

Press Conference by the President, 12/18/15



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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon, everybody. Clearly, this is not the most important event that's taking place in the White House today. There is a screening of Star Wars for Gold Star families and children coming up. So I'll try to be relatively succinct. Let me say a few words about the year behind us and the year ahead, and then I'll take a few questions.

As I look back on this year, one thing I see is that so much of our steady, persistent work over the years is paying off for the American people in big, tangible ways. Our early actions to rescue the economy set the stage for the longest streak of private sector job growth on record, with 13.7 million new jobs in that time. The unemployment rate has been cut in half -- down to 5 percent. And most importantly, wages grew faster than at any time since the recovery began. So, over the course of this year, a lot of the decisions that we made early on have paid off.

Years of steady implementation of the Affordable Care Act helped to drive the rate of the uninsured in America below 10 percent for the first time since records were kept on that.

Health care prices have grown at their lowest levels in five decades; 17 million more Americans have gained coverage, and we now know that six million people have signed up through HealthCare.gov for coverage beginning on January 1st -- 600,000 on Tuesday alone. New customers are up one-third over last year. And the more who sign up, the stronger the system becomes. And that's good news for every American who no longer has to worry about being just one illness or accident away from financial hardship.

On climate, our early investment in clean energy ignited a clean energy industry boom. Our actions to help reduce our carbon emissions brought China to the table. And last week, in Paris, nearly 200 nations forged an historic agreement that was only possible because of American leadership.

Around the world -- from reaching the deal to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, to reestablishing diplomatic relations with Cuba, to concluding a landmark trade agreement that will make sure that American workers and American businesses are

operating on a level playing field and that we, rather than China or other countries, are setting the rules for global trade -- we have shown what is possible when America leads.

And, after decades of dedicated advocacy, marriage equality became a reality in all 50 states.

So, I just want to point out -- I said at the beginning of this year that interesting stuff happens in the fourth quarter -- and we are only halfway through.

I do want to thank Congress for ending the year on a high note. I got to sign an education bill that is going to fix some of the challenges that we had with No Child Left Behind, and promises to invest more in high-quality early childhood education. We signed a transportation bill that, although not as robust as I think we need, still allows states and local governments to plan and actually get moving, putting people back to work rebuilding our roads and our bridges. We got Ex-Im Bank back to work supporting American exports.

And today they passed a bipartisan budget deal. I'm not wild about everything in it -- I'm sure that's true for everybody -- but it is a budget that, as I insisted, invests in our military and our middle class, without ideological provisions that would have weakened Wall Street reform or rules on big polluters.

It's part of an agreement that will permanently extend tax credits to 24 million working families. It includes some long-sought wins like strengthening America's leadership at the IMF. And because it eliminates the possibility of a shutdown for the first time -- or for the first nine months of next year, Congress and I have a long runway to get some important things done on behalf of the American people.

Now, there's still a lot of work to do. For example, there's still a lot more that Congress can do to promote job growth and increase wages in this country. I still want to work with Congress -- both Democrats and Republicans -- to reform our criminal justice system.

And earlier today I commuted the sentences of 95 men and women who had served their debt to society, another step forward in upholding our fundamental ideals of justice and fairness.

And, of course, our most important job is to keep Americans safe. I've had a lot to say about that this week, but let me reiterate, the United States continues to lead a global coalition in our mission to destroy ISIL. ISIL has already lost about 40 percent of the populated areas it once controlled in Iraq, and it's losing territory in Syria. As we keep up the pressure, our air campaign will continue to hit ISIL harder than ever -- taking out their leaders, their commanders and their forces. We're stepping up our support for partners on the ground as they push ISIL back. Our men and women in uniform are carrying out their mission with trademark professionalism and courage. And this holiday season, all of us are united in our gratitude for their service, and we are thankful to their families, as well, because they serve alongside those who are actually deployed.

Squeezing ISIL's heart -- its core in Syria and Iraq -- will make it harder for them to pump their terror and propaganda to the rest of the world. At the same time, as we know from San Bernardino, where I'll visit with families later today, we have to remain vigilant here at home. Our counterterrorism, intelligence, homeland security, and law enforcement communities are working 24/7 to protect our homeland. And all of us can do our part by staying vigilant, by saying something if we see something that is suspicious, by refusing to be terrorized, and by staying united as one American family.

In short, for all the very real progress America has made over the past seven years, we still have some unfinished business. And I plan on doing everything I can with every minute of every day that I have left as President to deliver on behalf of the American people.

Since taking this office, I've never been more optimistic about a year ahead than I am right now. And in 2016, I'm going to leave it out all on the field.

So with that, let me take some questions. I'll start with Roberta Rampton of Reuters.

Q Mr. President, you're going to California today. And as you said earlier this week, you told the nation that there's no specific or credible threat of a similar attack. But how is it really possible to know? I mean, aren't similar plots going to be just as hard to detect beforehand? And some lawmakers are saying that your government should review the social media of all people applying for visas to come to this country. What do you think of that idea? Should that be mandatory?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, Roberta, you're absolutely right that it is very difficult for us to detect lone wolf plots -- or plots involving a husband and wife, in this case -- because despite the incredible vigilance and professionalism of all our law enforcement, homeland security, et cetera, it's not that different from us trying to detect the next mass shooter.

You don't always see it. They're not always communicating publicly, and if you're not catching what they say publicly, then it becomes a challenge.

We are continuing to work at every level to make sure that there's no slip between information-sharing among agencies. We're continuing to strengthen our information-sharing with foreign countries. And because, in part, of the tragedy in Paris, I think you're seeing much greater cooperation from our European partners on these issues.

But this is a different kind of challenge than the sort that we had with an organization like al Qaeda that involved highly trained operatives who are working as cells or as a network.

Here, essentially, you have ISIL trying to encourage or induce somebody who may be prey to this kind of propaganda. And it becomes more difficult to see. It does mean that they're less likely to be able to carry out large, complex attacks. But as we saw in San Bernardino, obviously, you can still do enormous damage.

The issue of reviewing social media for those who are obtaining visas I think may have gotten garbled a little bit, because there may be -- it's important to distinguish between posts that are public -- social media on a Facebook page -- versus private communications through various social media or apps. And our law enforcement and intelligence

professionals are constantly monitoring public posts, and that is part of the visa review process, that people are investigating what individuals have said publicly and questioned about any statements that they maybe made.

But if you have a private communication between two individuals, that's harder to discern, by definition. And one of the things we'll be doing is engaging with the high-tech community to find out how we can, in an appropriate way, do a better job if we have a lead to be able to track a suspected terrorist. But we're going to have to recognize that no government is going to have the capacity to read every single person's text or emails or social media. If it's not posted publicly, then there are going to be feasibility issues that are probably insurmountable at some level, and it raises questions about our values.

I mean, keep in mind it was only a couple of years ago where we were having a major debate about whether the government was becoming too much like Big Brother. And overall, I think we've struck the right balance in protecting civil liberties and making sure that U.S. citizens' privacy is preserved, that we are making sure that there's oversight to what our intelligence agencies do. But we're going to have to continue to balance our needs for security with people's legitimate concerns about privacy.

And because the Internet is global and communication systems are global, the values that we apply here oftentimes are ones that folks who are trying to come into the country are also benefitting from because they're using the same technologies. But this is precisely why we're working very hard to bring law enforcement, intelligence, and high-tech companies together. Because we're going to have to really review what we can do both technically as well as consistent with our laws and our values in order to try to discern more rapidly some of the potential threats that may be out there.

David Jackson.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. A Gitmo question. Congress has made it pretty clear that they're just not going to let you transfer prisoners to the United States for trial. But some people think you already have the executive authority to transfer those prisoners and close Gitmo itself next year. My question is, do you believe you have that authority and are you willing to exercise it to close that place?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, we've been working systematically -- another example of persistence -- in reducing the population. We have a review process. Those who are eligible for transfer we locate in countries that have accepted some of these detainees. They monitor them, and it's been determined that they can be transferred. And my expectation is by early next year, we should have reduced that population below 100. And we will continue to steadily chip away at the numbers in Guantanamo.

There's going to come to a point where we have an irreducible population -- people who pose a significant threat, but for various reasons, it's difficult for us to try them in an Article III court. Some of those folks are going through a military commission process. But there's going to be a challenge there.

Now, at that stage, I'm presenting a plan to Congress about how we can close Guantanamo. I'm not going to automatically assume that Congress says no. I'm not being coy, David. I think it's fair to say that there's going to be significant resistance from some quarters to that. But I think we can make a very strong argument that it doesn't make sense for us to be spending an extra \$100 million, \$200 million, \$300 million, \$500 million, a billion dollars, to have a secure setting for 50, 60, 70 people. And we will wait until Congress has definitively said no to a well-thought-out plan with numbers attached to it before we say anything definitive about my executive authority here. I think it's far preferable if I can get stuff done with Congress.

Q So actually you could -- right -- on your own?

THE PRESIDENT: David, as I said -- and I think you've seen me on a whole bunch of issues like immigration -- I'm not going to be forward-leaning on what I can do without Congress before I've tested what I can do with Congress. And every once in a while, they'll surprise you, and this may be one of those places -- because I think we can make a really strong argument. Guantanamo continues to be one of the key magnets for jihadi recruitment.

To Roberta's question earlier about how do they propagandize and convince somebody here in the United States who may not have a criminal record or a history of terrorist activity to start shooting -- this is part of what they feed, this notion of a gross injustice, that America is not living up to its professed ideals. We know that. We see the Internet traffic. We see how Guantanamo has been used to create this mythology that America is at war with Islam. And for us to close it is part of our counterterrorism strategy that is supported by our military, our diplomatic, and our intelligence teams.

So when you combine that with the fact that it's really expensive that we are essentially at this point detaining a handful of people and each person is costing several million dollars to detain, when there are more efficient ways of doing it, I think we can make a strong argument.

But I'll take your point that it will be an uphill battle. Now, every battle I've had with Congress over the last five years has been uphill. But we keep on surprising you by actually getting some stuff done. Sometimes that may prove necessary, but we try not to get out ahead of ourselves on that.

Julie Pace.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. I wanted to ask you about some of the broader challenges in the Middle East. Some of the Republicans who are running for President have argued that the Mideast and the United States would be safer if we hadn't had regime change in places like Iraq, Libya, and Egypt. And having gone through the experience of the Arab Spring and the aftermath, I wonder what you now see the U.S. role in the Middle East in terms of trying to push dictators out of power. Would you advise future presidents to call for authoritarian leaders to step down as you did? And just specifically on Syria, at this point, is it your expectation that Bashar Assad's presidency will outlast yours?

THE PRESIDENT: There's been a lot of revisionist history, sometimes by the same people making different arguments depending on the situation. So maybe it's useful just for us to go back over some of these issues.

We did not depose Hosni Mubarak. Millions of Egyptians did, because of their dissatisfaction with the corruption and authoritarianism of the regime. We had a working relationship with Mubarak. We didn't trigger the Arab Spring. And the notion that somehow the U.S. was in a position to pull the strings on a country that is the largest in the Arab world I think is mistaken.

What is true is that at the point at which the choice becomes mowing down millions of people, or trying to find some transition -- we believed, and I would still argue that it was more sensible for us to find a peaceful transition to the Egyptian situation.

With respect to Libya, Libya is sort of an alternative version of Syria in some ways, because by the time the international coalition interceded in Syria, chaos had already broken out. You already had the makings of a civil war. You had a dictator who was threatening and was in a position to carry out the wholesale slaughter of large numbers of people. And we worked under U.N. mandate with a coalition of folks in order to try to avert a big humanitarian catastrophe that would not have been good for us.

Those who now argue, in retrospect, we should have left Qaddafi in there seem to forget that he had already lost legitimacy and control of his country, and we could have -- instead of what we have in Libya now, we could have had another Syria in Libya now. The problem with Libya was the fact that there was a failure on the part of the entire international community -- and I think that the United States has some accountability for not moving swiftly enough and underestimating the need to rebuild government there quickly -- and as a consequence, you now have a very bad situation.

And as far as Syria goes, I think it is entirely right and proper for the United States of America to speak out on behalf of its values. And when you have an authoritarian leader that is killing hundreds of thousands of his own people, the notion that we would just stand by and say nothing is contrary to who we are. And that does not serve our interests -- because, at that point, us being in collusion with that kind of governance would make us even more of a target for terrorist activity, would --

Q Do you think that government can cope -- try to stop extremists from --

THE PRESIDENT: The reason that Assad has been a problem in Syria is because that is a majority-Sunni country and he had lost the space that he had early on to execute an inclusive transition -- peaceful transition. He chose instead to slaughter people. And once that happened, the idea that a minority population there could somehow crush tens of millions of people who oppose him is not feasible. It's not plausible. Even if you were being cold-eyed and hard-hearted about the human toll there, it just wouldn't happen. And as a consequence, our view has been that you cannot bring peace to Syria, you cannot get an end to the civil war unless you have a government that is recognized as legitimate by a majority of that country. It will not happen.

And this is the argument that I've had repeatedly with Mr. Putin, dating five years ago, at which time his suggestion -- as I gather some Republicans are now suggesting -- was Assad is not so bad, let him just be as brutal and repressive as he can, but at least he'll keep order. I said, look, the problem is that the history of trying to keep order when a large majority of the country has turned against you is not good. And five years later, I was right.

So we now have an opportunity -- and John Kerry is meeting as we speak with Syria and Turkey and Iran and the Gulf countries and other parties who are interested -- we now have an opportunity not to turn back the clock -- it's going to be very difficult to completely overcome the devastation that's happened in Syria already -- but to find a political transition that maintains the Syrian state, that recognizes there are a bunch of stakeholders inside of Syria, and hopefully, to initiate a ceasefire that won't be perfect but allows all the parties to turn on what should be our number-one focus, and that is destroying Daesh and its allies in the region.

And that is going to be a difficult process. It's going to be a painstaking process. But there is no shortcut to that. And that's not based on some idealism on my part; that's a hard-headed calculation about what's going to be required to get the job done.

Q Do you think that Assad, though, potentially could remain in power a year from now?

THE PRESIDENT: I think that Assad is going to have to leave in order for the country to stop the bloodletting and for all the parties involved to be able to move forward in a non-sectarian way. He has lost legitimacy in the eyes of a large majority of the country.

Now, is there a way of us constructing a bridge creating a political transition that allows those who are allied with Assad right now -- allows the Russians, allows the Iranians to ensure that their equities are respected, that minorities like the Alawites are not crushed or retribution is not the order of the day -- I think that's going to be very important as well.

And that's what makes this so difficult. Sadly, had Assad made a decision earlier that he was not more important personally than his entire country, that kind of political transition would have been much easier. It's a lot harder now. But John Kerry has been doing some excellent work in moving that process forward. And I do think that you've seen from the Russians a recognition that, after a couple of months, they're not really moving the needle that much, despite a sizeable deployment inside of Syria. And of course, that's what I suggested would happen -- because there's only so much bombing you can do when an entire country is outraged and believes that its ruler doesn't represent them.

Cheryl Bolen.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. I'd like to ask you about the surprising Congress. Specifically, what are your top legislative priorities for next year? And how has the new Speaker, Paul Ryan, changed the dynamic with you and Capitol Hill? And can you be

more ambitious next year, doing things like maybe completing the Transatlantic Trade Partnership, or even getting tax reform?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, it's important to give some credit where credit is due. John Boehner did a favor to all of us, including now Speaker Ryan, by working with us to agree on a topline budget framework. That was the basis for subsequent negotiations. He was able to do that because he was going out the door, and was then given, I think, a little more room to maneuver than he previously had.

Having said that, I also want to give Speaker Ryan credit. I called both him and Mitch McConnell, as well as Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid, for the orderly way in which they actually negotiated a budget -- the way Congress is historically and typically supposed to work. I mean, we've gotten kind of used to last-minute crises and shutdown threats, and so forth. And this is a messy process that doesn't satisfy everybody completely, but it's more typical of American democracy. And I think that Speaker Ryan deserves a role in that.

I will say that in his interactions with me, he has been professional, he has reached out to tell me what he can do and what he cannot do. I think it's a good working relationship. We recognize that we disagree on a whole bunch of other stuff and have fundamentally different visions for where we want to move the country. But perhaps because even before he was elected he had worked on Capitol Hill, I think he is respectful of the process and respectful of how legislation works. So kudos to him, as well as all the leaders and appropriators who were involved in this process.

Now, I just want to repeat -- because sometimes we take for granted what's happened -- I said early on in this process that I wasn't going to sign a budget that did not relieve sequester, this artificial austerity that was making it difficult for us to invest in things like education and our military. And I said I would not accept a lot of ideological riders that were attached to a big budget deal. And we met our goals.

And because of some terrific negotiations by the Democrats up on Capitol Hill and I think some pretty good work by our legislative staff here, we're going to be able to fund environmental protection. We're going to be able to make sure that we're investing in things like early childhood education and making college more affordable. We're going to be able to implement the Clean Power Plan rule. We're going to be able to continue to invest in clean energy that spurs on innovation. We're going to be able to make sure that our military gets the equipment and the training that it needs in order to be effective in fighting ISIL and other threats around the world.

So it was a good win. And there are some things in there that I don't like, but that's the nature of legislation and compromise. And I think the system worked.

That gives me some optimism that next year, on a narrow set of issues, we can get some more work done. Now, as David said, it's an election year. And obviously a lot of the legislative process is going to be skewed by people looking over their shoulders, worrying

about primaries, trying to position themselves relative to the presidential candidates. So that makes it harder. But I think there are going to be a handful of areas where we can make real progress.

One of them you already mentioned -- Trans-Pacific Partnership, which now has been out, Congress has had a chance to review. And it meets the bar that I set. It is consistent with what I promised, which is the most pro-labor, pro-environment, progressive trade deal in history, that eliminates just about every tariff on American manufacturing goods in countries that up until this point have charged a tax, essentially, on anything that American workers and American businesses sell in these areas. It brings those taxes down to zero on basically all American-manufactured products -- a huge win for agriculture, because now the people of Japan are going to be in a better position to enjoy American beef and American pork, which up until this point, even though we're much more efficient producers, has been tagged with a tax that makes our products uncompetitive in Japanese markets.

So this is a big deal. And I think Speaker Ryan would like to try to get it done. And there are both proponents and opponents of this in both Democratic and Republican parties, and so it's going to be an interesting situation where we're going to have to stitch together the same kind of bipartisan effort in order for us to get it done.

A second area that I think is possible is criminal justice reform. There has been sincere, serious negotiations and efforts by Democrats and Republicans to create a criminal justice system that is more fair, more evenhanded, more proportionate, and is smarter about how we reduce crime. And I've really been impressed by the dedication of a core group of Democrats and Republicans -- some of them, the most liberal Democrats and the most conservative Republicans -- coming together saying this is the right thing to do.

We've got a good bill in the Senate that passed with bipartisan support out of committee. My hope is, is that gets to the floor, and that we can pair it up with a good bill out of the House. And this is an area where you potentially can see us save money, reduce recidivism, make sure that people who make a mistake on nonviolent crimes have to pay the price, have to serve time, but are released in a reasonable fashion, that they have more support so that they're less likely to go back into the criminal system subsequently. And that's an area where I think we may be able to make a big difference.

So those are just two examples. We'll keep on looking for a number of examples like that. And wherever there's an opportunity, I'm going to take it.

Philip Crowther.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. You mentioned climate change already. And at the time of the signing of the deal in Paris, you said it was potentially a turning point for the world.

But this was a deal that is not a legally binding document. And you bypassed Congress pretty much completely. Are you worried at this point that a Republican president who

might take over from you in the White House could stop the deal in its tracks entirely? And considering that possibility, are you more interested in campaigning for a Democratic nominee, considering that danger?

THE PRESIDENT: I think it's fair to say I was going to be campaigning for a Democratic nominee even without that danger. (Laughter.) And I am very confident that we're going to have a terrific Democratic nominee and -- (cellphone rings) -- whose phone is that, guys? Come on, now. (Laughter.) Somebody -- you recognize your ring. Don't be embarrassed. Just turn it off. (Laughter.) There you go. Okay. Can I still hear it? I think it's off now.

I think we will have a strong Democratic nominee. I think that Democratic nominee will win. I think I will have a Democratic successor. And I will campaign very hard to make that happen -- for a whole variety of reasons -- because they're far more likely to share my fundamental vision about where America should go.

But having said that, what I think people should also feel good about is that the agreement struck in Paris, although not legally binding when it comes to the targets that had been set, does create this architecture in which all around the world, countries are saying, this is where we're going. We're going to be chasing after this clean energy future. This is how we're going to meet our goals. We're going to double down on solar power. We're going to double down on wind power. We're going to invest more heavily in biofuels. We're going to figure out battery technologies.

And what you saw in this budget, which I think was really significant, was an extension of the solar tax credits and wind tax credits that we had helped to really boost early on in my administration and that resulted in wind power increasing threefold, solar power increasing by twentyfold.

Those tax credits are now going to be extended for five to seven years. And as a consequence, that combination of market signals means that the private sector is going to start investing much more heavily. They know this is coming. And it's not just coming here -- it's coming around the world. So you now have a global marketplace for clean energy that is stable and accelerating over the course of the next decade.

That then creates a different dynamic that is independent of what Congress does, but also helps to shape what Congress does. Because the more people that are now getting jobs in solar installation and production, the more that you have companies who are seeing how American innovation can sell products in clean energy all across the Asia Pacific and in Europe and in Africa, suddenly there's a big monetary incentive to getting this right.

And that's been the history of environmental progress in this country, and now we've exported it around the world. Every time we've made a decision, "you know what, we're going to have clean air," the predictions were everything would fall apart. And lo and behold, it turns out that American innovation makes getting clean air a lot less expensive than people expected and it happens a lot faster than expected.

When we made a decision that we were going to double fuel-efficiency standards on cars, everybody said, oh, this is going to ruin the American auto industry. The American auto industry has been booming over the last couple years. Acid rain -- when George H.W. Bush instituted a system to charge for the emissions that were causing acid rain, everybody said, well, you can't do that, that's going to ruin business. And it turned out it was smoother, faster, quicker, better. And acid rain folks who were born -- I don't know -- some of you reporters are getting younger, or I'm getting older -- may not remember it, but that was a big deal. Now most folks don't even remember it anymore, because it got solved. And there's no reason why the same won't happen here.

Now, do I think that there's going to be a lot of noise and campaigning next year about how we're going to stop Paris in its tracks? There will probably be a lot of noise like that.

Do I actually think that, two years from now, three years from now, even Republican members of Congress are going to look at it and say, that's a smart thing to do? I don't think they will.

Keep in mind that, right now, the American Republican Party is the only major party that I can think of in the advanced world that effectively denies climate change. I mean, it's an outlier. Many of the key signatories to this deal, the architects of this deal come from center-right governments. Even the far-right parties in many of these countries -- they may not like immigrants, for example, but they admit, yes, the science tells us we've got to do something about climate change.

So my sense is, is that this is something that may be an advantage in terms of short-term politics and a Republican primary. It's not something that is going to be a winner for Republicans long term.

Q You mentioned American leadership. Is it embarrassing to you that the other party denies climate change?

THE PRESIDENT: No -- because, first of all, I'm not a member of that party. (Laughter.) Second of all, it didn't stop us from being the key leader in getting this done.

I mean, this is something I've been working on now for five, six years. When I went to Copenhagen, I essentially engaged in 24 hours of diplomacy to salvage from a pretty chaotic process the basic principle that all countries had to participate, that we couldn't have a rigid division between developed countries and developing countries when it came to solving this problem. That was the initial foundation for us then working with other countries, culminating in the joint announcement with China, bringing in India, bringing in Brazil and the other big, emerging countries, working with the Europeans and getting this done.

This would not have happened without American leadership. And, by the way, the same is true for the Iran nuclear deal. The same is true for the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The same is true for stamping out Ebola -- something, you guys may recall from last year, which was the potential end of the world.

At each juncture, what we've said is, is that American strength and American exceptionalism is not just a matter of us bombing somebody. More often, it's a matter of us convening, setting the agenda, pointing other nations in a direction that's good for everybody and good for U.S. interests, engaging in painstaking diplomacy, leading by example. And sometimes the results don't come overnight, they don't come the following day, but they come.

And this year, what you really saw was that steady, persistent leadership on many initiatives that I began when I first came into office.

All right. I've got April Ryan.

Q Mr. President, I want to ask you something on criminal justice, or that something you said also -- something from Julie Pace. Your administration contends the United States is 5 percent of the world population, but 25 percent of the global jailed population. What legislation are you supporting that significantly cuts mass incarceration in this country? And going back to the Assad issue, does Assad have to go to defeat ISIS?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we're going to defeat ISIS, and we're going to do so by systematically squeezing them, cutting off their supply lines, cutting off their financing, taking out their leadership, taking out their forces, taking out their infrastructure. We're going to do so in partnership with forces on the ground -- that sometimes are spotty, sometimes need capacity-building, need our assistance, need our training -- but we're seeing, steadily, progress in many of these areas. And so they're going to be on the run.

Now, they are going to continue to be dangerous. So let me just be very clear -- because whenever I say that we have made progress in squeezing the territory that they control, or made real inroads against them, what people will say is, well, if something happens around the world, then obviously that must not be true. But in any battle, in any fight, even as you make progress, there are still dangers involved. And ISIL's capacity both to infiltrate Western countries with people who've traveled to Syria or traveled to Iraq, and the savviness of their social media, their ability to recruit disaffected individuals who may be French or British or even U.S. citizens, will continue to make them dangerous for quite some time. But we will systematically go after them.

Now, in order for us to stamp them out thoroughly, we have to eliminate lawless areas in which they cannot still roam. So we can disable them, we can dismantle much of their infrastructure, greatly reduce the threat that they pose to the United States, our allies and our neighbors. But, in the same way that al Qaeda is pinned down and has much more difficulty carrying out any significant attacks because of how we've systematically dismantled them, they still pose a threat. There are still operatives who are interested in carrying out terrorist attacks because they still operate in areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan, or more prominently right now, in Yemen, that are hard to reach.

Our long-term goal has to be able to stabilize these areas so that they don't have any safe haven. And in order for us to do that in Syria, there has to be an end to the civil war, and there has to be an actual government that has a police capacity and a structure in these

areas that currently aren't governed. And it is my firm belief and the belief of the experts in this administration, that so long as Assad is there, we cannot achieve that kind of stability inside of Syria. And I think the history over the last several years indicates as much.

So that's going to continue to be a top priority for us, moving aggressively on the military track and not letting ISIL take a breath, and pounding away at them with our Special Forces and our airstrikes, and the training and advising of partners who can go after them. But we also have to keep very aggressive on this diplomatic track in order for us to bring countries together.

All right? Everybody --

Q On criminal justice --

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, on criminal justice reform, I answered the question. I'm hopeful -

Q On the legislation -- are you supporting the -- mass incarceration?

THE PRESIDENT: And, April, what I said was, is that I strongly support the Senate legislation that's already been put forward. I'm hopeful that the House can come up with legislation that follows the same principles, which is to make sure that we're doing sentencing reform, but we're also doing a better job in terms of reducing recidivism and providing support for ex-offenders. And if we can get those two bills together in a conference, then I'm somewhat optimistic that we're going to be able to make a difference.

Now, keep in mind, April, when you use the term "mass incarceration," statistically, the overwhelming majority of people who are incarcerated are in state prisons and state facilities for state crimes. We can only focus on federal law and federal crimes. And so there's still going to be a large population of individuals who are incarcerated even for non-violent drug crimes, because this is a trend that started in the late '80s and '90s, and accelerated at the state levels.

But if we can show at the federal level that we can be smart on crime, more cost-effective, more just, more proportionate, then we can set a trend for other states to follow, as well. And that's our hope. This is not going to be something that's reversed overnight.

So just to go back to my general principle, April, it took 20 years for us to get to the point we are now. And it will be 20 years, probably, before we reverse some of these major trends.

Okay, everybody, I got to get to Star Wars. Thank you. Thank you guys. Appreciate you. Merry Christmas, everybody.

Q Happy New Year, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: Happy New Year to you!

END

2:58 P.M. EST