Remarks by Ambassador Samantha Power

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Thank you, Leader McConnell, for your kind words, for your vision in creating a center dedicated to public service, and for your invitation to this great state. I feel extremely honored to be here. Many of us grow up with big dreams of what we want to be when we get older. I grew up dreaming of playing outfield for the Pittsburgh Pirates, and while I'm still not quite ready to give up on that dream, I am told my chances are dimming.

Mitch McConnell’s first job after graduating from the University of Louisville was intern for Kentucky Senator John Sherman Cooper. That was when McConnell says he first dreamed of becoming Senate majority leader. That dream became a reality on January 6, and this is his first trip back as Leader to his home state, his alma mater, and the center he helped build. Please join me in congratulating him.

What a young Mitch McConnell could not have anticipated when he started that Senate internship back in 1964 was how gridlocked Washington would become fifty years later.

Of course, partisanship is not new to Washington. Indeed, back when Senator Cooper voted against party lines in one of his very first roll-call votes, he was chased down by a senior Republican Senator who asked him, “Are you a Republican or a Democrat? When are you going to start voting with us?” Cooper reportedly replied coolly, “I was sent here to represent my constituents, and I intend to vote as I think best.”

But if we go by the opinion surveys, we are living through one of the most divisive periods in American history. According to a December poll by the Pew Research Center, Republicans and Democrats are more split along ideological lines – and partisan antipathy is deeper – than at any point in the last decade. Nearly 80 percent of Americans expect partisan divisions to stay the same or get worse in the next five years. And Americans believe this will have serious consequences: 16 percent of Americans polled say the failure of Republicans and Democrats to work together over the next two years will hurt the nation “some,” and 71 percent said it will hurt the nation “a lot.”

Amidst all of this apparent rancor and partisanship, you in the audience might be a bit surprised to see a member of President Obama’s cabinet – and the Ambassador to the United Nations, no less – down here in Kentucky at the invitation of the new Republican Senate Majority Leader. You might wonder whether I’m here to pick a fight or walk into an ambush.

But I believe Senator McConnell invited me because on the central issues of American foreign policy, we actually agree on a great deal. Undergirding this common ground are several shared premises: We are each fully committed to keeping Americans safe. We each
believe that human rights are universal rights, which people of all nations strive to enjoy. And we each recognize that we cannot be the world’s policeman, and that we cannot afford to retreat from tackling the world’s biggest challenges.

Now, on this last point regarding the need for America to be engaged in the world, there may be more agreement between some Republicans and some Democrats than there is across the Republican party or across the Democratic party. Recent polls are in fact showing isolationist sentiment at its highest point in 50 years. It is not hard to see why. Sobered by long engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, and worn down by a seemingly endless procession of daunting global crises, many Americans feel concerned that U.S. engagement won’t do much good, and they are ready to focus our limited resources on challenges here at home.

While this isolationist view exists, President Obama, Leader McConnell, and millions of Americans recognize that we must work together to ensure continued U.S. leadership in the world. We understand that we cannot retrench. We cannot back down from these great challenges around the world today, in which our security and our principles are on the line. And we know we need to make this case to the American people.

You see evidence of our shared commitment to engage with the world in the way America has responded to three foreign policy challenges of our time: bending the curve of a deadly Ebola outbreak; confronting violent extremism; and advancing freedom and democracy in a decades-long military dictatorship, Burma. In all three of these instances, our ability to marshal America’s unparalleled strength behind a single goal has changed and saved lives, and advanced both our national security interests and our values.

Now, there are of course great foreign policy challenges today for which there is not consensus; issues where positions cannot be predicted on the basis of party affiliation, such as how best to advance human rights in Cuba, or how to stop Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. You are no doubt familiar with the passionate debate occurring on these issues. And it will not surprise you that, in those areas where we disagree, I will make the case today that President Obama is pursuing the path that has the greatest likelihood of achieving our shared goals. I hope I can persuade you. And the Leader.

But what is often lost in the coverage of these debates is the fact that they are disputes about means, not ends; about tactics, not objectives; about how America can tackle complex global challenges, and not whether we ought to try. As Thomas Jefferson once put it, “Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.”

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In a polarized political environment, it is striking to note the bipartisan response to two of the deadly global threats we are confronting: Ebola and violent extremism. With each one, Republicans and Democrats rightly recognized that we could not hang back and wait for the crises to blow over. The best way to keep Americans safe is to confront these threats at their source.

In December, members of Congress came together to commit $5.4 billion to President Obama’s “whole of government” Ebola response, some $2.5 billion of which is directed towards stopping the outbreak in West Africa. I saw the impact of U.S. engagement in West
Africa firsthand when I visited the countries hardest hit by Ebola last October. When we landed in Monrovia, Liberia, we were met by Major General Gary Volesky, who had recently taken lead of the U.S. Joint Force Command, which operates in support of the USAID-led Disaster Assistance Response Team in West Africa. He commands the Army’s 101st Airborne, which is based at Fort Campbell, only a few hours away from here. The unit, whose paratroopers earned distinction as the first to descend on Normandy during the D-Day invasion, is now a central part of the U.S. offensive against Ebola.

In just two months, around 1,200 engineers, doctors, lab technicians, and other troops from Fort Campbell – together with some 1,400 other members of the military and 200 civilian responders – have worked with the Liberian military to build Ebola Treatment Units, ETUs, so that sick people are no longer turned away for lack of beds. All told, the U.S. is building or supporting the construction of 15 ETUs in Liberia, as well as three in Sierra Leone and two in Guinea. These men and women have helped stand up four Army testing labs and two mobile Navy labs. And they have trained more than 1,500 Liberian health professionals, teaching them both how to provide better treatment to infected patients and how to avoid contracting Ebola.

The troops from Fort Campbell – and many civilians involved in the Ebola response effort – have been supported by members of the Kentucky Air National Guard, who have helped set up and man an air bridge out of Dakar, Senegal, sending over 1,800 tons of critical humanitarian aid – everything from thousands of those moon suits that help keep health professionals and burial teams from being infected; to doctors, epidemiologists, and humanitarian professionals who were flown into the region.

Tech Sergeant Jacob Harper led an Aircraft Maintenance Team that successfully managed aircraft deliveries at the Dakar aerial port. When he is not helping ensure life-saving supplies reach Ebola-affected countries, Sergeant Harper is a part-time guardsman who works for Louisville Gas and Electric as a power plant technician. Tech Sergeant Jarrod Blanford deployed as an Air Cargo Specialist, directly supporting the loading of vital humanitarian cargo, personnel, and equipment. Sergeant Blanford is a full-time guardsman based in Louisville. Staff Sergeant Miah Helm deployed as a Security Forces Fire Team Leader, providing airfield entry control and mobile response within the aerial port. In other words, he kept that airfield safe and efficient. A part-time guardsman, Sergeant Helm is a mental health associate at Our Lady of Peace psychiatric hospital here in Louisville. All three are here with us today. I’d like to ask Jacob, Jarrod, and to stand up and be recognized together with the Kentucky Air National Guard for their life-saving service.

All of these efforts that are so critical to ending the Ebola epidemic – the deployment of U.S. forces, the airlift of supplies, the construction of treatment facilities, the epidemiological work of USAID and the CDC – would be unsustainable without the unwavering generosity of the American people, and broad bipartisan support and funding.

Republicans and Democrats have also come together to stop the spread of Ebola by speeding up the development of drugs to treat and prevent the virus. In recent weeks, researchers at the National Institutes of Health published findings that a possible Ebola vaccine was safe for human. That vaccine is now undergoing large-scale clinical trials in West Africa. Just imagine for a moment what a game-changer a vaccine would be – for Africa, America, and the world. To support that effort, Congress passed legislation in December to fast-track the review of Ebola drugs by the Food and Drug Administration.
Republican Senator Lamar Alexander co-sponsored the bill with his Democratic colleague, Senator Tom Harkin, and he said, the bill “encourages the development of necessary but unprofitable drugs, offering a reward for drug makers who invest the time and resources.” With bipartisan support for bringing American ingenuity to bear on the world’s most deadly problems, we can make – and are making – a profound difference.

In the face of a challenge like Ebola, Americans don’t sit on the sidelines; we roll up our sleeves and ask, how can we help fix this? That’s what Muriel Harris’s story shows us. Muriel lived in Liberia in the 1980s with her two young sons, when war broke out. She had been born in Sierra Leone, so she returned her family back there. But not long after, civil war broke out there too. After her eleven-year-old son told her, “I’m not ready to die,” Muriel and her family fled to the U.S., where she got her PhD in public health. She eventually a job as a professor at the University of Louisville’s School of Public Health.

This past July, Muriel returned to Sierra Leone to spend a few months with her 93-year-old father. When she saw the country’s brittle public health system collapsing under the weight of the mounting epidemic, and watched so many health professionals becoming sick, she felt compelled to put her knowledge to work. She focused on maternal and child health facilities, where she observed that there was little oversight in admitting patients. A mother or child showing signs of illness was often sent to the same ward as patients with no signs of Ebola infection, Muriel said; sometimes, they were even placed in the same bed. “One sick person could infect 10 or 20 patients,” she said.

Muriel developed a triage system to screen everyone entering the facilities through a single entrance, where they were thoroughly examined by a healthcare professional. Individuals with a temperature or other Ebola symptoms were either sent directly to an Ebola treatment facility or quarantined for further observation, while those with other symptoms were admitted to the hospital. Today, the protocol Muriel designed is being adopted in women’s and children’s hospitals across Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Muriel only became a U.S. citizen three years ago, but her spirit of service, her compassion, and her commitment to tackling great problems represents America at its best. Muriel is here with us this morning. Muriel, please stand – you are an inspiration to us all. You’ve got some remarkable people here in Kentucky, Mr. Leader.

While efforts like Muriel’s have helped us make real progress to end the Ebola epidemic, the battle is far from won. This outbreak has killed more than 8,200 people, and the cases continue to mount. In the first week of 2015, there were 248 new cases reported in Sierra Leone alone. And as Guinea’s Minister of Foreign Affairs so eloquently put it when I met him in Conakry, “If there’s one sick person in [Liberia], then the epidemic is not over in Guinea.” That’s true for us in America too. Until the outbreak is wiped out completely, until every last case is isolated and treated, none of us are fully safe.

There is also bipartisan recognition that we urgently need to counter another deadly virus that does not respond to borders: violent extremism. Some Republicans and some Democrats may differ on various aspects of President Obama’s approach, but strong majorities in both parties agree – as does a weary American public – that we must confront terrorist groups and counter violent extremism. And we must ensure that other nations shoulder their fair share of the burden.
You see this bipartisan support in Congress’s authorization of $1.6 billion for training and equipping the Iraqi and Kurdish security forces, so that they can take the lead in rolling back ISIL; you see it in robust commitment Congress has made to train and equip moderate Syrian opposition fighters; and you see it in the large Counterterrorism Partnership Fund that President Obama set up to strengthen the capabilities of partner countries where terrorist networks are trying to gain a foothold; because the stronger our partners are, the better allies they can be, as we should never have to fight these battles alone. Here Republicans like Hal Rogers, the representative of Kentucky’s 5th district and chair of the House Appropriations Committee, worked hand in glove with their Democratic counterparts, like Representative Nita Lowey from New York.

The two parties also understand that one of the most effective ways to stop the growth of terrorist groups is by targeting the repressive conditions in which they thrive. In Syria, for example, ISIL’s dramatic rise was in part fueled by the barbarism of the Asad regime – a regime that, during Ramadan, calibrated its bombing runs to the times and places where Muslims were meeting to break the fast, and that meticulously documented the torture and killing of thousands of detainees, assigning each of its victims a serial number and case file.

Coupled with the atrocities by ISIL and other extremist groups, the Asad regime’s barbarism has produced the worst humanitarian disaster in a generation. More than 12 million Syrians – a population nearly three times the population of the entire state of Kentucky – currently need humanitarian aid to survive. Five million of those in need are children. Five million kids. Yet the Asad regime continues to use the suffering of civilians as a cynical tactic of war, cutting off entire communities from food, water, and medicine simply because they live in cities or neighborhoods controlled by opposition groups. In the face of this tremendous suffering, Democrats and Republicans have come together to contribute more than any other country in humanitarian aid to Syrian civilians – more than $3 billion. We are continuing to pursue a political solution to bring this horrific conflict to an end. And Democrats and Republicans agree that Asad not only must leave power for Syrians to have a chance at peace; he must be held accountable for his atrocities.

Last week’s horrific attacks in Paris underscored the serious threat posed by individuals inspired by extremist groups, and by those who travel abroad to train and fight with terrorists, many of whom carry U.S. and EU passports and who may return home to carry out attacks. The targets the terrorists chose – a satirical newspaper, a Kosher grocery store, and police officers – represent some of the most sacred values in our pluralistic democracies: freedom of expression, religious diversity, and public security. The more than a million people of all faiths and backgrounds who came out in the streets of Paris yesterday were only a fraction of the multitudes of people who believe in these values, and who will not be cowed by the few who use violence to try to impose their radical views. The Paris attacks also are a stark reminder of the importance of our continued cooperation with partners around the world to eradicate the networks that inspire, recruit and train violent extremists and foreign fighters, and the ideology that helps fuel these sinister plots.

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It is not only protecting American security that unites Republicans and Democrats, but also promoting the freedoms we value most.
Leader McConnell has made a profound difference in the lives of the Burmese people. Some 25 years ago, he read an article about a Burmese democracy activist named Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been placed under house arrest for pressing the country’s repressive military junta to allow basic freedoms. Her supporters had been harassed, beaten, and locked up. “From that moment on,” Leader McConnell said, “I felt compelled in my own small way to make that cause my own.”

Together with Senator Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat, Senator McConnell helped lead a bipartisan Congressional group that put in place a tough set of sanctions against the Burmese junta, including bans on imports, visas for senior government officials, and U.S. investment in the country; targeted financial sanctions against military leaders and their associates; an arms embargo; and legislation specifically aimed at preventing the regime from profiting from trade in precious gems – a major source of income and abuse.

At the end of 2011, Aung San Suu Kyi was freed from house arrest. In 2012, she and others from her party, the National League for Democracy, ran in a free and fair Parliamentary by-election. 44 seats were open; they won 43 of them. Restrictions on the press were eased. The junta announced ceasefires in several longstanding conflicts, and released hundreds of political prisoners.

Burma’s shift was of course driven largely by the brave, unflagging efforts of pro-democracy activists and the Burmese people’s growing demand for change. But the sanctions put in place by Republicans and Democrats in Congress – and Presidents from both parties over successive administrations – also played a key role. They isolated Burma’s military leaders, denying them access to the global financial system, and exacting a significant cost for their repressive measures.

The sanctions also signaled to activists under assault in Burma that they were not alone. To get a sense of what that meant to them, walk over to the McConnell-Chao archives in the Ekstrom Library after we finish here. You’ll see a hand-written letter that Aung San Suu Kyi sent from house arrest in 2002 to the Leader, who she called her “rocklike friend.” She wrote: “I hope very much that we shall be able to see the kind of developments for which we have all been working befoee too long. Of course there is still a lot to be done, but I am confident that with firmness and perseverance we shall achieve our goal.”

When Burma began to open up – when we saw what President Obama called “flickers of progress” after years of darkness – Democrats and Republicans decided to offer Burma a path to a new relationship. As Burma took steps, the United States did too, appointing our first ambassador in 22 years, resuming high-level diplomatic talks, and easing sanctions. As Senator McConnell told Congress when arguing for lifting import bans in 2013, the sanctions largely fulfilled their goal in helping catalyze a change in the junta’s behavior.

The vast majority of changes that the United States made were conditioned upon the regime’s meeting specific human rights and democracy benchmarks, such as dialogue with the opposition and the release of prisoners, giving us the flexibility and the leverage to reinstate sanctions if sufficient progress was not made.

Of course, Burma is still a long way from being a rights-respecting democracy. The civilian government is still subordinate to the military, and the Constitution continues to give the military the broad authority to dismiss Parliament and veto any constitutional amendment.
Attacks against the Rohingya and other Muslim groups have even increased, egged on by extremist monks, particularly in Burma’s Rakhine state. Yet virtually no one has been held accountable, and the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, with more than 100,000 Rohingya confined in squalid camps. Making matters worse, the government recently proposed legislation that would force the Rohingya to renounce their ethnicity in order to be registered as citizens. While Burma was never known for its freedom of the press, today Burmese journalists are under serious assault. In July, five journalists were sentenced to ten years of hard labor for reporting on an alleged military program to make chemical weapons.

Back in September 2012, Aung San Suu Kyi made her first trip to the United States since she was released from house arrest. In addition to meeting with President Obama and receiving the Congressional Gold Medal, she came here to the McConnell Center. In remarks to a group of students, she spoke of the need to “distinguish and discriminate between what is genuine progress and what is just progress on the surface.”

That is the challenge we face today: ensuring that Burma builds on the areas in which it has made progress, and avoids backsliding. And we have to be prepared to adapt our strategy to the conditions we observe, including setbacks. We – and when I say we, I am confident Leader McConnell shares this view – we have to examine every tool in our tool kit and ask: How can we take steps that may contribute to empowering the Burmese people and helping the country move towards genuine democratic reform?

Our tools include incentivizing continued progress, shining a bright light on the government’s shortcomings, and imposing targeted sanctions on individuals who stand in the way of change. In October, for example, we announced new sanctions against a senior Burmese official and businessman, Aung Thaung, for fueling violence and corruption, and undermining key democratic reforms. His assets in the United States have been frozen, and U.S. companies are prohibited from doing business with him.

And we still have great hope for Burma’s future. When President Obama made his second visit to Burma in November, he held a town hall with participants in the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, a U.S. government program aimed at strengthening and connecting rising leaders in the region. Even a few years ago, the idea that a U.S. president would be able to host an open discussion, in Rangoon, with several hundred youth leaders – and that it would be open to the press and streamed live – would have seemed unimaginable.

Yet not only were the young leaders there, but many came waving big protest signs, several of which said, “Reform is fake.” Even more remarkable was the question and answer session. The first student who took the microphone was from Rakhine state, where the worst anti-Muslim attacks and discrimination have taken place. He said, “I’ve experienced some sectarian and racial violence first-hand in my region…How can I be part of educating my generation to promote tolerance and respect cultural differences?” And just like that, a Burmese student asked President Obama about one of the country’s most alarming problems, which the Burmese government bears enormous responsibility for and too often acts as though does not exist. Another student said to President Obama: “We are in [a] democratic transition, so our country is facing so many challenges in every sector. So if you were the President of Myanmar, which sector [will you] focus on first?”
That open discussion – and the critical questions it allowed young leaders to raise – was as important for the advancement of Burmese democracy as any closed-door discussion between heads of state. Young leaders who have experienced the freedom of describing the problems they see are not likely to give up that right without a struggle.

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For all the areas of bipartisan agreement, there are times when – even when we share the same principles – we draw different conclusions about the best way to achieve them. Consider Cuba, where the U.S. embargo has been in place since 1961. That was the year that a young band from Liverpool played their first show at the Cavern club; To Kill a Mockingbird won the Pulitzer Prize; and the Berlin Wall was erected.

Last month, with the Castro communist government still firmly entrenched after more than 55 years of an embargo explicitly designed to topple it, President Obama decided it was time to try something new.

Now, while there is strong bipartisan support for the policy changes the President announced recently – and one’s views on Cuba do not divide along party lines – some members of Congress believe that the embargo should not be loosened in any way. Some of the embargo’s staunchest defenders are Democrats and Republicans with deep ties to the island – people whose families came to America fleeing the Castros’ repression. These are men and women who are completely dedicated to doing all they can to ensure that Cubans on the island get to enjoy true freedom. So it is important to acknowledge that while there may be disagreements on the best way to get there, we share a common goal of advancing the rights of the Cuban people.

In shifting not this overall goal, but U.S. tactics, President Obama instructed Secretary of State Kerry to start talks on normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba, putting us in a position to press our criticisms directly with the Cuban government. He ordered a review of Cuba’s designation as a state sponsor of terrorism. And he took a series of steps to increase travel, commerce, and the flow of information into and out of Cuba. The reforms will make it easier for Americans – our best ambassadors – to visit Cuba. They will multiply telecommunications links between the U.S. and Cuba, aiming to increase the paltry 5 percent of Cubans who have access the Internet, which is a powerful tool for ensuring access to information. If increased connectivity can spread the virus of violent extremism, so too can it spread the hunger for liberty and freedom. All of these changes will allow greater interaction between Americans and Cubans, and more opportunities for the Cuban people to shape their own future.

Even though the Castro regime has been repressing the Cuban people for decades, it is America that has been seen as Goliath picking a fight with David. I saw this first-hand at the UN. Last October, for the 23rd year in a row, the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn the U.S. embargo on Cuba. Out of the UN’s 193 member states, we were one of only two that voted to defend the embargo.

Within Cuba, the Castro government used the embargo as an excuse for its problems and a pretext for its repression. In 2003, for example, the government rounded up 75 of the country’s most prominent human rights defenders, journalists, and democracy activists, and swiftly sentenced them to an average of 20 years in prison. Many were prosecuted under a
law that criminalizes any act advancing the aim of the U.S. embargo – a provision the Cuban government interpreted broadly to include crimes such as writing articles critical of the government, and participating in unauthorized political marches.

President Obama assessed that, if we waited for the Castro government to grant the Cuban people basic rights before changing our policy, we would leave the prospect for change in the hands of the Cuban government, which has the greatest incentive to maintain the status quo and deny greater access to the outside world. The changes President Obama announced take away the Castros’ most trusted alibi for abuse, helping empower the Cuban people to secure the greater freedoms they want and deserve.

The change in policy also denies repressive governments in the region the ability to continue cynically to use our Cuba policy to deflect attention from their own abuses, such as Ecuador’s crackdown on the press, or Venezuela’s imprisonment of key opposition leaders.

At the same time, just as in Burma, we remain clear-eyed about just how repressive Cuban authorities remain. We know that the release of 53 political prisoners in recent days by the Cuban government – welcome as that step is, and heartening as it is for their families – does not resolve the larger human rights problems on the island. In 2014 alone, a Cuban human rights group reported that the government had carried out nearly 8,900 short-term detentions to prevent activists from gathering, or simply to harass them and stifle dissent.

Indeed, just three days after the U.S. and Cuban announcements of steps to change the relationship, a Cuban artist named Tania Bruguera announced a plan to hold an event in Havana’s historic Revolution Square. The purpose, she wrote, was for Cubans, “to discuss, via an open microphone, what kind of nation they want for themselves.” She promoted the event on Twitter and Facebook with the hashtag, #yotambienexijo – “I too demand.”

Tania was picked up before she made it to the Revolution Square. She and around a dozen other activists and journalists were detained on the morning of the event by Cuban authorities. Dozens of other activists, bloggers, and artists were placed under house arrest so they couldn’t reach the square.

But something pretty remarkable happened next. A letter began circulating, expressing support for Tania’s attempt to foster free expression. Nearly 300 Cuban artists signed it, and many more supporters. In spite of genuine fear, Cubans were speaking out. And the Castro government was forced to explain why it would rather arrest a woman than let her speak freely in a public square.

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Just as not everyone agrees with the approach we have taken on Cuba, the same is true on Iran. Americans across the political spectrum who care passionately about keeping this country and our allies safe have different views on how to do so. There is clear consensus among Republicans and Democrats that we cannot and we will not allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon. As President Obama has argued consistently since taking office, a nuclear-armed Iran, “would be a game-changer in the region. Not only would it threaten Israel, our strongest ally in the region and one of our strongest allies in the world, but it would also create a possibility of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists.” It would also seriously undermine the global nonproliferation regime that is a core national security
interest. And as the President has made clear, we will always keep all options on the table to defend our security and the security of our allies.

We all agree that sanctions have played a critical role in isolating Iran and bringing the Iranian government to the table to work towards a comprehensive plan aimed at preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. The toughest sanctions were put in place by President Obama with robust bipartisan leadership, including from Senator McConnell. And our vigorous enforcement of these sanctions is also what is helping keep Iran at the negotiating table.

The talks with Iran have produced some meaningful progress. The Joint Plan of Action interim agreement reached in November 2013 – which was recently extended until June 30, 2015 – not only required Iran to freeze the advance of its nuclear program, but also created a new, more vigorous inspections regime that granted the International Atomic Energy Agency expanded access to Iran’s nuclear facilities, so that we could better ascertain if Iran is meeting its commitments. And throughout the negotiations, we have kept the sanctions architecture of Iran in place – including key oil, banking, and financial measures.

In sum, we have continued to apply pressure, and we have halted -- and even rolled back parts of -- Iran’s nuclear program, all while working towards a comprehensive solution that, to gain U.S. support, would need to assure the international community of the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear program going forward. And importantly, notwithstanding the skepticism that all of us bring to these negotiations, the IAEA has reported that Iran has kept its commitments under the interim agreement.

Now, when we started this process, we knew that reaching an agreement with Iran was going to be extremely difficult, and that the talks might not succeed. That is still the case. After over a year of negotiations, significant gaps remain between our negotiating positions.

But we are still at the negotiating table for one reason, and one reason alone: we assess that we still have a credible chance of reaching the agreement we want, which is what is in the best interest of America’s security, as well as the security of our allies. The moment we stop believing that; the moment we judge that the risks of negotiating exceed the benefits, and that Iran’s leaders are not prepared to do what is necessary, we will end the negotiations and work with Congress – as we always have – to apply more pressure. But we have not reached that point yet, and it is in none of our interest to see Iran return to advancing its nuclear program.

Now, some members of Congress believe that the time has come to ratchet up sanctions on Iran. They argue that this is the most effective way to achieve the goal of getting Iran to give up its nuclear program. We in the administration believe that, at this time, increasing sanctions would dramatically undermine our efforts to reach this shared goal. Let me explain why:

First, imposing new sanctions now will almost certainly end a negotiations process that has not only frozen the advance of Iran’s nuclear program, but that could lead us to an understanding that would give us confidence in its exclusively peaceful nature. If new sanctions were imposed, Iran would be able to blame the U.S. for sabotaging the negotiations and causing the collapse of the process, and we would lose the chance to peacefully resolve a major national security challenge.
Second – and this may seem counterintuitive – new sanctions will actually likely weaken the sanctions pressure on Iran, by undermining crucial international support for the existing multilateral sanctions on Iran. The negotiations have worked so far in large part because we have remained united on our side of the negotiating table with the UK, France, Germany, Russia and China. Other countries have also supported the international sanctions regime that we, the EU, and the UN Security Council have built. If our international partners believe that the United States has acted prematurely by adding new sanctions now – as they most surely would – their willingness to enforce sanctions collectively will wane. And broad international enforcement is what has made our sanctions exponentially more effective than bilateral sanctions alone.

We have made great strides in bringing the international community together in isolating Iran and imposing significant costs on Tehran for pursuing a nuclear program that has raised profound concerns. That consensus is what gives us leverage with Iran. If we pull the trigger on new nuclear-related sanctions now, we will go from isolating Iran to isolating ourselves. We go from a position of collective strength to a position of individual weakness.

Now, imagine for a moment another scenario. If Iran cannot agree to a solution and we have remained united with our negotiating partners, we will have even greater international support and urgency in beefing up the sanctions-based approach.

Sanctions did indeed help to bring Iran to the negotiating table. But sanctions did not stop the advance of Iran’s nuclear program. Negotiations have done that, and it is in our interest not to deny ourselves the chance to achieve a long-term, comprehensive solution that would deny Iran a nuclear weapon.

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These differences of opinion on what are the most effective strategies in U.S. foreign policy – whether we are seeking to promote Cubans’ human rights or trying to prevent Iran from acquiring fissile material for a bomb – carry the highest stakes. To fail to debate them passionately, and to fight for what we think is the best approach, would suggest that we are not taking our responsibilities seriously enough.

Indeed, as Aung San Suu Kyi said in November, when she was asked at a press conference with President Obama about the different strategies of those fighting for democracy in Burma, “We would like to talk to those who disagree with us. That, again, is what democracy is about. You talk to those who disagree with you; you don’t beat them down. You exchange views. And you come to a compromise – a settlement that would be best for the country.”

Another politician known for his supreme skill in crafting a compromise was Kentucky statesman, Henry Clay. As some of you may know, Leader McConnell wrote his undergrad thesis on Clay, and keeps a large portrait of Clay above the desk in his Senate office. And he routinely points to Clay’s “marvelous combination of compromise and principle” as a model for public servants, and for him personally in his new role.

Clay’s last major act of public service, in 1850, was to broker a compromise between Northern and Southern states that kept the Union from breaking apart. As we all know, the settlement proved fleeting, as Civil War would erupt a decade later. But Clay’s remarks to
the Senate at that time feel strikingly prescient for our current moment. Clay told fellow Senators, who were about to give up on seeking an agreement:

The most disastrous consequences would occur, in my opinion, were we to go home, doing nothing to satisfy and tranquillize the country upon these great questions. What will be the judgment of mankind? What [will be] the judgment of that portion of mankind who are looking upon the progress of this scheme of self-government as being that which holds out the highest hopes and expectations of ameliorating the condition of mankind? What will their judgment be? ...What will be the judgment of our constituent[s], when we return to them and they ask us, How have you left your country?

Clay's question is more pressing today than ever before. Because it is no longer only Americans who are looking to us to tackle these “great questions.” It is the world. And more than ever before, ensuring America’s enduring security and prosperity requires us to address challenges far beyond our borders.

If America gets so bogged down in political divisions that we lose sight of the principles that unite us; if we present our nation with a false choice between tackling challenges abroad and fixing problems at home; and if, as Clay warned, we “do nothing to satisfy or tranquillize the country on these great questions”; we will fall short in our duty as public servants. If asked, How have we left the world? – the answer will be, not well.

But we know we can do better, and we know we can do better together. We have seen the tremendous difference the United States can make when we tackle the great problems of our time. We see it in the life-saving impact of individuals like Muriel Harris and the Kentucky Air National guardsmen, whose efforts to confront a deadly disease at its source have helped make us safer here at home. We see it in the work of our brave soldiers, law enforcement officers, diplomats and humanitarians, who are bringing all tools to bear in the fight against violent extremism. We see it in the policies the United States has pursued to help empower young Cubans and Burmese – who are struggling with great bravery, and at great risk, to carve out the freedoms they have long been denied. And while we are not there yet, we see it in the tough, principled negotiations the U.S. is leading to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

Only by engaging these global challenges will we be able to serve America’s interests. And when, as Clay warned, the American people ask us – “How have you left your country?” – we will have the answer that they – we – yearn to hear.

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