

Remarks by the President in Town Hall at Fort Meade

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TSGT. PARRY: Thank you, Mr. President, for joining us here at the Defense Media Activity. It is very exciting for us to have you here for a face-to-face conversation with U.S. servicemembers. We're very, very pleased to have you.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, Nathan, thank you so much for your participation. I want to thank everybody who's here in Fort Meade. There are a couple of people I want to acknowledge.

First of all, your Garrison Commander, Colonel Brian Foley. Where is he? I just rode over with him. There he is. He's in charge of a lot of stuff. I was -- with everything that's going on out of this incredible facility. Obviously we can't succeed in our missions without a strong support from Congress, and we've got a congressman here who works very hard on behalf of our military and our intelligence -- Congressman Dutch Ruppersberger. Where's Dutch? There he is. Thank you so much, Dutch.

I'm going to be very brief at the front, because I want to mainly take questions from folks not just here but all around the world. Today is a solemn day. I started my day commemorating 9/11 and all the people who were killed on that day. And I've had an opportunity as President to meet with many of the survivors, the family members of those who were killed. And on this particular day, we are constantly reminded of their loss. We want to let them know that we do not forget those who are fallen.

We are inspired by the survivors, many of whom still have the scars, both seen and unseen, of that terrible, terrible day. And it's also a good time to remember all the people who have served and sacrificed since 9/11 in order to keep America safe and free.

We have veterans now from every state in the union who have served oftentimes in multiple tours, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. And although we have made enormous strides in degrading the core al Qaeda, including bin Laden himself that had helped to direct the plot on 9/11, we are well aware of the fact that those threats still exist out there.

And here at Fort Meade, we do some of the most important work in helping to coordinate our efforts to make sure that we are bringing to bear all elements of American power against those who would try to do us harm here in the homeland or overseas, or would threaten our allies. Despite the progress we've made in Afghanistan, it's still critically important that we've got thousands of trainers and advisors who are supporting the Afghan military efforts there. Our combat role is complete, but we still have to make sure that they are getting the kind of help and assistance that they need.

The emergence of ISIL in Iraq and Syria has meant that we have to be present and we are pounding them every single day. Our airmen are doing extraordinary work with the support of all the other service branches. And we're providing training and assistance and support to the Iraqi security forces on the ground as they continue to push back ISIL from territory that they had taken.

But both in Iraq and in Syria, in Afghanistan, in North Africa, what we're very clear about is, is that we still have significant threats coming from terrorist organizations and a terrorist ideology. We also have the traditional threats that our military has to be prepared for -- from a new Pacific region where historically we have underwritten the security and prosperity of a region that came back after World War II and where we have tremendous alliances, to Europe and our role as the cornerstone of NATO.

And so we are going to continually have to work at every level to make sure that our men and women in uniform are provided the strategy they need to succeed, the resources they need to succeed, the equipment, the training. And in this new era, that's not just a matter of tanks and rifles; as everybody I think here is aware, especially here at Fort Meade, cybersecurity is opening up a whole new era in which we have to watch out for our adversaries.

So on 9/11, I thought it was particularly appropriate for me to be able to address you directly, and to say thank you on behalf of the American people. When I look out in this audience and when I think about all the members of the armed services all around the world who serve, this represents America. You've got people of every race, religion, faith, every region of the country. But what we share is a common creed, a common commitment to freedom, a common commitment to rule of law, a common belief that America is an indispensable force for good around the world, and that our military is a linchpin in our ability to project our values alongside our diplomatic efforts, our economy, and the people-to-people relations that helped to spread those core beliefs that all of you are willing to sacrifice for.

So I want to say thank you to you. I want to especially say thank you to those who are serving overseas and who are watching here today because many of them are away from family right now. We are grateful for your service. I don't have a greater honor than serving as your Commander-in-Chief. And every single day I see the extraordinary work that you do and I benefit from it as well.

So with that, why don't we start taking some questions?

TSGT. PARRY: Yes, of course, sir. As you mentioned, we do have family members and servicemembers worldwide watching this worldwide troop talk through American Forces Network and on ships at sea. We're going to go out there in a little bit, but the first question we do want to be represented from one of the many servicemembers we have here. So the first question will go out to the audience if someone has one ready.

Sergeant Harvey.

Q Good morning, Mr. President -- good afternoon.

THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon.

Q I'm Sergeant Brianna Harvey (ph). I'm from Texas. And my question is, what made you initiate MBK on the 27th of February in 2014? And will you create something similar for females? And what will you miss the most once you're no longer President and out of the Oval Office?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, those are great questions. What part of Texas you from?

Q Harker Heights, Texas.

THE PRESIDENT: Harker Heights, Texas.

Q Yes, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, tell everybody back home I said hi.

Q Yes, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: For servicemembers who aren't aware, what we're referring to when we talk about MBK is what we call My Brother's Keeper. One of the most important principles I think of America is that no matter who you are, no matter what you look like, if you work hard, you can get ahead. And there are pockets of poverty in places where people don't have an opportunity, and that's particularly true among young men who too often are ending up in prison instead of going to school or serving in our military.

And so what we've been trying to do is to setup mentorship programs, make sure that they're aware of what's going on, provide them with job training. I had a meeting with some folks in New Orleans -- young men who just come from terrible circumstances, terrible neighborhoods -- and we want to make sure that they are aware of how they can break the cycle and do right by themselves and ultimately do right by their families.

And one of the young men who was sitting next to me was interested in enrolling in the Marines, but he was worried that he had heard a rumor that he might not be able to serve in the Marines if he had tattoos. I said, I don't think -- I've met a lot of Marines, I don't think that's going to be a problem. (Laughter.)

But it gives you a sense of some young people are so out of the loop and have so little exposure that they don't know where to go and how to apply themselves in ways that allow them to succeed. So we are working diligently on that -- not just ourselves, but businesses and our military leaders are helping out on this issue.

Young women, we have a whole other set of initiatives in the White House called -- we have a White House Council on Women and Girls to provide opportunity for them as well.

I have to say, generally, the young women are doing better than the young men -- that's because you guys are a little smarter, but obviously they need opportunities as well.

In terms of what I'm going to miss the most, I meant what I said: The greatest privilege I have is serving as your Commander-in-Chief. When I travel around the world, every place I go, I see folks who are doing incredible work. And it's not typically fighting. A lot of times it's helping train other countries so that they can secure themselves. A lot of times it's helping on engineering projects or development projects or helping people after a natural disaster. You are ambassadors and spread good will around the world every single day at enormous sacrifice to yourselves. And so I'll miss that a lot.

The plane is nice, too -- (laughter) -- I got to admit, but my lease is running out.

(Laughter.) So I'm hoping that I'm not going to have to start taking off my shoes again going through security.

What I won't miss is the fact that I can -- I live in what's called the bubble, right, so they don't let me go anywhere. So if I just want to go take a walk, I've got to have helicopters and boats and all that stuff. And even when I cross the Potomac, they've got everybody in position. And I can't just on a Saturday morning go down to Starbucks or something, not shave. (Laughter.) It sounds pretty good to me. (Laughter.) So those are some of the things I'll be doing when I get out of here. (Laughter.) And I probably won't wear a tie for at least a month. (Laughter.)

Thank you very much.

Q Thank you, Mr. President.

TSGT. PARRY: Thank you, Sergeant Harvey for that question. I promised we were going to go worldwide, sir, and we are. Your first question from overseas is a place that you are familiar with, you've traveled there a few times and I'm sure our servicemembers are familiar with it as well. Our first question is going to come from downrange. And Petty Officer Lori Bent is going to take us there.

PETTY OFFICER BENT: Mr. President, we have your first live satellite question from Afghanistan. We have Sergeant Aaron Giese. Sergeant Giese, if you can hear me, go ahead and nod. You are on the line with the President. Go ahead with your question.

SERGEANT GIESE: Good afternoon, Mr. President. My name is Sergeant Aaron Giese, and I first want to take time to thank you for the opportunity to speak with me today.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, Aaron.

SERGEANT GIESE: My question for you is, due to the recent Russian activity in Syria and the possibility of future activity, how will that affect our current military strategy within the region?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it's a great question, Aaron. First of all, let me just say thank you for your service, and please tell everybody in your unit that we appreciate them as well, that we're thinking about them and you're in our thoughts and prayers.

As I indicated in my opening remarks, we've done an incredible job in going after and systematically dismantling the core al Qaeda network that was operating primarily in the FATA region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. They still pose a threat, but it is much diminished. But what's happened with this radical, violent extremism is that it's metastasized and it's spread to other areas. And right now, ground zero for those activities is in Syria with ISIL.

And our strategy has consistently been that we will use our airpower to support efforts by Iraqi security forces on the ground and, where we can find it, moderate opposition inside of Syria to push back on ISIL -- to put pressure on them, to go after their financing, to go after their networks, their supplies. A lot of their operations are funded by oil sales, and so blocking those, going after the infrastructure that they've built up.

Those strategies will all continue. The challenge we've had in Syria is that the President there, Bashar al-Assad, has been so destructive towards his own people, destroying entire cities, dropping bombs, creating a sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni inside of Syria, that it has become a magnet for jihadists throughout the region.

And the good news is, is that Russia shares with us a concern about countering violent extremism and shares with us the view that ISIL is very dangerous. So despite our conflicts with Russia in areas like Ukraine, this is an area potentially of converging interest. The bad news is that Russia continues to believe that Assad, who is their traditional partner, is somebody that is worthy of continuing support. And it has been my view and the view of the United States government that as long as Assad is there, he has alienated so much of the Syrian population that it will not be possible to arrive at a peaceful cease-fire and political settlement, and you'll continue to have this vacuum that's filled by extremists.

So Russia has, for many years now, provided financial support, sold arms to Assad. I remember a conversation I had with Mr. Putin four or five years ago, where I told him that was a mistake, it would make things worse as long as he continued to support Assad. He did not take my warnings, and as a consequence things have gotten worse.

It appears now that Assad is worried enough that he's inviting Russian advisors in and Russian equipment in. And that won't change our core strategy, which is to continue to put pressure on ISIL in Iraq and Syria, but we are going to be engaging Russia to let them know that you can't continue to double-down on a strategy that's doomed to failure. And if they are willing to work with us and the 60-nation coalition that we've put together,

then there's the possibility of a political settlement in which Assad would be transitioned out and a new coalition of moderate, secular and inclusive forces could come together and restore order in the country.

That's our goal. This is going to be a long discussion that we'll be having with the Russians, but it is not going to prevent us from continuing to go after ISIL very hard. It could prevent us from arriving at the political settlement that ultimately is needed to bring a peace back to Syria. And this is where our military efforts have to be combined with effective diplomatic efforts.

One of the things that I've said to all of our men and women in uniform is that you shouldn't be fighting for our security and our freedom alone; you've got to have the support of diplomats and intelligence experts and others, because although you are vital and necessary, if you're doing it by yourselves, we can win any battle, but our main challenge right now in a lot of these countries -- like Syria and Afghanistan and Libya and North Africa -- is disorder. And the only way you restore order -- unless you're occupying every country that starts breaking down -- is through political negotiations and settlement. And that's where the Russians are going to have to start getting a little smarter than they have been. Because they are threatened in many ways more than we are by ISIL. They've got large Muslim populations that historically have caused a lot of problems inside of Russia. And the strategy that they're pursuing right now of doubling down on Assad I think is a big mistake.

TSGT. PARRY: Thank you, Sergeant Giese, for that question from Afghanistan. We here at the Defense Media Activity do hope that you and others downrange do stay safe.

We do have thousands of members overseas watching the American Forces network, or they're streaming live on Defense.gov, and they, too, are eager to talk to you, Mr. President. And they can through social media. In fact, Petty Officer Lori Bent is going to take us out there now.

PETTY OFFICER BENT: Our next question is going to come from Twitter. Sir, we have a question from JRita2192. "Mr. President, can you share with us your personal experience and memories of when 9/11 first happened?"

THE PRESIDENT: It was interesting -- Michelle and I were just talking about that this morning.

Sasha, my youngest daughter, had just been born. She was four or five months old. And September 11th was Malia's first day of preschool or kindergarten -- I think it was kindergarten. So Michelle had gone with the girls to drop Malia off at school. They were tiny. I was at the time a state senator, so I was going to downtown Chicago to a hearing on an issue.

And I remember driving on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago and hearing the reports of a plane crashing into the buildings. And at first, the reports were unclear, so you thought it was a Cessna or some accident had happened. And it wasn't until I got downtown to

where the hearing was taking place that we started realizing it was something much more serious.

And at that time, no one was sure whether this was a one-off or whether this was going to be an ongoing attack, because then you started getting reports from the Pentagon and other places. So the building was evacuated. And I remember standing downtown Chicago with thousands of other people, and there were a lot of targets, obviously, for possible action, this including -- at the time, it was called the Sears Tower. And people didn't know what to think. And then I remember going to my law office, and that's when we saw the images of the Twin Towers starting to come down.

And that evening, I have very vivid memories of giving Sasha a bottle and rocking her to sleep while we were watching the aftermath of those attacks. And like I think everybody here, although most of you were a lot younger, it gave you a sense, for the first time in my lifetime, that our homeland could be vulnerable in that way. We hadn't seen an attack like that since Pearl Harbor.

And I think it inspired all of us to remember just how precious what we have is, and the need for us to defend it at any cost. And although subsequently I would have strong disagreements with the previous administration about certain decisions that were made, I remember and give great credit to President Bush for being at the site, throwing out that first pitch at Yankee Stadium, and everyone remembering that you're not a Democrat first or a Republican first, or a Texan first or Californian first, you're an American, and that we all have to come together.

And my hope is always on a day like today that we remember that sense that what binds us together is much more important than anything that divides us, and that what makes this country special is the fact that we are bound together -- we, or our parents, or our great-grandparents, we all come from different places, but we all have a shared creed, a shared belief system, and a shared set of commitments. And all of you in your service exemplify that every day.

TSGT. PARRY: It was an excellent question from social media. And our viewers can join us and join this conversation on social media from Twitter using the hashtag #askPOTUS, or the Department of Defense's Facebook page. We're actually going to go back overseas for you, Mr. President, and Petty Officer Lori Bent is going to take us there.

PETTY OFFICER BENT: Sir, we are headed to NATO -- Brussels, Belgium -- where we're going to talk to Navy Commander Scot Cregan. Commander Cregan, go ahead with your question for the President.

COMMANDER CREGAN: Thank you for your time, Mr. President. I was honored to march in your inaugural parade in 2009, and we briefly met a few years later when I worked a Halloween White House event. I was a Star Wars storm trooper.

THE PRESIDENT: You were great.

COMMANDER CREGAN: You may not remember what I looked like because we all kind of looked alike. (Laughter.) On a serious note, we're seeing more and more refugees coming to Europe by land and by sea. Do you think there should be a NATO response to this crisis?

THE PRESIDENT: I think that we have to work with our European partners on this issue. The refugee crisis is not just a European problem, it's a world problem. And we have obligations.

I made certain to send through every agency that we've got to do our part, first of all, in taking our share of refugees. And those of you who saw some of these heartbreaking images of that small boy drowned -- I think anybody who's a parent understands that -- that stirs all of our consciences, not just folks on the other side of the Atlantic.

So I've already been in discussions with people like Prime Minister Renzi of Italy, the Greeks, and others who are down south about how we can enhance maritime efforts to make sure, first of all, that people who are loading up on these rickety boats are safe and we're not seeing enormous loss of life there. We are encouraged by the efforts of the European Union to accept refugees in all countries and spread out some of the burdens and the pressure.

And as I said, the United States needs to do our share. I said that we should establish a floor of at least 10,000 refugees that we're willing to accept, and cut through some of the bureaucracy and red tape to do that.

Ultimately, though, as you well know, it is really important for us to go to the source.

There's the old story about if you see a bunch of bodies floating down a river, part of your job is to pull those folks out and save who you can, but you've also got to go downstream and see what exactly is happening. And this refugee crisis is prompted by the collapse of governance in Syria and the growth of ISIL and the cruelty that Assad is perpetrating on his own people.

And that's why the response I gave earlier, the importance of us continuing our military efforts against ISIL, but also trying to pull together a strong international, diplomatic effort to bring about some sort of political accord inside of Syria is going to be so important and so vital.

Last point I'll make about this, though -- and this is where NATO planning becomes critical, even as we're, in the short term, helping countries respond to the immediate crisis -- unfortunately, we can anticipate that refugees will be an ongoing problem for decades to come. And the reason is because there are too many states that are not doing well by their people. The spread of media gives people in war-torn countries or in extreme poverty a vision of a better life, and they are desperate and willing to take extraordinary risks to get there.

You then have other factors that may end up resulting in more migration and refugees -- for example, climate change. I just came back from Alaska, where you're seeing glaciers melt rapidly. And as temperatures rise, the Pentagon's own assessment is that this will

end up being a national security challenge, in part because people will be displaced from their traditional lands either by drought or by flooding, and that can create more refugee problems.

So we're going to have to work globally. And one of the topics, I'm sure, when I go to the United Nations General Assembly leaders gathering that we typically have at the end of this month is to start coming up with a more effective structure for an international response. No one country can solve these problems alone. But the United States, obviously, as the world's leader, and NATO, as the premier alliance in the world, is going to have to play a central role.

TSGT. PARRY: I want to thank the Lt. Commander for that question.

Mr. President, we've been to Europe, to Afghanistan. We've gone online, so I think it's time we come back to the studio here at the Defense Media Activity for a question.

THE PRESIDENT: Let's do it.

Q Good afternoon, Mr. President. You alluded to in your opening remarks the threat that cyber currently is. And there's been a lot of talk within the DOD and cyber community of the possibility of a separate branch of the military dedicated to cyber. I was wondering where you see cyber in the next five to ten years.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it's a great question. We initiated Cyber Command, anticipating that this is going to be a new theater for potential conflict. And what we've seen by both state and non-state actors is the increasing sophistication of hacking, the ability to penetrate systems that we previously thought would be secure. And it is moving fast. So, offense is moving a lot faster than defense.

Part of this has to do with the way the Internet was originally designed. It was not designed with the expectation that there would end up being three or four or five billion people doing commercial transactions, et cetera. It was thought this was just going to be an academic network to share papers and formulas and whatnot. And so the architecture of the Internet makes it very difficult to defend consistently.

We continue to be the best in the world at understanding and working within cyber. But other countries have caught up. The Russians are good. The Chinese are good. The Iranians are good. And you've got non-state hackers who are excellent. And unlike traditional conflicts and aggression, oftentimes we don't have a return address. If somebody hacks into a system and goes after critical infrastructure, for example, or penetrates our financial systems, we can't necessarily trace it directly to that state or that actor. That makes it more difficult as well.

So what we've done is to try to emphasize, number one, the need for a coordinated response. And over the last several years, what we've done is to bring together our military agencies, Cyber Command, with the NSA, with our intelligence, and working with the private sector to try to strengthen our defenses much better. And we've made progress, but we're not making enough progress. So I would anticipate that we are going

to have to do more both through the Defense Department, but again, we're going to have to work -- because this is not a traditional war theater -- we're going to have to work with a whole bunch of other actors and coordinate with them much more effectively.

The bulk of vulnerable information and data isn't in our military; it's in the private sector. It's throughout our economy. It's on your smartphones. And so we're going to have to both strengthen overall networks, but we're also going to have to train millions of individual actors -- small businesses, big vendors, individuals -- in terms of basic cyber hygiene. We're going to have to be much more rapid in responding to attacks.

And this is something that we're just at the infancy of. Ultimately, one of the solutions we're going to have to come up with is to craft agreements among at least state actors about what's acceptable and what's not. And so, for example, I'm going to be getting a visit from President Xi of China, a state visit here coming up in a couple of weeks. We've made very clear to the Chinese that there are certain practices that they're engaging in that we know are emanating from China and are not acceptable. And we can choose to make this an area of competition -- which I guarantee you we'll win if we have to -- or, alternatively, we can come to an agreement in which we say, this isn't helping anybody; let's instead try to have some basic rules of the road in terms of how we operate.

Now, as I said, there's still going to be individual actors, there are going to be terrorist networks and others, so we're still going to have to build a strong defense. But one of our first and most important efforts has to be to get the states that may be sponsoring cyber-attacks to understand that there comes a point at which we consider this a core national security threat and we will treat it as such.

TSGT. PARRY: Excellent question from one of our cyber warriors here at Fort Meade, Maryland.

THE PRESIDENT: He looks like he knows what he's doing. (Laughter.)

TSGT. PARRY: Well, we are here on the East Coast, but I hear Petty Officer Lori Bent wants to take us all the way to the West Coast for your next question.

PETTY OFFICER BENT: Yes, our next question comes from Joint Base Lewis-McChord from a C-17 instructor pilot, Major Jennifer Moore.

Major Moore, go ahead with your question.

MAJOR MOORE: Mr. President, good afternoon. Sir, both my husband and I have been serving side-by-side as C-17 and T-6 instructor pilots for the past 11 years, and we have two amazing and thriving children. How do you and Mrs. Obama know how to balance life and work to ensure your children will grow up to be successful in their future endeavors?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, thanks to you and your husband both for serving. And tell your kids I said hi and that they should do what you tell them to do. (Laughter.) How old are your kids?

MAJOR MOORE: Well, my daughter, Gabby, is seven and my son, Robert, is four. I have a picture, sir. It would kill me if I didn't have an opportunity to show you.

THE PRESIDENT: Sure. Hold up the picture. (Laughter and applause.) Oh, that's a good-looking crew right there. They're adorable.

MAJOR MOORE: Absolutely. The happiest place on Earth, thank you, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'll give you -- the best advice that I probably can offer is for me, at least, I just do what Michelle tells me to do and it seems to work out. (Laughter.) And your husband may take the same approach. And those are great ages -- seven and four -- because you come home and they're jumping on you, and so excited to see you. When they get to be 17 and 14, then they still love you, but you're not very interesting. (Laughter.)

But everybody here, the demands of your jobs are so extraordinary, and it's not like you're always on the clock, you've just got to get the job done. And that puts a lot of pressure on folks. One thing I know we can do is make sure that our military is supporting families, and that means making sure that housing and child care, all the things that go into supporting families when they're stationed -- particularly given how much they're moving -- becomes absolutely critical.

And Michelle has worked with Dr. Jill Biden on Joining Forces to make sure that we are spending a lot of time thinking about how are we supporting military families on an ongoing basis, including those spouses who are not in service but who are serving alongside, and do so much critical work -- making sure that they have the opportunity, for example, to find a job if they're getting transferred, and have the kind of backing that they need. So that's really important. You shouldn't have to do this alone.

What Michelle and I did with Malia and Sasha I think early on is we just -- we're a strong believer in structure and rules, and unconditional love but being pretty firm, too. We started real early: Here's your bedtime. Here's when you're not watching TV. You'll sit there and eat your vegetables even if we have to sit there with you, watch you chew for 10 minutes -- (laughter) -- and we're going to watch you swallow. (Laughter.) And if you start early enough with just high expectations, I think kids do well with that.

And part of that involves just loving those kids to death, but also letting them know, you know what, I'm your parent, I'm not your best friend. So I'm not that interested in what your friends are doing -- they've got parents, their parents can make a decision. This is what you're doing in our house. And when you leave here, you'll be able to make your own decisions, but we're trying to prepare you so that you've got some sense when you get out of here.

And I think that's worked. I think that's been appreciated. Sometimes they complain. They say, well, how come so-and-so is able to stay out until whatever hour? It's like, well, that's not really our problem, is it? (Laughter.) And they're getting old enough now where sometimes they appreciate it -- mainly because they also know that we just -- we adore them.

And last thing, I guess, is just, as much as possible, we try to make sure every night when we're home that they have to sit down and eat dinner with us. I'm a big believer in not getting the TV trays out and watching the Kardashians. (Laughter.) You sit down, leave your cell phone somewhere else, and we'll have a conversation. And that seems to help, too.

That's all, by the way, me just channeling Michelle. Like I said, the main thing for your husband to do is just listen to you. (Laughter.)

TSGT. PARRY: That was an excellent question and I know my wife, Jazzy, would agree. I listen to her day in and day out.

MAJOR MOORE: I'll tell him that, sir. Thank you very much.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

TSGT. PARRY: And I know, I'm sure all of our servicemembers who have families would agree a large part of why we do what we do and how we can do what we do is those loved ones we have at home.

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely.

TSGT. PARRY: I'm sure we all appreciate our family members there. So we do have family members watching on American Forces Network -- I know my wife, she's watching on Defense.gov right now with my two-year-old son -- and they have an opportunity to talk to you as well through social media.

THE PRESIDENT: Excellent.

TSGT. PARRY: Petty Officer Lori Bent is going to take us there now.

PETTY OFFICER BENT: We are headed online to Facebook. Sir, this question is coming from Michael Ong (ph): "Mr. President, how do you keep striving for great accomplishment with a positive attitude while everyone seems to be hating and talking smack about you and all you do?" (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Yeah! (Laughter.) You know, the truth is, is that not everyone is talking smack about me. (Laughter.) But there is a sizable percentage in Congress that talks smack about me, no doubt about it. (Laughter.) It's interesting -- when you go into public service, I think there are two ways to approach it. One way to approach it is that you just want to be popular. You want to get elected, you want to stay in office, you want to be popular. Another way of approaching it is, I want a particular position because I want to get something done for the American people. And not everything that is right to do is going to be the popular thing to do.

And I made a decision early on that if I was going to do this, if I was going to run for elected office, that I had to have some core, some set of beliefs and principles, and that there would be times where I made mistakes or I made a wrong call, but that I was guided

by what I thought was best for the American people, and that I couldn't worry about short-term popularity if I was going to do my best.

So I'll give you a good example. When I came into office, early on, we had the worst financial crisis in our history. One of the casualties of that was the U.S. auto industry.

The big three automakers were on the verge of flat-lining, and were getting all these bailouts but they weren't changing what they were doing. And a lot of folks thought that Chrysler was going to go bankrupt, and then GM was going to go next, and then all the suppliers would lose out, and pretty soon all we would be able to buy is Japanese and Korean and German cars.

And I said, this is an industry that's too important -- one that we essentially built -- for us to be able to just let it go. And I knew that we had to put more money into it to get the industry back on its feet, but I also knew that we had to force them to make management changes so they could start building good cars and competing again.

Well, I tell you, when we put forward our plan, I think that 10 percent of people agreed with it. Even in Michigan, I think the overwhelming majority of people opposed it, opposed our plan. And if I had been thinking in terms of just looking at the poll numbers, I wouldn't have done it. But I looked at the evidence and what I thought was going to be best, and we did it. And this year, we're probably going to sell more U.S. cars than we have in 20 years, and they've hired back hundreds of thousands of workers, and it's been driving a rebound of American manufacturing that is vital to our economy.

So the longer I'm in this office, the more committed I am to making those calls. And part of the challenge in this job is, is that if it's an easy question it doesn't get to my desk. The only things that come to my desk are things that somebody else hasn't been able to solve. And my job is to make a decision based on sometimes imperfect information and you're working on the percentages.

When I made the order for us to go in and get bin Laden at that house in Pakistan, it was probably a 50/50 proposition as to whether that was, in fact, him, and the risks obviously were enormous. If I had been making that decision based on wanting to avoid risk and not having somebody talk smack about me, then that might not be a decision that I would have been prepared to make.

And part of this is my own personal faith and prayer, and part of it is the support of an incredible family and friends. And part of it is seeing the sacrifices that all of you make.

When I go to Walter Reed and I visit wounded troops, then I say to myself, well, I've got to be serious about what I do, and I can't be worrying about poll numbers or what cable TV says. I've got to make sure that I am, to the best of my abilities, making the decisions that I think are going to be most important for American prosperity and American security over the long term.

And that way, you can at least sleep at night. That way when I go to bed, I go to bed easy, because I know that I've made the best decisions I could make.

Now, the only way that works is if I'm also open and listening to see if the decisions I made were the right ones, is it working. And I've got to be open to the fact that sometimes I may not make the right decision, and I'm willing to correct it. And I've got to own that. And that's what I always tell everybody in the White House, is if somebody screws up -- because there will be some screw-ups -- own it and correct it, and learn from it. And what applies to everybody on my team applies to me, as well.

So I think some of you may recall when we passed health care, everything was working fine until there was this website that didn't work. It was a disaster -- even though I had been asking every two weeks, how's the website going, I hope this works. But it didn't work. And we had to own that and double down. And we corrected it in three or four months, and now 16 million people have health insurance that didn't have it before, and it actually costs less than people anticipated. It's working the way it should have. But that was a screw-up, and there's no point in trying to hide things when they don't work.

So I guess the last thing I'd say is I tend to just take the long view on things. Political polls and what the pundits say and what other politicians say -- that comes and goes. It goes up and goes down. I try to think 20 years from now, when I look back, will people say, this person operated with integrity and made decisions that were best for the country. And so far that's working for me, anyway.

It doesn't mean I'm not sometimes a little offended. (Laughter.) That's why I go to the gym, work it off.

TSGT. PARRY: Well, Mr. President, your next question -- Petty Officer Lori Bent is going to take us overseas.

PETTY OFFICER BENT: Sir, your next question is coming from Gunnery Sergeant Bryson Elliott, and he's at U.S. AFRICOM Stuttgart, Germany. Gunny, go ahead with your question.

GUNNERY SERGEANT ELLIOTT: First of all, sir, thank you. Good afternoon. Thank you for taking my question. Mr. President, my question is, how are military exercises like African Lion with Morocco strengthening the relationships between the U.S. and African nations?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it's a great question. And thank you for your service. Tell everybody at AFRICOM we appreciate them.

I just came back from Africa several months ago, and there are huge challenges there, but also huge opportunities. First of all, that's a continent that appreciates America. When you look at polls, the continent as a whole, their positive views of America are as high as any other continent in the world. So the people of the African continent admire the United States. They appreciate our values and our way of life, and there's a real connection.

It also is the continent with some of the fastest-growing economies in the world. I think we tend to have stereotypes about Africa as Ebola and poverty and all this stuff. When you travel there, they're moving. And you go to cities there, and everybody has got a cell phone, and everybody is hustling, and everybody is working. And that's going to be one of the great next arenas for economic growth and trade. And that means that the United States is selling more goods there and they're selling more here, and there are enormous opportunities. So our prosperity with them is tied together.

What is also true is, is that there are parts of Africa -- particularly North Africa, but it's seeping down along the coasts -- where violent Islamic extremism has taken hold. And Somalia being a prime example where Al-Shabaab has been working for a long time; Boko Haram in Nigeria; al Qaeda in the Maghreb. And so we have to have a strategy to partner with those countries to ensure that our intelligence capabilities, our rapid-response capabilities, and their own capabilities for maintaining order and pushing back against extremism -- that they are a lot stronger in the years to come.

The good news is that these countries are eager for that kind of cooperation. Countries like Nigeria, countries like Kenya welcome our presence, welcome our training of their troops. We have excellent CT cooperation with them. The big problem they've got is capacity, but capacity is one of those things you can solve where you've got a willing partner.

So we're working with the joint chiefs to develop plans so that we are continuing to build up partnership capabilities across the continent. And that will help us not only with homegrown problems inside of Africa, but those platforms then also allow us to act more effectively against deeply rooted organizations like al Qaeda on the peninsula in Yemen, because that's right across the ocean and we want to be able to make sure that we can target those terrorist networks effectively. Having African partners helps us do that.

TSGT. PARRY: Mr. President, we're hoping to squeeze in at least one more question.

THE PRESIDENT: Come on.

TSGT. PARRY: Excellent. Because I promised you earlier, we have viewers out at sea -- in fact, that's where Petty Officer Lori Bent is going to take us now.

PETTY OFFICER BENT: And what do you know, this sailor is going to take you out to sea for your next question, Mr. President. This is coming from the deployed USS Theodore Roosevelt, and on the phone, we have Petty Officer Joseph Everett. Petty Officer Everett, you are on the line. Go ahead.

PETTY OFFICER EVERETT: Good afternoon, Mr. President. I'm Petty Officer Joseph Everett calling you from the Theodore Roosevelt. I just want to thank you for taking the time to talk to me.

THE PRESIDENT: Hey, Joe.

Q I'm very honored to have this opportunity.

THE PRESIDENT: Hold on, Joe, we're having trouble hearing you here. Slight technical difficulties. But if somebody can hear, they can repeat the question to us.

TSGT PARRY: Petty Officer Everett, would you like to try that question again?

PETTY OFFICER EVERETT: Good afternoon, Mr. President. This is Petty Officer Joseph Everett calling you from the Theodore Roosevelt. I just want to thank you for giving me this opportunity today, and I'm very honored.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I can hear you just fine now, Joe. And tell everybody on the ship we appreciate them, hope they get back home safe. You got a question for us?

PETTY OFFICER EVERETT: Yes, Mr. President. During your presidency, you've had a lot of great experiences. What would you say is your most rewarding?

THE PRESIDENT: Wow. Well, that's a big question. I tell you that there are different kinds of rewarding experiences, obviously, in this office. But across the board, what ends up being most rewarding for me is when somebody comes up to me in a rope line when I'm appearing someplace or at some event, and they say, "Mr. President, you helped me."

I've had moms come up and say, Mr. President, my son, who's 25 years old, didn't have health insurance when you passed that law to make sure that he could stay on my health insurance. He finally got a checkup after three, four years. They found a tumor, but they were able to get it out in time and now he's doing fine, and I appreciate it.

Or we have White House tours of wounded warriors, and once this wonderful couple was there, both the husband and wife were servicemembers. They had two adorable little kids. And as I was coining them and shaking their hands, one of them said -- the wife said, "I just want to thank you because you saved our family." Because the husband had had PTSD but wasn't getting help, and she had written to us and I had had folks at DOD reach out, and he had gotten counseling and now was doing well and the family was thriving.

A lot of times, this stuff seems abstract, and there's just a bunch of folks talking on television and it all seems like politics and arguing. But one of the things that you learn the longer you're in this is that these decisions matter, and you're touching people directly in some kind of way. And when you hear that something you did actually helped, then you say to yourself, all right, this was worth it, this was a good day.

And I know that everybody here feels that same way. There are going to be frustrations in our work. There are going to be challenges in our work. Many of you operate in obscurity, and people don't always say thank you. But then every once in a while, you see that, all right, what I did helped, made a difference. Somebody is safer. Somebody who was hungry has eaten. Somebody whose home was destroyed, now they've got shelter. Somebody whose village had been overrun, now they've got a chance at some security and some freedom. And that's what keeps you going. That's what inspires you.

So those are the most gratifying moments of my presidency. And the plane is cool. (Laughter.) And Marine One. I don't want to leave the Marines out.

TSGT. PARRY: Well, Mr. President, we know one of those challenges is that you do have other obligations and time constraints. I want to thank you on the part of Defense Media Activity, our soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen across the world, and the Coast Guard, and we are representing the Coast Guard here as well. Thank you. And if you have any final remarks for us.

THE PRESIDENT: I just want to say thank you to all of you and to your family members for your extraordinary service. What you do is vital to our way of life. It is vital our country.

I started off talking about 9/11 and how shaken all of us were, and angry and frustrated, and moved by it. But when you travel to New York now, there's a new tower soaring in the sky. And those first responders, the cops and the firemen and the EMTs, a lot of them are still serving and still doing great work every day. And it's just a good reminder of the essential spirit of the American people.

We don't always get things perfect the first time. There are times where we take a hit. There are times where, unfortunately, we have self-imposed problems because of politics or conflicts inside our own country. Our political system is not always serving people the way it should. One of the things that we haven't had a chance to talk about is the fact that Congress has a budget that it's supposed to be passing at the end of this month, and we've been operating under what's called a sequester, which is hampering our ability to finance the kind of readiness and modernization and research and development and support for our troops that's needed. It's also preventing us from funding education and job training and infrastructure that is vital for our long-term economic competitiveness.

I hope Congress is paying attention to how you operate and how you do your job -- because if they were as conscientious about it and selfless about it, then that sequester would be lifted, and we would end up being in a position where we could make the investments we need to stay strong, militarily and economically.

So we've got challenges. But just think about how we bounced back -- from 9/11, from the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. America is the strongest, the most prosperous and the most diverse country on Earth. And the 21st century is being shaped by our ideas of the Internet and of international trade and free markets. And the reason for all of that is because of our people.

Sometimes we hear about all the bad stuff that's going on, especially during political season. But America is strong. And it's strong because of all of you. And I never want you to forget that. You should be very proud of what you do, and very proud of the people that you represent in uniform every single day -- because this country is full of good, generous, hardworking people and they rely on you and they are grateful to you.

All right. Tell your families I said hi back home.

Thank you, everybody.

TSGT. PARRY: Ladies and gentlemen, our Commander-in-Chief. (Applause.)

END

3:58 P.M. EDT