

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks Following a Meeting on Community Policing and Criminal Justice Reform

July 13, 2016

The President. Well, we have had an excellent conversation. This group in part represents the 21st-Century Policing Task Force that I put together after Ferguson in order for us to find constructive steps that we could take that law enforcement and communities could get behind in order to make sure that we're keeping our streets safe and we are protecting and supporting police officers who are doing a very difficult job, and we can make sure that our communities are being treated fairly and that people have confidence that the law applies to everybody equally.

Thanks to Laurie Robinson and Charles Ramsey and the members of that Task Force, we came up with a set of recommendations. And the good news is, is that over the last several months since the report was issued, we have seen a lot of law enforcement officers, a lot of chiefs, a lot of departments begin to examine these recommendations and figure out how they can implement them. We've seen real progress with respect to data gathering. We've seen real progress with respect to training. We've seen progress with respect to transparency and outreach to communities.

The bad news is, as we saw so painfully this week, that this is a really hard job. We're not there yet. We're not even close to being there yet: where we want to be. We're not at a point yet where communities of color feel confident that their police departments are serving them with dignity and respect and equality. And we're not at the point yet where police departments feel adequately supported at all levels.

So what we've done here is to build off the Task Force report and find out what's working, what's not, and what more do we have to do in order to bring the country and communities around the country together and make more progress on this front.

And I'll just characterize a couple of things that have been identified. And I want to emphasize that there's still a diversity of views around this table. That was by design. We have police chiefs and representatives of rank-and-file law enforcement. We've got people who have been protesting just this week. And we have sociologists, civil rights attorneys, Governors, State legislatures. So as you might expect, not everybody agrees on everything. But here are the buckets of issues that everybody identified as worthy of more work, more study, and ultimately, more action.

Number one, we're going to have to do more work together in thinking about how we can build confidence that after police officers have used force, and particularly deadly force, that there is confidence in how the investigation takes place and that justice is done.

Now, that's a complicated piece of work, but it's going to involve engaging with police departments and States' attorneys, as well as communities themselves, and potentially shaping a set of best practices that ensure when something happens that people feel like it's being investigated effectively and fairly both for the police officer, but also for the families of those who've been affected. And so one of our charges, I think, is to try to find effective ways to do that.

Second is continuing work on working with police departments around training, which we emphasized in the initial Task Force, but also hiring, recruitment. And one of the themes that came from a number of people is, how do we support police officers not just in terms of eliminating bias, but also dealing with the stresses and strains of the job so that they have the capacity to interact with communities and deescalate more effectively? And are there ways for us to resource that? So that was bucket number two.

Third is data. Although we put forward a data initiative that is beginning to gather information about what's happening in police departments so that they can do a better job managing their force and ensure that what they're doing is effective, and so that communities can feel confident that they know what's happening with police forces, generally speaking, police departments, sheriffs' departments, law enforcement offices around the country either don't have good data collection or it's just in a form that people can't use.

Now, I don't necessarily fault all the departments on that because I know here in the Federal Government, with all the resources we have, it has been really hard to just get our data systems and IT and all that set up. Some of you may remember, we had a little problem with my health care initiative—[laughter]—when it came to data and computers and so forth. So imagine if you've got a small county, small budget, they've got old computers, they don't know how to work systems. But this is an area where we think we can actually make real progress, is to help departments all across the country to put their data in a way that they can use, but also creates greater systems of accountability and so we understand what happens.

And the—one of the encouraging things for me is, is that this is an area, when I was a State legislature, I was able to work with the Fraternal Order of Police and the State police organizations, as well as activists, to create a racial profiling bill that gathered data and allowed law enforcement to identify where do they think there's a problem. And because of that cooperation, we've seen improvement in Illinois around these areas. And that's something that I think we all have to spend some time thinking about.

Next, we're going to continue to examine how we, as a Federal Government, can work effectively with local communities, because we've got 1,800—18,000 different law enforcement entities, and we're not going to be able to do for a sheriff's department or a police department what it needs to be doing. What are the best ways for us to help them do the right thing when they want to do the right thing? And are there ways in which we can support communities to lift up problems when departments are unwilling to adopt some of the best practices that are out there? So we're going to spend time looking on that.

And finally, there was broad agreement that this needs to be sustained. I didn't hear anybody around this table suggest that this problem is going to be solved overnight. Because the roots of the problems we saw this week date back not just decades, date back centuries. There are cultural issues, and there are issues of race in this country and poverty and a whole range of problems that will not be solved overnight. But what we can do is to set up the kinds of respectful conversations that we've had here—not just in Washington, but around the country—so that we institutionalize a process of continually getting better and holding ourselves accountable and holding ourselves responsible for getting better.

And I think we've done that with the Task Force. But what's been apparent is, is that it's not enough just for us to have a Task Force or report and then follow up through our departments. We have to push this out into communities so that they feel ownership for some of the good ideas that have been floated around this table.

So I just want to say how encouraged I am by the conversation. To the American people, I want you to know that this is a pretty representative group of the folks who've been involved in the debate in this issue and have practical knowledge and are thinking each and every day about how we can prevent the tragedies we saw in Baton Rouge and in Minnesota and in Dallas. And the conversation that took place around this table is very different than the one that you see on a day-to-day or hourly basis in the media.

And one of the things that I encouraged everybody here to do was to try to be as thoughtful and respectful outside of this room as folks were to each other during the course of this conversation, because I think the American people would feel more encouraged.

Now, as I said yesterday, I do not want to gloss over the fact that not only are there very real problems, but there are still deep divisions about how to solve these problems. There's no doubt that police departments still feel embattled and unjustly accused. And there is no doubt that minority communities, communities of color still feel like it just takes too long to do what's right. And the pace of change is going to feel too fast for some and too slow for others. And sadly, because this is a huge country that is very diverse and we have a lot of police departments, I think it is fair to say that we will see more tension in police—between police and communities this month, next month, next year, and for quite some time.

The one thing, I think, we all have to do, though, is not paper over those differences or paper over those problems, but we do have to try to constructively solve them and not simply win talking-point arguments and not just give voice to what we're feeling at the moment. We have to, as a country, sit down and just grind it out, solve these problems. And I think they—if we have that kind of sustained commitment, I'm confident we can do so. All right?

So thank you all for participating. It was a terrific conversation. And they've all promised to take Michelle's call if she's wondering why I was late for dinner. [*Laughter*] All right?

Q. Mr. President—

The President. Thank you, guys. If I start taking questions, I think it's fair to say that I'm going to not get out of here, and we're already way late. Thank you, guys. Appreciate it. Thank you. Got a whole town hall tomorrow.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:49 p.m. in Room 350 of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Charles H. Ramsey and Laurie Robinson, Cochairs, President's Task Force on 21st-Century Policing. A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the audio was incomplete.

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