

Remarks at an Organizing for Action Summit April 23, 2015

The President. Hello, hello, hello! Hello, OFA! Thank you. You guys sound fired up. All right, all right, settle down, settle down. [Laughter] Settle down. You guys are—what did they put in your coffee? [Laughter] That’s—yes, I meant you. Sit down. [Laughter] Sit down, everybody. Golly. See, they’re still taking pictures.

So first of all, I want to thank José for the introduction. He is an example of what inspires me every day. You see, you get a chance to meet people all across the country who are just doing extraordinary things. And all of you are in that category. I could not be prouder of each and every one of you and everything that you’re doing. You are out there every day, you’re talking to your neighbors, you’re talking with your coworkers. You’re doing the work to change your communities. And that’s how a democracy is supposed to work. That’s how America is supposed to work. That’s how this country has always moved forward. And that’s how it’s going to keep moving forward.

Senate Confirmation of Loretta E. Lynch as Attorney General

Before I start with some other issues, I want to say publicly, for the first time—I’ve been looking forward to saying this—that I am very pleased that Loretta Lynch has now been confirmed as America’s next Attorney General. And America will be better off for it. She’s spent her life fighting for the fair and equal justice that’s the foundation of our democracy. She’s going to do a great job helping our communities, keeping them safe, but also making sure our citizens are protected by equal justice under the law.

She’s got credibility with law enforcement, but she’s also got credibility with communities. And she knows that one of the things that I want to work with her on is making sure that all around the country we are rebuilding trust with respect to our police forces and making sure that they and the communities together

are working so that everybody feels safe and everybody feels like the law is working on their behalf. And I can’t think of a better person to do it. We are very, very proud of her. She’s going to do a great job.

So I’m proud of all of you, and I hope all of you are proud of what we’ve done together. You think back to how we started this journey, why we started this journey in the first place. We’d gone through years in which too many Americans weren’t seeing their hard work rewarded. Wages weren’t rising; incomes weren’t rising. Schools weren’t preparing enough of our kids to get the jobs and careers in this new century. Our health care system was burdened—burdening too many families, too many businesses: too expensive, too inefficient. Other nations were racing ahead of us on clean energy. We were addicted to foreign oil. Just 2 weeks before the 2008 election, we had the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. Ordinary folks got hit like never before.

But in the face of all that, we believed in something that was more powerful. We believed that America could change. And that’s why so many people joined a grassroots campaign—Democrats, but also some Republicans and Independents—active citizens who wanted to do their part to change this country for the better.

We believed we could reverse the tide of outsourcing, we could draw new jobs to America. And over the last 5 years, our businesses have created more than 12 million new jobs.

We believed that we could prepare our kids for a more competitive world. Today, our high school graduation rate is at an alltime high; more young people are finishing college than ever before.

We said we could reduce our dependence on foreign oil and protect our planet, do something about climate change. And today, America is not just number one in oil and gas, we are also number one in wind. We’re also generating 20 times more electricity from the sun than—last year than we did the year I took

office. We're doubling the pace at which we cut our carbon pollution, a commitment that I've made and we're going to be working with other countries to meet. That's all because of you.

We believed we could fix a broken health care system. Today, more than 16 million Americans have gained the security of health insurance.

That's change. That's what you made possible. But here's something I want you to understand: We did not take on these fights just because they were progressive priorities. We took them on because they were economic priorities for this Nation and for every family out there. The priorities we've taken on are critical to restoring the security and opportunity for working families in the 21st century, in this new global economy.

We live in a time when our success depends on our skills, our knowledge. That's why we've pushed for higher standards and faster Internet in our schools. That's why we reformed our student loan program and increased grants and tax credits so more people could afford to go to college.

We live in a time when our young people will be trying lots of jobs, different careers. And that's why we made health care more accessible and more affordable and more portable: to give them the freedom to change jobs or launch their own business and not have to worry that they were going to be losing their insurance.

We live in a time when more and more households have both parents in the workforce. That's why we're fighting for things like childcare and paid sick leave and paid family leave. Because hard-working families who are doing the right thing need a little bit of help on those things in order to be successful, in order to be stable.

So the point is, the economy has changed. And we're finally getting to the business of updating our policies to change along with it. We're looking forward; we're not looking backwards. [Applause] We're looking forward.

We've got to recognize the realities of the new economy. And we've got to fight to make

sure that in America, hard work is still rewarded with the chance to take care of your family, and pass on a sense of optimism and hope in better days for our kids. That was always the vision behind my campaign. That's the vision that we have shared ever since I took office. Those are the values that inform my economic policies.

And so one of the things I want to talk about today—because I don't want to talk about the stuff we all agree on or we've already done. [Laughter] I want to talk about some stuff that creates some controversy, because it's important. And one of those policies right now that I'm focused on is new trade agreements with other countries.

And if you were watching MSNBC and all this stuff, and you're thinking, oh, man, well, I love Obama, but what's going on here? [Laughter] So I want to set the record straight here. I want everybody to be clear about what we're doing, because I believe in what I'm doing here. The—I want to talk about this because—in part because it's complicated, and also it's full of misinformation. But it's really, really important.

This set of trade agreements that we're looking at, it's—are vital to middle class economics: the idea that this country does best when everybody gets their fair shot, everybody does their fair share, everybody plays by the same set of rules. Simple values. American values. We want to make sure that our own economy lives up to it.

But we've also got to make sure that the rest of the world is a place where we can compete on a global scale. We want to make sure we're on an even playing field, not an uneven playing field. We've got to deal with a place where the rules are different in other countries, and we've got to make sure that those rules work for us. That's why I believe America needs to write the rules of the global economy. We can't leave it to somebody else.

We've got to do whatever we can to help our workers compete. And that's not a left or right issue. It's not a business or labor issue. It's an issue like the others that we've waged slowly,

steadily. It's a question of the past and the future.

Now, I've talked a lot recently about why new trade agreements are important to our economy. But I want everybody to understand so when you go back to your communities and you're talking to people, you are clear about why this is important. Ninety-five percent of the world's customers are outside of the United States, they're outside our borders—95 percent. The fastest growing markets in the world are in Asia. Jobs at businesses that export are good, middle class jobs. On average they pay more than other jobs. If you work for a company that exports, they're paying you probably better on average.

Those are facts. So it's important to our economy, but it's also important to our values. Our values have to reflect—be reflected in these new trade agreements in the way that they haven't always been in past trade agreements.

The—trade has always been tough, and it's always been tough especially in the Democratic Party. A lot of people are skeptical of trade deals, and a lot of times, it's for good reason. Because for decades now, technology made good jobs obsolete, global competition meant jobs were being shipped overseas, past trade deals didn't always live up to the hype. A lot of trade deals didn't include the kinds of protections that we're fighting for today. And I saw it in Chicago and in towns across Illinois where manufacturing collapsed, plants closed down, jobs dried up. When I ran for office, I'd talk about a man I met who had to pack up his own plant before he was laid off. And that made a mockery of the value of community and the dignity of work.

So for a lot of Americans, they attribute those changes to what happened in the aftermath of trade agreements. And I understand that. But what—we've got to make sure we learn the right lessons from that. We can't learn the lesson that somehow the global economy is going to stop and we're going to be able to put a bunch of barriers in front of it.

Because change is happening. You go into any store right now, you go to any company

right now, and it's global. So we've got to be able to compete. We're not going to stop a global economy at our shores. That's the wrong lesson to draw. We can't go back to the past. We shouldn't want to. We want to make sure we win the future. That's what America is about: winning the future.

So if America does not write rules for trade that are good for us, if we're not writing the rules of trade for the global economy while our economy is still in a position of global strength—because we're right now the fastest—we're the strongest economy compared to a lot of our competitors—now is the time for us to write rules that make sure that we aren't locked out of markets, that we're able to sell our goods in places like Asia.

We've got to make sure that we write rules so that our workers and our businesses can compete fairly. If we don't, then somebody else is going to write the rules. China is going to write the rules. And when they do it, they'll do it in a way that gives Chinese workers advantages and Chinese businesses the upper hand and locks American goods out. And I refuse to accept that for this country. We've the best workers in the world. We have the best businesses in the world. When the playing field is level, nobody beats the United States of America, products and services coming out of the United States of America. So we can't be afraid to compete.

So when I took office, while we were doing all this other stuff—while we were getting health care passed, and we were trying to raise the minimum wage, and we were changing student loans—I also started thinking about how do we revamp trade in a way that works for working families, working Americans. And that's what we've done negotiating a new trade partnership in the Asia-Pacific region.

It's the highest-standard trade agreement in our history. It is the most progressive trade agreement in our history. It's got strong provisions for workers, strong provisions for the environment. And unlike some past trade agreements, all these provisions are actually enforceable. If you're a country that wants to be in this agreement, you've got to meet these high

standards. Once you're a part of this partnership, if you violate your responsibilities, there are consequences. There are penalties.

So if we have this trade agreement in place, it means that other countries, they've got to treat their workers better. They've got to treat the environment better. They've got to think about logging and fishing and whether that's destroying the planet. They've got to make sure that they've got laws against child labor.

And so it would strengthen our hand overseas, and it gives us the tools to open up other markets to our goods and services to make sure they're playing by the same rules we are. And because this partnership includes Mexico and Canada, it fixes a lot that was wrong with NAFTA when it was passed back in the nineties.

So instead of having a race to the bottom, for lower wages and worse working conditions and more abuse of our natural resources, this is a race to the top. It's not just good for our businesses, it's good for our workers. And along with it, we're making sure that American workers can retool through training programs and community colleges, use new skills to transition to new jobs.

So the bottom line is this: These new trade partnerships would level the playing field. And when the playing field is level, American workers always win.

And I just have to say, as I've been listening to some of this debate, I've got some good friends who are opposed to this trade agreement, but when I ask them specifically what is it that you oppose, they start talking about NAFTA. [Laughter] And I'm thinking, well, I had just come out of law school when NAFTA was passed. [Laughter] That's not the trade agreement I'm passing. [Laughter] So you need to tell me what's wrong with this trade agreement, not one that was passed 25 years ago. And the fact is, is that if you end up just being opposed to this trade deal, then that means you're satisfied with the status quo. But that doesn't make any sense, because the status quo isn't working for our workers.

You go out on the street right now and you look at all the cars that are passing by, you'll see Hondas. You'll see Toyotas. You'll see Nis-

sans. Those are all fine cars; nothing wrong with that. But when you travel to Tokyo, you don't see Fords. [Laughter] You don't see Chevys. You don't see Chryslers.

So why would we want to maintain the current status quo, where people are selling a bunch of stuff here and we can't sell there? Why wouldn't we want to rewrite those rules so there is some reciprocity and we can start opening up the Japanese market? That would be good for American workers. Same goes for the other 10 countries in the agreement.

Look, I remember where the auto industry was at when I came into office. I've been to auto plants all across the country that would have closed if American workers hadn't rebuilt and retooled, come back and silenced all the naysayers and proven that America can build some of the best new cars in the world. And they shouldn't be competing with one tied behind their—one hand tied behind their back. They should be able to sell cars everywhere in the world.

But when I hear folks saying, "Oh, this trade deal would destroy the auto industry"—listen, I spent a lot of time and a lot of political capital to save the auto industry. Why would I pass a trade deal that was bad for U.S. autoworkers? That doesn't make any sense.

Under my watch, under my policies, American manufacturing is creating new jobs for the first time since the 1990s. We're opening up new plants at the fastest pace in nearly 20 years. And we—so we shouldn't have all that good work just restricted to selling in the United States. We shouldn't have "Made in the U.S.A." just apply to U.S. customers. We want "Made in the U.S.A." sold everywhere, all around the world. That's good for American businesses and American workers.

So when people say that this trade deal is bad for working families, they don't know what they're talking about. I take that personally. My entire Presidency has been about helping working families. I've been working too hard at this. And I've got some of those folks who are saying this stuff after all I've done to help lift their industries up.

I've spent 6½ years trying to wrestle this economy out of the worst recession since the Great Depression and rebuild it so that it benefits working Americans. I've had to do it against relentless opposition. But every single thing we've done—from Obamacare to Wall Street reform, to student loan reform, to credit card reform, to fighting for a fairer Tax Code, to higher minimum wages, to a smarter workplace—all of it's focused on making sure it's a good deal for middle class families and folks who are working hard to get into the middle class.

I've been talking about things like reversing rising inequality and strengthening social mobility since before it was cool. [Laughter] Go back to my first campaign for the United States Senate. I've got a bunch of people now talking about inequality, but back then, they sure weren't. Go back and look at the speech I gave in Kansas 4 years ago on economic fairness. Go back and look at the speech I gave in Southeast DC 2 years ago on income inequality. Back then, folks were saying I was preaching class warfare. Now, suddenly, it's their campaign platforms. [Laughter]

Some of these folks are friends of mine. I love them to death. [Laughter] But in the same way that when I was arguing for health care reform I asked people to look at the facts—just because somebody comes up with a slogan like “Death Panel,” doesn't mean it's true. Look at the facts. Well, the same thing is true on this. Look at the facts. Don't just throw a bunch of stuff out there and see if it sticks.

And we should be mindful of the past. We can't ignore what's happened and why people have felt sometimes that trade agreements weren't working for them, that corporations were shipping out jobs. All those things happened. But we can't ignore the realities of the new economy. And we can't just oppose trade on reflex alone. You've got to fight for trade that benefits our workers on our terms. We've got to give every single American who wakes up, sends their kids to school, rolls up their sleeves, punches in each day the chance to do what we do best: innovate and build and sell

the best products and ideas in the world to every corner of the world.

That's what I believe in. Smart, new, 21st-century trade agreements are as important to helping the middle class get ahead in this new economy as things like job training and higher education and affordable health care. They're all part of a package.

Audience member. And decrease the deficit.

The President. Well, I did that too. [Laughter] And if I didn't think this was the right thing to do for working families, I would not be doing it.

I mean, think about it. I've got some of these folks who are friends of mine, allies of mine saying this trade deal would destroy the American working families, despite the fact that I've done everything in my power to make sure that working families are empowered. And by the way, they've been with me on everything. [Laughter]

So by this logic, I would have had to do all this stuff for the last 6½ years and then, suddenly, just say, well, I want to just destroy all of that. [Laughter] Does that make sense?

Audience members. No.

The President. No, it—right answer—it does not. [Laughter]

If there was a trade agreement that undercut working families, I wouldn't sign it. The Chamber of Commerce didn't elect me twice; working folks did. I ran for office in the first place to expand the all-American idea of opportunity: No matter where you come from, what you look like, how you started out, who you love, you can make it if you try here in America.

I don't forget where I came from. I don't forget how I started. I moved to Chicago in my early twenties with barely anything except a desire to make a difference. I wanted to make sure my life attached itself to giving people a chance at opportunity: helping kids get a great education, helping parents who live in poverty get decent jobs that let them raise a family, help folks who work hard all day get health insurance so they don't have to go to the emergency room when they get sick.

So I became an organizer, like all of you. And I learned that change comes slow

sometimes, and sometimes, there are disappointments. But I also learned the sense of purpose that comes by working together. I learned that underneath our differences, there are hopes and aspirations and grit and resilience that binds us together. That's why I do this.

But what I also learned was that you don't make change through slogans. You don't make change through ignoring realities. Sometimes, you do things that are tough, but the right thing to do to prepare us for the future.

If I was just looking at the polling, I wouldn't have done health care. But it was the right thing to do. If I—it would be a lot easier for me politically not to do this Iran deal. But it's the right thing to do.

Audience members. Yeah!

Now, those things are popular with Democrats. Every once in a while, there are some things that aren't as popular with Democrats, but they still need to be done because they're the right thing to do. These trade agreements are the right thing to do. And if somebody doesn't agree with that, show me specifically what it is that you're concerned about. I'm happy to have a discussion about it. But don't just throw out a bunch of stuff, making accusations about it.

Remarks at an Organizing for Action Dinner

April 23, 2015

Thank you, Jennifer! Well, I've got nothing to add to that. [*Laughter*] Except just to say thank you.

I got a chance to see all of you backstage and take pictures with you, and some of you have been able basically to record my progressive graying. [*Laughter*] You've got, like, a picture from each year showing how I get older, and Michelle, like Dorian Gray, continues to just stay exactly the same. [*Laughter*] It's a little spooky. [*Laughter*]

But I'm going to be very brief on the front end so that I can just spend some time talking with all of you. Obviously, we've had a very consequential stretch since I last saw all of you.

I'm proud of all of you. And I'm a little envious that a lot of you seem to be better at organizing than I was. [*Laughter*] You're smarter. You're more effective. You've got better tools, like Connect.

So I'm still asking for your help. Keep talking to your friends. Talk to your neighbors. Talk about why this fight matters. Talk about why all the things we're doing we're just continuing to push on. I want you to share OFA content: forward these e-mails, and retweet these tweets. Join the Economic Opportunity group on Connect to engage and get involved with people all across the country who share your hopes and dreams. That's how change starts: each one of you reaching out to somebody else.

You give me hope. You guys are doing extraordinary things. You've done extraordinary things these past 8 years. That's just a preview of what you're going to accomplish in the years ahead.

Thank you, OFA. Love you. All right. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:13 p.m. at the Ritz-Carlton Washington, DC hotel. In his remarks, he referred to José Del Rio, national lead, Organizing for Action's Fulfilling the Promise Initiative.

We have had some tough stuff, like losing in the midterm, but we've had some really significant accomplishments, from a climate deal that promises to lead the world globally in making sure that this planet is working for future generations to an initiative on comprehensive immigration reform that says we want Congress to work with us, but we can't wait when we've got so many families out there who are prepared to come out of the shadows and earn a legal path so that they can do right by this country; to making sure that Iran doesn't get a nuclear weapon without having to resort to war; to the work we've done to extend the Children's Health Insurance Program and start