

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks at a Welcoming Ceremony for President Sauli Niinistö of Finland, Prime Minister Erna Solberg of Norway, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven of Sweden, Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen of Denmark, and Prime Minister Sigurður Ingi Jóhannsson of Iceland

May 13, 2016

President Obama. Good morning, everybody. Due to the possibility of thunderstorms, we decided to move our arrival ceremony indoors. Of course, our Nordic friends are used to tough weather. You should know that here in Washington we have not seen the sun for about 3 weeks, which you experience for months on end. But despite that fact, we want you to know that we are deeply happy to have all of you here.

We're honored to welcome not one nation, but five, our great Nordic friends and partners: President Niinistö and Mrs. Haukio of Finland; Prime Minister Solberg and Mr. Finnes of Norway; Prime Minister and Mrs. Löfven of Sweden; Prime Minister and Mrs. Rasmussen of Denmark; and Prime Minister Jóhannsson and Mrs. Ingaldsdóttir of Iceland.

To you and your delegations, welcome to the United States. I'm going to try this as best as I can. *Tervetuloa.*

President Niinistö. Excellent. [*Laughter*]

President Obama. *Velkommen. Välkommen.* [*Laughter*] And *Velkomin.* [*Laughter*] Those I'm not sure were delivered perfectly, but I think the spirit was understood.

Today is an opportunity for Michelle and me to return some of the warmth and hospitality that we've received on our visits to Copenhagen and Oslo and during my visit to Stockholm. And to Americans who cannot visit themselves, don't worry, I understand that Sweden has a phone number where you can call a Swede and learn about all things Swedish. Iceland invites you to send your questions to #AskGudmunder—[*laughter*]—I gather that Iceland has a lot of folks named Gudmunder—and they'll answer.

But they are extraordinary countries. And most importantly, for our purposes here today, they are extraordinarily friendly—extraordinary friends. This is also a special day for the millions of Americans who proudly trace their ancestry to Nordic countries, particularly in the Midwest, including my home State of Illinois. They'll remind you that Leif Erikson reached this continent more than a thousand years ago. They honor their parents and grandparents who crossed oceans and carved out new lives and helped build our country. They wear their woolly sweaters; they display Dala horses and love lutefisk and *lefse*. [*Laughter*] This is the history and the heritage and the ties of family and friendship that bring us together here today.

Around the world, America's closest partners are democracies. And we only need to look at our Nordic friends to see why. We share the same interests and we share the same values. We believe that our citizens have the right to live in freedom and security: free from terrorism and in a Europe where smaller nations are not bullied by larger nations. We believe in free markets and trade that support jobs and strong protections for workers and the environment and a strong safety net that provides a basic measure of security in life. We believe that we have a moral obligation—to this and future generations—to confront the reality of climate change and to protect our planet, including our beautiful Arctic.

We believe in societies that create opportunity for all people, through education, health care, and equal opportunity—including for women. In fact, in a world of growing economic disparities,

Nordic countries have some of the least income inequality in the world, which may explain one of the reasons that they're some of the happiest people in the world, despite not getting much sun. [Laughter]

And we believe in the inherent dignity of every human being. We believe in pluralism and tolerance and respect for free speech and freedom of religion. It's why we welcome the refugee who seeks a better life. It's why we stand up for human rights around the world. It's why our nations are leading contributors of humanitarian and development aid: to spare a child, even on the other side of the world, a preventable disease; to give girls, even on the other side of the world, the chance at an education; and to end the outrage of extreme poverty.

In their own region and with the world, the Nordic countries are a model of cooperation, and they consistently punch above their weight in meeting the challenges of our time. Our Nordic partners are not large countries, but there are almost no issues that we deal with—whether in terms of security or economics or humanitarian assistance—where the Nordic countries are not some of our most reliable and effective and important partners. And that's why I wanted to invite them here today, because sometimes, we have a tendency to take our best friends for granted, and it's important that we not do so. They have been extraordinarily important for us in shaping and maintaining an international order that is rule based, that is fair, that is just.

So I really do believe that the world would be more secure and more prosperous if we just had more partners like our Nordic countries. [Laughter] There have been times where I've said, why don't we just put all these small countries in charge for a while? [Laughter] And they could clean things up. [Laughter]

Now, I will admit that, to our American ears, Nordic languages and expressions can sometimes be a little confusing. We have a television program here called "Game of Thrones"—that's what it sounds like sometimes. [Laughter]

But the truth is, they—we are grateful to everything that our Nordic friends have contributed to us, not just in terms of partnerships and politics, but also our culture. We read our children Hans Christian Andersen and Pippi Longstocking. Our children's imaginations come to life with Legos. Our homes and lives are infused with Scandinavian furniture and design. Some of us dance and sing to ABBA and Avicii. [Laughter] I do want to point out that Finland has perhaps the most heavy metal bands in the world—[laughter]—per capita and also ranks high on good governance. I don't know that there's any correlation there. [Laughter] Thanks to Nordic innovators, we share our music on Spotify, stay in touch by Skype, and millions spend what would otherwise be productive hours on Minecraft, Angry Birds, and Candy Crush. [Laughter]

The poet Henrik Ibsen once wrote that "a community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm." As democratic societies, we believe that our ship is stronger when everyone has the opportunity to succeed. As free nations, we believe our world is safer when all of us contribute to security and peace. So, to my fellow leaders, this is the work I look forward to advancing with you here today. And in that spirit, I welcome you all, once again, to the United States of America.

Now, given the unique nature of this visit, we have an unusual arrangement to our program. Throughout the day, we are going to hear from all five Nordic leaders, but we're not going to have them speak consecutively in each occasion. Otherwise, we'd be here all day. [Laughter] So because the Nordic countries are famous for their cooperation, there has been an allocation of time, and we're going to begin this morning with President Niinistö of Finland and Prime Minister Solberg of Norway. So they will provide us some brief remarks, and you will hear from the other leaders later in the—today.

Mr. Prime Minister.

President Niinistö. Mr. President and Mrs. Obama, we, the leaders of the five Nordic countries and our spouses are grateful to you for inviting us and convening this second U.S.-Nordic summit. Thank you for the wonderful welcome.

Already, upon arrival, the flags on Pennsylvania Avenue gave a heartening feeling to us. Dear President, I have to apologize that we forgot to take the sun with us. *[Laughter]* We have had a lot of sunshine this spring. *[Laughter]*

The Nordics are a family with a profound commonality of values and history and with strong ties of cooperation. With you, Mr. President, we feel we have a kindred spirit. Gender equality, equal opportunities, and human rights for all, democracy, the rule of law, and respect of international law—these are hallmarks of our societies and an agenda that we share. Together, the Nordics are a superpower; not militarily, but when it comes to innovation, education, competitiveness, sustainable development, and clean technologies. See, together, we are the world's 12th largest economy. Free trade is clearly in our interest. We also claim superpower status as far as culture and sports are concerned. And as you see, we are champions in modesty too. *[Laughter]*

Mr. President, we are grateful for the leadership that the United States has shown in combating the most existential threat in the world—that is climate change—and focusing attention to the Arctic, where we are practically neighbors. The Arctic Council can be used also as an instrument of confidence building. The Nordic countries give high value to multilateral cooperation, which you have stressed during your tenure. This is vitally important.

Times are turbulent in many respects. Security threats abound. The situation has become more tense, even in the Baltic Sea region and northern Europe, our neck of the woods. Strengthening security and stability there is called for, and this includes appropriate dialogue with Russia to enhance transparency and reduce risks.

The Nordic countries are, in many ways, security providers in our own region and Europe, but also globally. We shoulder our responsibilities. We seek solutions instead of problems. We are willing and able to continue to cooperate with you in promoting security and stability. We value highly the U.S. commitment to Europe and to our security.

Finland is proud of the longstanding and firm friendship with the U.S. It is based on common values and interests, proud contacts between our people, and vibrant interaction, economically and socially. We are committed to strengthening this partnership even further.

Today I am honored to say to you on behalf of the Nordic countries: In us, Nordic countries, Mr. President, the United States has a solid friend and a strong partner. We are willing to work together with the United States to build a better future for the whole mankind. Thank you.

Prime Minister Solberg. President, First Lady, Nordic colleagues, distinguished guests, and dear friends: Thank you very much for the very warm welcome you've given both to my husband and me and the other members of our delegation. As you make the most of your final year in the White House, we are delighted to note, Mr. President, you have clearly saved the best for last. *[Laughter]*

A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of welcoming some special American guests to Norway. It was our annual NATO exercise, Cold Response. The exercise provided valuable joint training in winter warfare. But I'll be honest, and I'll confess that one of the highlights for the Norwegians is watching U.S. marines learning how to ski—cross-country ski. *[Laughter]*

Mr. President, you stand shoulder to shoulder with us in the deep snows of Norway, just as our navy proudly patrolled waters of Hawaii, your birth State, 2 years ago during the RIMPAC exercise; just as we stood together after 9/11, and just as we now have joined forces in the fight

against ISIL. This is the nature of our alliance and our partnership. We are bound by the experiences and the history that we share.

One of the Marines I met in the NATO exercise in Norway was called Cage—Cage Solberg. [Laughter] As his name illustrates, there are millions of people of Norwegian descent in the United States. In fact, there are more here than there are in Norway. [Laughter] Thousands of Norwegians crossed the huge, expansive Atlantic Ocean in the mid-19th century to pursue the new opportunities for themselves and their children. They carried the dream of a better life in the United States.

Today, the Atlantic Ocean unites us more than it separates us. It has made Norway a seafaring nation, open to trade with the world and committed to developing our fish, gas, and oil resources in a sustainable matter. The Norwegian coastline reaches to the North Cape. Keeping close eyes on the development in the high north is a key priority for us. Preserving stability and predictability in our own region benefits the entire NATO alliance.

And as close allies, we share common values. And that is, of course, no coincidence. In 1814, our Founding Fathers looked to America for inspiration in drafting the Norwegian Constitution. Our common values remain steadfast: freedom, democracy, equality, and human rights. Our values reflect the nature of our friendship and the partnership that we hold dear.

Today's U.S.-Nordic summit is a strong reminder of what we have achieved together. But we know there's more to be done. The United States is a great power, and the five Nordic countries have different roles to play in the international arena, but we can achieve great things when we pursue the same goals.

Mr. President, I would like to commend you on your leadership. Your commitment to achieving real progress in climate change was essential for the Paris Agreement. American leadership is key to ensuring the future of the planet. We share your dedication to disarmament and nuclear security. Nonproliferation, disarmament, and arms controls are key elements of international security. And we will support your request for bold new reductions on a reciprocal basis to make the world safer.

Mr. President, in New York last year, the international community established a roadmap for the future by agreeing on the sustainable development goals. If we make the right choices, over the next 15 years, we can eradicate extreme poverty, and we can have a fair and more peaceful future. And we can do all this in a way that safeguards the planet. Broad partnerships and innovative new approaches will be needed to achieve these goals. The United States and the Nordics will be in front. And we know of few ventures that will provide a better return than girls' education. I greatly appreciate the leadership of the First Lady, who has provided in this cause. It's a cause we share as women and as mothers and as leaders.

Today's summit is an important opportunity to advance the U.S.-Nordic cooperation and to reiterate the values that we share and the truths that we hold for being self-evident. Because we are stronger and more effective together, let us ensure that the bonds between us and our countries remain as powerful as they are today. Thank you.

President Obama. Thank you, everybody. We're going to go get to work. We're very grateful for the presence of our leaders here.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:24 a.m. in the Grand Foyer at the White House, where President Niinistö, Prime Minister Solberg, Prime Minister Löfven, Prime Minister Rasmussen of Denmark, and Prime Minister Jóhannsson were accorded a formal welcome with full military honors. In his remarks, he referred to Swedish musician Tim Bergling, known as

"Avicii." Prime Minister Solberg referred to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization.

Categories: Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Finland, President Niinistö; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Norway, Prime Minister Solberg; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Iceland, Prime Minister Jóhannsson; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Sweden, Prime Minister Löfven; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Denmark, Prime Minister Rasmussen.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Bergling, Tim "Avicii"; Finnes, Sindre; Haukio, Jenni; Ingjaldsdóttir, Ingibjörg Elsa; Jóhannsson, Sigurður Ingi; Löfven, Stefan; Löfven, Ulla; Niinistö, Sauli; Obama, Michelle; Rasmussen, Lars Løkke; Rasmussen, Solrun Jákupsdóttir Løkke; Solberg, Erna.

Subjects: Denmark : Prime Minister; Europe : Nordic States :: Relations with U.S.; Finland : President; Iceland : Prime Minister; Norway : Prime Minister; Sweden : Prime Minister.

DCPD Number: DCPD201600312.