



Obama praises Manitowoc: 'You've reinvented yourself'

By **Charlie Mathews** • Herald Times Reporter •
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MANITOWOC - President Barack Obama was only in Manitowoc for two hours on Wednesday, but he created memories that will last a lifetime for thousands of people.

Citizens lined thoroughfares hoping for a glimpse of the U.S. president, who traveled via motorcade to the Lakeshore area after Air Force One landed at Austin Straubel Airport in Ashwaubenon.

John F. Kennedy and Jimmy Carter campaigned as presidential candidates in Manitowoc decades ago, but didn't return after they were elected.

Obama is believed to be the first sitting U.S. president to visit Manitowoc.

Obama did more than talk with a few workers and company executives at Manitowoc-based Orion Energy Systems, Skana Aluminum Co. and Tower Tech Systems.

In a speech to hundreds of Orion employees, civic and business leaders, the president was effusive in his praise of its founder, Neal Verfuert, but also the city whose Native American name means "home of the great spirit."

"We've got to lead the world in innovation," Obama said, echoing a theme he shared Tuesday night during his State of the Union speech.

"That's how we're going to build the industries of the future, because we make smarter products using better technology than anybody else," Obama said to loud applause from employees of the energy technology company.

"So, I came here to Manitowoc to glimpse that future ... this is a place that's been doing what America has always done throughout its history ... you've reinvented yourself," Obama said.

In talking about Orion's founder, Obama said, "America needs to get behind entrepreneurs like Neal. We need to get behind clean energy companies like Orion." Obama said the jobs at Orion "are good for all of us

because they make everybody's energy bills cheaper. They make the planet safer.

"What you do is sharpening America's competitive edge all around the world." Obama said Verfuert likes to say that Orion plays to win.

"That's what sets Neal apart," the president said. "That's what sets Orion apart. That's what also sets America apart. Here in America, we play to win."

After watching employee Marisol DeBaushe perform final testing on a high-intensity modular light fixture and turn it on, Obama told the media Orion's signature product "creates 50 to 75 percent more light at half the power ... that's how we're going to win the future."

'Exceeded expectations'

City of Manitowoc Mayor Justin Nickels, along with Green Bay Mayor Jim Schmitt and Gov. Scott Walker, chatted with Obama before he went to the plant floor.

Made for him by Green Bay's Super Bowl-bound team, Nickels presented Obama with a Packers jersey with "OBAMA 12" on the back.

A well-known Chicago Bears fan, Obama later commented to the employees and assembled media, "I'm not here because I lost a bet" and then wished the Packers good luck in their super showdown against the Pittsburgh Steelers.

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Obama's remarks impressed Nickels.

"It was neat that he picked Manitowoc to start his campaign focusing on renewable energy," Nickels said. "The president had a good message that he shared with the world ... we couldn't ask for better press. His visit exceeded my expectations."

Obama also focused attention during his televised address on Tower Tech, which he said was "one of the largest wind tower manufacturers in North America - a company that's grown by several hundred workers in recent years."

He also saluted Skana Aluminum, which resumed aluminum hot mill production after the plant was shuttered for more than a year after the previous ownership filed for bankruptcy.

Obama had a tour of the facility, accompanied by Tom Testwuide, Skana's CEO and board chairman, along with Jerry Keehan, vice president-manufacturing.

After watching giant, aluminum ingot slabs melting in a 1,400-degree furnace, Obama told the media that Skana "is the result of a terrific business person like Tom working with the government to re-open plants."

A focus of Obama's "White House to Main Street" tours is to tout legislation he has signed including incentives to support reinvestments in renewable energy, tax cuts to encourage businesses to make new investments, and efforts to help small businesses get access to the credit they need to expand and hire.

Through city to Tower Tech

Following his tour of Skana, the presidential motorcade traveled on Mirro, Memorial and Maritime drives, as well as through downtown on Eighth, Franklin and 16th streets to the peninsula and Tower Tech.

People with American flags and signs lined the three-mile route including Madison Elementary School students on the hill overlooking Maritime Drive and Lake Michigan.

At Tower Tech, Obama was greeted by Paul Smith, Broadwind Towers president; Chris Wallander, plant manager; and Peter Duprey, president and CEO of the wind tower manufacturer's parent company, Broadwind Energy.

In the same plant where the Manitowoc Company built a couple dozen World War II submarines, Obama talked with welders Melissa Peters and Robin King, who were assembling wind tower sections.

The two young women are part of the business that opened in 2003 and has grown to more than 300 employees.

With severe winter weather conditions, including icy runways at Andrews Air Force Base, the decision was made to end the president's Manitowoc visit at 1:30 p.m. and Obama returned to Austin Straubel.

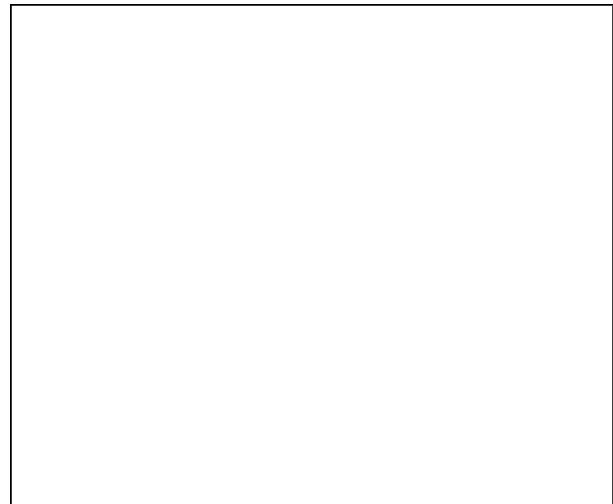
Forty minutes later, the president was at the top of the gangway waving good-bye to Wisconsin before ducking into Air Force One and jetting eastward, leaving behind a city that could feel proud to have hosted the nation's chief executive.

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President Barack Obama beholds an Orion Energy Systems' high-intensity modular fluorescent light held

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by Marisol DeBaushe of Orion during Obama's visit to Manitowoc on Wednesday.(Doug Sundin/HTR)

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