

Remarks at a Town Hall Meeting and a Question-and-Answer Session at Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina

March 6, 2015

The President. Hello, South Carolina! Thank you! Well, it is good to see everybody. It's good to be back in South Carolina. Now, you all—if you all have a seat, take a seat. If you don't have a seat, I'm sorry. *[Laughter]*

I want to say thank you to Benedict College for your hospitality. I want to thank Tiana for the great introduction. Give her a big round of applause. We have all kinds of luminaries and dignitaries and big shots here today—*[laughter]*—but I'm going to just mention a couple of them: one of the finest gentlemen and finest legislators we have in the country, your Congressman, Jim Clyburn; your outstanding mayor, Steve Benjamin; the president of this great institution, Dr. David Swinton. All right. Go Tigers!

It's been a while since I was in South Carolina. In fact, I got—it's been too long. It has. I'm not going to lie. I love you, and I've been loving you. It's just I've had a lot of stuff to do since I last saw you. But it was wonderful to be backstage because I got a chance to see so many of the wonderful people that I worked with back in 2008. If it was not for this great State, the Palmetto State, if it was not for all the people who had, at a grassroots level, gone door to door and talked to folks, got everybody fired up and ready to go, if it hadn't been for all of you, I might not be President. And I'm truly grateful for that. I'm truly grateful for that.

I hope that you don't mind, I also brought another good friend: the Attorney General of the United States, Eric Holder. We decided to take a Friday road trip together, because Eric has not only been a great friend, but an extraordinary Attorney General. As some of you know, he is going to go enjoy himself and has—is going to retire from public service. But I know he's still going to be doing great things around the country. I'm really going to miss him.

Now, I am not here to make a long speech. I'm here to make a short speech, because what I want to do is spend most of my time interacting, having a conversation. I want to get questions; I want to hear what you guys are thinking about. This is a good thing for me, to get out of Washington and talk to normal folk. *[Laughter]*

And I thought it was appropriate to come here because tomorrow I'll be visiting Selma, Alabama, for the 50th anniversary of the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. And one of the things I might talk about—I'm still working on my speech, but it might come up—is the meaning of Selma for your generation. Because Selma is not just about commemorating the past, it's about honoring the legends who helped change this country through your actions today, in the here and now. Selma is now. Selma is about the courage of ordinary people doing extraordinary things because they believe they can change the country, that they can shape our Nation's destiny. Selma is about each of us asking ourselves what we can do to make America better.

And historically, it's been young people like you who helped lead that march. You think about somebody like John Lewis who was one of the key leaders and will be joining us tomorrow. He was 23 when he helped lead that march that transformed the country. You think about the Children's Crusade in Birmingham or the 12-year-old boy who was elected head of the NAACP youth chapter who grew up to be Jim Clyburn. It was young people.

It was young people who stubbornly insisted on justice, stubbornly refused to accept the world as it is, that transformed not just the country, but transformed the world. You can see that spirit reflected in a poster put out by the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s. It had a picture of a young John Lewis kneeling in protest against an all-White swimming pool. And it reads: "Come let us build a new world together."

Come let us build a new world together. That's the story of America. That's why immigrants came here: the idea of building a new world together; not just settling on what is, but imagining what might be; insisting we live up to our highest ideals, our deepest values.

That's why I wanted to come here to Columbia and here to Benedict College, because we all know we still have work to do. We've got to ensure not just the absence of formal, legal oppression, but the presence of an active, dynamic opportunity: good jobs that pay good wages, a good start for every child, health care for every family, a higher education that prepares you for the world without crippling you with debt, a fairer and more just legal and criminal justice system.

Now, the good news is, we're in much better shape now than we were 6 years ago. This morning we learned that our economy created nearly 300,000 new jobs last month. The unemployment rate went down—[*applause*—the unemployment rate ticked down to 5.5 percent, which is the lowest it's been since the spring of 2008. Our businesses have now added more than 200,000 jobs a month for the past year. And we have not seen a streak like that in 37 years, since Jimmy Carter was President. So all told, over the past 5 years, our businesses have created nearly two—12 million new jobs.

And what's more, the unemployment rate for African Americans is actually falling faster than the overall unemployment rate, which makes sense because it went up faster, too, during the recession. But it's still too high. The unemployment rate across the country and here in South Carolina is still higher than we want, which means we've got more work to do. And we've got to make sure those are good jobs that pay a living wage and have benefits with them.

So we can't let up now. We've got to do everything we can to keep this progress going. This community, I know, is doing its part to prepare students for this new economy. Programs like YouthBuild are giving young people who may have gotten off track a chance to earn a degree and get the skills they need for the 21st century. City Year AmeriCorps—[*applause*—in the house. I see their jackets. They're working with the public schools in Columbia to increase graduation rates. The Benedict College community is doing outstanding work beyond your walls. We put you on the Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll. You earned that honor.

So as long as I'm President, we're going to keep doing everything we can to make sure that young people like you can achieve your dreams. Now, we can't do it for you; you've got to do it yourselves. But we can give you the tools you need. We can give you a little bit of a helping hand and a sense of possibility and direction. You got to do the work, but we can make it a little bit easier for you.

That's why, 1 year ago, we launched what we call "My Brother's Keeper." It's an initiative that challenges communities to bring together nonprofits and foundations and businesses and government, all focused on creating more pathways for young people to succeed. And this week, we put out a report showing the progress that's been made. That progress is thanks to the nearly 200 local leaders who've accepted what we call My Brother's Keeper's Challenge,

including Mayor Benjamin and the mayors of Johnston and Holly Hill. They're doing great work mentoring young people, giving them a new path for success.

I'm hugely optimistic about the progress we can make together this year and in the years ahead, because ultimately, I'm optimistic about all of you. Young people in this country make me optimistic. The future we can build together. This new world that we can build together. I'm proud of you. But we got a lot more work to do, starting right now, because I'm about to take your questions.

Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you.

All right, so, got to make sure the mike works. So here's how this is going to work. You raise your hand. If I call on you, then wait for the mike so everybody can hear your question. If you could stand up, introduce yourself. Try to keep your question relatively short. I'll try to keep my answer relatively short. That way we can get more questions and answers in. The only other thing—the only other rule is, we're going to go girl-boy-girl-boy, just to make it fair—*[laughter]*—so it's not always just the boys thinking they know everything. *[Laughter]*

So who wants to start? She says it's her birthday, so we'll call on her first. All right. Here, wait for the microphone. Go ahead and stand up. We've got to be able to see you. Happy birthday.

Q. Thank you.

The President. What's your name?

Q. My name is Daranesha Hamilton. I really don't have a question, I just wanted you to talk to me. *[Laughter]*

The President. Okay. She doesn't have a question. Happy birthday. *[Laughter]* All right. Next time, you've got to have a question. *[Laughter]* But it is your birthday, so we're going to make an exception.

Woman right there in the back. We're going to go—I know I said boy-girl-boy-girl, but that didn't count because she didn't ask a question.

Right there, yes. Yes, you had your hand up. Yes. Right. Yes, you! Go ahead.

Keystone XL Pipeline Project/Climate Change

Q. Okay. Hello.

The President. Hello.

Q. I'm a native Chicagoan, and I welcome you.

The President. Well, what are you doing down here?

Q. I love it.

The President. It's warmer, isn't it?

Q. I'm down here to protect the environment.

The President. Okay.

Q. And I wanted to thank you for vetoing the XL Keystone pipeline. Thank you. Thank you! Thank you!

The President. Okay.

Q. You are what we worked for. You are what we hoped for.

The President. Well, that—I appreciate that. Do you have a question for me?

Q. Yes. Do you think that will stop the XL Keystone pipeline?

The President. Well, for those of you who haven't been following this, the Keystone pipeline is a proposed pipeline that runs from Canada through the United States down to the Gulf of Mexico. Its proponents argue that it would be creating jobs in the United States. But the truth is, it's Canadian oil that's then going to go to the world market. It will probably create about a couple thousand construction jobs for a year or two, but only create about 300 permanent jobs.

The reason that a lot of environmentalists are concerned about it is, the way that you get the oil out in Canada is an extraordinarily dirty way of extracting oil. And obviously, there are always risks in piping a lot of oil through Nebraska farmland and other parts of the country.

What we've done is, I vetoed it because the Congress was trying to short-circuit a traditional process that we go through. I haven't made a final determination on it, but what I've said is, is that we're not going to authorize a pipeline that benefits largely a foreign company if it can't be shown that it is safe and if it can't be shown that overall it would not contribute to climate change.

Now, a lot of young people here, you may not be worrying about climate change. Although it's very cold down here, you can't attribute a couple days of cold weather or a couple days of hot weather to the climate changing. But the pattern overall is that the planet is getting warmer. That's undeniable. And it's getting warmer at a faster rate than even the scientists expect.

And you might think, well, you know, getting warmer, that's not—no big deal. Folks in South Carolina, we're used to dealing with hot weather; we can manage. But understand that when you start having overall global temperatures go up, even if it means more snow in some places or more rain in some places—it's not going to be hotter every single place, but the overall temperature is going up—that starts changing weather patterns across the globe. It starts raising ocean levels. It starts creating more drought and wildfires in some places.

It means that there are entire countries that may suddenly no longer be able to grow crops, which means people go hungry, which then creates conflict. It means diseases that used to be just in tropical places start creeping up, and suddenly, we've got a whole new set of, say, insect-borne diseases, like malaria, that we thought we had gotten rid of, now they're suddenly in places like the United States.

We start running out of water. It puts stresses and strains on our infrastructure. Hurricanes become more powerful when the water is warmer, which means a lot of our coastal cities and towns are put at risk.

I say all that because it may not be the thing that you are worried about right now. Right now you're worried about getting a job, or right now you're worried about is your girlfriend still mad at you—[laughter]—or right now you're thinking about just getting through classes and exams. I understand that. But what you have to appreciate, young people, is this will affect you more than old people like me. I'll be gone when the worst of this hits. And the disruptions—economic, social, security disruptions that it can cause can make your life and the lives of your children much harder and much worse. And if you don't stop it at a certain point, you can't stop it at all, and it could be catastrophic.

And I'm—I just want you to understand, what I just described, it's not science fiction, it's not speculation. This is what the science tells us. So we've got to worry about it, which is part of the reason why we've invested in things like green energy: trying to increase fuel efficiency standards on cars, trying to make sure that we use more solar and wind power, trying to find new energy sources that burn clean instead of dirty. And everybody here needs to be supportive and thinking about that because you're the ones who are going to have to live with it.

And what—I'm very proud of the fact that we've doubled the amount of clean energy produced since I've been President. We're increasing fuel efficiency standards on cars, which will save you, by the way, money at the pump. Don't think that just because gas prices are low right now—that's nice, it puts some more money in your pocket, but that's not going to last. So don't start going out and saying, oh, I'm going to buy a big gas guzzler now—[*laughter*—right? You—because the trajectory of the future is that gas—oil is going to get more expensive. It's going to get harder to extract. We're going to have to transition overtime to a new economy.

And there's huge opportunity. We can create a lot of jobs in those areas if we are focused on it and planning for it.

All right? But thank you very much for the question.

All right. It's a gentleman's turn. We've got any mikes back here? We've got the mike? I just wanted to make sure. Let's see. This young man right here in the red tie, looking sharp. [*Laughter*] You always wear a tie, or you just wore it today?

Q. I wear it often.

The President. Okay, good. Yes. [*Laughter*] I like that. Looking clean. Yes. Go ahead.

Higher Education Costs/Community Colleges

Q. My name is Brandon Pope, graduating senior here at Benedict College, majoring in business management.

The President. Excellent.

Q. My question is, tuition is very high in the United States——

The President. Can I make it lower? [*Laughter*] Is that the question? [*Laughter*]

Q.——while in other countries, it's free. What are some of your plans to assist those that are having trouble paying for school?

The President. Well, let me—first of all, let me just say, this is a cause near and dear to my heart because Michelle and I, we weren't born into wealthy families, so the only way we got our education was because we got help: loans, grants, work-study programs. If we hadn't had that available to us, we could not have pursued the education we did and couldn't have achieved what we achieved.

And even with all the help we got, we had so much debt when we got married that we had negative liabilities—[*laughter*—we just joined our—together our negative liabilities. And it took us, like, 10 years to pay off our debt. For the first 10 years of our marriage, our loans were more expensive than our mortgage. It was only about 2 years or 3 years before I was elected a U.S. Senator that I paid off my loans.

Now, the truth is that, historically, the reason America succeeded so well is, we've always been ahead of the curve in educating our population. We were the first country to say, let's have free public high schools. When folks who had fought in World War II came back, gave them a GI bill. Middle class helped to get built because people got new skills. And through much of the sixties and the seventies and the eighties, our public university system was hugely important in giving people a pathway into the middle class.

Now, here's what happened. Typically, State legislatures started cutting support for State universities. Those State universities and colleges then decided, well, we're going to have to jack up tuition to make up for the money that we've lost because the State is not giving us as much. And that's how tuition started to get higher and higher and higher.

Now, what I've done since I became President was a couple things. We significantly expanded the Pell grant program, with the help of people like Jim Clyburn. It used to be that the student loan program was run through the banks and the banks would take a cut. They were making billions of dollars on student loans. We said, why do we have to go through the banks? Let's just give it directly to the students, save that money, and give it to more students and increase the size of the Pell grant.

And we initiated a program that many of you can still take advantage of, and that is, we capped the percentage of your income that you have to pay in repaying your student loans so that if you decide to become a teacher or you decide to become a social worker, you get a job just starting off that's not paying you a lot of money, but is in the field that you want, you don't have to say no because you can't afford it. It's only going to be 10 percent of your income, so it makes your debt payments manageable.

But what we still have to do is—to deal with the question you pointed out—which is, how do we just keep tuition lower generally? Now, the big proposal that I put forward this year is, let's make community colleges free for those who are—[applause]. Now, it would be conditioned. You would have to keep up a certain GPA. You'd have to put in some sweat equity into the thing. But the point is, those first 2 years were free. The advantage of that is, first of all, a lot of young people start at community colleges, and they may not want a 4-year degree, but they can get a 2-year degree that gives them the skills they need to get a job and not have any debt.

Even if you want to go to a 4-year college, for a lot of young people, it may be a good option to go to a community college for the first four—2 years, then transfer your credits. And you've at least saved half of what you would otherwise spend on your 4-year degree. And we can do this just by closing some loopholes in the tax system that gives companies the ability to avoid paying the taxes that they're owed—they owe.

So far, at least, I haven't gotten the kind of support I'd like from some of my Republican friends in the Senate and House of Representatives. But we're going to keep on working on it because it's a smart idea. Look, I want ultimately—ultimately, I want at least the first 2 years of college to be just like public high schools are now. And everybody—because you—it is very hard nowadays to find a well-paying job without some form of higher education—without some form of higher education.

Even if you end up working in a factory these days—you go into a modern factory—it's all computerized, and you've got to know math, and you've got to be able to function in a high-tech environment. So it's a proposal whose time has come. We may not be able to convince Republicans to get it done this year, but we're going to just keep on going at this. Ultimately,

this is what is going to keep America at the cutting edge. And if we're able to do that, then we're going to be able save you a little bit of money, and you won't have the same kind of debt that I had to take out when I got my degree.

All right? Thank you for the question.

All right, it's a young lady's turn now. That young lady in the orange right there. It's hard to miss—[*laughter*—got the yellow and the orange. Did you wear that just so I'd call on you? [*Laughter*]

Education/President's Advice to Young People

Q. Just for you. Thank you for being here, President Obama. My name is Rania Jamison. I am a public relations consultant and a community organizer. I am, most proudly, the parent of two young Black males.

The President. There you go.

Q. Sit down for a moment because I have an 18-year-old and, yes, I have recently birthed a 1-year-old.

The President. Oh, oh. [*Laughter*] That's a big spread. [*Laughter*]

Q. Seventeen years.

The President. It took you that long to forget what it was like. [*Laughter*]

Q. I have a quick question for you, primarily about my 18-year-old. He is a scholarship student-athlete at South Carolina State University. I'm very proud of the fact that he is there. But as I'm sure you are aware, HBCUs—in particular, South Carolina State University is facing a bit of an uphill battle at this moment. I have a question for you for students like him that are there, others across the world that are facing situations that are insurmountable and challenging: How do you stay motivated, and what particular advice do you have for me to take back to Lenard, to tell him to stay encouraged, continue to keep the hope alive, and do his best? Thank you.

The President. Well, I mean, the main thing you should tell him is listen to your mom. [*Laughter*] I hope you recorded that. So—you did? Look, I'm trying to remember what it was like being 18 and 19 and 20. It's been a while. But the one thing that I always say to young people coming up these days is, you should be wildly optimistic about your possibilities in your future.

So often, when we watch the nightly news or read the papers, all you're hearing about is bad stuff going on. It just seems like, man, there's war and strife, and folks are arguing and yelling, and conflict. But the truth is, is that today, right now, you are more likely to be healthier, wealthier, less discriminated against, have more opportunity, less likely to be caught up in violence than probably any time in human history.

The opportunities for you to get information and to get an education and expose yourself to the entire world because of technology is unmatched. It's never been like this before. Your ability to start your own business or carve your own path has never been greater. So my first and general point is do not get cynical about what's possible.

The second thing is, you've got to work really hard. And there's no free lunch, and you can't make excuses. In particular, when I'm talking to young African American men, sometimes, I think the sense is, cards are stacked against us, and discrimination is still out

there, and so it's easy sometimes just to kind of pull back and say, well, you know, this is just too hard.

And this is part of why it's so important for us to remember Selma tomorrow. It's not as hard as it was 50 years ago. It's not as hard as it was when Jim Clyburn was coming up, and he's now one of the most powerful men in the country, growing up right here in South Carolina.

So there are no excuses not to put in the effort. There are no excuses not to hit the books. If you want a good education in this country, you can get a good education, even if you are in a bad school. And I'll be honest with you, we've got to do some work to make schools more equal. Right here in South Carolina, there are still schools that were built back in the 1800s that haven't been repaired and don't have decent restrooms and don't have proper books.

So we've still got to fight to make sure that every child, not just some, have equal opportunity. That's a worthy fight. But you can still learn even in that school. Even in the most rundown school, if you're putting in the effort, you can get a good education. So you can't make excuses. Even as you advocate for justice, you've got to make sure that you're also taking advantage of the opportunities that you currently have.

But that brings me to one last piece of advice for young people, and that is, think about more than just yourself. Think about how you can have an impact beyond yourself. The people who I know who are really happy and successful as they get older, it's because they have an impact on something other than just their own situation. They're not just thinking about, how do I get mine? They're thinking about, how does everybody get their fair share? And when they do that, that gives meaning to your life, that gives purpose to your life, that gives you influence and a sense of purpose.

And you've got to have a sense of purpose beyond just the almighty dollar. I mean, look, I am—we live in a free market society, and one of the things that sets America apart is business and entrepreneurship and hustle, and some—folks are out there just, they're trying to make a new product or create a new service, and the profit motive is strong. And that's good. That's important. But if that's all you're thinking about, and you're not thinking about how you can also have an impact through your church, or if you're not thinking about how you can treat your employees right when you do get a business, if you're not thinking, once you do make it, what am I giving back to make sure that I'm giving a helping hand to the folks coming up behind me—if you're not thinking that way, you won't be able to get through the tough times. What gets you through tough times is that sense of purpose. And that purpose cannot just be about yourself, it's got to be about something larger.

So all right. Oh, we got a young man right here. He's standing tall. Go ahead. Yes, sir.

Education

Q. My name is Trace Adams.

The President. Hey, Trace. How old are you, man?

Q. Ten.

The President. So you're in fifth grade?

Q. Fourth.

The President. Fourth grade? You're a tall guy.

Q. Thank you.

The President. So what's going on, Trace?

Q. I was just wondering—I'm 10, and I was just wondering when you were interested in being a President.

The President. Well, I wasn't—it wasn't when I was 10. Are you thinking about it?
[*Laughter*]

Q. A little bit, yes, sir. [*Laughter*]

The President. Okay. All right. I mean, you're definitely ahead of me. The—now, just remember, you got to wait until you're 35. That's in the Constitution. So you got at least 25 years to prepare.

I did not think about—when I was 10, I wasn't thinking about being President. I think when I was 10, I was interested in being an architect. I was interested in the idea of, like, building buildings, and I thought that was pretty cool. And then, I went through a bunch of stuff, and for a while, I thought I might be a basketball player, and it turned out, I was too slow and I couldn't jump. [*Laughter*] And so I stopped thinking that. And then I became interested in being a lawyer, and I did become a lawyer.

But what are you interested in right now? What subjects are you interested in school?

Q. Social studies, actually.

The President. Social studies? So you're interested in public policy. Are you starting to read the newspapers and things? Do you discuss—is that your dad behind you?

Q. That's me.

Q. Yes, sir.

The President. And you discuss the issues with your dad and stuff?

Q. Oh, yes, sir, definitely.

The President. Oh, yes, I can tell you do. [*Laughter*] Okay.

Well, I think the most important thing is to just make sure that you work hard in school. I think it's really good if you get involved in, like, some service projects and help out people in your community, whether it's through the Scouts or your church or at school or some other program, so that you get used to trying to help other people.

Make sure you graduate from college. And then, who knows, you might end up being—I might just be warming up the seat for you. [*Laughter*] And if you become President, I want you to remind everybody how, when you talked to President Obama, he said, go for it. All right? Don't forget me. [*Laughter*]

All right. That's Trey—Trey, who's 10 years old and already thinking—he's already thinking about public policy. I just want all the folks in college to just notice, he's reading the papers and talking public policy. [*Laughter*] So if all you're doing is watching the ballgame—don't let 10-year-old Trey embarrass you now. [*Laughter*]

All right, it's a young lady's turn. Well, it's not going to help you just to be all, like—you've got, like, five people all helping you out. I'll call on one of the young ladies there who's part of City Year. They're wearing the City—did you do paper, scissor, stone? Is that what happened? [*Laughter*] All right. You all did that fast too. It's like you guys do that for everything. Where are we going to lunch? [*Laughter*]

Q. Well, good afternoon, Mr. President. My name is Tarissa Young Clayborn. I am also a native of Illinois, so it's good to see you here. I am also a proud City Year AmeriCorps member at Hyde Park Elementary School here in Columbia.

The President. There you go. Fantastic. So there's a Hyde Park school here?

Q. Yes, sir.

The President. Because there's a Hyde Park in Chicago back home.

Q. Yes, there is a Hyde Park in Chicago. So my question for you—

The President. Look, he's like, "Hey-ay." [Laughter].

AmeriCorps/"My Brother's Keeper" Initiative/Criminal Justice System Reform Efforts

Q. My question for you, Mr. President: How can City Year and other AmeriCorps programs support the goals of "My Brother's Keeper"?

The President. Well, first of all, City Year, AmeriCorps—for those young people who are thinking about public service or want to serve before they go on to graduate school or, in some cases, want to get involved before they go to college, AmeriCorps programs are an outstanding way to help fund your college education.

And City Year is one of the great AmeriCorps programs that we have. In addition to them all getting these spiffy red jackets, they end up being placed in communities all across the country doing—working in schools, working in communities in need, working on housing programs, all kinds of different stuff. And we're very proud of them.

"My Brother's Keepers"—the idea, the genesis of this came after the Trayvon Martin verdict, and obviously, there was great controversy about how the case was handled. And Eric Holder, by the way, has done an outstanding job getting our Justice Department to stay focused on the equal application of the law at local and State, as well as Federal levels.

But what I realized is, also, part of the goal of making sure that young African American men succeed, young Latino men succeed, young White men who don't have opportunity succeed, is to make sure that everybody has got a path that leads in a positive direction. And you can't wait until somebody is in trouble before you start intervening. You got to start when they're younger.

You've got to—because the statistics show that if a child, by the time they're in third grade, is reading at grade level, they are far more likely to be able to graduate and succeed. If a child doesn't get suspended or disciplined in school, they're far less likely to get involved in the criminal justice system. If they get through high school without being involved in the criminal justice system, they are far less likely then to ever get involved in the criminal justice system.

So there are these points where we know that if you intervene in a timely way, it will make a difference. So what we've done is to get pledges from foundations and philanthropies. We've recruited businesses. We've gotten the NBA involved. We've gotten every agency in our Government involved. And we've gotten cities—and your mayor is participating in this, so Columbia is participating in this—in coming up with local plans for how are we going to give opportunities, pathways for mentorship, apprenticeship, afterschool programs, job search, college prep, you name it. And each community is coming up with its own programs and plans, and then, we are partnering with them and helping match them up with folks in their area who are also interested in resourcing these initiatives.

And AmeriCorps, I think, is a key part of this because where a city or a State or a local community has a good plan, there is an opportunity for City Year or any other AmeriCorps program to be plugged in to that plan and become part of that plan. And my hope is, is that over the next several years and beyond my Presidency, because I'll stay involved in this, that in every city around the country, we start providing the kinds of help that is needed to make sure our young men are on the right track.

Now, I want to point out, by the way, I'm not neglecting young women, because, as you might expect, Michelle would not let me. *[Laughter]* So she has initiated programs for mentorships. And we've got an entire office in the White House for women and girls, that's focused on some of these same initiatives. But there is a particular challenge that we face for African American and Latino men, young men of color. And we've got to be honest about that. We're losing a large portion of our generation—or a big chunk of this generation and the previous generation.

I was talking to my—we have something called the Council of Economic Advisers. And even though there's been good job growth, really strong job growth, and unemployment has come down, we've gotten through the recession, the labor participation rate, the number of people who are actively seeking work, still is low compared to what it was 10 years ago. And we're asking ourselves why.

Now, part of it is, the population is getting older, so more people are retiring and not working. But that's not the only reason. In the African American community, a big reason is that you've got young people with criminal records who are finding themselves unemployed.

Now, that's not just bad for that individual, that's bad for their children, that's bad for the community. So this is part of the reason why it's so important for us to rethink how we approach nonviolent drug offenses, which is responsible for a lot of the churn of young men of color going through the criminal justice system. We got to reexamining—reexamine how sentencing is working—and make sure it's done equally, by the way, because we know, statistically, it's been demonstrated that African American men are more likely to be arrested than their counterparts, more likely to be searched, more likely to be prosecuted, and more likely to get stiffer sentences despite the fact that they are no more likely to use drugs or deal drugs than the general population. And that's a problem.

So we're going to have to look at reforms there. But for those who are already in the pipeline, we've also got to think about, how do we help them get the kind of help that they need? And this is going to be something that I'm devoting a lot of energy to because this is not just a Black or Hispanic problem, this is an American problem. If you've got a big chunk of your workforce that is not working, and that's the youngest part of our—your workforce, and they're never contributing to the economy and not paying taxes and not supporting Social Security, then the whole economy grows slower. Everybody is worse off.

So this is not a issue just for one group. This is an issue for everybody. All right?

All right. *[Laughter]* All right. It's a young woman's turn. It's a young woman's turn. I'll be happy to sign your book. I know, you've been waving a lot, but it's not going to help. *[Laughter]* It's a young woman's turn. So let's see, this young lady way back in the back, right up there. Yes. I'm going to give—make the mike person get some exercise.

Presidential Pardons/White House Fellowship Program

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Good afternoon, and welcome to South Carolina. My name is Simone Martin. I'm an attorney in this area with the Rutherford law firm. In fact, my boss, Representative and House Minority Leader Todd Rutherford, is sitting right over there—probably wondering why I'm not at the office. *[Laughter]* But nevertheless—

The President. Are you advertising for him? Was this, like, a whole—*[laughter]*.

Q. No, I'm just trying to keep my job.

The President. Are you going to give, like, the number?

Q. No, I'm just trying to keep my job.

The President. "If you need representation"—*[laughter]*—"call Rutherford and Associates." *[Laughter]*

Q. Yes.

The President. All right, go ahead.

Q. I have two questions for you. I hope that you'll indulge me by addressing both. They're quick—or the second one is quick. The first one is, what can criminal defense attorneys, like myself and Mr. Rutherford, do to increase the number of Federal pardons that are granted? The second question is, to whom do I need to speak to improve my chances of being selected as a White House fellow? Can you help me out? *[Laughter]*

The President. Oh, okay. So the—well, let me address the non-self-interested question first. *[Laughter]* I just had a discussion about the criminal justice system. One of the extraordinary powers that a President has is the power to commute sentences or to pardon somebody who's already been sentenced. And when I came into office, for the first couple of years, I noticed that I wasn't really getting a lot of recommendations for pardons that I—at least not as many as I would expect. And many of them were from older folks. A lot of them were people just looking for a pardon so they could restore their gun rights. But, sort of, the more typical cases that I would have expected weren't coming up.

So I asked Attorney General Holder to work with me to set up a new office, or at least a new approach, inside the Justice Department. Because historically, what happened was the President would get a big stack of recommendations and then he could sign off on them—because obviously, I don't have time to go through each request. And so what we've done now is opened it up so that people are more aware of the process. And what you can do is contact the Justice Department. But essentially, we're now working with the NAACP, we're working with various public defenders' offices and community organizations just to make people aware that this is a process that you can go through.

Now, typically, we have a pretty strict set of criteria for whether we would even consider you for a pardon or a commutation.

Eric, I assume that that's available somewhere on the Justice Department website, is that correct?

Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr. Yes.

The President. Okay. So my first suggestion would be to go to the Justice Department website. If you—if the person doesn't qualify because they may have served time, but there were problems when they served time, or if it was a particularly violent crime, or they may just not fit the criteria where we would consider it—a lot of what we're focused on is nonviolent

drug offenses where somebody might have gotten 25 years, and she was the girlfriend of somebody and somehow got caught up, and since then has led an exemplary life, but now really wants to be able to start a new career or something like that. That's the kind of person, typically, that would get through the process.

Now, in terms of the White House Fellows program, there's a whole White House Fellows committee, and it's complicated, and I don't have any pull on it. *[Laughter]* I do not put my thumb on the scale, because if I did, I'd get into trouble. Because then, people would say, he just put his friends on there. So you've got to go through the process. But you seem very well qualified, so good luck.

Q. Thank you. It was an honor.

The President. You're welcome. All right.

How many more questions do I got? I like to—it looks like I'm okay. All right, you know what, I'm going to just call on this gentleman. He's been, like, waving, and I've got to make sure he's not waving. Because out of his periphery I just saw him the whole time. All right. Let's make sure this question—go ahead.

Department of Justice Reports on the Shooting of Michael Brown and Police Department Practices in Ferguson, MO/Law Enforcement Reform Efforts

Q. First, I have two questions. Firstly, would you sign my book?

The President. Yes, I will sign your book.

Q. All right. And I'm a student currently studying at the University of South Carolina.

The President. Okay. Go Gamecocks! *[Laughter]*

Q. I see President Pastides is in the house, so it's good to see you, Mr. President.

The President. You're sucking up to the president, huh? *[Laughter]*

Q. My question, well, I guess it relates to the Michael Brown case. And I've just recently seen the report that suggested that there's been grave injustices going on in Ferguson. And I'm trying to figure out why the Attorney General, Eric Holder, refused to press charges against the police officer. Why didn't he face the Federal charges?

The President. Well, I will answer that question.

Q. And——

The President. Now, that was two questions right now.

Q. And I'm trying——

The President. No, that's it. *[Laughter]* You don't get a third question. Sit down. I called on you. Come on, sit down. *[Laughter]* See, this is how folks will get you. My reporter friends here, they're famous for doing that. They'll be, like, Mr. President, I've got a four-part question. *[Laughter]* So you only get two. I will sign your book.

With respect to Ferguson, keep in mind that there are two separate issues involved. The first is the specific case of Officer Wilson and Michael Brown. And that is typically a charge that would be brought and dealt with at the State level, the local level. The Federal Government has a role only if it can show that there was a significant miscarriage of the justice

system and had clear evidence—now, I'm not being overly technical, but basically, the Federal jurisdiction here is to make sure that this wasn't just a completely wrong decision.

They don't retry the whole thing all over again. They look to see whether or not, at the State level, due process and the investigation was conducted. And the standard for overturning that or essentially coming in on top of the State decision is very high. The finding that was made was that it was not unreasonable to determine that there was not sufficient evidence to charge Officer Wilson.

Now, that was an objective, thorough, independent, Federal investigation. We may never know exactly what happened, but Officer Wilson, like anybody else who is charged with a crime, benefits from due process and a reasonable doubt standard. And if there is uncertainty about what happened, then you can't just charge him anyway just because what happened was tragic. That was the decision that was made. And I have complete confidence and stand fully behind the decision that was made by the Justice Department on that issue.

There is a second aspect to this, which is, how does the Ferguson Police Department and the government of Ferguson, the municipality, treat its African American citizens when it comes to law enforcement? And there, the finding was very clear, and it's available for everybody to read.

What we saw was that the Ferguson Police Department, in conjunction with the municipality, saw traffic stops, arrests, tickets as a revenue generator as opposed to serving the community, and that it systematically was biased against African Americans in that city who were stopped, harassed, mistreated, abused, called names, fined. And then, the—it was structured so that they would get caught up in paying more and more fines that they couldn't afford to pay or were made difficult for them to pay, which raised the amount of additional money that they had to pay. And it was an oppressive and abusive situation. And that is also the conclusion that the Justice Department arrived at.

The steps that now are to be taken is that the Justice Department has presented this evidence to the City of Ferguson, and the City of Ferguson has a choice to make. They're basically going to have to decide, do they dispute the findings of the Justice Department—and I shouldn't comment on that aspect of it, although I will say that what's striking about the report is a lot of this was just using e-mails from the officials themselves. So it wasn't like folks were just making it up. But the City of Ferguson will now have to make a decision: Are they going to enter into some sort of agreement with the Justice Department to fix what is clearly a broken and racially-biased system? Or if they don't, then the Justice Department has the capacity to sue the city for violations of the rights of the people of Ferguson.

And I—here's the thing that—here's the lesson that I would draw from this. I don't think that what happens in Ferguson is typical. I think that the overwhelming majority of law enforcement officers here in South Carolina and anyplace else—young man, sit down, I'm in the middle of talking. All right, thank you. The overwhelming number of law enforcement officers have a really hard, dangerous job, and they do it well, and they do it fairly, and they do it heroically. And I strongly believe that. And the overwhelming majority of law—police departments across the country are really thinking hard about, how do we make sure that we are protecting and serving everybody equally?

And we need to honor those folks, and we need to respect them, and not just assume that they've got ill will or they're doing a bad job.

But as is true in any part of our lives—as is true among politicians, as is true among business leaders, as is true among anybody—there are circumstances in which folks don't do a good job, or worse, are doing things that are really unlawful or unjust or unfair.

And what happened in Ferguson is not a complete aberration. It's not just a one-time thing. It's something that happens. And one of the things that I think frustrated the people of Ferguson, in addition to the specific case of Michael Brown, was this sense of, you know what, we've been putting up for this for years, and now when we start talking about it, everybody is pretending like it's just our imaginations, like we're just paranoid, we're just making this stuff up. And it turns out, they weren't just making it up. This was happening.

And so it's important for all of us then to figure out how do we move together to fix it. How do people of good will in law enforcement, in the community, everybody work to fix it and find concrete solutions, and to have accountability and oversight and transparency in terms of how law enforcement works?

And one of the great things that we did out of a tragic situation was, we were able to form a Task Force made up of law enforcement, police chiefs and community activists, including two of the activists who got the Ferguson marches and protests started. And they came up with a consensus document that was presented to me last week that was very specific in terms of how we can solve some of these problems: How we can make sure that police departments provide data about who they're stopping in traffic and data about how many people are killed in confrontations with the police, and how are those cases handled? And how are we training our law enforcement to respect the communities that they're serving? And how do we make sure we've got a diverse police force? And how do we look at new technologies like body cameras that may be helpful in this process? And how do we make sure that when something happens that may be an unjustified shoot, that people have confidence that the prosecutors are independent and there's a legitimacy to the process that they can trust.

That's good not just for the community, that's also good for the police department, so that they feel like they can get out from under a cloud if in fact the officer did the right thing. And if the officer did the wrong thing, that department should want to get rid of that officer, because they're going to undermine trust for the good cops that are out there doing a good job.

So the point is that now our task is to work together to solve the problem and not get caught up in either the cynicism that says this is never going to change because everybody is racist—that's not a good solution. That's not what the folks in Selma did. They had confidence that they could change things and change people's hearts and minds. So you've got to have the ability to assume the best in people, including law enforcement, and work with them.

And the flipside is, the larger community has to be able to say, you know what, when a community says systematically that it's having some problems with its law enforcement, you've got to listen and pay attention and engage constructively to build trust and accountability so that it gets better.

So often we get caught up in this, and it becomes just a political football instead of us trying to solve the problem. And our goal should be to stop circumstances such as Ferguson or what happened in New York from happening again. That should be our number-one goal. And it is achievable, but we've got to be constructive in going forward.

All right. I've got one more question. Now, it's a woman's turn. Men, all put down—men got to put down their hands now. I'm looking around. It's not going to be a guy. Well,

everybody, all right, we'll call on this young lady right here. [Laughter] Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Q. I am also a native of Chicago.

The President. Oh, well, I—now, I did not mean to call on three Chicagoans. [Laughter] I guess this is where everybody in Chicago moves to because it's too cold in Chicago. [Laughter] Go ahead.

Community-Oriented Policing/Gun Violence/Gun Control

Q. I am a senior majoring in psychology. One of my questions is, as you know, Chicago struggles with gun violence. So my question is, how—what organizations and programs are you guys designing to keep the youth off the streets and into better conditions? And how can we as a community help you guys execute those programs and designs and organizations?

The President. Well, I already mentioned "My Brother's Keepers," which is a major focus. Each community then is going to have its own—this is an example of where you got to work with the police department effectively and build trust. What we know is, things like community policing really work, where you're partnering with law enforcement; law enforcement gets to know young people when they're still in school before they're in trouble. People have confidence that law enforcement is there for them, not just in tamping down stuff, but to—in lifting people up. "My Brother's Keeper" and other initiatives are going to make a big difference in giving young people an opportunity.

Now, you mentioned gun violence, and that's probably the hardest issue to deal with. We have a long tradition of gun rights and gun ownership in this country. The Second Amendment has been interpreted by the Supreme Court to mean that people have the right to bear arms. There are a lot of law-abiding, responsible gun owners who use it for protection or sport. They handle their weapons properly. There are traditions of families passing down from father to son or daughter, you know, hunting. And that's important. That's part of our culture. That's part of who we are.

But what we also have to recognize is, is that our homicide rates are so much higher than other industrialized countries. I mean, by, like, a mile. And most of that is attributable to the easy, ready availability of firearms, particularly handguns.

Now, the courts and State legislatures—and I'm sure this is true in South Carolina—have greatly restricted the ability to put in place commonsense—some commonsense gun safety laws like background checks. I personally believe that it is not violating anybody's rights that if you want to purchase a gun, it should be at least your responsibility to get a background check so that we know you were not a violent felon or that you don't currently have a restraining order on you because you committed domestic abuse or—right now we don't know a lot of that. It's just not available. And that's—that doesn't make sense to me. And I'll be honest with you, I thought after what happened at Sandy Hook, that that would make us think about it.

The hardest day of my Presidency, and I've had some hard days, but nothing compares to being with the parents of 20 6-year-old kids, beautiful little kids, and some heroic teachers and administrators in that school, just 2, 3 days after they had been just gunned down in their own classroom. And you would have thought at that point, that has got to be enough of a motivator for us to want to do something about this. And we couldn't get it done. I mean, there was just—at least at the congressional level.

So what we've done is, we have tried as much as we can administratively to implement background laws checks and to make sure that we're working with those States and cities and jurisdictions that are interested and willing to partner with us to crack down on the illegal use of firearms, particularly handguns.

But I'll be honest with you. In the absence of more what I would consider heroic and courageous stances from our legislators both at the State level and the Federal level, it is hard to reduce the easy availability of guns. And as long as there—as long as you can go on—into some neighborhoods and it is easier for you to buy a firearm than it is for you to buy a book—there are neighborhoods where it's easier for you to buy a handgun and clips than it is for you to buy a fresh vegetable—as long as that's the case, we're going to continue to see unnecessary violence.

But I guess I'll end by saying this. Despite those frustrations, despite the failure of Congress to act, despite the failure of too many State legislators to act—in fact, in some places it goes the opposite direction, people just say well, we should have firearms in kindergarten and we should have machine guns in bars. You think I'm exaggerating—I mean, you look at some of these laws that come up.

Despite those frustrations, I would say it is still within our control to reduce the incidence of handgun violence by making sure that our young people understand that that is not a sign of strength, that violence is not the answer for whatever frustrations they may have or conflicts they may have, and work diligently with our young people and in our communities to try to put them on a positive path.

And the people who are going to lead that process are the young people who are here today. You are going to have more impact on the young people coming up behind you than anybody else. And the kind of example you set and the willingness of all of you to get involved and engaged in a concrete way, to remake our world together, that's what's going to determine the future of America. And looking out at all of you, you're what makes me optimistic.

Thank you very much, Benedict College. Appreciate you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:10 p.m. in the Benjamin E. Mays Human Resources Center. In his remarks, he referred to Tiana Cox, student, Benedict College; Mayor Terrence D. Culbreath of Johnston, SC; Mayor William Johnson of Holly Hill, SC; Harris Pastides, president, University of South Carolina; Darren Wilson, officer, Ferguson Police Department; and Brittany Packnett, executive director, Teach For America—St. Louis, and Rasheen Aldridge, Jr., director, Young Activists United St. Louis, in their capacity as members of the President's Task Force on 21st-Century Policing.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Benedict College in Columbia, SC, town hall meeting and a question-and-answer session.

Locations: Columbia, SC.

Names: Aldridge, Rasheen, Jr.; Benjamin, Stephen K.; Carter, James E., Jr.; Clyburn, James E.; Cox, Tiana; Culbreath, Terrence D.; Holder, Eric H., Jr.; Johnson, William; Lewis, John R.; Obama, Michelle; Packnett, Brittany; Pastides, Harris; Swinton, David H.; Wilson, Darren.

Subjects: AmeriCorps; Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Civil rights : Firearm rights; Civil rights : Minorities :: Racial profiling; Civil rights : Minorities :: Relations with police; Civil rights : Racial equality; Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Congress :

Bipartisanship; Connecticut : 2013 shootings in Newtown; Drug abuse and trafficking :
 Decriminalization and legalization; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national :
 Strengthening efforts; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : Global
 competitiveness; Education : Government and private sector, coordination efforts; Education :
 Hispanic students :: Performance and completion, improvement efforts; Education : Minority
 students; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Postsecondary
 education :: Career training and continuing education; Education : Postsecondary education ::
 College opportunity, expansion efforts; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community
 colleges; Education : Postsecondary education :: Pell grants; Education : Postsecondary
 education :: Student loans, elimination of subsidies to private providers; Education :
 Postsecondary education :: Student loans, repayment options; Education : School improvement
 and renovation; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and
 unemployment : Unemployment rate; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and
 technologies :: Promotion efforts; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies
 :: U.S. production; Energy : Fuel efficiency standards, strengthening efforts; Energy : Gasoline,
 oil, and natural gas costs; Energy : Oil and gas industry :: Keystone XL Pipeline project; Energy
 : Oil and gas industry :: Safety and environmental issues; Environment : Climate change;
 Health and medical care : Insurance coverage and access to providers; Immigration and
 naturalization : American "melting pot"; Justice, Department of : Attorney General; Law
 enforcement and crime : 21st-Century Policing, President's Task Force on; Law enforcement
 and crime : Community-oriented policing, strengthening efforts; Law enforcement and crime :
 Criminal justice system, reform efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Gun control; Law
 enforcement and crime : Gun violence, prevention efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Law
 enforcement officers, service and dedication; Law enforcement and crime : Pardons and
 commutations; Law enforcement and crime : Sentencing requirements, reform; Law
 enforcement and crime : State and community law enforcement agencies, Federal support;
 Legislation, proposed : Keystone XL Pipeline Approval Act; Missouri : Ferguson :: Civil unrest;
 Missouri : Ferguson :: Death Michael Brown; Missouri : Ferguson :: Death of Michael Brown;
 New York : New York City :: Death of Eric Garner; South Carolina : Benedict College in
 Columbia; South Carolina : President's visit; Taxation : Tax Code, reform; White House Office
 : "My Brother's Keeper" initiative; White House Office : Economic Advisers, Council of; White
 House Office : White House Fellowship Program; White House Office : Women and Girls,
 White House Council on.

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