

Remarks at an African American History Month Reception February 18, 2016

The President. Hello, everybody! Well, it is so good to see all of you. Welcome to the White House.

Audience member. Thank you! [Laughter]

Audience member. Hey, Michelle!

The President. Hey! We know it is Black History Month when you hear somebody say, “Hey, Michelle!” [Laughter] “Girl! You look so good!” [Laughter]

Audience member. You do too!

The First Lady. He’s all right. You look good too, baby.

The President. All right. I want to thank everybody who’s here this evening, this afternoon. I want to give a special thanks to the Members of Congress and the Congressional Black Caucus who are here tonight. Give them a big round of applause.

For the past 7 years—now, come on, y’all. [Laughter] I’m only going to be a second.

The First Lady. It’s exciting.

The President. Except for that little guy. He’s hungry. [Laughter]

For the past 7 years, and in some cases before that, the people in this room have been incredible supporters of me and Michelle. And we could not be more grateful for everything you’ve done for us, everything you’ve done for the country. And so I just want to start off by saying thank you. [Applause] Yes! Yes!

Now, we gather to celebrate Black History Month, and from our earliest days, Black history has been American history. We’re the slaves who carried the stone to build this White House, the soldiers who fought for our Nation’s independence, who fought to hold this Union together, who fought for freedom of others around the world. We’re the scientists and inventors who helped unleash American innovation. We stand on the shoulders not only of the giants in this room, but also countless, nameless heroes who marched for equality and justice for all of us.

And down through the decades, African American culture has profoundly shaped American culture: in music and art, literature and

sports. I want to give a special acknowledgment to my lovely wife, because just last week she hosted a performance of African American women and girls in dance. And we had luminaries like Debbie Allen and Judith Jamison working with the next generation of outstanding young Black dancers. It was, apparently, an incredible event. I was not invited. [Laughter] My dance moves did not make the cut. [Laughter]

So we are so proud to honor this rich heritage. But Black History Month shouldn’t be treated as though it is somehow separate from our collective American history or somehow just boiled down to a compilation of greatest hits from the March on Washington or from some of our sports heroes. There are well-meaning attempts to do that all around us, from classrooms to corporate ad campaigns. But we know that this should be more than just a commemoration of particular events.

It’s about the lived, shared experience of all African Americans, high and low, famous and obscure, and how those experiences have shaped and challenged and ultimately strengthened America. It’s about taking an unvarnished look at the past so we can create a better future. It’s a reminder of where we as a country have been so that we know where we need to go.

That’s why earlier today, we hosted an intergenerational roundtable of civil rights leaders to talk about today’s efforts to reform our criminal justice system. So we had icons of the civil rights movement that helped get me here, folks like Reverend C.T. Vivian and John Lewis. But they were with up-and-coming change makers like Stephen Green of the NAACP Youth and College Division or Brittany Packnett of Campaign Zero—

Audience member. Yes, Brittany!

The President. —who—yes—who has done outstanding work as a member of our 21st-Century Police Task Force. And to hear the incredible contributions these young people were making and to see how their courage and tenacity was connected to those who had

lived through Bloody Sunday, it made you optimistic about a future. It was powerful to see the fathers and the mothers of the movement in this constant interaction, understanding that each successive generation has to take the baton and move us forward.

And what's so inspiring about these young people and their generation is that they don't see Black history as a relic; it's not something to study in a book. They don't see themselves as distant from that history; they are participants, making history. It's alive; it's something that we have the power and the responsibility to shape and to wield.

The civil rights movement grew out of church basements and word of mouth and drew strength from freedom songs and the power of young people's examples. And thanks to technology and social media, today's leaders are building a new, inclusive movement that's mobilizing people of all backgrounds to stand up for change, from equal opportunity in education to a smarter criminal justice system, one that's more effective in keeping us safe, but also makes sure that everybody is treated fairly under the law.

So I want to give a special shout-out to young people here today and tell them we want them to continue doing what they're doing.

And that's the thing about our democracy. It takes all of us. It's important that we have responsive elected officials. Supreme Court appointments are important. But ultimately, everything comes down to the constant perseverance, the courage, the tenacity, the vision of citizens like you, making sure not only you exercise your right to vote, but that in between elections you are part of a constant movement in your local communities or at a national level

or at an international level to bring about the kind of change from which all of us in this room have benefited because of the labors of somebody who came before us.

America is a nation that is a constant work in progress. That's why we are exceptional. We don't stop. There's a gap—there always will be—between who we are and the “perfect Union,” that ideal that we see. But what makes us exceptional, what makes us Americans, is that we fight wars and pass laws and we march and we organize unions and we stage protests, and that gap gets smaller over time. And it's that effort to form a more perfect Union that marks us as a people.

As long as we keep at it, as long as we don't get discouraged, as long as we are out there fighting the good fight not just on 1 day or 1 month, but every single day, and every single month, I have no doubt that we're going to live up to the promise of our founding ideals and that all these young children who are standing in front, no matter who they are or where they come from, they're going to have the opportunity to achieve their dreams.

Thank you, everybody. God bless you. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:51 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Debbie Allen, founder, Debbie Allen Dance Academy; Judith Jamison, artistic director emerita, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; Cordy Tindell “C.T.” Vivian, founder, C.T. Vivian Leadership Institute; Stephen A. Green, national director, NAACP Youth and College Division; and Brittany Packnett, executive director, Teach For America St. Louis.

Remarks at a Democratic Governors Association Meeting February 19, 2016

The President. Well, I want to welcome back the Democratic Governors to the White House. It's wonderful to see you.

Before I get started, a couple of orders of business. First of all, I want to recognize that

Governor Hickenlooper of Colorado has had a very good year. [*Laughter*] First, he gets married; then, the Broncos win the Super Bowl. [*Laughter*] Now he gets to spend the weekend with all of you. [*Laughter*] He's got