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**Barack Obama**

*Town Hall Youth Leaders in Jamaica*

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**AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED:** Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Greetings, massive! Wah gwaan, Jamaica? Can everybody please give Aubrey a big round of applause for the great introduction? I want to thank the University of the West Indies for hosting us. Big up, You-Wee! Thank you. I've been making myself at home here.

It is great to be in beautiful Jamaica -- not only because I'm proud to be the first President of the United States to visit in more than 30 years, but because I just like the vibe here. I was born on an island, and it was warm, and so I feel right at home.

And I'm grateful for the warm Jamaican hospitality that I received this morning, including from Prime Minister Simpson-Miller. I also had the chance to meet with leaders from across the Caribbean, where we focused on issues of shared prosperity and shared security. And tomorrow, I'll meet with leaders from across the hemisphere at the Summit of the Americas in Panama.

But before my trip became all business, I wanted to come here and hear from young people like you. Because it is your generation who will shape the future of our countries and our region and this planet that we share long after those of us who are currently in public service are gone from the stage.

So I'm going to only speak for a few minutes at the top, because I'd rather spend time taking questions from you, and also because after we have a chance for our town hall, I get a chance to say hi to Usain Bolt and Shelly Ann Fraser-Pryce.



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When you have the fastest people on the planet, you've got to say hi to them, right? Because that's fast. There are a lot of people out there, and they're the fastest.

Now, we are not just nations, we're also neighbors. Tens of millions of Americans are bound to the Caribbean and the Americas through ties of commerce, but also ties of kin. More than one million Americans trace their ancestry to Jamaica. More than one million Americans visit Jamaica each year. So we're committed to you and this region. And as I've said before, in our foreign policy there are no senior or junior partners in the Americas; there are just partners.

And that's one reason why the United States has started a new chapter in our relations with the people of Cuba. We will continue to have some differences with the Cuban government, but we don't want to be imprisoned by the past. When something doesn't work for 50 years, you don't just keep on doing it; you try something new. And we are as committed as ever to supporting human rights and political freedom in Cuba and around the world. But I believe that engagement is a more powerful force than isolation, and the changes we are making can help improve the lives of the Cuban people. And I also believe that this new beginning will be good for the United States and the entire hemisphere.

My point is, I believe we can move past some of the old debates that so often define the region, and move forward in a way that benefits your generation with new thinking -- an energetic, impatient, dynamic and diverse generation that you represent, both in the United States and across this hemisphere. More than 100 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean are between the ages of 15 and 24. Most of the region is under 35.

And what gives me so much hope about your generation is that you're more interested in the hard work of waging peace than resorting to the quick impulses of conflict. You're more interested in the hard work of building prosperity through entrepreneurship, not cronyism or corruption. You're more eager for progress that comes not by holding down any segment of society, but by holding up the rights of every human being, regardless of what we look like, or how we pray, or who we love.

You care less about the world as it has been, and more about the world as it should be and can be. And unlike any other time in our history, the technology at your disposal means that you don't have to wait for the change that you're looking for; you have the freedom to create it in your own powerful and disruptive ways. Many of you already have, whether by starting your own enterprises or by helping others start theirs.

And I'm going to just single out two remarkable young leaders who are here today because I think they're an example of what is possible, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

So Angeline Jackson is here today. Where is Angeline? There she is, right there.



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Several years ago, when Angeline was 19, she and a friend were kidnapped, held at gunpoint and sexually assaulted. And as a woman, and as a lesbian, justice and society were not always on her side. But instead of remaining silent, she chose to speak out and started her own organization to advocate for women like her, and get them treatment and get them justice, and push back against stereotypes, and give them some sense of their own power.

And she became a global activist. But more than anything, she cares about her Jamaica, and making it a place where everybody, no matter their color, or their class, or their sexual orientation, can live in equality and opportunity. That's the power of one person, what they can do.

Jerome Cowans grew up in a tough part of Kingston. Where's Jerome? When Jerome was 12, he saw a friend gunned down. And when he looked at the shooters, he said, "I realized that wasn't a life I wanted to live. They had expensive machinery, but they had nothing else." So at the ripe old age of 13, he founded a youth group to help others like him stay on the right path. And he started small, with only six people, but they had one big thing in common and they believed that change was possible.

And like Angeline, he was threatened for his work, but he kept at it. And he said, "Things won't get any better if no one does anything." And today, the LEAD Youth Club he started has six chapters, including one in Colombia. His work has taken him to five continents. Last year, he became the first Jamaican to receive the Nelson Mandela Innovation Award. He's just 25 years old.

So individuals like those two young people -- the young people here today -- you remind me of something that Bob Marley once said. You know I went to his house yesterday. I thought, I'm only five minutes from his house, I got to go check it out. And one of the displays has to do when he was shot right before a concert he was supposed to give, trying to bring the political factions in Jamaica together. And he was treated for his wounds and he went ahead with the program, went ahead with the show. And somebody asked, well, why would you do that? He said, "The people who are trying to make this world worse are not taking the day off. Why should I?" Why should I?

So none of us can afford to take the day off. And I want you to have every chance, every tool you need to make this world better. So today I'm announcing nearly \$70 million in U.S. investments in education, training, and employment programs for our young people throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. And these investments will help young people in unemployed and impoverished and marginalized communities, and give them a chance to gain the skills they need to compete and succeed in the 21st century economy.

And that's not all. As President, some of the initiatives I'm most proud of are ones that increase my country's engagement with the next generation of leaders like Angeline and Jerome and all of you -- leaders in government and civil society, and entrepreneurship and the private sector.



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Four years ago, I launched an initiative called "100,000 Strong in the Americas." And the goal was to have 100,000 U.S. students studying in this region, and 100,000 of this region's students studying in the United States by the end of this decade. And we are on track to meet that goal.

So today, to build on that progress, I'm proud to launch the Young Leaders of the Americas Initiative right here in Kingston. Let me say this. This is not your traditional exchange. We're going to seek out the most innovative young entrepreneurs and civil society leaders in the Caribbean, Latin America, and we're going to give them a chance to earn a substantial continuum of the training and the resources and the connections, the networks and the capital that you need to make a difference.

So this year, we'll bring two dozen entrepreneurs and civil society leaders from Latin America and the Caribbean -- including young Cuban leaders -- to the United States. Then next year, we'll increase this fellowship to 250 young leaders. And we'll help you to expand your commercial and social ventures; we'll embed you in an American business and incubators. We'll give U.S. participants the chance to continue their collaboration with you in your home countries.

So the idea is that you'll get a chance to implement your ideas but now have linkages that give you access to capital and research and all the things you need to mobilize and implement the kinds of things that you're doing.

And this isn't charity for us. This is an investment in your future, because that means it's an investment in our future -- a future where climate researchers in the Amazon can collaborate with scientists in Alaska. An idea in Barbados suddenly can be developed in an incubator in Boston. Anti-gang activities in Honduras can be connected to similar activities in Houston, Texas. It's a future where any kid from Kingston can choose a path that opens his or her horizons beyond their neighborhood to the wider world.

And that impulse to make the world better, to push back on those who try to make it worse, that's something that your generation has to hold on to. And you have to remember, it's never easy; there are no days off. But if there's one thing that I know from my own life, it's that with hard work and with hope, change is always within our reach.

The Jamaican-American poet Claude McKay, who was a central figure of the Harlem renaissance, once wrote something along those lines: "We must strive on to gain the height although it may not be in sight." As long as we've got young strivers like you -- and I hope to see you in Washington as part of this Young Leaders of the Americas Initiative -- I'm confident that a brighter future will always be in sight.

So thank you very much. With that, let's take some questions. Alright? So....

[off mic....transmission problems]



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**President Obama:** All right, since we're getting to work I'm going to take my jacket off and get comfortable. All right. There...are no rules to this except that there are people with microphones in the audience, so wait for them to come when I call on you. We're going to go boy, girl, boy, girl so everybody gets a chance, so it's fair.

Before your question, please introduce yourself and tell us where you are from, okay? And try to keep your question or comment relatively short so we can get more questions or comments in, okay? We'll start with this young lady right here in the white blouse. It's a little tight here.

**Question:** Thank you. Yani Campbell [ph], a lecturer at the University of the West Indies. Thank you so much for your talk, very interesting. And I wondered as well, on the Cuban issue, now that your policy has actually changed towards Cuba, I wondered about your views on how it is that we should approach -- CARICOM should approach its relationship with Cuba in terms of deepening that relationship. Should they now perhaps move to join in CARICOM? Thank you.

**President Obama:** Well, first of all, I think CARICOM can make its own decisions and we'll respect it. Cuba will be participating in the Summit of the Americas, and I think -- it is my strong belief that if we engage, that that offers the greatest prospect for escaping some of the constraints of the past.

I think the Cuban people are extraordinary and have huge potential. And what's encouraging is, is that the overwhelming majority of Cubans are interested in ending the Cold War -- the last vestige of the Cold War -- and moving forward. It's going to take some time for the United States to fully implement some of the things that have already been agreed to, and it's going to take a little bit longer before you actually have complete normal relations between the United States and Cuba.

What I would say to Caribbean countries is, absolutely, you should continue to engage in Cuba in the ways that you've already doing -- you've already done in the past. I do think that it is important for all of us to be able to speak honestly where we see concerns about issues of human rights and political freedom. And I'm not saying anything publicly that I haven't said directly to Raul Castro. There are still constraints on the ability of the Cuban people to express themselves, or to organize political parties, or to start a business. And sometimes, the same things we expect for ourselves and our country, somehow we think other people don't want.

But I believe that each country -- I believe each country has its own unique cultures, its own unique traditions. I don't expect every country to pursue the same policies or have the same political practices as the United States. And I am certainly aware of the flaws that exist in our own country that we have to fix. But I do believe there are certain principles that are universal.



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I think that all people want basic dignity and want basic freedom, and want to be able to worship as they please without being discriminated against, or they should be able to speak their mind about an important issue pertaining to their community without being arrested. And so wherever we see that, we try to speak out.

But what we also try to do is engage and recognize that even with countries that we have differences, there's also going to be commonality and overlap. And the United States and Cuba should both have an interest in dealing with climate change, for example, because when the oceans start lapping upon Miami or on Havana, nobody is going to distinguish, well, where do they stand on this or that ideological issue. And so we have to find where there are areas of cooperation, but I will continue to try to be consistent in speaking out on behalf of the issues that are important to all people, not just some.

All right, it's a gentleman's turn. This gentleman right here. He looks very serious; he's got glasses. Looking sharp. Plus, he's got a copy of my book. So he's clearly a wise man.

**Question:** Thank you very much. My name is Chef Brian Lumley -- I'm a young Jamaican chef here. And I own a restaurant -- 689 by Brian Lumley. Just saying. My question to you -- I'm going to stay a little bit off the politics for a bit. And I've witnessed your journey a lot, and the question is kind of two-part. If you go back and give yourself one piece of advice before the start of your 2008 term, what would it be? And the second part is if you can sign this book when you're finished. Thank you very much.

**President Obama:** I'll sign the book. So the question was, for those couldn't hear: If I were to go back and give myself advice before I started in 2008, what would the advice be?

I suppose I could have started dying my hair earlier -- so then people wouldn't say, man, he's getting old. You're going like this -- at least I got hair, man. I'm teasing you. I'm messing with you.

I think that -- keep in mind that when I came into office we were going through the worst global financial crisis since the 1930s, and so we had to make a series of decisions very quickly, many of which were unpopular. Overall, I think we got it right. I think we did the right thing. And because, I think, we took these steps, not only were we able to avoid the kind of Great Depression that we saw in the 1930s, not only was America able to bounce back and start growing more rapidly than most of our peers, drive down unemployment faster, create more jobs faster, but that also had an impact on the global economy and it had an impact on the Caribbean economy, that we were able to bounce back quicker than we might have if we hadn't taken those steps.

But it was, I think, costly politically. And what I would have probably advised was that I might have needed to warn the American people and paint a picture for them that was more accurate about the fact that it would take some time to dig ourselves out of a very big hole.



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Because FDR, when he came into office, the Great Depression had already been going on for two, three years, and so people understood how serious it was. With us, we came in just as people were really starting to feel the impacts. And trying to paint a picture that we'll make it but it's going to take some time, and here are the steps that we need to take -- I think I would have advised myself to do a better job spending more time not just getting the policy right, but also describing it in ways that people understood, that gave them confidence in their own future. I think that would probably be the most important advice that I would have given myself.

All right, it's a young lady's turn. That young lady right there. Yes, you. You, yes. Oh, well, I'll call on both of you. I'll call on you later. Go ahead.

**Question:** Okay, so we're here and we're looking at you, and we're all very honored to be here and very taken about by your leadership qualities. And seeing that you are the President of the United States of America and you're so influential, I want to know how you handle the mental strain that comes with being in charge of so much.

**President Obama:** What's your name?

**Question:** Kimberly -- from the University of the West Indies.

**President Obama:** Fantastic. How do I handle stress? You know, I'll be honest with you. One of the things that happens as you get older is you start appreciating both your strengths and your weaknesses. Hopefully you gain a little wisdom about what you're good at and what you're not. And Michelle can give you a long list of things I'm not good at. But one thing that I've always had, which has served me well, is a pretty good temperament. And I attribute that partly from growing up on an island with trade winds and beaches, and it makes you calm. But I try not to get too high when things are going well so that I don't get too low when things are going badly, and try to keep a long view of how the process of social change takes place, and how the trajectory of your own life is going to proceed.

We get caught up in the day-to-day so much, and it's interesting now when I'm talking to my daughters and "somebody said something at school," or there's -- "well, I didn't do quite as well on that test as I wanted." And you want them to take it seriously, but you also want to say to them, you know what, this, too, shall pass; I promise you three months from now, much less 30 years from now, you will not remember.

And so I think that trying to keep your eye on the prize of where it is that you want to go and not be discouraged or overly impressed with yourself on a day-to-day basis I think is very important. And then you have to get some exercise in the morning. I don't run as fast as these folks, but I get a little exercise, which does help in terms of stress relief.

All right. It's a gentleman's turn. Let's see, somebody from this side. This young man right here in the sharp-looking checkered shirt.



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**Question:** Good afternoon again, Mr. President. Especially as it relates to human rights and social change -- I'm Jomain McKenzie and I'm a focal point with the Global Fund Board. As it relates to human rights and social change, how do you make the decision to allow societies to go through the natural evolutionary process of having change occur on their own versus having governments exert policies to make these same political social changes?

**President Obama:** That's a really interesting question. It's an interesting question and it's one that I have to struggle with all the time.

Every society, as I said, is at a different phase in development, in their own history; they have different cultural traditions. And so the way I think about it is, is that the United States has certain core values and principles that we believe deeply in. And we don't necessarily expect that every country will formulate how to secure those ideals and those principles. We don't expect it to be done exactly as we do any more than we expect every -- obviously, our democracy is not the same as a Jamaican democracy or a British democracy or Australian democracy. But we believe in democracy. We think that if people have the ability to speak out about their own lives, some sense of agency, then that society will be stronger. And that doesn't mean that we won't work with a country that doesn't precisely abide by those principles, but we will still speak out.

There are times where a country is clearly engaging in activities that are so egregious that it's not culturally specific; it typically has to do with a government wanting to exert control over people and oppress them. And in those instances, I think it is entirely appropriate for us to speak out forcibly and, in some cases, to not do business with them.

Look at a country like North Korea. I mean, obviously, Korean culture is different than American culture. On the other hand, you look at what's happening in South Korea and you look at what's happening in North Korea and those are two entirely different societies. And I can tell you which one you'd rather live in.

And if you have a situation in which people are being murdered simply because they didn't agree with the government on something or didn't want their economic fate to be entirely determined by the whims of some government bureaucrat, and suddenly they're sent to a labor camp -- that's something where we as an international community have to speak out on.

And then there are some issues that may be culturally specific, but you know what, I think they're wrong. I won't -- we're not going to try to force that country to change, but I may try to shame that country. There are nations where slavery still exists. And that may be part of the ancient culture in that society, but slavery is wrong. And I'm not going to give them the excuse that, well, this is who we are.

In Africa -- and I can speak I think fairly as somebody who is the son of an African father -- there are practices like female genital mutilation that may be part of the tradition there, but it's wrong. And I'm going to say so. And it will be U.S. policy to say that it's wrong.





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So the tools we use to try to bring about change around the world may vary. And as I said earlier, we're not always perfectly consistent. There are times where we've got allies who are not observing all the human rights we would like, and there are times where there are countries that are adversaries of ours where they do some things quite well. And you can't expect us, or any country, to be perfectly consistent in every circumstance. But what I've tried to do is be fairly consistent in terms of what we believe, what we stand for, and then we use different tools depending on what we think will bring about the most change. In some cases, it will just be a diplomatic statement; in some cases, it may be serious enough that we will organize -- try to organize the United Nations or other multilateral forums to speak out against certain practices. In some cases, it may be so egregious that we need to sanction them, and we will try to organize the international community in that way.

And then finally, in the ultimate circumstance, where the violations of our values are so severe that they start spilling over and -- in the instance of, for example, genocide -- we may be say to ourselves, in concert with the international community, we need to intervene because this government is so brutal and so unacceptable that we need to protect people. But we do that in the context of an international conversation so that we're not simply making these decisions -- or we're not so arrogant that we're not paying attention to what the rest of the world community is saying.

This young lady who I originally had called on and got skipped over. No, no, this one right here. Yes. Right here. I'm sorry, I love you, too, though.

**Question:** Good afternoon, Mr. President. My name is Katrina King-Smith. I'm from the Turks and Caicos Islands. My question is two-part, as well. Firstly, in countries such as the Turks and Caicos Islands where the population is small and our main sources of revenue are tourism and foreign direct investment, I was wondering if you can suggest two ways that the government may better generate and regulate sustainable revenue, especially with regulations currently being put in place to close off-shore financial centers.

And secondly, I was wondering if after your term has ended, would you mind coming to the Turks and Caicos to vacation?

**President Obama:** On the second question, absolutely. I'll do some island-hopping once I'm out of office. And you guys can show me all the good places to go.

On this issue of off-shore financial centers, we respect each country to set up its own financial regulations. And we recognize that for small countries, that providing services -- including financial services -- may be an important source of revenue.

The one thing that we have to make sure of is that these financial centers are not either used for illicit money laundering or tax avoidance by large U.S. corporations that set up cut-outs or front organizations, but as a practical matter are operating in the United States, employing



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folks in the United States, essentially headquartered in the United States and yet, somehow, their mailing address is such-and-such island where they have to pay no taxes.

Those are the kinds of egregious concerns that we're trying to deal with. I think we try to take it on a case-by-case basis. And in my CARICOM meeting that I just had, this issue was brought up. There were a number of leaders who expressed concern that maybe they were being unfairly labeled as areas of high financial risk. And what I committed to them is we will examine their complaints and go through in very concrete ways where our concerns are and how our governments can work together.

More broadly, I think that the -- if you look at some of the most successful countries in the world, they're actually pretty small countries -- like Singapore, for example -- that on paper look like they have no assets, and yet, if you go to Singapore, it has one of the highest standards of living in the world. What is it that Singapore did that might be replicable?

Well, one of the most important things they did was they made an enormous investment in their people. And if you've got a highly skilled, highly educated workforce, if you've set up rules of law and governance that are transparent and non-corrupt, then you can attract actually a lot of service industries to supplement the tourist industry, because people would want to locate in your country. You could envision people wanting to operate and have offices there where you've got a trained workforce. And these days, so many businesses are operating over the Internet that if you've got a really skilled workforce that provides value added, you will attract companies and you'll attract businesses.

What deters people from investing in most countries is conflict, corruption, and a lack of skills or infrastructure. And those countries that are able to address those problems have rule of law and eliminate corruption. Make sure that you are investing in the education of your people and it's a continuous education; it doesn't just stop at the lower grades, but you give people constant opportunities to upgrade their skills. You have a decent infrastructure -- you're going to be able to succeed. That's the recipe, the formula for a 21st-century economy.

All right. Uh oh, they're starting to holler at me. Let's see, I haven't gone back here in a while. This gentleman in the blue shirt right here.

**Question:** Thanks so much, Mr. President. We know that there's been an increasing military assertiveness of China, especially in the South China Sea. And it seems that the U.S. has responded to that by pledging to increase its military presence because it recognizes the danger that that military increase of China poses to its friends and allies there. Now, China's growing power isn't just military, it's economic. On this side of the world, China has used this soft power, this economic power especially to woo Caribbean governments.



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My questions are, how does the U.S. view China's influence in its own backyard, especially since you've just talked about the Cold War and alliances? And secondly, what plan does the U.S. have, if any, to contribute more to economic life in the Caribbean to ward off China in terms of foreign direct investment? Thank you very much, Mr. President.

**President Obama:** What's your name?

**Question:** Oh, sorry. My name is Newton Harris from the University of Technology-Jamaica.

**President Obama:** Fantastic. Well, first of all, let me say that it is U.S. official policy and it is my strong belief that we should welcome China's peaceful rise. What China has done in the last 20, 30 years is remarkable. More people have been lifted out of poverty in a shorter period of time than perhaps any time in human history. And that's good for the world. I mean, we should be more fearful of a poorer, collapsing China than a China that is participating in the world marketplace and trading and is getting along with its neighbors and part of the international order, because there are a really large number of Chinese people and we want them to be doing well.

So our policy is not to fear China's peaceful rise. Where we get concerned with China is where it is not necessarily abiding by international norms and rules, and is using its size and muscle to force countries into subordinate positions. And that's the concern we have around maritime issues. We think this can be solved diplomatically, but just because the Philippines or Vietnam are not as large as China doesn't mean that they can just be elbowed aside.

And, by the way, we don't have a particular view on the territorial disputes, the maritime disputes. Our attitude is simply, let's use the mechanisms that we have in place internationally to resolve them.

Now, with respect to Chinese investment in the Caribbean or in the Americas, in the Western Hemisphere, my response is the same one that I gave when I was asked this question in Africa, which is, if China is making investments that are building up infrastructure, or improving education, or helping the people, then we welcome that. We think that's great. The only thing is you got to make sure you look at what strings may be attached. If the investments are made and it's solely to build a road to a mine to extract raw materials that are going to then be immediately going to a port and shipped to China, and if Chinese workers are shipped in to build the road -- and if you don't know exactly what the deal was with the government that led to China getting the contract -- in those situations, it may not be, in fact, serving the long-term interests of the country.

Now, I would say -- by the way, I'd say the same thing about the United States. So if we come in with an aid package to your country, and we say we got this great deal, we're going to give you \$100 million for such and such, but if when you evaluate the actual benefits, it's



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U.S. companies that are disproportionately benefitting from it, and it's creating a situation where over the long term the United States is making a whole lot of profits but is not leaving behind a sustainable industrial base or ways in which that country can develop, then you have to evaluate that and try to get a better deal.

So what I'm saying is not unique to China. I think that's how all countries should be operating. Your government should be transparent; it should be clear about what you're getting. There should be an accounting of how the money flows. There should be a sense that over the long term, Jamaican businesses or somebody from Belize is getting a job, or -- right? I mean, there should be some sense of how is this benefitting us over the long term. And that's I think the only criteria that we're going to lay out.

Now, last thing I'll say -- because you asked -- you kind of posed, is there like a bidding war going on here for affections. The Chinese are giving us flowers and chocolates -- what are you doing for us lately? And so what I would say is this. The United States, I think historically, has been an enormous provider of development aid. Not always, by the way, has it followed the rule I just laid out in terms of whether or not the local recipients are benefitting, but I think we've gotten a lot better at that.

And if you look at institutions like the World Bank or other multilateral institutions, we remain the largest contributors by far. So sometimes when you get money from a multilateral institution -- you look at who's doing what; if you look at what happens in terms of when Haiti gets decimated, who's raising the money -- we tend to look pretty good. It turns out we're doing more than our fair share. And we will continue to do that.

We do have some fiscal constraints. And sometimes, I think -- when I travel to the Americas, to the region, people ask, why don't we have sort of the kinds of Alliance for Progress programs with huge sums of money. Well, part of it is, is that right after World War II, the United States was so large relative to the rest of the world. Japan was decimated; Europe was decimated. Huge chunks of the world were behind the Iron Curtain. And so it was natural that we gave fivefold or tenfold more than anybody else could do. Well, things have evened out, in case you haven't noticed.

We're still, by far, the most powerful nation on Earth and we still do more than everybody else, but we do expect others to step up and do their fair share. But I can guarantee you this: We will always do our fair share. And nowhere is that truer than in the Caribbean and in the Americas, because you are our neighbors and some of our closest friends.

Let's see. It's a young lady's turn. This young lady right here. Right here.

**Question:** Welcome, Mr. President. I lived a block away from you in Chicago when I went to the University of Chicago.

**President Obama:** Is that right?



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**Question:** And my college sweetheart, Sam Kass, was your private chef until very recently.

**President Obama:** Oh, wow! Well, you're just putting Sam's business all out there. All right. What's your name?

**Question:** Lisandra Rickards. I work for the Branson Centre of Entrepreneurship.

**President Obama:** Cassandra?

**Question:** Lisandra.

**President Obama:** Lisandra. All right. Well, I'll tease Sam about this one.

**Question:** Please do.

**President Obama:** Everybody knows about you now. Go ahead.

**Question:** My question is around immigration. We've heard a lot about your immigration policy for undocumented immigrants who are currently living in the U.S. But what about hopeful families that are seeking a legal pathway for immigration into the U.S. but are finding seven- to ten-year delays before they even can get to apply? I'd love to hear you talk some more about your policy regarding shortening that timeline and making it less onerous on the applicants.

**President Obama:** Good. That's a great question. That's a great question. The United States is a nation of immigrants. And this region has contributed to the remarkable progress that the United States has made over the last two centuries. And my goal during the course of my presidency has been to make sure we continue to be a nation of immigrants as well as a nation of laws, and that we're attracting talent from all around the world.

Part of what makes us special is you walk in Brooklyn and there are folks from everywhere. But they're all striving, they're all talented, they're all trying to make their dreams come true. And that is what gives us the energy and the strength to be able to accomplish everything we've accomplished.

So we need to fix what is, right now, a broken immigration system. Part of it is dealing with those who are undocumented but who have been living there a long time, are part of the community, providing them with a pathway in which they have to earn a legal status, but recognizing that they're there and we're not going to be separating out families. That's not who we are. That's not true to our values. And ultimately, it's not good for our economy.



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But you are absolutely right that part of the reason that some people take the illegal route is because we make the legal route so difficult. And so we're trying to identify ways to streamline that process.

Now, I have to be honest. A lot of people want to come to America. So unless we just had no borders, there's always going to be a wait. There's always going to be background checks. There's always going to be some prioritization in terms of who's admitted and who's not. But I do think that there are practices we have -- for example, where someone has a relation in the United States, is clearly qualified to become at some point a legal resident and maybe in the future a citizen, but in order to do it they have to first leave the country, wait, and now they're separated from their families. I mean, there have to be ways in which we can make the system clearer and less burdensome.

Some of those changes we wanted to make were in the legislation that was proposed and passed the United States Senate. I think there is still the opportunity to get that done before my presidency is over, but it does require the Republican Party I think to engage with me in a more serious effort, and to put aside the politics.

Thank you very much for the question. All right, this side has been neglected right here. I'm going to go with this guy with the beard, man, because he looks a little bit like -- he looks a little bit like Marshawn Lynch.

**Question:** Greetings, Mr. President.

**President Obama:** How are you?

**Question:** More life and blessings on you and your family.

**President Obama:** What's your name?

**Question:** My name is Miguel Williams, but you can call -- I am Steppa.

**President Obama:** Steppa.

**Question:** Ya mon, that is quite sufficient. My question has to do and surrounds U.S. policy as it regards the -- the legalization, the decriminalization of marijuana.

**President Obama:** How did I anticipate this question?

**Question:** Ya mon...Ya mon...Ya mon.

**President Obama:** How did I guess this question?



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**Question:** Yes. And, Mr. President, it really comes on the foreground of -- we face economic challenges with the IMF, et cetera. And and we find realistically that the hemp industry, the marijuana industry provides a highly feasible alternative to rise above poverty. So I am wanting to over stand and to understand how U.S. is envisioning and how you would you see Jamaica pushing forward on a decriminalization, legalization emphasis on the hemp industry.

**President Obama:** Okay. Well. Let me -- I do want to separate out what are serious issues in the United States and then how that relates to our foreign policy and our interactions with the region. There is the issue of legalization of marijuana, and then there is the issue of decriminalizing or dealing with the incarceration and, in some cases, devastation of communities as a consequence of nonviolent drug offenses.

I am a very strong believer that the path that we have taken in the United States in the so-called "War on Drugs" has been so heavy in emphasizing incarceration that it has been counterproductive. You have young people who did not engage in violence who get very long penalties, get placed in prison, and then are rendered economically unemployable, are almost pushed into, then, the underground economy, learn crime more effectively in prison, families are devastated.

So it's been very unproductive. And what we're trying to do is to reform our criminal justice system. And the good news is there has actually been some interest on the part of unlikely allies like the evangelical community or some otherwise very conservative Republicans, because it's very expensive to incarcerate people, and a recognition that this may not be the best approach. So that's one issue.

There's then the second issue of legalizing marijuana, whether it's medical marijuana or recreational use. There are two states in the United States that have embarked on an experiment to decriminalize or legalize marijuana -- Colorado and Washington State. And we will see how that experiment works its way through the process.

Right now, that is not federal policy, and I do not foresee anytime soon Congress changing the law at a national basis. But I do think that if there are states that show that they are not suddenly a magnet for additional crime, that they have a strong enough public health infrastructure to push against the potential of increased addiction, then it's conceivable that that will spur on a national debate. But that is going to be some time off.

And then the third issue is what will U.S. international policy be. And we had some discussion with the CARICOM countries about this. I know on paper a lot of folks think, you know what, if we just legalize marijuana, then it'll reduce the money flowing into the transnational drug trade, there are more revenues and jobs created.



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I have to tell you that it's not a silver bullet, because, first of all, if you are legalizing marijuana, then how do you deal with other drugs, and where do you draw the line? Second of all, as is true in the global economy generally, if you have a bunch of small medium-sized marijuana businesses scattered across the Caribbean and this is suddenly legal, if you think that big multi-national companies are not going to suddenly come in and market and try to control and profit from the trade -- that's I think a very real scenario.

And so I think we have to have a conversation about this, but our current policy continues to be that in the United States, we need to decrease demand. We need to focus on a public health approach to decreasing demand. We have to stop the flow of guns and cash into the Caribbean and Central America and Latin America. And at the same time, I think the Caribbean, Latin America have to -- Central America -- have to cooperate with us to try to shrink the power of the transnational drug organizations that are vicious and hugely destructive.

And if we combine a public health perspective, a focus on not simply throwing every low-level person with possession into prison by trying to get them treatment, if we combine that with economic development and alternative opportunities for youth, then I think we can strike the right balance. It may not comport with your -- completely with your vision for the future, but I think that we could certainly have a smarter approach to it than we currently do.

Got time for one more question. One more question. Let's see -- this is always hard. It's always hard to be that last -- it's a lady's turn, so all the guys just have to put down their hands. It's too late for you. Let's see. You know what, I'm just going to go with this young lady right here. She's just right in front. Go ahead, yes, you. Hold on a second, wait for the mic.

**Question:** Afternoon, Mr. President. I'm Alana Williams [ph], I'm from the South Side of Chicago.

**President Obama:** Wait, you're from Chicago?

**Question:** Yes!

**President Obama:** Well, what are you doing here? This is supposed to be for Caribbean young ladies.

**Question:** Actually, I attend Olivet Nazarene University and I'm studying abroad, so I'm here.

**President Obama:** I see, okay. Well, you're cheating a little bit. I'll have to call on somebody else after you. But I'm going to go ahead and let you ask a question real quick. Because I'll see you in Chicago.





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**Question:** Most definitely. My question is really more so about home. I love my city, but the violence is terrible, specifically amongst young black men. And I know we're talking a lot about police brutality, but I've lost a lot of friends from people who look just like me. And that's the problem. And so I would like to know what you believe is the true source of the violence, and what is one solution to an extreme problem. Thank you.

**President Obama:** Well, look, I know you asked it about Chicago but I know there are neighborhoods right here in Jamaica that have the same problems, and in every place all across the Caribbean; certainly in Central America.

I don't think there is just one single factor. Obviously, a contributor is one that we just talked about, which is the drug trade. If you have an illicit trade that generates huge amounts of money and is not regulated above board, that is going to attract ultimately people trying to carve out turf, trying to control markets, and violence ensues. So that's point number one.

Point number two is the easy accessibility of weapons. And we were talking earlier about different traditions; the United States has a tradition of gun ownership that is deep; dates back to the pioneer past. And I think it is a mistake that we do not do a better job of putting in place common-sense gun-safety regulations that would keep guns out of the hands of criminals, but unfortunately a majority of Congress does not agree with me. Even after six-year-olds were gunned down viciously in their classroom, we could not get action done. But what we are doing is cooperating with the region as we are cooperating with local jurisdictions to try to stem at least the flow of guns using the administrative tools that I have. So that's number two.

Number three is providing alternative paths for young people. If a young person is reading by the age -- by the third grade and at grade level, if they are enjoying school, if they see a path for success, then they are less likely to get involved in criminal activity and that will reduce gun violence, and that will reduce crime, and that will reduce death. Which means investing in things like early childhood education and improving our schools -- those things are absolutely vital.

But there is a fourth element to this, and that is our own responsibility. And particularly, as I speak to young people here today, we always talk about what can we do about the violence as if it's like just separate and apart. But we have control in our communities of our immediate friends, our immediate family. We influence our peers. And I do think that the power that all of you have as young leaders to be able to not make excuses for violence -- because there are a whole bunch of folks who have really tough backgrounds and come from terrible circumstances, and are really poor, but they don't go around shooting somebody. They don't beat somebody over the head because of sneakers or because they looked at them the wrong way.



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And so there is an element of us retaking our communities and being willing to speak out against violence in our midst. That doesn't ignore all the social factors. But Dr. King used to say it's not an either/or situation, it's a both/and situation.

Government has to act. We have to have effective policing, which means policing that is actually protecting as opposed to some of the things that we've been seeing of late in the United States, and I'm sure is true in other countries. And I say that saying that police have an extraordinarily difficult job, and the overwhelming majority do a great job under severe circumstances. But there's got to be trust built between the communities, and I had to put a task force together that put together some excellent reports in the wake of Ferguson around how we can do that.

But ultimately, what happens in the home, what happens in the school -- some of you are parents already; some of you will be parents -- what we teach our children in terms of values, valuing themselves, valuing others, that's important, too.

So there's no single solution. But all of us have to do better. Because the tragedy of what we see in the United States but also in cities and towns all across the Caribbean and Central America, is terrible. And there's no excuse for it.

All right. Because I called accidentally on a Chicagoan, I've got to call on one more person. Look, this young lady stood up, so she showed -- that wasn't fair, but I called on her, go ahead. You're not from Chicago are you?

**Question:** No.

**President Obama:** You promise? Okay. All right, get the mic -- oh, I'm sorry. You know what, I confess, even though I was going to call on you, she thought she was going to be called on. I'm going to call on both of you now, but each of you get a really short question. Really short, quick.

**Question:** Well, I'm the team leader for the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor and I want to thank you for the initiatives that you're planning to do here. And I wanted to invite you to our annual general meeting that's going to be held in Babson in the States, so we want you to come because you are part of a global team. So I'm representing Jamaica as the youngest female team leader, and I'm inviting you to come so we can talk about Startup America and we can collaborate on different projects. So I'm inviting you to come to that event.

**President Obama:** Okay, that was good. And I can say I'll await your invitation. And what I will say very quickly is entrepreneurship, small- and medium-sized businesses, that is a priority and that means that we've got to create channels for access to capital, technical training. These are areas where a lot of our development aid is shifting.



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Instead of just giving somebody a fish, we want to teach them how to fish. And what you're seeing -- what you see among young people all around the world is, is that instead of just finding a job in a big organization, they may want to create something of their own, a new vision. And that kind of creativity has to be tapped. So we're shifting a lot of the work that we do around issues of entrepreneurship, so I'll be interested in seeing what you have to say.

All right. This young lady right here, go ahead.

**Question:** Hello, everyone. Hi, Mr. President. My name is Davianne Tucker, and I'm the Guild president-elect for the University of the West Indies. Thank you. So my question is, the Jamaican government has been holding firmly to the stipulations of the IMF agreement. There are many who would like to know if the debt write-offs for Jamaica are being considered as a means of improving the livelihood of our people. So is that being considered?

**President Obama:** Well, this came up in my bilateral with your Prime Minister. And, look, historically, I think there has been times where the IMF or the international multilateral organizations worked with governments in ways that weren't always productive, got them deep into debt, and then suddenly you've got a lot more flowing out than was going in. And in some cases there were governments around the world that were corrupt, lent money, money goes into a Swiss bank account, suddenly the people are paying off for decades.

In Jamaica, some of it just had to do with tough circumstances, not always the best fiscal management. I think that the current government has been wise to work hard to abide by the IMF provisions. That's not been easy. And I think that has been the right thing to do.

But what I also agreed with, when I spoke to the Prime Minister, is the need to try to address in a more systematic fashion how we can spur growth and not just put the squeeze on folks. Because what it turns out is, is that if a -- the best way for a country to reduce its debt is to grow really fast, and to generate more income.

Now, that does require development plans and approaches that are productive. And it is true that sometimes that requires some short-term sacrifice. And I think the question that the people of Jamaica, just like the people of the United States and everywhere else, should be asking is: If the government is spending money right now, is it on something that is going to help create long-term growth and help people succeed? If the answer is no, you shouldn't spend that money.

Spending money just for the sake of spending money is not -- that's not the formula for success. But if the money is being spent on what we talked about -- early childhood education; if it's being spent on infrastructure; if it's being spent on research; if it's being spent on building skills for workers -- those are good investments. And I do think that the international financial institutions have to accommodate the interests of countries who have a



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sound plan for growth so that they can not just stay in this static state but can, over time, thrive and succeed. And the way that's going to happen is because of outstanding young leaders like you.

I've had a great conversation.

Thank you, Jamaica. Thank you. Appreciate it, young leaders.

God bless you.