

Statement by the President after Briefing at the National Counterterrorism Center

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December 17, 2015

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

December 17, 2015

McLean, Virginia

12:58 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: As President and Commander in Chief, my highest priority is the security of the American people. And on a regular basis, I convene members of my national security team for an in-depth review of our efforts to prevent terrorist attacks against our citizens -- around the world and here at home. We examine any known and emerging threats. We review our security posture and we make sure that we're taking every necessary measure to protect our people.

Today, I wanted to hold our meeting here -- rather than in the Situation Room at the White House, I wanted to hold it at the National Counterterrorism Center because this is the hub of where so many of our experts and efforts come together. And I want to thank our Director of National Intelligence Clapper, Jim Clapper, as well as NCTC Director Nick Rasmussen, and everybody at NCTC -- all of you -- for welcoming us here today.

Now, Nick, along with CIA Director Brennan and FBI Director Comey, provided a threat briefing. And Director Comey and Attorney General Lynch updated us on the investigation into the San Bernardino attacks. I reiterated that the investigation will continue to have the full support of the federal government and that we should leave no stone unturned in determining why and how these terrorists carried out that tragedy.

Secretary of Homeland Security Johnson updated us on the measures we're taking here at home to increase awareness, stay vigilant, and enhance the safety of the traveling public, especially with so many Americans traveling during the holidays.

After the terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, I know that a lot of Americans were anxious. And that's understandable. It's natural. What matters most to all of us are our friends and our families and our communities and their safety. That's true of folks inside of government as well as outside of government. But here's what I want every American to know. Since 9/11, we've taken extraordinary steps to strengthen our

homeland security -- our borders, our ports, our airports, our aviation security, including enhanced watch lists and screening. And we've gotten much better -- thanks in part to the people in this room -- of preventing large, complex attacks like 9/11.

Moreover -- and I think everybody here will agree -- we have the very best intelligence, counterterrorism, homeland security and law enforcement professionals in the world.

Our folks are the best. Across our government, these dedicated professionals, including here at NCTC, are relentless, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. At the operations center here, people from across our government work, literally shoulder-to-shoulder, pouring over the latest information, analyzing it, integrating it, connecting the dots. They're sharing information -- pushing it out across the federal government and, just as importantly, to our state and local partners. In other words, what you see here today is one, strong, united team.

So our professionals have a remarkable record of success. Of course, when terrorists pull off a despicable act like what happened in San Bernardino it tears at our hearts. But it also stiffens our resolve to learn whatever lessons we can and to make any improvements that are needed. In the meantime, what the world doesn't always see are the successes -- those terrorist plots that have been prevented. And that's how it should be. This work oftentimes demands secrecy. But as Americans, we should not forget how good these patriots are. Over the years, they have taken countless terrorists off the battlefield. They have disrupted plots. They've thwarted attacks. They have saved American lives.

And so, for everybody who is involved in our counterterrorism efforts, I want to say thank you, and the American people thank you.

I want to repeat what my team just told me. At this moment, our intelligence and counterterrorism professionals do not have any specific and credible information about an attack on the homeland. That said, we have to be vigilant. As I indicated in my address to the nation last week, we are in a new phase of terrorism, including lone actors and small groups of terrorists, like those in San Bernardino. Because they are smaller, often self-initiating, self-motivating, they're harder to detect, and that makes it harder to prevent.

But just as the threat evolves, so do we. We're constantly adapting, constantly improving, upping our game, getting better. And today, the mission to protect our homeland goes on, on three main fronts.

First, we're going after terrorists over there, where they plot and plan and spew their propaganda. As I described at the Pentagon, we're hitting ISIL harder than ever in Syria and Iraq. We are taking out their leaders. Our partners on the ground are fighting to push ISIL back, and ISIL has been losing territory.

Our Special Operations Forces are hard at work. We took out the ISIL leader in Libya. We've taken out terrorists in Yemen and Somalia. So we're sending a message: If you target Americans, you will have no safe haven. We will find you, and we will defend our nation.

Meanwhile, as always, we're working to protect Americans overseas -- including our military bases and servicemembers. And Secretary John Kerry updated us on security at our embassies and our diplomatic posts.

Second, we continue to do everything in our power to prevent terrorists from getting into the United States. We're doing more with countries around the world, including our European partners, to prevent the flow of foreign terrorist fighters -- both to places like Syria and Iraq, and back into our countries.

We're implementing additional layers of security for visitors who come here under the Visa Waiver Program and we're working with Congress to make further improvements.

Any refugee coming to the United States -- some of them victims of terrorism themselves -- will continue to get the most intensive scrutiny of any arrival. They go through up to two years of vetting, including biometric screening. And the review that I ordered into the fiancé visa program, under which the female terrorist in San Bernardino came here, is ongoing.

Third, we're stepping up our efforts to prevent attacks here at home. As I said, the NCTC is constantly sharing information with our state and local partners. Across the country more than 100 joint terrorism task forces are the action arm of this fight -- federal, state, and local experts all working together to disrupt threats. At the state level, fusion cells are receiving tips and pushing information out to local law enforcement. Just yesterday the Department of Homeland Security updated its alert system to make sure Americans are getting the most timely and useful information.

And with groups like ISIL trying to radicalize people to violence, especially online, part of our meeting today focused on how we can continue to strengthen our partnership between law enforcement, high-tech leaders, communities, faith leaders, and citizens.

We've got to keep on building up trust and cooperation that helps communities inoculate themselves from the kind of propaganda that ISIL is spewing out, preventing their loved ones -- especially young people -- from succumbing to terrorist ideologies in the first place.

And finally, one of our greatest weapons against terrorism is our own strength and resilience as a people. That means staying vigilant -- if you see something suspicious, say something to law enforcement. It also means staying united as one American family -- remembering that our greatest allies in this fight are each other, Americans of all faiths and all backgrounds. And when Americans stand together, nothing can beat us.

Most of all, we cannot give in to fear, or change how we live our lives, because that's what terrorists want. That's the only leverage that they have. They can't defeat us on a battlefield, but they can lead us to change in ways that would undermine what this country is all about. And that's what we have to guard against. We have to remind ourselves that when we stay true to our values, nothing can beat us.

So anyone trying to harm Americans need to know -- they need to know that we're strong and that we're resilient, that we will not be terrorized. We've prevailed over much greater threats than this. We will prevail again.

So I want to once again thank all of you at NCTC and every one of your home agencies across our entire government for your extraordinary service. I want every American to know -- as you go about the holidays, as you travel and gather with family, and the kids open their presents, and as you ring in the New Year -- that you've got dedicated patriots working around the clock all across the country to protect us all. Oftentimes they're doing so by sacrificing their own holidays and their own time with families. But they care about this deeply. And they're the best in the world. And for that, we're very grateful.

Thank you, everybody. Happy holidays. (Applause.)

END

1:10 P.M. EST