

The President's News Conference With Prime Minister David Cameron of the United Kingdom

May 13, 2013

President Obama. Good morning, everybody. Please have a seat. And to all our moms out there, I hope you had a wonderful Mother's Day.

It's always a great pleasure to welcome my friend and partner, Prime Minister David Cameron. Michelle and I have wonderful memories from when David and Samantha visited us last year. There was a lot of attention about how I took David to March Madness—we went to Ohio. And a year later, we have to confess that David still does not understand basketball. I still do not understand cricket.

As we've said before, the great alliance between the United States and the United Kingdom is rooted in shared interests and shared values, and it's indispensable to global security and prosperity. But as we've seen again recently, it's also a partnership of the heart. Here in the United States, we joined our British friends in mourning the passing of Baroness Margaret Thatcher, a great champion of freedom and liberty and of the alliance that we carry on today. And after the bombings in Boston, we Americans were grateful for the support of friends from around the world, particularly those across the Atlantic. At the London Marathon, runners paused in a moment of silence and dedicated their race to Boston. And David will be visiting Boston to pay tribute to the victims and first responders.

So, David, I want to thank you and the British people for reminding us that in good times and in bad, our two peoples stand as one.

Now, David is here, first and foremost, as he prepares to host the G-8 next month. I appreciate him updating me on the agenda as it takes shape, and we discussed how the summit will be another opportunity to sustain the global economic recovery with a focus on growth and creating jobs for our people. Michelle and I are looking forward to visiting Northern Ireland, and I know that the summit is going to be a great success under David's fine leadership.

We discussed the importance of moving ahead with the EU towards negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Our extensive trade with the U.K. is central to our broader transatlantic economic relationship, which supports more than 13 million jobs. And I want to thank David for his strong support for building on those ties, and I look forward to launching negotiations with the EU in the coming months. I believe we've got a real opportunity to cut tariffs, open markets, create jobs, and make all of our economies even more competitive.

With regard to global security, we reviewed progress in Afghanistan, where our troops continue to serve with extraordinary courage alongside each other. And I want to commend David for his efforts to encourage greater dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which is critical to regional security.

As planned, Afghan forces will take the lead for security across the country soon, this spring. U.S., British, and coalition forces will move into a support role. Our troops will continue to come home, and the war will end by the end of next year, even as we work with our Afghan partners to make sure that Afghanistan is never again a haven for terrorists who would attack our nations.

Given our shared commitment to Middle East peace, I updated David on Secretary Kerry's efforts with Israelis and Palestinians and the importance of moving towards negotiations. And we reaffirmed our support for democratic transitions in the Middle East and North Africa, including the economic reforms that have to go along with political reforms.

Of course, we discussed Syria and the appalling violence being inflicted on the Syrian people. Together, we're going to continue our efforts to increase pressure on the Asad regime, to provide humanitarian aid to the long-suffering Syrian people, to strengthen the moderate opposition, and to prepare for a democratic Syria without Bashar Asad.

And that includes bringing together representatives of the regime and the opposition in Geneva in the coming weeks to agree on a transitional body, which would allow a transfer of power from Asad to this governing body. Meanwhile, we'll continue to work to establish the facts around the use of chemical weapons in Syria, and those facts will help guide our next steps.

We discussed Iran, where we agreed to keep up the pressure on Tehran for its continued failure to abide by its nuclear obligations. The burden is on Iran to engage constructively with us and our P-5-plus-1 partners in order to resolve the world's concerns about its nuclear program.

And finally, today we're reaffirming our commitment to global development. Specifically, we're encouraged by the ambitious reforms underway at the Global Fund To Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, where both of our nations are stepping up our efforts. And David's made it clear that the G-8 summit will be another opportunity to make progress on nutrition and food security.

So, David, thank you very much, as always, for your leadership and your partnership. As we prepare for our work in Northern Ireland, as we consider the challenges we face around the world, it's clear we face a demanding agenda. But if the history of our people show anything, it is that we persevere. As one of those London runners said at the marathon, "We're going to keep running, and we're going to keep on doing this." And that's the spirit of confidence and resolve that we will continue to draw upon as we work together to meet these challenges.

So, David, thank you very much. And welcome.

Prime Minister Cameron. Thank you very much, Barack. And thank you for the warm welcome. It's great to be back here with you in the White House. Thank you for what you said about Margaret Thatcher. It was a pleasure to welcome so many Americans to her remarkable funeral in the U.K.

I absolutely echo what you said about the appalling outrage in Boston. I look forward to

going there to pay my tribute to the people of that remarkable city and their courage. And we will always stand with you in the fight against terrorism.

Thank you for the remarks about the cricket and the basketball. I haven't made much progress; I made a bit of progress on baseball; I actually read a book about it this year, so maybe next time, we'll get to work on that one.

It's good to be back for the first time since the American people returned you to office. And as you said, the relationship between Britain and the United States is a partnership without parallel. Day in, day out, across the world, our diplomats and intelligence agencies work together, our soldiers serve together, and our businesses trade with each other.

In Afghanistan, our armed forces are together defending the stability that will make us all safer. And in the global economic race, our businesses are doing more than \$17 billion of trade across the Atlantic every month of every year. And in a changing world, our nations share a resolve to stand up for democracy, for enterprise, and for freedom.

We've discussed many issues today, as the President has said. Let me highlight three: the economy, the G-8, and Syria.

Our greatest challenge is to secure a sustainable economic recovery. Each of us has to find the right solutions at home. For all of us, it means dealing with debt, it means restoring stability, getting our economy growing, and together seizing new opportunities to grow our economies.

President Obama and I have both championed a free trade deal between the European Union and the United States. And there is a real chance now to get the process launched in time for the G-8. So the next 5 weeks are crucial. To realize the huge benefits this deal could bring will take ambition and political will. That means everything on the table, even the difficult issues, and no exceptions. It's worth the effort. For Britain alone, an ambitious deal could be worth up to £10 billion a year, boosting industries from car manufacturing to financial services.

We discussed the G-8 Summit in some detail. When we meet on the shores of Loch Erne in Northern Ireland 5 weeks from today, I want us to agree ambitious action for economic growth. Open trade is at the heart of this, but we have a broader agenda too: to make sure everyone shares in the benefits of this greater openness, not just in our advanced economies, but in the developing world too. I'm an unashamedly probusiness politician, but as we open up our economies to get business growing, we need to make sure that all companies pay their taxes properly and enable citizens to hold their governments and businesses to account.

Today we've agreed to tackle the scourge of tax evasion. We need to know who really owns a company, who profits from it, whether taxes are paid. And we need a new mechanism to track where multinationals make their money and where they pay their taxes so we can stop those that are manipulating the system unfairly.

Finally, we discussed the brutal conflict in Syria: 80,000 dead, 5 million people forced from their homes. Syria's history is being written in the blood of her people, and it is happening on our watch. The world urgently needs to come together to bring the killing to an end. None of us have any interest in seeing more lives lost, in seeing chemical weapons used or extremist violence spreading even further.

So we welcome President Putin's agreement to join an effort to achieve a political solution. The challenges remain formidable, but we have an urgent window of opportunity before the worst fears are realized. There is no more urgent international task than this. We need to get Syrians to the table to agree a transitional government that can win the consent of all of the Syrian people. But there will be no political progress unless the opposition is able to withstand the onslaught and put pressure on Assad so he knows there is no military victory. So we will also increase our efforts to support and to shape the moderate opposition.

Britain is pushing for more flexibility in the EU arms embargo, and we will double nonlethal support to the Syrian opposition in the

coming year. Armored vehicles, body armor, and power generators are right to be shipped. We're helping local councils govern the areas that they liberate, and we're supporting Lebanon and Jordan to deal with the influx of refugees. We'll also do more for those in desperate humanitarian need: care for trauma injuries, helping torture victims to recover, getting Syrian families drinking clean water, having access to food, to shelter.

There is now, I believe, common ground between the U.S., U.K., Russia, and many others that whatever our differences, we have the same aim: a stable, inclusive, and peaceful Syria, free from the scourge of extremism. There is real political will behind this. We now need to get on and do everything we can to make it happen.

Barack, thank you once again for your warm welcome and for our talks today.

President Obama. Thank you. All right, we've got time for a couple of questions. We're going to start with Julie Pace [Associated Press].

Internal Revenue Service/Attack on U.S. Mission in Benghazi, Libya

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I wanted to ask about the IRS and Benghazi. When did you first learn that the IRS was targeting conservative political groups? Do you feel that the IRS has betrayed the public's trust? And what do you think the repercussions for these actions should be? And on Benghazi, newly public e-mails show that the White House and the State Department appear to have been more closely involved with the crafting of the talking points on the attack than first acknowledged. Do you think the White House misled the public about its role in shaping the talking points? And do you stand by your administration's assertions that the talking points were not purposely changed to downplay the prospects of terrorism? And, Prime Minister Cameron, on Syria, if the EU arms embargo that you mentioned is amended or lapses, is it your intention to send the Syrian opposition forces weapons? And are you encouraging President Obama to take the same step? Thank you.

President Obama. Well, let me take the IRS situation first. I first learned about it from the same news reports that, I think, most people learned about this. I think it was on Friday. And this is pretty straightforward.

If in fact IRS personnel engaged in the kind of practices that had been reported on and were intentionally targeting conservative groups, then that's outrageous, and there's no place for it. And they have to be held fully accountable, because the IRS, as an independent agency, requires absolute integrity, and people have to have confidence that they're applying it in a nonpartisan way—applying the laws in a nonpartisan way.

And you should feel that way regardless of party. I don't care whether you're a Democrat, Independent, or a Republican. At some point, there are going to be Republican administrations. At some point, there are going to be Democratic ones. Either way, you don't want the IRS ever being perceived to be biased and anything less than neutral in terms of how they operate. So this is something that I think people are properly concerned about.

The IG is conducting its investigation. And I am not going to comment on their specific findings prematurely, but I can tell you that if you've got the IRS operating in anything less than a neutral and nonpartisan way, then that is outrageous; it is contrary to our traditions. And people have to be held accountable, and it's got to be fixed. So we'll wait and see what exactly all the details and the facts are. But I've got no patience with it. I will not tolerate it. And we will make sure that we find out exactly what happened on this.

With respect to Benghazi, we've now seen this argument that's been made by some folks, primarily up on Capitol Hill, for months now. And I've just got to say, here's what we know: Americans died in Benghazi. What we also know is clearly they were not in a position where they were adequately protected. The day after it happened, I acknowledged that this was an act of terrorism. And what I pledged to the American people was that we would find out what happened, we would make sure that it did not happen again, and we would make

sure that we held accountable those who had perpetrated this terrible crime.

And that's exactly what we've been trying to do. And over the last several months, there was a review board headed by two distinguished Americans—Mike Mullen and Tom Pickering—who investigated every element of this. And what they discovered was some pretty harsh judgments in terms of how we had worked to protect consulates and Embassies around the world. They gave us a whole series of recommendations. Those recommendations are being implemented as we speak.

The whole issue of this—of talking points, frankly, throughout this process, has been a sideshow. What we have been very clear about throughout was that immediately after this event happened, we were not clear who exactly had carried it out, how it had been—how it had occurred, what the motivations were. It happened at the same time as we had seen attacks on U.S. Embassies in Cairo as a consequence of this film. And nobody understood exactly what was taking place during the course of those first few days.

And the e-mails that you allude to were provided by us to congressional committees. They reviewed them several months ago, concluded that, in fact, there was nothing afoul in terms of the process that we had used. And suddenly, 3 days ago, this gets spun up as if there's something new to the story. There's no "there" there.

Keep in mind, by the way, these so-called talking points that were prepared for Susan Rice 5, 6 days after the event occurred pretty much matched the assessments that I was receiving at that time in my Presidential daily briefing. And keep in mind that 2 to 3 days after Susan Rice appeared on the Sunday shows—using these talking points, which have been the source of all this controversy—I sent up the head of our National Counterterrorism Center, Matt Olsen, up to Capitol Hill and specifically said it was an act of terrorism and that extremist elements inside of Libya had been involved in it.

So if this was some effort on our part to try to downplay what had happened or tamp it

down, that would be a pretty odd thing that 3 days later, we end up putting out all the information that in fact has now served as the basis for everybody recognizing that this was a terrorist attack and that it may have included elements that were planned by extremists inside of Libya.

Who executes some sort of coverup or effort to tamp things down for 3 days? So the whole thing defies logic. And the fact that this keeps on getting churned out frankly has a lot to do with political motivations. We've had folks who have challenged Hillary Clinton's integrity, Susan Rice's integrity, Mike Mullen and Tom Pickering's integrity. It's a given that mine gets challenged by these same folks. They've used it for fundraising.

And frankly, if anybody out there wants to actually focus on how we make sure something like this does not happen again, I am happy to get their advice and information and counsel. But the fact of the matter is, these 4 Americans, as I said right when it happened, were people I sent into the field, and I've been very clear about taking responsibility for the fact that we were not able to prevent their deaths. And we are doing everything we can to make sure we prevent it, in part because there are still diplomats around the world who are in very dangerous, difficult situations. And we don't have time to be playing these kinds of political games here in Washington. We should be focused on what are we doing to protect them.

And that's not easy, by the way. And it's going to require resources and tough judgments and tough calls. And there are a whole bunch of diplomats out there who know that they're in harm's way. And there are threat streams that come through every so often, with respect to our Embassies and our consulates. And that's not just us, by the way; the British have to deal with the same thing.

And we've got a whole bunch of people in the State Department who consistently say, you know what, I'm willing to step up, I'm willing to put myself in harm's way because I think that this mission is important in terms of serv-

ing the United States and advancing our interests around the globe.

And so we dishonor them when we turn things like this into a political circus. What happened was tragic. It was carried out by extremists inside of Libya. We are out there trying to hunt down the folks who carried this out, and we are trying to make sure that we fix the system so that it doesn't happen again. David.

Prime Minister Cameron. Thank you. On the issue of the opposition in Syria, I mean, we have not made the decision to arm opposition groups in Syria. What we've done is we have amended the EU arms embargo in order that we can give technical assistance and technical advice. And as I said in my statement, that's exactly what we're doing.

We're continuing to examine and look at the EU arms embargo and see whether we need to make further changes to it in order to facilitate our work with the opposition. I do believe that there's more we can do, alongside technical advice, assistance, help, in order to shape them, in order to work with them. And to those who doubt that approach, I would just argue that, look, if we don't help the Syrian opposition—who we do recognize as being legitimate, who have signed up to a statement about a future for Syria that is democratic, that respects the rights of minorities—if we don't work with that part of the opposition, then we shouldn't be surprised if the extremist elements grow.

So I think being engaged with the Syrian opposition is the right approach, and that is an approach I know I share with the President and with other colleagues in the European Union.

James Landale from the BBC.

United Kingdom-European Union Relations/Syria/Russia-U.S. Relations

Q. James Landale, BBC. Prime Minister, you're talking here today about a new EU-U.S. trade deal, and yet members of your party are now talking about leaving the European Union. What is your message to them and to those pushing for an early referendum? And if there were a referendum tomorrow, how would you vote?

And, Mr. President, earlier this year, you told David Cameron that you wanted a strong U.K. in a strong EU. How concerned are you that members of David Cameron's Cabinet are now openly contemplating withdrawal?

And on Syria, if I may, a question to both of you: What gives you any confidence that the Russians are going to help you on this?

Prime Minister Cameron. Well, first of all, on the issue of a referendum, look, there's not going to be a referendum tomorrow. And there's a very good reason why there's not going to be a referendum tomorrow, is because it would give the British public, I think, an entirely false choice between the status quo, which I don't think is acceptable. I want to see the European Union change. I want to see Britain's relationship with the European [Union]^o change and improve. So it would be a false choice between the status quo and leaving. And I don't think that is the choice the British public want or the British public deserve.

Everything I do in this area is guided by a very simple principle, which is, what is in the national interests of Britain? Is it in the national interests of Britain to have a transatlantic trade deal that will make our countries more prosperous, that will get people to work, that will help our businesses? Yes, it is. And so we will push for this transatlantic trade deal.

Is it in our interests to reform the European Union to make it more open, more competitive, more flexible, and to improve Britain's place within the European Union? Yes, it is in our national interest. And it's not only in our national interest, it is achievable, because Europe has to change because the single currency is driving change for that part of the European Union that is in the single currency. And just as they want changes, so, I believe, Britain is quite entitled to ask for and to get changes in response.

And then, finally, is it in Britain's national interest, once we have achieved those changes, but before the end of 2017, to consult the British public in a proper, full-on, in-out referen-

dum? Yes, I believe it is. So that's the approach that we take: everything driven by what is in the British national interest.

That is what I'm going to deliver. It's absolutely right for our country. It has very strong support throughout the country and in the Conservative Party, and that's exactly what I'm going to do.

On the Syrian issue, you asked the question, what are the signs of Russian engagement? Well, I had very good talks with President Putin in Sochi on Friday. And look, we had a very frank conversation in that we have approached this—and in some extent, still do approach this—in a different way. I have been very vocal in supporting the Syrian opposition and saying that Assad is—has to go, that he is not legitimate, and I continue to say that. And President Putin has taken a different point of view.

But where there is a common interest is that it is in both our interests that at the end of this there is a stable, democratic Syria, that there is a stable neighborhood, and that we don't encourage the growth of violent extremism. And I think both the Russian President, the American President, and myself, I think we can all see that the current trajectory of how things are going is not actually in anybody's interests, and so it is worth this major diplomatic effort, which we are all together leading this major diplomatic effort to bring the parties to the table to achieve a transition at the top in Syria so that we can make the change that country needs. Go ahead.

President Obama. With respect to the relationship between the U.K. and the EU, we have a special relationship with the United Kingdom. And we believe that our capacity to partner with a United Kingdom that is active, robust, outward looking, and engaged with the world is hugely important to our own interests as well as the world. And I think the U.K.'s participation in the EU is an expression of its influence and its role in the world, as well as obviously a very important economic partnership.

Now, ultimately, the people of the U.K. have to make decisions for themselves. I will

^o White House correction.

say this, that David's basic point that you probably want to see if you can fix what's broken in a very important relationship before you break it off makes some sense to me. And I know that David has been very active in seeking some reforms internal to the EU. Those are tough negotiations. You've got a lot of countries involved; I recognize that. But so long as we haven't yet evaluated how successful those reforms will be, I at least would be interested in seeing whether or not those are successful before rendering a final judgment. Again, I want to emphasize these are issues for the people of the United Kingdom to make a decision about, not ours.

With respect to Syria, I think David said it very well. If you look objectively, the entire world community has an interest in seeing a Syria that is not engaged in sectarian war, in which the Syrian people are not being slaughtered, that is an island of peace as opposed to potentially an outpost for extremists. That's not just true for the United States, that's not just true for Great Britain, that's not just true for countries like Jordan and Turkey that border Syria, but that's also true for Russia.

And I'm pleased to hear that David had a very constructive conversation with President Putin shortly after the conversation that had taken place between John Kerry and President Putin. I've spoken to President Putin several times on this topic. And our basic argument is that as a leader on the world stage, Russia has an interest, as well as an obligation, to try to resolve this issue in a way that can lead to the kind of outcome that we'd all like to see over the long term.

And look, I don't think it's any secret that there remains lingering suspicions between Russia and other members of the G-8 or the West. It's been several decades now since Russia transformed itself and the Eastern Bloc transformed itself. But some of those suspicions still exist.

And part of what my goal has been, John Kerry's goal has been, and I know that David's goal has been to try to break down some of

those suspicions and look objectively at the situation.

If in fact we can broker a peaceful political transition that leads to Asad's departure, but a state in Syria that is still intact; that accommodates the interests of all the ethnic groups, all the religious groups inside of Syria; and that ends the bloodshed, stabilizes the situation—that's not just going to be good for us, that will be good for everybody. And we're going to be very persistent in trying to make that happen.

I'm not promising that it's going to be successful. Frankly, sometimes, once sort of the Furies have been unleashed in a situation like we're seeing in Syria, it's very hard to put things back together. And there is—there are going to be enormous challenges in getting a credible process going even if Russia is involved, because we have still other countries like Iran and we have nonstate actors like Hizballah that have been actively involved. And frankly, on the other side we've got organizations like al-Nusra that are essentially affiliated to Al Qaida that have another agenda beyond just getting rid of Asad.

So all that makes a combustible mix, and it's going to be challenging, but it's worth the effort. And what we can tell you is that we're always more successful in any global effort when we've got a strong friend and partner like Great Britain by our side and strong leadership by Prime Minister David Cameron.

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 11:41 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration J. Russell George; former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael G. Mullen, USN (Ret.), and former Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering, in their capacity as Cochairs of the Accountability Review Board for the attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya; and former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.