

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2014*

## **Remarks Announcing the "It's On Us" Campaign To Prevent Sexual Assault on College Campuses**

*September 19, 2014*

Thank you so much, everybody. Please have a seat. Well, welcome to the White House, everybody. And thank you to Joe Biden not just for the introduction, not just for being a great Vice President, but for decades, since long before he was in his current office, Joe has brought unmatched passion to this cause. And—[*applause*]. He has.

And at a time when domestic violence was all too often seen as a private matter, Joe was out there saying that this was unacceptable. Thanks to him and so many others, last week, we were able to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the law Joe wrote, a law that transformed the way we handle domestic abuse in this country: the Violence Against Women Act.

And we're here to talk today about an issue that is a priority for me, and that's ending campus sexual assault. I want to thank all of you who are participating. I particularly want to thank Lilly for her wonderful presentation and grace. I want to thank her parents for being here. As a father of two daughters, I on the one hand am enraged about what has happened; on the other hand, am empowered to see such an incredible young woman be so strong and do so well. And we're going to be thrilled watching all of the great things she is going to be doing in her life. So the—we're really proud of her.

I want to thank the White House Council on Women and Girls. Good Job. Valerie, thank you. I want to thank our White House Adviser on Violence Against Women, the work that you do every day partnering with others to prevent the outrage, the crime of sexual violence.

We've got some outstanding lawmakers with us. Senator Claire McCaskill is right here from the great State of Missouri, who I love. And we've got Dick Blumenthal from the great State of Connecticut, as well as Congresswoman Susan Davis. So thank you so much, I'm thrilled to have you guys here.

I also want to thank other Members of Congress who are here and have worked on this issue so hard for so long. A lot of the people in this room have been on the front lines in fighting sexual assault for a long time. And along with Lilly, I want to thank all the survivors who are here today and so many others around the country. Lilly, I'm sure, took strength from a community of people—some who came before, some who were peers—who were able to summon the courage to speak out about the darkest moment of their lives. They endure pain and the fear that too often isolates victims of sexual assault. So when they give voice to their own experiences, they're giving voice to countless others—women and men, girls and boys—who still suffer in silence.

So to the survivors who are leading the fight against sexual assault on campuses, your efforts have helped to start a movement. I know that, as Lilly described, there are times where the fight feels lonely, and it feels as if you're dredging up stuff that you'd rather put behind you. But we're here to say today, it's not on you. This is not your fight alone. This is on all of us, every one of us, to fight campus sexual assault. You are not alone, and we have your back, and we are going to organize campus by campus, city by city, State by State. This entire country is going to make sure that we understand what this is about and that we're going to put a stop to it.

And this is a new school year. We've been working on campus sexual assault for several years, but the issue of violence against women is now in the news every day. We've started to, I think, get a better picture about what domestic violence is all about. People are talking about it. Victims are realizing they're not alone. Brave people have come forward; they're opening up about their own experiences.

And so we think today's event is all that more relevant, all that more important for us to say that campus sexual assault is no longer something we as a nation can turn away from and say that's not our problem. This is a problem that matters to all of us.

An estimated one in five women has been sexually assaulted during her college years—one in five. Of those assaults, only 12 percent are reported, and of those reported assaults, only a fraction of the offenders are punished. And while these assaults overwhelmingly happen to women, we know that men are assaulted too. Men get raped. They're even less likely to talk about it. We know that sexual assault can happen to anyone, no matter their race, their economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity. And LGBT victims can feel even more isolated, feel even more alone.

For anybody whose once normal, everyday life was suddenly shattered by an act of sexual violence, the trauma, the terror can shadow you long after one horrible attack. It lingers when you don't know where to go or who to turn to. It's there when you're forced to sit in the same class or stay in the same dorm with the person who raped you; when people are more suspicious of what you were wearing or what you were drinking, as if it's your fault, not the fault of the person who assaulted you. It's a haunting presence when the very people entrusted with your welfare fail to protect you.

Now, students work hard to get into college. I know. I'm watching Malia right now. She's a junior. *[Laughter]* She's got a lot of homework. *[Laughter]* And parents can do everything they can to support their kids' dreams of getting a good education. When they finally make it onto campus, only to be assaulted, that's not just a nightmare for them and their families; it's not just an affront to everything they've worked so hard to achieve. It is an affront to our basic humanity. It insults our most basic values as individuals and families and as a nation. We are a nation that values liberty and equality and justice. And we're a people who believe every child deserves an education that allows them to fulfill their God-given potential, free from fear of intimidation or violence. And we owe it to our children to live up to those values. So my administration is trying to do our part.

First of all, 3 years ago, we sent guidance to every school district, every college, every university that receives Federal funding, and we clarified their legal obligations to prevent and respond to sexual assault. And we reminded them that sexual violence isn't just a crime, it is a civil rights violation. And I want to acknowledge Secretary of Education Arne Duncan for his department's work in holding schools accountable and making sure that they stand up for students.

Number two, in January, I created a White House task force to prevent—a Task Force To Protect Students From Sexual Assault. Their job is to work with colleges and universities on better ways to prevent and respond to assaults, to lift up best practices. And we held conversations with thousands of people: survivors, parents, student groups, faculty, law enforcement, advocates, academics. In April, the Task Force released the first report, recommending a number of best practices for colleges and universities to keep our kids safe. And these are tested, and they are commonsense measures, like campus surveys to figure out the scope of the problem, giving survivors a safe place to go and a trusted person to talk to,

training school officials in how to handle trauma. Because when you read some of the accounts, you think, what were they thinking? I mean, you just get a sense of too many people in charge dropping the ball, fumbling something that should be taken with the most—the utmost seriousness and the utmost care.

Number three, we're stepping up enforcement efforts and increasing the transparency of our efforts. So we're reviewing existing laws to make sure they're adequate. And we're going to keep on working with educational institutions across the country to help them appropriately respond to these crimes.

So that's what we have been doing, but there's always more that we can do. And today we're taking a step and joining with people across the country to change our culture and help prevent sexual assault from happening. Because that's where prevention—that's what prevention is going to require. We've got to have a fundamental shift in our culture.

As far as we've come, the fact is that from sports leagues to pop culture to politics, our society still does not sufficiently value women. We still don't condemn sexual assault as loudly as we should. We make excuses. We look the other way. The message that sends can have a chilling effect on our young women.

And I've said before, when women succeed, America succeeds. Let me be clear, that's not just true in America. If you look internationally, countries that oppress their women are countries that do badly. Countries that empower their women are countries that thrive.

And so this is something that requires us to shift how we think about these issues. One letter from a young woman really brought this point home. Katherine Morrison, a young student from Youngstown, Ohio, she wrote: "How are we supposed to succeed when so many of our voices are being stifled? How can we succeed when our society says that as a woman, it's your fault if you are at a party or walked home alone. How can we succeed when people look at women and say, 'You should have known better,' or, 'Boys will be boys'?"

And Katherine is absolutely right. Women make up half this country, half its workforce, more than half of our college students. They are not going to succeed the way they should unless they are treated as true equals and are supported and respected. And unless women are allowed to fulfill their full potential, America will not reach its full potential. So we've got to change.

And this is not just the work of survivors, it's not just the work of activists. It's not just the work of college administrators. It's a responsibility of the soccer coach and the captain of the basketball team and the football players. And it's on fraternities and sororities, and it's on the editor of the school paper and the drum major in the band. And it's on the English department and the engineering department, and it's on the high schools and the elementary schools, and it's on teachers, and it's on counselors, and it's on mentors, and it's on ministers.

It's on celebrities and sports leagues and the media to set a better example. And it's on parents and grandparents and older brothers and sisters to sit down young people and talk about this issue.

And it's not just on the parents of young women to caution them. It is on the parents of young men to teach them respect for women. And it's on grown men to set an example and be clear about what it means to be a man.

It is on all of us to reject the quiet tolerance of sexual assault and to refuse to accept what's unacceptable. And we especially need our young men to show women the respect they deserve

and to recognize sexual assault and to do their part to stop it. Because most young men on college campuses are not perpetrators. But the rest—we can't generalize across the board. But the rest of us can help stop those who think in these terms and shut stuff down. And that's not always easy to do with all the social pressures to stay quiet or go along; you don't want to be the guy who's stopping another friend from taking a woman home even if it looks like she doesn't or can't consent. Maybe you hear something in the locker room that makes you feel uncomfortable or see something at a party that you know isn't right, but you're not sure whether you should stand up, not sure it's okay to intervene.

Here—and I think Joe said it well. The truth is, it's not just okay to intervene, it is your responsibility. It is your responsibility to speak your mind. It is your responsibility to tell your buddy when he's messing up. It is your responsibility to set the right tone when you're talking about women, even when women aren't around, maybe especially when they're not around.  
[Laughter]

And it's not just men who should intervene, women should also speak up when something doesn't look right, even if the men don't like it. It's all of us taking responsibility. Everybody has a role to play.

And in fact, we're here with Generation Progress to launch, appropriately enough, a campaign called "It's On Us." I mean, the idea is to fundamentally shift the way we think about sexual assault. So we're inviting colleges and universities to join us in saying, we are not tolerating this anymore: not on our campuses, not in our community, not in this country. And the campaign is building on the momentum that's already being generated by college campuses by the incredible young people around the country who have stepped up and are leading the way. I couldn't be prouder of them.

And we're also joined by some great partners in this effort, including the Office of Women's Health, the college sports community, media platforms. We've got universities who have signed up, including, by the way, our military academies, who are represented here today. So the goal is to hold ourselves and each other accountable and to look out for those who don't consent and can't consent. And anybody can be a part of this campaign.

So the first step on this is to go to [ItsOnUs.org](https://ItsOnUs.org)—that's [ItsOnUs.org](https://ItsOnUs.org). Take a pledge to help keep women and men safe from sexual assault. It's a promise not to be a bystander to the problem, but to be part of the solution. I took the pledge. Joe took the pledge. You can take the pledge. You can share it on social media; you can encourage others to join us.

And this campaign is just part of a broader effort, but it's a critical part, because even as we continue to enforce our laws and work with colleges to improve their responses and to make sure that survivors are taken care of, it won't be enough unless we change the culture that allows assault to happen in the first place.

And I'm confident we can. I'm confident because of incredible young people like Lilly who speak out for change and empower other survivors. They inspire me to keep fighting. I'm assuming they inspire you as well. And this is a personal priority not just as a President, obviously, not just as a husband and a father of two extraordinary girls, but as an American who believes that our Nation's success depends on how we value and defend the rights of women and girls.

So I'm asking all of you, join us in this campaign. Commit to being part of the solution. Help make sure our schools are safe havens where everybody, men and women, can pursue their dreams and fulfill their potential.

Thank you so much for all the great work.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:14 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Lilly B. Jay, student, Amherst College, and her parents Molly Broughton Peter and Jeffrey A. Jay; White House Senior Adviser Valerie B. Jarrett; White House Adviser on Violence Against Women Lynn Rosenthal; and Katherine I. Morrison, student, Youngstown State University.

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