

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks Announcing the ConnectHome Initiative at Durant High School in Durant, Oklahoma

July 15, 2015

The President. Hello, Oklahoma! *Halito!*

Audience members. *Halito!*

The President. Everybody, please have a seat. Have a seat. It's good to see you. How is everybody doing?

First of all, Michelle says hi. [*Laughter*] And I want to thank all of you for helping to build the terrific partnership that we share with the Choctaw Nation.

Audience member. Love you!

The President. I love you too. [*Laughter*] So I want to first of all thank Chief Gary Batton and the many tribal leaders who are here today. I want to thank the extraordinary young people that I just had a chance to meet with. Give them a big round of applause. They were just exceptional and gave me all kinds of interesting thoughts and ideas about how young people can lead and thrive and reshape America. And I could not be prouder of them.

As many of you know, we've held a Tribal Nations Conference each year that I've been President. And just last week, as part of what we call our Generation Indigenous initiative, focused on young people, we hosted our first-ever Tribal Youth Gathering, with over a thousand young leaders from 230 tribes, including several Choctaw youth. And you spend time with these young people from all across the country, and they will blow you away. They are smart, and they're passionate, and they are ready to seize the future.

And Michelle and I believe we've got a special obligation to make sure that tribal youth have every opportunity to achieve their potential not just for the benefit of themselves and their communities, but for our entire nation; that all of you young people have a chance to succeed not by leaving your communities, but by coming back and investing in your communities; and that you have a whole range of options that can lift us all up. And so we are really excited about what you're doing, and we're really excited about some of the work that's going to be done not just here, but all across the country. That's why I'm here today.

When you step back and look at everything that we've done in the past 6½ years to rebuild our economy on a new foundation—from retooling our industries to rethinking our schools, reforming our health care system—all of it's been in pursuit of one goal, and that's creating opportunity for all people, not just some, but everybody.

And thanks to the hard work and the resilience of the American people, the work we've done is paying off. So our businesses have created 2.8 [12.8][°] million new jobs over the past 64 months in a row. That's the longest streak of private sector job growth on record. The housing market is stronger. The stock market recovered, so people's 401(k)s and retirement accounts got replenished. More than 16 million Americans now have the financial security of having health insurance. We've invested in clean energy. We've made ourselves more independent of foreign oil. We've seen jumps in high school enrollment and college graduation rates.

[°] White House correction.

So across the board, there's really no economic measure where we're not doing better than we were when I came into office. That's the good news. But I also made it clear when I came into office that even as we're trying to make sure the entire economy recovers, we also have to pay attention to those communities that all too often have been neglected and fallen behind. And as part of that, I said we're going to do better by our First Americans. We're going to do better.

Now, we can't reverse centuries of history: broken treaties, broken promises. But I did believe that we could come together as partners and forge a new path based on trust and respect. And that's what we've tried to do. So we strengthened the sovereignty of tribal nations. We gave more power to tribal courts and police. We restored hundreds of thousands of acres of tribal trust lands. We expanded opportunity by permanently reauthorizing the Indian Health Care Improvement Act and helping businesses and building roads and moving forward on renewable energy projects in Indian Country. We untied tribal hands when it came to dealing with domestic violence, which was really important.

Here in Oklahoma, we designated the Choctaw Nation as one of America's first Promise Zones, areas where the Federal Government is partnering with local communities and businesses to jumpstart economic development and job creation, expand educational opportunities, and increase affordable housing and improve public safety. And as a result, you've already received Federal investments in Early Head Start to make sure our young people are getting the best possible beginning in life, childcare, job training, support for young entrepreneurs. And I've called on Congress to pass a Promise Zone tax credit to encourage employment and private sector investment in places like this.

So we've made a lot of progress not just in Indian Country, but in America as a whole. But we've got more work to do. We've got more work to do, especially because the economy around the globe is changing so fast.

So today I want to focus on one way we can prepare our kids and our workers for an increasingly competitive world, a way that we can help our entrepreneurs sell more goods here at home and overseas, a way where we can get every American ready to seize the opportunities of a 21st-century economy.

Today we're going to take another step to close the digital divide in America and make sure everybody in America has access to high-speed broadband Internet. We're taking some initiatives today to make that happen.

Now, I don't really have to tell you why this is important. Even old folks like me know it's important. In this digital age, when you can apply for a job, take a course, pay your bills, order a pizza, even find a date—[laughter]—by tapping your phone, the Internet is not a luxury, it's a necessity. You cannot connect with today's economy without having access to the Internet. Now, that doesn't mean I want folks on the Internet all the time. I always tell young people when I meet them, sometimes, they just have the phone up, I'm standing right in front of them—[laughter]—and I've got to tell them, young man, put down that phone. Shake the hand of your President. [Laughter] And then, after you shake my hand and look me in the eye and told me your name, then you can maybe go back to taking pictures. [Laughter] So there's nothing wrong with every once in a while putting the technology aside and actually having a conversation. This is something I talk to Malia and Sasha about. We don't let those phones at the dinner table, but that's a whole other story. I went off track.

But if you're not connected today, then it's very hard for you to understand what's happening in our economy. Now, here's the problem. While high-speed Internet access is a given, it's assumed for millions of Americans, it's still out of reach for too many people, especially in low-income and rural communities. More than 90 percent of households headed by a college graduate use the Internet. Fewer than half of households with less than a high school education are plugged into the Internet. So, in other words, the people who could benefit the most from the latest technology are the least likely to have it.

So if you're a student and you don't have Internet access at home, that means you could be struggling to type papers or do online homework assignments or learn basic computer skills or try to get help from your teacher. You may have to wait in long lines at public libraries or even in parking lots at the local McDonald's just to try to get digital access. And what that means is, you're not learning the critical tech skills required to succeed in tomorrow's economy.

And this has consequences. A lot of you have heard about the achievement gap, how some kids in certain groups consistently lag behind, and the opportunity gap, where certain groups have a tougher time getting attached to the labor market. Well, this starts with a "homework gap" for a lot of young people and an "access to learning" gap, which then can translate into a science gap or a math gap and eventually becomes an economic gap for our country. And that's not what America is about. America doesn't guarantee you success. That's never been the promise. But what America does stand for—has to stand for—is, if you're willing to work hard and take responsibility, then you can succeed, no matter where you start off.

That's the essential American story. That's why we admire stories like Abraham Lincoln's. Starts off in a log cabin, teaches himself to read and write, and becomes our greatest President. That's what America is supposed to be about.

And in an increasingly competitive global economy, our whole country will fall behind unless we're got everybody on the field playing. I—obviously, as President, you travel around a lot, and you go to countries like South Korea where a higher percentage of the population has high-speed broadband—and by the way, they pay their teachers the way they pay their doctors, and they consider education to be at the highest rung of the professions. Well, we will start falling behind those countries, which is unthinkable when we invented the stuff. *[Laughter]* I mean, it's American ingenuity that created the Internet, that created all these technologies. And the notion that now we'd leave some Americans behind in being able to use that, while other countries are racing ahead, that's a recipe for disaster, and it offends our most deeply held values.

A child's ability to succeed should not be based on where she lives, how much money her parents make. That's not who we are as a country. We've got a different standard. We're a people who believe we should be able to go as far as our talents and hard work will take us. And just because you don't have money in your household to buy fancy technology, that should not be an obstacle.

We've been doing a lot to encourage coding and STEM education: math and science and technology education. And unfortunately, for too many of our kids, that's something that's viewed as out of reach. Listen, people are not born coders. It's not as if suddenly, if you're born in Silicon Valley, you can figure out how to code a computer. That's not—what happens is, kids get exposed to this stuff early, and they learn, they soak it up like sponges.

And somewhere among the millions of young people who don't have access to the digital world could be the next Mark Zuckerberg, the next Bill Gates. Some of them might be right here in the Choctaw Nation. But only if we make sure you have access and exposure. If we don't give these young people the access to what they need to achieve their potential, then it's our loss, it's not just their loss.

So that's why my administration has made it a priority to connect more Americans to the Internet and close that digital divide that people have been talking about for 20 years now. We've invested so far in more than a hundred thousand miles of network infrastructure. That's enough to circle the globe four times. We've laid a lot of line. We've supported community broadband. We've championed net neutrality rules to make sure that the Internet providers treat all web traffic equally. And then, we launched something called ConnectEd, and this was targeted at making sure that every school was connected and classrooms were connected. And we're now well on our way to connecting 99 percent of students to high-speed broadband in their classrooms by 2018, and that includes here in Durant. So—[*applause*].

So far, 29 million more students in 55,000 schools are on track to have access to high-speed broadband, and 20 million more have Wi-Fi in their classrooms. And last year, when I visited Standing Rock Nation in North Dakota, I announced that Verizon would connect 10 Native student dorms, Microsoft would donate more tablets to more Native students, including students right here in Oklahoma. So we've been making progress. We're chipping away at this thing.

But today we're going to go further. I'm announcing a new initiative called ConnectHome. Now, ConnectEd, the idea was making sure the schools were connected and that you didn't have a situation where in a classroom, even if it was connected to the Internet, you could only have one student at a time or a couple of computers at a time. So we had to make sure that the classroom was state of the art. ConnectHome is designed to make high-speed Internet more affordable to residents in low-income housing units across the country. Because young people today, they're not just learning in the classroom, they're learning outside the classroom as well. So my Department of Housing and Urban Development is going to work with 28 communities, from Boston to Durham, from Seattle to Durant. About 200,000 of our most vulnerable children and their families will soon be able to access affordable Internet in their home.

Now, I want to give credit where credit is due. This is not something Government does by itself. I'm proud to say that folks around the country are stepping up to do their part. So businesses like Cox are providing low-cost Internet and devices. Best Buy is committing free computer education and technical support so that folks learn how to make the most of the Internet. Organizations like the Boys & Girls Club will teach digital literacy so that kids in this community can be just as savvy as kids growing up in Silicon Valley. You've got nonprofits like EveryoneOn and U.S. Ignite who are going to help make this work on the ground. So we've got some great businesses and some great non-for-profits who are partnering with us on this.

But most importantly, it really requires all of us to be involved—parents, principals, teachers, neighbors—because we've got to demand the best in our schools and from our kids.

These investments are the right thing to do for our communities. They're the smart thing to do for the national economy. And we can't allow shortsighted cuts to the programs that are going to keep us competitive.

So this is a smart investment. These are the kinds of investments we need to make. Sometimes, there's a debate going on in Washington about the size of Government and what

we should be spending on. And look, I've said before, there are programs in Washington that don't work, and we don't want taxpayer money wasted. But there are some investments that we make in future generations, there are investments we make in things that help all of us that we can't do by ourselves. We're not going to build a road by ourselves; we've got to do that together. We're not going to invest in basic research to solve Alzheimer's by ourselves. At least, I don't have enough money to do that. We've got to do that together. I'll pay some tax dollars, we'll pool our money, and then, we all invest in the research because we all stand to benefit at some point. We don't know when we might get sick, and it's good for us to keep that cutting edge of science.

Well, the same thing is true when it comes to schools and investing in our young people and making sure that they've got the tools they need to succeed. So this idea of ConnectHome, just like ConnectEd, this is going to make the difference for a dad who can now—because it's not just for the kids—now he can learn a new skill and apply for a better job after work, because he's working a tough shift to pay the rent, but he knows he wants to advance. He may be able to take an online course because he's got access to the Internet, and that could make all the difference in his family and his future. This will make a difference for the young entrepreneur: got a great idea, wants to start a business, can start it from her home. This will make a difference for the student who can now download the resources he needs to study for that exam that's coming up and then maybe come up with a new theory that's going to make a difference in our understanding of the world.

This will make a difference for young people like Kelsey Janway. Where's Kelsey? There's Kelsey, right here. Stand up, Kelsey, so everybody can see you. See—[*applause*]*—so—all right, Kelsey, I know this is embarrassing, so you can sit down for a second. [Laughter]*

Kelsey is 16 years old, a proud member of the Choctaw Nation. This might be a game changer for her. When she was younger, her family only got phone reception if they stood on a particular rock in their yard or on the top window sill in their bathroom. Is that right?

Heavener, OK, resident Kelsey Janway. Yes.

The President. You remember the rock.

Ms. Janway. Yes.

The President. It was this particular rock. So today, she has spotty, slow Internet service at home. And at school, service is just as bad, which makes it tough for students like Kelsey to learn the skills they need for success. Meanwhile, a high school nearby has much better technology; it gives those kids an advantage that she doesn't have.

Now, even though she's seen many of her peers get caught up in trouble or lose motivation and maybe drop out of school, Kelsey is keeping on pushing. She works two jobs, belongs to 11 organizations. Now, we're going to need to talk about that. That's a lot of organizations. I don't know where you're finding that time. She's leading a youth council where she helps guide some of her peers. And she says that even the slow Internet that she's got—probably that buffer and things coming up all the time is getting on her nerves. Nevertheless, that's opened her mind and introduced her to views outside of her own. "I have a sense of a bigger world out there." That's what Kelsey says.

And that glimpse of what's possible, that can change everything. So last week, Kelsey represented Choctaw Nation at the White House Tribal Youth Gathering. Had a chance to hear from Michelle, right? And she plans to return to the White House one day as President.

So I'm just keeping the seat warm for her until she gets there. *[Laughter]* But I wanted to point out Kelsey having to stand on a rock trying to get phone service as an example of what we're talking about here.

There are amazing young people like Kelsey all across the country. I meet them every day: talented, smart, capable; of every race, of every ethnicity, every faith, every background. They've got big dreams. They're just poised to succeed, and they're willing to work through all kinds of obstacles to make great things happen. But they've got big dreams. We've got to have an interest in making sure that they can achieve those dreams. Kelsey, these young people, young people all across the country, they deserve a country that believes in those dreams and that invests in those dreams and that loves them for their dreams.

And ultimately, that's what America is about. You know, I know of—sometimes, folks get discouraged about Washington—I know I do—because the arguments between the parties are just so stark and all the differences are exaggerated and what attracts attention and gets on the news on TV is conflict and shouting and hollering. And as a consequence, everybody kind of goes into their corners, and nobody agrees to anything, and nothing gets done, and everybody gets cynical, and everybody gets frustrated.

But the thing is that, for all our disagreements, for all our debates, we are one family. And yes, we may squabble just like families do, but we're one family, from the First Americans to the newest Americans. We're one family. We're in this together. We're bound by a shared commitment to leave a better world for our children. We're bound together by a commitment to make sure that that next generation has inherited all the blessings that we inherited from the previous generation.

And that requires work on our part. It requires sacrifice. It requires compromise. And it requires that we invest in that future generation; that we're thinking not just about taking care of our own kids—because I know Malia and Sasha will be fine—but I want to make sure Kelsey is fine. I want to make sure every one of these young people are fine. I want to make sure that some kid stuck in the inner city somewhere, that they've got a shot. I can't do it for them, but I want to make sure at least that they've got a shot. I want to make sure that somebody down in some little border town in Texas, whose parents maybe never went to college, that they've got a dream and that they've got a shot.

And I'm willing to do something about that. And we all have to be. When we make those commitments to all of our children, the great thing about it is, the blessings are returned back to us, because you end up having a workforce that is better educated, which means, suddenly, companies want to locate, which means, businesses starts booming, which means, businesses start hiring, which means, everybody does better.

So not only is it the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. That's our tradition. It's not Democratic or Republican, it is the American tradition. And we forget that sometimes because we're so caught up in our day-to-day politics, and we listen to a bunch of hooey on TV or talk radio—*[laughter]*—that doesn't really tell the truth about what's going on.

So I'm proud of Kelsey. I'm proud of these young people. I'm proud of Choctaw Nation. And I surely am proud of these United States of America. Let's get to work and make sure we're leaving the kind of country we want for our kids.

God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:07 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Mark E. Zuckerberg, founder and chief executive officer, Facebook, Inc.; and William H. Gates, III, founder, technology adviser, and board member, Microsoft Corp.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : ConnectHome initiative in Durant, OK.

Locations: Durant, OK.

Names: Batton, Gary; Gates, William H., III; Janway, Kelsey; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Zuckerberg, Mark E.

Subjects: American Indians and Alaska Natives : Economic growth and development; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Tribal nations, relations with Federal Government; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Tribal Youth Gathering, White House; American Indians and Alaska Natives : White House Tribal Nations Conference; Communications : Broadband and wireless technologies; Economy, national : Improvement; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : Science and math programs; Education : Technology and innovation, expansion efforts; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Energy : Domestic sources; Health and medical care : Affordability and costs; Housing and Urban Development, Department of : ConnectHome initiative; Oklahoma : Durant High School in Durant; Oklahoma : President's visits; White House Office : ConnectHome initiative.

DCPD Number: DCPD201500497.