

sadness, we were reminded that the beauty of America remains our diversity and our right to religious freedom.

The President's News Conference November 14, 2012

The President. Good afternoon, everybody. Please have a seat. I hear you have some questions for me. [Laughter] But let me just make a few remarks at the top, and then I'll open it up.

First of all, I want to reiterate what I said on Friday. Right now our economy is still recovering from a very deep and damaging crisis, so our top priority has to be jobs and growth. We've got to build on the progress that we've made, because this Nation succeeds when we've got a growing, thriving middle class.

And that's the idea at the core of the plan that I talked about on the campaign trail over the last year: rewarding manufacturers and small businesses that create jobs here, not overseas; providing more Americans the chance to earn the skills that businesses are looking for right now; keeping this country at the forefront of research, technology, and clean energy; putting people back to work rebuilding our roads, our bridges, and our schools; and reducing our deficit in a balanced and responsible way.

Now, on this last item, we face a very clear deadline that requires us to make some big decisions on jobs, taxes, and deficits by the end of the year. Both parties voted to set this deadline. And I believe that both parties can work together to make these decisions in a balanced and responsible way.

Now, yesterday I had a chance to meet with labor and civic leaders for their input. Today I'm meeting with CEOs of some of America's largest companies. And I'll meet with leaders of both parties of Congress before the week is out. Because there's only one way to solve these challenges, and that is to do it together.

As I've said before, I'm open to compromise, and I'm open to new ideas. And I've been encouraged over the past week to hear Republican after Republican agree on the need for more revenue from the wealthiest

To those celebrating Diwali, I wish you, your families, and loved ones happy Diwali and *Saal Mubarak*.

Americans as part of our arithmetic if we're going to be serious about reducing the deficit.

Because when it comes to taxes, there are two pathways available: Option one, if Congress fails to act by the end of this year, everybody's taxes will automatically go up, including the 98 percent of Americans who make less than \$250,000 a year and the 97 percent of small businesses who earn less than \$250,000 a year. That doesn't make sense. Our economy can't afford that right now. Certainly, no middle class family can afford that right now. And nobody in either party says that they want it to happen.

The other option is to pass a law right now that would prevent any tax hike whatsoever on the first \$250,000 of everybody's income. And by the way, that means every American, including the wealthiest Americans, get a tax cut. It means that 98 percent of all Americans, and 97 percent of all small businesses won't see their taxes go up a single dime. The Senate has already passed a law like this. Democrats in the House are ready to pass a law like this. And I hope Republicans in the House come on board too.

We should not hold the middle class hostage while we debate tax cuts for the wealthy. We should at least do what we agree on, and that's to keep middle class taxes low. And I'll bring everyone in to sign it right away so we can give folks some certainty before the holiday season.

Now, I won't pretend that figuring out everything else will be easy, but I'm confident we can do it, and I know we have to. I know that that's what the American people want us to do. That was the very clear message from the election last week. And that was the message of a letter that I received over the weekend.

It came from a man in Tennessee who began by writing that he didn't vote for me, which is okay. [Laughter] But what he said

was, even though he didn't give me his vote, he's giving me his support to move this country forward. And he said the same to his Republican Representatives in Washington. He said that he'll back each of us, regardless of party, as long as we work together to make life better for all of us. And he made it clear that if we don't make enough progress, he'll be back in touch.

"So my hope," he wrote, "is that we can make progress in light of personal and party principles, special interest groups, and years of business as usual. We've got to work together and put our differences aside." I couldn't say it better myself. That's precisely what I intend to do.

And with that, let me open it up for your questions. And I'm going to start off with Ben Feller of AP.

Former Director of Central Intelligence David H. Petraeus

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Can you assure the American people that there have been no breaches of national security or classified information in the scandal involving Generals Petraeus and Allen? And do you think that you as Commander in Chief and the American people should have been told that the CIA chief was under investigation before the election?

The President. Well, I have no evidence at this point from what I've seen that classified information was disclosed that in any way would have had a negative impact on our national security.

Obviously, there's an ongoing investigation. I don't want to comment on the specifics of the investigation. The FBI has its own protocols in terms of how they proceed, and I'm going to let Director Mueller and others examine those protocols and make some statements to the public generally.

I do want to emphasize what I've said before: General Petraeus had an extraordinary career. He served this country with great distinction in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and as head of the CIA. By his own assessment, he did not meet the standards that he felt were necessary

as the Director of CIA with respect to this personal matter that he is now dealing with with his family and with his wife. And it's on that basis that he tendered his resignation, and it's on that basis that I accepted it.

But I want to emphasize that, from my perspective at least, he has provided this country an extraordinary service. We are safer because of the work that Dave Petraeus has done. And my main hope right now is, is that he and his family are able to move on and that this ends up being a single side note on what has otherwise been an extraordinary career.

Q. What about voters? Did they deserve to know?

The President. Again, I think you're going to have to talk to the FBI in terms of what their general protocols are when it comes to what started off as a potential criminal investigation. One of the challenges here is, is that we're not supposed to meddle in criminal investigations, and that's been our practice. And I think that there are certain procedures that both the FBI follow, or DOJ follow, when they're involved in these investigations. That's traditionally been how we view things, in part because people are innocent until proven guilty and we want to make sure that we don't prejudge these kinds of situations. And so my expectation is, is that they followed protocols that they already established. Okay?

Jessica Yellin [CNN]. Where's Jessica? Right there.

National Economy/Tax Rates

Q. Mr. President, on the fiscal cliff, 2 years ago, sir, you said that you wouldn't extend the Bush-era tax cuts, but at the end of the day, you did. So, respectfully, sir, why should the American people and the Republicans believe that you won't cave again this time?

The President. Well, 2 years ago, the economy was in a different situation. We were still very much in the early parts of recovering from the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. And ultimately, we came together not only to extend the Bush tax cuts, but also a wide range of policies that were going to be good for the economy at that point—

unemployment insurance extensions, payroll tax extension—all of which made a difference and is part of the reason why what we've seen now is 32 consecutive months of job growth and over 5½ million jobs created and the unemployment rate coming down.

But what I said at the time is what I meant, which is this was a one-time proposition. And what I have told leaders privately, as well as publicly, is that we cannot afford to extend the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy. What we can do is make sure that middle class taxes don't go up.

And so the most important step we can take right now—and I think the foundation for a deal that helps the economy, creates jobs, gives consumers certainty, which means gives businesses confidence that they're going to have consumers during the holiday season—is if we right away say 98 percent of Americans are not going to see their taxes go up, 97 percent of small businesses are not going to see their taxes go up. If we get that in place, we are actually removing half of the fiscal cliff. Half of the danger to our economy is removed by that single step.

And what we can then do is shape a process whereby we look at tax reform, which I'm very eager to do. I think we can simplify our tax system. I think we can make it more efficient. We can eliminate loopholes and deductions that have a distorting effect on our economy. I believe that we have to continue to take a serious look at how we reform our entitlements because health care costs continue to be the biggest driver of our deficits.

So there is a package to be shaped, and I'm confident that parties—folks of good will in both parties can make that happen. But what I'm not going to do is to extend Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest 2 percent that we can't afford and, according to economists, will have the least positive impact on our economy.

Tax Reform/Deficit and National Debt

Q. You've said that the wealthiest must pay more. Would closing loopholes instead of raising rates for them satisfy you?

The President. I think that there are loopholes that can be closed, and we should look at how we can make the process of deductions, the filing process easier, simpler. But when it comes to the top 2 percent, what I'm not going to do is to extend further a tax cut for folks who don't need it, which would cost close to a trillion dollars.

And it's very difficult to see how you make up that trillion dollars—if we're serious about deficit reduction—just by closing loopholes and deductions. The math tends not to work. And I think it's important to establish a basic principle that was debated extensively during the course of this campaign. I mean, this shouldn't be a surprise to anybody. This was—if there was one thing that everybody understood was a big difference between myself and Mr. Romney, it was, when it comes to how we reduce our deficit, I argued for a balanced, responsible approach, and part of that included making sure that the wealthiest Americans pay a little bit more.

I think every voter out there understood that that was an important debate, and the majority of voters agreed with me. Not—by the way, more voters agreed with me on this issue than voted for me. So we've got a clear majority of the American people who recognize if we're going to be serious about deficit reduction, we've got to do it in a balanced way.

The only question now is, are we going to hold the middle class hostage in order to go ahead and let that happen? Or can we all step back and say, "Here's something we agree on, we don't want middle class taxes to go up"? Let's go ahead and lock that in. That will be good for the economy. It will be good for consumers. It will be good for businesses. It takes the edge off the fiscal cliff. And let's also then commit ourselves to the broader package of deficit reduction that includes entitlement changes, and it includes potentially tax reform as well, as I'm willing to look at additional work that we can do on the discretionary spending side.

So I want a big deal. I want a comprehensive deal. I want to see if we can, at least for the foreseeable future, provide certainty to busi-

nesses and the American people so that we can focus on job growth, so that we're also investing in the things that we need. But right now what I want to make sure of is that taxes on middle class families don't go up. And there's a very easy way to do that. We could get that done by next week. Okay?

Lori Montenegro, Telemundo. Where's—

Immigration Reform

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. On immigration reform, the criticism in the past has been that you did not put forth legislation with specific ideas and send it up to the Hill. This time around you have said again that this will be one of the top priorities for a second term. Will you then send legislation to the Hill? And exactly what do you envision is broad immigration reform? Does that include a legalization program? And also, what lessons, if any, did Democrats learn from this last election and the Latino vote?

The President. Well, I think what was incredibly encouraging was to see a significant increase in Latino turnout. This is the fastest growing group in the country. And historically, what you've seen is the Latino vote at lower rates than the broader population, and that's beginning to change. You're starting to see a sense of empowerment and civic participation that, I think, is going to be powerful and good for the country.

And it is why I'm very confident that we can get immigration reform done. Before the election, I had given a couple interviews where I had predicted that the Latino vote was going to be strong, and that that would cause some reflection on the part of Republicans about their position on immigration reform. I think we're starting to see that already. I think that's a positive sign.

This has not historically been a partisan issue; we've had President Bush and John McCain and others who have supported comprehensive immigration reform in the past. So we need to seize the moment. And my expectation is, is that we get a bill introduced and we begin the process in Congress very soon after my Inauguration. And in fact, some conversations, I

think, are already beginning to take place among Senators and Congressmen and my staff about what would this look like.

And when I say comprehensive immigration reform, it is very similar to the outlines of previous efforts at comprehensive immigration reform. I think it should include a continuation of the strong border security measures that we've taken, because we have to secure our borders. I think it should contain serious penalties for companies that are purposely hiring undocumented workers and taking advantage of them. And I do think that there should be a pathway for legal status for those who are living in this country, are not engaged in criminal activity, are here simply to work. I—it's important for them to pay back taxes. It's important for them to learn English. It's important for them to potentially pay a fine. But to give them the avenue whereby they can resolve their legal status here in this country, I think, is very important.

Obviously, making sure that we put into law what the first step that we've taken administratively dealing with the "DREAM Act" kids is very important as well. One thing that I'm very clear about is that young people who are brought here through no fault of their own, who have gone to school here, pledged allegiance to our flag, want to serve in our military, want to go to school and contribute to our society, that they shouldn't be under the cloud of deportation, that we should give them every opportunity to earn their citizenship.

And so there are other components to it, obviously. The business community continues to be concerned about getting enough high-skill workers, and I am a believer that if you've got a Ph.D. in physics or computer science who wants to stay here and start a business here, we shouldn't make it harder for him to stay here, we should try to encourage him to contribute to this society.

I think that the agricultural sector obviously has very specific concerns about making sure that they've got a workforce that helps deliver food to our tables.

So there are going to be a bunch of components to it, but I think whatever process we

have needs to make sure our border security is strong, needs to deal with employers effectively, needs to provide a pathway for the undocumented here, needs to deal with the “DREAM Act” kids. And I think that’s something that we can get done.

Chuck Todd [NBC News]. Where’s Chuck?

Former Director of Central Intelligence David H. Petraeus/Tax Rates/Deficit and National Debt

Q. Mr. President, I just want to follow on a couple—both Ben’s question and Jessica’s question. On having to do with Ben’s question—

The President. How about Lori’s question? Do you want to follow up on that one too? [Laughter]

Q. No, you gave—I feel like you answered that one completely.

Are you withholding judgment on whether you should have known sooner that there was a potential—that there was an investigation into whether your CIA Director—potentially, there was a national security breach with your CIA Director. Do you believe you should have known sooner? Are you withholding judgment until the investigation is complete on that front?

And then the follow-up to Jessica’s question—tax rates. Are you—is there no deal at the end of the year if tax rates for the top 2 percent aren’t the Clinton tax rates, period, no ifs, ands, or buts? And any room in negotiating on that specific aspect of the fiscal cliff?

The President. I am withholding judgment with respect to how the entire process surrounding General Petraeus came up. And we don’t have all the information yet, but I want to say that I have a lot of confidence generally in the FBI, and they’ve got a difficult job. And so I’m going to wait and see to see if there’s any other—

Q. Is there another way that you should have known? Do you think in hindsight—[inaudible]?

The President. Well, I mean, Chuck, what I’ll say is, is that if—it is also possible that had we been told, then you’d be sitting here asking a question about why were you interfering in a criminal investigation. So I think it’s best right

now for us to just see how this whole process unfolded.

With respect to the tax rates, I just want to emphasize I am open to new ideas. If the Republican counterparts or some Democrats have a great idea for us to raise revenue, maintain progressivity, make sure the middle class isn’t getting hit, reduces our deficit, encourages growth, I’m not going to just slam the door in their face. I want to hear ideas from everybody.

Q. So not a full red line?

The President. Look, I believe this is solvable. I think that fair-minded people can come to an agreement that does not cause the economy to go back into recession, that protects middle class families, that focuses on jobs and growth, and reduces our deficit. I’m confident it can be done.

My budget, frankly, does it. I understand that—I don’t expect the Republicans simply to adopt my budget. That’s not realistic. So I recognize that we’re going to have to compromise. And as I said on election night, compromise is hard and not everybody gets 100 percent of what they want and not everybody is going to be perfectly happy.

But what I will not do is to have a process that is vague, that says we’re going to sort of, kind of, raise revenue through dynamic scoring or closing loopholes that have not been identified. And the reason I won’t do that is because I don’t want to find ourselves in a position 6 months from now or a year from now where, lo and behold, the only way to close the deficit is to sock it to middle class families or to burden families that have disabled kids or have a parent in a nursing home, or suddenly, we’ve got to cut more out of our basic research budget that is the key to growing the economy in the long term.

So that’s my concern. I’m less concerned about red lines per se. What I’m concerned about is not finding ourselves in a situation where the wealthy aren’t paying more or aren’t paying as much as they should, middle class families one way or another are making up the difference. That’s the kind of status quo that has been going on here too long, and that’s ex-

actly what I argued against during this campaign. And if there's one thing that I'm pretty confident about is the American people understood what they were getting when they gave me this incredible privilege of being in office for another 4 years.

They want compromise. They want action. But they also want to make sure that middle class folks aren't bearing the entire burden and sacrifice when it comes to some of these big challenges. They expect that folks at the top are doing their fair share as well. And that's going to be my guiding principle during these negotiations, but more importantly, during the next 4 years of my administration.

Nancy Cordes [CBS News].

Republican Presidential Nominee W. Mitt Romney/Bipartisanship

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, on election night, you said that you were looking forward to speaking with Governor Romney, sitting down in the coming weeks to discuss ways that you could work together on this Nation's problems. Have you extended that invitation? Has he accepted? And in what ways do you think you can work together?

The President. We haven't scheduled something yet. I think everybody forgets that the election was only a week ago and—I know I've forgotten. I forgot on Wednesday. [Laughter] So I think everybody needs to catch their breath. I'm sure that Governor Romney is spending some time with his family.

And my hope is, before the end of the year, though, that we have a chance to sit down and talk. There are certain aspects of Governor Romney's record and his ideas that, I think, could be very helpful.

Q. Such as?

The President. Well, to give you one example, I do think he did a terrific job running the Olympics. And that skill set of trying to figure out how do we make something work better applies to the Federal Government. There are a lot of ideas that I don't think are partisan ideas, but are just smart ideas about how can we make the Federal Government more customer friendly; how can we make sure that

we're consolidating programs that are duplicative; how can we eliminate additional waste. He presented some ideas during the course of the campaign that I actually agree with. And so it would be interesting to talk to him about something like that. There may be ideas that he has with respect to jobs and growth that can help middle class families that I want to hear.

So I'm not either prejudging what he's interested in doing, nor am I suggesting I've got some specific assignment. But what I want to do is to get ideas from him and see if there are some ways that we can potentially work together.

Q. But when it comes to your relationships with Congress, one of the most frequent criticisms we've heard over the past few years from Members on both sides is that you haven't done enough to reach out and build relationships. Are there concrete ways that you plan to approach your relationships with Congress in a second term?

The President. Look, I think there's no doubt that I can always do better, and so I will examine ways that I can make sure to communicate my desire to work with everybody, so long as it's advancing the cause of strengthening our middle class and improving our economy. I've got a lot of good relationships with folks both in the House and the Senate. I have a lot of relationships on both sides of the aisle. It hasn't always manifested itself in the kind of agreements that I'd like to see between Democrats and Republicans. And so I think all of us have responsibilities to see if there are things that we can improve on. And I don't exempt myself from needing to do some self-reflection and see if I can improve our working relationship.

There are probably going to be still some very sharp differences. And as I said during the campaign, there are going to be times where there are fights and I think those are fights that need to be had. But what I think the American people don't want to see is a focus on the next election instead of a focus on them.

And I don't have another election. And Michelle and I were talking last night about what an incredible honor and privilege it is to be put in this position. And there are people all across

this country, millions of folks, who worked so hard to help us get elected, but there are also millions of people who may not have voted for us, but are also counting on us. And we take that responsibility very seriously. I take that responsibility very seriously. And I hope and intend to be an even better President in the second term than I was in the first.

Jonathan Karl [ABC News]

U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Susan E. Rice/Attack on U.S. Mission in Benghazi, Libya

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Senator John McCain and Senator Lindsey Graham both said today that they want to have Watergate-style hearings on the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi and said that if you nominate Susan Rice to be Secretary of State, they will do everything in their power to block her nomination. As Senator Graham said, he simply doesn't trust Ambassador Rice after what she said about Benghazi. I'd like your reaction to that. And would those threats deter you from making a nomination like that?

The President. Well, first of all, I'm not going to comment at this point on various nominations that I'll put forward to fill out my Cabinet for the second term. Those are things that are still being discussed.

But let me say specifically about Susan Rice, she has done exemplary work. She has represented the United States and our interests in the United Nations with skill and professionalism and toughness and grace.

As I've said before, she made an appearance at the request of the White House in which she gave her best understanding of the intelligence that had been provided to her. If Senator McCain and Senator Graham and others want to go after somebody, they should go after me. And I'm happy to have that discussion with them. But for them to go after the U.N. Ambassador, who had nothing to do with Benghazi and was simply making a presentation based on intelligence that she had received, and to besmirch her reputation is outrageous.

And we're after an election now. I think it is important for us to find out exactly what hap-

pened in Benghazi, and I'm happy to cooperate in any ways that Congress wants. We have provided every bit of information that we have, and we will continue to provide information. And we've got a full-blown investigation, and all that information will be disgorged to Congress.

And I don't think there's any debate in this country that when you have four Americans killed, that's a problem. And we've got to get to the bottom of it, and there needs to be accountability. We've got to bring those who carried it out to justice. They won't get any debate from me on that.

But when they go after the U.N. Ambassador, apparently, because they think she's an easy target, then they've got a problem with me. And should I choose, if I think that she would be the best person to serve America in the capacity of the State Department, then I will nominate her. That's not a determination that I've made yet. Okay?

Ed Henry [FOX News]

Attack on U.S. Mission in Benghazi, Libya/2012 Presidential Election/National Economy

Q. I want to take Chuck's lead and just ask a very small follow-up, which is whether you feel you have a mandate not just on taxes, but on a range of issues because of your decisive victory?

But I want to stay on Benghazi, based on what Jon asked because you said, if they want to come after me, come after me. I wanted to ask about the families of these four Americans who were killed. Sean Smith's father, Ray, said he believes his son basically called 9-1-1 for help and they didn't get it. And I know you've said you grieve for these four Americans, that it's being investigated, but the families have been waiting for more than 2 months. So I would like to—for you to address the families, if you can. On 9/11, as Commander in Chief, did you issue any orders to try to protect their lives?

The President. Ed, I'll address the families not through the press. I'll address the families directly, as I already have. And we will provide all the information that is available about what

happened on that day. That's what the investigation is for.

But as I've said repeatedly, if people don't think that we did everything we can to make sure that we saved the lives of folks who I sent there and who were carrying out missions on behalf of the United States, then you don't know how our Defense Department thinks or our State Department thinks or our CIA thinks. Their number-one priority is obviously to protect American lives. That's what our job is. Now——

Q. So did you issue any orders that day?

The President. Ed, I will put forward every bit of information that we have. I can tell you that immediately upon finding out that our folks were in danger, that my orders to my national security team were: Do whatever we need to do to make sure they're safe. And that's the same order that I would give any time that I see Americans are in danger, whether they're civilian or military, because that's our number-one priority. Okay?

And with respect to the issue of mandate, I've got one mandate. I've got a mandate to help middle class families and families that are working hard to try to get into the middle class. That's my mandate. That's what the American people said. They said: Work really hard to help us. Don't worry about the politics of it, don't worry about the party interests, don't worry about the special interests. Just work really hard to see if you can help us get ahead, because we're working really hard out here and we're still struggling, a lot of us. That's my mandate.

I don't presume that because I won an election that everybody suddenly agrees with me on everything. I'm more than familiar with all the literature about Presidential overreach in second terms. We are very cautious about that. On the other hand, I didn't get reelected just to bask in reelection. I got elected to do work on behalf of American families and small businesses all across the country who are still recovering from a really bad recession, but are hopeful about the future.

And I am too. The one thing that I said during the campaign that maybe sounds like a

bunch of campaign rhetoric, but now that the campaign is over, I am going to repeat it, and hopefully, you guys will really believe me: When you travel around the country, you are inspired by the grit and resilience and hard work and decency of the American people. And it just makes you want to work harder. You meet families who are—have overcome really tough odds and somehow are making it and sending their kids to college. And you meet young people who are doing incredible work in disadvantaged communities because they believe in the American ideal and it should be available for everybody. And you meet farmers who are helping each other during times of drought, and you meet businesses that kept their doors open during the recession, even though the owner didn't have to take a salary.

And when you talk to these folks, you say to yourself, man, they deserve a better government than they've been getting. They deserve all of us here in Washington to be thinking every single day, how can I make things a little better for them. Which isn't to say that everything we do is going to be perfect or that there aren't just going to be some big, tough challenges that we have to grapple with. But I do know the Federal Government can make a difference.

We're seeing it right now on the Jersey coast and in New York. People are still going through a really tough time. The response hasn't been perfect, but it's been aggressive and strong and fast and robust, and a lot of people have been helped because of it. And that's a pretty good metaphor for how I want the Federal Government to operate generally, and I'm going to do everything I can to make sure it does.

Christi Parsons [Chicago Tribune]. Hey.

Q. Thank you, Mr. President, and congratulations, by the way.

The President. Thanks.

Q. One quick follow-up——

The President. Christi was there when I was running for State Senate.

Q. That's right, I was.

The President. So Christi and I go back a ways.

Q. I've never seen you lose. I wasn't looking that one time. [Laughter]

The President. There you go.

Tax Rates/National Economy/Iran

Q. One quick follow-up, and then I want to ask you about Iran. I just want to make sure I understood what you said. Can you envision any scenario in which we do go off the fiscal cliff at the end of the year?

And on Iran, are you preparing a final diplomatic push here to resolve the nuclear program issue? And are we headed toward one-on-one talks?

The President. Well, obviously, we can all imagine a scenario where we go off the fiscal cliff. If despite the election, if despite the dangers of going over the fiscal cliff and what that means for our economy, that there's too much stubbornness in Congress that we can't even agree on giving middle class families a tax cut, then middle class families are all going to end up having a big tax hike. And that's going to be a pretty rude shock for them and, I suspect, will have a big impact on the holiday shopping season, which, in turn, will have an impact on business planning and hiring, and we can go back into a recession.

It would be a bad thing. It is not necessary. So I want to repeat: Step number one that we can take in the next couple of weeks, provide certainty to middle class families—98 percent of families who make less than \$250,000 a year, 97 percent of small businesses—that their taxes will not go up a single dime next year. Give them that certainty right now. We can get that done.

We can then set up a structure whereby we are dealing with tax reform, closing deductions, closing loopholes, simplifying, dealing with entitlements. And I'm ready to and willing to make big commitments to make sure that we're locking in the kind of deficit reductions that stabilize our deficit, start bringing it down, start bringing down our debt. I'm confident we can do it.

It's—and look, I've been living with this for a couple of years now. I know the math pretty well. And it really is arithmetic, it's not calcu-

lus. There are some tough things that have to be done, but there is a way of doing this that does not hurt middle class families, that does not hurt our seniors, doesn't hurt families with disabled kids, allows us to continue to invest in those things that make us grow, like basic research and education, helping young people afford going to college. As we've already heard from some Republican commentators, a modest tax increase on the wealthy is not going to break their backs; they'll still be wealthy. And it will not impinge on business investment.

So we know how to do this. This is just a matter of whether or not we come together and go ahead and say, Democrats and Republicans, we're both going to hold hands and do what's right for the American people. And I hope that's what happens.

With respect to Iran, I very much want to see a diplomatic resolution to the problem. I was very clear before the campaign, I was clear during the campaign, and I'm now clear after the campaign: We're not going to let Iran get a nuclear weapon. But I think there is still a window of time for us to resolve this diplomatically. We've imposed the toughest sanctions in history. It is having an impact on Iran's economy.

There should be a way in which they can enjoy peaceful nuclear power while still meeting their international obligations and providing clear assurances to the international community that they're not pursuing a nuclear weapon.

And so yes, I will try to make a push in the coming months to see if we can open up a dialogue between Iran and not just us, but the international community, to see if we can get this thing resolved. I can't promise that Iran will walk through the door that they need to walk through, but that would be very much the preferable option.

Q. And under what circumstances would one-on-one conversations take place?

The President. I won't talk about the details of negotiations. But I think it's fair to say that we want to get this resolved and we're not going to be constrained by diplomatic niceties or protocols. If Iran is serious about wanting to resolve this, they'll be in a position to resolve it.

Q. At one point just prior to the election, that was talk that talks might be imminent.

The President. That was not true, and it's not true as of today. Okay.

Just going to knock through a couple others. Mark Landers [Mark Landler, New York Times]. Where's Mark? There he is right in front of me.

Climate Change

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. In his endorsement of you a few weeks ago, Mayor Bloomberg said he was motivated by the belief that you would do more to confront the threat of climate change than your opponent. Tomorrow you're going up to New York City, where you're going to, I assume, see people who are still suffering the effects of Hurricane Sandy, which many people say is further evidence of how a warming globe is changing our weather. What specifically do you plan to do in a second term to tackle the issue of climate change? And do you think the political will exists in Washington to pass legislation that could include some kind of a tax on carbon?

The President. As you know, Mark, we can't attribute any particular weather event to climate change. What we do know is the temperature around the globe is increasing, faster than was predicted even 10 years ago. We do know that the Arctic ice cap is melting, faster than was predicted even 5 years ago. We do know that there have been extraordinarily—there have been an extraordinarily large number of severe weather events here in North America, but also around the globe.

And I am a firm believer that climate change is real, that it is impacted by human behavior and carbon emissions. And as a consequence, I think we've got an obligation to future generations to do something about it.

Now, in my first term, we doubled fuel efficiency standards on cars and trucks. That will have an impact. That will take a lot of carbon out of the atmosphere. We doubled the production of clean energy, which promises to reduce the utilization of fossil fuels for power generation. And we continue to invest in potential breakthrough technologies that could

further remove carbon from our atmosphere. But we haven't done as much as we need to.

So what I'm going to be doing over the next several weeks, next several months, is having a conversation, a wide-ranging conversation with scientists, engineers, and elected officials to find out what can—what more can we do to make in—short-term progress in reducing carbons and then working through an education process that I think is necessary—a discussion, a conversation across the country—about what realistically can we do long term to make sure that this is not something we're passing on to future generations that's going to be very expensive and very painful to deal with.

I don't know what either Democrats or Republicans are prepared to do at this point, because this is one of those issues that's not just a partisan issue, I also think there are regional differences. There's no doubt that for us to take on climate change in a serious way would involve making some tough political choices. And understandably, I think the American people right now have been so focused, and will continue to be focused on our economy and jobs and growth, that if the message is somehow we're going to ignore jobs and growth simply to address climate change, I don't think anybody is going to go for that. I won't go for that.

If, on the other hand, we can shape an agenda that says we can create jobs, advance growth, and make a serious dent in climate change and be an international leader, I think that's something that the American people would support.

So you can expect that you'll hear more from me in the coming months and years about how we can shape an agenda that garners bipartisan support and helps move this agenda forward.

Q. Sounds like you're saying, though, in the current environment, we're probably still short of a consensus on some kind of tax.

The President. That I'm pretty certain of. And look, we're still trying to debate whether we can just make sure that middle class families don't get a tax hike. Let's see if we can resolve that. That should be easy. This one's hard, but it's important, because one of the

things that we don't always factor in are the costs involved in these natural disasters; we just put them off as something that's unconnected to our behavior right now. And I think what—based on the evidence we're seeing, is that what we do now is going to have an impact and a cost down the road if we don't do something about it.

All right, last question. Mark Felsenthal [Reuters]. Where's Mark?

Syria

Q. Thank you. Mr. President, the Asad regime is engaged in a brutal crackdown on its people. France has recognized the opposition coalition. What would it take for the United States to do the same? And is there any point at which the United States would consider arming the rebels?

The President. I was one of the first leaders, I think, around the world to say Asad had to go, in response to the incredible brutality that his government displayed in the face of what were initially peaceful protests.

Obviously, the situation in Syria has deteriorated since then. We have been extensively engaged with the international community as well as regional powers to help the opposition. We have committed to hundreds of millions of dollars of humanitarian aid to help folks both inside of Syria and outside of Syria. We are constantly consulting with the opposition on how they can get organized so that they're not splintered and divided in the face of the onslaught from the Asad regime.

We are in very close contact with countries like Turkey and Jordan that immediately border Syria and have an impact and obviously Israel, which is having already grave concerns, as we do, about, for example, movements of chemical weapons that might occur in such a chaotic atmosphere and that could have an impact not just within Syria, but on the region as a whole.

I'm encouraged to see that the Syrian opposition created an umbrella group that may have more cohesion than they have had in the past. We're going to be talking to them. My envoys are going to be traveling to various meetings

that are going to be taking place with the international community and the opposition.

We consider them a legitimate representative of the aspirations of the Syrian people. We're not yet prepared to recognize them as some sort of government-in-exile, but we do think that it is a broad-based representative group. One of the questions that we're going to continue to press is making sure that that opposition is committed to a democratic Syria, an inclusive Syria, a moderate Syria.

We have seen extremist elements insinuate themselves into the opposition, and one of the things that we have to be on guard about—particularly when we start talking about arming opposition figures—is that we're not indirectly putting arms in the hands of folks who would do Americans harm or do Israelis harm or otherwise engage in actions that are detrimental to our national security.

So we're constantly probing and working on that issue. The more engaged we are, the more we'll be in a position to make sure that we are encouraging the most moderate, thoughtful elements of the opposition that are committed to inclusion, observance of human rights, and working cooperatively with us over the long term. All right?

Thank you very much.

Q. Can we get a quick question on the spending side of the fiscal cliff? Because most of the conversation, you said—[inaudible]—on the taxing side. On the spending, the 1.2 trillion trigger—

The President. Yes.

Q. Is that something that you could see having a short-term postponement for, because during the debate, you said it's not going to happen; you'd get it done?

The President. That was a great question, but it would be a horrible precedent for me to answer your question just because you yelled it out. [Laughter]

So thank you very much, guys.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 1:34 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Brentwood, TN, resident Steven

M. Wise, president and chief executive officer, I-Denti-Fied, Inc.; Holly K. Petraeus, wife of David H. Petraeus; former President George W. Bush; and President Bashar al-Asad of Syria. He also referred to S. 3412. Reporters referred to Gen. John R. Allen,

USMC, commander, NATO International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan; and Rene “Ray” Smith, father of Foreign Service Officer Sean P. Smith, who was killed in an attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11.

Remarks Following a Tour of Storm Damage in Staten Island, New York *November 15, 2012*

Thank you so much, everybody. I’m going to be relatively brief. I came up here right after the storm, was on the Jersey side, and I had promised to everybody that I was speaking on behalf of the country when I said we are going to be here until the rebuilding is complete, and I meant it. So I’m going to come back today, but I’m also going to be coming back in the future to make sure that we have followed through on that commitment.

I want to thank the outstanding leadership that’s been provided by State and local officials. Obviously, Governor Cuomo and Mayor Bloomberg have done an outstanding job. To Borough President Molinaro, thank you so much for your leadership at a time when the folks here on this island were obviously going through extraordinarily difficult times, the people of Long Island who are going through really tough times.

Across the board, what we’ve seen is cooperation and a spirit of service. And for the first-responders who are here—the police officers, the firefighters, the EMS folks, the sanitation workers who sometimes don’t get credit, but have done heroic work—we are so grateful to you because you exemplify what America is all about. I’m grateful to the Red Cross who has been so responsive not just here, but in disasters around the country. And I want to thank all of the volunteers. As we were shaking hands over there, we had folks from every part of the country. We had some Canadians who had come down to help out.

And during difficult times like this, we’re reminded that we’re bound together and we have to look out for each other. And a lot of the things that seem important—the petty differences—melt away, and we focus on what binds

us together and that we as Americans are going to stand with each other in their hour of need.

Now, more specifically, we are now still in the process of recovery. As you can see, as you travel around parts of Staten Island, as we flew over parts of—other parts of the city and the region that had been impacted, there is still a lot of cleanup to do. People still need emergency help. They still need heat. They still need power. They still need food. They still need shelter. Kids are still trying to figure out where they’re going to school. So there’s a lot of short-term, immediate stuff that has to be dealt with. And we are going to make sure that we stay here as long as people need that immediate help. That’s FEMA’s primary task. And we’ll be coordinating closely with State and local governments to make sure folks are getting the short-term help.

But what we’ve also already heard is that there’s going to be some long-term rebuilding that’s required. You look at this block, and you know that this is a community that is deeply rooted. Most of the folks that I met here have been here 20, 30, 50 years. They don’t want to see their community uprooted, but there’s got to be a plan for rebuilding, and that plan is going to have to be coordinated, and they’re going to need resources.

So what I’ve committed to doing is to work with the outstanding congressional delegation led by your Senators Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, also working with Governor Christie and the Jersey delegation to try to come up with a game plan for how we’re going to be able to resource the rebuilding process.

And I’m confident, as Governor Cuomo said, that we’re going to be able to do it. But it’s going to require everybody focused on