

Remarks Following a Roundtable Discussion on Trade
March 25, 2015

Well, as I said in the State of the Union Address earlier this year, my top priority is to make sure that we continue the economic momentum that's been established, continue to grow businesses, create jobs, and make sure that we've got the kind of prosperity that is broad based and allows people not just to get into the middle class, but ultimately, to start their own businesses, start their own industries, in some cases, climb out of difficult circumstances and live out the American Dream.

And one of the major components to do that is to make sure that outstanding goods and services made right here in the United States of America have access to global markets. Ninety-five percent of the customers of the world are outside our borders, and we've got to make sure that we're able to sell to them. And when we do, our companies thrive.

This is one of the reasons why I am pursuing the kind of trade authority that allows me, working with Members of Congress, to pry open these markets and make sure there's a level playing field that's good for American businesses and American workers.

We already have one of the most open markets in the world. People are already selling to us. But oftentimes, it's not reciprocal. And what I want to do is make sure that those markets are as open to us, our businesses, American workers, American products, as our markets are open to them.

And one of the reasons that I brought this group together is because the perception sometimes is, is that the trade agenda is only important for big companies, big corporations, big Fortune 500 or 100 companies. Well, the group that's sitting around here is made up of small-businesspeople or medium-sized businesspeople who are seeing their businesses directly benefit from export, as well as a couple mayors, Mayor Nutter and Mayor Buckhorn, Philadelphia and Tampa, respectively, who can account for hundreds of thousands of jobs and tens of billions of dollars of sales coming out of their region as a consequence of exports.

So among the companies here, we've got companies that range from four employees to a couple hundred employees. Some are selling as much as 20 percent of their products and goods outside the United States; some are just getting started and are selling 7, 8, 10 percent of their goods outside the United States. In each case, what they know is that if the U.S. Government is getting their back, making sure that there's a level playing field, they can compete.

So I—just to tell one quick story: Jeff Hohman from Northwest Door makes big garage doors. And what he's finding is, is that when you have that stamp, "Made in America," on it, customers like that, they value it, and there's a ready market out there. And because he's been able to sell in places like Saudi Arabia and Australia, he's been able to hire more workers. Because his sales, traditionally, had gone down during the wintertime when people aren't thinking about buying a new garage door. They want to keep the one they've got closed. [*Laughter*] And so it was—there was a seasonal business cycle. Well, it turns out that when it's winter here, it's summer in Australia, and he's able to keep more folks on the job and, in fact, hire more people because of those sales and those opportunities.

Steve Basta with AlterG has created—or has a company that's created new technologies for medical rehabilitation. He's able to sell his products overseas, but what he's finding is, in some countries, you've got tariffs that make his products more expensive, and that means fewer sales.

And so this is not just the Boeings and the General Electrics that benefit, although they do benefit, and they've got a lot of suppliers up and down the chain, so small and medium-sized businesses benefit when the big companies are selling, because they're sourcing here in the United States. But it's also small businesses and medium-sized businesses directly benefit.

And I want to make sure that that story gets told, because we're going to make a big push to level the playing field. And I know that sometimes there's controversy around trade agendas. Trade deals have not always been good for American manufacturing. There have been times where because the trade deal was one way, American workers didn't benefit and somebody else did. Well, we intend to change that. We're not going to sit and settle for the status quo.

And that's why we're going to make sure that the trade deals of the future reflect the labor protections, the environment protections, the protection of property—or intellectual property that's so important to our businesses. But we're going to pry those markets open. I'm not going to settle for the status quo, because we think we can grow enormously.

And what we know is that people who export, their workers tend to get higher wages. Those businesses do better. And we want to make sure that "Made in America" is showing up in every country around the world. That's our goal.

And I appreciate very much the mayors who are here who, as Michael Nutter said, doesn't have time for a lot of abstract, ideological debates. What they know is, they want to make sure their businesses are able to access these markets.

You've got—Mayor Buckhorn has got the port in Tampa, which is the gateway for the entire southern part of our hemisphere. They know we've got to get this done. And so do these businesses as well.

So thank you very much, everybody. Appreciate it.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:36 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Jeff Hohman, president, Northwest Door; and Steve Basta, chief executive officer, AlterG, Inc.

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