.]*

- ▶ Why are the politicians talking into the tubes? What is the artist’s opinion of politicians?

*[The politicians are providing the hot air for conversion to electricity. The artist feels that politicians are “full of hot air”—that is, they are full of empty talk that has little or no substance.]*

- ▶ What does it mean to say someone is “full of hot air”? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?

*[When someone is full of hot air it means that they say a great deal, but do very little. It is negative. Note: Teachers should help students understand that being full of hot air does not necessarily mean that the person is lying.]*

- ▶ Do you agree with the artist’s depiction? Why or why not?

*[Students’ answers will vary.]*

Ask students if they believe the public would generally agree or disagree with the artist’s opinion, and support the range of points of view students express. Students should be encouraged to hypothesize why some might believe that politicians are full of hot air.

LESSON STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

Defining Rhetoric

Explain to students that a large part of a politician’s job is to convince other people of her or his ideas. Whether it is in an attempt to get elected, convince fellow politicians to support a particular idea, or explain the rationale behind her or his decisions, a politician must be adept at using rhetoric.

Inform students that, despite the cartoonist's depiction of politicians and "hot air" as words that sound good but have no meaning, powerful rhetoric very often communicates a level of meaning that a simple statement cannot. Present students with the following two quotes: the first from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, the second, a restatement of the first (minus the rhetoric).

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I hope that in the future my heirs will not be judged by their racial identity but by criteria common to all Americans.

Students should discuss which of the statements is more powerful and gets to the heart of Dr. King's message. Point out that both statements ultimately express the same sentiments. Students should understand that although the second version communicates a hope for the future, the effective use of rhetoric in the first version communicates that hope in a way that also inspires the American public to live up to those ideals.

Display the following definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2016), and ask students to discuss its relation to the previous activity:

Rhetoric, *n.* - The art of using language effectively so as to persuade or influence others, esp. the exploitation of figures of speech and other compositional techniques to this end

Students should begin by restating the definition in their own words. Use this as an opportunity to ensure that students understand difficult vocabulary like "exploitation" and "compositional." Ask students to relate the definition to the previous activity, and ask them whether politicians typically engage in the use of rhetoric. Lead the class in a discussion about political rhetoric guided by the following questions:

- ▶ What is rhetoric? What is its purpose?

*[Students' answers should demonstrate their understanding that rhetoric is a form of language used to persuade or convince others to support a particular point of view.]*

- ▶ Is rhetoric good or bad?

*[Students' answers will vary. Encourage students to see that rhetoric itself is neither good nor bad, though it can be used for good or bad purposes. Students should understand that rhetoric is a skill they use in everyday life (sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully), though they may not realize they are doing it.]*

## Examples of Rhetoric

Display the following quotes and discuss their relation to the previous activity:

Barack Obama will somehow manage to add more than \$8 trillion to the national debt, which is more debt than the 43 presidents who held office before him compiled together.

—Former Florida governor and Republican Presidential candidate Jeb Bush, on February 5, 2016, in a column posted to Medium.com (Politifact, 2016)

[Today, the deficit is] below the average deficits over the past 40 years.

—President Barack Obama, October 2, 2015, in a press conference (Politifact, 2015)

Inform the students that these two political leaders represent the two major political parties—Governor Bush is a Republican, and President Obama, a Democrat. Both of these facts, which may seem to be contradictory, were researched and found to be “Mostly True” by Politifact, a Pulitzer Prize-winning project that researches claims made by politicians.

After students have studied the quotes, ask them about their interpretation. Students may note that, although the two leaders are talking about two different statistics—the national debt, which is cumulative over time, and the budget deficit, which represents a single point in time—it is still striking how two apparently opposite claims can both be “Mostly True.” As students begin to grasp the quotes’ meanings, guide the discussion with the following questions:

- ▶ How can the deficit under President Obama in 2015 be “below the average deficits over the past 40 years,” while by 2016, President Obama has added “more debt than the 43 presidents who held office before him compiled together”?

*[Although the debt and deficits are closely interrelated—the debt is, in essence, the cumulative sum of all deficits—the deficit is more subject to fluctuation due to changing economic conditions and fiscal policy. Therefore, deficits may be relatively low toward the end of the Obama presidency, but may have still been sufficiently high at the start to significantly increase the debt. Importantly, as well, the debt and deficits should be considered as a fraction of the economy—even though the debt of \$8 trillion accumulated under President Obama may be large in absolute terms, the economy overall is also larger than at any prior time in history.]*

- ▶ What techniques are these politicians using to draw our attention to matters of the federal budget, deficit, and debt?

*[Both candidates are arguing with facts and statistics, and helping to place incomprehensibly large numbers into context by making historical comparisons. They draw different conclusions to argue opposite political points, however, due to different bases for comparisons—one statistic is cumulative and the other annual, and one is absolute and the other relative.]*

- ▶ How are these two quotes an example of political rhetoric?

*[Students’ answers should demonstrate their understanding that rhetoric is a form of language used to persuade or convince others to support a particular point of view.]*

## Rhetorical Devices

Explain to students the concept of rhetoric dates back to the ancient Greek philosophers. Inform students that Aristotle believed effective rhetoric was composed of three parts: ethos, pathos, and logos. These three components of rhetoric bring together the speaker, the audience, and the argument put forth. Rhetoric tends to be successful to the extent that it blends these three elements.

Display the following summary of these ideas:

**Ethos:** The character, credibility, or authority of the speaker

When I ran for city council, I didn't need focus groups and voter profiles because I knew those voters, and knew their families, too.

—Sarah Palin, 2008 Republican National Convention (CBS News, 2009)

**Pathos:** The convictions, values, or emotions of the audience

For as much as government can do and must do, it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies. It is the kindness to take in a stranger when the levees break, the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job which sees us through our darkest hours. It is the firefighter's courage to storm a stairway filled with smoke, but also a parent's willingness to nurture a child, that finally decides our fate.

—Barack Obama, 2009 Inaugural Speech (CNN, 2009)

**Logos:** The logic, evidence, or reasons of the argument

Tonight I stand before you to report that America has created the longest peacetime economic expansion in our history with nearly 18 million new jobs, wages rising at more than twice the rate of inflation, the highest homeownership in history, the smallest welfare rolls in 30 years and the lowest peacetime unemployment since 1957.

—Bill Clinton, 1999 State of the Union Address (CNN, 1999)

Ask students to revisit the previous quotes of Bush and Obama and identify how each speaker attempts to blend ethos, pathos, and logos. Guide the students' discussion with the following questions:

- ▶ What about these two quotes demonstrates the speakers' character, credibility, or authority (ethos)?

*[Students' answers will vary. Although the quotes themselves may not directly demonstrate the speakers' ethos, the credentials of each as elected representatives gives them authority and may demonstrate character and credibility.]*

- ▶ How do these two quotes draw on the audience's convictions, values, or emotions (pathos)?

*[Students' answers will vary. Bush draws on historical comparisons to tap into the potential fear of voters that the country is headed down the wrong path, whereas Obama uses similar historical comparisons to provide reassurance and emphasize a sense of historic normalcy around the deficit.]*

- ▶ What logic, evidence, or reasons do the speakers imply to support their positions (logos)?

*[Students' answers will vary. This answer may be challenging to students, because the quotes are only sound bites from longer speeches. Encourage students to discuss how this limited information from each speaker shapes their opinion, and help them identify where they could go to find additional information about these speeches.]*

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## DAY 2 of 2

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### Rhetoric and the 2016 State of the Union Address

Distribute the excerpt from the 2016 State of the Union Address (**Resource 2**), and inform students that they will be analyzing the speech looking for examples of ethos, pathos, and logos. Divide students into groups of three and provide each group with three markers (blue, red, and green).

Instruct the students to read through the excerpt within their group, underlining statements representing ethos in blue, pathos in red, and logos in green. As the students work, walk around the room to answer students' questions, monitor students' progress, and ensure students' comprehension.

### Rhetoric and the 2016 Republican Response

When the students have finished analyzing the State of the Union Address, distribute the Republican Response (**Resource 3**), and inform students that they will be following the same process of analysis. Remind the students to read through the excerpt within their group, underlining statements representing ethos in blue, pathos in red, and logos in green. As the students work, again walk around the room to answer students' questions, monitor students' progress, and ensure students' comprehension.

### Comparing Political Messages

Ask students to compare the two speeches, paying particular attention to each speaker's use of rhetoric to describe the economy, the federal budget deficit, and the national debt. Students should discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each speech, and attempt to reach consensus within their group about which speaker's rhetoric best supported their beliefs.

To conclude this activity, lead the class in a discussion comparing the two speeches. How did each speaker describe the economy? In what way did they use rhetoric to support their opinions? Were the two speeches balanced in their use of ethos, pathos, and logos? Did they tend to focus more on one component than another? Was that by design or omission? How might the speeches have been structured in a different way? Would that have made them more or less effective? Why?



**CLOSURE**

To conclude this activity, students should write a brief essay based on the following:

You are a reporter and your editor asks you to write a story titled, “Ethos, Logos, and Pathos: The Federal Budget Deficit and the National Debt.” You just watched President Obama give the State of the Union Address and watched Governor Haley give the Republican Response, so you feel very prepared to write this story. Your editor wants you to include examples of each type of rhetoric concerning the economy, deficit, and debt, along with your judgment of which speaker used rhetoric most effectively. This story will go to press soon, so do not delay!

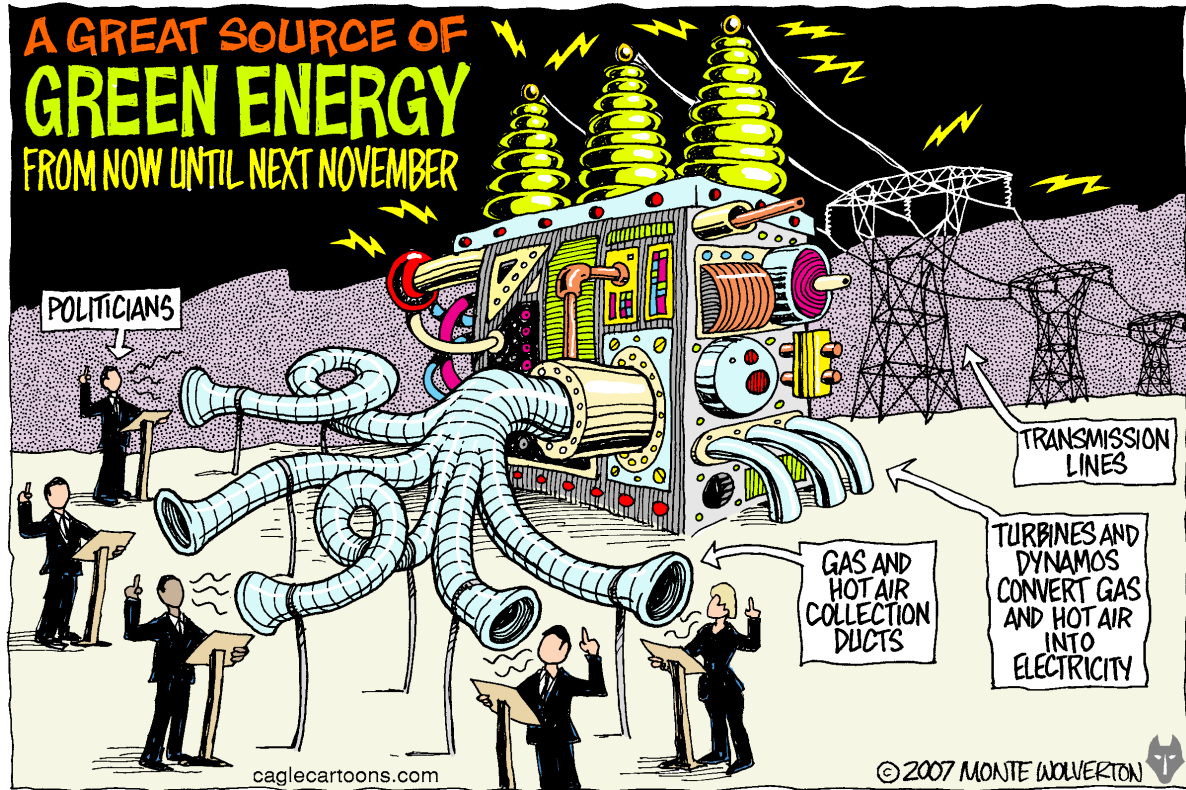
*[Though students’ answers will vary, students should include evidence learned from this lesson when writing their recommendations.]*

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Resource 1

Cartoon: "Green Hot Air"



by Monte Wolverton, politicalcartoons.com

**Resource 2 (1 of 2)****Excerpt from the State of the Union Address, 2016**

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By U.S. President Barack Obama, January 13, 2016

. . . We live in a time of extraordinary change—change that’s reshaping the way we live, the way we work, our planet, our place in the world. It’s change that promises amazing medical breakthroughs, but also economic disruptions that strain working families. It promises education for girls in the most remote villages, but also connects terrorists plotting an ocean away. It’s change that can broaden opportunity, or widen inequality. And whether we like it or not, the pace of this change will only accelerate.

America has been through big changes before—wars and depression, the influx of new immigrants, workers fighting for a fair deal, movements to expand civil rights. Each time, there have been those who told us to fear the future; who claimed we could slam the brakes on change; who promised to restore past glory if we just got some group or idea that was threatening America under control. And each time, we overcame those fears. We did not, in the words of Lincoln, adhere to the “dogmas of the quiet past.” Instead we thought anew, and acted anew. We made change work for us, always extending America’s promise outward, to the next frontier, to more people. And because we did—because we saw opportunity where others saw only peril—we emerged stronger and better than before.

What was true then can be true now. Our unique strengths as a nation—our optimism and work ethic, our spirit of discovery, our diversity, our commitment to rule of law—these things give us everything we need to ensure prosperity and security for generations to come.

In fact, it’s that spirit that made the progress of these past seven years possible. It’s how we recovered from the worst economic crisis in generations. It’s how we reformed our health care system, and reinvented our energy sector; how we delivered more care and benefits to our troops and veterans, and how we secured the freedom in every state to marry the person we love.

But such progress is not inevitable. It’s the result of choices we make together. And we face such choices right now. Will we respond to the changes of our time with fear, turning inward as a nation, turning against each other as a people? Or will we face the future with confidence in who we are, in what we stand for, in the incredible things that we can do together? . . .

For the past seven years, our goal has been a growing economy that works also better for everybody. We’ve made progress. But we need to make more. And despite all the political arguments that we’ve had these past few years, there are actually some areas where Americans broadly agree. . . .

And we have to make college affordable for every American. No hardworking student should be stuck in the red. We’ve already reduced student loan payments to 10 percent of a borrower’s income. And that’s good. But now, we’ve actually got to cut the cost of college. Providing two years of community college at no cost for every responsible student is one of the best ways to do that, and I’m going to keep fighting to get that started this year. It’s the right thing to do. . . .

We also need benefits and protections that provide a basic measure of security. It’s not too much of a stretch to say that some of the only people in America who are going to work the same job, in the same place, with a health and retirement package for 30 years are sitting in this chamber. For everyone else,

**Resource 2 (2 of 2)****Excerpt from the State of the Union Address, 2016**

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especially folks in their 40s and 50s, saving for retirement or bouncing back from job loss has gotten a lot tougher. Americans understand that at some point in their careers, in this new economy, they may have to retool and they may have to retrain. But they shouldn't lose what they've already worked so hard to build in the process.

That's why Social Security and Medicare are more important than ever. We shouldn't weaken them; we should strengthen them. And for Americans short of retirement, basic benefits should be just as mobile as everything else is today. That, by the way, is what the Affordable Care Act is all about. It's about filling the gaps in employer-based care so that when you lose a job, or you go back to school, or you strike out and launch that new business, you'll still have coverage. Nearly 18 million people have gained coverage so far. And in the process, health care inflation has slowed. And our businesses have created jobs every single month since it became law. . . .

**Source:** Obama, B. (2016, January 13). Remarks of President Barack Obama – state of the union address as delivered. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-%E2%80%93-prepared-delivery-state-union-address>

**Resource 3****Excerpt from the Republican Address to the Nation, 2016**

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By South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, January 13, 2016

. . . If we held the White House, taxes would be lower for working families, and we'd put the brakes on runaway spending and debt.

We would encourage American innovation and success instead of demonizing them, so our economy would truly soar and good jobs would be available across our country.

We would reform education so it worked best for students, parents, and teachers, not Washington bureaucrats and union bosses.

We would end a disastrous health care program, and replace it with reforms that lowered costs and actually let you keep your doctor.

We would respect differences in modern families, but we would also insist on respect for religious liberty as a cornerstone of our democracy.

We would recognize the importance of the separation of powers and honor the Constitution in its entirety. And yes, that includes the Second and Tenth Amendments.

We would make international agreements that were celebrated in Israel and protested in Iran, not the other way around.

And rather than just thanking our brave men and women in uniform, we would actually strengthen our military, so both our friends and our enemies would know that America seeks peace, but when we fight wars we win them.

We have big decisions to make. Our country is being tested.

But we've been tested in the past, and our people have always risen to the challenge. We have all the guidance we need to be safe and successful.

Our forefathers paved the way for us.

Let's take their values, and their strengths, and rededicate ourselves to doing whatever it takes to keep America the greatest country in the history of man. And woman. . . .

**Source:** Haley, N. (2016, January 13). Republican response to state of the union address: transcript. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/12/politics/state-of-the-union-2016-republican-response-nikki-haley/>