

Remarks by the President at MacDill Air Force Base



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THE PRESIDENT: Hello, MacDill! (Applause.) I want to thank General Austin for his introduction, Lloyd, for your exceptional leadership -- were you about to sneak off the stage?

GENERAL AUSTIN: Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I was.

THE PRESIDENT: Go ahead. (Laughter.) It's better when Lloyd is not standing next to me because I don't look small. (Laughter.) General Austin has done such an extraordinary work, both commanding our forces in Iraq; today as the commander of CENTCOM. I want to thank somebody else for his own lifetime of service to America -- first as a soldier who fought in Vietnam; now as our Secretary of Defense -- Chuck Hagel. Give it up for Chuck. (Applause.)

Chuck was here a few weeks ago to welcome the new head of Special Operations Command, General Joe Votel. Give Joe a big round of applause. (Applause.) For those of you who don't know, 13 years ago, Joe led his team of Army Rangers as they jumped into Afghanistan to establish our first base there -- by jumping out of the plane alongside them. So Joe is a tough guy, and he knows what he is doing and I can't think of somebody who is more qualified to head up our Special Forces. And so we want to thank Joe for accepting this assignment.

Your member of Congress, Kathy Castor, is here. Give Kathy a big round of applause -- there she is right there. (Applause.) Your Wing Commander, Colonel Dan Tulley. (Applause.) Your senior enlisted leaders: Command Sergeant Major Chris Greca; Command Sergeant Major Chris Faris; Chief Master Sergeant Matt Lusson. (Applause.) And most of all, I want to salute all the spouses and military families on base, because let's be honest -- they're the force behind the force. (Applause.) I spent time with some of them last night, and it's clear why our military is the finest fighting force in the history of the world -- and it's because our military families are serving right alongside you.

I know we've got some Air Force in the house. (Applause.) It's great to be at the home of the 6th Air Mobility Wing. (Applause.) The 927th Air Refueling Wing. (Applause.) CENTCOM. (Applause.) SOCOM. (Applause.) We've got some Army here. (Hooah!) Navy. (Hooyah!) The Marines. (Oorah!) And Coast Guard. (Laughter and applause.) We love our Coast Guard. (Laughter.)

Now, I'm not here to give a long speech. But what I really wanted to do is come down and just shake some hands. I just received a briefing from General Austin and met with your commanders. I met with representatives from more than 40 nations. It is a true team effort here at MacDill. And I came here to say the same thing that I've been saying to troops on bases across this country, around the world, and a few months ago in Bagram -- and that is thank you. On behalf of the American people, I want to thank all of you for your service; I want to thank all of you for your sacrifice; I want to thank you for your commitment to each other and your commitment to our country. As your Commander-in-Chief, I could not be more proud of each and every one of you.

For nearly 75 years, the men and women of MacDill have lived a commitment to "Airmen, Mission, and Community." You've supported our troops through each generation of challenges. And as home to both Central Command and Special Operations Command, you have shouldered some of the heaviest responsibilities in dealing with the challenges of this new century.

For more than a decade -- ever since that awful September morning 13 years ago; ever since Joe and his Rangers took that jump a month later -- you, and all our men and women in uniform, have borne the burden of war. Some of you -- our quiet professionals, our Special Forces -- were among the first to go. When the decision was made to go into Iraq, you were there. When we refocused the fight back to Afghanistan, you were there. You have served with skill, and honor, and commitment, and professionalism.

And some of you carry the wounds of these wars. I know some of you lost friends. Today, we remember all who have given their lives in these wars. And we stand with their families, who've given more than most Americans can ever imagine. And we honor those sacrifices forever.

But here is what I want every single one of you to know. Because of you, this 9/11 Generation of heroes has done everything asked of you, and met every mission tasked to you. We are doing what we set out to do. Because of you, Osama bin Laden is no more. Because of you, the core al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been decimated. Because of you, Afghans are reclaiming their communities; Afghan forces have taken the lead for their country's security. In three months, because of you, our combat mission will be over in Afghanistan, and our war in Afghanistan will come to a responsible end. That's because of you.

You and our counterterrorism professionals have prevented terrorist attacks. You've saved American lives. You've made our homeland more secure. But we've always known that the end of the war in Afghanistan didn't mean the end of threats or challenges to

America.

Here at MacDill, you knew this and have known this as well as anybody. You played a central role in our combat and counterterrorism operations. You make sure our troops and pilots get what they need in order to get the job done. You train forces around the world so countries can take responsibility for their own security. The 6th Air Mobility Wing is continuously deployed, supporting our humanitarian and combat operations around the world -- "Ready to Defend." And your work is as vital as ever.

Because in an uncertain world full of breathtaking change, the one constant is American leadership.

In a world where technology provides a small group of killers with the ability to do terrible harm, it is America that has the capacity and the will to mobilize the world against terrorists -- including the group in Syria and Iraq known as ISIL. Our intelligence community, as I said last week, has not yet detected specific plots from these terrorists against America. But its leaders have repeatedly threatened America and our allies. And right now, these terrorists pose a threat to the people of Iraq, the people of Syria, the broader Middle East -- including our personnel, our embassies, our consulates, our facilities there. And if left unchecked, they could pose a growing threat to the United States.

So, last month, I gave the order for our military to begin taking targeted action against ISIL. And since then, our brave pilot and crews -- with your help -- have conducted more than 160 airstrikes against these terrorists. Because of your efforts, we've been able to protect our personnel and our facilities, and kill ISIL fighters, and given space for Iraqi and Kurdish forces to reclaim key territory. They've helped our partners on the ground break ISIL sieges, helped rescue civilians cornered on a mountain, helped save the lives of thousands of innocent men, women and children. That's what you've done.

Now going forward, as I announced last week, we're going to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy. And whether in Iraq or in Syria, these terrorists will learn the same thing that the leaders of al Qaeda already know: We mean what we say; our reach is long; if you threaten America, you will find no safe haven. We will find you eventually.

AUDIENCE: Hooah! (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: But -- and this is something I want to emphasize -- this is not and will not be America's fight alone. One of the things we've learned over this last decade is, America can make a decisive difference, but I want to be clear: The American forces that have been deployed to Iraq do not and will not have a combat mission. They will support Iraqi forces on the ground as they fight for their own country against these terrorists.

As your Commander-in-Chief, I will not commit you and the rest of our Armed Forces to fighting another ground war in Iraq. After a decade of massive ground deployments, it is more effective to use our unique capabilities in support of partners on the ground so they

can secure their own countries' futures. And that's the only solution that will succeed over the long term.

We'll use our air power. We will train and equip our partners. We will advise them and we will assist them. We will lead a broad coalition of countries who have a stake in this fight. Because this is not simply America versus ISIL -- this is the people of the region fighting against ISIL. It is the world rejecting the brutality of ISIL in favor of a better future for our children, and our children's children -- all of them.

But we're not going to do this alone. And the one thing we have learned is, is that when we do things alone and the countries -- the people of those countries aren't doing it for themselves, as soon as we leave we start getting into the same problems.

So we've got to do things differently. This is why we've spent the past several weeks building a coalition to aid in these efforts. And because we're leading in the right way, more nations are joining us. Overall, more than 40 countries so far have offered assistance to the broad campaign against ISIL. Some nations will assist from the air -- and already France and the United Kingdom are flying with us over Iraq, with others committed to join this effort.

Some nations will help us support the forces fighting these terrorists on the ground. And already Saudi Arabia has agreed to host our efforts to train and equip Syrian opposition forces. Australia and Canada will send military advisors to Iraq. German paratroopers will offer training. Other nations have helped resupply arms and equipment to forces in Iraq, including the Kurdish Peshmerga.

Arab nations have agreed to strengthen their support for Iraq's new government and to do their part in all the aspects of the fight against ISIL. And our partners will help to cut off ISIL funding, and gather intelligence, and stem the flow of foreign fighters into and out of the Middle East.

And meanwhile, nearly 30 nations have helped us with humanitarian relief to help innocent civilians who've been driven from their homes -- whether they are Sunni, or Shia, or Christian, or Yazidi, or any other religious minority.

Yesterday, at the White House, I met with an outstanding American leader -- retired Marine General John Allen. He worked with Iraqi tribal leaders as they fought to reclaim their own communities from terrorists, and he's going to serve as America's special envoy to build and coordinate this incredible coalition. And I've called on Congress to make sure you've got all the authorities and resources you need to get the job done.

But the point is we cannot do for the Iraqis what they must do for themselves. We can't take the place of Arab partners in securing their own region and a better future for their own people. We can't do it for them, but this is an effort that calls on America's unique abilities -- and responsibilities -- to lead.

In a world that's more crowded and more connected, it is America that has the unique capability to mobilize against an organization like ISIL. In a world full of broader social challenges, it is America that has the unique capability and know-how to help contain and combat a threat like Ebola, the epidemic in Africa. And yesterday, on top of all that we're already doing to help, I announced a major boost to our response. We're establishing a military command center in Liberia, at the request of their government, to support civilian efforts across the region. And Major General Darryl Williams, commander of our Army forces in Africa, arrived yesterday -- he's already on the ground. And our armed forces will bring their unique, unrivaled expertise in command and control, and logistics and engineering, including creating an air bridge to get health workers and medical supplies into West Africa faster. And obviously, in all our efforts, the safety of our personnel will remain a top priority.

In the nation of Liberia, one person who heard this news yesterday was reported to say, "We have been praying to get the disease wiped out of our country. So if the coming of U.S. troops will help us get that done, we [will] be happy." And that's the story across the board. If there is a hurricane, if there is a typhoon, if there is some sort of crisis, if there is an earthquake, if there's a need for a rescue mission, when the world is threatened, when the world needs help, it calls on America. Even the countries that complain about America -- (laughter) -- when they need help, who do they call? They call us. And then America calls on you.

To all the servicemen and women here and around the world: we ask a lot of you. And any mission involves risk. And any mission separates you from your families. And sending our servicemembers into harm's way is not a decision I ever take lightly; it is the hardest decision I make as President. Nothing else comes close. I do it only when I know the mission is vital to the security of this country that we love. I do it only because I know that you're the best there is at what you do. And, frankly, there just aren't a lot of other folks who can perform in the same ways -- in fact, there are none. And there are some things only we can do. There are some capabilities only we have.

That's because of you -- your dedication, your skill, your work, your families supporting you, your training, your command structure. Our Armed Forces are unparalleled and unique. And so when we've got a big problem somewhere around the world, it falls on our shoulders. And sometimes that's tough. But that's what sets us apart. That's why we're America. That's what the stars and stripes are all about.

And between war and recession, it has been a challenging start to this new century. We've been busy. This has not been an easy 14 years. And many of you came of age in these years. But I want you to know, as I stand here with you today, I'm as confident as I have ever been that this century, just like the last century, will be led by America. It will be and is an American century.

At home, we're bouncing back, better positioning ourselves to win the future than any nation on Earth. Overseas, we're moving forward, answering the call to lead. And even when it seems like our politics is just dividing us, I want you to remember that when it comes to supporting you and your families, the American people stand united. We

support you. We are proud of you. We are in awe of your skill and your service. Only 1 percent of Americans may wear the uniform and shoulder the weight of special responsibilities that you do, but 100 percent of Americans need to support you and your families -- 100 percent.

This is a moment of American leadership, and thanks to you, it is a moment that we are going to meet. And I will keep standing up for your interests and for our security, and for the human rights and dignity of people wherever they live. And we're going to keep on working with our allies and partners to take out the terrorists who threaten us wherever they hide. Because in stark contrast to those who only know how to kill and maim and tear down, we keep on building up and offering a future of progress and hope. And like the generations before us, we're willing to defend this country we love. We're willing to help others on this planet that we share. We're protected by patriots like you. And for all those reasons, the United States of America will remain the greatest force for freedom that the world has ever known.

Thank you very much, everybody. I'm proud of you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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12:22 P.M. EDT