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Barack Obama

First Address at the Central Intelligence Agency

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AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Thank you for the extraordinary welcome. And thanks for those of you who prepared, from the CIA gift shop, the t-shirts, the caps, the water bottles. Michelle and the girls will appreciate that very much.

It is a great honor to be here with the men and women of the CIA. I've been eager to come out here to Langley for some time so I can deliver a simple message to you in person on behalf of the American people: Thank you. Thank you for all the work that you do to protect the American people and the freedom that we all cherish.

The CIA is fundamental to America's national security. And I want you to know that that's why I nominated such an outstanding public servant and close friend, Leon Panetta, to lead -- to lead the agency. He is one of our nation's finest public servants. He has my complete confidence. And he is a strong voice in my national security team, as well as a strong advocate for the men and women of the CIA.

I also benefit from the counsel of several agency veterans -- chief among them, Steve Kappes, who's stayed on to serve as Leon's deputy. He's -- and he's done outstanding work.



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I have to add, just as an aside, by the way, I just met with a smaller group of about 50, so we could have a dialogue. And all of you look really young. And so to have a graybeard literally and figuratively like Steve Kappes here, I think, is absolutely critical.

I also want you to know that we have one of your own, John Brennan, who is doing a terrific job as my adviser for counterterrorism and homeland security. And we are very grateful for the work that he does and the insights that he brings, from his long years of service here at the CIA.

And I would be remiss if I didn't mention the extraordinary former CIA officer and Director of Central Intelligence, Bob Gates, who is also part of our Cabinet and every once in a while gives me a few tips.

So let me share with you just a few thoughts about the situation in which we find ourselves.

First, I want to underscore the importance of the CIA. When the CIA was founded, you were focused on one overarching threat, the Soviet Union. And for decades, the CIA carried out a critically important mission. And with the end of the Cold War, some wondered how important the CIA would be to our future. Now we know.

Here in the 21st century, we've learned that the CIA is more important than ever. For as Leon mentioned, we face a wide range of unconventional challenges: stateless terrorist networks like al-Qaeda, the spread of catastrophic weapons, cyberthreats, failed states, rogue regimes, persistent conflict. And now we have to add to our list piracy.

The CIA is unique in the capabilities of collection, analysis and operation that you bring to bear. So you are an indispensable tool, the tip of the spear in America's intelligence mission and our national security.

It is because of you that I can make good decisions. You prove that the key to good intelligence is not simply technology. It's the quality of the men and women who have signed up to serve.

You're on the front lines against unconventional challenges.



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You help us understand the world as it is. You support the work of our troops and our diplomats and law enforcement officers. You disrupt terrorist plots, and you're critical to our efforts to destroy terrorist networks. You serve capably, courageously, and from here in Virginia to dangerous outposts around the globe, you make enormous sacrifices on our behalf.

So you should be proud of what you do.

Second, you need to know that you've got my full support. For decades, the American people have counted on you to protect them. I know that I've come to personally count on your services. I rely on your reporting and your analysis, which finds its way onto my desk every single day.

And I know you've got a tough job. I know there's no margin for error. And I know there are endless demands for intelligence. There is an urgent necessity to collect and analyze information and to work seamlessly with other agencies to act on it.

And -- And what makes it tougher is when you succeed, as you so often do, that success usually has to stay secret. So you don't get credit when things go good, but you sure get some blame when things don't.

Audience Member: [Words indistinct.]

President Obama: Now -- I got an amen corner out there.

Now, in that context, I know that the last few days have been difficult.

As I made clear, in releasing the OLC memos as a consequence of a court case that was pending and to which it was very difficult for us to mount an effective legal defense, I acted primarily because of the exceptional circumstances that surrounded these memos, particularly the fact that so much of the information was public -- had been publicly acknowledged. The covert nature of the information had been compromised.

I have fought to protect the integrity of classified information in the past, and I will do so in the future. And there is nothing more important than protecting the identities of CIA officers.



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So I need everybody to be clear: we will protect your identities and your security as you vigorously pursue your missions. I will be as vigorous in protecting you as you are vigorous in protecting the American people.

Now, I have put an end to the interrogation techniques described in those OLC memos. And I want to -- I want to be very clear and very blunt. I've done so for a simple reason: because I believe that our nation is stronger and more secure when we deploy the full measure of both our power and the power of our values, including the rule of law. I know I can count on you to do exactly that.

You know, there have been some conversations that I've had with senior folks here at Langley in which I think people have expressed understandable anxiety and concern. So I -- I -- I want to make a point that I just made in the smaller group. I understand that it's hard when you are asked to protect the American people against people who have no scruples and would willingly and gladly kill innocents.

Al-Qaeda's not constrained by a constitution. Many of our adversaries are not constrained by a belief in freedom of speech or representation in court or rule of law. So I'm sure that sometimes it seems as if that means we're operating with one hand tied behind our back or that those who would argue for a higher standard are naive. I understand that. You know, I've -- I watch the cable shows once in a while.

What makes the United States special, and what makes you special, is precisely the fact that we are willing to uphold our values and ideals even when it's hard -- not just when it's easy; even when we are afraid and under threat -- not just when it's expedient to do so. That's what makes us different.

So yes, you've got a harder job. And so do I. And that's okay, because that's why we can take such extraordinary pride in being Americans. And over the long term, that is why I believe we will defeat our enemies: because we're on the better side of history.

So don't be discouraged by what's happened in the last few weeks. Don't be discouraged that we have to acknowledge potentially we've made some mistakes. That's how we learn.



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But the fact that we are willing to acknowledge them and then move forward, that is precisely why I am proud to be President of the United States, and that's why you should be proud to be members of the CIA. All right?

Third point -- Third point -- I want you to know how much the American people appreciate your service. Sometimes it's hard to acknowledge sacrifices made by the people whose work, or even identity, must remain secret, and that's part of the enormous burden that you carry when you sign up. But you make the extraordinary sacrifice of giving up parts of your life in service to your country. Many of you take long deployments overseas. You miss seeing your families; you miss weekend barbecues and the birthday parties, watching your children grow up. You can't even exchange in the simplest pleasures of talking about your job -- or complaining about your job openly.

There are few signs of patriotism more powerful than offering to serve out of the limelight, and so many of you have signed up to serve after 9/11 -- that's partly why you're all so young -- fully aware of the dangers before you. You serve courageously, but your courage is only known to a few. You accomplish remarkable things, but the credit you receive is the private knowledge that you've done something to secure this country. That's a sacrifice that's carved into those marble walls. Those 89 stars stand as a testament to both the men and women of the CIA who gave their lives in service to their country, and to all who dedicate themselves to the mission of this agency.

Now we must look forward to the future with confidence. All that you've achieved, I believe that the CIA's best days are still yet to come. And you will have my support and appreciation as you carry on this critical work.

We live in dangerous times. I am going to need you more than ever, precisely because we're seeing changes in our foreign policy, and we want to send a new message to the world. That requires better intelligence, not less of it. That means that we're going to have to operate smarter and more effectively than ever. So I'm going to be relying on you, and the American people are going to rely on you. And I hope that you will continue to take extraordinary pride in the challenges that come with the job.

Thank you very much. God bless you. And God bless the United States of America.