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Barack Obama

Address to U.S. Conference of Mayors

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Thank you. Thank you, Mayors. Thank you so much. I love being with mayors. It is great to be here -- although I did worry a little bit that Dennis Johnson would introduce me again. At the White House, he had the old Bulls theme song, and it set a very high bar, as if I was Michael Jordan coming out. And he is a great friend and I very much appreciate him, as I do so many of the mayors here. I saw a lot of you in Washington in January. I thought I had such a good time, let's meet this summer, as well. And this time, I thought I'd come to you.

I want to thank our host, San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee. He was just in the White House for the San Francisco Giants' championship visit. I know how excited the Bay Area is over the Golden State Warriors' championship.

I want to thank two outstanding public servants -- Governor Jerry Brown and Leader Nancy Pelosi, who are here with us today. And I want to thank this year's leaders of the Conference of Mayors -- Kevin Johnson, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, and Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett.

I also want to mention a few outstanding mayors who are getting ready to step down. Michael Nutter of Philadelphia has done outstanding work. Greg Ballard of Indianapolis, an outstanding mayor, doing great work with My Brother's Keeper. Annise Parker of Houston. And my dear, old friend, Michael Coleman of Columbus, Ohio.



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And finally, a great mayor, one of my favorite people, and I know one of the people all of you admire so much -- a great mayor, Joe Riley of Charleston. Joe is back home doing one of a mayor's sadder, more important duties today.

Obviously, the entire country has been shocked and heartbroken by what happened in Charleston. The nature of this attack -- in a place of worship, where congregants invite in a stranger to worship with them, only to be gunned down -- adds to the pain. The apparent motivations of the shooter remind us that racism remains a blight that we have to combat together. We have made great progress, but we have to be vigilant because it still lingers. And when it's poisoning the minds of young people, it betrays our ideals and tears our democracy apart.

But as much as we grieve this particular tragedy, I think it's important, as I mentioned at the White House, to step back and recognize these tragedies have become far too commonplace.

Few people understand the terrible toll of gun violence like mayors do. Whether it's a mass shooting like the one in Charleston, or individual attacks of violence that add up over time, it tears at the fabric of a community. It costs you money and it costs resources. It costs this country dearly.

More than 11,000 Americans were killed by gun violence in 2013 alone -- 11,000. If Congress had passed some common-sense gun safety reforms after Newtown, after a group of children had been gunned down in their own classroom -- reforms that 90 percent of the American people supported -- we wouldn't have prevented every act of violence, or even most. We don't know if it would have prevented what happened in Charleston. No reform can guarantee the elimination of violence. But we might still have some more Americans with us. We might have stopped one shooter. Some families might still be whole. You all might have to attend fewer funerals.

And we should be strong enough to acknowledge this. At the very least, we should be able to talk about this issue as citizens, without demonizing all gun owners who are overwhelmingly law-abiding, but also without suggesting that any debate about this involves a wild-eyed plot to take everybody's guns away.

I know today's politics makes it less likely that we see any sort of serious gun safety legislation. I remarked that it was very unlikely that this Congress would act. And some reporters, I think, took this as resignation. I want to be clear -- I am not resigned. I have faith we will eventually do the right thing. I was simply making the point that we have to move public opinion. We have to feel a sense of urgency.

Ultimately, Congress will follow the people. And we have to stop being confused about this. At some point, as a country, we have to reckon with what happens. It is not good enough simply to show sympathy.



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You don't see murder on this kind of scale, with this kind of frequency, in any other advanced nation on Earth. Every country has violent, hateful, or mentally unstable people. What's different is not every country is awash with easily accessible guns. And so I refuse to act as if this is the new normal, or to pretend that it's simply sufficient to grieve, and that any mention of us doing something to stop is somehow politicizing the problem.

We need a change in attitudes among everybody -- lawful gun owners, those who are unfamiliar with guns. We have to have a conversation about it and fix this.

And ultimately, Congress acts when the public insists on action. And we've seen how public opinion can change. We've seen it change on gay marriage. We've seen it beginning to change on climate change. We've got to shift how we think about this issue. And we have the capacity to change, but we have to feel a sense of urgency about it. We, as a people, have got to change. That's how we honor those families. That's how we honor the families in Newtown. That's how we honor the families in Aurora.

Now, the first time I spoke at this conference, in 2008, I said that American cities shouldn't be succeeding despite Washington, they should be succeeding with some help from Washington. And as President, I've made it a priority to partner with mayors like you. That's why I've named three former mayors to my Cabinet. That's why I asked a former president of this conference, Jerry Abramson, to be one of my top advisors. That's why my staff and I work with mayors across the country just about every day, on just about every issue under the sun -- from school reform to community policing, from business development to veterans homelessness.

Because mayors have to get the job done. If you're a mayor, it's not sufficient to just blather on. You actually have to do something. It's not enough to figure out how do I position myself on a particular issue to minimize the possibility that I might get in trouble or criticized -- because people expect to trim the trees and pave the roads, and pick up the garbage, and educate our kids, and police our streets.

Whatever the problem, large or small, you got to do everything you can to solve it. You don't let partisanship stop you. You don't let cynicism stop you. You're always in the hunt for good ideas, no matter where they come from.

And I'm going to embarrass Jerry for a second. He took his wife, Madeline, to Paris a few years after they got married. And she took in all the splendor of the Champs-Élysées. And he took photos of garbage cans. That's a mayor for you. So she teased him about it. She said, there's the Eiffel Tower. There's the Seine. And he said, "Those are some beautiful garbage cans." And soon enough, downtown Louisville had garbage cans that looked a lot like the Parisian garbage cans.

That's a mayor, right there. Somebody who's always thinking about how to make his or her city better -- even on vacation in Paris -- and stops at nothing to get it done.



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Now, as President, I'm constantly thinking about how we, together, can keep growing the economy and growing new pathways of opportunity for the American people to get ahead. And across the country, the good news is we're making progress. And you're seeing it in your cities. More than 12 million new private sector jobs in the past five years; more than 16 million Americans who've gained health insurance; more jobs creating more clean energy. Here in California, solar is going crazy. We're producing 10 times as much solar power today as we did when I came into office -- 10 times; three times as much wind power; double the amount of clean energy. More kids graduating from high school and college than ever before.

I'm proud of that record. And by the way we've done it while reducing the deficit by two-thirds. You don't hear that that much, but let me just point that out. And I'm proud of it particularly when it's so hard to get anything through Congress -- even when we're talking about issues that most Americans outside of Washington agree on.

But that's also why we've partnered with many of you over the past couple of years -- to make real progress on the economic priorities that matter to middle-class Americans. We're working with many of you to help working families make ends meet and feel more secure in a changing economy. So far, 19 cities have enacted paid sick days; five states have enacted paid sick days or paid family leave. Oregon is set to join them soon. Seventeen states have raised their minimum wage; 27 cities and counties have taken action to raise the wage, as well.

We're working with many of you to help working families earn higher wages down the road with skills and education they need. Seattle, a city with a Democratic mayor, Ed Murray, just passed universal pre-K. Indianapolis, a city with a Republican mayor, Greg Ballard, is starting citywide preschool scholarships. Thirty-four states have increased funding for preschool as well, which means even more young people getting the early enrichment that can pay off over a lifetime.

Three months ago, I launched an initiative called TechHire to help train workers for the high-skill, high-wage jobs of tomorrow. Twenty-one communities have signed up for TechHire so far, and we're looking to double that number. So if your town has tech jobs that need filling to people who want to fill them, come join us.

We're working with many of you to generate more high-wage jobs for our workers to fill. Eleven cities have joined a new initiative called "Startup in a Day" to help entrepreneurs apply for all the licenses and permits they need to start a business in just one day. Cut the red tape.

We're working with cities to create a network of high-tech manufacturing hubs to keep America at the forefront of innovation. The first hub in Youngstown, Ohio is doing cutting-edge research in 3-D printing and has already attracted tens of millions of dollars in investment to the region.



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So we're creating jobs, we're training folks for jobs. We're also working with many of you to make our streets safer and our communities stronger. More than 230 local and tribal leaders have joined the My Brother's Keeper initiative, and are taking meaningful steps to change the odds for young people in tough circumstances. Together, you're working to curb juvenile arrests, reduce absenteeism -- and you're helping these kids imagine a bigger future for themselves.

Today, at the Lawrence Livermore National Lab just down the road, more than 100 students from Oakland and San Francisco are participating in the first "MBK Day at the Lab," where they can learn about STEM careers.

And meanwhile, from police holding impromptu town hall meetings in barbershops in Charlotte, to the Boston Police Academy improving how it trains cops to deal with young people on the job, cities like yours are striving to rebuild trust between law enforcement and communities, making sure police have the resources they need to do their job, and making sure that every police officer who has an incredibly tough job is trained in making the kinds of connections with communities that engender trust and ensure that everybody is treated equally under the law -- which makes for smart law enforcement and vindicates our values.

So these are just a few of the examples of the work that's being done. And I'd name every single way that we're working together to open new doors of opportunity for the American people, but we'd be here all day. So here's the bottom line.

On America's most important economic priorities -- from supporting working families to improving education, to creating good new jobs, to getting people to those new jobs, to improving affordable housing, to dealing with homelessness -- cities are not standing still. You are moving forward. So I want to say two things to you. Number one -- thank you. Thank you for your leadership and your vision. And I particularly want to thank you because more than just about any other office in the land, those who occupy the office of mayor, are approaching it in a practical way. Democrats aren't clinging to dogmas, and are partnering with businesses anywhere they can. And Republicans aren't clinging to their dogmas; they're recognizing that government has a role to play in helping make for a vibrant city and expanding opportunity.

And that common-sense, problem-solving, can-do attitude -- that's what the American people are looking for. That's what they need. So I want to say thank you to all of you. You're setting a good example.

Now, second, I also want to say don't stop now, because we've still got a lot more work to do. We've got to keep pushing to grow our economy so that more Americans who work hard feel like their hard work is paying off -- which is why I'm working with Congress to pass new 21st century trade agreements with higher standards and tougher protections than past agreements.



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And I appreciate the help of many of the mayors here to get that done, because you know it's important to your cities. I believe it's the right thing to do for American workers and families, or I would not be doing it. I want to thank all of you who helped me make that case, that this matters to your cities.

We've got to keep pushing to put people to work rebuilding our infrastructure. There's not a mayor here who can't reel off 10 infrastructure projects right now that you'd love to get funding for, and that would put people to work right away and improve your competitiveness, and help businesses move their products and help people get to their jobs. We can keep paying the costs of patching over our existing infrastructure -- more expensive, less efficient, leading to higher commute times, more waste. That's an option. Or we can create tens of thousands of jobs right now building a 21st century infrastructure that makes us competitive well into the 21st century. That's what we need to do. We just got to convince Congress to make it happen. And I need mayors to help, from all across the country. Put some pressure on Congress to get this done.

We've got to keep pushing to prepare for the impacts of climate change -- because it's science. It's a fact. It's like gravity.

Audience Member: Yes, it is.

President Obama: It is.

A lot of cities have gone far ahead of states on this issue -- along with states. You're making a difference right now. You're not waiting for Congress. Mayor Roy Buol is here from Dubuque, Iowa. They've set a target to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions 50 percent from 2003 levels by the end of the next decade. Just met with Governor Jerry Brown. He's talking about how California, which so often has been a leader on environmental issues, is looking to partner and make a difference internationally.

Today, my administration proposed new fuel standards for buses and tractor-trailers and other heavy-duty vehicles -- another important step towards reducing harmful carbon pollution and protecting our planet.

But a lot of this does come down to Congress. I know many of you are worried about Congress cutting programs that are important to your city's economic growth. But the battle we should be having with Congress isn't just about individual programs. It's about the foolish, self-destructive cuts that in Washington are known as the sequester -- because with the sequester, the whole pie is smaller, so protecting one program means cutting another one.

That's why you're facing cuts that don't make any sense to things like TIGER grants, which you all know are so important to putting our people to work rebuilding our infrastructure.



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That's the reason why it's so hard for us to get the funding we need to get homeless assistance grants, which help some of our most vulnerable neighbors and get them off the streets. That's why it's been so difficult to fund the preschool development grants, which help educate our children -- which we know if we make that investment will pay off for your cities, your states, and for our country.

I've been clear, I will not sign bills at sequestration levels. I will not sign bills that seek to increase defense spending before addressing any of our needs here at home.

And I need your help. I need your help, Mayors, to talk to your members of Congress to get rid of the sequester once and for all -- because it is harming our cities and harming our country. There is no business -- no successful business -- that if it needed to reduce spending, would simply lop off 10 percent of everything. Or 15 percent of everything. That's not how any of us would run our household budget. You'd cut out things you don't need, but you'd still keep the college fund going. You'd still pay your health insurance bill and your mortgage note. There are things we have to do as a country to stay ahead.

Once again, mayors understand that if there's a conflict between ideology and reality, you should opt for reality. Reality is a stubborn thing -- facts, evidence, reason.

So, thanks for your partnership. I want you to know that as long as I'm in the White House, I've got your back. I love the country, I love the suburbs, but I'm a city guy. And I know that when cities thrive, suburbs thrive. And when cities thrive, farmlands thrive. And when cities thrive, states thrive. And when cities thrive, America thrives.

You guys are making it happen. I enjoy working with each and every one of you. And I know that each of you takes pride in what makes your hometown unique. You may be proud of your pizza, or your hoagies, or your barbeque -- even though everybody knows Chicago has the best pizza. You may be proud of your city's victory parades, even though we got a Blackhawk parade that's pretty good. I'm sure you're all very proud of your parks. We've got nice parks. Or the number of sunny days you've got -- which we enjoy half the year. Chances are you've got a few superlatives ready in case somebody asks, "What makes your city so special?" That's what mayors do. You're boosters.

Yet as unique as your cities are, as proud as you should be of your cities, we always remind ourselves we're also Americans. And we all want America to be a place where our zip code does not determine our destiny -- where every kid, in whatever city, whatever hamlet, whatever town, has an equal shot at life when they grow up. No matter who you are or where you come from, you can make it if you try.

That's what America is about. That's what you're fighting for every day. And I'm going to fight right there alongside with you. Thank you, everybody. God bless you. God bless America.