

Press Conference by the President After Meeting with National Security Officials

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THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon, everybody. I just met again with my National Security Council on the campaign to destroy ISIL. I want to thank Secretary Carter and Chairman Dunford -- who just returned from meetings with our coalition partners in the Middle East -- for hosting us and for their continued leadership of our men and women in uniform.

I last updated the American people on our campaign in June, shortly after the horrifying attack in Orlando. In the weeks since, we've continued to be relentless in our fight against ISIL -- and on the ground in Syria and Iraq, ISIL continues to lose territory. Tragically, however, we have also seen that ISIL still has the ability to direct and inspire attacks. So we've seen terrible bombings in Iraq and in Jordan, in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Afghanistan; attacks on an Istanbul airport, a restaurant in Bangladesh, Bastille Day celebrations and a church in France, and a music festival in Germany. In fact, the decline of ISIL in Syria and Iraq appears to be causing it to shift to tactics that we've seen before -- an even greater emphasis on encouraging high-profile terrorist attacks, including in the United States.

As always, our military, diplomatic, intelligence, homeland security and law enforcement professionals are working around the clock -- with other countries and with communities here at home -- to share information and prevent such attacks. And over the years, they've prevented many. But as we've seen, it is still very difficult to detect and prevent

lone actors or small cells of terrorists who are determined to kill the innocent and are willing to die. And that's why, as we discussed today, we're going to keep going after ISIL aggressively across every front of this campaign.

Our air campaign continues to hammer ISIL targets. More than 14,000 strikes so far. More than 100,000 sorties --including those hitting the ISIL core in Raqqa and in Mosul. And in stark contrast to ISIL -- which uses civilians as human shields -- America's armed forces will continue to do everything in our power to avoid civilian casualties. With our extraordinary technology, we're conducting the most precise air campaign in history. After all, it is the innocent civilians of Syria and Iraq who are suffering the most and who need to be saved from ISIL's terror. And so when there are allegations of civilian casualties, we take them very seriously. We work to find the facts, to be transparent, and to hold ourselves accountable for doing better in the future.

We continue to take out senior ISIL leaders and commanders. This includes ISIL's deputy minister of war, Basim Muhammad al-Bajari; a top commander in Mosul, Hatim Talib al-Hamdani; and, in yet another significant loss for ISIL, its minister of war, Umar al-Shishani. None of ISIL's leaders are safe -- and we are going to keep going after them.

On the ground in Iraq, local forces keep pushing ISIL back. In a major success, Iraqi forces, with coalition support, finally liberated Fallujah. Now they're clearing ISIL fighters from more areas up the Euphrates Valley, and Iraqi forces retook the strategic airbase at Qayyarah -- just 40 miles from Mosul, now the last major ISIL stronghold in Iraq. Given this success, the additional 560 U.S. support personnel that I ordered to Iraq last month will help turn this base into a logistical hub and launch pad for Iraqi forces as they push into Mosul.

Meanwhile, in Syria, a coalition of local forces -- backed by our Special Operations Forces and airstrikes -- continues to take the fight to ISIL as well. The coalition is fighting its way into the town of Manbij -- a gateway for ISIL fighters coming in and terrorists heading out to attack Europe, which is why ISIL is fighting hard to hold it. As ISIL is beaten back, we're gaining vast amounts of intelligence -- thousands of documents, thumb drives, digital files -- which we will use to keep destroying ISIL's networks and stop foreign fighters. We also continue to intensify our efforts against al Qaida in Syria, which -- no matter what name it calls itself -- cannot be allowed to maintain a safe haven to train and plot attacks against us.

I do want to step back and note the broader progress that has been made in this campaign so far. Two years ago, ISIL was racing across Iraq, to the outskirts of Baghdad itself, and, to many observers, ISIL looked invincible. Since then, in Iraq, ISIL has lost at the Mosul Dam, at Tikrit, at Baiji, at Sinjar, at Ramadi, at Hit, at Rutbah and now Fallujah. In Syria, ISIL has lost at Kobani and Tal Abyad and the Tishrin Dam and al-Shaddadi. ISIL has lost territory across vast stretches of the border with Turkey and almost all major transit routes into Raqqa. And in both Iraq and Syria, ISIL has not been able to reclaim any significant territory that they have lost.

So I want to repeat -- ISIL has not had a major successful offensive operation in either Syria or Iraq in a full year. Even ISIL's leaders know they're going to keep losing. In their message to followers, they're increasingly acknowledging that they may lose Mosul and Raqqa. And ISIL is right, they will lose them. And we'll keep hitting them and pushing them back and driving them out until they do. In other words, ISIL turns out not to be invincible -- they're, in fact, inevitably, going to be defeated.

But we do recognize at the same time that the situation is complex. And this cannot be solved by military force alone. That's why, last month, the United States and countries around the world pledged more than \$2 billion in new funds to help Iraqis stabilize and rebuild their communities. It's why we're working with Iraq so that the military campaign to liberate Mosul is matched with humanitarian and political efforts to protect civilians and promote inclusive governance and development so ISIL cannot return by exploiting divisions or new grievances.

In Syria, as I've repeatedly said, defeating ISIL and al Qaeda requires an end to the civil war and the Assad regime's brutality against the Syrian people, which pushes people into the arms of extremists. The regime and its allies continue to violate the Cessation of Hostilities, including with vicious attacks on defenseless civilians, medieval sieges against cities like Aleppo, and blocking food from reaching families that are starving. It is deplorable. And the depravity of the Syrian regime has rightly earned the condemnation of the world.

Russia's direct involvement in these actions over the last several weeks raises very serious questions about their commitment to pulling the situation back from the brink. The U.S. remains prepared to work with Russia to try to reduce the violence and strengthen our efforts against ISIL and al Qaeda in Syria. But so far, Russia has failed to take the necessary steps. Given the deteriorating situation, it is time for Russia to show that it is serious about pursuing these objectives.

Beyond Syria and Iraq, we'll keep working with allies and partners to go after ISIL wherever it tries to spread. At the request of Libya's Government of National Accord, we are conducting strikes in support of government-aligned forces as they fight to retake Sirte from ISIL, and we will continue to support the government's efforts to secure their country.

In Afghanistan, one of the reasons that I decided to largely maintain our current force posture was so that we could keep eliminating ISIL's presence there -- and we delivered another blow last month when we took out a top ISIL leader in Afghanistan, Umar Khalifa.

Finally, it should be clear by now -- and no one knows this better than our military leaders -- that even as we need to crush ISIL on the battlefield, their military defeat will not be enough. So long as their twisted ideology persists and drives people to violence, then groups like ISIL will keep emerging and the international community will continue to be at risk in getting sucked into the kind of global whack-a-mole where we're always reacting to the latest threat or lone actor. That's why we're also working to counter violent extremism more broadly -- including the social, economic and political factors that help fuel groups like ISIL and al Qaeda in the first place.

Nothing will do more to discredit ISIL and its phony claims to being a caliphate than when it loses its base in Raqqa and in Mosul. And we're going to keep working with partners -- including Muslim countries and communities -- especially online -- to expose ISIL for what they are: murderers who kill innocent people, including Muslim families and children as they break their Ramadan fast, and who set off bombs in Medina near the Prophet's Mosque, one of the holiest sites in Islam.

Moreover, we refuse to let terrorists and voices of division undermine the unity and the values of diversity and pluralism that keep our nation strong. One of the reasons that America's armed forces are the best in the world is because we draw on the skills and the talents of all of our citizens, from all backgrounds and faiths, including patriotic Muslim Americans who risk and give their lives for our freedom. And I think the entire world was inspired this past Sunday, when Muslims across France joined their Catholic neighbors at Mass and, in a moving display of solidarity, prayed together. The greeting they extended to each other has to be the message we echo in all of our countries and all of our communities -- peace be with you, and also with you.

Now, before I take some questions, I also want to say a few words on another topic. As our public health experts have been warning for some time, we are now seeing the first locally transmitted cases of the Zika virus by mosquitoes in the continental United States. This was predicted and predictable. So far, we've seen 15 cases in the Miami area. We're taking this extremely seriously. Our CDC experts are on the ground working shoulder-to-shoulder with Florida health authorities. There's a very aggressive effort underway to control mosquitoes there. And pregnant women have been urged to stay away from the particular neighborhood that we're focused on. We'll keep working as one team -- federal, state and local -- to try to slow and limit the spread of the virus.

I do want to be very clear, though, our public health experts do not expect to see the kind of widespread outbreaks of Zika here that we've seen in Brazil or in Puerto Rico. The kind of mosquitoes that are most likely to carry Zika are limited to certain regions of our country. But we cannot be complacent because we do expect to see more Zika cases. And even though the symptoms for most people are mild -- many may never even know that they have it -- we've seen that the complications for pregnant women and their babies can be severe. So I, again, want to encourage every American to learn what they can do to help stop Zika by going to CDC.gov.

In addition, Congress needs to do its job. Fighting Zika costs money. Helping Puerto Rico deal with its Zika crisis costs money. Research into new vaccines -- and, by the way, NIH just announced the first clinical trials in humans -- that costs money. And that's why my administration proposed an urgent request for more funding back in February. Not only did the Republican-led Congress not pass our request -- they worked to cut it. And then they left for summer recess without passing any new funds for the fight against Zika.

Meanwhile, our experts at the NIH and CDC -- the folks on the frontlines -- have been doing their best and making do by moving funds from other areas. But now the money that we need to fight Zika is rapidly running out. The situation is getting critical. For instance, without sufficient funding, NIH critical trials -- clinical trials and the possibilities of a vaccine -- which is well within reach -- could be delayed.

So this is not the time for politics. More than 40 U.S. servicemembers have now contracted Zika overseas. In 50 U.S. states, we know of more than 1,800 cases of Zika connected to travel to infected areas, and that includes nearly 500 pregnant women. Zika is now present in almost every part of Puerto Rico. And now we have the first local transmission in Florida -- and there will certainly be more.

And meanwhile, Congress is on a summer recess. A lot of folks talk about protecting Americans from threats. Well, Zika is a serious threat to Americans, especially babies -- right now. So, once again, I want to urge the American people to call their members of Congress and tell them to do their job, deal with this threat, help protect the American people from Zika.

With that, I'm going to take some questions. I'm going to start with someone who just assumed the second-most powerful office in the land -- Jeff Mason -- (laughter) -- the new Correspondents' Association president -- also from Reuters.

Jeff.

Q Thank you, sir. Hardly powerful. And happy birthday.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much.

Q As Islamic State loses territory, you and other officials have said that it is becoming a more traditional terrorist group. Are you satisfied that the United States and its allies have shifted strategy sufficiently to address that change?

And secondly, given your comments this week about Donald Trump's volatility and lack of fitness to be President, are you concerned that he will be receiving security briefings about ISIS and other sensitive national security issues?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm never satisfied with our response, because if you're satisfied that means the problem is solved, and it's not. So we just spent a couple hours meeting with my top national security folks to look at what more can be done.

It is absolutely necessary for us to defeat ISIL in Iraq and Syria. It is not sufficient, but it is necessary. Because so long as they have those bases, they can use their propaganda to suggest that somehow there's still some caliphate being born, and that can insinuate itself then in the minds of folks who may be willing to travel there or carry out terrorist attacks. It's also destabilizing for countries in the region at a time when the region is already unstable.

So I am pleased with the progress that we've made on the ground in Iraq and Syria. We're far from freeing Mosul and Raqqa. But what we've shown is, is that when it comes to conventional fights, ISIL can be beaten with partners on the ground so long as they've got the support from coalition forces that we've been providing.

In the meantime, though, you're seeing ISIL carry out external terrorist acts, and they've learned something they've adapted from al Qaeda, which had a much more centralized operation and tried to plan very elaborate attacks. And what ISIL has figured out is that if they can convince a handful of people, or even one person, to carry out an attack on a subway or at a parade or some other public venue and kill scores of people, as opposed to thousands of people, it still creates the kinds of fear and concern that elevates their profile.

So, in some ways, rooting out these networks for smaller, less complicated attacks is tougher, because it doesn't require as many resources on their part or preparation. But it does mean that we've got to do even more to generate the intelligence and to work with our partners in order to degrade those networks.

And the fact is, is that those networks will probably sustain themselves even after ISIL is defeated in Raqqa and Mosul. But what we've learned from our efforts to defeat al Qaeda is that if we stay on it, our intelligence gets better, and we adapt as well. And eventually, we will dismantle these networks also.

This is part of the reason why, however, it is so important for us to keep our eye on the ball and not panic, not succumb to fear. Because ISIL can't defeat the United States of America or our NATO partners. We can defeat ourselves, though, if we make bad decisions. And we have to understand that as painful and as tragic as these attacks are, that we are going to keep on grinding away, preventing them wherever we can, using a whole-of-government effort to knock down their propaganda, to disrupt their networks, to take their key operatives off the battlefield, and that eventually we will win.

But if we start making bad decisions -- indiscriminately killing civilians, for example, in some of these areas, instituting offensive religious tests on who can enter the country -- those kinds of strategies can end up backfiring. Because in order for us to ultimately win

this fight, we cannot frame this as a clash of civilizations between the West and Islam. That plays exactly into the hands of ISIL and the perversions -- the perverse interpretations of Islam that they're putting forward.

As far as Mr. Trump, we are going to go by the law, which is that -- in both tradition and the law -- that if somebody is the nominee, the Republican nominee for President, they need to get a security briefing so that if they were to win, they are not starting from scratch in terms of being prepared for this office.

And I'm not going to go into details of the nature of the security briefings that both candidates receive. What I will say is that they have been told these are classified briefings. And if they want to be President, they got to start acting like President, and that means being able to receive these briefings and not spread them around.

Q Are you worried about that?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think I've said enough on that.

Mary Bruce.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. What is your response to critics who say the \$400 million in cash that you sent to Iran was a ransom payment? Was it really, simply a pure coincidence that a sum that was -- a payment that was held up for almost four decades was suddenly sent at the exact same time that the American prisoners were released? And can you assure the American people that none of that money went to support terrorism?

THE PRESIDENT: Okay. It's been interesting to watch this story surface. Some of you may recall we announced these payments in January -- many months ago. There wasn't a secret. We announced them to all of you. Josh did a briefing on them. This wasn't some nefarious deal. And at the time we explained that Iran had pressed a claim before an international tribunal about them recovering money of theirs that we had frozen; that, as a consequence of its working its way through the international tribunal, it was the assessment of our lawyers that we were now at a point where there was significant litigation risk and we could end up costing ourselves billions of dollars. It was their advice

and suggestion that we settle. And that's what these payments represent. And it wasn't a secret. We were completely open with everybody about it. And it's interesting to me how suddenly this became a story again. That's point number one.

Point number two, we do not pay ransom for hostages. We've got a number of Americans being held all around the world. And I meet with their families, and it is heartbreaking. And we have stood up an entire section of interagency experts who devote all their time to working with these families to get these Americans out.

But those families know that we have a policy that we don't pay ransom. And the notion that we would somehow start now in this high-profile way and announce it to the world -- even as we're looking into the faces of other hostage families whose loved ones are being held hostage and say to them that we don't pay ransom -- defies logic. So that's point number two.

We do not pay ransom. We didn't here. And we don't -- we won't in the future -- precisely because if we did, then we would start encouraging Americans to be targeted, much in the same way that some countries that do pay ransom end up having a lot more of their citizens being taken by various groups.

Point number three is that the timing of this was, in fact, dictated by the fact that as a consequence of us negotiating around the nuclear deal, we actually had diplomatic negotiations and conversations with Iran for the first time in several decades. So the issue is not so much that it was a coincidence as it is that we were able to have a direction discussion.

John Kerry could meet with the foreign minister, which meant that our ability to clear accounts on a number of different issues at the same time converged. And it was important for us to take advantage of that opportunity both to deal with this litigation risk that had been raised -- it was important for us to make sure that we finished the job on the Iran nuclear deal -- and since we were in a conversation with them, it was important for us to be able to push them hard in getting these Americans out.

And let me make a final point on this. It's now been well over a year since the agreement with Iran to stop its nuclear program was signed. And by all accounts, it has worked exactly the way we said it was going to work. You will recall that there were all these

horror stories about how Iran was going to cheat, and this wasn't going to work, and Iran was going to get \$150 billion to finance terrorism and all these kinds of scenarios. And none of them have come to pass.

And it's not just the assessment of our intelligence community. It's the assessment of the Israeli military and intelligence community -- the country that was most opposed to this deal -- that acknowledges this has been a game-changer, and that Iran has abided by the deal, and that they no longer have the sort of short-term breakout capacity that would allow them to develop nuclear weapons.

So what I'm interested in is, if there's some news to be made, why not have some of these folks who were predicting disaster say, you know what, this thing actually worked? Now that would be a shock. (Laughter.) That would be impressive, if some of these folks who had said the sky is falling suddenly said, you know what, we were wrong and we are glad that Iran no longer has the capacity to break out in short term and develop a nuclear weapon. But, of course, that wasn't going to happen.

Instead, what we have is the manufacturing of outrage in a story that we disclosed in January. And the only bit of news that is relevant on this is the fact that we paid cash -- which brings me to my last point. The reason that we had to give them cash is precisely because we are so strict in maintaining sanctions and we do not have a banking relationship with Iran that we couldn't send them a check and we could not wire the money.

And it is not at all clear to me why it is that cash, as opposed to a check or a wire transfer, has made this into a new story. Maybe because it kind of feels like some spy novel or some crime novel because cash was exchanged. The reason cash was exchanged is because we don't have a banking relationship with Iran -- which is precisely part of the pressure that we're able to apply to them so that they would ship a whole bunch of nuclear material out and close down a bunch of facilities that, as I remember, two years ago, three years ago, five years ago, was people's top fear and priority that we make sure Iran doesn't have breakout nuclear capacity. They don't. This worked.

Josh Lederman.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Repeatedly now, Donald Trump has said that this election will be rigged against him, challenging really the core foundation of our democratic system. Can you promise the American people that this election will be conducted in a fair way? And are you worried that comments like his could erode the public's faith in the outcome of the election? And if he does win, given that you have just declared him "unfit," what will you say to the American people?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, at the end of the day, it's the American people's decision. I have one vote. I have the same vote you do. I have the vote that all the voters who are eligible all across the country have. I've offered my opinion, but ultimately it's the American people's decision to make collectively. And if somebody wins the election and they are President, then my constitutional responsibility is to peacefully transfer power to that individual and do everything I can to help them succeed.

It is -- I don't even really know where to start on answering this question. (Laughter.) Of course the elections will not be rigged. What does that mean? (Laughter.) The federal government doesn't run the election process. States and cities and communities all across the country, they are the ones who set up the voting systems and the voting booths. And if Mr. Trump is suggesting that there is a conspiracy theory that is being propagated across the country, including in places like Texas, where typically it's not Democrats who are in charge of voting booths, that's ridiculous. That doesn't make any sense. And I don't think anybody would take that seriously.

Now, we do take seriously -- as we always do -- our responsibilities to monitor and preserve the integrity of the voting process. If we see signs that a voting machine or system is vulnerable to hacking, then we inform those local authorities who are running the elections that they need to be careful. If we see jurisdictions that are violating federal laws in terms of equal access and aren't providing ramps for disabled voters, or are discriminating in some fashion, or are otherwise violating civil rights laws, then the Justice Department will come in and take care of that.

But this will be an election like every other election. And I think all of us at some points in our lives have played sports or maybe just played in a schoolyard or a sandbox. And sometimes folks, if they lose, they start complaining that they got cheated. But I've never heard of somebody complaining about being cheated before the game was over, or before the score is even tallied. So my suggestion would be go out there and try to win the election.

If Mr. Trump is up 10 or 15 points on Election Day and ends up losing, then maybe he can raise some questions. That doesn't seem to be the case at the moment.

Barbara Starr.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. On the question of ISIS expansion that you've been talking about, because you see them expanding around the world, because you see them trying to inspire attacks, what is your current level of concern about the homeland? You talk about the protection measures, but what is your assessment about the possibility your own intelligence advisors suggest is possible about the direct ISIS threat to Americans? And if I may follow up somewhat along the same lines, what is your assessment today as you stand here about whether Donald Trump can be trusted with America's nuclear weapons?

THE PRESIDENT: On your second question -- and I'll sort of address this to any additional Trump questions -- I would ask all of you to just make your own judgment. I've made this point already multiple times. Just listen to what Mr. Trump has to say and make your own judgment with respect to how confident you feel about his ability to manage things like our nuclear triad.

Q With respect, sir, it suggests that you're not confident.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, as I recall, I just answered a question about this a couple days ago and I thought I made myself pretty clear. And I don't want to just keep on repeating it, or a variation on it. I obviously have a very strong opinion about the two candidates who are running here. One is very positive and one is not so much. And I think that you will just hear -- any further questions that are directed at this subject I think you'll hear pretty much variations on the same theme.

What I can say is that this is serious business. And the person who is in the Oval Office and who our Secretary of Defense and our Joint Chiefs of Staff and our outstanding men and women in uniform report to, they are counting on somebody who has the temperament and good judgment to be able to make decisions to keep America safe. And that should be very much on the minds of voters when they go into the voting booth in November.

In terms of the threat that ISIL poses to the homeland, I think it is serious. We take it seriously. And as I said earlier, precisely because they are less concerned about big, spectacular 9/11-style attacks, because they've seen the degree of attention they can get with smaller-scale attacks using small arms or assault rifles, or, in the case of Nice, France, a truck, the possibility of either a lone actor or a small cell carrying out an attack that kills people is real.

And that's why our intelligence and law enforcement and military officials are working around the clock to try to anticipate potential attacks, to obtain the threads of people who might be vulnerable to brainwashing by ISIL. We are constrained here in the United States to carry out this work in a way that's consistent with our laws and presumptions of innocence. And the fact that we prevent a lot of these attacks as effectively as we do, without a lot of fanfare and abiding by our law, is a testament to the incredible work that these folks are doing. They work really hard at it. But it is always a risk.

And some of you may have read the article in The New York Times today -- I guess it came out last night online -- about this individual in Germany who had confessed and given himself up, and then explained his knowledge of how ISIL's networks worked. There was a paragraph in there that some may have caught, which we don't know for a fact that this is true, but according to this reporting, the individual indicated that ISIL recognizes it's harder to get its operatives into the United States, but the fact that we have what he referred to as "open gun laws" meant that anybody, as long as they didn't have a criminal record that barred them from purchase, could go in and buy weapons -- that made sort of a homegrown extremist strategy more attractive to them. And those are the hardest to stop because, by definition, if somebody doesn't have a record, if it's not triggering something, it means that anticipating their actions becomes that much more difficult.

And this is why the military strategy that we have in Syria and Iraq is necessary, but it is not sufficient. We have to do a better job of disrupting networks. And those networks are more active in Europe than they are here. But we don't know what we don't know, and so it's conceivable that there are some networks here that could be activated. But we also have to get to the messaging that can reach a troubled individual over the Internet and do a better job of disrupting that. And what I've told my team is that, although we've been working on this now for five, six, seven years, we've got to put more resources into it. This can't be an afterthought. It's something that we have to really focus on.

This is also why how we work with the Muslim American community, the values that we affirm about their patriotism and their sacrifice and our fellow feeling with them is so important. One of the reasons that we don't have networks and cells that are as active here as they are in certain parts of Europe is because the Muslim American community in

this country is extraordinarily patriotic and largely successful, and fights in our military, and serves as our doctors and our nurses, and there are communities in which they are raising their kids with love of country and a rejection of violence. And that has to be affirmed consistently. And if we screw that up, then we're going to have bigger problems.

Gregory Korte of USA Today.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Yesterday, you commuted the sentences of 214 federal inmates. It was the largest single-day grant of commutations in the history of the American presidency. So I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about your clemency thought process.

One is, you've talked about this as low-level drug offenders who got mandatory minimum sentences, but about a quarter of the commutations you've made also had firearms offenses. Given your overall philosophy on firearms, can you reconcile that for us? And given that previously in your presidency you had sent a memo to the Office of Pardon Attorney saying there was sort of a predisposition against firearms to be granted clemency, why did you change your mind on that?

Also, the other side of the ledger here is pardons. You've granted more commutations than any President since Calvin Coolidge. You've granted fewer pardons than any two-term President since John Adams. Why is that? Is the focus on commutations taking energy away from pardons, especially since these are -- you've talked about second chances; a full pardon would give people a better chance at those second chances.

THE PRESIDENT: Good.

Q And then finally, just one other thing on pardons. Many of your predecessors in the final days of their presidency have saved -- reserved that for their more politically sensitive pardons. Should we expect you to do that? Or would you rule that out? Thanks.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay. I appreciate the question, Gregory, because I haven't had a chance to talk about this much and this is an effort that I'm really proud of.

It is my view, shared by Democrats and Republicans alike in many quarters, that as successful as we've been in reducing crime in this country, the extraordinary rate of incarceration of nonviolent offenders has created its own set of problems that are devastating. Entire communities have been ravaged where largely men, but some women, are taken out of those communities. Kids are now growing up without parents. It perpetuates a cycle of poverty and disorder in their lives. It is disproportionately young men of color that are being arrested at higher rates, charged and convicted at higher rates, and imprisoned for longer sentences.

And so ultimately, the fix on this is criminal justice reform. And I still hold out hope that the bipartisan effort that's taking place in Congress can finish the job and we can have a criminal justice system, at least at the federal level, that is both smart on crime, effective on crime, but recognizes the need for proportionality in sentencing and the need to rehabilitate those who commit crimes.

But even as that slow process of criminal justice reform goes forward, what I wanted to see is we could reinvigorate the pardon process and commutation process that had become stalled over the course of several years -- partly because it's politically risky. You commute somebody and they commit a crime, and the politics of it are tough. And everybody remembers the Willie Horton ad.

And so the bias I think of my predecessors and, frankly, a number of my advisors early in my presidency is, be careful about that. But I thought it was very important for us to send a clear message that we believe in the principles behind criminal justice reform even if ultimately we need legislation.

So we have focused more on commutations than we have on pardons. I would argue, Gregory, that by the time I leave office, the number of pardons that we grant will be roughly in line with what other Presidents have done. But standing up this commutations process has required a lot of effort and a lot of energy, and it's not like we got a new slug of money to do it. So you've got limited resources. The primary job of the Justice Department is to prevent crime and to convict those who have committed crimes and to keep the American people safe. And that means that you've had this extraordinary and Herculean effort by a lot of people inside the Justice Department to go above and beyond what they're doing to also review these petitions that have been taking place. And we've been able to get bar organizations around the country to participate, to kind of screen and help people apply.

And what we -- the main criteria that I've tried to set is if under today's laws -- because there have been changes in how we charge nonviolent drug offenses -- if under today's charges, their sentences would be substantially lower than the charges that they received, if they got a life sentence but a U.S. attorney or the Justice Department indicates that today they'd be likely to get 20 years and they've already served 25, then what we try to do is to screen through and find those individuals who have paid their debt to society, that have behaved themselves and tried to reform themselves while incarcerated, and we think have a good chance of being able to use that second chance well.

On the firearms issue, what I've done is to try to screen out folks who seem to have a propensity for violence. And so -- and these are just hypotheticals, but there may be a situation where a kid at 18 was a member of a gang, had a firearm, did not use it in the offense that he was charged in, there's no evidence that he used it in any violence offense, it's still a firearms charge in enhancement, but he didn't use it. He's now 48 -- or 38, 20 years later, and has a unblemished prison record, has gone back to school, gotten his GED, has gone through drug treatment, has the support of the original judge that presided, the support of the U.S. attorney that charged him, support of the warden, has a family that loves him. And in that situation, the fact that he had 20 years early an enhancement because he had a firearm is different than a situation where somebody has engaged in armed robbery and shot somebody. In those cases, that is still something that I'm concerned about.

Our focus really has been on people who we think were overcharged and people who we do not believe have a propensity towards violence.

And in terms of your last question about sort of last-minute pardons that are granted, the process that I put in place is not going to vary depending on how close I get to the election. So it's going to be reviewed by the pardon attorney, it will be reviewed by my White House counsel, and I'm going to, as best as I can, make these decisions based on the merits, as opposed to political considerations.

And finally, Jim Miklaszewski is retiring after 30 years at NBC. He has done an outstanding job, mostly covering the Department of Defense. This may be my last press conference here, so I just wanted to thank Jim for the extraordinary career that he's had and the great job that he's done. And he gets the last question.

Q Thank you very much, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: You bet.

Q First, back to ISIS and Iran and Syria. Your very own national counterterrorism operation has found that despite all of the decisive defeats that the U.S. and coalition have dealt ISIS on the battlefield, that they've expanded their threat worldwide to include as many as 18 operational bases. In the six years you've been dealing, do you feel any personal disappointment that there hasn't been more progress? And in any discussions you've had with the U.S. military and your intelligence agencies, have you come up with any new ideas on how to deal or defeat ISIS?

THE PRESIDENT: Every time there is a terrorist attack I feel disappointment because I'd like to prevent all of them. And that's true not just when the attacks are in Europe or in the United States. When you read stories about attacks in Lebanon or Iraq or Afghanistan or distant parts of the world that don't get as much attention, they get my attention because that's somebody's kid and that's somebody's mom and that's somebody who was just going about his business, and mindlessly, senselessly, this person was murdered.

So I haven't gotten numb to it. It bugs me whenever it happens and wherever it happens. And we are constantly pushing ourselves to see are there additional ideas that we can deploy to defeat this threat.

Now, it is important that we recognize terrorism as a tactic has been around for a long time. And if you look at the '70s or the '80s or the '90s, there was some terrorist activity somewhere in the world that was brutal. And as much as I would like to say that during my eight-year presidency we could have eliminated terrorism completely, it's not surprising that that hasn't happened and I don't expect that will happen under the watch of my successors.

I do think that because of our extraordinary efforts, the homeland is significantly safer than it otherwise would be. Now, in some ways this is arguing the counterfactuals, but the attacks we prevent I take great satisfaction in, and I am grateful for the extraordinary work that our teams do. I don't think there's any doubt that had we not destroyed al Qaeda in the FATA that more Americans would have been killed, and we might have seen more attacks like we saw on 9/11. And we have maintained vigilance, recognizing that those threats still remain, those aspirations in the minds of these folks still remain, but it is much harder for them to carry out large-scale attacks like that than it used to be.

What we have seen is that these lower-level attacks carried out by fewer operatives or an individual with less sophisticated and less expensive weapons can do real damage. And that, I think, points to the need for us to not just have a military strategy, not just have a traditional counterterrorism strategy that's designed to bust up networks and catch folks before they carry out their attacks -- although those still are necessary, and we have to be more and more sophisticated about how we carry those out, it still requires us to have much greater cooperation with our partners around the world -- but it points to the fact that we're going to have to do a better job in draining the ideology that is behind these attacks, that right now is emanating largely out of the Middle East and a very small fraction of the Muslim world a perversion of Islam that has taken root and has been turbocharged over the Internet, and that is appealing to even folks who don't necessarily know anything about Islam and aren't even practicing Islam in any serious way, but have all kinds of psychosis and latch on to this as some way of being important and magnifying themselves.

And that's tougher because that involves both changes in geopolitics in places like Syria. It requires cultural changes in regions like the Middle East and North Africa that are going through generational changes and shifts as the old order collapses. It requires psychology and thinking about how do these messages of hate reach individuals and are there ways in which we can intervene ahead of time. And all that work is being done. And we've got the very best people at it, and each day they're making a difference in saving lives -- not just here, but around the world.

But it's a challenge precisely because if you're successful 99 percent of the time, that 1 percent can still mean heartbreak for families. And it's difficult because in a country, let's say, of 300 million people here in the United States, if 99.9 percent of people are immune from this hateful ideology but one-tenth of 1 percent are susceptible to it, that's a lot of dangerous people running around. And we can't always anticipate them ahead of time because they may not have criminal records. So this is going to be a challenge.

I just want to end on the point that I made earlier. How we react to this is as important as the efforts we take to destroy ISIL, prevent these networks from penetrating. You can't separate those two things out. The reason it's called terrorism, as opposed to just a standard war, is that these are weak enemies that can't match us in conventional power, but what they can do is make us scared. And when societies get scared, they can react in ways that undermine the fabric of our society. It makes us weaker and makes us more vulnerable, and creates politics that divide us in ways that hurt us over the long term.

And so if we remain steady and steadfast and vigilant, but also take the long view and maintain perspective and remind ourselves of who we are and what we care about most deeply, and what we cherish and what's good about this country, and what's good about the international order and civilization that was built in part because of the sacrifices of our men and women after a 20th century full of world war -- if we remember that, then we're going to be okay. But we're still going to see, episodically, these kinds of tragedies, and we're going to have to keep working on until we make things better.

Q If I may, Mr. President --

THE PRESIDENT: You may only because this is your retirement.

Q I was hoping you'd --

THE PRESIDENT: But I hope it's not too long because --

Q No, no --

THE PRESIDENT: -- I'm going to be late for my birthday dinner. (Laughter.)

Q You alluded earlier to the negotiations between the U.S. and Russia over some military-to-military cooperation in Syria against some of the militant forces there, presumably in exchange for whatever Russian influence could be imposed on the Assad regime for a variety of reasons. Now, I'm sure you're not surprised that some in the military are not supportive of that deal. Some European allies think it would be a deal with the devil. What makes you so confident that you can trust the Russians and Vladimir Putin?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not confident that we can trust the Russians and Vladimir Putin, which is why we have to test whether or not we can get an actual Cessation of Hostilities that includes an end to the kinds of aerial bombing and civilian death and destruction that we've seen carried out by the Assad regime. And Russia may not be able to get there either because they don't want to or because they don't have sufficient influence over Assad. And that's what we're going to test.

So we go into this without any blinders on. We're very clear that Russia has been willing to support a murderous regime and an individual, in Assad, who has destroyed his country just to cling on to power. What started with peaceful protests has led to a shattering of an entire pretty advanced society. And so whenever you're trying to broker any kind of deal with an individual like that, or a country like that, you got to go in there with some skepticism.

On the other hand, if we are able to get a genuine Cessation of Hostilities that prevents indiscriminate bombing, that protects civilians, that allows humanitarian access and creates some sort of pathway to begin the hard work of political negotiations inside of Syria, then we have to try -- because the alternative is a perpetuation of civil war.

I've been wrestling with this now for a lot of years. I am pretty confident that a big chunk of my gray hair comes out of my Syria meetings. And there is not a meeting that I don't end by saying is there something else we could be doing that we haven't thought of. Is there a plan F, G, H that we think would lead to a resolution of this issue so that the Syrian people can put their lives back together and we can bring peace and relieve the refugee crisis that's taken place. And the options are limited when you have a civil war like this, when you have a ruler who doesn't care about his people, when you've got terrorist organizations that are brutal and would impose their own kind of dictatorship on people, and you have a moderate opposition and ordinary civilians who are often outgunned and outmanned. And that's a very difficult situation to deal with. But we've got to give it a chance.

There are going to be some bottom lines that we expect for us to cooperate with Russia beyond the sort of de-confliction that we're currently doing. And that means restraint on the part of the regime that so far has not been forthcoming.

Early on in this version of the Cessation of Hostilities, we probably saw some lives saved and some lessening of violence. The violations of this cessation have grown to the point where it just barely exists, particularly up in the northwestern part of the country. So we're going to test and see if we can get something that sticks. And if not, then Russia will have shown itself very clearly to be an irresponsible actor on the world stage that is supporting a murderous regime and will have to answer to that on the international stage.

All right? Thank you very much, everybody.

END
5:52 P.M. EDT