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Remarks at “Christmas in Washington” *December 11, 2011*

Good evening, everybody. I just want to start by thanking all the folks who have joined us at the National Building Museum. Let’s give it up for our host, who also happens to be the host of the best late night show on TBS, Conan O’Brien. [*Laughter*] And I want to thank all the spectacular artists and choirs and glee clubs who’ve made this such a spectacular evening. Please give them a big round of applause.

I want to congratulate 30 years of “Christmas in Washington.” It’s always an extraordinary honor to be a part of this event because it benefits such a special place, the Children’s National Medical Center. For so many children and their parents, the work that they do to save lives and improve care is nothing short of a miracle. And that’s fitting, because this is the season to celebrate miracles.

This is the season to celebrate the story of how, more than 2,000 ago, a child was born to two faithful travelers who could find rest only in a stable, among cattle and sheep. He was no ordinary child. He was the manifestation of

God’s love. And every year we celebrate His birth because the story of Jesus Christ changed the world. For me and for millions of Americans, His story has filled our hearts and inspired our lives. It moves us to love one another, to help and serve those less fortunate, to forgive, to draw close to our families, to be grateful for all that has been given to us, to keep faith, and to hold on to an enduring hope in humanity.

Service to others, compassion to all, treating others as we wish ourselves to be treated, those values aren’t just at the center of Christianity, those are values that are shared by all faiths. So tonight let us all rededicate ourselves to each other. And in that spirit, from my family to yours, happy holidays. Merry Christmas.

God bless you all, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:31 p.m. at the National Building Museum.

The President’s News Conference With Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of Iraq *December 12, 2011*

President Obama. Please have a seat. Good afternoon, everyone.

When I took office, nearly 150,000 American troops were deployed in Iraq, and I pledged to end this war responsibly. Today, only several thousand troops remain there, and more are coming home every day.

This is a season of homecomings, and military families across America are being reunited for the holidays. In the coming days, the last American soldiers will cross the border out of Iraq with honor and with their heads held high.

After nearly 9 years, our war in Iraq ends this month.

Today I’m proud to welcome Prime Minister Maliki, the elected leader of a sovereign, self-reliant, and democratic Iraq. We’re here to mark the end of this war, to honor the sacrifices of all those who made this day possible, and to turn the page, begin a new chapter in the history between our countries, a normal relationship between sovereign nations, an equal partnership based on mutual interests and mutual respect.

Iraq faces great challenges, but today reflects the impressive progress that Iraqis have made. Millions have cast their ballots—some risking or giving their lives—to vote in free elections. The Prime Minister leads Iraq's most inclusive government yet. Iraqis are working to build institutions that are efficient and independent and transparent.

Economically, Iraqis continue to invest in their infrastructure and development. And I think it's worth considering some remarkable statistics. In the coming years, it's estimated that Iraq's economy will grow even faster than China's or India's. With oil production rising, Iraq is on track to once again be one of the region's leading oil producers.

With respect to security, Iraqi forces have been in the lead for the better part of 3 years, patrolling the streets, dismantling militias, conducting counterterrorism operations. Today, despite continued attacks by those who seek to derail Iraq's progress, violence remains at record lows.

And, Mr. Prime Minister, that's a tribute to your leadership and to the skill and the sacrifices of Iraqi forces.

Across the region, Iraq is forging new ties of trade and commerce with its neighbors, and Iraq is assuming its rightful place among the community of nations. For the first time in two decades, Iraq is scheduled to host the next Arab League Summit, and what a powerful message that will send throughout the Arab world. People throughout the region will see a new Iraq that's determining its own destiny, a country in which people from different religious sects and ethnicities can resolve their differences peacefully through the democratic process.

Mr. Prime Minister, as we end this war and as Iraq faces its future, the Iraqi people must know that you will not stand alone. You have a strong and enduring partner in the United States of America.

And so today the Prime Minister and I are reaffirming our common vision of a long-term partnership between our nations. This is in keeping with our strategic framework agreement, and it will be like the close relationships we have with other sovereign nations. Simply

put, we are building a comprehensive partnership.

Mr. Prime Minister, you've said that Iraqis seek democracy, "a state of citizens and not sects." So we're partnering to strengthen the institutions upon which Iraq's democracy depends: free elections, a vibrant press, a strong civil society, professional police and law enforcement that uphold the rule of law, an independent judiciary that delivers justice fairly, and transparent institutions that serve all Iraqis.

We're partnering to expand our trade and commerce. We'll make it easier for our businesses to export and innovate together. We'll share our experiences in agriculture and in health care. We'll work together to develop Iraq's energy sector even as the Iraqi economy diversifies, and we'll deepen Iraq's integration into the global economy.

We're partnering to expand the ties between our citizens, especially our young people. Through efforts like the Fulbright Program, we're welcoming more Iraqi students and future leaders to America to study and form friendships that will bind our nations together for generations to come. And we'll forge more collaborations in areas like science and technology.

We'll partner for our shared security. Mr. Prime Minister, we discussed how the United States could help Iraq train and equip its forces, not by stationing American troops there or with U.S. bases in Iraq—those days are over—but rather, the kind of training and assistance we offer to other countries. Given the challenges we face together in a rapidly changing region, we also agreed to establish a new, formal channel of communication between our national security advisers.

And finally, we're partnering for regional security. For just as Iraq has pledged not to interfere in other nations, other nations must not interfere in Iraq. Iraq's sovereignty must be respected. And meanwhile, there should be no doubt, the drawdown in Iraq has allowed us to refocus our resources, achieve progress in Afghanistan, put Al Qaida on the path to defeat, and to better prepare for the full range of challenges that lie ahead.

So make no mistake, our strong presence in the Middle East endures, and the United States will never waver in defense of our allies, our partners, or our interests.

This is the shared vision that Prime Minister Maliki and I reaffirm today: an equal partnership, a broad relationship that advances the security, the prosperity, and the aspirations of both our people.

Mr. Prime Minister, you've said it yourself: Building a strong and durable relationship between our two countries is vital. And I could not agree more.

So this is a historic moment. A war is ending. A new day is upon us. And let us never forget those who gave us this chance, the untold number of Iraqis who've given their lives; more than 1 million Americans, military and civilian, who have served in Iraq; nearly 4,500 fallen Americans who gave their last full measure of devotion; tens of thousands of wounded warriors; and so many inspiring military families. They are the reason that we can stand here today. And we owe it to every single one of them—we have a moral obligation to all of them—to build a future worthy of their sacrifice.

Mr. Prime Minister.

[At this point, Prime Minister Maliki spoke in Arabic, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter and joined in progress.]

Prime Minister Maliki. —positive atmosphere that prevailed among us, and for the obligations, the common obligations, of ending the war, and the commitment to which the American forces will withdraw from Iraq, which is a withdrawal that affects—that indicates success, and not like others have said, that it was negative, but the goals that we established were achieved.

Iraq had a political process established, a democratic process, and adoption of the principles of elections and the transfer—peaceful transfer of authority. Iraq is following a policy, a foreign policy, which does not intervene in the affairs of others and does not allow the others to intervene in its own affairs. Iraq is looking for common grounds with the others and

establishes its interest at the forefront and the interest of the others, which it is concerned about, like from any confusion.

Your Excellency, today we meet in Washington after we have completed the first page of a constructive cooperation in which we also thank you and appreciate you for your commitment to everything that you have committed yourself to. And anyone who observes the nature of the relationship between the two countries will say that the relationship will not end with the departure of the last American soldier. It only started when we signed in 2008, in addition to the withdrawal treaty, the strategic framework agreement for the relationship between our two countries.

And because we have proven success in the first mission, a very unique success—nobody imagined that we would succeed in defeating terrorism and the Al Qaida—we must also establish the necessary steps in order to succeed in our second stage, which is the dual relationship under the strategic framework agreement, in the economic sphere, as well as in educational and commercial and cultural and judicial and security cooperation fields.

Iraq now has become reliant completely on its own security apparatus and internal security as a result of the expertise that it gained during the confrontations and the training and the equipping. But it remains in need of cooperation with the United States of America in security issues and information and combating terrorism and in the area of training and the area of equipping, which is needed by the Iraqi Army. And we have started that. And we want to complete the process of equipping the Iraqi Army in order to protect our sovereignty and does not violate the rights of anybody—or do not take any missions that violate the sovereignty of others.

Today, the joint mission is to establish the mechanisms and the commitments that will expedite our—we have reached an agreement, and we have held a meeting for the higher joint committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Biden, the Vice President, and myself in Baghdad, and we spoke about all the details that

would put the framework agreement into implementation.

And here we talked about it and its activation. And there will be other discussions and other meetings with the higher committee here in Washington in order to put the final touches regarding the necessary mechanisms for cooperation and achieving the common vision that we followed, which was based on our common wills and political independent decision and the desire to respect the sovereignty of each other.

And we feel that we need political cooperation as well, in addition to cooperating in the security and economic and commercial fields. We need a political cooperation, particularly with regard to the matters that are common and are of concern for us as two parties that want to cooperate.

The common vision that we used as a point of departure we have confirmed today. And I am very happy. Every time we meet with the American side, I find determination and a strong will to activate the strategic framework agreement. And I will say frankly, this is necessary, and it serves the interests of Iraq, as it is necessary and serves the interests of the United States of America.

This makes us feel that we will succeed with the same commitment, common commitment that we had in combating terrorism and accomplishing the missions, the basis of which Iraq was independent. Iraq today has a lot of wealth, and it needs experience and expertise, and American and foreign expertise, to help Iraq exploiting its own wealth in an ideal way. Iraq is still suffering from a shortage of resources, and we have established a strategy to increase the Iraqi wealth. And we hope that the American companies will have the largest role in increasing our wealth in the area of oil and other aspects as well.

Iraq wants to rebuild all these sectors that were harmed because of the war and because of the adventurous policies that were used by the former regime, and we need a wide range of reform in the area of education.

We have succeeded in signing several agreements through the educational initiative, which

put hundreds of our college graduates to continue their graduate studies and specialized subject in American universities. And I am putting it before everyone who is watching the relationship between the U.S. and Iraq. It is a very—it has very high aspirations.

And I would like to renew my thanks for His Excellency the President for giving me this opportunity, and I wish him more success, God willing. Thank you very much.

President Obama. We have time for a few questions. I'm going to start with Ben Feller of AP [Associated Press].

Syria/Iraq/Iran

Q. Thank you, Mr. President and Mr. Prime Minister. Mr. President, I have two questions for you on the region. In Syria, you have called for President Asad to step down over the killing of his people, but Prime Minister Maliki has warned that Asad's removal could lead to a civil war that could destabilize the whole region. I'm wondering if you're worried that Iraq could be succumbing to Iran's influence on this matter and perhaps helping to protect Asad.

And speaking of Iran, are you concerned that it will be able to weaken America's national security by discovering intelligence from the fallen drone that it captured?

Prime Minister Maliki, I'd like to ask you the question about Syria. Why haven't you demanded that Asad step down, given the slaughter of his people?

President Obama. First of all, the Prime Minister and I discussed Syria, and we share the view that when the Syrian people are being killed or are unable to express themselves, that's a problem. There's no disagreement there.

I have expressed my outrage in how the Syrian regime has been operating. I do believe that President Asad missed an opportunity to reform his Government, chose the path of repression, and has continued to engage in repressive tactics so that his credibility, his capacity to regain legitimacy inside Syria, I think, is deeply eroded.

It's not an easy situation. And I expressed to Prime Minister Maliki my recognition that given Syria is on Iraq's borders, Iraq is in a tough neighborhood, that we will consult closely with them as we move forward.

But we believe that international pressure, the approach we've taken along with partners around the world to impose tough sanctions and to call on Asad to step down, a position that is increasingly mirrored by the Arab League states, is the right position to take.

Even if there are tactical disagreements between Iraq and the United States at this point in how to deal with Syria, I have absolutely no doubt that these decisions are being made based on what Prime Minister Maliki believes is best for Iraq, not based on considerations of what Iran would like to see.

Prime Minister Maliki has been explicit here in the United States; he's been explicit back in Iraq in his writings, in his commentary, that his interest is maintaining Iraqi sovereignty and preventing meddling by anybody inside of Iraq. And I believe him. And he has shown himself to be willing to make very tough decisions in the interest of Iraqi nationalism even if they cause problems with his neighbor.

And so we may have some different tactical views in terms of how best to transition to an inclusive, representative government inside of Syria, but every decision that, I believe, Prime Minister Maliki is making he is making on the basis of what he thinks is best for the Iraqi people. And everything that we've seen in our interactions with Prime Minister Maliki and his Government over the last several years would confirm that.

With respect to the drone inside of Iran, I'm not going to comment on intelligence matters that are classified. As has already been indicated, we have asked for it back. We'll see how the Iranians respond.

[Prime Minister Maliki spoke in Arabic, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter and joined in progress.]

Prime Minister Maliki. —difficult in Syria, and perhaps in other states as well. But I know that peoples must get their freedom and

their will and democracy and equal citizenship. We are with these rights, the rights of people and with their wills, because we have achieved that ourselves. And if we could compare Iraq today with the past, we find that there is a great difference in democracy and elections and freedom.

Therefore, we honor the aspirations of the Syrian people. But I cannot have—I do not have the right to ask a President to abdicate. We must play this role, and we cannot give ourselves this right.

Iraq is a country that is bordering on Syria, and I am concerned about the interest of Iraq and the interest of the security of the region. And I wish that what is required by the Syrian people would be achieved without having—without affecting the security of Iraq. And I know the two countries are related to each other, and we must be very prudent in dealing with this matter.

We were with the initiative by the Arab League. But frankly speaking, because we suffered from the blockade and the military interventions, we do not encourage a blockade because it exhausts the people and the government. But we stood with the Arab League, and we were very frank with ourselves when they visited us in Baghdad, and we agreed on an initiative. Perhaps it will be the last initiative that we'll see in this situation and will achieve the required change in Syria without any violent operations that could affect the area in general.

I believe that the parties, all the parties realize the dangers of a sectarian war in Iraq, in Syria, and in the region, because it will be like a snowball that it will expand and it will be difficult to control it.

We will try to reach a solution, and I discussed the matter with His Excellency, the President, President Obama, and the Secretary General of the Arab League. And there is agreement even from the Syrian opposition, who are leading the opposition in Syria, to search for a solution. If we can reach a solution, it will avoid all the evils and the dangers. And if we don't, there must be another way to reach a solution that will calm the situation in Syria and in the area in general.

[A reporter spoke in Arabic, and the question was translated by an interpreter and joined in progress.]

Iraq-U.S. Relations

Q. —establish a new relationship—to establish the characteristics of a new relationship with the United States after the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Iraq? Relying on the strategic framework agreement, have you reached a specific mechanism for the implementation of the framework agreement?

Your Excellency, President Obama, you said that there will be long-range relationships with Iraq. Can you tell us exactly, will Iraq be an ally of the United States or just a friend, or will have a different type of relationship?

Thank you very much.

Prime Minister Maliki. Definitely, without mechanisms, we will not be able to achieve anything we have. These mechanisms will control our continuous movement. Therefore, the framework agreement has a higher committee, or a joint committee from the two countries that meets regularly, and it has representatives from all the sectors that we want to develop relationship in: commerce, industry, agriculture, economy, security.

So the joint higher committee is the mechanism in which the ideas will be reached in relationship between the ministries that will implement what is agreed upon. We believe through these two mechanisms, the mechanism of the joint committee and the mechanism of contact between each minister and his counterpart, we will achieve success, and this will expedite achieving our goal.

President Obama. As the Prime Minister described, I think our goal is to have a comprehensive relationship with Iraq. And what that means is, is that on everything from expanding trade and commerce to scientific exchanges, to providing assistance as Iraq is trying to make sure that electricity and power generation is consistent for its people, to joint exercises militarily, to a whole range of issues, we want to make sure that there is a constant communication between our governments, that there are deep and rich exchanges between our two

governments and between our peoples, because what's happened over the last several years has linked the United States and Iraq in a way that is potentially powerful and could end up benefiting not only America and Iraq, but also the entire region and the entire world.

It will evolve over time. What may be discovered is, is that there are certain issues that Prime Minister Maliki and his Government think are especially important right now, for example, making sure that oil production is ramped up, and we are helping to encourage global investment in that sector.

I know that the Prime Minister has certain concerns right now, militarily, that 5 years from now or 10 years from now, when the Iraqi Air Force is fully developed or the Iraqi Navy is fully developed, he has less concern about.

Our goal is simply to make sure that Iraq succeeds, because we think a successful, democratic Iraq can be a model for the entire region. We think an Iraq that is inclusive and brings together all people—Sunni, Shia, Kurd—together to build a country, to build a nation, can be a model for others that are aspiring to create democracy in the region.

And so we've got an enormous investment of blood and treasure in Iraq, and we want to make sure that, even as we bring the last troops out, that it's well understood both in Iraq and here in the United States that our commitment to Iraq's success is going to be enduring.

Christi Parsons [Chicago Tribune].

U.S. Military Operations in Iraq/Iraq-U.S. Relations

Q. Thank you. You were a little delayed coming out today. I was wondering if you could talk about any agreements that you may have reached that you haven't detailed already. For instance, can you talk a little bit more about who will be left behind after the U.S. leaves, how big their footprint will be, and what their role will be?

And, Mr. President, could you also address how convinced you are that the Maliki Government is ready to govern the country and protect the gains that have been made there in re-

cent years? I also wonder if, on this occasion, you still think of this as “a dumb war.”

President Obama. I’ll take the last question first. I think history will judge the original decision to go into Iraq. But what’s absolutely clear is, as a consequence of the enormous sacrifices that have been made by American soldiers and civilians—American troops and civilians—as well as the courage of the Iraqi people, that what we have now achieved is an Iraq that is self-governing, that is inclusive, and that has enormous potential.

There are still going to be challenges. And I think the Prime Minister is the first one to acknowledge those challenges. Many of them, by the way, are economic. After many years of war and, before that, a brutal regime, it’s going to take time to further develop civil society, further develop the institutions of trade and commerce and the free market so that the extraordinary capacity of the Iraqi people is fully realized. But I have no doubt that Iraq can succeed.

With respect to security issues, look, when I came into office, I said we’re going to do this in a deliberate fashion. We’re going to make sure that we leave Iraq responsibly, and that’s exactly what we’ve done. We did it in phases. And because we did it in phases, it—we were continually able to build up Iraqi forces to a point where when we left the cities, violence didn’t go up in the cities; when we further reduced our footprint, violence didn’t go up. And I have no doubt that that will continue.

First question you had had to do with what footprint is left. We’re taking all of our troops out of Iraq. We will not have any bases inside of Iraq. We will have a strong diplomatic presence inside of Iraq. We’ve got an Embassy there that is going to be carrying out a lot of the functions of this ongoing partnership and executing on the strategic framework agreement.

We will be working to set up effective military-to-military ties that are no different from the ties that we have with countries throughout the region and around the world. The Iraqi

Government has already purchased F-16s from us. We’ve got to train their pilots and make sure that they’re up and running and that we have an effective Iraqi Air Force.

We both have interests in making sure that the sea lanes remain open in and around Iraq and throughout the region, and so there may be occasion for joint exercises. We both have interests in counterterrorism operations that might undermine Iraqi sovereignty, but also could affect U.S. interests, and we’ll be working together on those issues.

But what we are doing here today, and what we’ll be executing over the next several months, is a normalization of the relationship. We will have a strong friend and partner in Iraq; they will have a strong friend and partner in us, but as one based on Iraqi sovereignty and one based on equal partnerships of mutual interest and mutual respect. And I’m absolutely confident that we’re going to be able to execute that over the long term.

While I’m at it, since this may be the last question I receive, I just want to acknowledge: None of this would have been successful obviously without our extraordinary men and women in uniform. And I’m very grateful for the Prime Minister asking to travel to Arlington to recognize those sacrifices.

There are also some individuals here who’ve been doing a bang-up job over the last year to help bring us to this day. And I just want to acknowledge General Lloyd Austin, who was a warrior and, turns out, is also a pretty good diplomat, as well as Ambassador Jim Jeffreys [Jeffrey]. Both of them have done extraordinary work on the ground, partnering with their Iraqi counterparts.

And I’m going to give a special shout-out to my friend and partner Joe Biden, who, I think, ever since I came in, has helped to establish high-level, strong links and dialogue between the United States and Iraq through some difficult times. And I think Prime Minister Maliki would agree that the Vice President’s investment in making this successful has been hugely important.

* White House correction.

Prime Minister Maliki. Thank you very much. I believe the remaining of the question that was given was answered by His Excellency the President. And I also—I said at the beginning, the dialogues that were to confirm the confidence and to move into the implementation of the framework agreement and to find the companies and to train our soldiers on the weapons that were bought from America and the need for expertise in other civil fields and the protection of their movement in Iraq.

We talked also about the political issues, which is a common interest for us. And we spoke also about the question of armament. As the President said, Iraq has bought some weapons and now is applying for buying other weapons to develop its capabilities in the protection of Iraq.

These are all titles of what we discussed, but it was done in an atmosphere of harmony.

Iraq-U.S. Security Cooperation/Iraq-U.S. Relations

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, you stated that there is cooperation in the area of armament. Can you tell us the amount of military cooperation between the United States and Baghdad in this area? Specifically, have you received any promises from President Obama in this regard, specifically—of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad? There is argument going on inside Iraqi politician now regarding the size; it's 15,000. And I wonder if you discussed with Prime Minister to reduce the number of the diplomats. Thank you.

Prime Minister Maliki. Definitely, we have raised the issue of Iraqi need for weapons, for aerial protection and naval and ground protection. We have a lot of weapons, American weapons, and it requires trainers. And we received promises for cooperation from His Excellency the President for some weapons that Iraq is asking for, especially those related to its protection of its airspace. And we hope that the Congress will approve another group of F-16 airplanes to Iraq because our air force was destroyed completely during the war that Iraq entered into.

And this is not all. We also need technical equipment related to the security field. These are issues that are being discussed by the concerned people in both countries, between the ministers of defense and interior, with their counterparts in the United States, and we received promises and facilitations. And we agreed on how to make this relationship continuous in the security field, because both of us need each other and need cooperation, especially in chasing Al Qaida, which we started and was not defeated anywhere except in Iraq. And we hope to cooperate with all those who feel the dangers of this organization—to cooperate with us as well.

President Obama. Our view is a sovereign Iraq that can protect its borders, protect its airspace, protect its people. And our security cooperation with other countries I think is a model for our security cooperation with Iraq. We don't want to create big footprints inside of Iraq—and that's, I think, demonstrated by what will happen at the end of this month, which is we're getting our troops out. But we will have a very active relationship, military-to-military, that will, hopefully, enhance Iraqi capabilities and will assure that we've got a strong partner in the region that is going to be effective.

With respect to the Embassy, the actual size of our Embassy with respect to diplomats is going to be comparable to other countries that we think are important around the world. There are still some special security needs inside of Iraq that make the overall number larger. And we understand some questions have been raised inside of Iraq about that.

Look, we're only a few years removed from an active war inside of Iraq. I think it's fair to say that there are still some groups, although they are greatly weakened, that might be tempted to target U.S. diplomats or civilians who are working there to improve the performance of the power sector inside of Iraq or are working to help train agricultural specialists inside of Iraq. And as President of the United States, I want to make sure that anybody who is out in Iraq trying to help the Iraqi people is protected.

Now, as this transition proceeds, it may turn out that the security needs for our diplomats

and for our civilians gradually reduces itself, partly because Iraq continues to make additional progress. But I think the Iraqi people can understand that, as President of the United States, if I'm putting civilians in the field in order to help the Iraqi people build their economy and improve their productivity, I want to make sure that they come home, because they are not soldiers.

So that makes the numbers larger than they otherwise would be, but the overall mission that they're carrying out is comparable to the missions that are taking place in other countries that are big, that are important, and that are friends of ours. Okay?

Remarks at an Obama Victory Fund 2012 Fundraiser December 13, 2011

Hello, everybody! Hello, hello, hello! Thank you. Love you guys. Thank you so much. All right, everybody have a seat. I don't want to milk this too much here. [Laughter]

To Matthew, thank you for your extraordinary leadership. We could not be prouder of you. And for you to have made all the life-changing sacrifices to take on this job, it's something that I couldn't be prouder of. So please give Matthew a big round of applause. He's working hard.

Jane Stetson, Andy Tobias, they are doing remarkable work for the DNC. And our outstanding chairwoman of the DNC, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, is in the house. Give her a big round of applause as well.

I don't want to give a long speech. I want to save most of my time for questions and discussion with all of you. I've got two simple messages. Number one, thank you. I look around the room: Everybody here has gone above and beyond the call of duty, not just for the last few months, but for several years now. I'm reminded of what my friend Ab Mikva said about being friends with a politician: It's like having a perpetual child in college. [Laughter] It just never stops. [Laughter] But all of you have just done incredible work with great cheer and great determination. And I'm thankful for it.

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 12:24 p.m. in the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, the President referred to Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, USA, commanding general, U.S. Forces—Iraq. Prime Minister Maliki referred to Secretary General Nabil Elaraby of the League of Arab States; Acting Minister of Defense Sadun al-Dulaymi of Iraq; and Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta. Prime Minister Maliki and two reporters spoke in Arabic, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Which brings me to the second point. The reason you do it, I'd like to think, is a little bit because you like me and you think I'm a pretty good guy. [Laughter] I definitely know that part of it is because you love Michelle and think she's one of the best First Ladies we've ever had. But the main reason you do it is because you know what's at stake.

Back in 2008, we used to talk about this being a historic moment for America, that we were at a crossroads in our history. Well, we haven't fully crossed the road, and in some ways, 2012 is even more important than it was 4 years ago. The choices could not be starker. The vision about where we want to take the country could not be more different.

I gave a speech in Kansas last week where I talked about where we need to go as a country, a country that's based on everybody having a fair shot, a country that depends on everybody doing their fair share, a country where fair play applies across the board. And I talked about how, for decades now, people have felt that the basic compact that if you worked hard, you acted responsibly, you looked after your family, that you would be able to be in the middle class, stay in the middle class, get into the middle class, that your kids would have a better life than you did, that you'd have some semblance of security, that that compact had eroded.