

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

**Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a Town Hall Meeting at
McKinley Senior High School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana
January 14, 2016**

The President. Hello, Louisiana! Hello, Baton Rouge! Geaux Tigers! For those of you who are not aware, that's a "geaux" with an "x." I've got it.

Can everybody give Che a big round of applause? We are—we could not be more proud of her. I was backstage; I asked her, "Are you nervous?" She said, "No, I've got this." [*Laughter*] "I'm fine." That is a serious leader of the future. And we are so proud of her. And I want to thank everybody at McKinley for hosting us today.

There are a couple of people I want to make sure we acknowledge. Your mayor, Kip Holden, is in the house. [*Applause*] There he is. We've got Congressman Cedric Richmond here, who's got a really cute little boy. [*Laughter*] And New Orleans Mayor and great friend of mine, Mitch Landrieu is in the house, whose son is not so little, but it—looks pretty cool. [*Laughter*] I want to congratulate your new Governor who's going to do outstanding work. John Bel Edwards is in the house and his lovely family. We are so grateful to have them here.

Since LSU has a pretty good sports team—sports teams, historically, I thought I might mention you've got an okay basketball player named Ben Simmons in the house, so—[*applause*—who, he—his dad played in Australia with my Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. So they can hoop. But I think they would both acknowledge that Ben is better. [*Laughter*] And it's wonderful to have him here.

Now, it is my intention not to give a long speech, because this is sort of a town hall. I want to spend a little time having a conversation with all of you. And—but I do want to make mention of what your incoming Governor is already doing. He is already delivering for the people of Louisiana. This week, he took the bold and wise step to expand Medicaid to cover hundreds of thousands of hard-working Louisianans, providing them with the financial security of health care. It was the right thing to do. And by the way, it will actually help the State's finances. And it shows you why elections matter.

And right now we're hoping to encourage more States to do the right thing. One of the ways we're doing that is proposing additional funding to support new States that choose, as John did, to expand Medicaid. So I'm very—I'm just so proud of him, and I'm confident that he's going to do great work. [*Applause*] He's going to do great work. And everybody here needs to get behind him because it's not going to be easy. He's coming in a little like I came in, sort of, got to clean up some stuff.

Now, I love Louisiana. I love Baton Rouge, but this is the first time I've been here as President. I've been trying to pack all my fun trips into my last year. And although I missed the Tigers beating Ole Miss last night, maybe I'll come back for football season.

Some of you know I gave my final State of the Union Address this week. I focused on the fact that we're going through a time of extraordinary change. And that's unsettling. It can seem sometimes, especially during political season, where everybody is running around saying, "Oh, everything is terrible, and let's find somebody to blame," that our politics won't meet the moment. But what I want folks to know—that's right, if you have a chair, go ahead and sit

down. [Laughter] If you don't have a chair, don't sit down. [Laughter] I don't want you falling down. Good thing—whoever the first one was who did that, you're a leader. [Laughter]

Audience member. We love you!

The President. Love you back. Thank you.

But what I want people to know is, is that we've been through big changes before. And America always comes out stronger and better, as long as we make decisions together that are designed to seize the future instead of run away from it. And we're uniquely positioned to do that. We've got the strongest economy in the world. We've gone through the worst economic crisis of our lifetime, and we have bounced back with 14 million new jobs, cut the unemployment rate in half. We're the most powerful country on Earth, capable of meeting any threat. Our commitment to science and education and entrepreneurship and our diversity make us a perfect match for what's needed in this new century.

But our progress is not inevitable. So we've got to answer some big questions. Number one, how do we make sure that we create an economy where everybody is benefiting, everybody feels secure, everybody has a shot at success, not just some? That's question number one. Question number two: How do we make sure we've got an innovation economy and we embrace science and reason and facts, instead of running away from it? Number three, how do we make sure that we keep America safe, not through trying to talk tough, but by being smart? Number four, how do we make sure our politics works, not in a way where everybody agrees—because in a big country like ours, people aren't going to agree on everything—but so that it is civil and so that it is constructive and so that we can work together to find solutions to the problems that are not just going to face us, but our kids and our grandkids? All right?

Now, I tried to give you a sense of how I think we need to answer those questions going forward, but I promised I wasn't going to talk long because I want to have a chance to hear from you. I just want to make this point. We're pretty close to New Orleans, and I had a chance to go back and travel with Mitch as we were commemorating the anniversary of Katrina. And if you have any doubt about America's capacity to overcome anything, you just visit some of those neighborhoods, and you talk to some of those families, and you see the businesses that are thriving and the homes that have been built and the parishes that have pulled together.

And it's just a reminder of the fact that when we work together, we cannot be stopped. We cannot be stopped. We work best as a team. And it is my ardent hope that, during the course of this year, as long as I have this extraordinary privilege to be your President, that I'm going to be able to encourage more and more of you to get involved and feel that optimism and confidence about where America is headed. All right?

So with that, let's start this conversation. And we—let me say this. We've got mikes in the audience. And we're going to go boy, girl, boy, girl, so it's fair. [Laughter]

Audience member. [Inaudible]—girl, boy, girl, boy.

The President. And—or girl, boy, girl, boy. That's fine. See—[laughter].

Audience member. Girl, girl, girl!

The President. [Laughter] She said, "Girl, girl, girl." Now, that's not fair. [Laughter] Come on. [Laughter]

So what I'm going to do is, people just raise their hands, I will call on you. A couple things: Wait until the mike gets there. Number two, introduce yourself so we know who you are.

Number three, if you keep your question relatively—or comment relatively short, then my response, I can't guarantee I'll keep it short, but I'll keep it shorter. And that way, we have a chance to hear from more people. All right?

Okay, so let's see who's going to go first. Where's my mike? Here we go. All right, I'll—let's see. This is a good-looking crowd too. I'm—oh, I don't know who to call on. That young lady right there in the brown jacket. Right there. Yes, you.

Q. I want to ask you—my name is Rachel—

The President. Okay, hold on. Wait for the mike. You didn't follow instructions. You're already—[laughter]—careful. Careful. She didn't go to McKinley, is that what happened?

Q. No, I didn't. [Laughter]

The President. All right, go ahead, go ahead.

Q. My name is Rachel. I'm from Texas. And my question—I don't have one—I just wanted to tell you thank you.

The President. Oh, okay, well, that's sweet. [Laughter] All right, the—well, she just—she didn't really have a question, so I'm going to go back to—I'm going to go to this young lady right here in the black-and-white jacket. Right there. Hold on a second. The mike is coming to you. It's just that we're so packed in, it may take—you can go ahead and pass her the mike. She looks like she'll give it back.

The President's Plans for His Post-Presidency

Q. Hi, Mr. President. My name is Jasmine Elliott, and I am a 10th grade cheerleader here at McKinley High School.

The President. Yay, all right! Go Panthers!

Q. And I love you—me and my family love you so much. And I want to thank you.

The President. Oh, that's sweet.

Q. And as a future broadcast journalist, I would like to ask you two questions.

The President. Okay.

Q. My first question is: What are your plans to do when you leave office?

The President. Okay.

Q. And can you please give my grandmother a hug? [Laughter]

The President. See, now first of all, I know your grandma put you up to that. [Laughter] So I will give your grandma a hug because you did such a nice job asking the question.

In terms of my plans, look, I've got so much work to do this next year that, I—Michelle and I, we haven't had a chance to really step back and think about it. But as I said at the State of Union, when I get out, I'm still holding the most important job in a democracy, and that is the office of citizen. So I will continue to work on the things that Michelle and I care so deeply about. We want to encourage young people to get involved. We want to improve education. We want to make sure that our criminal justice system works the way it should. We want to make sure that we are promoting science education and learning. So—we want to work internationally to help other countries develop.

So we're going to have a busy agenda, but I'm not overthinking that right now because I've got a whole bunch of stuff to do between now and next year. All right? But thank you for the question.

All right, it's a gentleman's turn. This man, because he's got such a sharp bowtie. Right here. Yes, all right. Go ahead.

Q. Good morning.

The President. Good morning.

Q. This is a pleasure, sir.

The President. Thank you.

Political Polarization/Political Participation/Bipartisanship/Criminal Justice Reform/Tax Reform

Q. My name Tremaine Sterling. I'm from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Through your entire two terms as President, what would be your biggest regret and why?

The President. I think that is a great question. Although, had you been watching my State of Union on Tuesday—[*laughter*]*—he might have known that I actually already answered that question. [Laughter]* But that's okay. I'm sure there was a good ballgame on that night. [*Laughter*]

No, what I told the country—except for you—[*laughter*]*—was that my biggest regret was the fact that politics has become more rancorous during my Presidency and more polarized than it was when I came in. And keep in mind, when I ran, my belief was that there were no red States and blue States. There wasn't a Black or White or Latino America. There was a United States of America. And that continues to be my belief.*

Now, I have, as President, obviously done soul searching about, what are things I could do differently to help bridge some of those divides? I think part of it had to do with when I came in we had a real emergency and we had to act quickly. And people in Washington sometimes weren't always as focused on getting the job done as they were, how is this going to position us for future elections?

And—but I—as I said at the State of Union, I have no doubt that there are things I could have done better. But what I also say is that, this is not something a President can do by himself. When it comes to how we work together, the main impetus for a better politics is going to be the American people. They have to demand it.

And so if we have voters who are not getting involved, then the people who tend to determine the agenda are the special interests or money or power or the loudest voices or the most polarizing voices, because a lot of folks—some of the best people—they're just sitting at home. And they're getting cynical about politics, and they don't get involved. And then, the people who do get involved end up being the folks who aren't willing to work together.

It's important for voters to insist that their elected officials are strong on principle, but also are willing to compromise with people who don't agree with them. And if you punish an elected official for even talking to the other side, then it's going to produce the kind of politics that we have seen in Washington too often.

So this is an area where I regret. I'm going to keep on working at it, try to see what more we can do to reach across the aisle to get things done. I said on Tuesday that I think at the end

of last year, maybe we surprised the cynics by getting a budget done. And we extended tax cuts for working families that were due to expire. And we were able to continue funding for transportation. I know that your mayor was talking about how the interstate here narrows, and we may need to do something about it to relieve some traffic. And those things are not things that should be subject to a lot of Republican and Democratic argument. Maybe that's something that we can carry over into this year.

One area, for example, that there's been genuine bipartisan interest and support is the idea that we've got to reform our criminal justice system; that we have to be tough on violent crime, but also be smart when we think about, how can we prevent young people from getting into the criminal justice system in the first place? How can we provide alternatives for low-level, nonviolent drug offenders? How can we make sure that the sentencing is proportional? How do we make sure that we're training folks while they're incarcerated to get a skill that would allow them to be gainfully employed? How do we make sure that when they are released that there is a transition process for them? How do we lift up all the outstanding employers who are willing to give people second chances? So there's a whole slew of work that we could be doing there.

And it—to their credit, we've seen some very conservative Republicans and some very liberal Democrats sitting down at the table and trying to work it out. And that's an example of where we see some promise.

Another area is—and I mentioned this at the State of the Union—some of you have heard of the earned-income tax credit. Now, this is a program historically that is supported by Democrats and Republicans. And it's a pretty simple idea. If you work, you shouldn't be in poverty. And so we should provide tax breaks to low-income working families so that they don't say, "I might as well just be on welfare because I'll get more benefits than if I'm working."

Well, the earned-income tax credit creates an incentive to say, you work hard, you're working full time, but it's, say, a minimum-wage job, we're going to give you a chance, if you've got kids, to raise that income level, get a tax break.

The problem is that it does not apply to individuals without children. And that means a lot of men in that category don't benefit and young people don't benefit. And one of the things we've been talking about is, if we expand that to reach workers who don't have children but are also working hard and are in poverty, that could be helpful.

And these are areas where Cedric—who has—he's been a leader on criminal justice reform. He's working on this as well. I know that Mitch has been doing great work when it comes to the criminal justice system in New Orleans. These are the kinds of areas where just common sense can prevail if we've all got a spirit of trying to solve problems instead of just winning elections. Okay? All right.

Okay, it's a young lady's turn. Okay. You know what, I'm going to call on that little young lady right there. Yes. She's in her daddy's lap. And my daughter—my oldest daughter is about to go to college next year. And I can't really talk about it a lot because I start to cry. *[Laughter]*

Cancer Research

Q. My name is Noelle Remeny. And I'm in the fourth grade, and I'm 10 years old. And do you think there's going to be a cure for cancer?

The President. Well, there you go. Are you interested in math and science?

Q. A little bit.

The President. A little bit? [*Laughter*] Well, I tell you what, it's going to be young people like you that are going to help cure cancer. So you better study up on your math and study up on your science.

But I do think that we are seeing medical breakthroughs right now that we have not seen in my lifetime. Part of the reason is because—some of you heard of the Human Genome Project. What happens is that we're now able to look at not just how cells work, but we're actually able to track how individual DNA and genetics operates. And when you do that, it turns out that a cancer cell that I have may be different than a cancer cell that John or somebody else has and may require different cures. And certain treatments might work better than other treatments. And because we're able to get into the really nitty-gritty of how our bodies work, in ways that we haven't before, we're starting to see more effective treatments.

But we have to make a big investment. And my Vice President, Joe Biden, who I love, suffered the kind of tragedy last year that is unbelievable. And he managed it with grace. His son Beau Biden was one of the finest men I knew. And so I thought it was entirely appropriate for Joe Biden, who has seen this and gone through it, to lead this effort like a Moon launch. We're going to double down on medical research. We're going to look at the best—we're going to gather the best researchers, the best scientists, and we are going to go after this thing.

It probably won't be cured in my lifetime. But I think it will be cured in yours. And that's why we've got to get started now. All right?

Okay, it is a gentleman's turn. This gentleman back here. Right there. Yes, sir, the—you. [*Laughter*] Hold on. The mike is coming. The mike is coming.

First Lady Michelle Obama

Q. Mr. President, first of all, I'm Greg Gavins. I'm the proud father of one of your special, great Secret Service.

The President. Outstanding.

Q. I have a question for you. Since you can't run again for another term, is there any way that we as a group can talk the First Lady into running?

The President. No. [*Laughter*] No, no, no. No, no.

Audience member. I know that's right. I know that's right. [*Laughter*]

The President. Let me tell you, there are three things that are certain in life. [*Laughter*] Death, taxes, and Michelle is not running for President. [*Laughter*] That I can tell you.

But you know what, the First Lady, though—the work she's done around reducing childhood obesity, the work that she and Jill Biden have done on military families and making sure they get support, I could not be prouder of her. And I am certain that she's going to be really active as a First Lady.

Not only is she going to be a very young ex-First Lady, but unlike me, she looks young. [*Laughter*] I was looking at a wedding picture—actually, we found the old video from our wedding. We've been married 23 years now. And so my mother-in-law had been going through some storage stuff and found the—our wedding video. And I popped it in—and I look like a teenager—and realized, boy, I sure have aged. [*Laughter*]

Audience member. [Inaudible]

The President. I know that though. [Laughter] But Michelle looked—she looked identical. Looked identical.

Q. We're proud of her.

The President. Well, I'm proud of her too, because most importantly, she's been an unbelievable mom, which is why my daughters turned out so well.

So, all right, it is a young woman's turn. This young lady right here. Go ahead. Yes, you. Yes, you've been raising your hand. [Laughter] Okay. But hold on, mike is coming. Go ahead.

Environment/Climate Change

Q. Hi, my name is Imani Maxberry. I'm a coastal environmental science major at LSU.

The President. Outstanding.

Q. One, I want to say thank you for rejecting the Keystone pipeline. And two, I want to ask: While you've been in office, what environmental impact do you—what environmental issue do you think has impacted you the most and should be more brought to the public?

The President. Okay. The—that's a great question, and I'm proud that you're doing that work. That's important.

First of all, it's important for us to understand how much environmental progress we've made in my lifetime. And the reason is, sometimes, when we talk about the environment, it sounds like something far away. But we don't realize—we don't remember what we've accomplished already.

In the 1970s, in California, there would be regular days where people did not go outside. When Ronald Reagan was Governor in California, there were regularly days where the smog was so bad, it was like it is in Beijing now. People just wouldn't go outside. And if you had asthma or some respiratory disease, you might die.

I remember as recently as 1979, when I first started college—I started college in Los Angeles—and when I went running, the first week I was there, after about 5 minutes, I'd start feeling a burning in my chest. And it was just me sucking in soot and smog. And now you go there, and that smog isn't there. And the reason is because we instituted things like catalytic converters and unleaded gasoline. And we changed the technologies to reduce smog.

It used to be that places like the Cuyahoga River in—around Cleveland caught fire it was so polluted. Caught fire. No, this is no joke. And now you go there, and people are able to use it. Same thing with the Chicago River. Now people are kayaking and fishing.

And so the point is, is that we actually can make progress when we make an effort because of our technology and our innovation. And a lot—every time we've made—taken a step to try to clean up our air or our water or our environment, there are all kinds of people who say this is going to kill jobs, we can't afford it, can't do it, it's going to cost too much. And then, after we do it, we look back and say, you know, that didn't cost as much as we thought, it happened quicker than we did. Our businesses figured out how to do it and to make money doing it at the same time. What a—that's what I mean when I say an innovation economy. We've got to be confident about our ability to solve any problem if we put our minds to it.

So now, the answer to your question right now is, what I am very much concerned about is climate change. And I—there are folks who are still denying that this is a problem or that we can do anything about it. Look, if 99 doctors told you that you have diabetes—[laughter]—and you need to change your eating habits and get some exercise and lose some weight, you may decide not to do it because you're stubborn. But don't say they're wrong because the science is unsure. This is happening. And by the way, if you live in Louisiana, you should especially be concerned about this because you are right next to some water that has a tendency to heat up, and that then creates hurricanes. And as oceans rise, that means that the amount of land that is getting gobbled up continuously in this State is shrinking—the land mass—and it's going to have an impact.

Now, we can build things, and we can fortify things, and we can do things smarter, and we can control how development happens, and we can restore wetlands. All those things make a difference. But ultimately, we've got to do something about making sure that ocean levels don't rise 4, 5, 6, 8 feet, because if they do, this State is going to have some big problems—bigger problems.

So what we've done is, we've gotten together with 200 other nations, American leadership, to say all of us have to start bringing down the carbon pollution that we send in the atmosphere. And here in the United States, there are two main ways we can do that. Number one is our power plants; we've got to start using cleaner energy. Number two, we've got to start promoting solar and wind, which create jobs. And we're a leader in this technology as long as we start investing in it.

And that transition from old, dirty fuels to clean fuels, that's going to be tough. A lot of people make money in the coal industry, for example. A lot of people have worked there, historically. But now you actually have more people working in solar than you do in coal. Those communities that are reliant on coal, we should help them get a jump on making money in wind power and solar power. Those are hard-working, good people. Let's not have them stuck in old jobs that are going to be slowly declining. Let's get them in the new jobs that are going to be going up.

And then, in our transportation sector, we need to continue to build on the things we've done since I've been President: doubling fuel efficiency standards on cars, promoting electric cars. All this stuff adds up. And the good news is, businesses can succeed, and we can make money doing it at the same time. But don't think that this is not a problem for all of us. This is the main message I have. We talked—that young lady was asking about curing cancer—well, we might cure cancer, but if temperatures have gone up 2, 3 degrees around the planet, 4 degrees, and oceans are rising, we've got—we're going to have more problems than medical science can cure. We've got to make that investment now. And we can do it.

All right. Good question. This gentleman right here. Hold on, I've got a mike right there. How you doing?

Q. I can hold it.

The President. Go ahead.

Government Efficiency/Department of Veterans Affairs/President's Legislative Agenda

Q. I'm a big kid. [Laughter] Well, maybe I'm not a big kid. Okay. My name is Alan Tura, from near Youngstown, Ohio. You've been there many times in helping with the steel mills get back on track. That's all good. And in your defense, my business is doing good, making money,

growing for the last 10 years. And I've got a lot of friends that have businesses; they're doing real well too. So for a lot of people that are complaining, there's a lot of people doing well. So I think if you hustle, you can make good.

The President. Absolutely.

Q. But my question to you is, you're on your last year—is there any one big thing that you'd like to see happen before you leave the office?

The President. Good. The—well, first of all, what's your business?

Q. Well, I've got a couple of businesses. I manufacture Halloween props, and I own a haunted house and hay ride in Lordstown, Ohio, which you've been there many times, to the car plant.

The President. I've been, yes.

Q. It's called Fear Forest. Maybe if you make it back into Youngstown in October, you can come check it out. But I make Halloween props, and I like to scare people.

The President. [Laughter] So that's kind of interesting. That's fun. The—you sell a lot of Obama masks? [Laughter]

Q. Hey, Obama is not scary. So—

The President. There you go, all right. I don't think so.

I—the things that I talked about in the State of the Union are all things that I think are possible. Some of them I can get done on my own. So I'll give you a couple of examples.

We need to revamp how our information systems, our IT systems in Government work. This is one of the areas where we're—there's a biggest gap between Government and the private sector is—if you just want to order a pizza, you've got your smartphone and you just—and the pizza shows up. Yes, you want to buy an airline ticket, you punch in a couple things and suddenly if you go to the airport it's all printing out. And the systems in Government are really old.

Now, that causes two problems. Number one is, they're less safe and secure than they should be because they're old. They're outdated systems. So it's easier for folks to try to hack into them, break into them, and we're constantly putting patches up.

The second thing is, it just means that things are slower for customers. And I want to make sure Government is in the 21st century, and we're systematically going agency through agency. If you want to get a small business loan from the SBA, I want you to be able to go to one website, in English, be able to figure out what you need to do, apply online, get that money, start that business, put people to work. And right now we're continually trying to streamline that process.

And we've made some good progress. But that's an example of something that we can do administratively. The same is true, by the way, for the VA. You'll remember—we are so proud of our veterans and our young men and women who served. And we got some folks here looking sharp in uniform that we are grateful for their service. And we have put more resources and provided more support to—and increased budgets for the VA than any administration in history. We have cut backlogs. We included folks who had been affected by agent orange. We have boosted the resources available for folks suffering from PTSD. We are ending veterans' homelessness. We've made some huge investments, made really good progress.

But you'll remember that story that came out last year, or a year and a half ago, in Phoenix, where folks were waiting so long to try to get an appointment that—and many of these were elderly, aging folks, and they were dying before they got an appointment. And it was unacceptable.

When we did an investigation of what had happened—and what was worse was some of the administrators there were hiding what was going on and manipulating, sort of, records in ways that meant they had to be fired. But when you looked at what was going on, a lot of it had to do with the fact that they had a system where a veteran would call in trying to get an appointment, somebody was writing it down on paper, then they were tapping it into some 30-year-old computer system that would then print out something that then would get walked over to someplace, that then they'd have to match—it was a mess. And so we've had to make big investments in trying to clean up that whole process. So that's what we can do without Congress.

Some things I think we can do with Congress, I've already mentioned. I think we can get criminal justice reform passed. I think that we can potentially do some work on what I just identified, the earned-income tax credit, that would help millions of people around the country who are working hard get out of poverty. And on the issue of medicine, I think that we're seeing some bipartisan work to try to bring together all the resources we have around these new medical breakthroughs that could potentially, not just affect things like cancer, but also Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, and a lot of diseases that people suffer from. It's a good story, and it's not as politically controversial as some other issues.

Now, there are some things I'd love to do, like raising the minimum wage all—for everybody. I'd love to get immigration reform passed. But I'm realistic that Congress probably will not act on some of those more controversial issues. That's where people are going to have to make a decision in this election. That's what elections are about. You've got to decide which direction America needs to go in.

Okay, let's see. These folks have been neglected, so I've got to pay them a little attention here. It's a young lady's turn. Well, you've got a beautiful dress on. Let's just call on you. There you go.

Criminal Justice Reform

Q. Mr. President, I'm Judge Trudy M. White, and I'm the district court judge here in the 19th judicial district court.

The President. Good to see you, Judge.

Q. I am also the reentry court judge for our parish. And I did notice when you spoke at the State of the Union, you made your address, that the first issue that you did address was criminal justice reform. I'd like to know, as a reentry court judge, what incentives could you offer our Governor—our new Governor and Governors across the United States, that would provide opportunities for felons who are returning as they exit the criminal justice system?

The President. Well, Judge, you probably know more than I do. [*Laughter*]

Q. Well, can my people get with your people to get those incentives down here?
[*Laughter*]

The President. Absolutely. I'll have my people call your people. [*Laughter*]

Q. All right.

The President. But I will tell you what I know I've seen with my own eyes.

I was in Camden with a fellow Federal district court judge who had taken—who had worked with the U.S. attorney there to supplement some of the reentry programs that were already there with some grants. And this judge, she's a wonderful woman, just like you. And she had this terrific lead probation officer. And together, what they had done is just made sure that anybody who got released, the day they were out, they were getting a call from the probation officer. And the probation officer was saying, all right, what do you need? Do you need clothes? What are you doing in terms of a place to stay? How are you going to think about getting your résumé together? Do you have an alarm clock? Just basic stuff. How are you going to get around?

Because so often, what happens is, these young people are getting released, and they're just dropped off in the neighborhood where they were. Oftentimes, part of the reason they got down a wrong path in the first place is the mom and dad might not have been there, or they might have moved by now, and so they're literally all alone.

And so this young man who was there, who had gone through this process, he had been arrested when he was 17 and had a record that accumulated, then arrested at 27, spent 10 years in Federal prison, was released at 37. And he really decided, I want to change my life. He had a spiritual awakening. And he started just pounding the pavement and got a job at a fast food place. And he was describing what it was like. He had been doing this about 3 months, and he still didn't have enough money for rent, and the halfway house that he was staying at, it was about to kick him out because they only have a certain number of slots, and you don't stay there long enough.

And he was saying how his old friends, the drug dealers and the gang bangers who he had used to run with, they would come up every once in a while, and he'd be sitting there in his uniform serving—flipping burgers and serving food, and they'd be talking to him: "Hey, man, any time you're ready. That—those are the only clothes you got? Those are the same shoes we saw you in 10 years ago; these are the—this is the new style." And that temptation for him was powerful.

Now, this is where a well-designed reentry program comes in, because what happened was, the judge, the probation officer, they worked with him, signed him up. The judge, unfortunately, because the program didn't have a lot of money, had to basically do a collection, dig into her own pocket. But they got the fees to have him go study at a community college to be an emergency medical technician. And he ended up graduating from this class, working for a private health firm, and then, by the time he was sitting next to me 3 or 4 years later, or maybe 5 years later, he's now working for the county as an EMT, fully trained, saving lives.

But the point is that it required intensive intervention and support and help, but what a smart investment that was. Because if we spent whatever it cost during those 1, 2, 3 years of transition to help that person get their life straight, we might have just saved ourselves another 10 years or 15 years or 20 years of incarcerating him on taxpayer expense.

So it made me realize that if we really want to be smart on crime—you've got, let's say, a maximum minimum sentence—mandatory minimum sentence of 20 years for some drug-related charge—if we reduced the amount of time that they're incarcerated, took all those savings and we took just some of that for 1, 2 years of reentry programs that are highly supervised, then we're going to get better results—safer streets, better citizens—because he's now paying taxes as an EMT instead of taking taxes as a ward of the State. Less violence. More

hope. He's got an opportunity now to be a father, as opposed to an absent presence in a child's life. That's how we rebuild communities. And that's why this is such a promising area.

And as I said, I want to make sure to acknowledge, this is an area where there's been some really powerful bipartisan, interesting coalitions. I think the evangelical community, because they have a lot of strong prison ministries, they care about this, they believe in redemption and second chances. And so they've gotten involved. And you've got libertarians who just don't like the idea of the State spending that much money on prisons. They've gotten involved. And so there's a lot of good work. And as I said, Cedric has been a leader in this process, so we've got to see if we can make this happen, all right? But "my people get with your people."

That redhead right there. It's good having hair like that. You stand out in a crowd.

Education

Q. My name is Martin Brown. I'm from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. And my question is about education. Education is one of the most important things in achieving equal opportunity. And in the past decades, we've seen desegregation orders lifted, and we've seen a resegregation in the South. Furthermore, there's huge disparities in resources for different students in different school districts and parishes. And I was wondering, what can the Federal Government do, what have you done, and what do you think should happen in the future to resolve these issues that we have been fighting for decades?

The President. Are you a teacher, by the way?

Q. I'm not. I'm a student. [*Laughter*]

The President. The—where are you going to school?

Q. LSU.

The President. Fantastic. What are you studying?

Q. Math and economics.

The President. All right. Well, maybe you'll solve this problem. [*Laughter*] Well, thanks for the question. It's a great question.

I talked about this at the town hall. In this—or in the State of the Union. This economy will become more and more knowledge based during the course of our lifetimes, our children's lifetimes, our grandchildren's lifetimes. There's no denying it. That is not going to change. And so when people talk about how the economy is changing and what—how come we can't have it the way it was back in the fifties and sixties, it used to be that if you were willing to work hard, you could drop out of high school, walk into the factory, say, "I'm ready to work," and if you showed yourself to be a hard worker, you could actually build a middle class life on the factory floor. And that's great.

But if you go into a factory today, it's full of computers and robots. And if you don't know math and you don't know science, you can't get that job on the factory floor. And by the way, because of automation and technology, when I go to a car plant—and our—we sold more cars—U.S. automakers sold more cars last year than any time in history. It has come all the way back. It has rehired hundreds of thousands of folks. We created 900,000 manufacturing jobs. But you go into a plant, and it's just quiet and clean, and probably where—if you used to have a thousand people in that plant, now you've got a hundred, just because it's so automated.

And the point is, you are not going to be able to build a middle class life in this society unless you have some education and skills that you can continually enhance and retool throughout your career. That's just—so, young people, I'm going to be honest—I'm not going to call him out, but if you're Ben Simmons, maybe you'll do fine not hitting the books, but—although he's a very fine student, I'm sure. But I—but my point is, unless you are one in a million, you'd better be working hard. You'd better be studying. And it's not going to stop.

Now, the point you made is exactly right. How do we make sure everybody gets that opportunity? Because we know what the ingredients are. We know that early childhood education makes a huge difference, the kind of start that young people get. We know that poorer kids oftentimes are not starting off in school with the same vocabulary because they haven't heard as many words, which means that we've got to train parents, not just teachers, to help get kids rolling. We know that schools that have great teachers and high standards and are creative and have the best technologies and are—that are used the right way make a difference. That high expectations make a difference. So we know all these things.

But the way that education in America has been organized is, local school districts, local control, and local property funding as the primary way of supporting schools. And that has led to big disparities in every State in the country. So the Federal Government can't get at that. What the Federal Government has done and can do is, through programs like Title I funding, we provide additional money to school districts that have a high proportion of low-income kids to try to give them more resources. The Federal Government—what I've done during my administration is worked with States and local school districts to give them incentives to adopt best practices to help develop and train teachers to more effectively teach kids to make sure that we've got high expectations and high standards.

We just—I just signed, last year, a reform of No Child Left Behind, that had led to a lot of overtesting and stress among teachers, but had not necessarily improved learning. But ultimately, it's going to be up to States and local school districts to make a decision about how much do we care about equities in funding within States. That's not something the Federal Government can force States to do.

There was a case way back in the seventies that was brought before the U.S. Supreme Court making the argument that it was unconstitutional to have this property tax-based system of funding education. And the Supreme Court said it's not unconstitutional; it's up to States to make a decision on what they want to do. Some State supreme courts have said it's unconstitutional to fund education that way.

But if you don't have States making those decisions, the Federal Government can't force them to. We can help. We can give incentives. But Federal funding for education accounts only about for 7 percent of total education funding. The main thing we can do is hold up best practices, show people this is what works, this is what doesn't, and then the people of those communities have to determine, this is what we want to do to make a real serious change. All right?

Now, one last point I'm going to make on education: Making sure folks like Che can afford college is critical. And if I had my wish about what I could get Congress to do—I mentioned a whole bunch of issues—one of them also would be the proposal I've put forward: 2 years of community college at no cost for responsible students.

Tennessee has already adopted this. Tennessee has already adopted this proposal. The city of Chicago is working to adopt it. So you've got Democrats and Republicans who have seen the

wisdom of this. If young people can go to a community college for 2 years at no cost, that means they can get a lot of credits out of the way. They can then transfer to a 4-year institution. But they've cut their costs in half. And this is an affordable proposal. I mean, we proposed paying for it essentially by closing some corporate tax loopholes and some tax breaks for hedge funds. It's enough money to actually make sure that every young person has at least that baseline. And that's part of the reason why America became an economic superpower was because, earlier than anybody else, we said we're going to give everybody universal high school education. Now, the next step is, everybody in addition to high school education should be able to get that 2 years of postsecondary education as well.

All right? So how much time do I have? I've got to check with my people. One or two more questions. Okay, this young lady right there. You can stop jumping. [Laughter] Yes, I just called on you, but do you actually have a question, or were you just jumping? [Laughter] Just—all right, where is the mike? Right here. Right here. Yes, you. I don't know why you're surprised. [Laughter] She—you raised your hand.

First Lady Michelle Obama/President's Advice for Young People

Q. Thank you so much for taking my question. First off, my name is Angana Turner. I'm a law student at Tulane, in New Orleans, in the Big Easy.

The President. There you go.

Q. I'm here with my little sister and one of my other friends from Tulane, who also went to Columbia for undergrad.

The President. Okay.

Q. First off, I just want to say that we're very inspired by you and the First Lady.

The President. That's nice.

Q. And you are our biggest inspirations. And we want to be just like you guys, so can you help us? Give us some tips? [Laughter]

The President. I'm sorry, what was the question? [Laughter]

Q. The question is, can you help us be more like you and the First Lady and give us some tips to be——

The President. Some tips?

Q. Yes.

The President. Well, look, I will say this. Michelle and I, we've been through an extraordinary journey. When we think about where we've come from, Michelle grew up on the South Side of Chicago. Her mom was a secretary. Her dad worked at the water filtration plant. Neither of them ever went to college. They lived on the second floor of her mom's sister's house, a little bungalow. She was—we were talking the other day, she was watching HGTV. She likes watching HGTV. And for those of you who don't know, Home and Garden TV. [Laughter]

And I guess there was this show about this so-called movement or trend towards tiny houses, right? So people get these little, tiny—some of them they put on—hitch on the back of their car, some of them they're already there. She said, I didn't know this was a movement

because we lived in a tiny house. [Laughter] I—we just thought that's how you live. We didn't know this was a—we were cutting edge. [Laughter]

And so her—Michelle, her brother, her dad, her mom—her dad, by the way, had multiple sclerosis, so he's going to work every day. He had to wake up an hour early to get to work because it took a long time for him to just button his shirt and get in the car and then get out of the car and then get to his job.

And in that second floor, with—and I know, because Michelle and I, right after we got married, we stayed in that same place before we were able to save up enough to buy our place. These two folks were able to raise these incredible young people, Michelle and her brother, who both ended up going to college and both had these extraordinary careers.

Now, I say all that because Michelle would be the first to say—and I certainly would be the first to say—the only reason this happened was because there were people who invested in us. So there were park programs in Chicago, public park programs, where she could be part of dance classes and her brother could be in Little League. And there were accelerated programs at her public elementary school where she had teachers who really took extra time. And then, there was a magnet school that she was able to attend and that was able to get her prepared for college. And then, she got student loans and support in order to be able to go to college and go to law school. Although, she tells the story about how her dad, he couldn't really contribute much, but he insisted on writing something, a check, to help support that college education for her and her brother because he knew what it was worth.

And so when you ask sort of the main tip I have—look, we benefited because somebody invested in us. The most important tip I would have is make sure not only are you working hard to deserve that investment, but that you're also investing in the next generation coming up behind you. If you do that—if you do that—then you're going to do great things. And your sister will do great things.

And the one other young—the one other thing I tell young people all the time: Don't worry so much about what you want to be, worry about what you want to do. Worry about the kind of person you want to be and what you want to accomplish. And the reason I say that is because a lot of times people ask me, oh, I'm interested in politics, how can I get—I say, well, let me tell you, the people who are most successful in politics and business and whatever, they don't start off saying, I want to be President or Governor; they start off by saying, I want to give people a better education, or I want to make sure that folks have jobs, or I believe in justice under the law. And they pursue a goal. They're trying to get something done.

A byproduct of that is that they may find themselves in positions of authority or power or influence. But even if you never get elected to something, if you're interested in the environment, you don't have to be the head of the EPA to make a difference. You might organize in a local community to clean up a site and plant gardens and make sure that the water is clean. And you can look back and then say, wow, what an amazing life I've had, and look at all the difference that I've made.

And I'll tell you, the same is true in business. The most successful business people—if you talk to somebody like a Bill Gates, they don't start off saying, "I want to be the second richest man in the world." They start off saying, "I really want to figure out this computer thing." "I want to make this thing work better." "I'm excited or interested in how we can solve this problem." And then, because they're so passionate about it and they've worked so hard at it, it

turns out, they make something really good, and they're—everybody else says, I want to be part of that. That, I think, is a good tip as well.

All right. I've only got time for one more question. It's a young man's turn, and he's right in front, and he looks very sharp. He's got his tie on and everything.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Q. How you doing, Mr. President?

The President. How you doing? What's your name?

Q. My name is Anthony King. And I am an 18-year-old mass communications major, and I go to the Southern University and A&M College. [*Applause*]

The President. All right, okay.

Q. Mr. President, first, I would like to say thanks for being an inspiration, because I aspire to be where you are in the next 30 years, and I know I will be there.

The President. Okay.

Q. But one of my main questions for you, sir, Mr. President—going to an HBCU institute such as Southern University, most times, I know when I go recruit off of high school students, most of the time, a lot of them say: "Oh, I don't want to go to an HBCU because I feel like if I go to an HBCU, I won't get as many opportunities as a student at a university as LSU or Tulane." So what is your take of—or advice to students like me, thousands of students like me who go to HBCUs, and us finishing the course in order to be great leaders in this society?

The President. Okay. All right. [*Applause*] See, you've got some folks voting for you already.

Well, first of all, the role of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities in producing our leadership and expanding opportunity—training doctors and teachers and lawyers and ministers who change the landscape of America—I hope most people know that story, and if not, you'd better learn it. Because it has been powerful and continues to be a powerful tradition.

And I will tell you that if you have done well at an HBCU and graduated and you go to an employer and are making the kind of presentation you make or a Morehouse man makes or a Spelman young lady makes, you will do just fine. I don't think it's true that actually people don't take that—or discount that tradition. And you will be credentialed. You'll succeed.

I do think that there's a range of challenges that HBCUs face. Some are doing great; some are having more difficulty. And some of that's good. Look—or some of it is the result of good things. We don't live in a society where African Americans are restricted in what colleges they can go to. And I want them to be able to go to an LSU or a Tulane as well as a Southern, as well as a Morehouse, as well as a Howard or a Spelman. That—so more opportunities open up. That's good.

We have been very supportive of HBCUs over the last several years. And to their credit, the previous administration had supported them as well. There are some HBCUs that are having trouble with graduation rates. And that is a source of concern. And what we've said to those HBCUs is, we want to work with you, but we don't want a situation in which young people are taking out loans, getting in debt, thinking that they're going to get a great education, and then, halfway through, they're dropping out.

Now, some of it is, those HBCUs may be taking chances on some kids that other schools might not. And that's a positive thing, and that has to be taken into account. But we also have to make sure that colleges—any college, HBCU or non-HBCU—take seriously the need to graduate that student and not load them up with debt.

Everybody needs a college education or a secondary education—an education beyond high school. Even if it's at a community college, if it's a technical school, if it's a training program, you're going to need more training as your career goes on.

But I don't want you taking out a Pell grant or a bunch of—not a Pell grant—like a Federal loan or a private loan, and you walk out with \$50,000, \$60,000, \$100,000 worth of debt, and you didn't get your degree. So we are working very hard with every school, all colleges and universities, not just to reduce costs, but also to increase graduation rates, give students a better sense as they come in—here's what it's going to take for you to finish; here's why you've got to not lollygag and not take enough credits and think going to college is about partying, because it's actually about getting your degree. And we want students and parents to be better informed about that process ahead of time.

All right, listen, you guys have been wonderful. Michelle, Sasha, Malia, Bo, Sunny, they all send their love. But I want—before we go, I want to remind you of what I said. Our system of government only works when you are involved not just by voting, but by being informed and staying involved throughout the process. Your Governor, your mayor, your Congressman, they all want to do right by you. But there are going to be challenges. There are going to be folks who want to stop progress. There are going to be people who like the status quo. There's always going to be in this democracy countervailing pressures. And if you want to see change, you've got to help make it happen.

When I ran for office in 2007, 2008, I did not say, "Yes, I can." I said——

Audience members. Yes, we can!

The President. Yes, we can, people. God bless you. Love you. Thank you, New Orleans. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:14 a.m. in the. In his remarks, he referred to Che'dra Joseph, student, McKinley Senior High School, who introduced the President; Ben Simmons, forward, Louisiana State University men's basketball team, and his father Dave Simmons; former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan; Jill T. Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden; Madeline Cox Arlea, judge, U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey; U.S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey Paul J. Fishman; Federal probation officer Kevin Egli; Essex County, NJ, resident Dquan Rosario, a former participant in Department of Justice's "ReNew" prisoner reentry program in Newark, NJ; and William H. Gates, III, founder, technology adviser, and board member, Microsoft Corp. He also referred to his mother-in-law Marian Robinson and brother-in-law Craig M. Robinson.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Baton Rouge, LA, town hall meeting and question-and-answer session at McKinley Senior High School.

Locations: Baton Rouge, LA.

Names: Arlea, Madeline Cox; Biden, Jill T.; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Duncan, Arne; Edwards, John Bel; Edwards, John Bel ; Egli, Kevin; Fishman, Paul J.; Gates, William H., III; Holden, Melvin L. "Kip"; Holden, Melvin L. "Kip"; Joseph, Che'dra; Landrieu, Mitchell J.; Obama,

Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Richmond, Cedric L.; Robinson, Craig M.; Robinson, Marian; Rosario, Dquan; Simmons, Ben; Simmons, Dave.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), treatment efforts; Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Improvement; Congress : Bipartisanship; Diseases : Cancer research, prevention, and treatment; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Poverty; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Postsecondary education :: College opportunity, expansion efforts; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges; Education : Postsecondary education :: Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Education : Postsecondary education :: Historically Black Colleges and Universities ; Education : Standards and school accountability; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Unemployment rate; Energy : Fuel efficiency standards, strengthening efforts; Energy : Greenhouse gas emissions, regulation; Energy : Solar and wind energy; Environment : Climate change; Environment : Paris Agreement; Environment : Quality and improvement efforts; Government organization and employees : Federal programs, improvement efforts; Government organization and employees : Government data and information, access and format improvements; Health and medical care : Medicare and Medicaid; Health and medical care : Research and development; Law enforcement and crime : Criminal justice system, reform efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Parole and ex-convict reintegration programs, improvement efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Sentencing requirements, reform; Louisiana : Baton Rouge :: McKinley Senior High School in Baton; Louisiana : Governor; Louisiana : President's visit; Presidency, U.S. : State of the Union Address; Small Business Administration; Taxation : Earned-income tax credit; Veterans : Homelessness; Veterans : Service and dedication; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Program improvements; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Veterans Health Administration; White House Office : Vice President.

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