

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks Following a Meeting With Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero of Spain and an Exchange With Reporters
October 13, 2009

President Obama. Well, let me first of all say welcome to Prime Minister Zapatero and his delegation. The United States and Spain are NATO allies, and our countries have a relationship that dates back centuries. So on behalf of the American people, I want to welcome you and deliver a strong message of friendship.

Spain and the United States are working together on some of the most difficult security issues that we face in the world. And during the course of our lunch, we discussed the situation in Afghanistan, and I thanked Prime Minister Zapatero for the partnership with Spanish forces in helping to bring security and stability to Afghanistan and to help train Afghans so that they can provide for their own security.

We discussed the Middle East, where the Prime Minister will be traveling after his visit to Washington. And we both agreed that the time is right for a resumption of negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis in order to create a—two states that are living side by side in peace and security.

We discussed the issue of Iran specifically and nuclear proliferation more generally. And we pledged cooperation in trying to encourage Iran to take a path that allows for peaceful nuclear energy, but also rejects a path of nuclear weapons that could lead to a arms race in the region.

And I congratulated Prime Minister Zapatero on his assumption in 2010 of the EU Presidency and pledged that the United States is going to be working closely with the EU on a whole range of issues, from counterterrorism to Kosovo to dealing with improving relations with Russia, even as we continue to move forward on further integration in Europe.

Finally, we discussed the economy and noted that, obviously, the United States and Spain are both working diligently to put our people back to work and recover from what has been the worst recession in decades.

We noted that Spain is the third largest investor in the United States this past quarter, and the United States is the largest investor in Spain. And so we have enormous commercial ties between our two countries, and we pledged to work diligently to strengthen them, particularly around key issues like renewable energy and transportation, where Spain has been a worldwide leader and the United States, I think, has enormous potential to move forward.

So in conclusion, I want to thank you for taking the time to be here. And I am absolutely confident that your Government and ours will continue to strengthen our relationship in the years to come, and that with Spain's leadership in Europe and around the world that we can make enormous progress together that serves both the Spanish people well as well as the American people. So thank you so much.

Prime Minister Zapatero. Thank you. Thank you very much. Well, this is the first day of our work together, and I would very much like to thank President Obama for his hospitality, and I join him in his words, when President Obama said that Spain and the United States have

a great possibility for developing our relations and our common work in the economy and in all these different fields, in security, so much we can do together.

In addition, the Spanish people are most satisfied about this very positive relationship and the good atmosphere between our two countries. We've always looked with great attention and appreciation the political developments and evolution in North America, ever since the Founding Fathers up to the present time. There we have always seen great lessons for history and democracy.

There are two major fields, two great fields that have occupied most of our time in our workday today; that's the economy and security. We are, as regards the economy, coming out of a very difficult economic crisis, and we have to do so in a way that is more rational and more sustainable. And a more sustainable growth in which we attach much more importance to innovation and not greed, in which the new technologies, the new energies, the biotechnology occupy an essential and pivotal role.

In addition, Spain and the United States have a very intense economic relationship. Great American companies have invested and created employment in Spain. And we have shared the technology, and therefore, we hope that in the future, we'll continue to bear witness to the investment of American companies also in Spain.

And today, Spanish companies are also investing in the United States. They're leaders in renewable energy and high speed and also in the biotech industry. And my wish is that in this coming out of the crisis that we're working on, that there may be more American companies investing in Spain, creating employment and that also the reverse—that we may continue in Spain, also in the United States, so that we can do this together anyway.

We are going to be working to—in order for there to be a forum on bilateral investments so that it may be celebrated; also on economic cooperation, something that—to be done by our two Governments, together with the great companies that are working bilaterally in our two countries, American and Spanish, in America and Spain, respectively.

And now allow me to talk about world security. I fully respect President Obama's peace efforts for the international world order. And I especially support him in his call for the reduction of nuclear weapons. And we will be cooperating in—for the conference in April on the reduction of nuclear weapons from our position as Presidency of the European Union at the beginning of next year.

We've spoken in depth about the Middle East, and we agree that there is a moment of opportunity for us right now. And the key to the peace in the Middle East—sorry, the peace in the Middle East is the key to settling problems with security, with peace in other parts of the world. And we've agreed to strengthen the actions of the United States and the European Union in the Middle East.

Our engagement in Afghanistan is firm, is solid. And we're guaranteeing the stability, the security. Reducing radicalism and Talibans as essential in order to make it possible for their people to have a future. And we will continue working together in our cooperation in Afghanistan with our training in security matters and also with economic support.

Iran has to respect the rules of the international community. And we certainly wish and hope and trust that this small window in the reduction of nuclear weapons may consolidate and strengthen. But there will always be a demanding and firm stance on behalf of both the European Union and the United States.

And finally, we've also talked about Latin America, about cooperation there, about this continent that is too so close to us both and so essential in terms of its stability and its prosperity. And also, we've committed to a new transatlantic agenda of the United States and the European Union to work together in counterterrorism and also to improve security worldwide, in addition, also, to increase our scientific cooperation.

Thank you very much, President Obama. As you see, we've had a very intensive working session, but I certainly think that it has been most productive both for the United States and Spain and for the two countries jointly.

President Obama. Excellent. All right, we're going to take two questions. First one from Stephen Collinson [Agence France-Presse]. Yes.

Afghanistan

Q. Mr. President, you said a while back that your job is to be the chief skeptic towards the idea of sending more troops to Afghanistan. Have you heard anything that would—that's eased your skepticism so far? And when do you think you might be in a position to make a final decision on the way forward?

President Obama. We are going through a very deliberate process that is completely consistent with what I said back in March. At the time, I said we were going to deploy additional troops in order to secure the election. After the election, I said it was important for us to reassess the situation on the ground, and that's what we're doing not just on the military side but also on the civilian side.

And I won't provide you a preview of what I've been seeing or hearing. I will tell you that our principal goal remains to root out Al Qaida and its extremist allies that can launch attacks against the United States or its allies. That's our principal mission. We are also, obviously, interested in stability in the region, and that includes not only Afghanistan but also Pakistan.

And finally, we hope that the people in those areas are able to achieve peace and prosperity. The military security that's provided in our ability to train Afghan forces is one element of it. Another element of it is making sure that we are doing a good job in helping build capacity on the civilian side, in areas like agriculture and education. And I would expect that we will have a completion of this current process in the coming weeks.

In the meantime, we still have troops there who are doing extraordinary work each and every day, helping to keep the Afghan people secure, training Afghan troops, working with our ISAF partners. And so we are extraordinarily grateful to them.

The work continues in Afghanistan. We just want to make sure that at all times not only the young men and women who are already there but also any additional young men and women, both military and civilian, who might be working there are served by a policy that's sustainable and effective. And I'm confident that we're going to be able to achieve that.

I apologize. I forgot that there were some, perhaps, not English speakers here. [Laughter] That's a long thing to translate. You want to give it a stab?

Interpreter. That will be fine.

President Obama. Okay, go ahead.

[At this point, the President's remarks were translated into Spanish.]

President Obama. Muy bien. [Laughter]

Guantanamo Bay Detainees

Q. I have a question for the Spanish President of the Government. I would like to know about the closing down of Guantanamo—this is for the Spanish President of the Government—about how many of the detainees Spain would be taking, what nationality they would have?

Prime Minister Zapatero. President Obama, yes, we were talking about with in fact the closing down of Guantanamo and the detainees. It's something that we are assessing right now. President Obama welcomed the initiative of Spain, the offering of Spain. We are still assessing the exact numbers, but our resolve to support President Obama and back him in this is absolutely, absolutely clear for closing down, to make it possible.

As regards Afghanistan, we've thanked President Obama for his words of appreciation because we—because of our commitment in Afghanistan have also suffered the loss of lives over the 9 years we've been present there, casualties in our service men and women.

And President Obama has also acknowledged the important role that we are playing as trainers, as civil guard, Guardia Civil, in security training, where they have a brilliant record.

We also conveyed that we are ready to continue to that and make the most possible of that capability of ours, to take it to its maximum effect in training, to continue training security forces in Afghanistan and also elsewhere in other countries, as Guardia Civil has such a longstanding experience in this.

President Obama. Excellent. Thank you, everybody.

Health Care Reform Legislation

Q. Any response to Senator Snowe voting for the Senate Finance bill?

President Obama. Well, I know the vote has not taken place yet.

Q. I have heard that she will vote for it.

President Obama. But I just want to thank the Senate Finance Committee for plowing forward on what we all acknowledge is a extraordinarily complicated issue. I think they've done excellent work. And I think not only Chairman Baucus and others, but in particular Senator Snowe, has been extraordinarily diligent in working together so that we can reduce costs of health care, make sure that people who don't have it are covered, make sure that people who do have insurance have more security and stability, and that over the long run we're saving families, businesses, and our Government money.

So I never count chickens before they're hatched, but this is, obviously, another step forward in bringing about a better deal for the American people.

All right. Thanks, guys.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:21 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. Prime Minister Zapatero and a reporter spoke in Spanish, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

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