



AmericanRhetoric.com

Barack Obama

Islamic Society of Baltimore Address

delivered 3 February 2016, Baltimore, Maryland



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Well, good afternoon. And, Sabah, thank you for the wonderful introduction and for your example -- your devotion to your faith and your education, and your service to others. You're an inspiration. You're going to be a fantastic doctor. And I suspect, Sabah, your parents are here because they wanted to see you so -- where are Sabah's parents? There you go. Good job, Mom. She did great, didn't she? She was terrific.

To everyone here at the Islamic Society of Baltimore, thank you for welcoming me here today. I want to thank Muslim Americans leaders from across this city and this state, and some who traveled even from out of state to be here. I want to recognize Congressman John Sarbanes, who is here. As well as two other great leaders in Congress -- and proud Muslim Americans -- Congressman Keith Ellison from the great state of Minnesota -- and Congressman Andre Carson from the great state of Indiana.

This mosque, like so many in our country, is an all-American story. You've been part of this city for nearly half a century. You serve thousands of families -- some who've lived here for decades as well as immigrants from many countries who've worked to become proud American citizens.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Now, a lot of Americans have never visited a mosque. To the folks watching this today who haven't -- think of your own church, or synagogue, or temple, and a mosque like this will be very familiar. This is where families come to worship and express their love for God and each other. There's a school where teachers open young minds. Kids play baseball and football and basketball -- boys and girls -- I hear they're pretty good. Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts meet, recite the Pledge of Allegiance here.

With interfaith dialogue, you build bridges of understanding with other faith communities -- Christians and Jews. There's a health clinic that serves the needy, regardless of their faith. And members of this community are out in the broader community, working for social justice and urban development. As voters, you come here to meet candidates. As one of your members said, "just look at the way we live...we are true Americans."

So the first thing I want to say is two words that Muslim Americans don't hear often enough -- and that is, thank you. Thank you for serving your community. Thank you for lifting up the lives of your neighbors, and for helping keep us strong and united as one American family. We are grateful for that.

Now, this brings me to the other reason I wanted to come here today. I know that in Muslim communities across our country, this is a time of concern and, frankly, a time of some fear. Like all Americans, you're worried about the threat of terrorism. But on top of that, as Muslim Americans, you also have another concern -- and that is your entire community so often is targeted or blamed for the violent acts of the very few.

The Muslim American community remains relatively small --several million people in this country. And as a result, most Americans don't necessarily know -- or at least don't know that they know -- a Muslim personally. And as a result, many only hear about Muslims and Islam from the news after an act of terrorism, or in distorted media portrayals in TV or film, all of which gives this hugely distorted impression.

And since 9/11, but more recently, since the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, you've seen too often people conflating the horrific acts of terrorism with the beliefs of an entire faith. And of course, recently, we've heard inexcusable political rhetoric against Muslim Americans that has no place in our country.

No surprise, then, that threats and harassment of Muslim Americans have surged. Here at this mosque, twice last year, threats were made against your children. Around the country, women wearing the hijab -- just like Sabah -- have been targeted. We've seen children bullied. We've seen mosques vandalized. Sikh Americans and others who are perceived to be Muslims have been targeted, as well.



AmericanRhetoric.com

I just had a chance to meet with some extraordinary Muslim Americans from across the country who are doing all sorts of work. Some of them are doctors; some of them are community leaders; religious leaders. All of them were doing extraordinary work not just in the Muslim community but in the American community. And they're proud of their work in business and education, and on behalf of social justice and the environment and education. I should point out they were all much younger than me -- which is happening more frequently these days. And you couldn't help but be inspired, hearing about the extraordinary work that they're doing. But you also could not help but be heartbroken to hear their worries and their anxieties.

Some of them are parents, and they talked about how their children were asking, are we going to be forced out of the country, or, are we going to be rounded up? Why do people treat us like that? Conversations that you shouldn't have to have with children -- not in this country. Not at this moment.

And that's an anxiety echoed in letters I get from Muslim Americans around the country. I've had people write to me and say, I feel like I'm a second-class citizen. I've had mothers write and say, "my heart cries every night," thinking about how her daughter might be treated at school. A girl from Ohio, 13 years old, told me, "I'm scared." A girl from Texas signed her letter "a confused 14-year-old trying to find her place in the world."

These are children just like mine. And the notion that they would be filled with doubt and questioning their places in this great country of ours at a time when they've got enough to worry about -- it's hard being a teenager already -- that's not who we are.

We're one American family. And when any part of our family starts to feel separate or second-class or targeted, it tears at the very fabric of our nation.

It's a challenge to our values -- and that means we have much work to do. We've got to tackle this head on. We have to be honest and clear about it. And we have to speak out. This is a moment when, as Americans, we have to truly listen to each other and learn from each other. And I believe it has to begin with a common understanding of some basic facts. And I express these facts, although they'd be obvious to many of the people in this place, because, unfortunately, it's not facts that are communicated on a regular basis through our media.

So let's start with this fact: For more than a thousand years, people have been drawn to Islam's message of peace. And the very word itself, Islam, comes from salam -- peace. The standard greeting is as-salamu alaykum -- peace be upon you. And like so many faiths, Islam is rooted in a commitment to compassion and mercy and justice and charity. Whoever wants to enter paradise, the Prophet Muhammad taught, "let him treat people the way he would love to be treated." For Christians like myself, I'm assuming that sounds familiar.



AmericanRhetoric.com

The world's 1.6 billion Muslims are as diverse as humanity itself. They are Arabs and Africans. They're from Latin America to Southeast Asia; Brazilians, Nigerians, Bangladeshis, Indonesians. They are white and brown and black. There's a large African American Muslim community. That diversity is represented here today. A 14-year-old boy in Texas who's Muslim spoke for many when he wrote to me and said, "We just want to live in peace."

Here's another fact: Islam has always been part of America. Starting in colonial times, many of the slaves brought here from Africa were Muslim. And even in their bondage, some kept their faith alive. A few even won their freedom and became known to many Americans. And when enshrining the freedom of religion in our Constitution and our Bill of Rights, our Founders meant what they said when they said it applied to all religions.

Back then, Muslims were often called Mahometans. And Thomas Jefferson explained that the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom he wrote was designed to protect all faiths -- and I'm quoting Thomas Jefferson now -- "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mahometan."

Jefferson and John Adams had their own copies of the Quran. Benjamin Franklin wrote that "even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach to us, he would find a pulpit at his service." So this is not a new thing.

Generations of Muslim Americans helped to build our nation. They were part of the flow of immigrants who became farmers and merchants. They built America's first mosque, surprisingly enough, in North Dakota. America's oldest surviving mosque is in Iowa. The first Islamic center in New York City was built in the 1890s. Muslim Americans worked on Henry Ford's assembly line, cranking out cars. A Muslim American designed the skyscrapers of Chicago.

In 1957, when dedicating the Islamic center in Washington, D.C., President Eisenhower said, "I should like to assure you, my Islamic friends, that under the American Constitution...and in American hearts...this place of worship, is just as welcome...as any other religion."

And perhaps the most pertinent fact, Muslim Americans enrich our lives today in every way. They're our neighbors, the teachers who inspire our children, the doctors who trust us with our health -- future doctors like Sabah. They're scientists who win Nobel Prizes, young entrepreneurs who are creating new technologies that we use all the time. They're the sports heroes we cheer for -- like Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Hakeem Olajuwon. And by the way, when Team USA marches into the next Olympics, one of the Americans waving the red, white and blue -- will a fencing champion, wearing her hijab, Ibtihaj Muhammad, who is here today. Stand up. I told her to bring home the gold. Not to put any pressure on you.

Muslim Americans keep us safe. They're our police and our firefighters. They're in homeland security, in our intelligence community. They serve honorably in our armed forces -- meaning they fight and bleed and die for our freedom. Some rest in Arlington National Cemetery.



AmericanRhetoric.com

So Muslim Americans are some of the most resilient and patriotic Americans you'll ever meet. We're honored to have some of our proud Muslim American servicemembers here today. Please stand if you're here, so we can thank you for your service.

So part of the reason I want to lay out these facts is because, in the discussions that I was having with these incredibly accomplished young people, they were pointing that so often they felt invisible. And part of what we have to do is to lift up the contributions of the Muslim American community not when there's a problem, but all the time.

Our television shows should have some Muslim characters that are unrelated to national security -- because -- it's not that hard to do. There was a time when there were no black people on television. And you can tell good stories while still representing the reality of our communities.

Now, we do have another fact that we have to acknowledge. Even as the overwhelming majority -- and I repeat, the overwhelming majority -- of the world's Muslims embrace Islam as a source of peace, it is undeniable that a small fraction of Muslims propagate a perverted interpretation of Islam. This is the truth.

Groups like al Qaeda and ISIL, they're not the first extremists in history to misuse God's name. We've seen it before, across faiths. But right now, there is a organized extremist element that draws selectively from Islamic texts, twists them in an attempt to justify their killing and their terror. They combine it with false claims that America and the West are at war with Islam. And this warped thinking that has found adherents around the world -- including, as we saw, tragically, in Boston and Chattanooga and San Bernardino -- is real. It's there. And it creates tensions and pressure that disproportionately burden the overwhelming majority of law-abiding Muslim citizens.

And the question then is, how do we move forward together? How do we keep our country strong and united? How do we defend ourselves against organizations that are bent on killing innocents? And it can't be the work of any one faith alone. It can't be just a burden on the Muslim community -- although the Muslim community has to play a role. We all have responsibilities. So with the time I have left, I just want to suggest a few principles that I believe can guide us.

First, at a time when others are trying to divide us along lines of religion or sect, we have to reaffirm that most fundamental of truths: We are all God's children. We're all born equal, with inherent dignity.

And so often, we focus on our outward differences and we forget how much we share. Christians, Jews, Muslims -- we're all, under our faiths, descendants of Abraham. So mere tolerance of different religions is not enough.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Our faiths summon us to embrace our common humanity. "O mankind," the Quran teaches, we have "made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another." So all of us have the task of expressing our religious faith in a way that seeks to build bridges rather than to divide.

Second, as Americans, we have to stay true to our core values, and that includes freedom of religion for all faiths. I already mentioned our Founders, like Jefferson, knew that religious liberty is essential not only to protect religion but because religion helps strengthen our nation -- if it is free, if it is not an extension of the state. Part of what's happened in the Middle East and North Africa and other places where we see sectarian violence is religion being a tool for another agenda -- for power, for control. Freedom of religion helps prevent that, both ways -- protects religious faiths, protects the state from -- or those who want to take over the state from using religious animosity as a tool for their own ends.

That doesn't mean that those of us with religious faith should not be involved. We have to be active citizenry. But we have to respect the fact that we have freedom of religion.

Remember, many preachers and pastors fought to abolish the evil of slavery. People of faith advocated to improve conditions for workers and ban child labor. Dr. King was joined by people of many faiths, challenging us to live up to our ideals. And that civil activism, that civic participation that's the essence of our democracy, it is enhanced by freedom of religion.

Now, we have to acknowledge that there have been times where we have fallen short of our ideals. By the way, Thomas Jefferson's opponents tried to stir things up by suggesting he was a Muslim -- so I was not the first -- No, it's true, it's true. Look it up. I'm in good company.

But it hasn't just been attacks of that sort that have been used. Mormon communities have been attacked throughout our history. Catholics, including, most prominently, JFK -- John F. Kennedy -- when he ran for President, was accused of being disloyal. There was a suggestion that he would be taking orders from the Pope as opposed to upholding his constitutional duties. Anti-Semitism in this country has a sad and long history, and Jews were excluded routinely from colleges and professions and from public office.

And so if we're serious about freedom of religion -- and I'm speaking now to my fellow Christians who remain the majority in this country -- we have to understand an attack on one faith is an attack on all our faiths. And when any religious group is targeted, we all have a responsibility to speak up. And we have to reject a politics that seeks to manipulate prejudice or bias, and targets people because of religion.

We've got to make sure that hate crimes are punished, and that the civil rights of all Americans are upheld.



AmericanRhetoric.com

And just as faith leaders, including Muslims, must speak out when Christians are persecuted around the world -- or when anti-Semitism is on the rise -- because the fact is, is that there are Christians who are targeted now in the Middle East, despite having been there for centuries, and there are Jews who've lived in places like France for centuries who now feel obliged to leave because they feel themselves under assault --sometimes by Muslims. We have to be consistent in condemning hateful rhetoric and violence against everyone. And that includes against Muslims here in the United States of America.

So none of us can be silent. We can't be bystanders to bigotry. And together, we've got to show that America truly protects all faiths.

Which brings me to my next point: As we protect our country from terrorism, we should not reinforce the ideas and the rhetoric of the terrorists themselves. I often hear it said that we need moral clarity in this fight. And the suggestion is somehow that if I would simply say, these are all Islamic terrorists, then we would actually have solved the problem by now, apparently. Well, I agree, we actually do need moral clarity. Let's have some moral clarity.

Groups like ISIL are desperate for legitimacy. They try to portray themselves as religious leaders and holy warriors who speak for Islam. I refuse to give them legitimacy. We must never give them that legitimacy. They're not defending Islam. They're not defending Muslims. The vast majority of the people they kill are innocent Muslim men, women and children.

And, by the way, the notion that America is at war with Islam ignores the fact that the world's religions are a part of who we are. We can't be at war with any other religion because the world's religions are a part of the very fabric of the United States, our national character.

So the best way for us to fight terrorism is to deny these organizations legitimacy and to show that here in the United States of America, we do not suppress Islam; we celebrate and lift up the success of Muslim Americans. That's how we show the lie that they're trying to propagate. We shouldn't play into terrorist propaganda. And we can't suggest that Islam itself is at the root of the problem. That betrays our values. It alienates Muslim Americans. It's hurtful to those kids who are trying to go to school and are members of the Boy Scouts, and are thinking about joining our military.

That kind of mindset helps our enemies. It helps our enemies recruit. It makes us all less safe. So let's be clear about that.

Now, finally, just as all Americans have a responsibility to reject discrimination -- I've said this before -- Muslims around the world have a responsibility to reject extremist ideologies that are trying to penetrate within Muslim communities.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Here at this mosque, and across our country and around the world, Muslim leaders are roundly and repeatedly and consistently condemning terrorism. And around the globe, Muslims who've dared to speak out have often been targeted and even killed. So those voices are there; we just have to amplify them more.

And it was interesting, in the discussion I had before I came out, some people said, why is there always a burden on us? When a young man in Charleston shoots African Americans in a church, there's not an expectation that every white person in America suddenly is explaining that they're not racist. They can Everybody is assumed to be horrified by that act. And I recognize that sometimes that doesn't feel fair.

But part of the answer is to make sure that the Muslim community in all of its variety, in all the good works that it's doing, in all the talent that's on display, that it's out there visible on a consistent basis -- not just at a certain moment.

But what is also true is, is that there is a battle of hearts and minds that takes place -- that is taking place right now, and American Muslims are better positioned than anybody to show that it is possible to be faithful to Islam and to be part of a pluralistic society, and to be on the cutting-edge of science, and to believe in democracy.

And so I would urge all of you not to see this as a burden, but as a great opportunity and a great privilege to show who you are. To use a little Christian expression -- let your light shine. Because when you do you'll make clear that this is not a clash of civilizations between the West and Islam. This is a struggle between the peace-loving, overwhelming majority of Muslims around the world and a radical, tiny minority. And ultimately, I'm confident that the overwhelming majority will win that battle. Muslims will decide the future of your faith. And I'm confident in the direction that it will go.

But across the Islamic world, influential voices should consistently speak out with an affirmative vision of their faith. And it's happening. These are the voices of Muslim clerics who teach that Islam prohibits terrorism, for the Quran says whoever kills an innocent, it is as if he has killed all mankind. These are the voices of Muslim scholars, some of whom join us today, who know Islam has a tradition of respect for other faiths; and Muslim teachers who point out that the first word revealed in the Quran -- igra -- means "read" -- to seek knowledge, to question assumptions.

Muslim political leaders have to push back on the lie that the West oppresses Muslims, and against conspiracy theories that says America is the cause of every ill in the Middle East. Now, that doesn't mean that Muslim Americans aren't free to criticize American -- U.S. foreign policy. That's part of being an American. I promise you, as the President of the United States, I'm mindful that that is a healthy tradition that is alive and well in America. But like leaders everywhere, these leaders have been offering, and need to continue to offer, a positive vision for progress, and that includes political and economic progress.



AmericanRhetoric.com

And we have to acknowledge that much of the violence in places like the Middle East is now turning into fights between sects -- Shia, Sunni and others -- where differences are often exploited to serve political agendas, as I said earlier. And this bloodshed is destroying Muslim families and communities, and there has to be global pressure to have the vision and the courage to end this kind of thinking and this approach to organizing political power.

It's not historically unique. It's happened in every part of the world -- from Northern Ireland to Africa, to Asia, to right here in the United States -- in the past. But it is something that we have to fight against.

And we know it's possible. Across the history of Islam, different sects traditionally have lived and thrived together peacefully. And in many parts of the world they do today, including here in the United States.

Like people of all religions, Muslims living their faith in a modern, pluralistic world are called upon to uphold human rights, to make sure that everyone has opportunity. That includes the aspirations of women and youth and all people. If we expect our own dignity to be respected, so must we respect the dignity of others.

So let me conclude by saying that as Muslim communities stand up for the future that you believe in, that you exhibit in your daily lives, as you teach your children, America will be your partner. We will -- I will -- do everything I can to lift up the multiplicity of Muslim voices that promote pluralism and peace. We will continue to reach out to young Muslims around the world, empowering them with science and technology and entrepreneurship, so they can pursue their God-given potential, and help build up their communities and provide opportunity. It's why we will continue to partner with Muslim American communities -- not just to help you protect against extremist threats, but to expand health care and education and opportunity -- because that's the best way to build strong, resilient communities.

Our values must guide us in this work. Engagement with Muslim American communities must never be a cover for surveillance. We can't give in to profiling entire groups of people. There's no one single profile of terrorists. We can't securitize our entire relationship with Muslim Americans. We can't deal with you solely through the prism of law enforcement. We've got to build trust and mutual respect. That's how we'll keep our communities strong and our communities united.

As I was in discussion with the young people before I came in here, I said this will be a process. Law enforcement has a tough job. Some of these groups are specifically trying to target Muslim youth. We're going to have to be partners in this process. There will be times where the relationship is clumsy or mishandled. But I want you to know that from the President to the FBI Director, to everybody in law enforcement, my directive and their understanding is, is that this is something we have to do together. And if we don't do it well, then we're actually not making ourselves safer; we're making ourselves less safe.



AmericanRhetoric.com

And here, I want to speak directly to the young people who may be listening. In our lives, we all have many identities. We are sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters. We're classmates; Cub Scout troop members. We're followers of our faith. We're citizens of our country. And today, there are voices in this world, particularly over the Internet, who are constantly claiming that you have to choose between your identities -- as a Muslim, for example, or an American. Do not believe them. If you're ever wondering whether you fit in here, let me say it as clearly as I can, as President of the United States: You fit in here -- right here. You're right where you belong. You're part of America, too. You're not Muslim or American. You're Muslim and American.

Don't grow cynical. Don't respond to ignorance by embracing a world view that suggests you must choose between your faith and your patriotism. Don't believe that you have to choose between your best impulses and somehow embrace a world view that pits us against each other -- or, even worse, glorifies violence. Understand your power to bring about change. Stay engaged in your community. Help move our country forward -- your country forward.

We are blessed to live in a nation where even if we sometimes stumble, even if we sometimes fall short, we never stop striving for our ideals. We keep moving closer to that more perfect union. We're a country where, if you work hard and if you play by the rules, you can ultimately make it, no matter who you are or how you pray. It may not always start off even in the race, but here, more than any place else, there's the opportunity to run that race.

And as we go forward, I want every Muslim American to remember you are not alone. Your fellow Americans stand with you -- just as Sabah described her friends after she decided that she was going to start wearing a hijab. That's not unusual. Because just as so often we only hear about Muslims after a terrorist attack, so often we only hear about Americans' response to Muslims after a hate crime has happened, we don't always hear about the extraordinary respect and love and community that so many Americans feel.

I'm thinking about the seven-year-old boy in Texas who emptied his piggy bank to help a mosque that had been vandalized. Or all the faith communities that rallied around Muslim Americans after the tragedy in Chapel Hill. The churches and the synagogues standing shoulder-to-shoulder with their local mosques, including the woman carrying a sign saying "We love our Muslim neighbors." Think of our men and women in uniform who, when they heard that a little girl was afraid because she's a Muslim, sent her a message -- "I Will Protect You."

I want every American to remember how Muslim communities are standing up for others, as well. Because right now, as we speak, there are Muslims in Kenya who saved Christians from terrorists, and Muslims who just met in Morocco to protect religious minorities, including Christians and Jews. The good people of this mosque helped this city move forward after the turmoil of last year. Muslim Americans across the country helped African American churches rebuild after arson.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Remember the Muslim Americans in Boston who reached out to victims of the Marathon bombing; the Muslim Americans across the country who raised money for the families of San Bernardino; the Muslim Americans in Chattanooga who honored our fallen servicemembers, one of them saying, "in the name of God, the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, God bless our fallen heroes."

We are one American family. We will rise and fall together. It won't always be easy. There will be times where our worst impulses are given voice. But I believe that ultimately, our best voices will win out. And that gives me confidence and faith in the future.

After more than 200 years, our blended heritage, the patchwork quilt which is America, that is not a weakness, that is one of our greatest strengths. It's what makes us a beacon to the world. It's what led that mother who wrote to me -- the one who worries about her young daughter -- it led her to end her letter with hope, despite her fears. She said, "I still believe in one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

May God's peace be upon you.

May God bless the United States of America.

Thank you very much, everybody.