

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

**Remarks Honoring the 2015 College Football Playoff National Champion
University of Alabama Crimson Tide**

March 2, 2016

The President. Hello, everybody!

Audience members. Hello! Roll Tide!

The President. Welcome to the White House. Roll Tide!

Audience members. Roll Tide!

The President. I guess for a lot of folks it's, welcome back. [*Laughter*] So let's give it up for the national champs, the Alabama Crimson Tide!

Everybody, please have a seat. We're so glad to have you here today. Now, my first question is, Coach, what took you so long? [*Laughter*] I mean, it's been 3 whole years since I last saw you. [*Laughter*]

We've got some big Alabama fans in the house, starting with your Governor, Governor Bentley. It's good to see you, Doctor. We've got some outstanding Members of Congress, members of the Alabama delegation. One of my most important people, the guy who takes care of me in the White House, Quincy Jackson. Where's Quincy? I know Q got here. There you go. The—I want to welcome University President Stuart Bell for the outstanding work he's done, and Athletic Director Bill Battle. Of course, a lot of recognition goes to somebody who's in the running to be the greatest college football coach of all time, Coach Nick Saban.

This is the fourth time I've hosted Alabama here at the White House. So, clearly, I've brought you some good luck. [*Laughter*] In fact, you could call me O'Bama. [*Laughter*] You like that? You've now won four titles in 7 years, which is historic. It's like winning a best-of-seven series, except you're playing 127 teams around the country. [*Laughter*]

The last time a team went on this kind of run was in the 1940s. Back then, folks were still wearing leather helmets. I don't feel like anybody in a leather helmet would do too well trying to tackle Derrick Henry. [*Laughter*] Of course, even with modern helmets, they didn't do too well tackling Derrick Henry. [*Laughter*] Derrick racked up an SEC record of more than 22,000 [2,200]^{*} rushing yards, which is the fifth most in major college history; 28 touchdowns—all the way to becoming the Tide's second Heisman Trophy winner. Give it up for Derrick.

Where is he? He's back there somewhere. There he is right there. I met Derrick last month at the National Prayer Breakfast, and we struck a Heisman pose together. [*Laughter*] His looked a little more intimidating than mine. [*Laughter*] But I want to point out that Derrick wasn't just there to pose for pictures with fans. He led a gathering in a powerful and humble prayer. And he prayed not just for the leaders in the room, but also for—and I'm quoting him now—"people who weren't able to eat breakfast" that day, "people who don't have clothes on their back or shoes on their feet." But you could see Derrick's character in those words. This is a kid who grew up running down dirt roads, and raised on his grandma's oxtail stew. And so he knew something about hardship and was remembering that hardship in his prayer.

^{*} White House correction.

And that's the kind of grit that he played every game with. And that's the kind of determination that defines this entire team. Anybody who watched them knows it was not just a one-man wrecking crew. You had three more all-Americans: center Ryan Kelly, defensive lineman A'Shawn Robinson, linebacker Reggie Ragland, who returned for his senior year to make good on the pledge he made to his mama that he'd get a degree. And just because he's big doesn't mean he's not scared of his mama. *[Laughter]*

Led by Reggie and A'Shawn, the Tide's smothering defense was the best in the country against the run, third best in scoring and total defense. Quarterback Jake Coker picked apart Michigan State in the semifinals, threw for 300 yards in the title game against top-ranked Clemson. And that come-from-behind victory was a good example of just how complete this team was.

We saw a 95-yard kick return touchdown by Kenyan Drake, more than 200 receiving yards from tight end O.J. Howard, a surprise fourth-quarter onside kick. *[Laughter]* That was one of the few times you ever saw Coach Saban smile on the sidelines. *[Laughter]* You know it—there was a good night if Coach Saban was smiling. *[Laughter]* Coach earned his fifth national title. And as a bonus, it gave him an incredible 5-to-1 record at Alabama against top-ranked teams.

Of course, Coach Saban's teams aren't just defined by what they do on the field. Alabama was number one in the SEC and third among Top 25 teams in graduation rates. That is something to be proud of. They also volunteered hundreds of hours in and around Tuscaloosa: at retirement homes and at hospitals and at schools. They spent some time with Wounded Warriors from Walter Reed and Fort Belvoir earlier today.

Coach Saban and his wife Terry have raised more than \$6 million through Nick's Kids foundation for charities and not-profits. And they're making plans to build their 16th Habitat for Humanity home in the 5 years since the devastating tornado in Tuscaloosa. That's one house for each of the school's 16 national titles. So, for all the other frustrated football programs out there, there's a silver lining to all these guys getting these championships because they're doing some good with it.

So I just want to say, Coach, I couldn't be prouder of you and the work that you've done. I know that the people of Alabama are extraordinarily proud of this team. Maybe the Auburn fans don't want to admit it—*[laughter]*—but everybody recognizes excellence when they see it, and nobody has had more sustained excellence as a football program at the collegiate level than the Alabama Crimson Tide.

Congratulations. And I'd like to say I'll see you next year, but we've got this thing called term limits. *[Laughter]* You can keep on going. All right?

With that, let me bring up Coach Saban to the podium.

Head Coach Nicholas L. Saban. Well, certainly, I'd like to thank Mr. President here and the White House staff for the great hospitality that—this is really special for our team and all the people who made our team special. We'd also like to thank you for your service. I think everybody here appreciates anybody who gives their lives to the service of others and the quality of our life and our great country, so we certainly appreciate that.

The President. Thanks.

Coach Saban. I'd also like to say—*[applause]*—I'd also like to congratulate our team and thank our team for a wonderful job this year. They did some things that were special in their own way. And I think the thing that was greatest about this team was they won as one. There

was tremendous togetherness, respect, trust for each other. The principles and values of the organization, they all bought in. Tremendous adversity in losing early on and having 12 straight elimination games to win the championship.

So this is a really special group. This is one of the last times that we'll together. But it's certainly one of the most special times that we've had, to come here and share this with you. And it's something that we certainly thank you for.

And our captains would like to present you again—I don't know what you——

The President. Again. [*Laughter*] I've got a lot of these jerseys.

[*At this point, the President was presented with a team jersey, helmet, and football.*]

The President. All right. Let's take a picture. You guys help me out.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:24 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Robert J. Bentley of Alabama; former University of Alabama and NFL professional football player Quincy Jackson; Gladys Henry, grandmother of University of Alabama running back Derrick Henry; Anne White, mother of University of Alabama linebacker Reggie Ragland; and Kenyan Drake, running back, University of Alabama football team.

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