

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative Town Hall Meeting in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
May 25, 2016

The President. Thank you! Thank you so much. Everybody, please have a seat. Thank you very much. Well, *xin chào*.

Audience members. *Xin chào!*

The President. Thank you, Tú, for the excellent introduction and your outstanding work to help more young people in Vietnam get an education. Give Tú a big round of applause for—*[applause]*. It's not that easy introducing the President of the United States. *[Laughter]* Also, because the podium was a little higher than her. *[Laughter]*

I want to thank everybody at the GEM Convention Center for hosting us. I want to thank the Government and the people of Vietnam for the wonderful hospitality that you've extended to me over the past 3 days. I have been deeply touched.

Wherever I travel around the world, obviously, one of my jobs is to meet with government leaders. And these meetings are important. But it means that I spend a lot of time with older people like me. There's a lot of gray hair in the room. *[Laughter]* So one of my favorite parts of the trips I take overseas is to get out of the government offices and to spend time with young people like you. It's fun. It gives me incredible optimism about the future, because all of you embody the energy and the drive that is helping to propel this region to new heights. You make me hopeful about the future of ASEAN, hopeful about the future of the world. And so that's what I want to briefly talk about before I start taking your questions.

As I think all of you know, I have a strong personal connection to this part of the world, to the Asia-Pacific and to Southeast Asia. I was born in Hawaii, spent most of my childhood in Hawaii. But I also spent time in Indonesia as a young boy. My sister was born in Jakarta. So this region helped to shape me. It is also why I really like the food. *[Laughter]* And I have to say that the food I've had since I've been here, I've been really happy with.

Now, as President, a key part of my foreign policy is to deepen our ties with countries and the peoples of Southeast Asia. And we've done that. We've deepened the ties with our allies and our partners. We've engaged more with institutions like ASEAN. We're pursuing the Trans-Pacific Partnership to grow our economies and to support jobs in our countries. Together, we're promoting peace and encouraging sustainable development. We're protecting our environment and trying to meet shared challenges like climate change.

But government and businesses are only part of the equation. If we're going to meet all of these challenges, we also have to build strong relationships between our people and especially between young people like you and young people in other ASEAN countries.

Keep in mind that here in Vietnam, two-thirds of you were born after 1975. As I often say to young Americans back home, your generation can look at the world with fresh eyes, without some of the old notions, the old habits of a previous generation. And that gives you the perspective and the power not just to help to grow Vietnam, but also to help shape the world.

Thanks to technology and social media, you're the most connected generation in history. I see it in my daughters, who are always on the phone—*[laughter]*—and they have to teach me

how to use the phone. [Laughter] More than 30 million people in Vietnam, one-third of the population, are on Facebook—just on Facebook. You're posting selfies. [Laughter] I know. I was in the gym this morning; people were trying to take selfies. [Laughter] You're streaming the latest Sơn Tùng M-TP hit. [Applause] Right? [Laughter] But you're also exchanging ideas and learning from each other.

And so this gives you tremendous power. And we need your passion and energy and talents to tackle some of our biggest global challenges, whether it's reducing poverty, to advancing equality for women and girls, to fighting climate change.

Now, even in this digital age, as Tú pointed out, change doesn't happen overnight. It requires that you stay active and involved over the long term. And it requires you to develop some practical tools. And that's why, 3 years ago, I launched the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, or YSEALI. And the goal is to empower young people like you with the skills and the resources and the networks that you need to turn your ideas into action.

Since we started this, the YSEALI network has grown to more than 67,000 members across all 10 ASEAN countries, including over 13,000 here in Vietnam alone. And we've welcomed more than 350 YSEALI Fellows to the United States, including some of you, with more than 200 coming in the next 6 months.

So a lot of what we do in YSEALI is rooted in the power and importance of education. That's why nearly 19,000 Vietnamese students studying in the United States right now are helping to bring back the kinds of skills and talents that Vietnam will need to continue to grow and develop. It's why, on this visit, we announced a new partnership between American universities like Arizona State and Vietnamese universities to boost training in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine. It's why we announced that, for the first time, the Peace Corps will be coming to Vietnam, with a focus on teaching English.

And it's why we announced that we're moving ahead this fall with Fulbright University Vietnam, right here in Ho Chi Minh City, the country's first nonprofit, independent university. And the goal is to make sure that Vietnamese students, no matter what their background, has access to a world-class education that's rooted in Vietnam's rich culture and fueled by the free exchange of ideas.

And I want to thank Senator—former Senator Bob Kerrey, who is here, who's been one of the key people to help lead this effort. Thank you very much, Bob.

So all these efforts reflect our belief in you: in your ability to keep moving Vietnam forward. And there are some incredible young people who are here who are great examples of the incredible talent and drive of young people in Vietnam today. For example, I see Vietnam's promise in Ngân Đăng. Where's Ngân? Somewhere. There you are right there.

So, I had a chance to meet Ngân when I welcomed our YSEALI Fellows to the White House. She started as a volunteer—she started a volunteer group to work with street children and orphans and people with physical disabilities right here in Ho Chi Minh City. So far, they've recruited some 450 volunteers, delivered over 7,000 hours of mentoring, built 5 libraries in 2 cities. And that's just one example of the incredible work that's being done by young people right here in Vietnam. We're very proud of you. Thank you. Thank you, Ngân.

Couple other people I want to point out. We've got Loc Le Xuan. Where's Loc?

Q. [Inaudible]

The President. There he is right there. So Loc teaches at Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam National University. He's a researcher at the Pasteur Institute. His dream is to go back to his hometown and open a medical center so he can deliver quality, affordable health care. He also helped start Give2Give, which works with YSEALI members across ASEAN to improve their skills and build stronger networks. So we're very excited about the work that you're doing, Loc. Thank you so much.

I'm going to close with one more story just to give you an example of the incredible work that's being done by young people. Elizabeth Phu is here, I think, and was born here. In the aftermath of the war, Liz and her family became refugees; Liz was barely 4 years old. They packed themselves into a boat; they began a dangerous journey. Pirates ransacked their boat. But they made it to a refugee camp in Malaysia and, eventually, in 1979, to America. With just \$20 in their pocket, Liz's parents started to build a new life in California. They taught their children about the importance of education. And after years of studying and hard work, Liz, a proud Vietnamese American, ended up becoming one of my top advisers on Asia in the White House. And we've relied on her for all kinds of incredible policy work that we've done over the last several years.

So Tú, Ngân, Loc, Liz, so many of you—you're already showing that you can change the world to reflect our best values. You're showing that with determination and commitment and optimism and hard work, anything is possible. And that's why I'm so hopeful about the future between the United States and Vietnam; that our relationship will continue to grow deeper and stronger. But I'm also optimistic that you're going to be able to change the region and the world in so many positive ways. So as the great Trần Lập sang, "the path to glory days is getting closer." So *cám ơn*.

And so, with that, now is the time for me to start taking some questions. I don't know if you've been briefed, but we have microphones in the audience. I'm going to just call on people, and I'm going to go boy, girl, boy, girl so it's fair. [Laughter] If you can keep your questions relatively short so that we can get as many questions as possible. And introduce yourself before you ask the question so we know who you are. Okay? So, I'm going to start right here. Yes. And we've got a microphone coming.

Entrepreneurship/Trans-Pacific Partnership/Vietnam-U.S. Trade

Q. Okay, good morning, Mr. President. My name is—[inaudible]—from Ho Chi Minh City. And we are a hundred-percent Vietnamese-owned company that produce high-end plastic products and components in the supporting industries. And today it is our honor to meet with the President, and we have an ambition to request for your help. And that is, we would like to be given opportunities to approach the leading enterprises in the United States, especially in the sector of consumer electronics, automotive, and airline industries, and other plastic-related products for supporting industries. And so, under your help, we could be able to join and be the supplier in the direct supply chain. And we are committed to share the values of integrity and accountability. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Well, thank you so much. I—as you know, one of the things that we're really emphasizing is entrepreneurship, the idea of people starting their own businesses, selling goods across borders, creating jobs, creating great products and services. And yesterday I had a chance to meet with a number of young Vietnamese entrepreneurs who are already starting to create digital platforms to sell goods, not just in Vietnam, but also overseas.

This is one of the reasons why we're pushing very hard for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, TPP. Because what that does is, it reduces the barriers between countries for selling their goods and services. It gives opportunities not just to big companies, but also to small companies to enter into the global supply chain. It raises labor standards and environmental standards so that all countries are working on a level playing field. And if we can get that done—and the goal is, I think, to try to complete TPP before the end of this year—then that will open up a lot of opportunities and create great confidence among investors here in Vietnam and U.S. companies who are interested in working with young people like you who may have a great idea.

Now, my general rule in all this is not to actually broker deals and sign contracts. [Laughter] That's somebody else's job. My job is to make sure that we have the kinds of rules in place that make it easier for businesses to get to know each other, to meet. And one of the things that we're doing with the Vietnamese Government is constantly looking for opportunities for trade missions, for businesses to come and learn about what's going on.

And so what we'll do is, we'll make sure that, through the consulate or through the Embassy, if and when we have U.S. businesses who are coming here to Vietnam and are interested in meeting young entrepreneurs, that you'll have an opportunity potentially to present your ideas and see if you can make a deal. All right? Good luck.

All right, it's a gentleman's turn. All right, this guy, he looks very happy, right here. [Laughter]

The President's Leadership Advice

Q. Hello, sir.

The President. Hello!

Q. Yes, my name is—[inaudible]. I'm a student in Vietnam National University. I have two questions for you. The first one is that you are a very great leader, and we are young leaders. Do you have any advice that how can we be great like you?

The President. Oh, wow. [Laughter] Okay. Now, what's the second question?

Q. Yes, and the second question is, we are young leaders. Do you have any suggestions that how can we have to strengthen the relationship between Vietnam and the America?

The President. Okay, well, the—well, first of all, let me tell you, that when I was your age, I was not as well organized and well educated and sophisticated as all of you. When I was young, I fooled around a lot. [Laughter] I didn't always take my studies very seriously. And I was more interested in basketball and girls. [Laughter] And I wasn't always that serious. So you're already way ahead of me. You're doing good.

Whenever I meet with young people and they ask me this question, my most important advice is to find something that you care deeply about, find something that excites you, and put all your energy and effort into it, because the path for everybody is different. Some people are very passionate about education. Some people are very passionate about medicine. Some people are passionate about business.

And so there's no one path to ending up being a leader. People sometimes think that to be a leader you have to be a great—you have to make great speeches or you have to be in politics. But there are a lot of ways to lead. Some of the greatest leaders are people who are behind the scenes. So, for example, in the United States, during the civil rights movement that helped to

create opportunities for people like me—because at the time, African Americans couldn't fully participate in society—everybody here has heard of Martin Luther King, but there were all these young organizers, your age—people like Bob Moses and John Lewis, and others who were helping go into poor communities and registering voters and getting them active and getting them involved. And they were enormous leaders, amazing leaders, even though they never made big speeches in front of big crowds.

But you have to feel passionate about something. And one of the things that I always tell young people is, don't worry so much about what you want to be, worry more about what you want to do. And what I mean by that is, if you are passionate about your work, then naturally, over time, you are going to rise, and people will admire and respect what you've done. But if all you're thinking about is, I want to be a member of the National Assembly, or I want to be very rich, or I want to be this or I want to be that, then you pay less attention to the actual work in front of you.

And most of the people I meet who are very successful, in any field, are people who just love their work. So Bill Gates, who started Microsoft, he didn't start off thinking, I want to be a multibillionaire. He started off thinking, I really like computers, and I want to find out how I can create really neat software.

And people—I didn't start off thinking I wanted to be President of the United States. When I finally stopped fooling around and I wanted to get serious, what I decided was that I wanted to help people in low-income communities, poor people, have opportunity. And so I went to work in poor neighborhoods in Chicago. And because I was interested in the work, I started asking questions: Okay, how can I get more education dollars for these communities? How can I get better housing built in these communities? And that's when I became more aware of how politics worked. And I started asking questions about how could I have more influence and how could I build organizations that could potentially deliver the things that I was interested in. And that's what led me into politics. But I didn't start off saying I want to be President. I started off saying I wanted to help these people.

So I—so that's my most important advice. Decide what it is that you care about deeply, and then put everything you have into doing that. If you're interested in social media and you want to start a company, then focus on that. And if you're interested in health care for people in villages around Vietnam, focus on that. And if you get good at that, naturally, you'll end up being a leader, and you'll have opportunities to do great things in the future.

All right? Good. Okay, it's a young lady's turn. Here you go, since you got such a—when you've got the paddy hat with the "Thank you, Obama"—see, that was good organizing. So go ahead. *[Laughter]* She came prepared.

Vietnam's Son Doòng Cave/UNESCO World Heritage Site Designation Process/Climate Change

Q. I am. So thank you very much, President, for your very inspiring speeches. My name is—*[inaudible]*. I'm from an organization called Save Son Doòng. So yesterday I literally—*[applause]*—thank you. I literally burst to tears when you mentioned preserving the cave for our children, our grandchildren. That is something that we have been trying to do for the past few years. So my questions for you is that, because Son Doòng is not just belong to Vietnam, it is a world heritage, how would you, an American leader, a global citizen, preserve it? And you also mentioned that you would like to get back to Vietnam. If you have a chance to visit Son

Doòng, would you like to do it on foot by trekking, or would you take a cable car, if unfortunately, there's one?

The President. Well——

Q. And also I have a gift——

The President. You've got a shirt for me.

Q. ——that, it would be my honor if you accept this gift.

The President. Well, that's a beautiful shirt, so——

Q. Thank you so much.

The President. The—well, first of all, I definitely want to go visit the next time I come. And I'm a pretty healthy guy, so I can go on foot. I'm—it's, uh—how long is it? [*Laughter*]

Q. It can take 7 days.

The President. Seven days. [*Laughter*] Okay, I'm good. All right. [*Laughter*] I can do that. Is—are there places to get something to eat along the way—[*laughter*]—or do I have to carry my own food?

Q. We will carry it for you.

The President. Oh, well, no, I'll carry it myself. I'm—yes.

The—well, look, I think that the possible designation of a world heritage site is a complex process. It would involve I think working with the Government of Vietnam, with existing organizations that designate world heritage sites. We'll be happy to work with your organization, with the Vietnamese Government, and others about the possibilities of doing that.

But I do think that one of the great things about your generation is, is that you're already much more conscious about the environment than my generation was or previous generations were. And that's really important not only to preserve beautiful sites in our countries, but also because economic development and the well-being and the health of your people and everyone around the world is going to depend on how we deal with some of these environmental issues.

Now, to some degree, this is not fair, I think it's important to note, because if you think about Western industrial development, before we knew anything about climate change, they used enormous amounts of carbon energy, and we in the United States have a huge carbon footprint and for 100 years or 150 years were helping to warm the planet. So it's not entirely fair, then, to say to countries that are developing now, well, you have to stop because of climate change.

But the problem is, is that if a country like Vietnam or China or India took the same development path that the West did, we're all going to be under water, because the climate is going to warm up so quickly and the climate patterns are going to change, that, in fact, the terrible consequences could actually impede development rather than advance development.

That's why we had this agreement in Paris to have all countries join together to deal with climate change. And what it says is, is that each country at different stages of development has different obligations. The United States, we have to do more. Countries like China that are large have to do more. But everybody has to do something. And we all have an obligation then also to help developing countries find new paths for energy and development that are

environmentally friendly, developing clean energy strategies that can leapfrog over the old, dirty industries and immediately go to the clean industries.

Now, the good news is, I think that can happen. Because if you think about—everybody here has a cell phone, I assume, right? Everybody has a smartphone? Yes, you do. Of course, you do. [*Laughter*] Well, in many countries like Vietnam, you didn't start off with a lot of phone towers and digging and laying telephone lines under the ground. You've leapfrogged the old technologies and immediately went to a cellular technology and a wireless technology. Well, the same that we're—same thing that we're doing with communications, that's what we need to do with energy.

And so, instead of going through the same energy usage in developing and providing electricity and power, we need to start immediately finding cleaner energy sources, which can create jobs and businesses and opportunities all throughout this region. And I'm very excited about the possibilities of doing that.

So we have to think about beautiful areas that need to be preserved. But we also have to recognize that no matter how well we preserve one or two areas in each country, if the overall climate patterns change radically, then we're all going to be in a really difficult situation. And you're already starting to see the effects of climate change here in Vietnam. I think this country is going to be one of the most affected. And in someplace like the Mekong Delta, you have drought on the one hand, but you also have saline intrusion on the other hand. And that could have a huge impact on Vietnam's ability to feed its people, on fishermen, on farmers. And it could be a really, really big problem if we don't do something about it. So it's going to be up to you to start, and I'm going to want to partner with you to make that happen.

Thanks for the T-shirt also.

All right, so let's see. Oh, you've got flags and everything. [*Laughter*] Gentleman right here.

The President's Young Leaders Initiatives/Post-Presidency Plans

Q. Good morning, President Obama. My name is Tấn Phát. I'm from SIT Study Abroad, which brings American students to come to Vietnam to learn. So my question is that, as you said earlier, YSEALI is your initiative, and I know that you want to leave the White House very soon, so I'm wondering, when you leave, how you—do you come up any plans to handle for the next President to maintain this very good idea? Thanks.

The President. Well, it's a great question. Yes, this is something that we're already planning. Our expectation is, is that the next President will want to continue the incredible work that we've done with the YSEALI. It's not just, by the way, young people in Southeast Asia that we're doing this with. We have a Young African Leaders program that involves young people from 50 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. We have a Latin American version that brings young people together. And at some point, we're going to bring key leaders from each of these areas so that they can start learning from each other.

And our hope is, is that the State Department will continue this program. But one of the things—people always ask me, what am I going to do after I leave the Presidency. Because I'm still relatively young—not compared to you, but I'm—compared to other Presidents, I'm pretty young. And I don't know everything that I'm going to do, but the one thing I do know I will continue to work on is developing young leaders in the United States and around the world. So, in addition to my hope that the next President continues the program through the State

Department, I'll make sure that through my philanthropy and my own work that we're continuing to bring young people together so that we can start building the kind of talent that knows each other and is networked and is connected and is learning from each other. Because that's what it's going to take for countries in the future to be able to solve these big problems.

If you ask me what I'm most excited about in terms of my legacy 20 years from now, I would feel really good if I see 10,000 or 20,000 or 50,000 young leaders who are now taking over governments and businesses and nonprofit organizations, and they now know each other from different countries, and they've worked together, and they've built trust, and they've built relationships. And if I can help facilitate that, that would be something that I'd be very proud of. So you can guarantee that I'll continue to work on this. Good.

All right, yes, right here. Oops. Is it working? Mike ready? Here we go, switch it up.

Q. My name is—[inaudible]—hello, hello?

The President. Uh-oh. I might—you might end up needing to use mine.

Q. Oh! Hello?

The President. All right, it's working?

Q. Yes.

The President. Oh, okay, there you go. Just in time. [Laughter]

Q. Good morning, President Obama. I'm a YSEALI Academy Fellow, 2015, in the University of Montana.

The President. Excellent. How do you like Montana?

Q. It's not cold, it's too hot.

The President. Oh, it's very cold. You just haven't—what, have you gone through January yet?

Q. Summer batch, luckily.

The President. When did you get there?

Q. June to August.

The President. Well it's not—yes, it's not cold in June and August. [Laughter]

Q. Luckily.

The President. You just went there at the right time. But it's a beautiful State, isn't it?

Q. Yes. I love it.

The President. Yes, it's lovely. You—some gorgeous mountains. Have you learned how to fish?

Q. Yes.

The President. Fly fishing?

Q. Yes. I went rafting as well.

The President. And rafting also.

Q. Yes.

The President. That's great.

Vietnam's Mekong Delta/Association of Southeast Asian Nations/President's Post-Presidency Plans/U.S. Politics

Q. So my topic is about global environmental issues. So I'm going to make my professor in Montana happy by asking a question related to climate change—

The President. Good.

Q. —and environment. So, in the Mekong region, there a lot of hydropower dams are being built on the mainstream of the Mekong. And this problem is not easy because we have big countries and small countries related to the hydropower building in the area.

The President. Yes.

Q. So do you have any suggestions for all the governments of the Mekong region to get together and sustain the interests, both economic and environmental interests in region?

And just one more question.

The President. Yes. [*Laughter*]

Q. It's like a very typical job interview. Where do you find yourself in 5 years? [*Laughter*] Because I think it's a very interesting period when Malia probably graduates from Harvard University and you still struggle with computer or iPhone 10. [*Laughter*] And also that's when probably maybe Mr. Sanders or Mr.—Mrs. Hillary or maybe Mr. Trump finish his—their President's term. So what—where do you find yourself and the world in 5 years? Thank you.

The President. Well, the—first of all, on the Mekong Delta, we actually, through ASEAN and the East Asia Summit, created a Mekong Delta working group with all the countries that are impacted. And we're, through our State Department and various programs, we're working to help them plan and create sustainable development across countries.

Now, you're right that one of the big challenges is how do you deal with water resources and the building of dams and hydropower. And that's not a problem that's unique to the Mekong Delta. You see this in a lot of parts of the world where big projects get built with unintended consequences, and it has severe effects downstream. And the results in some cases have been not great. And have had significant environmental degradation because of lack of planning.

So what we're going to try to do is to continue to work with the affected countries and to provide them with the technical assistance and the evaluations of what needs to happen, what they need to watch out for. And hopefully, that information is power. That information then can be used to negotiate on an international level to try to prevent some projects that might have very bad effects.

But one of the things that we've seen in ASEAN is, when small countries band together as a unit, then their power is magnified. That's true on economic issues; that's true on environmental issues; that's true on security issues. And we've seen, since I was President—since I became President, I think, a greater willingness of the ASEAN countries to do more substantive work. It used to be, I think, ASEAN would meet, and everybody was very polite, but you didn't always have, I think, as many specific, concrete plans of action. And now you're starting to see, I think, ASEAN being used as a much more effective tool for policymaking, and the environmental area is a critical place where that can happen.

In terms of where I see the world in 5 years, some of you are going to be doing great things, and I'll be very excited to find out what you're doing. I suspect that I'm going to be doing the kinds of work that I'm—that I've been doing all my life. I'll be doing organizing work and involved in public policy issues. But I just won't be doing it in a formal way through elected office. I'll be like a community organizer, except a little more famous than I used to be. [Laughter]

In terms of American politics, I tend to be positive and optimistic about American politics. I think sometimes other countries look at our election system, and we think—and people think, wow, what a mess. [Laughter] But usually, we end up doing okay because the American people are good people, and they have—as I hope you've met, you've gotten to know people in Montana—the American people are generous, and they're decent, and they're hard working. And sometimes, our politics doesn't express all the goodness of the people. But usually, eventually, the voters make good decisions, and democracy works.

So I'm optimistic that we'll get through this period, and of—one of the great things about the United States is that even when it makes mistakes, I think it's able to adjust and recognize our mistakes, and then we correct course and take different steps. So things are going to be okay, I promise. [Laughter]

Go ahead. All right. Let's see, all right. This guy, he has two hands up and a symbol. I don't know what that means, but—[laughter]. I don't know, it was interesting, so we'll call on him. Maybe he'll explain it.

Q. Yes, hello.

The President. Hello.

Q. Mr. President. I want to say that you are so handsome. [Laughter]

The President. Oh, okay! [Laughter] The—well that's—you can just stop there if you want. [Laughter]

Q. Okay. The two questions of me—now turn a little bit into business.

The President. Business.

Q. Yes. You told us just find something you are completely care about, and my biggest care about is human resource management or talent management. And now——

The President. Hotel management, did you say?

Q. Talent management.

The President. Talent management.

Q. Yes.

The President. Got it.

Entrepreneurship/Vietnam's Business Environment

Q. Okay, now we are joining AEC and TPP. This mean that, beside opportunities, we have many challenges. The more challenge that—they have many, like, overseas companies, they want to attract Vietnamese talent. And can you give, like, a suggestion? We cannot just base on the patriotism of them to force them to stay in Vietnam. They have a chance to seek for their, like, own development. So how can Vietnamese firms and Vietnam Government can have them stay and contribute to Vietnam? And one more question about entrepreneurship. In the—

[inaudible]—there is more—like startup company who have a lack of human resource because they move from other countries. And how can the young entrepreneurs can deal with it? Can you give me any suggestion? Thank you.

The President. Okay. The—well, look, if I understood your question—so TPP, you've got these new opportunities. Companies are going to be interested in coming into Vietnam as investors or as business partners with existing Vietnamese companies. And I think that any good foreign company is going to want to partner with a Vietnamese partner who understands the culture, understands the system. They're going to be looking for young talent. And if you start a company that helps to identify talent and is then helping those who are doing business here to recruit, I'm sure that that will go very well.

This is not an area that I'm an expert on, but one of the things that we're seeing is, through organizations like—or companies like LinkedIn—I don't know if you've heard of that—based out of Silicon Valley. But they've been able to build these digital platforms where people are continually updating their résumés and providing their information. And that becomes a powerful tool then for human resource people who are recruiting. And it's conceivable that you could do something equivalent to that in Vietnam in preparation for the ongoing growth and development of businesses here in Vietnam.

So that's a great idea. Good luck.

I—in terms of the question on entrepreneurship, I wasn't clear exactly what your question was. Was it that you think talented Vietnamese are going someplace else instead of staying here? Is that right?

Q. How can Vietnamese firms and Government have policies to keep, to retain the talent?

The President. To retain talent.

Q. Yes.

The President. So you're worried about a brain drain where—

Q. Yes, brain drain, yes.

The President. —where young Vietnamese, they get an education, and suddenly, they're being recruited to go to Australia or to go to Singapore or to go the United States or China, and then you don't have enough entrepreneurs here.

Well, look, I think the best way to retain talent in any country is to make sure that talent is rewarded. And the way to reward talent is to have strong rule of law; to have a good education system; to have the ability to start a business relatively easily; to make sure that government policies, when it comes to taxation or when it comes to building infrastructure, that those policies are good ones, and so that people feel as if, by staying here, this is the best place for them to make it.

People usually don't want to leave their home countries if they feel like they've got opportunity in their home countries. Usually, they end up leaving if they feel as if they're stuck in their home countries. And so one of the benefits of the Trans-Pacific Partnership is, it's going to lead to the Government taking a series of legal reforms that I actually think will create a better business environment. And it means for young talented people like you, there's no reason to leave because you're going to be in a position to do great things here in Vietnam.

The places that, I think, lose talent where there's a lot of corruption—so no matter how hard you work, you always have to pay a bribe or you've got to hire somebody's cousin to get a license to do something—that ends up frustrating people. I think people feel frustrated if there's not a good education system, because the truth is, is that not only do you need a good education, but then if you want to start a business, you've got to be able to hire people who also have a good education. And so you've got to count on the schools training people properly. You want to have good infrastructure, proper roads, and you want to have proper wireless service in order for you to do business in the 21st century.

Environmental issues are increasingly important. I mean, there are some countries where it's actually hard to recruit people because it's hard to breathe in some of the big cities. Now, you don't want to raise your kids—no job is so important that it's okay if your children have asthma and they can't breathe. Right? And so, interestingly enough, if you want the best talent today, you have to pay attention to quality-of-life issues and making sure that people can have clean air and clean water and they're not being exposed to pollution that may cause cancer and things like that.

So those are all policies that end up making a difference in retaining talent in any country, in any city, in any community.

Good. All right. Okay, well, we've got these young ladies—well, they've got a flag. So since you brought a flag, that's a—I'm very impressed with your planning. [Laughter] Those of you with the hats, the flags, it's good organizing.

Human Trafficking/Trans-Pacific Partnership

Q. Hi, my name is Christina, and I'm with my colleague Hoa and some of our other colleagues here. And we work for an American anti-human trafficking NGO called Pacific Links Foundation. So we fight against human trafficking here in Vietnam. With Vietnam emerging as an important player in the TPP, many companies will start to shift their production and factories to Vietnam, which will create a new mobile workforce. With that comes the unfortunate opportunity for human traffickers and labor brokers to take advantage of these workers, such as promising—like, creating false promises or tricking them or even coercing them into moving across borders and therefore forcing them into a situation of being trafficked. What is the United States Federal Government doing to prevent human trafficking in the global supply chain?

The President. Well, first of all, this is a——

Q. Before you answer, can I ask you a question? Yes.

The President. I'm sorry, I didn't know——

Q. Yes, because we come—we had the same comment——

The President. You're a tag team, I've got you.

Q. Yes, yes. Okay. Thank you. So, dear President, what should I ask you for now? Because, before I came here—two, couple months, I asked many when I—whenever I met someone, I also asked what should—what do you want to ask if you can meet the President? And a lot of questions and a lot of comments. And for now, I forgot everything. But this flag is remind me about a Kenya friend—she's lawyer and very smart, and she said that—we see you, so you go meet, because she said that I say—should he come to Kenya—President, and she said I do. If you can ask, please, Obama about human trafficking prevention strategy. Thank you. Yes.

The President. Okay. All right. Well, the—let me see. You lost my train of thought. [Laughter] No, look, the issue of human trafficking is something that we have made a top priority in our State Department and the United States Government. So we have an entire set of policies designed specifically to work with countries to prevent human trafficking. And we've actually begun making progress in improved enforcement, in improved law enforcement coordination. NGOs have been very helpful as partners with us in identifying what are some of the paths where people are being exploited.

With respect to TPP, it's precisely because we put such an emphasis on this that we actually have provisions in TPP designed to prevent human trafficking. And it's actually given us leverage to work with some countries to say, if you want to be part of TPP, you have to have a better system in place to prevent human trafficking, including some of these cross-border migrant worker situations.

So, when I was in Malaysia, for example, meeting with Prime Minister Najib, one of the most important topics as we were negotiating TPP was, how could we do more work in order to protect people who are being brought in—whether it's working at the palm oil plants or what have you—so that there was better tracking, better enforcement, better protections for people? And that's in the actual agreement.

Now, I think that an agreement on paper is never enough, so there have to be systems in place to monitor what's taking place. And these human traffickers are very clever. They're like drug traffickers. If you cut off one path, then try to take another path, and they're always looking to exploit people who are desperate. So this is why this can't just be a government initiative or a law enforcement initiative. It has to be something where we're partnering with NGOs, human rights organizations. We have to be very nimble in how we adapt to changing circumstances so that we're constantly shutting down some of these pathways.

Having—the last thing I'll say, though, is one of the best ways for us to reduce human trafficking is to provide more opportunity for people, particularly in rural areas throughout Southeast Asia. And if we can give young people in villages a chance to make a living and get an education, and if we particularly focus on women and girls—because a lot of human trafficking results from the fact that girls are not given the same educational opportunities as boys, and as a consequence, they find themselves in very desperate situations—the more we can change those dynamics, that will also reduce the ability of people to exploit people who have no hope or think that they have to leave their village and are vulnerable then to claims that if you just come with us you're going to be able to get a great job and everything is going to be okay. And then, by the time they get there, they suddenly find themselves trapped in a very bad situation.

So congratulations on the good work you're doing. I'm very proud of you. Thank you.

All right, how much more time we got? We've only got time for one more question? All right, I'll take two more questions. But it's a guy's turn first. I'm going to call on this guy just because I kind of like the little—the yellow in his hair there. All right, I like the style. [Laughter] There you go.

The President's Childhood/U.S. Declaration of Independence

Q. Hi, thank you. My name is—[inaudible]—and I'm a filmmaker, so I'm very interested in personal stories. And as you said before, when you are young, you're like—love fooling around. And I read on Internet—I'm not sure if true or not—that you also like smoking weed and things like that. [Laughter] So I wonder—

The President. I don't know if that's true, but—[laughter].

Q. I wonder what makes you from that guy, become a guy who care about the society. Because, like, a lot of places, many—I think many young Vietnamese people, they still love, like fooling around—

The President. Yes.

Q. —and they don't really care about the society. But this must be something that makes you become this person. So thank you.

The President. Well, it's a good question. I wrote a book about this called, "Dreams From My Father." I think it was translated into Vietnamese, but I don't know if it's still in bookstores near you. You know, you never know exactly why something inside you clicks and you decide to take a different path.

I think, for me, when I was young—because my—I didn't know my father, and I didn't grow up with him in the house—my grandmother's—or my grandparents and my mother raised me. And they were very loving and very generous. But I think I rebelled in part because I felt that something was missing. And as I got older, I realized that instead of worrying about the father who wasn't there, I should worry more about what can I do and take more responsibility for my own life.

And that led me to start studying more, and it led me to start thinking about social issues more. I grew up. And why it took me until I was 19 or 20, where some other people like many of you have always been very organized—like this young lady, I'll bet she's always been, like, very focused—you don't know why.

And—but I think your point about stories is good. One of the things that I've learned about being a leader is, sometimes, we think people are motivated only by money or they're only motivated by power or these very concrete incentives.

But people are also inspired by stories. The stories they tell themselves about what's important and about their lives and about their country and about their communities. And I think if you want to—in whatever field you're in, whether it's business or politics or nonprofit work, it's worthwhile to listen to other people and ask them questions about the stories that are important to them, because oftentimes, you'll find their motivations. And when we come together to do important things, it's usually because we've told a good story about why we should be working together.

You think about the United States of America. We have a really good story called the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal; that we're endowed with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." That's a wonderful story. There's no—when the Declaration was made, there really was no United States. It was just a good story that they were telling about what could be. And then, people were attracted to that story. And it led to independence, and it led to immigrants from around the world who wanted that vision for themselves. It led Ho Chi Minh to adapt it when Vietnam was trying to declare independence. It inspired movements around the world.

So yes, the stories we tell each other are very, very important. And good luck on making your movies. Don't believe everything you read on the Internet though. [Laughter]

Okay, last question. All right, oh, this young lady, she stood up, and she's, like, "hey!" I couldn't say no to her. She had her hand up. I thought she was going to hit me if I didn't call on her. *[Laughter]* Go ahead. I'm teasing.

Importance of the Arts/Freedom of Expression

Musician Hàng Lâm Trang "Suboi" Anh. Hi. So I am a rapper here——

The President. Oh, you're a rapper?

Suboi. ——in Saigon, Vietnam.

The President. Oh, yes?

Suboi. So you have spoken a lot about environment and, like, politics and economic progress of Vietnam. But as an artist, we have a lot to say.

The President. Okay.

Suboi. We have a message to send. I want to know how important it is for a nation to really help and promote their art and culture, and help it—to help its nation in the future.

The President. Okay. The—before I answer your question, why don't you give me a little rap? Let's see. Let's what you've got. Come on. Do you need like a little beat? Badoo, badoo. *[Laughter]*

Suboi. Yes, I do, actually. *[Laughter]*

The President. No, no, go ahead. Come on.

Suboi. Vietnamese or English?

The President. In Vietnamese, of course.

Suboi. In Vietnamese?

The President. I mean, I—the—I won't know what it means, but——

Q. Okay.

The President. ——just a short version, because I've got to get going. Go ahead. *[Laughter]*

[At this point, Suboi performed a rap in Vietnamese, and no translation was provided.]

Suboi. My name is Suboi, by the way.

The President. Well, that was good. See there, that was pretty good. What were you just rapping? What was your verse there?

Suboi. I was just talking about some people having a lot of money, having big houses, but actually, are they really happy?

The President. Hmm. Okay.

Suboi. So, yes, a lot of things that people look at us and see, like, different things and something they assume, or a lot of, like, stereotypes, like, you know, like, me, a Asian rapper, it's like looking at a cute girl. People don't know——

The President. Is that what they think? *[Laughter]*

Suboi. But for Vietnamese people, it's different. They think rapping is not, like, for women.

The President. Ahh. Well, that's true in the United States too. [*Laughter*] No, no, what—I just mean that there's always been sort of sexism and gender stereotypes in the music industry like every other part of life.

But to answer your question, look, the arts are important. Artistic expression is important. It's what I was just saying to the filmmaker about stories that we tell each other. Music, poetry, representations of life as it is and how it should be—those are the things that inspire people. Life is a combination of very practical things. Right? You've got to eat, you've got to work, you've got to build roads and make sure that the—some dam isn't ruining a community. But it's also the spirit that we have inside of us and how is that expressed and what are our vision and what are our ideals for the future and how do we want to live together and how do we treat each other.

And one of the most important things about art is, it teaches you to not just think about yourself, but it puts you in the head of other people. So you start realizing somebody else's pain or somebody else's hopes. And you start realizing that we have more in common. So if I read a novel by somebody in Africa, now, suddenly, I understand more about how we are similar. And if I listen to a Vietnamese rap, and it connects to the things that I'm feeling, now I feel closer to a country on the other side of the world. And that's how we build understanding. And that's how we end up being able to work together and plan together and build a better future together.

So look, let's be honest. Sometimes, art is dangerous though. And that's why governments sometimes get nervous about art. But one of the things that I truly believe is that if you try to suppress the arts, then I think you're suppressing the deepest dreams and aspirations of a people.

And one of the great things about the United States, for all of our flaws in a lot of areas is, is that we do give much greater expression to our culture. And something like rap, which started off as an expression of poor African Americans, now, suddenly has become a global phenomenon and is really the art form of most young people around the world today in a lot of ways. And imagine if, at the time when rap was starting off, that our Government had said, no, because some of the things you say are offensive, or some of the lyrics are rude, or you're cursing too much. Then, that connection that we've seen now in hip-hop culture around the world wouldn't exist.

So you've got to let people express themselves. That's part of what a modern, 21st-century culture is all about.

All right, everybody. I'm—I've got to go, but this has been wonderful. Thank you so much. God bless you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:07 a.m. in Pollux 1 and 2 at the GEM Center. In his remarks, he referred to Ngô Thùy Ngọc Tú, cofounder and board member, Yola Institute; musician Nguyễn Thanh "Son Tùng M-TP" Tùng; White House Director for Southeast Asia, Oceania, and East Asian Security Affairs Elizabeth M. Phu and her father Frank Phu; civil rights activists Robert P. Moses and Rep. John. R. Lewis; and William H. Gates III, founder, technology adviser, and board member, Microsoft Corp. He also referred to his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng. A participant referred to Sen. Bernard Sanders, former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham

Clinton, and Donald J. Trump, chairman and president, Trump Organization, in their capacity as Presidential candidates.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, town hall and question-and-answer session in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Locations: Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Names: Anh, Hàng Lâm Trang "Suboi"; Gates, William H., III; Kerrey, Robert J.; Lewis, John R.; Moses, Robert P.; Najib Razak; Ngân, Đặng Trần Ngọc; Obama, Malia; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Phu, Elizabeth M.; Soetoro-Ng, Maya; Tú, Ngô Thùy Ngọc; Tùng, Nguyễn Thanh "Sơn Tùng M-TP"; Xuan, Loc Le.

Subjects: Africa : Young African Leaders Forum; Asia : Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); Asia : East Asia Summit; Asia : Relations with U.S.; Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Commerce, international : Environmental protection standards; Commerce, international : Labor protection standards; Developing countries : Economic growth and development; Developing countries : Food security, strengthening efforts; Developing countries : Poverty; Education : Foreign exchange programs; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: Promotion efforts; Energy : Developing countries, energy sources; Environment : Climate change; Environment : Conservation :: International promotion efforts; Environment : Water management policy, improvement efforts; Foreign policy, U.S. : Trafficking in persons, efforts to combat; Malaysia : Prime Minister; Peace Corps, U.S.; Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP); Vietnam : Economic growth and development; Vietnam : Educational exchanges with U.S.; Vietnam : President Obama's visit; Vietnam : Relations with U.S.; Vietnam : Science and technology, cooperation with U.S.; Vietnam : Trade with U.S.; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Southeast Asia, Oceania, and East Asian Security Affairs, Director; Young Leaders of the Americas Initiative, President's; Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEAKI); Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI).

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