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Remarks by the President on the Administration's Approach to Counterterrorism

MacDill Air Force Base

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you so much! (Applause.) Thank you. Thank you so much, everybody. Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat. Have a seat. Well, thank you so much.

Good afternoon, everybody. I was just told that was going to be the last "Hail to the Chief" on the road, and it got me kind of sentimental. I want to first and foremost say thanks to all of you. Just before I came here, I was able to visit with some of the men and women from MacDill Air Force Base, Central Command, our Special Operations Command to thank them for their extraordinary service. And so to you and your families, and to the extended family of American servicemembers, let me say that our nation owes you an unbelievable debt of gratitude. We are grateful for you, and will be praying for you over the holidays. (Applause.)

As you know all too well, your mission -- and the course of history -- was changed after the 9/11 attacks. By the time I took office, the United States had been at war for seven years. For eight years that I've been in office, there has not been a day when a terrorist organization or some radicalized individual was not plotting to kill Americans. And on January 20th, I will become the first President of the United States to serve two full terms during a time of war. (Applause.) Now, we did not choose this fight, but once it came to us, the world saw the measure of our resolve.

The most solemn responsibility for any President is keeping the American people safe. In carrying out that duty, I have sent men and women into harm's way. I've visited troops around the globe. I have met our wounded warriors, and I've grieved with Gold Star families. I know better than most that it is because of your service and your sacrifice that we have been able, during these eight years, to protect our homeland, to strike crippling blows against terrorist networks, and fortify our friends and our allies. So today, I'd like to reflect on that work, and talk about the foundation that we will leave for the next administration.

I came to this office with a set of core convictions that have guided me as Commander-in-Chief. I believe that the United States military can achieve any mission; that we are, and must remain, the strongest fighting force the world has ever known. (Applause.) I believe that we must never hesitate to act when necessary, including unilaterally when necessary, against any imminent threats to our people. But I have also insisted that it is unwise and unsustainable to ask our military to build nations on the other side of the world, or resolve their internal conflicts, particularly in places where our forces become a magnet for terrorists and insurgencies. Instead, it has been my conviction that even as we focus relentlessly on dismantling terrorist networks like al Qaeda and ISIL, we should ask allies to do their share in the fight, and we should strengthen local partners who can provide lasting security.

And these convictions guided the policies we pursued both in Iraq and Afghanistan. When I took office, the United States was focused overwhelmingly on Iraq, where nearly 150,000 American troops had spent years fighting an insurgency and helping to build a democratic government. Meanwhile, al Qaeda had regrouped in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and was actively planning attacks against our homeland. So we brought nearly 150,000 troops home from Iraq, consistent with the Status of Forces Agreement negotiated by the previous administration, and we surged our efforts along with our allies in Afghanistan, which allowed us to focus on dismantling al Qaeda and give the Afghan government the opportunity to succeed.

And this focus on al Qaeda -- the most dangerous threat to the United States at the time -- paid dividends. Today, by any measure, core al Qaeda -- the organization that hit us on 9/11 -- is a shadow of its former self. (Applause.) Plots directed from within Afghanistan and Pakistan have been consistently disrupted. Its leadership has been

decimated. Dozens of terrorist leaders have been killed. Osama bin Laden is dead. (Applause.) And, importantly, we have built a counterterrorism capability that can sustain this pressure against any terrorist network in South Asia that might threaten the United States of America. That was because of the work of our outstanding servicemembers.

Moreover, that early decision to strengthen our efforts in Afghanistan allowed us to build the capacity of Afghans to secure and defend their own country. So today, there are less than 10,000 American troops in Afghanistan. Instead of being in the lead against the Taliban, Americans are now supporting 320,000 Afghan security forces who are defending their communities and supporting our counterterrorism efforts.

Now, I don't want to paint too rosy a picture. The situation in Afghanistan is still tough. War has been a part of life in Afghanistan for over 30 years, and the United States cannot eliminate the Taliban or end violence in that country. But what we can do is deny al Qaeda a safe haven, and what we can do is support Afghans who want a better future, which is why we have worked not only with their military, but we've backed a unity government in Kabul. We've helped Afghan girls go to school. We've supported investments in health care and electricity and education. You have made a difference in Afghanistan, and America is safer for it. (Applause.)

Of course, the terrorist threat was never restricted to South Asia, or to Afghanistan, or Pakistan. Even as al Qaeda has been decimated in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the threat from terrorists metastasized in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa. And most dangerously, we saw the emergence of ISIL, the successor to al Qaeda in Iraq, which fights as both a terrorist network and an insurgency.

There's been a debate about ISIL that's focused on whether a continued U.S. troop presence in Iraq back in 2011 could have stopped the threat of ISIL from growing. And as a practical matter, this was not an option. By 2011, Iraqis wanted our military presence to end, and they were unwilling to sign a new Status of Forces Agreement to protect our troops from prosecution if they were trying to defend themselves in Iraq.

In addition, maintaining American troops in Iraq at the time could not have reversed the forces that contributed to ISIL's rise -- a government in Baghdad that pursued a sectarian agenda, a brutal dictator in Syria who lost control of large parts of the

country, social media that reached a global pool of recruits, and a hollowing out of Iraq's security forces, which were ultimately overrun in Mosul in 2014. In fact, American troops, had they stayed there, would have lacked legal protections and faced a choice between remaining on bases or being drawn back into a sectarian conflict against the will of Iraq's elected government or Iraq's local populations.

But circumstances changed. When ISIL made substantial gains first in Mosul and then in other parts of the country, then suddenly Iraqis reached out once again for help. And in shaping our response, we refused to repeat some of the mistakes of the 2003 invasion that have helped to give rise to the organization that became ISIL in the first place.

We conditioned our help on the emergence of a new Iraqi government and prime minister that was committed to national unity, and committed to working with us. We built an international coalition of nearly 70 nations, including some of Iraq's neighbors. We surged our intelligence resources so that we could better understand the enemy. And then we took the fight to ISIL in both Iraq and Syria, not with American battalions but with local forces backed by our equipment and our advisors and, importantly, our Special Forces. In that campaign, we have now hit ISIL with over 16,000 airstrikes. We have equipped and trained tens of thousands of partners on the ground.

And today, the results are clear: ISIL has lost more than half its territory. ISIL has lost control of major population centers. Its morale is plummeting. Its recruitment is drying up. Its commanders and external plotters are being taken out, and local populations are turning against it. (Applause.)

As we speak, ISIL faces an offensive on Mosul from Iraqi troops and coalition support. That's the largest remaining city that it controls. Meanwhile, in Syria, ISIL's self-declared capital in Raqqa is being squeezed. We have attacked ISIL's financial lifeline, destroying hundreds of millions of dollars of oil and cash reserves. The bottom line is we are breaking the back of ISIL. We're taking away its safe havens. (Applause.) And we've accomplished all this at a cost of \$10 billion over two years, which is the same amount that we used to spend in one month at the height of the Iraq War. (Applause.)

So the campaign against ISIL has been relentless. It has been sustainable. It has been multilateral. And it demonstrates a shift in how we've taken the fight to terrorists everywhere from South Asia to the Sahel. Instead of pushing all of the burden onto American ground troops, instead of trying to mount invasions wherever terrorists appear, we've built a network of partners.

In Libya, where U.S. airpower has helped local militias dislodge a dangerous ISIL cell. In Mali, where U.S. logistics and intelligence support helped our French allies roll back al Qaeda branches there. In Somalia, where U.S. operations support an African Union-led force and international peacekeepers. And in Yemen, where years of targeted strikes have degraded al Qaeda in the Peninsula.

And these offensive efforts have buttressed a global effort to make it harder for terrorist networks to breach our defenses and spread their violent ideologies. Working with European allies who have suffered terrible attacks, we've strengthened intelligence-sharing and cut in half the flow of foreign fighters to ISIL. We've worked with our tech sector to support efforts to push back on terrorist messages on social media that motivate people to kill. A recent study shows that ISIL's propaganda has been cut in half. We've launched a Global Engagement Center to empower voices that are countering ISIL's perversion of Islam, and we're working closely with Muslim-majority partners from the Gulf to Southeast Asia.

This is your work. We should take great pride in the progress that we've made over the last eight years. That's the bottom line.

No foreign terrorist organization has successfully planned and executed an attack on our homeland. (Applause.) And it's not because they didn't try. Plots have been disrupted. Terrorists have been taken off the battlefield. And we've done this even as we drew down nearly 180,000 troops in harm's way in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today there are just 15,000.

New partnerships have been built. We've respected the rule of law. We've enlisted our values in this fight. And all of this progress is due to the service of millions of Americans like you -- in intelligence and in law enforcement, in homeland security, in diplomacy, in the armed services of the United States of America. It's thanks to you -- (applause) -- thanks to you.

Now, to say that we've made progress is not to say that the job is done. We know that a deadly threat persists. We know that in some form this violent extremism will be with us for years to come. In too many parts of the world, especially in the Middle East, there has been a breakdown of order that's been building for decades, and it's unleashed forces that are going to take a generation to resolve. Long-term corruption has rotted too many nation-states from within. Governance is collapsing. Sectarian conflicts rage. A changing climate is increasing competition for food and water. (Applause.) And false prophets are peddling a vision of Islam that is irreconcilable with tolerance and modernity and basic science. And in fact, every one of these trends is at play inside of Syria today.

And what complicates the challenge even more is the fact that for all of our necessary focus on fighting terrorists overseas, the most deadly attacks on the homeland over the last eight years have not been carried out by operatives with sophisticated networks or equipment, directed from abroad. They've been carried out by homegrown and largely isolated individuals who were radicalized online.

These deranged killers can't inflict the sort of mass casualties that we saw on 9/11, but the pain of those who lost loved ones in Boston, in San Bernardino, in Fort Hood and Orlando, that pain continues to this day. And in some cases, it has stirred fear in our populations and threatens to change how we think about ourselves and our lives.

So while we've made it much more difficult -- you have made it much more difficult -- to carry out an attack approaching the scale of 9/11, the threat will endure. We will not achieve the kind of clearly defined victory comparable to those that we won in previous wars against nations. We won't have a scene of the Emperor of Japan and Douglas MacArthur in a surrender. And the reason we won't have that is because technology makes it impossible to completely shield impressionable minds from violent ideologies. And somebody who is trying to kill and willing to be killed is dangerous, particularly when we live in a country where it's very easy for that person to buy a very powerful weapon.

So rather than offer false promises that we can eliminate terrorism by dropping more bombs, or deploying more and more troops, or fencing ourselves off from the rest of the world, we have to take a long view of the terrorist threat, and we have to pursue a smart strategy that can be sustained.

In the time remaining, let me suggest what I think should guide this approach. First of all, a sustainable counterterrorism strategy depends on keeping the threat in perspective. The terrorist threat is real and it is dangerous. But these terrorists want to cast themselves as the vanguard of a new world order. They are not. They are thugs and they are murderers, and they should be treated that way. (Applause.) Fascism threatened to overrun the entire world -- and we had to wage total war in response. Communism threatened not only to overturn a world order, but threatened nuclear holocaust -- so we had to build armaments and alliances to contain it. Today's terrorists can kill innocent people, but they don't pose an existential threat to our nation, and we must not make the mistake of elevating them as if they do. That does their job for them. It makes them more important and helps them with recruitment.

A second and related point is that we cannot follow the path of previous great powers who sometimes defeated themselves through over-reach. By protecting our homeland while drawing down the number of troops serving in harm's way overseas, we helped save resources, but more importantly, we saved lives. I can tell you, during the course of my eight years, that I have never shied away from sending men and women into danger where necessary. It's always the hardest decision I make, but it's one that I've made where the security of the American people is at stake. And I've seen the costs. I've held the hands of our wounded warriors at Walter Reed. I've met the caskets of the fallen at Dover. And that's why I make no apologies for only sending our troops into harm's way when there is a clear mission that is achievable and when it is absolutely necessary.

Number three, we need the wisdom to see that upholding our values and adhering to the rule of law is not a weakness; in the long term, it is our greatest strength. (Applause.) The whole objective of these terrorists is to scare us into changing the nature of who we are and our democracy. And the fact is, people and nations do not make good decisions when they are driven by fear. These terrorists can never directly destroy our way of life, but we can do it for them if we lose track of who we are and the values that this nation was founded upon. (Applause.)

And I always remind myself that as Commander-in-Chief, I must protect our people, but I also swore an oath to defend our Constitution. And over these last eight years, we have demonstrated that staying true to our traditions as a nation of laws advances our security as well as our values.

We prohibited torture, everywhere, at all times -- and that includes tactics like waterboarding. And at no time has anybody who has worked with me told me that doing so has cost us good intelligence. (Applause.) When we do capture terrorists, despite all the political rhetoric about the need to strip terrorists of their rights, our interrogation teams have obtained valuable information from terrorists without resorting to torture, without operating outside the law. Our Article III courts have delivered justice faster than military trials. And our prisons have proven more than capable of holding the most dangerous terrorists.

Consider the terrorists who have been captured, lawfully interrogated, and prosecuted in civilian courts. Faisal Shahzad, who tried to set off a car bomb in Times Square. Dzhokar Tsarneyev, the Boston Marathon bomber. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the so-called "underwear bomber." American juries and judges have determined that none of these people will know freedom again. But we did it lawfully. And the wheels of justice right now are turning for others -- terrorists like Ahmed Warsame, an al-Shabaab commander, and Abu Khatalla, accused leader of the Benghazi attacks. We can get these terrorists and stay true to who we are.

And, in fact, our success in dealing with terrorists through our justice system reinforces why it is past time to shut down the detention facility at Guantanamo. (Applause.) This is not just my opinion, it's the opinion of many military leaders. During my administration, we have responsibly transferred over 175 detainees to foreign governments, with safeguards to reduce the risk of them returning to the battlefield. And we've cut the population in Gitmo from 242 to 59. The politics of fear has led Congress to prevent any detainees from being transferred to prisons in the United States -- even though, as we speak, we imprison dangerous terrorists in our prisons, and we have even more dangerous criminals in all of our prisons across the country; even though our allies oftentimes will not turn over a terrorist if they think that terrorist could end up in Gitmo; even though groups like ISIL use Gitmo in their propaganda. So we're wasting hundreds of millions of dollars to keep fewer than 60 people in a detention facility in Cuba. That's not strength. Until Congress changes course, it will be judged harshly by history, and I will continue to do all that I can to remove this blot on our national honor. (Applause.)

Number four, we have to fight terrorists in a way that does not create more terrorists. For example, in a dangerous world, terrorists seek out places where it's often impossible to capture them, or to count on local governments to do so. And that

means the best option for us to get those terrorists becomes a targeted strike. So we have taken action under my command, including with drones, to remove terrorists from the battlefield, which protects our troops and has prevented real threats to the American people. (Applause.)

Now, under rules that I put in place and that I made public, before any strike is taken outside of a warzone, there must be near certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured. And while nothing is certain in any strike, and we have acknowledged that there are tragic instances where innocents have been killed by our strikes, this is the highest standard that we can set. Nevertheless, we still have critics who suggest that these strikes are wrong. And I say to them, you have to weigh the alternatives. Drone strikes allow us to deny terrorists a safe haven without airstrikes, which are less precise, or invasions that are much more likely to kill innocent civilians as well as American servicemembers.

So the actions that we've taken have saved lives at home and abroad. But the point is, is that we do have to be careful to make sure that when we take actions, we're not alienating local populations, because that will serve as recruitment for new terrorists.

Number five, transparency and accountability serve our national security not just in times of peace, but, more importantly, in times of conflict. And that's why we've made public information about which terrorist organizations we're fighting and why we're fighting them. We've released assessments of non-combatants killed in our operations, taken responsibility when mistakes are made. We've declassified information about interrogation methods that were wrong so we learn from past mistakes. And yesterday, I directed our government for the first time to release a full description of the legal and policy frameworks that guide our military operations around the world.

This public information allows for a more informed public debate, and it provides a potential check on unfettered executive power. The power of the presidency is awesome, but it is supposed to be bound by you, our citizens. (Applause.) But here's the thing: That information doesn't mean anything, it doesn't work if the people's representatives in Congress don't do their jobs, if they're not paying attention. (Applause.)

Right now, we are waging war under authorities provided by Congress over 15 years ago -- 15 years ago. I had no gray hair 15 years ago. (Laughter.) Two years ago, I asked Congress, let's update the authorization, provide us a new authorization for the war against ISIL, reflecting the changing nature of the threats, reflecting the lessons that we've learned from the last decade. So far, Congress has refused to take a vote.

Democracies should not operate in a state of permanently authorized war. (Applause.) That's not good for our military, it's not good for our democracy. And, by the way, part of the reason that's dangerous is because today, with our outstanding, all-volunteer force, only one percent of the population is actually fighting. (Applause.) Which means that you are carrying the burden. Which means that it is important for us to know what it is that we're doing and have to explain what we are doing to the public, because it becomes too easy to just send one percent of the population out to do things even if they're not well thought through.

If a threat is serious enough to require the sacrifice of our men and women in uniform, then members of Congress should at least have the courage to make clear where they stand -- not on the sidelines -- (applause) -- not on cable TV shows, but by fulfilling their constitutional duty and authorizing the use of force against the threats that we face today. That's how democracies are supposed to work.

Number six, alongside our outstanding military work, we have to draw upon the strength of our diplomacy. Terrorists would love to see us walk away from the type of work that builds international coalitions, and ends conflicts, and stops the spread of deadly weapons. It would make life easier for them; it would be a tragic mistake for us.

Just think about what we've done these last eight years without firing a shot. We've rolled back Iran's nuclear program. That's not just my assessment, that's the assessment of Israeli intelligence, even though they were opposed to the deal. We've secured nuclear materials around the globe, reducing the risk that they fall into the hands of terrorists. We've eliminated Syria's declared chemical weapons program. All of these steps have helped keep us safe and helped keep our troops safe. Those are the result of diplomacy. And sustained diplomatic efforts, no matter how frustrating or difficult they sometimes appear, are going to be required to resolve the conflicts roiling the in Middle East, from Yemen, to Syria, to Israel and

Palestine. And if we don't have strong efforts there, the more you will be called upon to clean up after the failure of diplomacy.

Similarly, any long-term strategy to reduce the threat of terrorism depends on investments that strengthen some of these fragile societies. Our generals, our commanders understand this. This is not charity. It's fundamental to our national security. A dollar spent on development is worth a lot more than a dollar spent fighting a war. (Applause.)

This is how we prevent conflicts from starting in the first place. This is how we can ensure that peace is lasting -- after we've fought. It's how we stop people from falling prey to extremism -- because children are going to school and they can think for themselves, and families can feed themselves and aren't desperate, and communities are not ravaged by diseases, and countries are not devastated by climate changes.

As Americans, we have to see the value of empowering civil societies so that there are outlets for people's frustrations, and we have to support entrepreneurs who want to build businesses instead of destroying. We have to invest in young people because the areas that are generating terrorists are typically having a huge youth bulge, which makes them more dangerous. And there are times where we need to help refugees who have escaped the horrors of war in search of a better life. (Applause.) Our military recognizes that these issues of governance and human dignity and development are vital to our security. It's central to our plans in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. Let's make sure that this wisdom is reflected in our budgets, as well.

And finally, in this fight, we have to uphold the civil liberties that define us. Terrorists want us to turn on one another. And while defeating them requires us to draw upon the enormous capabilities of all of our government, we have make sure changes in how we address terrorists are not abused. This is why, for example, we've made extensive reforms in how we gather intelligence around the world, increasing oversight, placing new restrictions on the government's ability to retain and search and use certain communications so that people trust us, and that way they cooperate and work with us.

We don't use our power to indiscriminately read emails or listen to phone calls just targeted at folks who might be trying to do us harm. We use it to save lives. And by

doing so, by maintaining these civil liberties, we sustain the confidence of the American people and we get the cooperation of our allies more readily. Protecting liberty -- that's something we do for all Americans, and not just some. (Applause.)

We are fighting terrorists who claim to fight on behalf of Islam. But they do not speak for over a billion Muslims around the world, and they do not speak for American Muslims, including many who wear the uniform of the United States of America's military. (Applause.)

If we stigmatize good, patriotic Muslims, that just feeds the terrorists' narrative. It fuels the same false grievances that they use to motivate people to kill. If we act like this is a war between the United States and Islam, we're not just going to lose more Americans to terrorist attacks, but we'll also lose sight of the very principles we claim to defend.

So let my final words to you as your Commander-in-Chief be a reminder of what it is that you're fighting for, what it is that we are fighting for. The United States of America is not a country that imposes religious tests as a price for freedom. We're a country that was founded so that people could practice their faiths as they choose. The United States of America is not a place where some citizens have to withstand greater scrutiny, or carry a special ID card, or prove that they're not an enemy from within. We're a country that has bled and struggled and sacrificed against that kind of discrimination and arbitrary rule, here in our own country and around the world.

We're a nation that believes freedom can never be taken for granted and that each of us has a responsibility to sustain it. The universal right to speak your mind and to protest against authority, to live in a society that's open and free, that can criticize a President without retribution -- (applause) -- a country where you're judged by the content of your character rather than what you look like, or how you worship, or what your last name is, or where your family came from -- that's what separates us from tyrants and terrorists.

We are a nation that stands for the rule of law, and strengthen the laws of war. When the Nazis were defeated, we put them on trial. Some couldn't understand that; it had never happened before. But as one of the American lawyers who was at Nuremberg says, "I was trying to prove that the rule of law should govern human behavior." And

by doing so, we broadened the scope and reach of justice around the world. We held ourselves out as a beacon and an example for others.

We are a nation that won World Wars without grabbing the resources of those we defeated. We helped them rebuild. We didn't hold on to territory, other than the cemeteries where we buried our dead. Our Greatest Generation fought and bled and died to build an international order of laws and institutions that could preserve the peace, and extend prosperity, and promote cooperation among nations. And for all of its imperfections, we depend on that international order to protect our own freedom.

In other words, we are a nation that at our best has been defined by hope, and not fear. A country that went through the crucible of a Civil War to offer a new birth of freedom; that stormed the beaches of Normandy, climbed the hills of Iwo Jima; that saw ordinary people mobilize to extend the meaning of civil rights. That's who we are. That's what makes us stronger than any act of terror.

Remember that history. Remember what that flag stands for. For we depend upon you -- the heirs to that legacy -- our men and women in uniform, and the citizens who support you, to carry forward what is best in us -- that commitment to a common creed. The confidence that right makes might, not the other way around. (Applause.)

That's how we can sustain this long struggle. That's how we'll protect this country. That's how we'll protect our Constitution against all threats, foreign and domestic.

I trust that you will fulfill that mission, as you have fulfilled all others. It has been the greatest honor of my life to serve as your Commander-in-Chief. I thank you for all that you've done, and all that you will do in the future. May God bless you. May God bless our troops, and may God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

END

4:40 P.M. EST