Barack Obama

Address on Iran at American University

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I apologize for the slight delay. Even Presidents have problems with toner.

It is a great honor to be back at American University, which has prepared generations of young people for service in public life. I want to thank President Kerwin and the American University family for hosting us here today.

Fifty-two years ago, President Kennedy, at the height of the Cold War, addressed this same university on the subject of peace. The Berlin Wall had just been built. The Soviet Union had tested the most powerful weapons ever developed. China was on the verge of acquiring a nuclear bomb. Less than 20 years after the end of World War II, the prospect of nuclear war was all too real. With all of the threats that we face today, it's hard to appreciate how much more dangerous the world was at that time.

In light of these mounting threats, a number of strategists here in the United States argued that we had to take military action against the Soviets, to hasten what they saw as inevitable confrontation. But the young President offered a different vision. Strength, in his view, included powerful armed forces and a willingness to stand up for our values around the world. But he rejected the prevailing attitude among some foreign policy circles that equated security with a perpetual war footing. Instead, he promised strong, principled American leadership on behalf of what he called a "practical" and "attainable peace" -- a peace "based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions -- on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements."

Such wisdom would help guide our ship of state through some of the most perilous moments in human history. With Kennedy at the helm, the Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved peacefully. Under Democratic and Republican Presidents, new agreements were forged -- a Non-Proliferation Treaty that prohibited nations from acquiring nuclear weapons, while allowing them to access peaceful nuclear energy; the SALT and START Treaties which bound the United States and Soviet Union to cooperation on arms control. Not every conflict was averted, but the world avoided nuclear catastrophe, and we created the time and the space to win the Cold War without firing a shot at the Soviets.

The agreement now reached between the international community and the Islamic Republic of Iran builds on this tradition of strong, principled diplomacy. After two years of negotiations, we have achieved a detailed arrangement that permanently prohibits Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. It cuts off all of Iran's pathways to a bomb. It contains the most comprehensive inspection and verification regime ever negotiated to monitor a nuclear program. As was true in previous treaties, it does not resolve all problems; it certainly doesn't resolve all our problems with Iran. It does not ensure a warming between our two countries. But it achieves one of our most critical security objectives. As such, it is a very good deal.

Today, I want to speak to you about this deal, and the most consequential foreign policy debate that our country has had since the invasion of Iraq, as Congress decides whether to support this historic diplomatic breakthrough, or instead blocks it over the objection of the vast majority of the world. Between now and the congressional vote in September, you're going to hear a lot of arguments against this deal, backed by tens of millions of dollars in advertising. And if the rhetoric in these ads, and the accompanying commentary, sounds familiar, it should -- for many of the same people who argued for the war in Iraq are now making the case against the Iran nuclear deal.

Now, when I ran for President eight years ago as a candidate who had opposed the decision to go to war in Iraq, I said that America didn't just have to end that war -- we had to end the mindset that got us there in the first place. It was a mindset characterized by a preference for military action over diplomacy; a mindset that put a premium on unilateral U.S. action over the painstaking work of building international consensus; a mindset that exaggerated threats beyond what the intelligence supported. Leaders did not level with the American people about the costs of war, insisting that we could easily impose our will on a part of the world with a profoundly different culture and history. And, of course, those calling for war labeled themselves strong and decisive, while dismissing those who disagreed as weak -- even appeasers of a malevolent adversary.

More than a decade later, we still live with the consequences of the decision to invade Iraq. Our troops achieved every mission they were given. But thousands of lives were lost, tens of thousands wounded. That doesn't count the lives lost among Iraqis. Nearly a trillion dollars was spent. Today, Iraq remains gripped by sectarian conflict, and the emergence of al Qaeda in Iraq has now evolved into ISIL.

And ironically, the single greatest beneficiary in the region of that war was the Islamic Republic of Iran, which saw its strategic position strengthened by the removal of its long-standing enemy, Saddam Hussein.

I raise this recent history because now more than ever we need clear thinking in our foreign policy. And I raise this history because it bears directly on how we respond to the Iranian nuclear program.

That program has been around for decades, dating back to the Shah's efforts -- with U.S. support -- in the 1960s and '70s to develop nuclear power. The theocracy that overthrew the Shah accelerated the program after the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, a war in which Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons to brutal effect, and Iran's nuclear program advanced steadily through the 1990s, despite unilateral U.S. sanctions. When the Bush Administration took office, Iran had no centrifuges -- the machines necessary to produce material for a bomb -- that were spinning to enrich uranium. But despite repeated warnings from the United States government, by the time I took office, Iran had installed several thousand centrifuges, and showed no inclination to slow -- much less halt -- its program.

Among U.S. policymakers, there's never been disagreement on the danger posed by an Iranian nuclear bomb. Democrats and Republicans alike have recognized that it would spark an arms race in the world's most unstable region, and turn every crisis into a potential nuclear showdown. It would embolden terrorist groups, like Hezbollah, and pose an unacceptable risk to Israel, which Iranian leaders have repeatedly threatened to destroy. More broadly, it could unravel the global commitment to non-proliferation that the world has done so much to defend.

The question, then, is not whether to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, but how. Even before taking office, I made clear that Iran would not be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon on my watch, and it's been my policy throughout my presidency to keep all options -- including possible military options -- on the table to achieve that objective. But I have also made clear my preference for a peaceful, diplomatic resolution of the issue -- not just because of the costs of war, but also because a negotiated agreement offered a more effective, verifiable and durable resolution.

And so, in 2009, we let the Iranians know that a diplomatic path was available. Iran failed to take that path, and our intelligence community exposed the existence of a covert nuclear facility at Fordow.

Now, some have argued that Iran's intransigence showed the futility of negotiations. In fact, it was our very willingness to negotiate that helped America rally the world to our cause, and secured international participation in an unprecedented framework of commercial and financial sanctions. Keep in mind unilateral U.S. sanctions against Iran had been in place for decades, but had failed to pressure Iran to the negotiating table.

What made our new approach more effective was our ability to draw upon new U.N. Security Council resolutions, combining strong enforcement with voluntary agreements from nations like China and India, Japan and South Korea to reduce their purchases of Iranian oil, as well as the imposition by our European allies of a total oil embargo.

Winning this global buy-in was not easy -- I know. I was there. In some cases, our partners lost billions of dollars in trade because of their decision to cooperate. But we were able to convince them that absent a diplomatic resolution, the result could be war, with major disruptions to the global economy, and even greater instability in the Middle East. In other words, it was diplomacy -- hard, painstaking diplomacy -- not saber-rattling, not tough talk that ratcheted up the pressure on Iran.

With the world now unified beside us, Iran's economy contracted severely, and remains about 20 percent smaller today than it would have otherwise been. No doubt this hardship played a role in Iran's 2013 elections, when the Iranian people elected a new government that promised to improve the economy through engagement with the world. A window had cracked open. Iran came back to the nuclear talks. And after a series of negotiations, Iran agreed with the international community to an interim deal -- a deal that rolled back Iran's stockpile of near 20 percent enriched uranium, and froze the progress of its program so that the P5+1 -- the United States, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and the European Union -- could negotiate a comprehensive deal without the fear that Iran might be stalling for time.

Now, let me pause here just to remind everybody that when the interim deal was announced, critics -- the same critics we're hearing from now -- called it "a historic mistake." They insisted Iran would ignore its obligations. They warned that sanctions would unravel. They warned that Iran would receive a windfall to support terrorism.

The critics were wrong. The progress of Iran's nuclear program was halted for the first time in a decade. Its stockpile of dangerous materials was reduced. The deployment of its advanced centrifuges was stopped. Inspections did increase. There was no flood of money into Iran, and the architecture of the international sanctions remained in place. In fact, the interim deal worked so well that the same people who criticized it so fiercely now cite it as an excuse not to support the broader accord. Think about that. What was once proclaimed as a historic mistake is now held up as a success and a reason to not sign the comprehensive deal. So keep that in mind when you assess the credibility of the arguments being made against diplomacy today.

Despite the criticism, we moved ahead to negotiate a more lasting, comprehensive deal. Our diplomats, led by Secretary of State John Kerry, kept our coalition united. Our nuclear experts -- including one of the best in the world, Secretary of Energy Ernie Moniz -- worked tirelessly on the technical details. In July, we reached a comprehensive plan of action that meets our objectives.

Under its terms, Iran is never allowed to build a nuclear weapon. And while Iran, like any party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, is allowed to access peaceful nuclear energy, the agreement strictly defines the manner in which its nuclear program can proceed, ensuring that all pathways to a bomb are cut off.

Here's how: Under this deal, Iran cannot acquire the plutonium needed for a bomb. The core of its heavy-water reactor at Arak will be pulled out, filled with concrete, and replaced with one that will not produce plutonium for a weapon. The spent fuel from that reactor will be shipped out of the country, and Iran will not build any new heavy-water reactors for at least 15 years.

Iran will also not be able to acquire the enriched uranium that could be used for a bomb. As soon as this deal is implemented, Iran will remove two-thirds of its centrifuges. For the next decade, Iran will not enrich uranium with its more advanced centrifuges. Iran will not enrich uranium at the previously undisclosed Fordow facility, which is buried deep underground, for at least 15 years. Iran will get rid of 98 percent of its stockpile of enriched uranium, which is currently enough for up to 10 nuclear bombs, for the next 15 years. Even after those 15 years have passed, Iran will never have the right to use a peaceful program as cover to pursue a weapon.

And, in fact, this deal shuts off the type of covert path Iran pursued in the past. There will be 24/7 monitoring of Iran's key nuclear facilities. For decades, inspectors will have access to Iran's entire nuclear supply chain -- from the uranium mines and mills where they get raw materials, to the centrifuge production facilities where they make machines to enrich it. And understand why this is so important: For Iran to cheat, it has to build a lot more than just one building or a covert facility like Fordow. It would need a secret source for every single aspect of its program. No nation in history has been able to pull off such subterfuge when subjected to such rigorous inspections. And under the terms of the deal, inspectors will have the permanent ability to inspect any suspicious sites in Iran.

And finally, Iran has powerful incentives to keep its commitments. Before getting sanctions relief, Iran has to take significant, concrete steps like removing centrifuges and getting rid of its stockpile. If Iran violates the agreement over the next decade, all of the sanctions can snap back into place. We won't need the support of other members of the U.N. Security Council; America can trigger snapback on our own. On the other hand, if Iran abides by the deal and its economy begins to reintegrate with the world, the incentive to avoid snapback will only grow.

So this deal is not just the best choice among alternatives -– this is the strongest non-proliferation agreement ever negotiated. And because this is such a strong deal, every nation in the world that has commented publicly, with the exception of the Israeli government[1], has expressed support. The United Nations Security Council has unanimously supported it.

The majority of arms control and non-proliferation experts support it. Over 100 former ambassadors -- who served under Republican and Democratic Presidents -- support it. I've had to make a lot of tough calls as President, but whether or not this deal is good for American security is not one of those calls. It's not even close.

Unfortunately, we're living through a time in American politics where every foreign policy decision is viewed through a partisan prism, evaluated by headline-grabbing sound bites. And so before the ink was even dry on this deal -- before Congress even read it -- a majority of Republicans declared their virulent opposition. Lobbyists and pundits were suddenly transformed into arm-chair nuclear scientists, disputing the assessments of experts like Secretary Moniz, challenging his findings, offering multiple -- and sometimes contradictory -- arguments about why Congress should reject this deal. But if you repeat these arguments long enough, they can get some traction. So let me address just a few of the arguments that have been made so far in opposition to this deal.

First, there are those who say the inspections are not strong enough because inspectors can't go anywhere in Iran at any time with no notice.

Well, here's the truth: Inspectors will be allowed daily access to Iran's key nuclear sites. If there is a reason for inspecting a suspicious, undeclared site anywhere in Iran, inspectors will get that access, even if Iran objects. This access can be with as little as 24 hours' notice. And while the process for resolving a dispute about access can take up to 24 days, once we've identified a site that raises suspicion, we will be watching it continuously until inspectors get in. And by the way, nuclear material isn't something you hide in the closet. It can leave a trace for years. The bottom line is, if Iran cheats, we can catch them -- and we will.

Second, there are those who argue that the deal isn't strong enough because some of the limitations on Iran's civilian nuclear program expire in 15 years. Let me repeat: The prohibition on Iran having a nuclear weapon is permanent. The ban on weapons-related research is permanent. Inspections are permanent. It is true that some of the limitations regarding Iran's peaceful program last only 15 years. But that's how arms control agreements work. The first SALT Treaty with the Soviet Union lasted five years. The first START Treaty lasted 15 years. And in our current situation, if 15 or 20 years from now, Iran tries to build a bomb, this deal ensures that the United States will have better tools to detect it, a stronger basis under international law to respond, and the same options available to stop a weapons program as we have today, including -- if necessary -- military options.

On the other hand, without this deal, the scenarios that critics warn about happening in 15 years could happen six months from now. By killing this deal, Congress would not merely pave Iran's pathway to a bomb, it would accelerate it.

Third, a number of critics say the deal isn't worth it because Iran will get billions of dollars in sanctions relief.

Now, let's be clear: The international sanctions were put in place precisely to get Iran to agree to constraints on its program. That's the point of sanctions. Any negotiated agreement with Iran would involve sanctions relief. So an argument against sanctions relief is effectively an argument against any diplomatic resolution of this issue.

It is true that if Iran lives up to its commitments, it will gain access to roughly 56 billion dollars of its own money -- revenue frozen overseas by other countries. But the notion that this will be a game-changer, with all this money funneled into Iran's pernicious activities, misses the reality of Iran's current situation. Partly because of our sanctions, the Iranian government has over half a trillion dollars in urgent requirements -- from funding pensions and salaries, to paying for crumbling infrastructure. Iran's leaders have raised the expectations of their people that sanctions relief will improve their lives. Even a repressive regime like Iran's cannot completely ignore those expectations. And that's why our best analysts expect the bulk of this revenue to go into spending that improves the economy and benefits the lives of the Iranian people.

Now, this is not to say that sanctions relief will provide no benefit to Iran's military. Let's stipulate that some of that money will flow to activities that we object to. We have no illusions about the Iranian government, or the significance of the Revolutionary Guard and the Quds Force. Iran supports terrorist organizations like Hezbollah. It supports proxy groups that threaten our interests and the interests of our allies -- including proxy groups who killed our troops in Iraq. They try to destabilize our Gulf partners. But Iran has been engaged in these activities for decades. They engaged in them before sanctions and while sanctions were in place. In fact, Iran even engaged in these activities in the middle of the Iran-Iraq War -- a war that cost them nearly a million lives and hundreds of billions of dollars.

The truth is that Iran has always found a way to fund these efforts, and whatever benefit Iran may claim from sanctions relief pales in comparison to the danger it could pose with a nuclear weapon.

Moreover, there's no scenario where sanctions relief turns Iran into the region's dominant power. Iran's defense budget is eight times smaller than the combined budget of our Gulf allies. Their conventional capabilities will never compare with Israel's, and our commitment to Israel's qualitative military edge helps guarantee that. Over the last several years, Iran has had to spend billions of dollars to support its only ally in the Arab World -- Bashar al-Assad -- even as he's lost control of huge chunks of his country. And Hezbollah has suffered significant blows on the same battlefield. And Iran, like the rest of the region, is being forced to respond to the threat of ISIL in Iraq.

So contrary to the alarmists who claim that Iran is on the brink of taking over the Middle East, or even the world, Iran will remain a regional power with its own set of challenges. The ruling regime is dangerous and it is repressive.

We will continue to have sanctions in place on Iran's support for terrorism and violation of human rights. We will continue to insist upon the release of Americans detained unjustly. We will have a lot of differences with the Iranian regime.

But if we're serious about confronting Iran's destabilizing activities, it is hard to imagine a worse approach than blocking this deal. Instead, we need to check the behavior that we're concerned about directly: By helping our allies in the region strengthen their own capabilities to counter a cyber-attack or a ballistic missile; by improving the interdiction of weapons shipments that go to groups like Hezbollah; by training our allies' special forces so that they can more effectively respond to situations like Yemen. All these capabilities will make a difference. We will be in a stronger position to implement them with this deal. And, by the way, such a strategy also helps us effectively confront the immediate and lethal threat posed by ISIL.

Now, the final criticism -- this sort of a catch-all that you may hear -- is the notion that there's a better deal to be had. "We should get a better deal" -- that's repeated over and over again. "It's a bad deal, need a better deal" -- one that relies on vague promises of toughness, and, more recently, the argument that we can apply a broader and indefinite set of sanctions to squeeze the Iranian regime harder.

Those making this argument are either ignorant of Iranian society, or they're just not being straight with the American people. Sanctions alone are not going to force Iran to completely dismantle all vestiges of its nuclear infrastructure -- even those aspects that are consistent with peaceful programs. That oftentimes is what the critics are calling "a better deal." Neither the Iranian government, or the Iranian opposition, or the Iranian people would agree to what they would view as a total surrender of their sovereignty.

Moreover, our closest allies in Europe, or in Asia -- much less China or Russia -- certainly are not going to agree to enforce existing sanctions for another 5, 10, 15 years according to the dictates of the U.S. Congress. Because their willingness to support sanctions in the first place was based on Iran ending its pursuit of nuclear weapons. It was not based on the belief that Iran cannot have peaceful nuclear power. And it certainly wasn't based on a desire for regime change in Iran.

As a result, those who say we can just walk away from this deal and maintain sanctions are selling a fantasy. Instead of strengthening our position as some have suggested, Congress's rejection would almost certainly result in multilateral sanctions unraveling. If, as has also been suggested, we tried to maintain unilateral sanctions, beefen them up, we would be standing alone. We cannot dictate the foreign, economic and energy policies of every major power in the world.

In order to even try to do that, we would have to sanction, for example, some of the world's largest banks. We'd have to cut off countries like China from the American financial system. And since they happen to be major purchasers of or our debt, such actions could trigger severe disruptions in our own economy and, by the way, raise questions internationally about the dollar's role as the world's reserve currency.

That's part of the reason why many of the previous unilateral sanctions were waived. What's more likely to happen, should Congress reject this deal, is that Iran would end up with some form of sanctions relief without having to accept any of the constraints or inspections required by this deal. So in that sense, the critics are right: Walk away from this agreement and you will get a better deal -- for Iran.

Now, because more sanctions won't produce the results that the critics want, we have to be honest. Congressional rejection of this deal leaves any U.S. Administration that is absolutely committed to preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon with one option -- another war in the Middle East.

I say this not to be provocative. I am stating a fact. Without this deal, Iran will be in a position -- however tough our rhetoric may be –- to steadily advance its capabilities. Its breakout time, which is already fairly small, could shrink to near zero. Does anyone really doubt that the same voices now raised against this deal will be demanding that whoever is President bomb those nuclear facilities?

And as someone who does firmly believes that Iran must not get a nuclear weapon, and who has wrestled with this issue since the beginning of my presidency, I can tell you that alternatives to military action will have been exhausted once we reject a hard-won diplomatic solution that the world almost unanimously supports.

So let's not mince words. The choice we face is ultimately between diplomacy or some form of war -- maybe not tomorrow, maybe not three months from now, but soon. And here's the irony. As I said before, military action would be far less effective than this deal in preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. That's not just my supposition. Every estimate, including those from Israeli analysts, suggest military action would only set back Iran's program by a few years at best, which is a fraction of the limitations imposed by this deal. It would likely guarantee that inspectors are kicked out of Iran. It is probable that it would drive Iran's program deeper underground. It would certainly destroy the international unity that we've spent so many years building.

Now, there are some opponents -- I have to give them credit; there are opponents of this deal who accept the choice of war. In fact, they argue that surgical strikes against Iran's facilities will be quick and painless. But if we've learned anything from the last decade, it's that wars in general and wars in the Middle East in particular are anything but simple. The only certainty in war is human suffering, uncertain costs, unintended consequences.

We can also be sure that the Americans who bear the heaviest burden are the less than 1 percent of us, the outstanding men and women who serve in uniform, and not those of us who send them to war.

As Commander-in-Chief, I have not shied from using force when necessary. I have ordered tens of thousands of young Americans into combat. I have sat by their bedside sometimes when they come home. I've ordered military action in seven countries. There are times when force is necessary, and if Iran does not abide by this deal, it's possible that we don't have an alternative.

But how can we in good conscience justify war before we've tested a diplomatic agreement that achieves our objectives; that has been agreed to by Iran; that is supported by the rest of the world; and that preserves our options if the deal falls short? How could we justify that to our troops? How could we justify that to the world or to future generations?

In the end, that should be a lesson that we've learned from over a decade of war. On the front end, ask tough questions. Subject our own assumptions to evidence and analysis. Resist the conventional wisdom and the drumbeat of war. Worry less about being labeled weak; worry more about getting it right.

I recognize that resorting to force may be tempting in the face of the rhetoric and behavior that emanates from parts of Iran. It is offensive. It is incendiary. We do take it seriously. But superpowers should not act impulsively in response to taunts, or even provocations that can be addressed short of war. Just because Iranian hardliners chant "Death to America" does not mean that that's what all Iranians believe.

In fact, it's those hardliners who are most comfortable with the status quo. It's those hardliners chanting "Death to America" who have been most opposed to the deal. They're making common cause with the Republican caucus.

The majority of the Iranian people have powerful incentives to urge their government to move in a different, less provocative direction -- incentives that are strengthened by this deal. We should offer them that chance. We should give them that opportunity. It's not guaranteed to succeed. But if they take it, that would be good for Iran, it would be good for the United States. It would be good for a region that has known too much conflict. It would be good for the world.

And if Iran does not move in that direction, if Iran violates this deal, we will have ample ability to respond. The agreements pursued by Kennedy and Reagan with the Soviet Union, those agreements, those treaties involved America accepting significant constraints on our arsenal. As such, they were riskier. This agreement involves no such constraints. The defense budget of the United States is more than 600 billion dollars. To repeat, Iran's is about 15 billion dollars.

Our military remains the ultimate backstop to any security agreement that we make. I have stated that Iran will never be allowed to obtain a nuclear weapon. I have done what is necessary to make sure our military options are real. And I have no doubt that any President who follows me will take the same position.

So let me sum up here. When we carefully examine the arguments against this deal, none of them stand up to scrutiny. That may be why the rhetoric on the other side is so strident. I suppose some of it can be ascribed to knee-jerk partisanship that has become all too familiar; rhetoric that renders every decision that's made a disaster, a surrender -- "you're aiding terrorists; you're endangering freedom."

On the other hand, I do think it's important to acknowledge another, more understandable motivation behind the opposition to this deal, or at least skepticism to this deal, and that is a sincere affinity for our friend and ally, Israel -- an affinity that, as someone who has been a stalwart friend to Israel throughout my career, I deeply share.

When the Israeli government is opposed to something, people in the United States take notice. And they should. No one can blame Israelis for having a deep skepticism about any dealings with a government like Iran's -- which includes leaders who have denied the Holocaust, embrace an ideology of anti-Semitism, facilitate the flow of rockets that are arrayed on Israel's borders, are pointed at Tel Aviv. In such a dangerous neighborhood, Israel has to be vigilant, and it rightly insists that it cannot depend on any other country -- even its great friend the United States -- for its own security. So we have to take seriously concerns in Israel.

But the fact is, partly due to American military and intelligence assistance, which my Administration has provided at unprecedented levels, Israel can defend itself against any conventional danger -- whether from Iran directly or from its proxies. On the other hand, a nuclear-armed Iran changes that equation.

And that's why this deal ultimately must be judged by what it achieves on the central goal of preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. This deal does exactly that. I say this as someone who has done more than any other President to strengthen Israel's security. And I have made clear to the Israeli government that we are prepared to discuss how we can deepen that cooperation even further. Already we've held talks with Israel on concluding another 10-year plan for U.S. security assistance to Israel. We can enhance support for areas like missile defense, information sharing, interdiction -- all to help meet Israel's pressing security needs, and to provide a hedge against any additional activities that Iran may engage in as a consequence of sanctions relief.

But I have also listened to the Israeli security establishment, which warned of the danger posed by a nuclear-armed Iran for decades. In fact, they helped develop many of the ideas that ultimately led to this deal.

So to friends of Israel, and to the Israeli people, I say this: A nuclear-armed Iran is far more dangerous to Israel, to America, and to the world than an Iran that benefits from sanctions relief.

I recognize that Prime Minister Netanyahu disagrees -- disagrees strongly. I do not doubt his sincerity. But I believe he is wrong. I believe the facts support this deal. I believe they are in America's interest and Israel's interest. And as President of the United States, it would be an abrogation of my constitutional duty to act against my best judgment simply because it causes temporary friction with a dear friend and ally. I do not believe that would be the right thing to do for the United States. I do not believe it would be the right thing to do for Israel.

Over the last couple weeks, I have repeatedly challenged anyone opposed to this deal to put forward a better, plausible alternative. I have yet to hear one. What I've heard instead are the same types of arguments that we heard in the run-up to the Iraq War: Iran cannot be dealt with diplomatically; we can take military strikes without significant consequences; we shouldn't worry about what the rest of the world thinks, because once we act, everyone will fall in line; tougher talk, more military threats will force Iran into submission; we can get a better deal.

I know it's easy to play on people's fears, to magnify threats, to compare any attempt at diplomacy to Munich. But none of these arguments hold up. They didn't back in 2002 and 2003; they shouldn't now. The same mindset, in many cases offered by the same people who seem to have no compunction with being repeatedly wrong, led to a war that did more to strengthen Iran, more to isolate the United States than anything we have done in the decades before or since. It's a mindset out of step with the traditions of American foreign policy, where we exhaust diplomacy before war, and debate matters of war and peace in the cold light of truth.

"Peace is not the absence of conflict," President Reagan once said. It is "the ability to cope with conflict by peaceful means."[1] President Kennedy warned Americans, "not to see conflict as inevitable, accommodation as impossible, and communication as nothing more than the exchange of threats."[2] It is time to apply such wisdom. The deal before us doesn't bet on Iran changing, it doesn't require trust; it verifies and requires Iran to forsake a nuclear weapon, just as we struck agreements with the Soviet Union at a time when they were threatening our allies, arming proxies against us, proclaiming their commitment to destroy our way of life, and had nuclear weapons pointed at all of our major cities -- a genuine existential threat.

We live in a complicated world -- a world in which the forces unleashed by human innovation are creating opportunities for our children that were unimaginable for most of human history. It is also a world of persistent threats, a world in which mass violence and cruelty is all too common, and human innovation risks the destruction of all that we hold dear. In this world, the United States of America remains the most powerful nation on Earth, and I believe that we will remain such for decades to come. But we are one nation among many.

And what separates us from the empires of old, what has made us exceptional, is not the mere fact of our military might. Since World War II, the deadliest war in human history, we have used our power to try to bind nations together in a system of international law. We have led an evolution of those human institutions President Kennedy spoke about -- to prevent the spread of deadly weapons, to uphold peace and security, and promote human progress.

We now have the opportunity to build on that progress. We built a coalition and held it together through sanctions and negotiations, and now we have before us a solution that prevents Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, without resorting to war. As Americans, we should be proud of this achievement. And as members of Congress reflect on their pending decision, I urge them to set aside political concerns, shut out the noise, consider the stakes involved with the vote that you will cast.

If Congress kills this deal, we will lose more than just constraints on Iran's nuclear program, or the sanctions we have painstakingly built. We will have lost something more precious: America's credibility as a leader of diplomacy; America's credibility as the anchor of the international system.

John F. Kennedy cautioned here, more than 50 years ago, at this university, that "the pursuit of peace is not as dramatic as the pursuit of war."[3] But it's so very important. It is surely the pursuit of peace that is most needed in this world so full of strife.

My fellow Americans, contact your representatives in Congress. Remind them of who we are. Remind them of what is best in us and what we stand for, so that we can leave behind a world that is more secure and more peaceful for our children.

Thank you very much.

[1] See esp. Benjamin Netanyahu's 2015 Address to a Joint Session of Congress

[2] Ronald Reagan, Eureka College Commencement Address (9 May 1982)

[3] John F. Kennedy, American University Commencement Address (10 June 1963)

[4] Ibid