

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks Following a Meeting With the President's Task Force on 21st-Century Policing and an Exchange With Reporters

March 2, 2015

The President. Last year, the events in Ferguson and New York exposed a deep-rooted frustration in many communities of color around the need for fair and just law enforcement. And so back in December, I announced a Task Force on 21st-Century Policing, chaired by two outstanding leaders who are respected both in law enforcement and in civil rights circles: Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey and former Assistant Attorney General Laurie Robinson. And I asked them to help to form a task force made up of community leaders, law enforcement leaders, academics, practitioners, and to come up in 90 days with a very specific set of recommendations that would allow us to continue to drive crime down, to continue to deal with issues of community building, but would begin to build the kind of trust that we need in order to continue to make progress in the future.

For the last few months, they've been holding hearings. They met with people who care passionately about these issues. They've debated recommendations thoughtfully and deliberately. Some put their lives on hold for more than 2 months to do this. I am extraordinarily grateful for their efforts.

This morning, they presented to me their report, which will be available online for everybody to see. It offers pragmatic, commonsense ideas based on input from criminal justice experts, community leaders, law enforcement, and civil liberties advocates. We are carefully reviewing all their recommendations, which include very specific recommendations, more general recommendations, everything from training issues to technology issues, to approaches for interacting with schools, to how we get research and data. But I want to summarize just a few key points that were made so that people are very clear about the direction that we're going to be moving.

Number one, I think uniformly, the Task Force talked about the issue of legitimacy as being important not just for the communities, but also for law enforcement officers. That the more there is trust between communities and law enforcement, the safer it is for cops, the more effectively they can do their jobs, the more cooperation there's going to be, the more likely those communities are to be safe. And so there is no theoretical separation between the interests of community and law enforcement. But obviously, the devil is in the details, and we've got to figure out how to make that work.

Number two, there was a great emphasis on the need to collect more data. Across this country, we've got 18,000 law enforcement jurisdictions. Right now we do not have a good sense, and local communities do not have a good sense, of how frequently there may be interactions with police and community members that result in a death, result in a shooting. That's the kind of information that is needed for police departments to do their job, to be able to manage their forces effectively, and for communities to be able to evaluate and provide appropriate oversight to the folks who are supposed to be serving and protecting them.

There was a lot of discussion about the need for expanding and enhancing community policing that we know works. When I had several law enforcement officers from around the country the other day, almost all of them—and this is a diverse group, some from big cities,

some from small communities, some from tribal areas—they all discussed the need for police officers to be engaged with the community, not just in a stop, but also in a school, also working with children, also being seen as enhancing the life of the community beyond law enforcement. That trust then enhances their ability to do a good job. And that's an area that was emphasized by this Task Force.

There's a great interest in training. We know some things that work, but we need more information to find out how to take to scale best practices when it comes to training so that police officers are able to work in a way that reduces the possibilities of bias, that allows them to deal with what are very stressful situations. Oftentimes, police officers have extraordinarily difficult jobs. They may be put in situations in which there's a lot of tension. And how do they deal with that appropriately, and how do they work with the community effectively to mitigate some of those challenges?

There are going to be some controversial recommendations in here. For example, the need for independent investigations and independent or special prosecutors when there is a situation in which law enforcement has interacted with an individual that results in death.

[At this point, Task Force Cochair Laurie Robinson coughed.]

I'm going to give Laurie some water right now—*[laughter]*—because I think it's important. She's been working very hard. *[Laughter]* And Michelle has that same cough.

But the importance of making sure that there is a sense of accountability when, in fact, law enforcement is involved in a deadly shooting is something that I think communities across the board are going to need to consider. There were some recommendations around prohibiting racial profiling. That's a step that we've already taken at the Federal level. If you talk to the FBI, if you talk to our Federal law enforcement, it may be challenging for them to change old practices, but they are confident that they're able to continue to do their job effectively. The same is going to be true at the local level as long as it is an intentional policy coming from the top that is followed up with key metrics so the people know exactly what is going on.

And then there is some discussions of technology. There's been a lot of talk about body cameras as a silver bullet or a solution. I think the Task Force concluded that there is a role for technology to play in building additional trust and accountability, but it's not a panacea, and that it has to be embedded in a broader change in culture and a legal framework that ensures that people's privacy is respected and that not only police officers, but the community themselves feel comfortable with how technologies are being used.

There's some additional recommendations that are very specific. For example, how law enforcement handles mass demonstrations. I think there was a lot of concern that bubbled up in the wake of Ferguson. The Federal Government has already taken it upon itself to look at how we are dealing with providing military equipment to local law enforcement and how that may be used. There are some recommendations that deal with civilian oversight and how that might be managed.

The point is that this report is going to contain a series of very specific, concrete, commonsense efforts for us to build trust. It will be good for police, and it will be good for the communities involved. And as a consequence, it will be good for the country. Everybody wants our streets safe, and everybody wants to make sure that laws are applied fairly and equitably.

Nobody, by the way, wants that more than law enforcement themselves. I was keenly interested in hearing from some of our law enforcement representatives who talked about how

important it is for police to feel as if the community supports them, because they got into law enforcement to serve and protect, not to be viewed as some external force. And unfortunately, sometimes policies, politics, politicians put law enforcement in an untenable position.

There was some discussion about—within the report about how we have to look at the broader context in which law enforcement is happening. Our approach to our drug laws, for example, and criminalization of nonviolent offenses rather than taking more of a public health approach, that may be something that has an impact in eroding trust between law enforcement and communities. Issues—broader issues of poverty and isolation may have an impact. I emphasized to the Task Force that I think it's important for us to recognize that context, but I don't want us to have such a 40,000-foot argument that we lose track of the very specific concrete practices that can be instituted right now that will make a difference.

Now, last point I'll make. Most of the recommendations that have been made are directed at the 18,000 law enforcement jurisdictions that are out there. Law enforcement is largely a local function as opposed to a Federal function. Many of the recommendations that have been made for changes in Federal practice we already have entrain. Those that we do not yet have entrain, that we have not yet implemented, I'm going to be asking Eric Holder and the Justice Department and his successor to go through all these recommendations so that we can start implementing them.

I know that one area that's going to be of great interest is whether we can expand the COPS program that in the past has been very effective, continues to be effective, but is largely underfunded, to see if we can get more incentives for local communities to apply some of the best practices and lessons that are embodied in this report.

But a lot of our work is going to involve local police chiefs, local elected officials, States recognizing that the moment is now for us to make these changes. We have a great opportunity, coming out of some great conflict and tragedy, to really transform how we think about community law enforcement relations so that everybody feels safer and our law enforcement officers feel, rather than being embattled, feel fully supported.

We need to seize that opportunity. And so this is something that I'm going to stay very focused on in the months to come. I'm going to be pushing my Justice Department and the COPS program and others to continue to work on it. But I want to close by just once again saying thank you to the extraordinary contributions that have been made by this Task Force.

I expect our friends in the media to really focus on what's in this report and pay attention to it. So often we see an event that's flashy. It makes the news. People are crying out for solutions. And by the time recommendations are put forward, our focus has moved on and we don't actually see and pay attention to the concrete ways that we can improve the situation. This is a moment where a lot of work has been done. There's some good answers to be had if we don't make this a political football or sensationalize it, but rather really focus on getting the job done.

So I appreciate everybody's efforts. I'm going to be focused on it. I hope you will be too.

Thank you very much, everybody.

Q. Surely you don't mean us, do you?

The President. You pay attention, personally. It's more generically.

Thank you, guys.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:09 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the audio was incomplete.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : 21st-Century Policing, President's Task Force on, meeting with President; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: White House.

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