

Remarks Following a Meeting With African American Faith and Civil Rights Leaders

February 18, 2016

Well, as we commemorate Black History Month, we've got some history makers around the table here today. Some are legends, like Congressman Lewis and Reverend C.T. Vivian. I would not be here were it not for the battles that they fought a generation ago.

But we've also got some young people here who are making history as we speak. People like Brittany, who served on our Police Task Force in the wake of Ferguson and has led many of the protests that took place there and shined a light on the injustice that was happening. People like DeRay Mckesson, who has done some outstanding work mobilizing in Baltimore around these issues. And to see generations continuing to work on behalf of justice and equality and economic opportunity is greatly encouraging to me.

And a lot of the discussion here today focused on the possibilities of completing criminal justice reform. We've seen some outstanding bipartisan support, both in the House and the Senate. We want to see if we can get that across the finish line this year. We talked about how we, in addition to the legislative actions that can be—that are taken, how we as an administration can continue to consult with these organizations, local municipalities, sheriffs' offices to implement some of the reforms and recommendations that have already been put forward by the Task Force, but also how we can use our administrative actions to encourage reform.

And Attorney General Loretta Lynch has been all on top of this and has been very focused on how we can make sure that the Justice Department and the FBI are not only identifying areas where there are problems in the equal application of the law, but how the Justice Department and the FBI can be models for how we approach some of these issues.

We also had a chance to talk about education and the ways in which we want to ensure that we break this school-to-prison pipeline and start creating a school-to-college-to-jobs pipeline. It has to start early. It means that we make sure that we have a culture in all of our schools that values diversity, values people from different cultures, that is encouraging teachers to understand how to best approach kids who may not have all the advantages that others do and to nurture them in effective ways.

All of these things require resources, and so we tried to describe for these organizations how our budget is reflective of many of these priorities.

But overall, what I am most encouraged by is the degree of focus and seriousness and constructiveness that exists not only with existing civil rights organizations, but this new generation. They are some serious young people. I told them that they are much better organizers than I was when I was their age, and I am confident that they are going to take America to new heights. My job is just to make sure that I'm listening to them and learning from them a little bit. And hopefully, working together across divides of race and party, we can make sure that we're living up to our highest American ideals. There's no better way for us to celebrate Black History Month. All right?

Thank you so much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:59 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Cordy Tindell "C.T." Vivian, founder, C.T. Vivian Leadership Institute; Brittany Packnett, executive director, Teach For America St. Louis, in her capacity as a member of the President's Task Force on 21st-Century Policing; and civil rights activist and Baltimore, MD, mayoral candidate DeRay Mckesson.