



AmericanRhetoric.com

Barack Obama

Address to the People of Laos

delivered 6 September 2016, Lao National Cultural Hall, Vientiane, Laos



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

President Obama: Thank you so much. Thank you. Sabaidii! Sabaidee bor?

Audience: Sabaidii.

President Obama: To the government and the people of Laos, thank you so much for the kind welcome that you've extended to me and my delegation. I am very honored to be the first American president to visit Laos. Thank you.

I am told that this hall is where you come together for the national singing contest. And I know that you celebrate your musical traditions, including kap lam. But I'm not going to sing today, so you should not worry. As you host leaders from across Southeast Asia and beyond, I do want to thank Laos for your leadership as this year's chair of ASEAN.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Today, the eyes of the world are on Laos. And I know that that may be a little unusual, because Laos is a small nation next to larger neighbors and, as a result, too often, the richness of your culture has not been fully appreciated. And that's why, as part of my visit, I'm grateful for the opportunity to know Laos better, and to help share your story with the world.

I know that here, you cherish the beauty of the land -- the mist-covered mountains and sunsets over the Mekong. The achievements of ancient civilizations that echo in the ruins of Vat Phou, and palm leaf manuscripts that are preserved at your temples. Tomorrow, I'll experience some of this heritage myself when I visit Luang Prabang. I only regret that -- I know this is called the Land of a Million Elephants, but Secret Service will not let me ride an elephant. But maybe I'll come back when I'm no longer President.

But in countless stupas and in your daily lives, we see the strength that draws -- so many of you from your Buddhist faith -- a faith that tells you that you have a moral duty to each other, to live with kindness and honesty, and that we can help end suffering if we embrace the right mindset and the right actions. And in literature like the epic of Sinxay, we see the values that define the people of Laos, which is modesty and compassion, and resilience and hope.

At our luncheon today, I was treated to the best of Lao culture and cuisine, including khao niaw. I did not get any Beerlao, but I will try some later, maybe this evening. And in all of you here today -- and especially the young people of Laos -- we see the diversity that is the strength of this nation. You have Lao and Khmu and Hmong, and a tapestry of proud ethnic groups and indigenous peoples. So you are truly a people of the heart, and I thank you for welcoming me with such generosity, your nam jai.

I realize that having a U.S. president in Laos would have once been unimaginable. Six decades ago, this country fell into civil war. And as the fighting raged next door in Vietnam, your neighbors and foreign powers, including the United States, intervened here. As a result of that conflict and its aftermath, many people fled or were driven from their homes. At the time, the U.S. government did not acknowledge America's role. It was a secret war, and for years, the American people did not know. Even now, many Americans are not fully aware of this chapter in our history, and it's important that we remember today.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Over nine years -- from 1964 to 1973 -- the United States dropped more than two million tons of bombs here in Laos -- more than we dropped on Germany and Japan combined during all of World War II. It made Laos, per person, the most heavily bombed country in history. As one Laotian said, the "bombs fell like rain." Villages and entire valleys were obliterated. The ancient Plain of Jars was devastated. Countless civilians were killed. And that conflict was another reminder that, whatever the cause, whatever our intentions, war inflicts a terrible toll, especially on innocent men, women and children. Today, I stand with you in acknowledging the suffering and sacrifices on all sides of that conflict.

And from the anguish of war, there came an unlikely bond between our two peoples. Today, the United States is home to many proud Laotian Americans. Many have made a hard journey through refugee camps and relocation, building new lives in a new country. And even as they've become Americans, they've held on to their Lao heritage -- worshipping in their temples, honoring their elders, dancing the lamvong. Even now, they remember a beloved song -- that "If we depart from our homeland and flee far away from her, we will always have you as our true friend as long as we live." And as a new generation has come of age, more Laotian Americans have made the journey here to their ancestral homeland. Said one of them who was born in Vientiane, our "heart and home have always been in Laos." And this spirit of reconciliation is what brings me here today.

Our two governments will continue to have differences. That's true with many nations. As we do around the world, the United States will continue to speak up on behalf of what we consider universal human rights, including the rights of the people of Laos to express yourselves freely and decide your own future. Yet even as our governments deal candidly with our differences, I believe, as we have shown from Cuba to Burma to Vietnam, the best way to deliver progress for all of our peoples is by closer cooperation between our countries. And that's why, today, the United States and Laos have agreed to a new comprehensive partnership to guide and deepen our relationship for years to come.

Our partnership recognizes that the Lao People's Democratic Republic is an independent, sovereign nation. The United States does not seek to impose our will on Laos. Rather, we seek a relationship based on mutual respect, including respect for your independence and your sovereignty.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Our new partnership will continue to deal with the painful legacy of war. And on behalf of the American people, especially our veterans and military families, I thank the government and the people of Laos for your humanitarian cooperation as we've worked together to account for Americans missing in action. And I'm pleased that, as a result of this visit, we will increase our efforts and bring more of our missing home to their families in America.

I also know that the remnants of war continue to shatter lives here in Laos. Many of the bombs that were dropped were never exploded. Over the years, thousands of Laotians have been killed or injured -- farmers tending their fields, children playing. The wounds -- a missing leg or arm -- last a lifetime. And that's why, as President, I've dramatically increased our funding to help remove these unexploded bombs. As a result, Laos is clearing more bombs. Fewer Laotians are being hurt or killed. And together, we are saving lives.

But there is still much more work to do. So today, I'm proud to announce a historic increase in these efforts. The United States will double our annual funding to \$90 million over the next three years to help Laos expand its work. This will help Laos expand its work to remove even more bombs, allow Laotians to farm more land, and increase support for victims. I'll bear witness to this work tomorrow when I meet with survivors.

Given our history here, I believe that the United States has a moral obligation to help Laos heal. And even as we continue to deal with the past, our new partnership is focused on the future. We want to be your partners as you invest in the well-being of your people, and especially your children. I believe that when any child anywhere goes hungry, when their growth is stunted, that's a profound injustice. So we're joining with Laos to promote nutrition and bring more healthy meals to children in school so they can grow strong, focus in class, and realize their full potential.

We want to be your partner in improving education. I'm told that there's a saying here -- "a tray full of silver is not worth a mind full of knowledge." [1] So we'll help more children learn how to read. We'll bring more American teachers here to help teach English, and more Lao teachers to America to strengthen their English. And I'm proud to announce that an initiative that's very important to me and to my wife Michelle, an initiative called Let Girls Learn, is coming to Laos and Nepal.



AmericanRhetoric.com

We believe that the daughters of Laos have just as much talent and potential as your sons. And none of our countries anywhere in the world can truly succeed unless our girls and our women have every opportunity to succeed, the same opportunities as boys and men do.

We want to be your partner with the young people of Laos as you strengthen your communities and start businesses, and use Facebook to raise awareness for the rights and dignity of all people. And that's why, as part of our Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, we're helping young men and women across Laos develop the skills you need to succeed. Two of our top companies -- Microsoft and General Electric -- are helping to increase training in engineering and technology. Young people in Laos shouldn't have to move someplace else in order to prosper. You should be able to work and build a better life right here in Laos.

And we want to be your partners as Laos forges greater trade and commerce with the world. When other countries invest here, it should create jobs here for the people of Laos. So as Laos pursues economic and labor reforms, we'll work to encourage more trade and investment between our two countries, and between Laos and the rest of this region. As a result of my visit, I hope that more Americans come here as well, to experience your country and the beautiful culture, and to forge new friendships between our peoples.

And as Laos grows, we want to be your partner in protecting the natural beauty of your country, from your forests to your rivers. As Laos works to meet its growing need for energy, I want to work with you to pursue clean, renewable energies like solar. And let's help farmers protect their crops, and villages adapt to a changing climate. We should work together so that development is sustainable -- especially along the Mekong, upon which millions of people depend for their livelihood and their food and their health. The Mekong is a treasure that has to be protected for future generations, and we want to be your partner in that process.

So this is the future our two countries can build together, and I'm optimistic that we can do it. I'm confident because my visit is part of a broader agenda. As some of you know, as President, a key priority of my foreign policy has been to deepen our engagement with the nations and peoples of the Asia Pacific. And here, on the final leg of my last visit to Asia as President, I want to discuss why the commitment of the United States to this region will endure for the long term.



AmericanRhetoric.com

America's interest in the Asia Pacific is not new. It's not a passing fad. It reflects fundamental national interests. And in the United States, across the political spectrum, there's widespread recognition that the Asia Pacific will become even more important in the century ahead, both to America and to the world. In this region, we see hundreds of millions of young people with high expectations for their lives. With many of our major trading partners and most of the world's growing middle class, growth here can mean more jobs and opportunity in all countries. This region is home to five of our treaty allies and some of the world's most capable militaries, which means Asia will shape the course of global security. And this region is home to more than half of humanity -- Asian nations, developing and developed, who will be essential in the fight against challenges like climate change.

So for all these reasons, I've worked to rebalance our foreign policy so the United States is playing a larger and long-term role in the Asia Pacific region. We've strengthened our alliances. With our new defense guidelines, Japan and the United States will do even more together to uphold regional security. We've expanded our collaboration with the Republic of Korea, including on missile defense to counter North Korean threats. Today, I'll be meeting with President Park to reaffirm our unbreakable alliance and to insist that the international community remain united so that North Korea understands that its provocations will only continue to deepen its isolation. With our U.S. Marines now rotating through Australia, we can respond even faster to regional challenges. And with our new access agreement with the Philippines, our militaries are closer than they've been in decades.

To keep the peace and deter aggression, we've deployed more of our most advanced military capabilities to the region, including ships and aircraft to Singapore. And by the end of the decade, a majority of our Navy and Air Force fleets will be based out of the Pacific. And our allies and partners are collaborating more with each other as well. So our alliances and defense capabilities in the Asia Pacific are as strong as they've ever been.

We've also forged deeper ties with emerging economies and emerging powers. With Indonesia and Malaysia, we're promoting entrepreneurship. We're opposing violent extremism, and we're addressing environmental degradation. With my recent visit to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, we've shown our commitment to fully normalizing our relationship with Vietnam. We've elevated our ties with India across the board, and we welcome India's growing role in the Asia Pacific.



AmericanRhetoric.com

We've deepened our cooperation with regional institutions, especially here in Southeast Asia. And as part of our new strategic partnership with ASEAN, we've agreed to key principles, including that ASEAN will remain central to peace, prosperity and progress in the Asia Pacific. The United States is now part of the East Asia Summit, and together we've made it the leading forum in the region for addressing political and security challenges, including maritime security.

We've increased the trade and investment that creates jobs and opportunity on both sides of the Pacific. Since I took office, we've boosted U.S. exports to the Asia Pacific by 50 percent. Our young leaders' initiative is helping more than 100,000 young men and women across this region start new companies and ventures. So we're connecting entrepreneurs and investors and businesses in America and in ASEAN with each other. And thanks to our sustained leadership, 12 of our nations have come together in the Trans-Pacific Partnership to establish the rules of trade for nearly 40 percent of the global economy.

We've also stood with citizens on behalf of democracy and human rights. We've expanded our support for civil society groups and open government. We saw another democratic election and transition in Indonesia. And as the first U.S. president to visit Myanmar, I am proud that the United States encouraged and now is supporting a historic transition toward democracy. And I look forward to welcoming State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi to the White House next week as we stand with the people of Myanmar in their journey towards pluralism and peace.

And alongside all these efforts, we've worked to build a constructive relationship with China. Our two governments continue to have serious differences in important areas. The United States will remain unwavering in our support for universal human rights, but at the same time, we've shown that we can work together to advance mutual interests. The United States and China are engaged across more areas than ever before -- from preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, to our shared commitment to denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, to our historic leadership together on climate change.

So I will say it again: The United States welcomes the rise of a China that is peaceful and stable and prosperous and a responsible player in global affairs, because we believe that that will benefit all of us.



AmericanRhetoric.com

In other words, the United States is more deeply engaged across the Asia Pacific than we have been in decades. Our position is stronger. And we've sent a clear message that, as a Pacific nation, we're here to stay. In good times and bad, you can count on the United States of America.

And the question going forward is, what will the future hold for this region? Will disagreements be resolved peacefully, or lead to conflict? Will economies continue to integrate, or succumb to mercantilism or protectionism? Will human dignity be upheld, or will it be denied? Will the international rules and norms that have enabled progress in this region be maintained, or will they erode?

So with the time I have left, allow me to share our vision, the values that guide us, and the future we're working toward; our basic principles for peace and progress here in this region, including Laos, and across the Asia Pacific.

First, we believe that all nations and peoples deserve to live in security and peace. We believe that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of every nation must be upheld. And we believe that every nation matters, no matter their size. We believe that bigger nations should not dictate to smaller nations, and that all nations should play by the same rules. America's treaty allies must know our commitment to your defense is a solemn obligation that will never waiver. And across the region, including in the East and South China Seas, the United States will continue to fly and sail and operate wherever international law allows, and support the right of all countries to do the same.

We will stand with our allies and partners in upholding fundamental interests, among them freedom of navigation and overflight, lawful commerce that's not impeded, and peaceful resolution of disputes. That's the security that we seek.

We also believe that just as nations have rights, nations also have responsibilities, including the responsibility to work together to address problems no nation can solve alone. So many of today's threats transcend borders, and every country has a role to play. We will have to cooperate better together to stop terrorist attacks, and to prevent the spread of the world's most dangerous weapons. We will have to work together to avoid the worst effects of climate change. We have to work together to stop the horror of human trafficking, and end the outrage of modern-day slavery. These are areas where we seek deeper cooperation.



AmericanRhetoric.com

We believe in prosperity that is shared and that reduces poverty and inequality by lifting up the many and not just a few wealthy people at the top. Rather than simply extracting another country's natural resources, we believe development has to invest in people -- in their education and in their skills. We believe that trade should be free and truly fair, and that workers and the environment should be protected. We believe that governments should not conduct or knowingly support cyber-enabled theft of intellectual property for commercial gain. And we believe that there needs to be good governance, because people should not have to pay a bribe to start a business or sell their goods. And that's the kind of development and the kind of trade that we seek.

That's why the Trans-Pacific Partnership is so important -- not only because TPP countries, including the United States, will be able to sell more goods to each other, but it also has important strategic benefits. TPP is a core pillar of America's rebalance to the Asia Pacific. And the trade and the growth it supports will reinforce America's security alliances and regional partnerships. It will build greater integration and trust across this region. And I have said before and I will say again: Failure to move ahead with TPP would not just have economic consequences, but would call into question America's leadership in this vital region. So as difficult as the politics are back home, I will continue to push hard on the U.S. Congress to approve TPP before I leave office, because I think it is important for this entire region and it is important for the United States.

I believe that nations are stronger and more successful when they uphold human rights. We speak out for these rights not because we think our own country is perfect -- no nation is -- not because we think every country should do as we do, because each nation has to follow its own path. But we will speak up on behalf of human rights because we believe they are the birthright of every human being. And we know that democracy can flourish in Asia because we've seen it thrive from Japan and South Korea to Taiwan.

Across this region, we see citizens reaching to shape their own futures. And freedom of speech and assembly, and the right to organize peacefully in civil society without harassment or fear of arrest or disappearing we think makes a country stronger. A free press that can expose abuse and injustice makes a country stronger. And access to information and an open Internet where people can learn and share ideas makes a country stronger. An independent judiciary that upholds the rule of law, and free and fair elections so that citizens can choose their own leaders -- these are all the rights that we seek for all people.



AmericanRhetoric.com

We believe that societies are more stable and just when they recognize the inherent dignity of every human being -- the dignity of being able to live and pray as you choose, so that Muslims know they are a part of Myanmar's future, and Christians and Buddhists have the right to worship freely in China. The dignity of being treated equally under the law, so that no matter where you come from or who you love or what you look like you are respected. And the dignity of a healthy life -- because no child should ever die from hunger or a mosquito bite, or the poison of dirty water. This is the justice that we seek in the world.

And finally, we believe that the ties between our nations must be rooted in friendship and trust between our peoples. I think of several Laotian Americans whose families came to the United States as refugees. Our nations are connected not just by policies, but also by people like John Douangdara -- whose family settled in our state of Nebraska -- and after high school joined our military, served with our elite Special Forces, and ultimately gave his life for our nation. His mother said, "He is a son of the Lao people." And he sacrificed for us, and we honor him.

We're connected by Channapha Khamvongsa, who came to America when she was seven years old and who is back here today. And for years, she urged the United States to do more to help remove unexploded bombs here in Laos. "There are many, many problems in this world that might not be able to be solved in a lifetime," she's said, but this is one we can fix. So, Channapha, we thank you for working to fix this problem.

And we're connected by Stacey Phengvath, who is here as well and who I met earlier. Her parents came to America and stressed the importance of education. And today, this proud Laotian American serves at our embassy here in Laos. "I feel a sense of home," she says, "as if I have known this country before, through my parents." It feels "like we've come full circle." So, Stacey, on behalf of all of us, thank you for helping to bring our countries closer together.

So these are the values that guide us. And this is the partnership that America offers here in Laos and across the Asia Pacific. Respect for your sovereignty. Security and peace through cooperation. Investment in the health of children. Education for students. Support for entrepreneurs. Development and trade that creates jobs for all of us and protects our environment. A commitment to rights and dignity that is borne out of our common humanity.



AmericanRhetoric.com

This is our vision. This is the future we can realize together. And based on my visit to Laos and the proud work of the past eight years, I believe that Americans and the peoples of the Asia Pacific will be able to say to each other, as the song goes, "we will always have you as our true friend as long as we live." Khop jai lai lai.

Thank you very much.