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Coats Opening Statement: The Transformative Impact of Robots and Automation

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Joint Economic Committee Chairman Dan Coats (R-Ind.) delivered the following opening statement during a hearing on technology and the economy entitled “The Transformative Impact of Robots and Automation”:

“Today the Committee will examine how robots, automation, and technology are transforming our economy. I’d like to thank our witnesses for being here, and I will be introducing them shortly.

“But first, I would like to draw the Committee’s attention to the gavel I just used to start today’s hearing. It looks and functions just like a typical gavel, but it was not made from a block of wood. In fact, it was created just down the street at the Washington D.C. Public Library’s Fabrication Laboratory, or ‘Fab Lab,’ using 3D printing.

“3D printing works by heating up raw material, in this case plastic, and ‘printing’ one small layer at a time until the object is completed. Rather than needing to mold or carve raw material as in the past, now we can simply upload a file to a printer and it will create the item according to the user’s exact specifications.

“I also have with me a different 3D-printed gavel that we will use to adjourn this hearing. It was made by students at the Washington Mathematics Science Technology Public Charter High School, also located in the District of Columbia. What an exciting new world we live in, where objects can be manufactured on demand with such ease and specificity.

“I would like to thank both institutions for their contributions to today’s hearing, which tangibly illustrate the topic we are about to explore. I would also like to thank Senator Lee and his staff for helping the Committee prepare for today’s hearing.

“Recent technological developments have been pushing the envelope faster and further than was expected even a decade ago, making what was once thought of as science fiction a reality. I remember the hassle of getting my children to program our VCR. Now my cable box is capable of recording all my favorite shows, without me even asking. Meanwhile some of my grandchildren are probably asking, ‘What is a VCR?’

“The robotic machines are here. Whether it is vacuuming our carpets or assisting in precise surgeries, robots are helping with and performing almost any task we can imagine. This has led to a greater abundance of consumer products, and more productive and creative workers.

“However, as with the Industrial Revolution, this new robot revolution clearly is contributing to pressures arising within our changing labor force. Even before these technological advances, America’s workforce was starting to age and businesses were beginning to rely much more on automated labor than physical labor. Robots are expected to hasten this trend as they fill in for humans in both blue- and white-collar jobs.

“This picture of a modern assembly line illustrates the prevalence of automation in today’s economy. Where workers used to assemble vehicles directly by hand, now they oversee teams of precise robots that can weld and assemble vehicles far more advanced than ever before.

“Automation’s rapid progress has also raised challenges with certain government policies. How can we foster an environment where innovators thrive and grow? Is our social safety net prepared for a 21st century labor market? Do some government policies make human workers prohibitively expensive for employers? How will current workers adapt? And is our education system preparing our youngest citizens for the future economy?

“These are important questions. For guidance, we look forward to hearing the views of our distinguished witnesses.

“Today we will hear from Dr. Andrew McAfee, principal research scientist and co-founder of MIT’s Institute Initiative on the Digital Economy. We also welcome Adam Keiper, fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and editor of the quarterly technology publication The New Atlantis. Our final witness is Harry Holzer, professor at the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University and a Senior Fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution.

“My thanks to all of you for providing us with your expertise and giving us a glimpse into the possibilities of the future.”

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