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Obama hails Sally Ride, other pioneers in State of the Union address



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WASHINGTON—Invoking the examples of astronaut Sally Ride and other pioneering Americans, President Obama used his final State of the Union address to call for a renewal of the nation’s “spirit of discovery.”

“That spirit of discovery is in our DNA,” Obama said during the speech to a joint session of Congress Jan. 12. “America is Thomas Edison and the Wright brothers and George Washington Carver. America is Grace Hopper and Katherine Johnson and Sally Ride.”

The innovators singled out by Obama included household names as well as less familiar figures:

- **Thomas Edison** was a prolific inventor best known for the electric light bulb, the phonograph, and the motion picture camera.
- **Wilbur and Orville Wright** invented and built the first successful airplane.
- **George Washington Carver**, a former slave, was a botanist who invented more than 100 products using peanuts.
- **Grace Hopper** was a mathematician who programmed some of the first computers and rose to the rank of rear admiral in the Navy.
- **Katherine Johnson** is an African American physicist and mathematician who calculated trajectories for key space missions, including the Apollo 11 Moon landing in 1969.
- **Sally Ride**, a physicist, became the first American woman in space in 1983.

In his address, the president looked back to the space race of the 1960s as an illustration of the spirit of discovery we should strive to rekindle.

“Sixty years ago, when the Russians beat us into space, we didn’t deny Sputnik was up there,” he said. “We didn’t argue about the science, or shrink our research and development budget. We built a space program almost overnight, and 12 years later, we were walking on the Moon.”

Obama said the same innovative spirit is needed to tackle the pressing problems America faces today. He called for a renewed push, to be led by Vice President Joe Biden, to find a cure for cancer. Obama also advocated accelerating the nation’s transition to cleaner energy to combat climate change.

The speech was not the first time Obama has recognized Ride’s contributions. He awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously in 2013. “As the first American woman in space, Sally did not just break the stratospheric glass ceiling, she blasted through it,” he said during the presentation ceremony. “And when she came back to Earth, she devoted her life to helping girls excel in fields like math, science, and engineering.”

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