

Remarks on Sexual Assault Prevention Efforts

January 22, 2014

The President. Thank you. Please have a seat. Well, hello, everybody. Welcome to the White House. To all of you in my administration, the partners with the White House Council on Women and Girls, led by Valerie and Tina Tchen, I want to thank all of you for being here today and for the work that you're doing every single day to advance a cause that matters to all of us, and that's preventing the outrage, the crime, of sexual violence in America.

I especially want to thank the members of my Cabinet who are here today. We've got Secretaries Chuck Hagel, Kathleen Sebelius, and Arne Duncan, as well as Attorney General Holder. And their presence here today, and the presence of so many leaders from across my administration, is a testament to how important we consider this issue and how committed we are across the entire Federal Government to meeting this challenge.

And that, of course, includes our outstanding Vice President. Few people have brought more passion to this fight over the decades than Joe Biden. Back when a lot of people believed that domestic abuse was a private family matter and women in danger often had nobody to turn to, Joe was out there saying: "This is unacceptable. This has to change." And thanks to Joe and so many others, this Nation enshrined its commitment in the Violence Against Women's Act.

Police officers and prosecutors got special training on domestic violence. More shelters opened across the country. A national hotline was created. And as Joe mentioned, a cultural shift began to occur. Americans came to see how serious this problem was and how we all needed to do more to address it. And that's resulted in more hope and more safety and a new chance at life for countless women. So Joe was on the frontlines on this, and you can tell his passion is unabated. And so we are very grateful for everything that you've done on this work.

Vice President Joe Biden. Thank you.

The President. Thank you, Joe. [*Applause*] Appreciate it.

So I think that conviction and that passion brings us all here today, because this is not an abstract problem that goes on in other families or other communities. Even now, it's not always talked about enough. It can still go on in the shadows. But it affects every one of us. It's about all of us: our moms, our wives, our sisters, our daughters, our sons. Sexual assault is an affront on our basic decency and humanity. And for survivors, the awful pain can take years, even decades to heal. Sometimes, it lasts a lifetime. And wherever it occurs—whether it's in our neighborhoods or on our college campuses, our military bases or our tribal lands—it has to matter to all of us.

Because when a young girl or a young boy starts to question their self-worth after being assaulted and maybe starts withdrawing, we're all deprived of their full potential. When a young woman drops out of school after being attacked, that's not just a loss for her, that's a loss for our country. We've all got a stake in that young woman's success.

When a mother struggles to hold down a job after a traumatic assault or is assaulted in order to keep a job, that matters to all of us, because strong families are a foundation of a strong country. And if that woman doesn't feel like she has recourse when she's subject to abuse and we're not there supporting her, shame on us. When a member of our military is

assaulted by the very people he or she trusted and serves with, or when they leave the military, voluntarily or involuntarily because they were raped, that's a profound injustice that no one who volunteers to defend America should ever have to endure.

So sexual violence is more than just a crime against individuals. It threatens our families, it threatens our communities; ultimately, it threatens the entire country. It tears apart the fabric of our communities. And that's why we're here today, because we have the power to do something about it as a Government, as a nation. We have the capacity to stop sexual assault, support those who have survived it, and bring perpetrators to justice.

And that's why last year I was proud to sign the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women's Act, which improved the support we gave to cities and States to help end sexual assault. And that includes funding to train police officers and nurses and to speed up the processing of untested rape kits so we can reduce that backlog, solve unsolved cases, get justice for victims.

We pushed for the Violence Against Women Act to include more protections for immigrants; for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans; for Native Americans. Because no matter who you are or where you live, everybody in this country deserves security and justice and dignity. And we have to keep reaching out to people who are still suffering in the shadows.

As Commander in Chief, I've made it clear to our military leadership that we need to deal aggressively with the problem of sexual assault in our Armed Forces. It has been going on too long, and we have an obligation to protect the men and women who put their lives on the line to protect us. And Secretary Hagel and Secretary—and Chairman Dempsey have already taken steps to reduce violence and support those who have been harmed. But I've made it clear, I expect significant progress in the year ahead. These crimes have no place in the greatest military on Earth.

I've directed agencies across the Federal Government to do more to help members of their workforce who have been assaulted, because employers have a role to play too, and I want my administration to lead by example. That's why we're releasing a new report today that outlines all of our efforts and where we intend to do more. And I met earlier today with Secretaries Sebelius, Hagel, Duncan, Attorney General Holder, as well as Vice President Biden, as well as members of my senior staff to discuss how we implement going forward. Because I want to make sure we're doing everything we can to spare another American the trauma of sexual assault.

Today we're taking another important step with a focus on our college campuses. It is estimated that one in five women on college campuses has been sexually assaulted during their time there—one in five. These young women worked so hard just to get into college; often, their parents are doing everything they can to help them pay for it. So when they finally make it there only to be assaulted, that is not just a nightmare for them and their families, it's an affront to everything they've worked so hard to achieve. It's totally unacceptable.

Three years ago, we sent every school district, college, and university that receives Federal funding new instructions clarifying their legal obligations to prevent and respond to sexual assault. And we have seen progress, including an inspiring wave of student-led activism and a growing number of students who have found the courage to come forward and report attacks. That's exactly what we want them to do. And we owe all these brave young people an extraordinary debt of gratitude.

But we cannot stop there. There's obviously more that we have to do to keep our students safe. And that's why here today I will sign a Presidential memorandum creating the White House Task Force To Protect Students From Sexual Assault. And we're going to work with colleges and universities and educational institutions of all kinds across America to help them come up with better ways to prevent and respond to sexual assault on their campuses. And then we'll help them put those ideas into practice, because our schools need to be places where our young people feel secure and confident as they prepare to go as far as their God-given talents can carry them.

And none of this is going to be easy. Some of you have worked on these issues for years. You know how long it took for our country to get to where we are now. And it didn't just take new laws. It took a fundamental change in our culture, a shift in our attitudes about how we think about sexual violence and how much we value the lives and dignity of our wives and sisters and daughters and sons. Over time, we've become a better, stronger nation for it.

But now it's up to each of us—every single one of us—to keep up that momentum. We've got to keep teaching young men in particular to show women the respect they deserve and to recognize sexual violence and be outraged by it and to do their part to stop it from happening in the first place. Now, during our discussion earlier today, we talked about, I want every young man in America to feel some strong peer pressure in terms of how they are supposed to behave and treat women. And that starts before they get to college.

So those of us who are fathers have an obligation to transmit that information. But we can do more to make sure that every young man out there—whether they're in junior high or high school or college or beyond—understand what's expected of them and what it means to be a man and to intervene if they see somebody else acting inappropriately. We're going to need to encourage young people, men and women, to realize that sexual assault is simply unacceptable. And they're going to have to summon the bravery to stand up and say so, especially when the social pressure to keep quiet or to go along can be very intense.

We've got to keep working with our teachers and police officers and health professionals and community leaders to search for new ways to prevent these crimes. My hope and intention is, is that every college president who has not personally been thinking about this is going to hear about this report and is going to go out and figure out who is in charge on their campus of responding properly and what are the best practices and are we doing everything that we should be doing? And if you're not doing that right now, I want the students at the school to ask the president what he is doing or she is doing. And perhaps most important, we need to keep saying to anyone out there who has ever been assaulted, you are not alone. You will never be alone. We have your back; I've got your back.

And I promise I'm going to keep fighting for you and your families, and I'm going to keep pushing for others to step up across my administration and in Congress and in State capitals and in college campuses and on our military bases and all across our country. This is a priority for me not only as President and Commander in Chief, but as a husband and a father of two extraordinary girls.

I've often said in my travels around the world: You can judge a nation and how successful it will be based on how it treats its women and its girls. Those nations that are successful, they're successful in part because women and girls are valued. And I'm determined that, by that measure, the United States of America will be the global leader. I'm grateful to each of you for making sure that happens. I'm grateful for Joe Biden for having led the charge both in Congress and in my administration on many of these issues.

And now I'd ask that those of you who will be joining me, please come up so I can sign this memorandum.

[At this point, the President signed the memorandum.]

Done. All right.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:05 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Senior Adviser Valerie B. Jarrett; and Chief of Staff to the First Lady Christina M. Tchen, in her capacity as Executive Director of the White House Council of Women and Girls. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Vice President Biden, who introduced the President.

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