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Subject: FW: Remarks by the President in Roundtable with Progressive Journalists (1/17/2017)
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We have not shared this at all, but could be worth a read.

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Subject: Remarks by the President in Roundtable with Progressive Journalists (1/17/2017)

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

Internal Transcript

January 17, 2017

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT

IN ROUNDTABLE WITH PROGRESSIVE COLUMNISTS

Roosevelt Room

4:19 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: I figured you guys won't answer my phone calls after today. I'll be like the Maytag repairman, sitting there. So I thought I'd get my last few little licks in.

Before I start, you should just know that probably while we're in this meeting, my final batch of pardons and commutations will be announced, and it will include Manning and it will include Cartwright. And so that will be newsworthy. So I'm sorry you guys won't be scooping it at this moment, but you'll have more than enough time to comment on it. And I'm happy to answer any questions.

Q How many people total on the list?

THE PRESIDENT: Goodness. I mean, I sort of lost track. What are we, around 1,400?

MR. EARNEST: So on the batch today, I think it put you around 1,300, and then we're going to do another big batch on Thursday, actually.

THE PRESIDENT: On Thursday.

MR. EARNEST: We weren't able to get all of them through today.

THE PRESIDENT: I see. I've approved all of them, but I think they have to be processed.

MR. EARNEST: Exactly. There's a whole bunch of paperwork that goes with them, so we weren't able to get them out. But I think that we're going to be up, like, 1,800 or 1,900 by the end of the week.

THE PRESIDENT: That's just a shade under 2,000. And I should just comment on a couple of things on this that may be of interest.

It is absolutely true that I prioritized the commutations over the pardons. I mention that just because I know The New York Times and a couple of folks have editorialized on the pardons issue. We revamped the office, and the amount of paperwork that has to be done and FBI checks, I mean, there's

just -- each one is actually a pretty extensive piece of business. And so given the amount of time that I had with the office revamped, the question was, the people who had gotten life sentences for nonviolent drug crimes versus pardons -- we tried to get through as many as possible that were meritorious, but, frankly, these are not people who are actually in jail; most of them who might qualify for the pardons typically almost by definition were living fulfilling lives, doing pretty good, and had rehabilitated themselves. And so we tried to get through everything that we could, and we'll have a big batch of pardons coming up. But I would have loved to have done more.

I will tell you the amount of work that was involved just in going through 1,800, because I read the files on each one of these, was not insubstantial. I've been up late.

And I'll just make a quick comment. With respect to Manning, my view is, is that a young person did significant damage because they hadn't thought through sort of the approach that that young person took -- that he took in doing something that he thought was important. He deserved punishment. He did not deserve the sentence that he received, which was, I felt, not commensurate with leaking, even as mass of a leak as this one.

And with respect to Cartwright, my view was that although he properly takes responsibility for having not been truthful to the FBI when questioned, that I think even some of your fellow journalists whose stories were involved here acknowledged that he was not the primary source of something, and was in some ways trying to mitigate what he viewed as already damaging reports that were out -- and in light of his extraordinary service to the country. Otherwise, I thought it was appropriate.

So other than those two topics, I assume you guys have some stuff on your mind about the election, about the Democratic Party, about progressive movements. And I'm happy to just answer questions from you guys. And I will allocate a good solid -- around an hour.

Who wants to go first? Greg.

Q So, I've been sort of trying to figure out how pessimistic you are. (Laughter.)

Q That's a great start. I like that.

Q There were some public comments recently in which you expressed a fair amount of optimism about our institutions being able to withstand what's coming. But I think there was a presser abroad -- you wrote about that -- and there were -- sort of laced in those comments was a fair amount of pessimism about whether our institutions actually were up to the task. I guess this is sort of -- I'd love to get a real, unvarnished view of that.

And also, as a corollary to that, we're starting to see some real, deep-state interference with this transition. And how worrisome is that over the long haul? Where could that go?

THE PRESIDENT: My actual views are not wildly far off from what I've said publicly. I've tempered my language and tried to be diplomatic about it. I am a genuine optimist in the sense that, number one, I think it's important for us not to ignore the multiple contingencies that resulted in Trump being elected and not somehow suggest that the country is invariably racist, misogynist, what have you. And the fact of the matter is, setting aside that Hillary Clinton got the substantially bigger share of the vote, I think it's fair to say that a whole series of different things happening -- how the email thing unfolded, and sort of the chain from Bill Clinton getting on that plane, to Comey making an announcement. At a bunch of different junctures, people could have made different decisions that would have resulted in it playing differently.

I think the Russian leaks, how that played out, how all this stuff was reported -- I mean, I'm just being honest with you, and many of you share this view. You guys weren't necessarily the culprits, but how that played out. Some failures of polling and analytics leading a leading Democratic candidate never to appear in Michigan or Wisconsin, or show up in a union hall, right? I mean, there's just a bunch of stuff that could have happened in which we wouldn't be having this particular conversation.

So, A, I think it's important not to over-interpret where the minds of the American people are at.

Number two, I speak from experience, having been here eight years -- and you guys don't have to agree with this, but I'll say it: I have really smart people who worked really hard and who were really steeped in the substance and sweated the details and were really capable. And you had a President, I think, who had a pretty good sense of what he was trying to do, and a team that worked really well together. And when we started, we had a bigger majority in the House and the Senate than Trump does now.

And it was hard getting stuff done, right? We're very proud of what we got done and the track record we laid out. But we were a lot better prepared and a lot better organized than the incoming team. And even with 59 votes in the Senate and with a sizeable majority in the House, it was still like pulling teeth to just move basic stuff, even where we had consensus. Because part of that 59 was Ben Nelson and Joe Lieberman, and eventually Arlen Specter. Right? I mean, it was -- so this is an ocean liner. It is not a speedboat. And it takes time to undo stuff. So that's the second thing.

The third thing is, a lot of the stuff we did is actually pretty popular in an à la carte sense, even if we got beat on some of the PR on it. And Obamacare is the classic example. It is going to be impossible for them to fulfill what Trump and Congress says they're planning to do. I know because we looked at every option, as I said, at our health care summit. If there was a cheaper, smoother, better way of doing things, we would have done it. Their critique, and to the degree that people were not happy with Obamacare, it was because it wasn't socialist enough, wasn't government-funded enough. And since that's not what they're offering, it's going to very hard for them fulfill the promises they've made. And I think that there is going to be fractures and fissures around those issues.

So I think that there are a number of reasons why I don't foresee a complete collapse of the Democratic Party or the rolling back of my entire legacy and so forth. Powers disperse. You take something like climate change, it's all embedded in the market now. It's all embedded in the plans and decisions that are made even by Rex Tillerson's old shop. You got markets like California -- they're gone. I mean, they're moving. That's not reversing itself anytime soon. And there are a bunch of jobs and offsetting special interests now that are going to protect and preserve that, even in the reddest of states. So that's on the positive side of the ledger.

I think where my concerns come in are, I think, the complete lack of transparency during the election means that it is very hard to figure out how to untangle and unwind what could be just constant, massive conflicts of interest that undermine basic norms that we have built up over time, at least in my lifetime. I think policing those things are going to be difficult. And I think part of what's going to make it difficult is, without -- two reasons. One is, without just basic documents like tax returns, if you don't have the clearest smoking gun, the public just kind of feels like, well, everybody is a crook and this isn't that different. And so there's a certain amount of just resignation in the public around some of these issues that seems to be hard to break through.

And the other thing is, it's just there are so many that you guys have trouble keeping track of them, and you don't get one sustained story the way you would normally. And it's weird that that's an advantage. I think it brings his poll numbers down. I think the public senses that this isn't good. I don't feel like this is a drainage of the swamp. And again, that's one more reason not to be over distraught. I mean, the guy is starting at 37 percent. That's hard to do. (Laughter.) I mean, I started at -- at this time, a week out, I was, what, 68, 70 percent? And very rarely do your numbers go up, right?

So I think it does weigh on it, but that killer sort of thing that just says, okay, this is intolerable and there's consensus. And so I think that's a problem.

The second problem that I see is, is that Congress -- so far at least, the Republicans are showing no shame in a way that doesn't entirely surprise me but I don't think is duplicated among Democrats. I mean, if any one of the things that came up here had happened in my administration, the number of Democrats who would have gone south on me and started saying, "Well, we think this is a problem," it would have happened pretty quick. And here, you got a guy like Chaffetz who's just, "What? What are you talking about?" So I think that is a problem.

I think the Russia thing is a problem. And it's of a piece with this broader lack of transparency. It is hard to know what conversations the President-elect may be having offline with business leaders in other countries who are also connected to leaders of other countries. And I'm not saying there's anything I know for a fact or can prove, but it does mean that -- here's the one thing you guys have been able to know unequivocally during the last eight years, and that is that whether you disagree with me on policy or not, there was never a time in which my relationship with a foreign entity might shade how I viewed an issue. And that's -- I don't know a precedent for that exactly.

Now, the good news there, I will say, is just that there's a lot of career folks here who care about that stuff, and not just in the intelligence agencies. I think in our military, in our State Department. And I think that to the extent that things start getting weird, I think you will see surfacing objections, some through whistleblowers and some through others. And so I think there is some policing mechanism there, but that's unprecedented.

And then the final thing that I'm most worried about is just preserving the democratic process so that in two years, four years, six years, if people are dissatisfied, that dissatisfaction expresses itself. So Jeff Sessions and the Justice Department and what's happening with the voting rights division and the civil rights division, and -- those basic process issues that allow for the democratic process to work. I'd include in that, by the way, press. I think you guys are all on top of how disconcerting -- you guys complain about us -- (laughter) -- but let me just tell you, I think -- we actually respected you guys and cared about trying to explain ourselves to you in a way that I think is just going to be different.

On balance, that leads to me to say I think that four years is okay. Take on some water, but we can kind of bail fast enough to be okay. Eight years would be a problem. I would be concerned about a sustained period in which some of these norms have broken down and started to corrode.

Q Could you talk a bit more about the Russia thing? Because it sounds like you, who knows more than we do from what you've seen, and is genuinely --

THE PRESIDENT: And can say less. (Laughter.) This is one area I've got to be careful about. But, look, I mean, I think based on what you guys have, I think it's -- and I'm not just talking about the most recent report or the hacking. I mean, there are longstanding business relationships there. They're not classified. I think there's been some good reporting on them, it's just they never got much attention. He's been doing business in Russia for a long time. Pent house apartments in New York are sold to folks -- let me put it this way. If there's a Russian who can afford a \$10-million, or a \$15- or a \$20- or a \$30-million penthouse in Manhattan, or is a major investor in Florida, I think it's fair to say Mr. Putin knows that person, because I don't think they're getting \$10 million or \$30 million or \$50 million out of Russia without Mr. Putin saying that's okay.

Q Could you talk about two things? One is, the damage he could do to our standing in the world through that. I mean, just this interview he gave the other day, and what you're worried about there. And then the other side -- and you sat down with him. I found the way in which he screamed at Jim Acosta just really chilling. If you just look at the face in a kind an authoritarian or autocratic, whatever word you want to use, personality -- would you, on those two?

THE PRESIDENT: On the latter issue, EJ, you saw what I saw. I don't think I need to elaborate on that.

Q But you sat down with him privately. I'm curious about --

THE PRESIDENT: Privately, that's not -- his interactions with me are very different than they are with the public, or, for that matter, interactions with Barack Obama, the distant figure. He's very polite to me, and has not stopped being so. I think where he sees a vulnerability he goes after it and he takes advantage of it.

And the fact of the matter is, is that the media is not credible in the public eye right now. You have a bigger problem with a breakdown in institutional credibility that he exploits, at least for his base, and is sufficient for his purposes. Which means that -- the one piece of advice I'd give this table is: Focus. I think if you're jumping after every insult or terrible thing or bit of rudeness that he's doing and just chasing that, I think there's a little bit of a three-card Monte there that you have to be careful about. I think you have to focus on a couple of things that are really important and just stay on them and drive them home. And that's hard to do in this news environment, and it's hard to do with somebody who, I think, purposely generates outrage both to stir up his base but also to distract and to -- so you just have to stay focused and unintimidated, because that's how you confront, I think, a certain personality type.

But in terms of the world -- look, rather than pick at one or two different things -- number one, I don't think he's particularly isolationist -- or I don't think he's particularly interventionist. I'm less worried than some that he initiates a war. I think that he could stumble into stuff just due to a lack of an infrastructure and sort of a coherent vision. But I think his basic view -- his formative view of foreign policy is shaped by his interactions with Malaysian developers and Saudi princes, and I think his view is, I'm going to go around the world making deals and maybe suing people. (Laughter.) But it's not, let me launch big wars that tie me up. And that's not what his base is looking from him anyway. I mean, it is not true that he initially opposed the war in Iraq. It is true that during the campaign he was not projecting a hawkish foreign policy, other than bombing the heck out of terrorists. And we'll see what that means, but I don't think he's looking to get into these big foreign adventures.

I think the bigger problem is nobody fully appreciates -- and even I didn't appreciate until I took this office -- and when I say "nobody," I mean the left as well as the right -- the degree to which we really underwrite the world order. And I think sometimes from the left, that's viewed as imperialism or sort of an extension of a global capitalism or what have you. The truth of the matter, though, is, if I'm at a G20 meeting, if we don't initiate a conversation around human rights or women's rights, or LGBT rights, or climate change, or open government, or anti-corruption initiatives, whatever cause you believe in, it doesn't happen. Almost everything -- every multilateral initiative function, norm, policy that is out there -- it's underwritten by us. We have some allies, primarily Europe, Canada, and some of our Asia allies.

But what I worry about most is, there is a war right now of ideas, more than any hot war, and it is between Putinism -- which, by the way, is subscribed to, at some level, by Erdogan or Netanyahu or Duterte and Trump -- and a vision of a liberal market-based democracy that has all kinds of flaws and is subject to all kinds of legitimate criticism, but on the other hand is sort of responsible for most of the human progress we've seen over the last 50, 75 years.

And if what you see in Europe -- illiberalism winning out, the liberal order there being chipped away -- and the United States is not there as a bulwark, which I think it will not be, then what you're going to start seeing is, in a G20 or a G7, something like a human rights agenda is just not going to even be -- it

won't be even on the docket, it won't be talked about. And you'll start seeing -- what the Russians, what the Chinese do in those meetings is that they essentially look out for their own interests. They sit back, they wait to see what kind of consensus we're building globally, they see if sometimes they can make sure their equities are protected, but they don't initiate.

If we're not there initiating ourselves, then everybody goes into their own sort of nationalist, mercantilist corners, and it will be a meaner, tougher world, and the prospects for conflict that arise will be greater. I think the weakening of Europe, if not the splintering of Europe, will have significant effects for us because, you may recall, but the last time Europe was not unified, it did not go well. So I'm worried about Europe.

There are a lot of bad impulses in Europe if -- you know, Europe, even before the election, these guys will remember when we were, like, in Hanover and stuff, and you just got this sense of, you know, like the Yeats poem -- the best lacked all conviction and the worst were full of passion and intensity, and everybody on their heels, and unable to articulate or defend the fact that the European Union has produced the wealthiest, most peaceful, most prosperous, highest living standards in the history of mankind, and prior to that, 60 million people ended up being killed around the world because they couldn't get along.

So you'd think that we'd have the better argument here, but you didn't get a sense of that. Everybody was defensive, and I worry about that. Seeing Merkel for the last time when I was in Berlin was haunting. She looked very alarmed.

Q What can you share with us about what foreign leaders, like Merkel and others, have expressed to you about what happened here in this election and what's happening internationally generally since November 8th?

THE PRESIDENT: I think they share the concerns that I just described. But it's hard for them to figure out how to mobilize without us. This is what I mean -- I mean, I'll be honest, I do get frustrated sometimes with like the Greenwalds of the world. There are legitimate arguments to be made about various things we do, but overall we have been a relatively benign influence and a ballast, and have tried to create spaces -- sometimes there's hypocrisy and I'm dealing with the Saudis while they're doing all kinds of stuff, or we're looking away when there's a Chinese dissident in jail. All legitimate concerns. How we prosecute the war against terrorism, even under my watch. And you can challenge our drone policy, although I would argue that the arguments were much more salient in the first two years of my administration -- much less salient today.

You can talk about surveillance, and I would argue once again that Snowden identified some problems that had to do with technology outpacing the legal architecture. Since that time, the modifications we've made overall I think have been fairly sensible.

But even if you don't agree with those things, if we're not there making the arguments -- and even under

Bush, those arguments were made. I mean, you know, they screwed up royally with Iraq, but they cared about stuff like freedom of religion or genital mutilation. I mean, there was a State Department that would express concern about these things, and push and prod and much less NATO, which you kind of would think, well, that's sort of a basic, let's keep that thing going, that's worked okay.

So I think the fear is a combination of poor policy articulation or just silence on the part of the administration, a lack of observance ourselves of basic norms. So, I mean, we started this thing called the Open Government Partnership that's gotten 75 countries around the world doing all kinds of things that we've been poking and prodding them to do for a long time. It's been really successful making sure that people know what their budgets are and how they can hold their elected officials accountable, and we're doing it in Africa, in Asia, et cetera. And now, if we get a President who doesn't release his tax returns, who's doing business with a bunch of folks, then everybody looks and says, well, what are you talking about? They don't even have to, like, dismantle that program, it's just -- our example counts too.

Q Mr. President, can I ask you to go to kind of a dark place for a second in terms of --

THE PRESIDENT: I was feeling pretty dark. (Laughter.) I don't know how much -- where do you want me to go exactly?

Q I can bring us lower, trust me.

Q The John McCain line, everything is terrible before it goes completely black. (Laughter.)

Q I know that you feel that there's a lot you can't say on the Russia story, but just even speaking hypothetically, if there were somebody with the powers of U.S. President who Russia felt like they could give orders to, that Russia felt like they had something on them, what's your worst-case scenario? What's the worry there in terms of the kind of damage that could be done?

And also domestically, with a truly malign actor, if he's, way worse than we all think he might be, and he wanted to use the powers of the U.S. government to cause -- to advance his own interests and cause other people harm that he saw as his enemies, are there breaks out there that you see? What are the places where you worry the most in terms of damage being done?

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, on the foreign policy, the hypothetical is just -- I can't answer that because I'll let you guys spin yourselves.

What I would simply say would be that any time you have a foreign actors who, for whatever reason, has ex parte influence over the President of the United States, meaning that the American people can't

see that influence because it's not happening in a bilateral meeting and subject to negotiations or reporting -- any time that happens, that's a problem. And I'll let you speculate on where that could go.

Domestically, I think I've mentioned to Greg the place that I worry the most about. I mean, I think that the dangers I would see would be -- and we saw some hints of this in my predecessor -- if you politicize law enforcement, the attorney general's office, U.S. attorneys, FBI, prosecutorial functions, IRS audits, that's the place that I worry the most about. And the reason is because if you start seeing the government engaging in some of those behaviors and you start getting a chilling effect, then looking at history I don't know that we're so special that you don't start getting self-censorship, which in some ways is worse, or at least becomes the precursor.

We have enough institutional breaks right now to prevent just outright -- I mean, you would not, even with a Supreme Court appointment of his coming up, Justice Roberts would not uphold the President of the United States explicitly punishing the Washington Post for writing something. I mean, the First Amendment -- there's certain things that you can't get away with.

But what you can do -- it's been interesting watching sort of a handful of tweets, and then suddenly companies are all like, oh, we're going to bring back jobs, even if it's all phony and bullshit. What that shows is the power of people thinking, you know what, I might get in trouble, I might get punished.

And it's one thing if that's just verbal. But if folks start feeling as if the law enforcement mechanisms we have in place are not straight, they'll play it straight. That's dangerous, just because the immense power -- one of the frustrations I've had over the course of eight years is the degree to which people have, I think in the popular imagination and certainly among the left, this idea of Big Brother and spying and reading emails and writing emails -- and that's captured everybody's imaginations.

But I will tell you, the real power that's scary is just basic law enforcement. If the FBI comes and questions you and says it wants your stuff, and the Justice Department starts investigating you and is investigating you for long periods of time, even if you have nothing to hide, even if you've got lawyers, that's a scary piece of business, and it will linger for long periods of time.

I mean, look, when Congress calls -- my staff, when we were subjected to some of those bullshit subpoenas around Benghazi, tough people around here, they get nervous. Because now you've got to -- okay, you've got to hire a lawyer, you got to prepare stuff, you're going behind there. If you say something that is interpreted as not with precision, something accurate, if it doesn't end up being illegal, it sure can damage your reputation. And the Justice Department has a lot of resources, and the FBI has a lot of resources, and they can go for long periods of time. And you can run out of money. And your stuff can be in the papers if they're leaking it. And at a certain point in time, people start looking and they say, you know what, that's just not worth it, so let me keep my head down. That's the thing that I worry about the most. I would argue that, along with if you start seeing a Good Housekeeping Seal on the kind of stuff you saw in North Carolina.

Now, the good news is, is that I've appointed enough federal judges, short of the Supreme Court, that it's messy to try to pull off. Even North Carolina, eventually, a court case was won. But during that

interim period where stuff -- if they tried that kind of stuff everywhere, and all that stuff is working out up through the courts, and in the meantime you had a midterm and then in the meantime after that you've got an election that's going to determine the sentences and redistricting, you start building in structural advantages that are very hard to break through.

So I would say those are the two things that I worry about the most and you should be paying the closest attention to. I would be like white on rice on the Justice Department. I'd be paying a lot of attention to that. And if there is even a hint of politically motivated investigations, prosecutions, et cetera, I think you guys have to really be on top of that.

Q Should we be worried about the FBI, what just happened?

THE PRESIDENT: You know, I will say this about Comey. I think that -- and I've been very careful about this -- I think the way -- as I said, if there's Bill Clinton deciding he should get on Loretta Lynch's plane, to the last announcement about Wiener emails, and it's just like this train wreck and this cascade of decisions that I was powerless to intervene in, because I actually observe institutional norms and I'm not supposed to investigate -- or meddle in investigations.

But I think Comey is actually a person of high character and is not partisan when it comes to this stuff, and believes in playing it straight. That doesn't mean that every call he makes necessarily will be the right one, because this is a human enterprise and everybody is human. But I trust his basic integrity. I trust him to -- I think he thinks of himself as serving the American people and as a guardian of certain values and norms that I share with him.

Q Is he under pressure from agents inside? You saw the New York thing.

THE PRESIDENT: Possibly.

Q And connected to people on the Hill?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'll let you make judgements on that. Obviously, the IGs take some of those issues.

Q Just on the question of what happened --

THE PRESIDENT: But I will say this, though -- I think it is misplaced to think that somehow Comey

-- Comey did not enjoy the last four months. You can challenge decisions he made, but this notion that somehow he was trying to -- I do not believe that at all.

Q Just on the question of what happened down in North Carolina, which seems to be sort of emblematic of a kind of liberalism within the Republican Party with voter suppression and all this --

THE PRESIDENT: Right.

Q Where do you see the GOP going? During 2012, you had hoped that you might be able to break the fever within the Republican Party.

THE PRESIDENT: Yeah, I think that's not happening anytime soon. (Laughter.)

Q And that sort of -- the fever has run high.

THE PRESIDENT: I think we had a chance with this election. And I think it's fair to say that it pisses me off that we did not take advantage of it. There were some structural issues. It is entirely fair to recognize that we lost a lot of governorships and state legislatures and all that, congressional seats on my watch, and "why didn't Obama do more to rebuild the party." And I'll own some of that.

The truth is, it's primarily as a consequence of some bad luck. 2010 really hurt because that was the redistricting year. And we just were not in the game on the House side, and in a lot of state legislatures -- gerrymandering happens at the state level, not just here. So we just got some structural problems generally. But we should have done better.

But anyway, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

Q No, no, no. And I guess --

THE PRESIDENT: Where do I think they're going?

Q Yeah, where they are going? And this attitude that seems to be developing in the party, and it's not just that they disagree with Democrats but that they seem to see Democrats as illegitimate, as not appropriate to govern. Do you see that fading away? Because it seems to me like it's tied to the party's

demographic situation, and that is ongoing as well.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. Yeah, having a black President has kind of stirred things up, hasn't it? (Laughter.)

Q Not just having a black President, but sort of --

THE PRESIDENT: Then you were going to have a woman after that. I mean, it's like, come on. (Laughter.)

Q The declining white minority that maybe sort of --

THE PRESIDENT: Yeah. Look, I mean, you guys have all looked at this and read about this. I'll make some broad assertions here.

I want to repeat that the majority is, for lack of a better word, on our side. The majority of the American people share a vision with us of an inclusive, democratic, equal-opportunity society. That's my belief. They may not be able to articulate every element of it, but I think that's their broad vision of it. Which is why -- you know, when I made the point, everybody jumped on it, including my successor, about -- that I felt if I -- that I could have built a majority around my vision, it wasn't even directed at Trump. I was just making a point that I feel confident that I could rally a majority of the country around my vision and get it reelected to the presidency, where you don't have to worry about some of the redistricting issues.

And I think that it is still true that the demographics are on our side, because even among white southerners, which is the cohort which has dragged down my poll numbers among whites -- if you go regionally, I'm doing just fine up north. I mean, it's a very specific regional issue. But even there, the differences in views between 20-year-olds, 30-year-olds, 40-year-olds and so forth is still significant. So the kids who are coming up have different attitudes than the folks who are dying off. And that creates the possibilities and room for a greater majority.

But I think -- and I also think that the Republican Party now is ideologically completely incoherent. I mean, they've just broke them down. The Democrats, for all the stuff about Bernie versus Hillary, et cetera, I mean, the truth is, is that the Democratic Party has been more unified from the time of, let's say, 2006 until today, over the last decade, than any time I can remember, ideologically. The ideological band that we operate in is fairly narrow. The tactical issues can be pretty heated.

But the Republican Party, you don't know what they stand for. I actually met with some conservative

columnists as well, and I just asked them, what does it mean to be a conservative? And they all laughed, because they don't know.

So what's bound them together is opposition to me, opposition to a fantastical creature called the liberal who looks down on them and just feeds all that regional resentment. And there are a handful of issues, like guns, that trigger that sense of "these folks aren't like us and they don't think like us and act like us." And there's obviously some racial elements that get put into that stew.

But the danger here is just that you got the Koch Brothers and others doing some really good organizing on the ground, and you have a powerful media mechanism that I talked about on Tuesday in my farewell speech that is constantly reinforcing and feeding those fears, resentments, et cetera. And if we don't create some counter to that, then even with ideological incoherence, if you're continually fanning that up, and you combine it with gerrymandering, and you combine it with better political organizing, they can hang on for a while. And that's where you start seeing structural shifts in the Democratic playing field that are dangerous. And if you combine that with accelerating inequality, then you've got a problem.

So I don't see the Republican Party making a big shift any time soon. I think had they lost this election, I think it could have happened. And I think if they have a problem in these midterms and they lose -- if this does not go well for them, I think they'll have to make some adjustments.

At minimum, they've got to reconcile the fact that their economic agenda does not at all match up with their base. Trump understood that. Trump sort of blew up the whole Business Roundtable consensus, the Chamber of Commerce consensus in the Republican Party. So that's blown up and the pieces are -- and that's why you're going to start seeing, I think, this fascinating back and forth where Trump, having blown it up now, has appointed a bunch of folks who actually still believe in that agenda. And Ryan still believes in that agenda, McConnell still believes in that agenda, but he's got to look as if he really hadn't blown it up.

And it may be that being unorthodox from a Republican perspective on trade is enough. But if it's not delivering the goods two years later or four years later, I don't think it will be enough, particularly if you keep on seeing stories about the guy who's supposed to write the terrific health care plan trading stocks in companies that he's been introducing legislation on.

I give these guys credit, though. I mean, there's just like a -- there's sort of an element of just shamelessness that is stunning to me. I can't believe we ever got a hard time on anything. (Laughter.) I really can't. What, like, I had some IRS agents who were overzealous in trying to figure out what a 501(c)3 or 4 was? Really? That's our problem? (Laughter.)

Q Since we're on health care, I actually had a question. It's not just about his --

THE PRESIDENT: I've probably got about 20 minutes.

Q Okay. I'll keep it relatively quick.

THE PRESIDENT: Or maybe 10. I want to make sure everybody gets a question. But I've been going on long rants, so I'll try to shorten my --

Q So in thinking why wasn't the Affordable Care Act more popular, and obviously there was the death panels and there was opposition. But, I mean, there are a lot of people who were just like, this isn't a very good deal for me. And there's a significant number.

And they don't necessarily hate it, but there's just not a lot of enthusiasm for it. And when you unwind why that was, a lot of this was you guys -- you guys tried to do this responsibly. You did the painful stuff. You did the tax. You kept it within the budget. And maybe that's -- you had said before -- I think I've heard you say you were good with the policy, but you need to it sell better. Or maybe it's good policy you can't sell better. You look at Part D, right? It's -- tax. That's all it is.

Do you feel like you -- I'm curious -- do you ever have a sense of -- I mean, kind of like you were saying, you could have gotten away. You guys could have blown off the CBO. You didn't have to have such a budget-responsible. And think about -- we've seen this before with Clinton. Clinton balances the budget, Bush comes in and blows up the deficit. You come in and clean it up and now --

THE PRESIDENT: No, no, look, look, a couple things I'd say. Substantively, you're right. I think I mentioned this: The very thing that made Obamacare less popular than it could have been is that it wasn't heavily subsidized enough. It's not a rich-enough subsidy to make people feel better about it. Although I think it's important to note that 20 million people are using it and --

Q Oh, hey, I know it.

THE PRESIDENT: And that's why I feel bad arguing about that. (Laughter.) And 70 percent say they're satisfied with it.

But look, this is a problem I inherited and I don't think I could have changed in the first two years, and maybe couldn't have changed in the second two years, and that is there are some built-in mental maps in people's heads. People still think I increased the deficit. I mean, it's just -- I mean, I've given -- you guys have seen me on the campaign trail. I will repeat over and over again: We've reduced it by two-thirds. It does not matter. It just sticks with Democrats, not just Republicans.

And what is also true is, is that we couldn't have blown through a hole in the deficit because there'd be at least five, six, seven Democrats who were -- you do remember the whole Bowles-Simpson thing. I mean, it wasn't like I was dying to do that. I got a bunch of folks on my side that I'm trying to keep in line, and if they didn't -- partly because they read The Wall Street Journal, and they do fundraisers in Manhattan, and they're being told all the time and they're getting calls from Bob Rubin and others, hey, this is a problem, we've got to be responsible.

So it's true, we don't have the luxury of saying at any given point deficits don't matter. And that's not ideological, that's just political. You guys have heard me talk about this. Do you think I would not have done a trillion dollars' worth of stimulus instead of \$800,000 if I could have convinced Ben Nelson to do so? Of course. I mean, I'm a pretty fact-based guy. I listen to Christy Romer. I sit there and I do my homework. I think I could go back and forth with Krugman. He's a better economist than me, but on macro stuff I understand the arguments. We just can't -- we couldn't do it because I had a Democrat from Nebraska, I had a Republican convert from Pennsylvania. I had -- people don't remember, I had to get Susan Collins.

So, yes, the -- now, you are absolutely right that Medicare for everybody is a lot easier to explain. I just couldn't pass it. So the one other element, though, that I think is just important to remember is part of the reason Obamacare is hard to sell is because 85 percent of the people have health insurance. I mean, let's face it, I was trying to provide and continue to try to provide -- to close the gap on that last 15 percent. They do not represent a majority. The majority of Americans don't love their health care but are relatively satisfied with it.

And so if you've got a system that is trying to help 15 percent of the population imposing some possible inconveniences on the other 85 percent even though they can't -- don't know what exactly they are, and since people don't pay real careful attention to policy, any problem that crops up in the health care system after you've passed it is potentially attributable to this new law. "Your premiums went up" -- well, yes, your premiums went up for the last 10 years. They went up slower this time. People don't -- they don't want to hear that. What they know is, is that they spent 500 bucks more on my health insurance. Must be -- and Republicans, and some of the press, were saying it was Obama's fault.

But your point is well taken. It was interesting talking to the conservative columnists because they were -- their big worry was, do you think that there's going to be a left version of Trump? And I said, well, first of all, we tend to be a little more analytical, so probably not. (Laughter.) And maybe our authoritarian impulse isn't quite as strong.

But what I did say to them is, is that it probably does make sense -- I think one shift that has taken place and probably needed to take place couldn't take place initially under my watch because I came in and was just putting out so many fires as bolder prescriptions around economic policy I think should be forthcoming within the Democratic Party.

I would add, by the way, that I think on trade, people are barking up the wrong tree. That's not going to be the problem. The problem is driverless Uber and variations thereof. I think we're not prepared right now for what is going to be another big wave of displacement that will once again disproportionately affect working-class males. And working-class males do not like when they don't feel useful. That's true in the African American community; it's just with us it happened about 45, 50 years ago. The same thing is now happening with white working-class males. And it creates problems.

Q Can I ask --

THE PRESIDENT: Go ahead.

Q I guess this is maybe the opposite of Rachel's question. She wanted to go somewhere dark; I want to go somewhere maybe twilighty.

THE PRESIDENT: Let's go. (Laughter.)

Q Sure, throw me under the bus. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: You're wearing a red dress.

Q Right, we're even dressed like kind of ying and yang here. (Laughter.)

What, in your view, is the most -- like the best-case scenario out of the next four years? You mentioned that there's kind of a court stop gap. Like, will they just be paralyzed for four years and they do nothing? Or is there something that -- that's really the best-case scenario for the next four years?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. I think the way I described it to Merkel is, find high ground and make sure you've got adequate supplies. (Laughter.) That you've got good sightlines and you play defense. And there's nothing wrong with that.

I mean, look, I think we get used to this notion of just this constant perpetual progress, and that's just not how things work. Every action gets a reaction. And we did a lot of big stuff. I mean, there are all these retrospectives currently being written, and I think it's entirely legitimate to see how much of it sticks, how much of it gets washed away, how much of it is just not sustained because of inattention.

But we did really big stuff over these last eight years, and I think the best case scenario is, is that if what we did was 100 percent, then we lose 20 percent. And that 20 percent is noticeable enough that it activates people to say, you know what, actually we liked x-number of people having health care. We don't like those stories we saw about people losing it. We liked enforcing overtime laws. And then there's a new surge and there's new energy and we get organized.

And in the midterms, we don't set expectations so high that the spin ends up being, we're disappointed, but we set expectations among ourselves high enough that we create the building blocks; that we are very aggressive in challenging any structural erosion or our democracy; that the press is focused and doesn't get distracted by -- you know what, let me tell you, if Donald Trump tweets Meryl Streep, I don't care. You should not either. (Laughter.) I mean, you just shouldn't.

You cannot afford to write about that because while that's happening, you've got his appointee at HHS trading stocks on health care companies that he's introducing legislation to. Or you've got Carl Jr.'s guy, whose main agenda is undermining workers' rights, potentially as the head of the Labor Department. And there's going to be just all kinds of stuff there. So you've got to just be focused. That's the best case scenario.

Q Mr. President --

Q But if we stipulate that, then what do you do when he tweets about John Lewis? How do you adjudicate that distinction?

THE PRESIDENT: You know, I -- well, I think that's a good point, but I'll be honest with you. John -- what, Donald Trump tarnishes John Lewis's image? (Laughter.) It's not his -- those are not the sins that are going to destroy our democracy.

Q Mr. President, what would you say are the biggest risks to a President who doesn't exhibit self-restraint and tends to be impulsive in the key moments? I think that's been a theme for Trump with his campaign, and are there -- have there been moments in your presidency where you felt tempted or pressured to do something outside the public eye where, if you didn't show that self-restraint, something bad would have happened? And since you like two-part questions, are there measures in the law, executive actions, whether it's the 1332 state waivers or Medicaid waivers that you worry can be used by a Tom Price or a Trump if they want to undermine this thing from within?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. On the second question, the answer is yes. But those have always been there. Those aren't unique to me. I mean, administrations have executed waivers on every major program. So, yes.

Look, there's a big difference between how ACA performed in states that wanted to make it work and states that didn't. That's true of every program. That's the difference -- you talk about Part D -- Part D the difference was Democrats and governors and state legislators thought, you know what, we actually want seniors to have prescription drugs. So yeah, they would tolerate messiness or Bush writing checks or what have you because, ultimately, they wanted the program to work.

So if you don't want something to work, you can make it work less well. That, I think will be -- even if they fail to repeal, which I, by the way, I think this first vote, I tried to express, got overhyped. It's the second vote. It's actually the writing legislation now that's going to be where the rubber hits the road. They are going to have really hard choices to make and it's going to be very transparent, and CBO thankfully is not cooperating with some nonsense about what constitutes insurance or not, and I think they're going to have trouble. But some of the 20 percent in the health care space that we lose is going to be just because, administratively, if you try not to make it work, then it doesn't work as well.

On the impulse question, I think there's no area of the presidency in which not having impulse control is not important. Now, maybe this is a bias because I'm a Vulcan and I don't have impulses and so forth. (Laughter.) But I think it served me pretty well, measuring twice before you cut seems to be a pretty good policy.

I think there's no doubt that it's in foreign policy that -- because that's where the executive power has the fewest checks, and I think that if you are just -- if you are careless, the mistakes you make can haunt you for a long time. You just can't be careless about -- like Afghanistan is really hard and really complicate and really dangerous. And I make no apologies for having taken a really deliberate time in terms of how we thought about that. And I still am not satisfied with the outcomes, but I can honestly say that I thought things through and we're probably doing about as well as we could in a bad situation.

You know, just managing something like a country like Pakistan. You start being impulsive and you say something on a state visit or where Modi is visiting and suddenly the Pakistani Army is going nuts and thinks you've done X,Y,Z and next you know, you got -- so, it's not a good thing in those situations.

Q On your post-presidency, I've heard you mention in a couple of interviews that, unless the new administration is really pressing constitutional boundaries like drawing up a Muslim registry or using DACA to find people to report, that you're probably not going to be a constant or consistent voice of opposition. But we've gone through a pretty long list of things that could happen that fit that bill, I think. So do you actually -- how much of a presence do you anticipate being?

THE PRESIDENT: You know what, I want as little of presence as is required, but I want to be able to -- I want to lift up other voices. I mean, I meant what I said.

Here's the thing, this is probably a good sort of closing comment, because I've got to go. I think Eric and Jess and other people who work for me, they'll tell you, I pretty much believe what I say and I say what I believe, and I -- and one of the things I genuinely believe is that I want this democracy to just be

replenished. And part of my job -- the best thing I can do is to identify a bunch of great talent and lift them up. And me sort of hovering around as this -- and casting this long shadow and clinging to the spotlight as long as possible -- I do not think is helpful to that.

If there are issues -- let me put it this way, I would think of myself as a sort of break the glass. You know, put out the bat signal. (Laughter.) I'll show up. But generally -- but it's got to -- I don't want to be involved in the day-to-day scrum. And that's part of what, I think, we have to make sure we do.

I think the danger on our side is, if we're hysterical about everything, then nobody pays attention when something is different. And I think that we have to really think through, what are the things that are the natural back and forth? Because it's not just -- I think we have to be honest -- it is not just the Republicans who say the other side is just bad.

Now, granted, I think we're more justified in that opinion, but we have a tendency in this social media age where everything is just a parade of horrors all the time, and there is a difference between the callousness of a Paul Ryan wanting to block grant Medicaid that will hurt people and will cut taxes for the wealthy, but that is a normal debate that we have within our democracy about how extensive or restrictive is our welfare state -- versus Jeff Sessions assigning U.S. attorneys to investigate Rachel because the President doesn't like what she's been saying.

Those are two different things, and the latter is worthy of hysteria. And if I see stuff like that happening then I may, if I think that fight is not being fought with sufficient vigor, then I may be required to step in. But partly, you guys shouldn't want me to keep my powder dry and not over -- you know, because the fewer performances, the greater the demand.

Q Who are the leaders you're looking to then, the Democratic -- it can't be like Evan McMullin and Meryl Streep right? (Laughter.) There have to be voices that you've identified who you think show promise.

THE PRESIDENT: Yeah. I mean, they're out there. I think there's a little bit of a generation gap. I mean, I think that we have some really talented young people, but they're just not quite ripe yet. And the question is whether I can help accelerate them so that they get there a little faster.

I mean, let's face it, I came in -- I knew, at the age of 40, 42, that if I got a national platform, I'd have something to say. EJ knew me back then. But there was a lot of luck involved in me getting that national platform and had I not, I would have retired from politics, because there's only so long you can stay in the state legislature. (Laughter.) If you think Congress is bad, I mean -- (laughter.)

So the question is, can I create more pathways -- because there are guys and gals like me out there -- but it can't be as hard as it was for me if we want a healthy cohort. And I'm just as concerned, by the

way, about the voters, not just the elected officials. I mean, we can't have a politics -- Democrats have to stop thinking that we have to have inspiration in order to function. This is work. I mean, I don't think I'm patting myself or trying to toot my own horn here. How many exciting Presidents have there been? (Laughter.) Right? I mean, just rhetorically, it's like a handful. If that's our standard, then we're going to get beat. So there's got to be an element of -- and certainly that's true at the congressional level. We've got to work. This is work. But it's okay -- it's joyful work. I've enjoyed it.

So I'll see you guys around. I'll be around. All right?

END

5:39 P.M. EST
