

# Press Conference by the President

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James S. Brady Briefing Room

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THE PRESIDENT: Hello, everybody. Hello, hello.

Hello, everybody. In a couple hours, I'll be departing on my final foreign trip as President. And while we're abroad, I'll have a chance to take a few of your questions, but I figured why wait? I know that there's a lot of domestic issues that people are thinking about, so I wanted to see if I could clear out some of the underbrush so that when we're overseas, and people are asking about foreign policy questions, people don't feel obliged to tack on three other questions to them.

Let me -- I know you still will. (Laughter.) That I'm aware, but I'm trying something out here. First of all, let me mention three brief topics.

First of all, as I discussed with the President-elect on Thursday, my team stands ready to accelerate in the next steps that are required to ensure a smooth transition. And we are going to be staying in touch as we travel. I remember what it was like when I came in eight years ago. It is a big challenge. This office is bigger than any one person. And that's why ensuring a smooth transition is so important.

It's not something that the Constitution explicitly requires, but it is one of those norms that are vital to a functioning democracy -- similar to norms of civility and tolerance, and a commitment to reason and to facts and analysis. It's part of what makes this country work. And as long as I'm President, we are going to uphold those norms and cherish and uphold those ideals.

As I've told my staff, we should be very proud that their work has already ensured that when we turn over the keys the car is in pretty good shape. We are indisputably in a stronger position today than we were when I came in eight years ago. Jobs have been growing for 73 straight months. Incomes are rising. Poverty is falling. The uninsured rate is at the lowest level on record. Carbon emissions have come down without impinging on our growth.

And so my instructions to my team are that we run through the tape. We make sure that we finish what we started, that we don't let up in these last couple of months, because my goal is, on January 21st, America is in the strongest position possible and hopefully there's an opportunity for the next President to build on that.

Number two, our work has also helped to stabilize the global economy. And because there is one President at a time, I'll spend this week reinforcing America's support for the approaches that we've taken to promote economic growth and global security on a range of issues.

I look forward to my first visit in Greece. And then, in Germany, I'll visit with Chancellor Merkel, who's probably been my closest international partner these past eight years. I'll also signal our solidarity with our closest allies, and express our support for a strong, integrated, and united Europe. It's essential to our national security and it's essential to global stability. And that's why the Transatlantic Alliance and the NATO Alliance have endured for decades under Democratic and Republican administrations.

Finally, in Peru, I'll meet with the leaders of countries that have been the focus of our foreign policy through our rebalance in the Asia Pacific. This is a time of great change in the world. But America has always been a pillar of strength and a beacon of hope to peoples around the globe. And that's what it must continue to be.

Finally, on a personal note, Michelle and I want to offer our deepest condolences to Gwen Ifill's family and to all of you, her colleagues, on her passing. Gwen was a friend of ours. She was an extraordinary journalist. She always kept faith with the fundamental responsibilities of her profession -- asking tough questions, holding people in power accountable, and defending a strong and free press that makes our democracy work.

I always appreciated Gwen's reporting, even when I was at the receiving end of one of her tough and thorough interviews. Whether she reported from a convention floor or from the field, whether she sat at the debate moderator's table or at the anchor desk, she not only informed today's citizens, but she also inspired tomorrow's journalists. She was an especially powerful role model for young women and girls who admired her integrity, her tenacity, and her intellect -- and for whom she blazed a trail as one-half of the first all-female anchor team on network news.

So Gwen did her country a great service. Michelle and I join her family and her colleagues, and everybody else who loved her in remembering her fondly today.

So, with that, I'm going to take some questions. And because Josh Earnest has some pull around here, he just happened to put at the top of the list Colleen Nelson of the Wall Street Journal.

My understanding is, Colleen, that this is wrapping up your stint here and you're going to Kansas City.

Q Correct.

THE PRESIDENT: Josh just happens to be from Kansas City. (Laughter.) So I didn't know if there was any coincidence there. But we wish you the very best of luck in your new endeavors.

Q As it turns out, there's no place like Kansas City.

THE PRESIDENT: There you go.

Q You're about to embark on your final foreign trip. What will you say to other world leaders about your successor? They've expressed many of the same misgivings that you have about Donald Trump. Should they be worried about the future of U.S. foreign policy? And secondly, as Democrats scramble to regroup after a pretty shocking upset, what is your advice about where the party goes now? And who should lead your party?

THE PRESIDENT: One of the great things about the United States is that when it comes to world affairs, the President obviously is the leader of the executive branch, the Commander-in-Chief, the spokesperson for the nation, but the influence and the work that we have is the result not just of the President, it is the result of countless interactions and arrangements and relationships between our military and other militaries, and our diplomats and other diplomats, and intelligence officers and development workers. And there's enormous continuity beneath the day-to-day news that makes us that indispensable nation when it comes to maintaining order and promoting prosperity around the world. That will continue.

In my conversation with the President-elect, he expressed a great interest in maintaining our core strategic relationships. And so one of the messages I will be able to deliver is his commitment to NATO and the Transatlantic Alliance. I think that's one of the most important functions I can serve at this stage, during this trip, is to let them know that there is no weakening of resolve when it comes to America's commitment to maintaining a strong and robust NATO relationship, and a recognition that those alliances aren't just good for Europe, they're good for the United States, and they're vital for the world.

With respect to the Democratic Party, look, as I said in the Rose Garden right after the election, when your team loses, everybody gets deflated and it's hard and it's challenging. And so I think it's a healthy thing for the Democratic Party to go through some reflection. I think it's important for me not to be big-footing that conversation. I think we want to see new voices and new ideas emerge. That's part of the reason why I think term limits are a really useful thing.

The Democrats should not waver on our core beliefs and principles; The belief that we should have an economy that works for everybody, not just a few. The belief that America, at its best, is inclusive and not exclusive. That we insist on the dignity and God-given potential and worth of every child, regardless of race, or gender, or sexual orientation, or what zip code they were born in. That we are committed to a world in which we keep America safe, but we recognize that our power doesn't just flow from our extraordinary military, it also flows from the strength of our ideals and our principles and our values.

So there are going to be a core set of values that shouldn't be up for debate, should be our North Star. But how we organize politically I think is something that we should spend some time thinking about. I believe that we have better ideas. But I also believe that good ideas don't matter if people don't hear them. And one of the issues that Democrats have to be clear on is that, given population distribution across the country, we have to compete everywhere. We have to show up everywhere. We have to work at a grassroots level -- something that's been a running thread in my career.

I won Iowa not because the demographics dictated that I would win Iowa, it was because I spent 87 days going to every small town and fair and fish fry and VFW hall. And there were some counties where I might have lost, but maybe I lost by 20 points instead of 50 points. There are some counties maybe I won that people didn't expect because people had a chance to see you and listen to you and get a sense of who you stood for and who you were fighting for.

And the challenge for a national party is how do you dig in there and create those kinds of structures so that people have a sense of what it is that you stand for. And that increasingly is difficult to do just through a national press story. It's increasingly difficult to do because of the splintering of the press.

And so I think the discussions that have been taking place about how do you build more grassroots organizing, how do you build up state parties and local parties and schoolboard elections you're paying attention to, and state rep races and city council races -- that all I think will contribute to stronger outcomes in the future.

And I'm optimistic that will happen. For Democrats who are feeling completely discouraged, I've been trying to remind them everybody remembers my Boston speech in 2004; they may not remember me showing up here in 2005 when John Kerry had lost a close election, Tom Daschle, the leader of the Senate, had been beaten in an upset. Ken Salazar and I were the only two Democrats that won nationally. Republicans controlled the Senate and the House. And two years later, Democrats were winning back Congress, and four years later, I was President of the United States.

Things change pretty rapidly. But they don't change inevitably. They change because you work for it. Nobody said democracy was supposed to be easy. This is hard. And in a big country like this, it probably should be hard.

Mark Knoller.

Q Thank you, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Good to see you.

Q Thank you. Good to see you. Mr. President, what can you tell us about the learning curve on becoming President? Can you tell us how long it took you before you were fully at ease in the job, if that ever happens? And did you discuss this matter with President-elect Trump?

THE PRESIDENT: About a week ago I started feeling pretty good. (Laughter.) No, look, I think the learning curve always continues. This is a remarkable job. It is like no other job on Earth. And it is a constant flow of information and challenges and issues. That is truer now than it has ever been, partly because of the nature of information and the interconnection between regions of the world.

If you were President 50 years ago, the tragedy in Syria might not even penetrate what the American people were thinking about on a day-to-day basis. Today, they're seeing vivid images of a child in the aftermath of a bombing. There was a time when if you had a financial crisis in Southeast Asia somewhere, it had no impact on our markets; today it does.

So the amount of information, the amount of incoming that any administration has to deal with today -- and respond to much more rapidly than ever before -- that makes it different. I was watching a documentary, that during the Bay of Pigs crisis, JFK had about two weeks before anybody reported on it. Imagine that. I think it's fair to say that if something like that happens under a current President, they've got to figure out in about an hour what their response is.

So these are the kinds of points that I shared with the President-elect. It was a free-flowing and, I think, useful conversation. I hope it was. I tried to be as honest as I could about the things I think any President coming in needs to think about. And probably the most important point that I made was that how you staff -- particularly your chief of staff, your national security advisor, your White House counsel -- how you set up a process and a system to surface information, generate options for a President, understanding that ultimately the President is going to be the final decision-maker, that that's something that has to be attended to right away.

I have been blessed by having -- and I admittedly am biased -- some of the smartest, hardest-working, good people in my administration that I think any President has ever had. And as a consequence of that team, I've been able to make good decisions. And if you don't have that around you, then you'll get swamped. So I hope that he appreciated that advice.

What I also discussed was the fact that I had been encouraged by his statements on election night about the need for unity and his interest in being the President for all people, and that how he staffs, the first steps he takes, the first impressions he makes, the reset that can happen after an election -- all those things are important and should be thought about. And I think it's important to give him the room and the space to do that. It takes time to put that together.

But I emphasized to him that, look, in an election like this that was so hotly contested and so divided, gestures matter. And how he reaches out to groups that may not have supported him, how he signals his interest in their issues or concerns, I think those are the kinds of things that can set a tone that will help move things forward once he's actually taken office.

Q And how long did it take before you were at ease in the job?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I didn't really have time to worry about being at ease, because you'll recall we were losing about 800,000 jobs a month.

So the good news is that in some ways my experience is atypical. It's hard to find an analogous situation. By the time FDR came into office, the Depression had been going on for a couple of years. We were in the midst of a free fall. The financial system was locking up. The auto industry was about to go belly up. The housing market had entirely collapsed. So one of the advantages that I had was that I was too busy to worry about how acclimated I was feeling in the job. We just had to make a bunch of decisions.

In this situation, we're turning over a country that has challenges, has problems, and obviously there are people out there who are feeling deeply disaffected -- otherwise, we wouldn't have had the results that we had in the election. On the other hand, if you look at the basic indicators of where the country is right now, the unemployment rate is as low as it's been in eight, nine years. Incomes and wages have both gone up over the last year faster than they have in a decade or two. We've got historically low uninsured rates. The financial systems are stable. The stock market is hovering around its all-time high, and 401(k)s have been restored. The housing market has recovered.

We have challenges internationally, but our most immediate challenge with respect to ISIL, we're seeing significant progress in Iraq, and Mosul is now increasingly being retaken by Iraqi security forces supported by us. Our alliances are in strong shape. The progress we've made with respect to carbon emissions has been greater than any country on Earth. And gas is two bucks a gallon.

So he will have time and space I think to make judicious decisions. The incoming administration doesn't have to put out a huge number of fires. They may want to take the country in a significantly different direction, but they've got time to consider what exactly they want to achieve. And that's a testament to the tremendous work that my team has done over the last eight years. I'm very proud of them for it.

Athena Jones.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. You said more than once that you do not believe that Donald Trump would ever be elected President, and that you thought he was unfit for the office. Now that you've spent time with him, sitting down and talking to him for an hour and a half in the Oval Office, do you now think that President-elect Trump is qualified to be President?

And if I can do a compound question, the other one is you mentioned staffing and tone. What do you say to those Americans who may not doubt that there will be a peaceful transition but that are concerned about some of the policies and sentiments that were expressed by President-elect Trump himself or his supporters that may seem hostile to minorities and others? Specifically, I'm talking about the announcement that Steve Bannon, who is a proponent of the so-called alt-right movement, what many call the white

nationalist movement, is going to have a prominent role in the White House under President Trump as his chief strategist and senior advisor. What message does that send to the country, to the world?

THE PRESIDENT: Athena, without copping out, I think it's fair to say that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on every appointment that the President-elect starts making if I want to be consistent with the notion that we're going to try to facilitate a smooth transition.

Look, the people have spoken. Donald Trump will be the next President, the 45th President of the United States. And it will be up to him to set up a team that he thinks will serve him well and reflect his policies. And those who didn't vote for him have to recognize that that's how democracy works. That's how this system operates.

When I won, there were a number of people who didn't like me and didn't like what I stood for. And I think that whenever you've got an incoming President of the other side, particularly in a bitter election like this, it takes a while for people to reconcile themselves with that new reality. Hopefully it's a reminder that elections matter and voting counts. And so I don't know how many times we have to relearn this lesson, because we ended up having 43 percent of the country not voting who were eligible to vote. But it makes a difference.

So given that President-elect Trump is now trying to balance what he said in the campaign and the commitments he made to his supporters with working with those who disagreed with him, and members of Congress, and reaching out to constituencies that didn't vote for him, I think it's important for us to let him make his decisions. And I think the American people will judge over the course of the next couple of years whether they like what they see, and whether these are the kinds of policies and this is the direction that they want to see the country go in.

And my role is to make sure that when I hand off this White House that it is in the best possible shape and that I've been as helpful as I can to him in going forward and building on the progress that we've made.

And my advice, as I said, to the President-elect when we had our discussions was that campaigning is different from governing. I think he recognizes that. I think he's sincere in wanting to be a successful President and moving this country forward. And I don't think any President ever comes in saying to themselves, I want to figure out how to make people angry or alienate half the country. I think he's going to try as best he can to make sure that he delivers, not only for the people who voted for him, but for the people at large. And the good thing is, is that there are going to be elections coming up, so there's a built-in incentive for him to try to do that.

But it's only been six days. And I think it will be important for him to have the room to staff up, to figure out what his priorities are, to be able to distinguish between what he was campaigning on and what is practical, what he can actually achieve. There are certain

things that make for good sound bites but don't translate into good policy. And that's something that he and his team, I think, will wrestle with, in the same way that every President wrestles with.

I did say to him, as I've said publicly, that because of the nature of the campaigns, and the bitterness and ferocity of the campaigns, that it's really important to try to send some signals of unity, and to reach out to minority groups or women or others that were concerned about the tenor of the campaign. And I think that's something that he will want to do. But this is all happening real fast. He's got commitments to supporters that helped to get him here, and he's going to have to balance those. And over the coming weeks and months and years, my hope is, is that those impulses ultimately win out. But it's a little too early to start making judgments on that.

Q And your view of his qualifications. Has that changed after meeting with him?

THE PRESIDENT: I think that he successfully mobilized a big chunk of the country to vote for him, and he's going to win -- he has won. He's going to be the next President. And regardless of what experience or assumptions he brought to the office, this office has a way of waking you up. And those aspects of his positions or predispositions that don't match up with reality he will find shaken up pretty quick, because reality has a way of asserting itself.

And some of his gifts that obviously allowed him to execute one of the biggest political upsets in history -- those are ones that hopefully he will put to good use on behalf of all the American people.

Scott Horsley.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. You're off to Europe, which is facing some of the same populous pressures we see at work in this country. When you spoke at the U.N., you talked about the choice we're facing between integration and building walls. What choice do you think the American people made last week? And is there still a chance for what you called a course correction before Europeans make some of their choices?

THE PRESIDENT: I think the American people recognize that the world has shrunk, that it's interconnected, that you're not going to put that genie back in the bottle. The American people recognize that their careers, or their kids' careers are going to have to be more dynamic -- that they might not be working at a single plant for 30 years, but they might have to change careers. They might have to get more education. They might have to retool or retrain.

And I think the American people are game for that. They want to make sure that the rules of the game are fair. And what that means is that if you look at surveys around Americans' attitudes on trade, the majority of the American people still support trade. But they're concerned about whether or not trade is fair, and whether we've got the same access to other countries' markets as they have with us; is there just a race to the bottom when it comes to wages, and so forth.

Now, I made an argument -- thus far, unsuccessfully -- that the trade deal we had organized, TPP, did exactly that, that it strengthened workers' rights and environmental rights, leveled the playing field and, as a consequences, would be good for American workers and American businesses. But that's a complex argument to make when people remember plants closing and jobs being offshored.

So part of what I think this election reflected was people wanting that course correction that you described. And the message around stopping surges of immigration, not creating new trade deals that may be unfair -- I think those were themes that played a prominent role in the campaign.

As we now shift to governing, my argument is that we do need to make sure that we have an orderly, lawful immigration process, but that if it is orderly and lawful, immigration is good for our economy. It keeps this country young. It keeps it dynamic. We have entrepreneurs and strivers who come here and are willing to take risks. And that's part of the reason why America, historically, has been successful. It's part of the reason why our economy is stronger and better positioned than most of our other competitors, is because we got a younger population that's more dynamic.

When it comes to trade, I think when you're governing, it will become increasingly apparent that if you were to just eliminate trade deals with Mexico, for example, well, you've got a global supply chain. The parts that are allowing auto plants that were about to shut down to now employ double shifts is because they're bringing in some of those parts to assemble out of Mexico. And so it's not as simple as it might have seemed.

And the key for us -- when I say "us," I mean Americans, but I think particularly for progressives -- is to say your concerns are real, your anxieties are real; here's how we fix them: Higher minimum wage. Stronger worker protections so workers have more leverage to get a bigger piece of the pie. Stronger financial regulations, not weaker ones. Yes to trade, but trade that ensures that these other countries that trade with us aren't engaging in child labor, for example. Being attentive to inequality and not tone deaf to it, but offering prescriptions that are actually going to help folks that are in communities that feel forgotten.

That's going to be our most important strategy. And I think we can successfully do that. People will still be looking to the United States. Our example will still carry great weight. And it continues to be my strong belief that the way we are going to make sure that everybody feels a part of this global economy is not by shutting ourselves off from each other even if we could, but rather by working together more effectively than we have in the past.

Martha Raddatz.

Q Thanks, Mr. President. We heard some of the harsh words you had about Mr. Trump, calling him "temperamentally unfit to be Commander-in-Chief." Did anything surprise you about President-elect Trump when you met with him in your office? And also I want to know, does anything concern you about a Trump presidency?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we had a very cordial conversation. And that didn't surprise me to some degree because I think that he is obviously a gregarious person. He's somebody who I think likes to mix it up and to have a vigorous debate.

And what's clear is that he was able to tap into, yes, the anxiety, but also the enthusiasm of his voters in a way that was impressive. And I said so to him, because I think that to the extent that there were a lot of folks who missed the Trump phenomenon, I think that connection that he was able to make with his supporters that was impervious to events that might have sunk another candidate, that's powerful stuff.

I also think that he is coming to this office with fewer set hard-and-fast policy prescriptions than a lot of other Presidents might be arriving with. I don't think he is ideological. I think ultimately he's pragmatic in that way. And that can serve him well, as long as he's got good people around him and he has a clear sense of direction.

Do I have concerns? Absolutely. Of course, I've got concerns. He and I differ on a whole bunch of issues. But the federal government and our democracy is not a speedboat, it's an ocean liner -- as I discovered when I came into office. It took a lot of really hard work for us to make significant policy changes -- even in our first two years, when we had larger majorities than Mr. Trump will enjoy when he comes into office.

And one of the things I advised him to do was to make sure that before he commits to certain courses of action, he's really dug in and thought through how various issues play themselves out. I'll use an obvious example where we have a difference, but it will be interesting to see what happens in the coming year, and that's the Affordable Care Act.

So obviously this has been the Holy Grail for Republicans over the last six, seven years -- was "we've got to kill Obamacare." Now, that has been taken as an article of faith -- that this is terrible, it doesn't work and we have to undo it.

But now that Republicans are in charge, they got to take a look and say, let's see, we got 20 million people who have health insurance who didn't have it before; health care costs generally have gone up at a significantly slower rate since Obamacare was passed than they did before, which has saved the federal Treasury hundreds of billions of dollars; people who have health insurance are benefitting in all sorts of ways that they may not be aware of -- everything from no longer having lifetime limits on the claims that they can make, to seniors getting prescription drug discounts under Medicare, to free mammograms.

Now, it's one thing to characterize this thing as not working when it's just an abstraction.

Now, suddenly, you're in charge and you're going to repeal it. Okay, well, what happens to those 20 million people who have health insurance? Are you going to just kick them off and suddenly they don't have health insurance? And in what ways are their lives better because of that? Are you going to repeal the provision that ensures that if you do have health insurance on your job, and you lose your job or you change jobs or you start a small business that you're not discriminated against because you've got a preexisting condition?

That's really popular. How are you going to replace it? Are you going to change the policy that kids can stay on their parents' health insurance plan until they're 26? How are you going to approach all these issues?

Now, my view is that if they can come up with something better that actually works, and a year or two after they've replaced the Affordable Care Act with their own plan, that 25 million people have health insurance, and it's cheaper and better and running smoothly, I'll be the first one to say, that's great -- congratulations.

If, on the other hand, whatever they're proposing results in millions of people losing coverage, and results in people who already have health insurance losing protections that were contained in the legislation, then we're going to have a problem. And I think that's not going to be unique to me; I think the American people will respond that way.

So I think on a lot of issues, what you're going to see is now comes the hard part. Now is governance. We are going to be able to present to the incoming administration a country that is stronger, a federal government that is working better and more efficiently; a national security apparatus that is both more effective and truer to our values; energy policies that are resulting in not just less pollution, but also more jobs.

And I think the President-elect, rightly, would expect that he's judged on whether we improve from that baseline and on those metrics, or things get worse. And if things get worse, then the American people will figure that out pretty quick. And if things get better, then more power to him. And I'll be the first to congratulate him.

Q Mr. President, you had talked specifically about his temperament. Do you still have any concern about his temperament?

THE PRESIDENT: As I said -- because, Athena asked the question -- whatever you bring to this office, this office has a habit of magnifying and pointing out, and hopefully then you correct for it.

This may seem like a silly example, but I know myself well enough to know I can't keep track of paper. I am not well organized in that way. And so pretty quickly, after I'm getting stacks of briefing books coming in every night, I say to myself, I've got to figure out a system because I have bad filing, sorting and organizing habits. And I've got to find some people who can help me keep track of this stuff. That seems trivial, but actually it ends up being a pretty big piece of business.

I think what will happen with the President-elect is there are going to be certain elements of his temperament that will not serve him well unless he recognizes them and corrects them. Because when you're a candidate and you say something that is inaccurate or controversial, it has less impact than it does when you're President of the United States.

Everybody around the world is paying attention. Markets move. National security issues require a level of precision in order to make sure that you don't make mistakes. And I think he recognizes that this is different, and so do the American people.

All right, I'm going to take just a couple more questions and then I get out of here.

Nadia Bilbassy.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. President-elect Trump threatened to unravel the Iran nuclear deal that your administration worked very hard to get. What would be a concern if he alters part of it? And what would your advice be, considering that he said he's open to advice?

And on Syria, sir, the Syrian regime now is threatening Aleppo with massive destruction. You spoke passionately a few years back about Benghazi and you warned against the killing of civilians there. Many people criticized your administration for the shortcoming of the Syria policy. Are you willing to admit any fault under your watch? And how do you act with President-elect Trump says that he won't support the Syrian opposition? Thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: Iran is a good example of the gap I think between some of the rhetoric in this town -- not unique to the President-elect -- and the reality. I think there was a really robust debate about the merits of the Iran deal before it was completed. And I actually was pretty proud of how our democracy processed that. It was a serious debate. I think people of goodwill were on both sides of the issue. Ultimately, we were able to persuade members of Congress and the public -- at least enough of them -- to support it.

At the time, the main argument against it was Iran wouldn't abide by the deal, that they would cheat. We now have over a year of evidence that they have abided by the agreement. That's not just my opinion, it's not just people in my administration. That's the opinion of Israeli military and intelligence officers who are part of a government that vehemently opposed the deal.

So my suspicion is, is that when the President-elect comes in, and he's consulting with his Republican colleagues on the Hill, that they will look at the facts. Because to unravel a deal that's working and preventing Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon would be hard to explain -- particularly if the alternative were to have them freed from any obligations and go ahead and pursue a weapon.

And keep in mind this is not just an international agreement between us and the Iranians; this is between the P5+1, other countries, some of our closest allies. And for us to pull out would then require us to start sanctioning those other countries in Europe or China or Russia that were still abiding by the deal because, from their perspective, Iran had done what it was supposed to do.

So it becomes more difficult I think to undo something that's working than undo something that isn't working. And when you're not responsible for it, I think you can call it a terrible deal. When you are responsible for the deal and preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, you're more likely to look at the facts.

That is going to be true in other circumstances. For example, the Paris agreement. There's been a lot of talk about the possibility of undoing this international agreement. Now, you've got 200 countries that have signed up to this thing. And the good news is

that what we've been able to show over the last five, six, eight years is that it's possible to grow the economy really fast and possible to bring down carbon emissions as well.

It's not just a bunch of rules that we've set up. You've got utilities that are putting in solar panels and creating jobs. You've got the Big Three automakers who have seen record sales and are overachieving on the fuel efficiency standards that we set. Turns out that people like not having to fill up as often and save money at the pump, even if it's good for the environment.

You've got states like California that have been moving forward on a clean energy agenda separate and apart from any federal regulations that have been put forward. In fact, 40 percent of the country already lives under -- in states that are actively pursuing what's embodied in the Paris agreement and the Clean Power Plan rule. And even states like Texas that politically tend to oppose me -- you've seen huge increases in wind power and solar power. And you've got some of the country's biggest companies, like Google and Walmart, all pursuing energy efficiency because it's good for their bottom line.

So what we've been able to do is to embed a lot of these practices into how our economy works. And it's made our economy more efficient, it's helped the bottom line of folks, and it's cleaned up the environment.

What the Paris agreement now does is say to China and India and other countries that are potentially polluting, come onboard; let's work together so you guys do the same thing.

And the biggest threat when it comes to climate change and pollution isn't going to come from us -- because we only have 300 million people. It's going to come from China, with over a billion people, and India, with over a billion people. And if they are pursuing the same kinds of strategies that we did before we became more aware of the environment, then our kids will be choked off.

And so, again, do I think that the new administration will make some changes?

Absolutely. But these international agreements, the tradition has been that you carry them forward across administrations, particularly if, once you actually examine them, it turns out that they're doing good for us and binding other countries into behavior that will help us.

Last question. Justin Sink.

Q Sir, on Syria.

THE PRESIDENT: I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Okay, you're right. You are right about that.

With respect to Syria -- in Benghazi, we had an international mandate. We had a U.N. Security resolution. We had a broad-based coalition, and we were able to carry out a support mission that achieved the initial goal of preventing Benghazi from being slaughtered fairly quickly. It's no secret -- you know this region well -- that Syria is a much more messy situation, with proxies coming from every direction.

And so I wish that I could bring this to a halt immediately. We have made every effort to try to bring about a political resolution to this challenge. John Kerry has spent an infinite amount of time trying to negotiate with Russians and Iranians and Gulf States and other parties to try to end the killing there. But if what you're asking is do we have the capacity to carry out the same kinds of military actions in Syria that we did in Libya, the situation is obviously different. We don't have that option easily available to us.

And so we're going to have to continue to try to pursue, as best we can, a political solution and, in the interim, put as much pressure as we can on the parties to arrive at humanitarian safe spaces and ceasefires that at least alleviate the suffering that's on the ground.

I recognize that that has not worked. And it is something that I continue to think about every day, and we continue to try to find some formula that would allow us to see that suffering end. But I think it's not surprising to you, because you study this deeply, that if you have a Syrian military that is committed to killing its people indiscriminately, as necessary, and it is supported by Russia that now have substantial military assets on the ground and are actively supporting that regime, and Iran actively supporting that regime, and we are supporting what has to be our number-one national security priority, which is going after ISIL both in Mosul and ultimately in Raqqa -- that the situation is not the same as it was in Libya.

And obviously there are some who question the steps we took in Libya. I continue to believe that was the right thing to do, although, as I indicated before, in the aftermath of that campaign, I think the world community did not sufficiently support the need for some sort of security structures there and now is a situation that we have to get back into a better place.

I've given you -- last question is Justin Sink of Bloomberg.

Q Thanks, Mr. President. I wanted to ask about two things that might be on your desk over the next couple months as you prepare for a Trump administration. One is at least three-quarters of a million undocumented immigrants provided the federal government information about themselves and their families as part of your deferred action program. I'm wondering if there's anything you can do to either reassure them or shield that information from the incoming Trump administration, considering his stance on immigration.

And the second is, the administration and you have long maintained that the legal constraints upon you by Congress governing the movement of detainees from Gitmo are an unconstitutional infringement on your right as Commander-in-Chief. Considering that the gradual transfers that you've pursued are unlikely to continue under a Trump administration, is this now the time to sort of test that theory by moving the detainees and see where the chips will lie?

THE PRESIDENT: Those are both excellent questions. On the deferred action program that we have known as DACA that relates to DREAMers who are currently benefitting from these provisions, I will urge the President-elect and the incoming administration to think long and hard before they are endangering that status of what for all practical purposes are American kids.

These are kids who were brought here by their parents. They did nothing wrong. They've gone to school. They have pledged allegiance to the flag. Some of them have joined the military. They've enrolled in school. By definition, if they're part of this program, they are solid, wonderful young people of good character. And it is my strong belief that the majority of the American people would not want to see suddenly those kids have to start hiding again. And that's something that I will encourage the President-elect to look at.

With respect to Guantanamo, it is true that I have not been able to close the darn thing because of the congressional restrictions that have been placed on us. What is also true is we have greatly reduced the population. You now have significantly less than a hundred people there. There are some additional transfers that may be taking place over the next two months.

There is a group of very dangerous people that we have strong evidence of having been guilty of committing terrorist acts against the United States. But because of the nature of the evidence, in some cases, that evidence being compromised, it's very difficult to put them before a typical Article III court. And that group has always been the biggest challenge for us. My strong belief and preference is that we would be much better off closing Gitmo, moving them to a different facility that was clearly governed by U.S. jurisdiction. We'd do it a lot cheaper and just as safely.

Congress disagrees with me, and I gather that the President-elect does, as well. We will continue to explore options for doing that. But keep in mind that it's not just a matter of what I'm willing to do. One of the things you discover about being President is that there are all these rules and norms and laws, and you got to pay attention to them. And the people who work for you are also subject to those rules and norms. And that's a piece of advice that I gave to the incoming President.

I am very proud of the fact that we will -- knock on wood -- leave this administration without significant scandal. We've made mistakes, there have been screw-ups, but I will put the ethics of this administration and our track record in terms of just abiding by the rules and norms, and keeping trust with the American people -- I will put this administration against any administration in history.

And the reason is because, frankly, we listened to the lawyers. And we had a strong White House Counsel's Office. We had a strong Ethics Office. We had people in every agency whose job it was to remind people, this is how you're supposed to do things. It doesn't mean everybody always did everything exactly the way it's supposed to -- because we got 2 million people working in the federal government, if you're including the military, and so we had to just try to institutionalize this as much as we could. And that takes a lot of work.

And one of my suggestions to the incoming President is, is that he take that part of the job seriously, as well. Again, you wouldn't know this if you were listening to some news outlets, or some members of oversight committees in Congress. But if you actually look at the facts, it works.

And this is just one example of the numerous ways in which the federal government is much better today than it was, without people really knowing. You look at VA. People remember the legitimate problems that were publicized in Phoenix. It was scandalous what happened. What people don't remember is, is that we've brought in well over a million people who are getting benefits that weren't getting it before, driven the backlog for disability benefits way down, cut homelessness in half. Just made the agency work better -- not work perfect, but work better.

And one of the mottos I always had with my staff was, better is good. Perfect is unattainable. Better is possible.

And so we will try to share the lessons that we've learned over these last eight years with the incoming President. And my hope is he makes things better. And if he does, we'll all benefit from it.

All right? Thank you, everybody. You guys, some of you who are traveling, you'll get a chance to ask more questions. All right? Thank you.

END

4:39 P.M. EST