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Barack Obama

Press Conference on Outgoing and Incoming Education Secretary, The Economy, Congress, Syria, Putin, Gun Control, and Pope Francis

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Please be seated, everybody. Good afternoon.

Arne Duncan is one of my longest-serving Cabinet Secretaries, and he's been a friend for a lot longer than that. So it's with some regret and sorrow that I've accepted his decision to return to our hometown of Chicago. After more than six years of living in Washington, Arne's wonderful wife, Karen, and their excellent kids, Claire and Ryan -- who are also buddies of mine -- wanted to move back home. And that's meant in the interim a lot of time apart.

So I'll be honest -- I pushed Arne to stay. Sorry, guys. But I also know from personal experience how hard it is to be away from your family on a sustained basis. So while I will miss Arne deeply, he's more than earned the right to return home.

Take a look at what Arne has accomplished over the last six and a half years. He's one of the longest-serving Secretaries of Education in our history -- and one of the more consequential.

In just a few years, Arne and his team have delivered some incredible results at every stage of the educational experience. More than 30 states have upped their investment in early childhood education. Nearly every state in America has raised standards for teaching and learning, and expectations for what our kids can learn, and our high school graduation rate is at an all-time high. We've helped millions more families afford college, and more Americans are graduating from college than ever before. And that's just scratching the surface.



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Arne has done more to bring our educational system -- sometimes kicking and screaming -- into the 21st century than anybody else. America is going to be better off for what he has done. It's going to be more competitive and more prosperous. It is going to be more equal and more upwardly mobile. It's a record that I truly believe no other Education Secretary can match. Arne bleeds this stuff. He cares so much about our kids. And he's been so passionate about this work. And everybody who interacts with him, including people who disagree with him on some issues, never questions the genuineness and heart that he has brought to this job.

So I couldn't be prouder of him. And, for good measure, Arne also holds the record for most points scored in an NBA All-Star game. And he is my favorite partner in pickup basketball -- the smartest player I know -- even though he's very slow -- and has no hops. He knows it's true. I will say, watching Ryan, by the way, that the son will soon be surpassing the father because this young man has got game.

Now, keep in mind, none of this change has been easy, and we still have a long way to go. One of the things about education is that it doesn't deliver results tomorrow or the next day; this is a decade-long or longer proposition. We plant seeds now; we make changes now; and we watch each successive class benefit from these reforms. And it goes in fits and starts, and we have a decentralized system -- that's how our education tradition evolved. So it's not easy and it's not quick, but we are making progress. And we're not going to stop in these last 15 months.

And that's why it's so important and why I think we're very lucky that, even as Arne steps down, we've got an exceptionally talented educator to step in -- and that is Dr. John King.

John is already on Arne's leadership team. He's been an educator all his life -- a teacher, a principal, a leader of schools, the New York State's education chief. He's the right man to lead the department. He shares our commitment to preparing every child for success in a more innovative and competitive world. He's got a great team already at the Department of Education of which I am very, very proud. His family is equally cool and good-looking. (Laughter.) And he has equally exceptional children. And I know that, together, we're going to continue to be able to do great things on behalf of all our kids.

So, Arne and John, I want to wish both of you a hardy congratulations and good luck.

Now I'm going to let them say a few words, and then I'm just going to make a few remarks before I take some questions from the press.

We'll start with Arne.



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Secretary Duncan: I've cried more today than I have in a while, so I'll try not to get up here and cry.

I'll start with the President. And when he asked us to come to D.C. and work with him, that was about a one-minute conversation with my wife. And it wasn't that we wanted to leave Chicago; it wasn't that I necessarily wanted to be the Education Secretary -- I just wanted to be on his team and believed so much in what he was about and what he stood for.

And I have to say, seven and a half years later, my admiration is only greater. And it's pretty remarkable -- it's important for the folks to know, that every hard decision, his only question was, what's the right thing to do for kids, and challenging us and our team to fight for kids every single day. And often, that was a hard political decision, and that was never a factor.

His passion and his commitment has been absolutely extraordinary. For me, it's not the political leadership; it's not the educational leadership; it's the moral leadership.

And I just can't tell you, Mr. President, personally, what an unbelievable honor it was just to spend some time.

And for those -- every day you see -- for folks who watched him last night talking about the horrendous massacre, gun massacre in Oregon, and how preventable these things are, we need that moral leadership. And please keep that fight

To our team, the team you have at the White House -- Cecilia and Denis and Valerie and others -- it's been extraordinary to work with DPC. I don't say this lightly -- I think our team at the Department of Education is stronger than it's ever been. You never know over seven, eight years, how those teams go, and do you have the B team towards the end -- well, I think we have the A team and a combination of being able to work with the White House -- Shaun and Sylvia and so many folks are here -- Anthony. We have the team in place. I'm just extraordinarily hopeful and confident about what they can do together.

Emma and Ted, and the rest of the crew -- you said a little bit about John -- and folks know, for all of us, this work is very, very personal. For the President, it's very personal. For me it's very personal. John was one of those kids that probably shouldn't be in a room like this, if you sort of look at the stereotypes. And not the easiest time growing up -- he'll tell you more about it -- he lost both his parents at a pretty early age; went to live with his brother. That wasn't very easy either. But he had an amazing teacher who saw something in him, who kept him going. And today, he gets to stand here with the President.



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And so many times, I think we, as a society, write off kids that look like John and come from places like John. And to see what he can accomplish -- I think that's what drives all of us.

We know there are so many other kids out there we can reach.

And while I'm deeply, deeply sad to be leaving, I'm extraordinarily happy and thankful and proud that John is going to carry on this work with the team. So I want to thank everybody for their hard work.

I quickly want to -- try not to get emotional here -- but thank my parents, as well. My dad was a lifelong educator at the University of Chicago, taught throughout his life. My mother started an inner-city tutoring program before we were born, and raised all of us as a part of that program. And that changed our lives. And all our life, we saw what kids could do when they were given a chance. And that's why we do this work today. And to be able to see what she did at one little corner at 46th and Greenwood, and to now have a chance over the past six and a half years to try and have an impact around the nation, because this man gave us a chance -- for my family, I can't tell you how much it means to us.

And then, finally, just to my family. I love this work. I love this team. I love the President. I love the chance to serve. The only thing I love more is you guys. And I can't wait to come home and see a couple more track meets and maybe get to coach Ryan a little bit, and maybe have a few more dinners, and maybe go to a movie someday -- that would be pretty amazing.

President Obama: Wow! All right!

Secretary Duncan: It's been too long. And so it's been an amazing, amazing journey and I feel so proud and so lucky to have been a part of this team. And, Mr. President, thanks for creating the climate in which all of us here -- all of us here -- could have the impact we did.

And we can never repay the debt of gratitude we owe you for your leadership and your courage. So thank you so much.

And I want to turn it over to John.



Secretary King: Thank you, Arne, for very kind words. Thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to serve and for the faith that you've placed in me and the team that we have at the department.



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I'm deeply honored by the chance to serve and also deeply humbled by following in Arne's footsteps. Arne is an extraordinary leader who I have watched demonstrate tremendous courage in fighting for kids and fighting for what's best for kids; but also he's been willing to listen -- to listen to folks and to make adjustments, and to make sure that everything we do every day is towards the goal of greater equity.

Mr. President, you and Arne and our team at the department have laid out an ambitious agenda -- from strengthening early childhood education and expanding access to early childhood, to raising standards for teaching and learning in K through 12, to ensuring that more Americans have access to high-quality higher education, to ensuring that we support our teachers and that we invest in our teachers and provide the best preparation and support and leadership opportunities for them. It's an incredible agenda, and I'm proud to be able to carry it forward with the amazing team that we have at the department.

Earlier this week, Arne gave a speech at the National Press Club, and in that speech, Arne said education can be the difference between life and death. And I know that's true because it was for me. I grew up in Brooklyn. I lost my mom when I was eight; my dad when I was 12. My dad was very sick before he passed. I moved around between family members and schools. But teachers, New York City public school teachers, are the reason that I am alive. They are the reason that I became a teacher. They are the reason I am standing here today. Those teachers created amazing educational experiences, but also gave me hope -- hope about what is possible, what could be possible for me in life.

I know schools can't do it alone. There's work we have to do on economic development and housing and health care. But I know that my parents -- who spent their lives as New York City public school educators -- believed that school was at the heart of our promise of equality of opportunity for all Americans. That's what they believed. That's what the President believes. That's what Arne believes. And that's what I feel very privileged to be able to work on with this amazing team we have at the department.

Every child in the United States, every college student, every disconnected youth, every working parent who just wants a few more credits in order to improve their salary and position at their job -- everyone deserves the kind of opportunity that I had to have a great education. Every child deserves the kind of opportunity that my beautiful daughters, Amina and Mireya, have to have a great education, the kind of education their grandparents worked to provide.

I'm so grateful to my very supportive wife, Melissa. So grateful to the Secretary for the opportunity he gave me to join his team, and incredibly grateful to the President for the opportunity to work with a wonderful group of people at the Education Department to try to expand opportunity.

Thank you.



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President Obama: Thank you.

Two good men, doing really important work. So I'm lucky to have them, both as colleagues and as friends, and I'm looking forward to seeing even more work done in the next few months.

We've got some other business to attend to. So all of you who are here to celebrate Arne and John, you're lucky enough now to have to sit through -- a little bit of a press conference with me. So make yourselves comfortable. I warned the kids ahead of time. I said, try not to look completely bored.

I'm going to take a couple of questions from the press. But first, a few additional pieces of business.



First of all, we learned today that our businesses created another 118,000 new jobs in September, which means that we now have had 67 straight months of job creation; 13.2 million new jobs in all -- and an unemployment rate that has fallen from a high of 10 percent down to 5.1 percent. These long-term trends are obviously good news, particularly for every American waking up each morning and heading off to a new job.

But we would be doing even better if we didn't have to keep on dealing with unnecessary crises in Congress every few months. And this is especially important right now, because although the American economy has been chugging along at a steady pace, much of the global economy is softening. We've seen an impact on our exports, which was a major driver of growth for us particularly at the beginning of the recovery. And so our own growth could slow if Congress does not do away with some of the counterproductive austerity measures that they have put in place, and if Congress does not avoid the kind of manufactured crises that shatter consumer confidence and could disrupt an already skittish global economy.

On Wednesday, more than half of Republicans voted to shut down the government for the second time in two years. The good news is that there were enough votes in both parties to pass a last-minute bill to keep the government open and operating for another 10 weeks before we can get a more long-term solution. But keep in mind that gimmick only sets up another potential manufactured crisis just two weeks before Christmas.



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And I've said this before, I want to repeat it -- this is not the way the United States should be operating.

Oftentimes I hear from folks up on Capitol Hill, "the need for American leadership," "the need for America to be number one." Well, you know what, around the globe, part of what makes us a leader is when we govern effectively and we keep our own house in order, and we pass budgets, and we can engage in long-term planning, and we can invest in the things that are important for the future. That's U.S. leadership.

When we fail to do that, we diminish U.S. leadership. It's not how we are supposed to operate. And we can't just keep on kicking down the road without solving any problems or doing any long-term planning for the future. That's true for our military; that's true for our domestic programs. The American people, American families deserve better. And we can grow faster and the economy can improve if Congress acts with dispatch. It will get worse if they don't.

That's why I want to be very clear: I will not sign another shortsighted spending bill like the one Congress sent me this week. We purchased ourselves 10 additional weeks; we need to use them effectively.

Keep in mind that a few years ago, both parties put in place harmful automatic cuts that make no distinction between spending we don't need and spending we do. We can revisit the history of how that happened -- I have some rather grim memories of it. But the notion was that even as we were bringing down the deficit, we would come up with a sustainable, smart, long-term approach to investing in the things that we need. That didn't happen. And so now these cuts that have been maintained have been keeping our economy from growing faster. It's time to undo them. If we don't, then we will have to fund our economic and national security priorities in 2016 at the same levels that we did in 2006.

Now, understand, during that decade, between 2006 and 2016, our economy has grown by 12 percent. Our population has grown by 8 percent. New threats have emerged; new opportunities have appeared. We can't fund our country the way we did 10 years ago because we have greater demands -- with an aging population, with kids who need schools, with roads that need to be fixed, with a military on which we are placing extraordinary demands.

And we can't cut our way to prosperity. Other countries have tried it and it has not worked. We've grown faster than they have because we did not pursue these blind, unthinking cuts to necessary investments for our growth. And by the way, because we've grown faster than them, we've brought our deficits down faster than they have.



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I want to repeat this because the public apparently never believes it. Since I took office, we've cut our deficits by two-thirds. The deficit has not been going up; it has been coming down -- precipitously. We've cut our deficits by two-thirds. They're below the average deficits over the past 40 years.

So the bottom line is, Congress has to do its job. It can't flirt with another shutdown. It should pass a serious budget. And if they do, and get rid of some of these mindless cuts, even as we're still prudent about maintaining the spending that we need but not spending we don't need and is not working, their own non-partisan budget office estimates we're going to add an extra half-million jobs to our economy next year alone. We can immediately put half a million more people back to work if we just have a more sensible budget.

And in these negotiations, nobody is going to get everything they want. We have to work together, though, even if we disagree, in order to do the people's business. At some point we have to want to govern, and not just play politics or play to various political bases. At some point, we need to pass bills so that we can rebuild our roads, and keep our kids learning, and our military strong, and help people prepare for and recover from disasters. That is Congress's most basic job. That's what our government is supposed to do -- serve the American people.

So with that, let me take some questions. And I'll start with Julie Pace of AP.

Hang in there, kids.

Question: It will be over soon. Thank you, Mr. President. There have been several developments in Syria that I wanted to ask you about, starting with Russia's involvement. You met with President Putin earlier this week, and I wonder if you think he was honest with you about his intentions in Syria. If Russia is targeting groups beyond the Islamic State, including U.S.-aligned groups, does the U.S. military have an obligation to protect them? And on the situation in Syria more broadly, there have obviously been failures in the U.S. train-and-equip program. Do you believe that that program can be fixed or do you have to look at other options? Would you, in particular, be willing to reconsider a no-fly zone, which several presidential candidates, including your former Secretary of State, are now calling for?

President Obama: Well, first and foremost, let's understand what's happening in Syria and how we got here. What started off as peaceful protests against Assad, the president, evolved into a civil war because Assad met those protests with unimaginable brutality. And so this is not a conflict between the United States and any party in Syria; this is a conflict between the Syrian people and a brutal, ruthless dictator.

Point number two is that the reason Assad is still in power is because Russia and Iran have supported him throughout this process. And in that sense, what Russia is doing now is not particularly different from what they had been doing in the past -- they're just more overt about it.



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They've been propping up a regime that is rejected by an overwhelming majority of the Syrian population because they've seen that he has been willing to drop barrel bombs on children and on villages indiscriminately, and has been more concerned about clinging to power than the state of his country.

So in my discussions with President Putin, I was very clear that the only way to solve the problem in Syria is to have a political transition that is inclusive -- that keeps the state intact, that keeps the military intact, that maintains cohesion, but that is inclusive -- and the only way to accomplish that is for Mr. Assad to transition, because you cannot rehabilitate him in the eyes of Syrians. This is not a judgment I'm making; it is a judgment that the overwhelming majority of Syrians make.

And I said to Mr. Putin that I'd be prepared to work with him if he is willing to broker with his partners, Mr. Assad and Iran, a political transition -- we can bring the rest of the world community to a brokered solution -- but that a military solution alone, an attempt by Russia and Iran to prop up Assad and try to pacify the population is just going to get them stuck in a quagmire. And it won't work. And they will be there for a while if they don't take a different course.

I also said to him that it is true that the United States and Russia and the entire world have a common interest in destroying ISIL. But what was very clear -- and regardless of what Mr. Putin said -- was that he doesn't distinguish between ISIL and a moderate Sunni opposition that wants to see Mr. Assad go. From their perspective, they're all terrorists. And that's a recipe for disaster, and it's one that I reject.

So where we are now is that we are having technical conversations about de-confliction so that we're not seeing U.S. and American firefights in the air. But beyond that, we're very clear in sticking to our belief and our policy that the problem here is Assad and the brutality that he has inflicted on the Syrian people, and that it has to stop. And in order for it to stop, we're prepared to work with all the parties concerned. But we are not going to cooperate with a Russian campaign to simply try to destroy anybody who is disgusted and fed up with Mr. Assad's behavior.

Keep in mind also, from a practical perspective, the moderate opposition in Syria is one that if we're ever going to have to have a political transition, we need. And the Russian policy is driving those folks underground or creating a situation in which they are de-capacitated, and it's only strengthening ISIL. And that's not good for anybody.

In terms of our support of opposition groups inside of Syria, I made very clear early on that the United States couldn't impose a military solution on Syria either, but that it was in our interest to make sure that we were engaged with moderate opposition inside of Syria because eventually Syria will fall, the Assad regime will fall, and we have to have somebody who we're working with that we can help pick up the pieces and stitch back together a cohesive, coherent country. And so we will continue to support them.



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The training-and-equip program was a specific initiative by the Defense Department to see if we could get some of that moderate opposition to focus attention on ISIL in the eastern portion of the country. And I'm the first one to acknowledge it has not worked the way it was supposed to, Julie. And I think that the Department of Defense would say the same thing. And part of the reason, frankly, is because when we tried to get them to just focus on ISIL, the response we'd get back is, how can we focus on ISIL when every single day we're having barrel bombs and attacks from the regime? And so it's been hard to get them to reprioritize, looking east, when they've got bombs coming at them from the west.

So what we're doing with the train-and-equip is looking at where we have had success -- for example, working with some of the Kurdish community in the east that pushed ISIL out -- seeing if we can build on that. But what we're also going to continue to do is to have contacts with and work with opposition that, rightly, believes that in the absence of some change of government inside of Syria we're going to continue to see civil war, and that is going to turbocharge ISIL recruitment and jihadist recruitment, and we're going to continue to have problems.

Now, last point I just want to make about this -- because sometimes the conversation here in the Beltway differs from the conversation internationally. Mr. Putin had to go into Syria not out of strength but out of weakness, because his client, Mr. Assad, was crumbling. And it was insufficient for him simply to send them arms and money; now he's got to put in his own planes and his own pilots. And the notion that he put forward a plan and that somehow the international community sees that as viable because there is a vacuum there -- I didn't see, after he made that speech in the United Nations, suddenly the 60-nation coalition that we have start lining up behind him.

Iran and Assad make up Mr. Putin's coalition at the moment. The rest of the world makes up ours. So I don't think people are fooled by the current strategy. It does not mean that we could not see Mr. Putin begin to recognize that it is in their interest to broker a political settlement. And as I said in New York, we're prepared to work with the Russians and the Iranians, as well as our partners who are part of the anti-ISIL coalition to come up with that political transition. And nobody pretends that it's going to be easy, but I think it is still possible. And so we will maintain lines of communication.

But we are not going to be able to get those negotiations going if there is not a recognition that there's got to be a change in government. We're not going to go back to the status quo ante. And the kinds of airstrikes against moderate opposition that Russia is engaging in is going to be counterproductive. It's going to move us farther away rather than towards the ultimate solution that we're all -- that we all should be looking for.

Question: [Inaudible]



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President Obama: Julie, throughout this process, I think people have constantly looked for an easy, low-cost answer -- whether it's we should have sent more rifles in early and somehow then everything would have been okay; or if I had taken that shot even after Assad offered to give up his chemical weapons, then immediately things would have folded, or the Assad regime would have folded, and we would have suddenly seen a peaceful Syria.

This is a hugely, difficult, complex problem. And I would have hoped that we would have learned that from Afghanistan and Iraq, where we have devoted enormous time and effort and resources with the very best people and have given the Afghan people and the Iraqi people an opportunity for democracy. But it's still hard, as we saw this week in Afghanistan. That's not by virtue of a lack of effort on our part, or a lack of commitment. We've still got 10,000 folks in Afghanistan. We're still spending billions of dollar supporting that government, and it's still tough.

So when I make a decision about the level of military involvement that we're prepared to engage in, in Syria, I have to make a judgment based on, once we start something we've got to finish it, and we've got to do it well. And do we, in fact, have the resources and the capacity to make a serious impact -- understanding that we've still got to go after ISIL in Iraq; we still have to support the training of an Iraqi military that is weaker than any of us perceived; that we still have business to do in Afghanistan. And so I push -- and have consistently over the last four, five years sought out a wide range of opinions about steps that we can take potentially to move Syria in a better direction.

I am under no illusions about what an incredible humanitarian catastrophe this is, and the hardships that we're seeing, and the refugees that are traveling in very dangerous circumstances and now creating real political problems among our allies in Europe, and the heartbreaking images of children drowned trying to escape war, and the potential impact of such a destabilized country on our allies in the region. But what we have learned over the last 10, 12, 13 years is that unless we can get the parties on the ground to agree to live together in some fashion, then no amount of U.S. military engagement will solve the problem. And we will find ourselves either doing just a little bit and not making a difference, and losing credibility that way, or finding ourselves drawn in deeper and deeper into a situation that we can't sustain.

And when I hear people offering up half-baked ideas as if they are solutions, or trying to downplay the challenges involved in this situation -- what I'd like to see people ask is, specifically, precisely, what exactly would you do, and how would you fund it, and how would you sustain it? And typically, what you get is a bunch of mumbo jumbo.

So these are hard challenges. They are ones that we are going to continue to pursue. The topline message that I want everybody to understand is we are going to continue to go after ISIL. We are going to continue to reach out to a moderate opposition. We reject Russia's theory that everybody opposed to Assad is a terrorist. We think that is self-defeating. It will get them into a quagmire. It will be used as a further recruitment tool for foreign fighters.



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We will work with the international community and our coalition to relieve the humanitarian pressure. On refugees, we are working with the Turks and others to see what we can do along the border to make things safer for people. But ultimately, we're going to have to find a way for a political transition if we're going to solve Syria.

Jon Karl.

Question: Thank you, Mr. President.

President Obama: Yes.

Question: Back in July you said that the gun issue has been the most frustrating of your presidency, and we certainly heard that frustration from you last night.

President Obama: Yes.

Question: So in the last 15 months of your presidency, do you intend to do anything differently to get Congress to act or to do something about this gun violence problem?

And I have to get you to respond to something that Jeb Bush just said, and to be fair to Governor Bush I want to read it directly. Asked about the drive to take action in light of what happened in Oregon, he said, "Look, stuff happens. There's always a crisis. And the impulse is always to do something, and it's not always the right thing to do." How would you react to Governor Bush?

President Obama: I don't even think I have to react to that one. I think the American people should hear that and make their own judgments, based on the fact that every couple of months, we have a mass shooting, and in terms of -- and they can decide whether they consider that "stuff happening".

In terms of what I can do, I've asked my team -- as I have in the past -- to scrub what kinds of authorities do we have to enforce the laws that we have in place more effectively to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. Are there additional actions that we can take that might prevent even a handful of these tragic deaths from taking place? But as I said last night, this will not change until the politics change and the behavior of elected officials changes.

And so the main thing I'm going to do is I'm going to talk about this on a regular basis, and I will politicize it because our inaction is a political decision that we are making.

The reason that Congress does not support even the modest gun safety laws that we proposed after Sandy Hook is not because the majority of the American people don't support it. I mean, normally, politicians are responsive to the views of the electorate. Here you've got the majority of the American people think it's the right thing to do.



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Background checks, other common-sense steps that would maybe save some lives couldn't even get a full vote. And why is that? It's because of politics. It's because interest groups fund campaigns, feed people fear. And in fairness, it's not just in the Republican Party -- although the Republican Party is just uniformly opposed to all gun safety laws. And unless we change that political dynamic, we're not going to be able to make a big dent in this problem.

For example, you'll hear people talk about the problem is not guns, it's mental illness. Well, if you talk to people who study this problem, it is true that the majority of these mass shooters are angry young men, but there are hundreds of millions of angry young men around the world -- tens of millions of angry young men. Most of them don't shoot. It doesn't help us just to identify -- and the majority of people who have mental illnesses are not shooters. So we can't sort through and identify ahead of time who might take actions like this. The only thing we can do is make sure that they can't have an entire arsenal when something snaps in them.

And if we're going to do something about that, the politics has to change. The politics has to change. And the people who are troubled by this have to be as intense and as organized and as adamant about this issue as folks on the other side who are absolutists and think that any gun safety measures are somehow an assault on freedom, or communistic -- or a plot by me to takeover and stay in power forever or something. I mean, there are all kinds of crackpot conspiracy theories that float around there -- some of which, by the way, are ratified by elected officials in the other party on occasion.

So we've got to change the politics of this. And that requires people to feel -- not just feel deeply -- because I get a lot of letters after this happens -- "do something!" Well, okay, here's what you need to do. You have to make sure that anybody who you are voting for is on the right side of this issue. And if they're not, even if they're great on other stuff, for a couple of election cycles you've got to vote against them, and let them know precisely why you're voting against them. And you just have to, for a while, be a single-issue voter because that's what is happening on the other side.

And that's going to take some time. I mean, the NRA has had a good start. They've been at this a long time, they've perfected what they do. You've got to give them credit -- they're very effective, because they don't represent the majority of the American people but they know how to stir up fear; they know how to stir up their base; they know how to raise money; they know how to scare politicians; they know how to organize campaigns. And the American people are going to have to match them in their sense of urgency if we're actually going to stop this.

Which isn't to say stopping all violence. We're not going to stop all violence. Violence exists around the world, sadly. Part of original sin. But our homicide rates are just a lot higher than other places -- that, by the way, have the same levels of violence. It's just you can't kill as many people when you don't have easy access to these kinds of weapons.



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And I'm deeply saddened about what happened yesterday. But Arne is going back to Chicago -- let's not forget, this is happening every single day in forgotten neighborhoods around the country. Every single day. Kids are just running for their lives, trying to get to school. Broderick, when we were down in New Orleans, sitting down with a group of young men, when we were talking about Katrina, and I've got two young men next to me, both of them had been shot multiple times. They were barely 20.

So we got to make a decision. If we think that's normal, then we have to own it. I don't think it's normal. I think it's abnormal. I think we should change it. But I can't do it by myself.

So the main thing I'm going to do, Jon, is talk about it. And hope that over time I'm changing enough minds -- along with other leaders around the country -- that we start finally seeing some action. I don't think it's going to happen overnight.

Cheryl Bolen.

Question: Thank you, Mr. President. To go back to your opening remarks, you said that you won't sign another short-term CR. But as you know, yesterday Secretary Lew announced that the government's borrowing authority would run out around November 5th. Would you recommend negotiating an increase in the debt ceiling as part of these budget negotiations on spending caps? And also does the Speaker's race complicate these negotiations?

President Obama: I'm sure the Speaker's race complicates these negotiations. That was a rhetorical question. It will complicate the negotiations. But when it comes to the debt ceiling, we're not going back there.

Maybe it's been a while, so let me just refresh everybody's memory. Raising the debt ceiling does not authorize us to spend more, it simply authorizes us to pay the bills that we have already incurred. It is the way for the United States to maintain its good credit rating -- the full faith and credit of the United States.

Historically, we do not mess with it. If it gets messed with, it would have profound implications for the global economy and could put our financial system in the kind of tailspin that we saw back in 2007-2008. It's just a bad thing to do. So we're not going to negotiate on that. It has to get done in the next five weeks. So even though the continuing resolution to keep the government open lasts for 10 weeks, we have to get the debt ceiling raised in five. You've got a shorter timetable to get that done.

But here's the bottom line: Mitch McConnell, John Boehner, myself, Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid -- we've all spoken and talked about trying to negotiate a budget agreement. And, yes, Speaker Boehner's decision to step down complicates it.



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But I do think that there is still a path for us to come up with a reasonable agreement that raises the spending caps above sequester to make sure that we can properly finance both our defense and nondefense needs, that maintains a prudent control of our deficits, and that we can do that in short order. It's not that complicated. The math is the math.

And what I've encouraged is that we get started on that work immediately, and we push through over the next several weeks -- and try to leave out extraneous issues that may prevent us from getting a budget agreement.

I know, for example, that there are many Republicans who are exercised about Planned Parenthood. And I deeply disagree with them on that issue, and I think that it's mischaracterized what Planned Parenthood does. But I understand that they feel strongly about it, and I respect that. But you can't have an issue like that potentially wreck the entire U.S. economy -- any more than I should hold the entire budget hostage to my desire to do something about gun violence. I feel just as strongly about that and I think I've got better evidence for it. But the notion that I would threaten the Republicans that unless they passed gun safety measures that would stop mass shootings I'm going to shut down the government and not sign an increase in the debt ceiling would be irresponsible of me. And the American people, rightly, would reject that.

Well, same is true for them. There are some fights that we fight individually. They want to defund Planned Parenthood, there's a way to do it. Pass a law, override my veto. That's true across a whole bunch of issues that they disagree with me on, and that's how democracy works. I got no problem with that.

But you have to govern. And I'm hoping that the next Speaker understands that the problem Speaker Boehner had or Mitch McConnell had in not dismantling Obamacare, or not eliminating the Department of Education, or not deporting every immigrant in this country was not because Speaker Boehner or Mitch McConnell didn't care about conservative principles. It had to do with the fact that they can't do it in our system of government, which requires compromise. Just like I can't do everything I want in passing an immigration bill, or passing a gun safety bill. And that doesn't mean, then, I throw a tantrum and try to wreck the economy, and put hardworking Americans who are just now able to dig themselves out of a massive recession, put them in harm's way. Wrong thing to do.

Peter Alexander.

Question: Thank you, Mr. President. You addressed -- I want to follow up on Jon's questions about the issue that's obviously deeply personal and moving to you -- that is the gun issue. Apart from Congress's inaction, apart from the desire for new laws and, beyond that, apart from the gun lobby, as you noted, the pattern is that these perpetrators are angry, aggrieved, oftentimes mentally ill young men. Is there something that you can do with the bully pulpit, with your moral authority, with your remaining time in office to help reach these individuals who believe that gun violence is the way out?



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President Obama: No. I think I can continue to speak to the American people as a whole and hopefully model for them basic social norms about rejecting violence, and cooperation and caring for other people. But there are a lot of young men out there. And having been one myself once, I can tell you that us being able to identify or pinpoint who might have problems is extraordinarily difficult.

So I think we, as a culture, should continuously think about how we can nurture our kids, protect our kids, talk to them about conflict resolution, discourage violence. And I think there are poor communities where, rather than mass shootings, you're seeing just normal interactions that used to be settled by a fistfight settled with guns where maybe intervention programs and mentorship and things like that can work. That's the kind of thing that we're trying to encourage through My Brother's Keeper.

But when it comes to reaching every disaffected young man, 99 percent of -- or 99.9 percent of whom will hopefully grow out of it -- I don't think that there's a silver bullet there. The way we are going to solve this problem is that when they act out, when they are disturbed, when that particular individual has a problem, that they can't easily access weapons that can perpetrate mass violence on a lot of people.

Because that's what other countries do. Again, I want to emphasize this. There's no showing that somehow we are inherently more violent than any other advanced nation, or that young men are inherently more violent in our nation than they are in other nations. I will say young men inherently are more violent than the rest of the population, but there's no sense that somehow this is -- it's something in the American character that is creating this. Levels of violence are on par between the United States and other advanced countries. What is different is homicide rates and gun violence rates and mass shooting rates. So it's not that the behavior or the impulses are necessarily different as much as it is that they have access to more powerful weapons.

Julia Edwards.

Question: Thank you, Mr. President. You just said that you reject President Putin's approach to Syria and his attacks on moderate opposition forces. You said it was a recipe for disaster.

But what are you willing to do to stop President Putin and protect moderate opposition fighters? Would you consider imposing sanctions against Russia? Would you go so far as to equip moderate rebels with anti-aircraft weapons to protect them from Russian air attacks? And how do you respond to critics who say Putin is outsmarting you, that he took a measure of you in Ukraine and he felt he could get away with it?

President Obama: Yes, I've heard it all before. I've got to say I'm always struck by the degree to which not just critics but I think people buy this narrative. Let's think about this. So when I came into office seven and a half years ago, America had precipitated the worst financial crisis in history, dragged the entire world into a massive recession.



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We were involved in two wars with almost no coalition support. U.S. -- world opinion about the United States was at a nadir -- we were just barely above Russia at that time, and I think potentially slightly below China's. And we were shedding 800,000 jobs a month, and so on and so forth.

And today, we're the strongest large advanced economy in the world -- probably one of the few bright spots in the world economy. Our approval ratings have gone up. We are more active on more international issues and forge international responses to everything from Ebola to countering ISIL.

Meanwhile, Mr. Putin comes into office at a time when the economy had been growing and they were trying to pivot to a more diversified economy, and as a consequence of these brilliant moves, their economy is contracting 4 percent this year. They are isolated in the world community, subject to sanctions that are not just applied by us but by what used to be some of their closest trading partners. Their main allies in the Middle East were Libya and Syria -- Mr. Gaddafi and Mr. Assad -- and those countries are falling apart. And he's now just had to send in troops and aircraft in order to prop up this regime, at the risk of alienating the entire Sunni world.

So what was the question again?

No, but I think it's really interesting to understand. Russia is not stronger as a consequence of what they've been doing. They get attention. The sanctions against Ukraine are still in place. And what I've consistently offered -- from a position of strength, because the United States is not subject to sanctions and we're not contracting 4 percent a year -- what I've offered is a pathway whereby they can get back onto a path of growth and do right by their people.

So Mr. Putin's actions have been successful only insofar as it's boosted his poll ratings inside of Russia -- which may be why the beltway is so impressed, because that tends to be the measure of success. Of course, it's easier to do when you've got a state-controlled media.

But this is not a smart, strategic move on Russia's part. And what Russia has now done is not only committed its own troops into a situation in which the overwhelming majority of the Syrian population sees it now as an enemy, but the Sunni population throughout the Middle East is going to see it as a supporter, an endorser, of those barrel bombs landing on kids -- at a time when Russia has a significant Muslim population inside of its own borders that it needs to worry about.

So I want Russia to be successful. This is not a contest between the United States and Russia. It is in our interest for Russia to be a responsible, effective actor on the international stage that can share burdens with us, along with China, along with Europe, along with Japan, along with other countries -- because the problems we have are big.



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So I'm hopeful that Mr. Putin, having made this doubling-down of the support he has provided to Mr. Assad, recognizes that this is not going to be a good long-term strategy and that he works instead to bring about a political settlement.

Just as I hope that they can resolve the issues with Ukraine in a way that recognizes Russian equities but upholds the basic principle of sovereignty and independence that the Ukrainian people should enjoy like everybody else. But until that time, we're going to continue to have tensions and we're going to continue to have differences.

But we're not going to make Syria into a proxy war between the United States and Russia. That would be bad strategy on our part. This is a battle between Russia, Iran, and Assad against the overwhelming majority of the Syrian people. Our battle is with ISIL, and our battle is with the entire international community to resolve the conflict in a way that can end the bloodshed and end the refugee crisis, and allow people to be at home, work, grow food, shelter their children, send those kids to school. That's the side we're on.

This is not some superpower chessboard contest. And anybody who frames it in that way isn't paying very close attention to what's been happening on the chessboard.

All right, last question. Major Garrett.

Question: Mr. President, good to see you.

President Obama: Good to see you.

Question: And for the children there, I promise I won't take too long. So you've been very patient.

President Obama: I've been boring them to death, I guarantee it. But there have been times where I've snagged rebounds for Ryan when he is shooting three-pointers so he has got to put up with this.

Question: Understood. Mr. President, I wonder if you could tell the country to what degree you were changed or moved by what you discussed in private with Pope Francis? What do you think his visit might have meant for the country long term? And for Democrats who might already be wondering, is it too late for Joe Biden to decide whether or not to run for President? And lastly, just to clarify, to what degree did Hillary Clinton's endorsement just yesterday of a no-fly zone put her in a category of embracing a half-baked answer on Syria that borders on mumbo jumbo?

President Obama: On the latter issue, on the last question that you asked, Hillary Clinton is not half-baked in terms of her approach to these problems. She was obviously my Secretary of State.



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But I also think that there's a difference between running for President and being President, and the decisions that are being made and the discussions that I'm having with the Joint Chiefs become much more specific and require, I think, a different kind of judgment. And that's what I'll continue to apply as long as I'm here. And if and when she's President, then she'll make those judgments. And she's been there enough that she knows that these are tough calls but that --

Question: -- that she should know better?

President Obama: No, that's not what I said. That's perhaps what you said. What I'm saying is, is that we all want to try to relieve the suffering in Syria, but my job is to make sure that whatever we do we are doing in a way that serves the national security interests of the American people; that doesn't lead to us getting into things that we can't get out of or that we cannot do effectively; and as much as possible, that we're working with international partners.

And we're going to continue to explore things that we can do to protect people and to deal with the humanitarian situation there, and to provide a space in which we can bring about the kind of political transition that's going to be required to solve the problem. And I think Hillary Clinton would be the first to say that when you're sitting in the seat that I'm sitting in, in the Situation Room, things look a little bit different -- because she's been right there next to me.

I love Joe Biden, and he's got his own decisions to make, and I'll leave it at that. And in the meantime, he's doing a great job as Vice President and has been really helpful on a whole bunch of issues.

Pope Francis I love. He is a good man with a warm heart and a big moral imagination. And I think he had such an impact in his visit here -- as he has had around the world -- because he cares so deeply about the least of these, and in that sense expresses what I consider to be, as a Christian, the essence of Christianity. And he's got a good sense of humor. Well, I can't share all his jokes. They were all clean.

And as I said in the introduction in the South Lawn when he appeared here at the White House, I think it's really useful that he makes us uncomfortable in his gentle way; that he's constantly prodding people's consciences and asking everybody all across the political spectrum what more you can do to be kind, and to be helpful, and to love, and to sacrifice, and to serve. And in that sense, I don't think he's somebody where we should be applying the typical American political measures -- liberal and conservative, and left and right -- I think he is speaking to all of our consciences, and we all have to then search ourselves to see if there are ways that we can do better.

Question: [Inaudible]



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President Obama: It did. I think that when I spend time with somebody like the Pontiff -- and there are other individuals, some of whom are famous, some of whom are not, but who are good people and deeply moral -- then it makes me want to be better, makes me want to do better. And those people are great gifts to the world. And sometimes they're just a teacher in a classroom. And sometimes they're your neighbor. And sometimes they're your mom, or your wife. Sometimes they're your kids. But they can encourage you to be better. That's what we're all trying to do.

And that's part of the wonderful thing about Pope Francis, is the humility that he brings to do this. His rejection of the absolutism that says I'm 100 percent right and you're 100 percent wrong; but rather, we are all sinners and we are all children of God. That's a pretty good starting point for being better.

All right. Thank you, guys, for your patience. You can now go home.

Thanks.