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Remarks by President Obama at Press Conference After NATO Summit

PGE Narodowy

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PRESIDENT OBAMA: Good evening, everybody. Once again, I want to thank the government and the people of Poland for hosting this NATO Summit. And I especially want to thank the people of Warsaw for their wonderful hospitality. It is my third visit to Poland. Each time, we have been received with tremendous friendship, and it signifies the close bonds between our two countries.

I want to begin this press conference with events back home. This has been a tough week -- first and foremost, for the families who have been killed, but also for the entire American family. In my call yesterday to Attorney General Loretta Lynch, I stressed that the Justice Department and our federal government should continue to do everything that we can to assist the investigation in Dallas, and to support the police and the city of Dallas as they deal with this tragedy.

In my call to Chief Brown, I commended him for showing outstanding leadership during an extremely challenging time, and asked him to convey to all the officers and their families how the American people are grieving with them and that we stand with them.

I'll have the opportunity to convey our condolences and show our solidarity when I visit Dallas in a few days. But before I do, let me just make some very brief points. First of all, as painful as this week has been, I firmly believe that America is not as divided as some have suggested. Americans of all races and all backgrounds are rightly outraged by the inexcusable attacks on police, whether it's in Dallas or anyplace else.

That includes protestors. It includes family members who have grave concerns about police conduct, and they have said that this is unacceptable. There's no division there. And Americans of all races and all backgrounds are also rightly saddened and angered about the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, and about the larger, persistent problem of African Americans and Latinos being treated differently in our criminal justice system.

So there is sorrow, there is anger, there is confusion about next steps. But there's unity in recognizing that this is not how we want our communities to operate. This is not who we want to be as Americans. And that serves as the basis for us being able to move forward in a constructive and positive way.

So we cannot let the actions of a few define all of us. The demented individual who carried out those attacks in Dallas, he's no more representative of African Americans than the shooter in Charleston was representative of white Americans, or the shooter in Orlando or San Bernardino were representative of Muslim Americans. They don't speak for us. That's not who we are.

And one of the things that gives me hope this week is actually seeing how the overwhelming majority of Americans have reacted -- with empathy and understanding. We've seen police continue to reach out to communities that they serve all across the country, and show incredible professionalism as they're protecting protestors. We've seen activists and grassroots groups who have expressed concern about police shootings, but are also adamant in their support of the Dallas Police Department -- which is particularly appropriate because the Dallas Police Department is a great example of a department that has taken the issue of police shootings seriously and has engaged in an approach that has not only brought down their murder rates but also drastically reduced complaints around police misconduct.

That's the spirit that we all need to embrace. That's the spirit that I want to build on. It's one of the reasons why next week, using the task force that we had set up after Ferguson, but also building on it, and inviting both police and law enforcement and community activists and civil rights leaders, bringing them together to the White House. I want to start moving on constructive actions that are actually going to make a difference, because that is what all Americans want.

So when we start suggesting that somehow there's this enormous polarization, and we're back to the situation in the '60s -- that's just not true. You're not seeing riots, and you're not seeing police going after people who are protesting peacefully. You've seen almost uniformly peaceful protests. And you've seen uniformly police handling those protests with professionalism.

And so, as tough, as hard, as depressing as the loss of life was this week, we've got a foundation to build on. We just have to have confidence that we can build on those better angels of our nature. And we have to make sure that all of us step back, do some reflection, and make sure that the rhetoric that we engage in is constructive, and not destructive; that we're not painting anybody with an overly broad brush; that we're not constantly thinking the worst in other people rather than the best. If we do that, then I'm confident that we will continue to make progress.

Now, here in Europe, this is a pivotal moment for our Alliance. In the nearly 70 years of NATO, perhaps never have we faced such a range of challenges all at once -- security, humanitarian, political. NATO nations -- the United States, Canada, France, Belgium, and Turkey -- have endured heinous terrorist attacks directed or inspired by ISIL. Russia has violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of an independent European nation -- Ukraine -- and engaged in provocative behavior toward NATO allies. European borders and economies have been tested by millions of migrants fleeing conflicts and depravation. And the vote in the United Kingdom to leave the EU has raised questions about the future of European integration.

In this challenging moment, I want to take this opportunity to state clearly what will never change -- and that is the unwavering commitment of the United States to the security and defense of Europe, to our transatlantic relationship, to our commitment to our common defense.

And next year will mark the 100th anniversary of the first American troops arriving on European soil in the first world war. And ever since, through two world wars, a long Cold War, and the decades since, generations of Americans have served here for our common security. In quiet cemeteries, from France to the Netherlands to Italy, Americans still rest where they fell. Even now, more than 60,000 American military personnel serve in dozens of European countries.

And my point is this: In good times and in bad, Europe can count on the United States -- always.

Here in Warsaw, we haven't simply reaffirmed our enduring Article 5 obligations to our common security; we're moving forward with the most significant reinforcement of our collective defense any time since the Cold War. First, we're strengthening NATO's defense and deterrence posture. Building on our European Reassurance Initiative -- which has already increased readiness, from the Baltics to the Black Sea -- our Alliance will enhance our forward presence on our eastern flank.

As I announced yesterday, the United States will be the lead nation here in Poland, deploying a battalion of American soldiers. The United Kingdom will take the lead in Estonia, Germany in Lithuania, and Canada in Latvia. This will mean some 4,000 additional NATO troops, on a rotational basis, in this region. Moreover, the additional U.S. Armored Brigade will rotate through Europe, including an additional 4,000 U.S. troops. Meanwhile, to the south, we agreed on new deterrence measures in Romania and Bulgaria. So NATO is sending a clear message that we will defend every ally.

We're also strengthening the readiness of our forces against a range of threats. So NATO's joint task force is now operational and can deploy anywhere in Europe on short notice. With recent progress here in Poland, Romania and Spain, NATO's ballistic missile defense is coming online. And we're launching a new effort to boost the resilience of allies to better defend against new types of threats, including cyberattacks.

NATO is increasing our support to Ukraine. At our meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission, we agreed on a new assistance package to improve Alliance support for Ukrainian forces. Prime Minister Cameron, President Hollande, Chancellor Merkel, Prime Minister Renzi and I met with President Poroshenko, and we reaffirmed our strong support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as the need to continue political and economic reforms.

(Applause heard from another room.)

Thank you. I'm already getting applause. (Laughter.) I'm not even finished yet. (Laughter.)

And even as the NATO-Russia Council will meet in Brussels next week, our 28 nations are united in our view that there can be no business as usual with Russia until it fully implements its Minsk obligations.

NATO will do more also to fight against terrorist networks. Every ally already contributes to the campaign against ISIL. Now, the Alliance will contribute AWACS aircraft to improve our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance against ISIL. NATO training of Iraqi security forces, currently run in Jordan, will move to Iraq, where they can be even more effective. And building on my decision to largely maintain the current U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan into next year, 39 nations, including the U.S., have committed more than 12,000 troops to NATO's training mission. And, in addition, some 30 nations have pledged upwards of \$900 million to help sustain Afghan forces -- which is a very strong message of our enduring commitment to Afghanistan.

We're bolstering our efforts on NATO's southern flank. The Alliance will increase our support to EU naval operations in the Mediterranean to stop arms traffickers and go after criminals that are exploiting desperate migrants. And we're going to do more to help partners from North Africa to the Middle East to Georgia strengthen their own defense capacity.

And, finally, after many years, NATO has stopped the collective decline in defense spending. Over the past two years, most NATO members have halted cuts and begun investing more in defense. And this means defense spending across the Alliance is now scheduled to increase. I especially want to commend our friends in the UK, Poland, Greece, Estonia -- all who, along with the United States, pay their full share of at least 2 percent of GDP for our collective defense. But for those of you doing the math, that means that the majority of allies are still not hitting that 2 percent mark -- an obligation we agreed to in Wales. So we had a very candid conversation about this. There's a recognition that given the range of threats that we face and the capabilities that we need, everybody has got to step up and everybody has got to do better.

So, in closing, I'd just note that this is my final NATO Summit. Throughout my time in office, one of my top foreign policy priorities has been to strengthen our alliances, especially with NATO. And as I reflect on the past eight years -- both the progress and the challenges -- I can say with confidence that we've delivered on that promise. The United States has increased our presence here in Europe. NATO is as strong, as nimble, and as ready as ever. And as we see from the presence of Montenegro at this summit, the door to NATO membership remains open to nations that can meet our high standards.

So nobody should ever doubt the resolve of this Alliance to stay united and focused on the future. And just as our nations have stood together over the past hundred years, I know that we'll stay united and grow even stronger for another hundred more.

With that, let me take some questions. I'm going to start with Kathleen Hennessey of AP.

Q Thanks, Mr. President. I wanted to specifically ask about the Dallas shooting and the attacker there. Now that we know more about the man who we believe did those crimes, I'm wondering if you could help us understand how you describe his motives. Do you consider this an act of domestic terrorism? Was this a hate crime? Was this a mentally ill man with a gun? How should Americans understand why that happened? And then also, on the issue of political division and looking for solutions, there have been some critics who noted that you

immediately mentioned your call for gun control soon after the attacks. Do you think that in any way encourages or ensures that people retreat to their corners as they think about this?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: First of all, I think it's very hard to untangle the motives of this shooter. As we've seen in a whole range of incidents with mass shooters, they are, by definition, troubled. By definition, if you shoot people who pose no threat to you -- strangers -- you have a troubled mind. What triggers that, what feeds it, what sets it off, I'll leave that to psychologists and people who study these kinds of incidents.

What I can say is that although he may have used as an excuse his anger about previous incidents -- as has been indicated, at least, in the press, and as Chief Brown I think indicated -- in no way does that represent what the overwhelming majority of Americans think.

Americans, to a large degree, want to make sure that we have a police force that is supported, because they know our police officers do a really tough, dangerous job. And witness the professionalism of our Dallas police officers. As they were being shot at, the fact that they helped to clear the area, they helped to get the fallen and the injured out of there, they were able to isolate the suspect, and that you didn't have other casualties as a consequence of the police shooting back -- that just gives you an indication of what a tough job they have and how well they do it on a regular basis.

So I think the danger, as I said, is that we somehow suggest that the act of a troubled individual speaks to some larger political statement across the country. It doesn't. When some white kid walks into a church and shoots a bunch of worshippers who invite him to worship with them, we don't assume that somehow he's making a political statement that's relevant to the attitudes of the rest of America. And we shouldn't make those assumptions around a troubled Muslim individual who is acting on their own in that same way.

Now, with respect to the issue of guns, I am going to keep on talking about the fact that we cannot eliminate all racial tension in our country overnight; we are not going to be able to identify ahead of time and eliminate every madman or troubled individual who might want to do harm against innocent people; but we can make it harder for them to do so.

And if you look at the pattern of death and violence and shootings that we've experienced over the course of the last year, or the last five years, or the last 10 years -- I've said this before -- we are unique among advanced countries in the scale of violence that we experience. And I'm not

just talking about mass shootings. I'm talking about the hundreds of people who have already been shot this year in my hometown of Chicago -- the ones that we just consider routine.

Now, we may not see that issue as connected to what happened in Dallas, but part of what's creating tensions between communities and the police is the fact that police have a really difficult time in communities where they know guns are everywhere. As I said before, they have a right to come home -- and now they have very little margin of error in terms of making decisions. So if you care about the safety of our police officers, then you can't set aside the gun issue and pretend that that's irrelevant.

At the protest in Dallas, one of the challenges for the Dallas Police Department -- as they're being shot at -- is because this is an open-carry state, there are a bunch of people participating in the protest who have weapons on them. Imagine if you're a police officer and you're trying to sort out who is shooting at you and there are a bunch of people who have got guns on them.

In Minneapolis, we don't know yet what happened, but we do know that there was a gun in the car that apparently was licensed, but it caused in some fashion those tragic events.

So, no, we can't just ignore that and pretend that that's somehow political or the President is pushing his policy agenda. It is a contributing factor -- not the sole factor, but a contributing factor to the broader tensions that arise between police and the communities where they serve. And so we have to talk about that.

And as I've said before, there is a way to talk about that that is consistent with our Constitution and the Second Amendment. The problem is even mention of it somehow evokes this kind of polarization.

And you're right, when it comes to the issue of gun safety, there is polarization between a very intense minority and a majority of Americans who actually think that we could be doing better when it comes to gun safety. But that expresses itself in stark terms when it comes to legislation in Congress or in state legislatures. And that's too bad. We're going to have to tackle that at some point. And I'm not going to stop talking about it, because if we don't talk about it, we're not going to solve these underlying problems. It's part of the problem.

Carol Lee.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. You mentioned San Bernardino and Orlando. And Americans have been warned that similar attacks could happen here in -- over there in the United States. And obviously what happened this week in Minnesota and Louisiana and Dallas -- these are not necessarily the same types of attacks and the motivations may be different, but, collectively, they're having a real impact on the American public in that there's a real anxiety out there, where people are genuinely afraid, going about their daily lives, doing routine things.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Right.

Q So my questions are, do you see any sort of common thread in these events? Is this sort of just a new normal? Is there anything that you can do about this? And what's your message to Americans who are genuinely afraid? Because the anxiety just seems to be getting worse, not better, and these attacks keep seeming to happen in much more regularity that wasn't a part of their experience even, say, a year ago.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, Carol Lee, I do think we have to disentangle these issues. When it comes to terrorist attacks, people are understandably concerned not just because of what's happening in the United States, but what happened in Brussels, and what's happened in Paris, and what's happened in Turkey, and what is consistently happening in Iraq and Bangladesh and all around the world. And that's why the work that we've done with NATO and our counter-ISIL coalition and other partners is so vital.

One of the things that's been commented on is that as ISIL loses territory and the fraud of the caliphate becomes more obvious, they are going to start resorting to more traditional terrorist tactics. They can't govern. They can't deliver anything meaningful to the people whose territory they can control. The one thing they know how to do is kill.

And so we're going to have to redouble our efforts in terms of intelligence, coordination, our counter-messaging on extremism, working closely with Muslim communities both overseas and in our own countries to make sure that we are reducing the number of people who are inspired by their message or are, in some coordinated fashion, trying to attack us.

And obviously, we have built up a huge infrastructure to try to do that. The more successful we are in Iraq and Syria and Libya and other places where ISIL has gotten a stronghold, the weaker they are, the less resources they have, the less effectively they can recruit. But when individuals are willing to die, and they have no conscience and compunction about killing innocent people, they are hard to detect. And it means that we've got to continually up our game.

Having said that, I think it is important to note just the success that we've seen in the last several weeks when it comes to rolling back al Qaeda. The liberation of Fallujah got a little bit lost in the news, but that's a big town, and with our support, the counter-ISIL coalition support, the Iraqi government was able to move through there quickly. They're now positioning themselves so that they can start going after Mosul. In Syria, you're seeing progress along Pocket Manbij that has been used for foreign fighter flows. And so they're on their heels, and we're going to stay on it.

Now, when it comes to crime, generally, I think it's just important to keep in mind that our crime rate today is substantially lower than it was five years ago, 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago. Over the last four or five years, during the course of my presidency, violent crime in the United States is the lowest it's been since probably the 1960s, maybe before the early 1960s. There's been an incredible drop in violent crime.

So that doesn't lessen, I think, people's understandable fears if they see a video clip of somebody getting killed. But it is important to keep in perspective that in places like New York, or Los Angeles, or Dallas, you've seen huge drops in the murder rates. And that's a testimony to smarter policing, and there are a range of other factors that have contributed to that.

So that should not -- we should never be satisfied when any innocent person has been killed, but that should not be something that is driving our anxieties, relative to where we've been in the past.

And with respect to, finally, the issue of police shootings, there's no doubt that the visual records that we're seeing have elevated people's consciousness about this. But as I've said before, for African Americans or Latinos in the pre-smartphone age, I don't think that people were not aware of the fact that there is evidence of racial bias in our criminal justice system. It's been well-documented, and it's been experienced. And even before I got to the U.S. Senate, when I was in the State Senate in Illinois, I passed legislation to try to reduce the incidents of racial profiling by collecting data. And that was prompted by evidence that it was taking place in certain parts of the state.

And the fact that we're aware of it may increase some anxiety right now, and hurt and anger. But it's been said, sunshine is the best disinfectant. By seeing it, by people feeling a sense of urgency about it, by the larger American community realizing that, gosh, maybe this is a problem -- and we've seen even some very conservative commentators begin to acknowledge this is something

maybe we need to work on -- that promises the possibility of actually getting it done. So, it hurts, but if we don't diagnose this we can't fix it.

Ayesha Rascoe. Reuters.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. As you come to the end of your term, there's a lot of talk about your legacy. I know you may like to leave that to the historians, but --

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I do.

Q -- but when you look back on your presidency and consider race relations, what do you hope your legacy will be? How do you think the shootings in Dallas and the high-profile shootings by police, and other events will shape the way your presidency is remembered?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I do want to leave legacy questions to the history books. But what I can do -- maybe this is a fair response to your question -- is to say how I've tried to lead the country on this issue.

More than anything, what I hope is that my voice has tried to get all of us as Americans to understand the difficult legacy of race; to encourage people to listen to each other; to recognize that the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow and discrimination didn't suddenly vanish with the passage of the Civil Rights Act or the Voting Rights Act, or the election of Barack Obama; that things have gotten better -- substantially better -- but that we've still got a lot more work to do; and that, as was the case with the police task force that we set up, that I've tried to encourage people to come up with practical, concrete solutions that can reduce, if not eliminate, the problems of racial bias.

And if my voice has been true and positive, then my hope would be that it may not fix everything right away, but it surfaces problems, it frames them; it allows us to wrestle with these issues and try to come up with practical solutions; and that that perspective may lead to continued improvement so that not just Malia and Sasha, but their children can experience a country that is more just and more united and more equal.

And that's not going to happen right away, and that's okay. We plant seeds, and somebody else maybe sits under the shade of the tree that we planted. And I'd like to think that, as best as I could, I have been true in speaking about these issues.

Justin.

Q Thanks, Mr. President. Throughout the summit, EU leaders have echoed your confidence about Brexit happening in an orderly way. They've also stressed that the UK has to have access to an open market, must continue to respect the freedom of migration for workers. Someone who has repeatedly advocated for globalization and extolled the virtues of immigration, shouldn't that principle be pre-baked in the negotiations? What specific assurances did you get during the summit from other leaders that make you confident that the currency markets are wrong, and the political turmoil in Britain and subsequently -- the EU will go smoothly?

And finally, both you and Secretary Kerry have used "if" to describe Brexit. So I'm wondering if you see any way for the British people to put the toothpaste back in the tube on this issue.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I think we have to assume that a referendum having been passed, with a lot of attention, a lengthy campaign and relatively high participation rates, is going to stick, and that the incoming government, a conservative government, is going to invoke Article 50 and begin the process of negotiations. How that process unfolds, how the negotiations work I think is going to be up to the parties involved.

The main message I've had here is we are close friends, allies, commercial partners with the UK and with the EU. We will remain close friends, allies, partners, continue to have strong relationships on both sides of the Channel. Our primary interest is to make sure that the negotiations and this process are as orderly and as sensible as possible, recognizing that it is in the interests of both sides to get it right.

They are major trading partners. That's where goods get sent, back and forth. And it's important that neither side harden positions in ways that ultimately do damage to their respective economies and ultimately to the world economy at a time when our world economy is still pretty wobbly in places.

I want to make a further point. I'm not sure it's accurate to say that I am a huge booster of globalization. What is accurate to say is that I believe the process of globalization is here to stay -- as a consequence of technology and the mobility of capital, and cargo container ships and global supply chains. And conceivably, we could run back the tape to 50 years ago and see whether we could rearrange some of that process, but it's happening. It's here. And we see it every day in our lives. Everybody who has got a smartphone in their pocket is seeing it.

And my argument has been that there are enormous benefits to be gained from that global integration, just as there are enormous benefits to be gained from European integration, so long

as we recognize that with that integration there is the danger of increased inequality, or workers having less leverage and capital having more leverage, that it threatens to leave people behind.

And if we don't take steps to make sure everybody can participate in that global integration -- making sure that wages are high enough, making sure that we rebuild the social compact so that pensions and health care are taken care of, making sure that communities are not completely abandoned when a factory leaves and there's an economic plan for transition -- if we do not do that effectively, then there's going to be a backlash.

With respect to immigration, it is America's experience that immigration has been, by far, a net plus for our economic growth, our culture, our way of life. Now, in America, that's by necessity, because unless you're a Native American, you came from -- everybody came from someplace else. Europe may not have as many of those traditions.

But keep in mind, one of the huge macroeconomic advantages that America has is we're still a relatively young country, our birth rate is not dropping off like Europe's is, or Russia's is, or China's, or Japan's. And that's as a consequence of immigration. And it's economics 101, if you've got a younger population, your growth rate is going to be higher.

And immigrants are strivers, and they work hard. And they're looking to build a better life. Otherwise they wouldn't move from where they were. And that's been part of our tradition and our culture and our society.

Now, huge influxes of the sort that we've seen in Europe -- that's always going to be a shock to the system. And I think it is entirely appropriate for Europe, even as generous as it has been -- and I think that Chancellor Merkel deserves enormous credit, and other European leaders who have taken in these migrant populations deserve enormous credit, because that's hard. It's a strain on the budget. It's a strain on politics. It's a strain on culture. It's legitimate for them to say, look, we got to slow this thing down. We got to manage it properly.

That's why we're setting up a U.N. Conference on Refugees on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly, because a few countries shouldn't be shouldering the burden for 60 million refugees. And we've got to come up with strategies to allow people in countries that are very poor, or are in the middle of a war zone, enjoy some peace and prosperity. Otherwise, the world has shrank and they're going to want to move. And that's not going to go away anytime soon.

So it's one more reason why, given the fact of global integration, we have to think globally, more broadly. Because our security interests, our economies are all going to depend on the institutional arrangements that we have across boundaries.

And NATO is an example of a really enduring multilateral institution that helped us get through some very difficult times. But even the best of institutions have to be adapted to new circumstances. That's true for organizations like NATO. It's true for organizations like the U.N. It's true for organizations like the EU. It's true for all the architecture that has helped the world and our countries improve their standard of livings and reduce overall violence between states substantially over the last several decades.

Mark Landler.

Q Thank you very much, Mr. President. You've been scrupulous about saying you would not comment on the Justice Department investigation of Hillary Clinton's email. The investigation is now closed. And I hope that I could ask you about some of the comments that FBI Director Comey made a few days ago.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: You may, Mark, but I want you to make sure you're not wasting your question. I'm going to continue to be scrupulous about not commenting on it, just because I think Director Comey could not have been more exhaustive. My understanding is not only did he make a full presentation, but while we were over here, or at least flying, he was presenting to Congress for hours on end. But I just want to give you a chance, just in case you didn't want to burn your question.

Q Okay. I actually have a backup. (Laughter.) Maybe I could cut to the chase and ask you about a broader question. Let's leave aside Mrs. Clinton for the moment. He did talk at the end of his presentation about how he feared that there was a broader cultural issue in the State Department for the handling of classified information that troubled him. And I wondered whether you -- since you rely on the State Department to conduct your foreign policy -- whether that concerns you as well.

And if I may, could I ask another question -- because I think it might get an interesting response. You, last May, passed a milestone in that you are now President longer when the country was at war than your predecessor, George W. Bush. And if you complete your presidency, as you will, with troops in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, you will be the only two-term President in American history to have served with the country at war. And I wonder, given the

way that you ran for office and the aspirations you brought into office, how you feel about that reality? And a second follow-up on that -- should the American people simply resign themselves to living in a state of perpetual war, even if that war is not the all-out war that we think of in the 20th century?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: That was an interesting question so -- first of all, with respect to the State Department, I am concerned. And the challenge that we've got is primarily driven by the changing nature of how information flows. Look, the advent of email and texts and smartphones is just generating enormous amounts of data. Now, it is hugely convenient. It means that in real time I'm getting information that some of my predecessors might not have gotten for weeks.

But what it also is doing is creating this massive influx of information on a daily basis, putting enormous pressure on the department to sort through it, classify it properly, figure out what are the various points of entry because of the cyber-attack risks that these systems have, knowing that our adversaries are constantly trying to hack into these various systems. If you overclassify, then all the advantages of this new information suddenly go away because it's taking too long to process.

And so we've been trying to think about this in a smart way. And I think Secretary Kerry has got a range of initiatives to try to get our arms around this. It reflects a larger problem in government. We just recently, for example -- I just recently signed a bill about FOYA requests - - Freedom of Information Act requests that built on a number of reforms that we've put in place. We're processing more Freedom of Information Act requests and doing so faster than ever before. The problem is the volume of requests has skyrocketed. The amount of information that answers the request has multiplied exponentially.

So across government, you're seeing this problem. And it's a problem in terms of domestic affairs. It becomes an even bigger problem when you're talking about national security issues. So it is something that we're going to have to take care of.

With respect to reflections on war, when I came into office, we had 180,000 troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today we have a fraction of that. They are not involved in active combat situations, but are involved in train, advise and assist situations, other than the direct attacks that we launch against ISIL in conjunction with the Iraq government and the Syrian government.

So in some ways, Mark, I think you'd recognize that our military operations today in Iraq and Afghanistan are fundamentally different than the wars that we were engaged in when I came into

office. But I think you are making an important point, which is when we are dealing with non-state actors, and those non-state actors are located in countries with limited capacity, our ultimate goal is to partner with those countries so that they can secure their borders and, themselves, eliminate these terrorist threats.

But as we've seen in Afghanistan, for example, that takes some time. The Afghans are fighting. They are much more capable now than they were when I came into office. But they still need support -- because it's really tough territory, and it's a really poor country with really low literacy rates and not much experience in things that we take for granted like logistics.

And so, we have an option of going in, taking out al Qaeda, pulling out, potentially then seeing a country crumble under the strains of continued terrorist activity or insurgency, and then going back in. Or we can try to maintain a limited partnership that allows them to continue to build their capacity over time, and selectively take our own actions against those organizations that we know are trying to attack us or our allies.

Because they're non-state actors, it's very hard for us ever to get the satisfaction of McArthur and the Emperor meeting and a war officially being over. AQI was defeated in the sense that we were able to execute a transition to a democratically elected Iraqi government. But for all of our efforts, and incredible courage and bravery and sacrifice of our troops, the political structure there was still uneven. You had continued Sunni resentments, continued de-Baathification, and as a consequence, those vestiges of AQI were able to reconstitute themselves, move into Syria as Syria began to engage in civil war, rebuild and then come back in.

Some have argued that this is the reason why we should have never pulled out of Iraq, or at least we should have left some larger presence there. Of course, the problem was that we didn't have an Iraqi government that wanted them, unlike Afghanistan where we've been invited. And it's very difficult for us to -- for me, as Commander-in-Chief, to want to put our troops in a precarious situation where they're not protected.

So I think what we've been trying to do, what I've been trying to do is to create an architecture, a structure -- and it's not there yet -- that emphasizes partnerships with countries, emphasizes building up fragile states, resolving internal conflicts wherever we can, trying to do as much as we can through our local partners, preserving the possibility, the necessity to take strikes ourselves against organizations or individuals that we know are trying to kill Americans or Belgians or French or Germans -- combine that with much more effective intelligence-

gathering. But it becomes more of a hybrid approach to national security. And that I do think is probably going to be something that we have to continue to grapple with for years to come.

The good news is that there are fewer wars between states than ever before. And almost no wars between great powers. And that's a great legacy of leaders in the United States and Europe and Asia, after the Cold War -- or after the end of World War II that built this international architecture. That's worked. And we should be proud of that and preserve it.

But this different kind of low-grade threat, one that's not an existential threat but can do real damage and real harm to our societies, and creates the kind of fear that can cause division and political reactions -- we have to do that better. We have to continually refine it.

So, for example, the reason that I put out our announcement about the civilian casualties resulting from drone attacks -- understanding that there are those who dispute the numbers -- what I'm trying to do there is to institutionalize a system where we begin to hold ourselves accountable for this different kind of national security threat and these different kinds of operations.

And it's imperfect, still. But I think we can get there. And what I can say honestly is, whether we're talking about how the NSA operates, or how drone strikes operate, or how we're partnering with other countries, or my efforts to close Guantanamo -- that by the end of my presidency -- or banning torture -- by the end of my presidency, I feel confident that these efforts will be on a firmer legal footing, more consistent with international law and norms, more reflective of our values and our ethics. But we're going to have more work to do. It's not perfect, and we have to wrestle with these issues all the time.

And as Commander-in-Chief of the most powerful military in the world, I spend a lot of time brooding over these issues. And I'm not satisfied that we've got it perfect yet. I can say honestly, it's better than it was when I came into office.

Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you, Poland. (Applause.)