

ple, to reach out to someone whose Christmas isn't so jolly, to turn our blessings into kindness and compassion, to treat one another the way we would like to be treated. That's the real Christmas spirit.

To all our men and women in uniform serving far from home and to the families who miss them, we thank you for your service and sacrifice, and we're thinking of you this holiday sea-

son. And to every American, from the Obama family to yours, merry Christmas. God bless you, and God bless America.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:32 p.m. at the National Building Museum. In his remarks, he referred to actor Dwayne D. "The Rock" Johnson.

Remarks to United States Troops and Department of Defense Personnel at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey December 15, 2014

The President. Hello, McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst! Thank you, General Martin, for the introduction and for your great leadership of the Air Force Expeditionary Center. I want to thank all the outstanding leaders for coming to welcome me here today, including General Maggie Boor and Colonel James Hodges. I want to thank the folks who are the backbone of our military: Give a big round of applause for your incredible senior NCOs.

Now, this is one of our Nation's premier joint military bases. Everybody's here. We've got Army.

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. We've got Navy.

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. We've got Air Force.

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. We've got Marines.

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. And we've got some Coast Guard.

Audience members. Hooah! [*Laughter*]

The President. Who's that one Coast Guard? There you go. That was loud, right there. [*Laughter*]

All of you come together as one great American team. And I know that we also have some spouses and families here today. Your wives, your husbands, your partners, your sons, your daughters—they serve as well. They make their own sacrifices, especially when you're deployed. So our military families are the heroes here in New Jersey. That's what we do all

on the homefront. Give it up for our remarkable military families.

We've got some outstanding elected officials who support the mission of this facility each and every day. I want to thank Governor Christie for joining us here today. We've got some outstanding Members of Congress who are here: Bob Menendez, Cory Booker, Congressmen Jon Runyan, Congressman Donald Norcross, and incoming Congressman Tom MacArthur. And they were already lobbying me about the base on the way in, so they're doing a good job. [*Laughter*]

It is great to be back. I was here last year and visited with some of you on my way to the Jersey Shore. Christie and I went down to Asbury Park, spent some time on the boardwalk. We played a little Frog Bog. Chris's kids taught me how to hit the hammer to get those little frogs into the buckets. It was hard. And then, Christie beat me at football toss, which really aggravated me. [*Laughter*] And he bragged about it afterwards, which is okay, but I will get a rematch at some point.

But we weren't there just to have fun. We came because, after Hurricane Sandy, people across this State—including those of you here at this base—you had to pick yourselves up, pull together, rebuild, show that here in New Jersey, here in America, we are stronger than any storm. Like a friend of mine from New Jersey likes to say, "Wherever this flag's flown, we take care of our own." And that's what we do across America.

And this facility exemplifies that spirit. For nearly a century, our flag has flown right here. Millions of Americans passed through the old Fort Dix. This was where they shipped out. This was where they were welcomed home. One of them was Don Drysdale, Hall of Fame Dodgers pitcher. And he had the same thought as a lot of new recruits at basic training: "What the hell am I doing here?" [Laughter] Another recruit remembered, "I cleaned a lot of latrines with toothbrushes."

Among those who were demobilized here was a soldier from Tennessee, serial number 53310761, a guy named Sergeant Elvis Presley. He was all shook up. [Laughter] His homecoming was a little different though. Apparently, the King drove off in a limo. [Laughter] Now, if it were up to me, I'd give all you all limos when you come home.

Because part of the message I'm here to deliver on behalf of the American people is very simple: It's just to say thank you. Thank you for your extraordinary service. I thank you as your President because you inspire me. And of all the privileges I have in serving in this office, nothing comes close to the honor of serving as your Commander in Chief.

And I also thank you on behalf of more than 300 million Americans. We Americans may disagree and debate and argue sometimes. That is part of our democracy. It is messy sometimes. Sometimes, it results in some gridlock in Washington. But whether liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, White, Black, Brown, rich, poor, no matter how we pray, no matter who we love, when it comes to our troops, when it comes to you and your families, as Americans we stand united. We are proud of you, we support you, and we can never thank you enough.

And that's especially true now, during the holidays. We can gather with family and friends because you're willing to hug yours goodbye and step forward to serve. After a long day, we can come home because you're willing to leave your home and deploy. We get to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries and holidays, go to soccer games and go to dance recitals because you're willing to miss those of your fami-

ly. We're free and safe and secure over here because you're willing to serve over there.

That's the noble spirit of your sacrifice. That's the selfless character of our military. Those are the precious gifts that you give America, not just this time of year, but all year, every year. You never stop serving. You never stop giving. You guys are like Santa in fatigues. [Laughter] Although, I'll bet one of those C-130s is a little more efficient than Santa's sleigh.

Audience members. Wood!

The President. I figured I'd get something out of our guys on that. [Laughter]

I also wanted to be here, though, because after more than a decade of war, our Nation is marking an important milestone. Ever since our country was attacked that awful September morning, 9/11, our Nation's been at war in Afghanistan. Many people here have deployed there, or to Iraq, and you've deployed multiple times in some cases. There are people here who've lost really good friends, patriots who made the ultimate sacrifice, including 54 fallen heroes from this base, who we will honor forever.

For more than a year, Afghan forces have been in the lead to secure their country, and that means more of our troops have been coming home, including right here to this joint base. So let me just say to all of you who have returned from Afghanistan in recent weeks, on behalf of a grateful nation, I want to say welcome home. You're home for the holidays. And we're glad to have you back.

Now, this month, in just 2 weeks, the transition that we're making in Afghanistan will be complete. Afghans will take full responsibility for their security. This month, after more than 13 years, our combat mission in Afghanistan will be over. This month, America's war in Afghanistan will come to a responsible end.

Now, that doesn't mean everything's great in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's still a very dangerous place. But I want you and every American who has served in Afghanistan to be proud of what you've accomplished there. Because your generation—the 9/11 generation—has met every mission that's been given to you. You

helped decimate the core Al Qaida leadership and deliver justice to Usama bin Laden. He will not be attacking here anymore. You helped to prevent terrorist attacks against this country. You helped push back the Taliban. You helped train Afghan forces to take the lead. You helped make possible a historic election this year and the first democratic transfer of power in Afghanistan's history. And despite all their challenges, Afghans are now looking to the future. And that's all because of you. That makes us safer, and it gives them a chance for a better future.

Now, even as our combat mission ends, our commitment to Afghanistan endures. We'll continue to have a limited military presence there because we've got to keep training and equipping Afghan forces, and we've got to conduct counterterrorism missions because there are still remnants of Al Qaida there. After all the sacrifices you've made, we want to preserve the gains that you've made. We want a stable and secure Afghanistan. And we want to make sure that country is never again used to launch attacks against the United States of America.

Now, this year is also a reminder that even as our combat mission ends in Afghanistan, there are still challenges to our security around the globe. In times of crisis, people around the world look to one nation to lead, and that is the United States of America. Even our critics, when they get into trouble, they're calling us. And when the world calls on America, we call on you, our men and women in uniform, because nobody can do what you can do.

One news article said it best: When our forces train here, folks who live nearby might "feel the ground shake," because no other military in the world is as good as you, as ready as you, as capable as you, able to go as far, able to go as fast as you do and perform your basic missions. Nobody. Nobody in history has been able to do what you've done.

Which means we're leading the global coalition against the brutal terrorist group ISIL in Iraq and Syria. And you are doing your part, supporting the aerial refueling that keeps our aircraft in the skies and the airlift that moves

our people and equipment into place. Some folks from this base are there right now doing incredible work. And to them, and to all our troops far from home and their families for the holidays, you are in our thoughts, our prayers, and we can't wait till you come home too.

Just look at the difference that you and the rest of our military have made. Rescuing thousands of innocent Iraqi men, women, and children that were trapped up on a mountain in danger of slaughter—you saved them. Airdropping food and water and medicine, saving countless lives—America led the way. That's what we do.

Along with our coalition partners, we are hammering these terrorists, taking out their fighters, their commanders, hundreds of vehicles and tanks, nearly 200 oil and gas facilities, the infrastructure that funds their terror. More than a thousand fighting positions, checkpoints, buildings, barracks—we're taking them out. That's because of the work that you do. We're cutting their command and control and supply lines and making it harder for them to maneuver.

In Iraq, local forces have held the line in some places and pushed back ISIL in other places. In Syria, our airstrikes are inflicting heavy losses on ISIL fighters and leaders. Because of you, we have blunted their momentum, and we have put them on the defensive. And these terrorists are learning the same thing that the leaders of Al Qaida have learned the hard way: They may think that they can chalk up some quick victories, but our reach is long. We do not give up. You threaten America, you will have no safe haven. We will find you. And like petty tyrants and terrorists before you, the world is going to leave you behind and keep moving on without you, because we will get you. That's thanks to you.

Now, this campaign in Iraq will take time. But make no mistake, our coalition isn't just going to degrade this barbaric terrorist organization, we're going to destroy it. And because this isn't just a military effort, we're going to keep working with those in the Middle East who believe in tolerance and opportunity and peace, because that's what the region needs.

These terrorists only know how to destroy. And we know how to do something bigger, how to build the security and peace and justice that we can build with others. But none of that would be possible without you. That's American leadership. That's the difference you make.

In the same way that we're leading the fight against ISIL, we're leading the global fight against Ebola in West Africa. And you've been doing your part: deploying to Liberia and Senegal, improving airfields, setting up the logistics and command-and-control, building the infrastructure, manning that air bridge, airlifting food and equipment and personnel. You have been out front.

And if you doubt the impact that you're having, take a look at what's going on there. With your help, we've built new treatment centers. We're training more health care workers. We're delivering medicine and supplies. Other countries are now willing to come in because you laid the foundation. And this is still a terrible epidemic, and the world has to keep on stepping up, but in Liberia, where we focused our efforts, cases are starting to decline. Ultimately, we will have saved thousands of lives because of you.

As one of our American commanders said, "Everywhere I go, Liberians are waving; hope is what we're providing." Or what—as one West African put it, "We've always loved America, and for them to come in and help at a time like this reinforces that." That's the difference you're making. There are people who are alive today because of what you guys do. That's American leadership.

So, stepping back for a moment, we're at a turning point. When I took office, we had nearly 180,000 troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. By the end of this month, we'll have fewer than 15,000 in those two countries. We've now brought home about 90 percent of our troops—90 percent. The time of deploying large ground forces with big military footprints to engage in nation-building overseas, that's coming to an end.

And going forward, our military will be leaner. But as your Commander in Chief, I'm going

to make sure we keep you ready for the range of missions that we ask of you. We are going to keep you the best trained, the best led, the best equipped military in the history of the world because the world will still be calling.

And that's why it was so important that folks in Congress—Democrats and Republicans—came together and passed legislation that I'm going to sign to keep our Government open and funded for the coming year. And that includes military operations: the support and commissaries that your families depend on, a pay raise for you, health care for our wounded warriors and our veterans. You've always been there for us; we've got to be there for you.

And let me make one other point. At this time of transition, I know some of you will be returning to civilian life. I was talking about this with the two generals that I rode over with. We want to make sure you can enjoy the American Dream that you helped to defend. So we'll keep helping you with the transition assistance and the credentialing and the licensing to help find civilian jobs worthy of your incredible talents.

We're going to keep funding the post-9/11 GI bill and keep working with colleges and universities to help you and your families realize your dream of a higher education. And as many of you know, Michelle, the First Lady, Vice President Biden's wife, Jill Biden, everybody at Joining Forces, we're all going to be saying to every company in America: If you want somebody who's going to get the job done, hire a military spouse. Hire a veteran. That's the difference you can make here at home. Because that's also American leadership: the jobs and the opportunity and the country that we can build together as one American team. You understand that. You've trained for it. And when you get in the job, that's what you deliver every single time.

So I want to leave you with a story of somebody who has a special understanding of the American spirit. I just met them before I came out here, but before I came out, Yeoman Carrie Chavez and Staff Sergeant Ashley Montgomery, they did the Pledge of Allegiance and sang our national anthem, and I had a chance

to take a picture with them out back. And I asked them where they're from, and they're from Jersey, of course. [Laughter] And, in fact, Ashley said that her dad had served at this facility 30 years earlier. So I asked her, had she ever left the base—[laughter]—and she said, yes, she had been deployed at four other bases. But that's one example of American service: a generation passing the baton to the next generation; entire families who have served our country nobly, dating back in some cases over a century.

But then, there's another part of the American story. There's another young man I met. His name is Nelson Rieu, and Nelson's here today. Wave, Nelson. There's Nelson. Now, the reason I want to tell Nelson's story is because, unlike Ashley, Nelson wasn't born here on base, he wasn't born in Jersey. He was born in the Republic of Congo. And when his country slipped into civil war, he and his mother became refugees. And that was a terrible civil war. Over a million people died in that civil war. That was a hard life. When he was 20 years old, he and his mom got some incredible news—"the best thing that's ever happened to me," he says. He had the chance to come to America.

So they land in Los Angeles, and Nelson said it was like being in a movie, all these glistening buildings and freeways. And they settled in Arizona. And Nelson barely spoke a word of English. So he took high school classes: English, American history; he earned his high school diploma. And then he signed up to serve a country that wasn't even yet fully his own. He raised his hand, took the oath, and joined the United States Air Force. And then, this past Fourth of July, he put on his uniform, he raised his hand again, and he took another oath to become a citizen of the United States. "The Fourth of July," he says, "is my new American birthday."

And today, Airman First Class Nelson Rieu is an engineering apprentice here on base, helping to keep his fellow airmen safe. And at 24 years old, he dreams of someday joining the Special Forces. And he says, "Freedom is the reason why I am in this country and [why I]

wanted to be part of those who sustain that freedom. It's a great feeling to know you're the backbone of the greatest nation on Earth."

So you think about that. You've got folks whose dads were born on—or who were born on base and who served going back generations. But then, you've got new Americans with that same patriotism, that same sense of what we're about as Americans, that same creed that we can all pledge allegiance to, regardless of what we look like or where we come from. We're fighting on the same team for the same values and the same ideals.

So thank you for your patriotism, Nelson.

And that's one of the things that makes America exceptional and what makes our military the absolute best in the world. It's not just your training or your equipment or your technology, although all that's important. What makes us special, what makes us the best, is all of you. It's your character and your willingness to say, "Send me." Your dedication to duty and your courage and your readiness to defend our values and our ideals of freedom and liberty, not just for us, but for people all around the world.

You are the backbone of the greatest nation on Earth, and you will always be that. And for that, America is eternally grateful, and I am incredibly proud to serve as your Commander in Chief.

So happy holidays, everybody. God bless you. God bless your families. God bless our Armed Forces. God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:49 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Maj. Gen. Frederick H. "Rick" Martin, USAF, commander, U.S. Air Force Expeditionary Center; Maj. Gen. Margaret Wynnell Boor, USA, commanding general, 99th Regional Support Command; Col. James C. Hodges, USAF, commander, 87th Air Base Wing, and installation commander, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst; Andrew, Sarah, Patrick, and Bridget Christie, children of Gov. Christopher J. Christie of New Jersey; musician Bruce Springsteen; Maj. Gen. Darryl A. Williams, USA, commander, U.S. Army Af-

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rica; and Mayor Sarah Z. Mendoabor of Tappita, Liberia. He also referred to the Islamic

State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; and H.R. 83.

Statement on Senate Confirmation of Vivik H. Murthy as United States Surgeon General

December 15, 2014

I applaud the Senate for confirming Vivek Murthy to be our country's next Surgeon General. As "America's Doctor," Vivek will hit the ground running to make sure every American has the information they need to keep themselves and their families safe. He'll bring his lifetime of experience promoting public health to bear on priorities ranging from stopping new diseases to helping our kids grow up

healthy and strong. Vivek will also help us build on the progress we've made combating Ebola, both in our country and at its source. Combined with the crucial support for fighting Ebola included in the bill to fund our Government next year, Vivek's confirmation makes us better positioned to save lives around the world and protect the American people here at home.

Statement on the Terrorist Attack at the Army Public School in Peshawar, Pakistan

December 16, 2014

The United States condemns in the strongest possible terms today's horrific attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar, Pakistan. Our hearts and prayers go out to the victims, their families, and loved ones. By targeting students and teachers in this heinous attack, ter-

rorists have once again shown their depravity. We stand with the people of Pakistan and reiterate the commitment of the United States to support the Government of Pakistan in its efforts to combat terrorism and extremism and to promote peace and stability in the region.

Statement on the Observance of Hanukkah

December 16, 2014

Over the 8 nights of Hanukkah, Jews across America, Israel, and the world will remember an ancient triumph of freedom over oppression and renew their faith in the possibility of miracles large and small.

Even in the darkest, shortest days of winter, the Festival of Lights brims with possibility and hope. The courage of the Maccabees reminds us that we too can overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. The candles of the menorah remind us that even the small-

est light has the power to shine through the darkness. And the miracle at the heart of Hanukkah—the oil that lasted for 8 nights instead of only 1—reminds us that even when the future is uncertain, our best days are yet to come.

May this Hanukkah embolden us to do what is right, shine a light on the miracles we enjoy, and kindle in all of us the desire to share those miracles with others. From my family to yours, *Chag Sameach*.