

Remarks at the League of Conservation Voters Capital Dinner

June 25, 2014

The President. Hello, hello, hello! Hello! Well, it's good to be back. First of all, I just want to thank Carol Browner, one of my favorite people. We miss her in the White House, but it looks like she has occupied herself. *[Laughter]* We appreciate all the work that you do helping to protect our planet and to give our children a brighter future, so give Carol a big round of applause. I want to thank Gene Karpinski and everybody at LCV for having me here tonight.

I was telling the story—many people know this—I know you think I'm here just because, like, I care about the environment—*[laughter]*. No, it's deeper than that. I guess Gene told this story: When I ran for the U.S. Senate, I was decidedly the underdog; really, nobody knew me. And LCV, because it's a good-government type, goes through process, and they had the board interview all the candidates. *[Laughter]* And I went in, and I did my shtick—*[laughter]*—and they endorsed me. And I was not at all favored to win, and it was the first and probably only prominent national organization to endorse me in the primary; everybody endorsed me in the general. *[Laughter]* But it was—for me, at least, it was a testament that this was an organization that cared about ideas and obviously had a really good eye for talent. *[Laughter]* So I am here primarily out of loyalty. There's a little payback going on here. *[Laughter]* But then, there is also the whole protecting the planet thing. *[Laughter]*

The work you do to protect our planet and our country and dealing with the rapidly growing threat of climate change is even more urgent and more important than the last time I spoke to you back in 2006 when I was still a Senator. Because we know two big things: We know more about the threat than we did back then, and we know through experience that we can act; that we don't have to be passive, that we can act in ways that protect our environment and promote economic growth at the same time. We know we can do it. We've shown we can do it.

So exactly 1 year ago today, I was at Georgetown University to announce my climate action plan. And I remember this because it was 95 degrees. *[Laughter]* The staff purposely put the speech outside, and so there are a number of photographs of me wiping my brow, and I don't sweat usually. I was hot. *[Laughter]* But I started my speech the same way I start all my speeches on climate change, with the facts. Not a lot of spin, just the facts.

We know that burning fossil fuels release carbon dioxide. We know that carbon dioxide traps heat. We know that the levels of carbon dioxide are higher than they've been in 800,000 years. We know that the 20 warmest years on record for our planet all happened since 1990 and last month was the warmest May ever recorded. We know that communities across the country are struggling with longer wildfire seasons, more severe droughts, heavier rainfall, more frequent flooding. That's why, last month, hundreds of experts declared that climate change is no longer a distant threat, it's "moved firmly into the present." Those are the facts. You can ignore the facts; you can't deny the facts.

So the question is not whether we need to act. The overwhelming judgment of science, accumulated and measured and reviewed and sliced and diced over decades, has put that to rest. The question is whether we have the will to act before it's too late. Because if we fail to protect the world we leave our children, then we fail in the most fundamental purpose of us being here in the first place.

For more than 40 years, that has been your mission: preserve and protect this planet we call home. And by the way, it's been the mission of a lot of Members of Congress who are here today. It's been a priority of mine for as long as I've been in office. And part of it, maybe, is growing up in Hawaii, where every day you appreciate the wonder of your planet, but you also understand how fragile it is. So we're working in a few ways to do our part: by using more clean energy, less dirty energy, and wasting less energy throughout our economy.

Right now America generates more clean energy than ever before. Thanks in part to the investments we made in the Recovery Act. You remember that old Recovery Act? *[Laughter]* It was the largest investment in green energy and technology in U.S. history. That was just one of its attributes.

As a consequence of those investments, the electricity we generate from wind has tripled since 2008. The energy we generate from the sun has increased more than tenfold. Every 4 minutes, another American home or business goes solar. And last year alone, solar jobs jumped 20 percent.

And the good news is, we can do even better. So my climate action plan will help us double our electricity from renewable energy again by 2020. And I've—I directed the Interior Department to green-light enough private renewable energy capacity on public lands to power more than 6 million homes. The Department of Defense, the biggest energy consumer in America, is installing 3 gigawatts of renewable power on its bases. So we are going to continue to incentivize the adaptation of technologies that are not going to solve our entire problem—there's no silver bullet—but what we're seeing is unit costs go down, efficiency and power generation going up. We're moving, and it's making a difference.

So that's the first part of our plan: generating and using more clean energy. Then we've got to use less dirty energy. Since I took office, we've doubled how far our cars and trucks will go on a gallon of gas by the middle of the next decade. We're helping families and businesses save billions of dollars with more efficient homes and buildings and appliances. By the end of the next decade, these combined efficiency standards for appliances and Federal buildings will reduce carbon pollution by at least 3 billion tons compared to when I took office, and that's an amount equal to what our entire energy sector emits in nearly half a year.

So together, we've held our carbon emissions to levels not seen in about 20 years. And since 2006, no country on Earth has reduced its total carbon pollution by as much as the United States of America.

And by the way, the private sector knows how important this is. Today, at the White House, some of America's leading foundations and impact investors committed more than \$300 million to accelerate clean energy technology and energy-efficient buildings. So we're making progress on that front.

But everybody here knows, for the sake of our kids, we've got to do more. Today, about 40 percent of America's carbon pollution comes from our power plants. There are no Federal limits to the amount those plants can pump into the air. None. We limit the amount of toxic chemicals like mercury and sulfur and arsenic in our air and water, but power plants can dump as much carbon pollution into our atmosphere as they want. It's not smart, it's not right, it's not safe, and I determined it needs to stop.

And so that's why, in my speech a year ago, I directed the EPA to build on the efforts of a lot of States and cities and companies, and I told them, come up with commonsense standards for reducing dangerous carbon pollution from our power plants. Last month, I unveiled those

proposed standards, which will cut down our carbon pollution and our smog and our soot that threaten the health of our most vulnerable Americans, including children and the elderly. We've constructed it so that States have the flexibility to meet these standards with whatever clean energy sources make sense for them, including renewables and taking advantage of natural gas—natural gas, replacing even dirtier energy sources. And in just the first year that these standards go into effect, they'll help avoid up to 100,000 asthma attacks, about 2,100 heart attacks. Those numbers keep on going up after the first year. And we're taking a whole bunch of carbon out of the atmosphere.

So I say all this to say that, no matter how big a problem, progress is possible. It's not instantaneous; we've got to sometimes cut these things into pieces. But as I told graduates at UC Irvine a couple weeks ago at—[*applause*]*—there you go, UC Irvine. [Laughter]* You got the little anteater. [*Laughter*] It's a—I've got to say, it's a pretty cute mascot. [*Laughter*] An anteater, it's nice, I like it. [*Laughter*]

It's pretty rare that you encounter people who say that the problem of carbon pollution is not a problem. You've all—in most communities and workplaces, et cetera, when you talk to folks, they may not know how big a problem, they may not know exactly how it works, they may doubt that we can do something about it, but generally, they don't just say, no, I don't believe anything scientists say. [*Laughter*] Except where?

Audience members. Congress!

The President. In Congress. [*Laughter*] In Congress. Folks will tell you climate change is a hoax or a fad or a plot. [*Laughter*] It's a liberal plot. [*Laughter*] And then most recently, because many who say that actually know better and they're just embarrassed, they duck the question. They say, hey, I'm not a scientist, which really translates into, I accept that manmade climate change is real, but if I say so out loud, I will be run out of town by a bunch of fringe elements that think science—climate science is a liberal plot, so I'm going to just pretend like, I don't know, I can't read.

I mean, I'm not a scientist either, but I've got this guy, John Holdren; he's a scientist. [*Laughter*] I've got a bunch of scientists at NASA, and I've got a bunch of scientists at EPA. I'm not a doctor either—[*laughter*]*—but if a bunch of doctors tell me that tobacco can cause lung cancer, then I'll say, okay. [Laughter]* Right? [*Laughter*] I mean, it's not that hard.

Now, the good news is, the American people are wiser than this. Seven in 10 Americans say global warming is a serious problem. Seven in 10 say the Federal Government should limit pollution from our power plants. And of all the issues in the—a recent poll asking Americans where we—where they think we can make a difference, protecting the environment came out on top. We actually believe we can do this. We can make a difference.

And that's in large part thanks to you. Many of you have done just terrific work at the grassroots level: educating, mobilizing. That isn't to say, by the way, and I say this sometimes to environmental groups, it's not to say that it's not easy and that we should not take seriously the very real concerns people have about their current economic state. People don't like gas prices going up. They don't like electricity prices going up. And we ignore those very real and legitimate concerns at our peril, so if we're blithe about saying this is the defining issue of our time, but we don't address people's legitimate economic concerns, then even if they are concerned about climate change, they may not support efforts to do something about it. So we've got to shape our strategies to speak to the very real and legitimate concerns of working families all across America. But we can do that. That's the good news. We can do it.

And the sooner we do it, the better. Right now developing countries have some of the fastest rising levels of carbon pollution. They are less equipped to cope with the effects of climate change than we are. But they're also trying to deal with hundreds of millions of people in poverty. And so the tradeoffs for them are even tougher than for us sometimes, unless we describe how development should leapfrog some of the old technologies, learn lessons from us, and go right to a clean energy future. And we should be part of that conversation, but we've got to lead by example. They're waiting to see what America does. And I'm convinced, when America proves what's possible, other countries are going to come along.

I should point out, by the way, that we're not just acting on climate change; we're also doing more for conservation. Since I took office, we've established 10 new national parks, 10 new national wildlife refuges, 11 new national monuments. I just announced plans to further protect our oceans. And I'm not just going to stand with environmentalists, I'm going to stand with sportsmen and conservationists against Members of Congress who want to dismantle the Clean Water Act. We've got to dredge up that old tape of the Cuyahoga River on fire and the Chicago River and just remind people that this thing worked. It was—one of the great achievements of modern American politics was realizing that we didn't have to trade off a healthy environment for our kids and economic growth. Because, as Americans, we have an obligation to be good stewards of the gifts that have been given and make sure that they're around for our kids and our grandkids.

I don't have to tell you all this. Whether it's shifting to clean energy, preserving our landscapes and natural resources, you understand our mission. You've helped define it. And it's not going to happen overnight. This is a generational project. And sometimes, it can be easy to get discouraged, and to feel like, oh, we're not setting high enough goals, we're not reaching them quickly enough. I know. I read the science. I'm not a scientist, but I read it. *[Laughter]*

But what I also know is, is that when you take those first steps, even if they're hard and even if they're halting sometimes, that you start building momentum and you start mobilizing larger and larger communities. And when it comes to a challenge as far reaching and important as protecting our planet, every step makes a difference.

And one of the great things about it is, is that this is a generational fight, but the younger generation is more attuned to this than just about anybody. You talk to Malia, you talk to Sasha, you talk to your kids or your grandkids, and this is something they get. It's—they don't need a lot of persuading. They understand how important this is. And that should make us hopeful and optimistic.

And I'll close with a story I heard recently that illustrates the point. I called Gregg Popovich, coach of the San Antonio Spurs, to congratulate him on winning the NBA Championship. And by—and I love Pop. He is not just a great coach, he is a great guy. And I've gotten to know him and really love the guy. And for more than a decade, Coach Pop has hung a sign in the Spurs locker room for all his players to see. And on that sign is a quote from a 19th-century reformer, which is not what you'd expect to see in an NBA locker room, but that's the kind of guy Coach Popovich is, and the quote goes something like this: "When nothing seems to help, I go look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at that—at the hundred and first blow, it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it, but all that had gone before."

So that's what we're doing. Together, we are pounding the rock. And together, we are making progress. And sometimes, it feels like, man, I'm getting tired. *[Laughter]* And we're not

moving fast enough. But then one day, the rock splits open, not because one person comes up or one President comes up and strikes a mighty blow, but because of all the work that has gone on before. Our work. So until the day comes that the rock is split, we've all got to take turns pounding. We've got to keep fighting. We've got to keep mobilizing. We've got to keep making sure that your voices are heard in Congress, in State capitals, in city halls. Because that's the only way we're going to build the kind of future that we want: cleaner, more prosperous, more good jobs; a future where we can look our kids in the eye and tell them we did our part, we served you well, we were good stewards, we're passing this on.

Thank you, everybody. God bless you. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:23 p.m. at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center. In his remarks, he referred to former Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change Carol M. Browner, in her capacity as member of the board of directors, and Gene Karpinski, president, League of Conservation Voters.

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