

Remarks During a Lunch With Commutation Recipients and an Exchange With Reporters

March 30, 2016

The President. Well, this has been an extraordinary lunch that I've had a chance to have here with some extraordinary people. As all of you know, it has been one of my top priorities for us to bring about a more sensible, more effective approach to our criminal justice system, particularly when it comes to drug crimes. And part of that has been to try to make sure that we have, on the front end, sensible sentencing, rehabilitation, education, and training in prison to prepare people so that they're not going back to the old mistakes that they made before.

Part of it has been to really reinvigorate our commutations and pardons process, because it is my strong belief that by exercising these Presidential powers, I have the chance to show people what a second chance can look like, that I can highlight the individuals who are getting these second chances and doing extraordinary things with their lives.

And this is just a small sample of individuals who were—whose sentences were commuted, a couple by me, a couple by President Bush, a couple by President Clinton. They're all at different stages of this new chapter in their lives, but the stories are extraordinary. You've got individuals sitting around this table who are now attorneys themselves and raising children and about to get married. You've got folks who are inspirational speakers and working with those who are reentering society after having done their time and helping people make adjustments.

To my left right here, just a good example, Phillip Emmert, who lives in Iowa City. Phillip, who served in our United States Army, was arrested and convicted of distributing methamphetamines, received a 27-year sentence. His wife, while he was in prison, had an accident that paralyzed her, had a small child at home. But Phil had the strength to do everything he could to get trained to learn a whole bunch of systems and ended up specializing in heating and air conditioning systems. He was commuted by President Bush, was able to find a job with the VA; today, is gainfully employed. His boss loves him. *[Laughter]* He's doing great work, is at the same time caring for his wife, who's still disabled. Has been a terrific father, is part of a Bible study group and a leader in the community. And this is an example of what we mean when we talk about second chances. And I could tell you just as compelling stories about everybody sitting at this table.

So I wanted to have lunch with them in part so that I could hear their stories and be able to relay them to the American peoples to make sure that folks are understood not just as a number, but these are individuals with families and children and parents who love them, and have made mistakes, but take responsibility for it.

I also wanted to have this lunch to learn how can we improve the process of making sure this—that people, after they've served their time, can reintegrate in the society effectively. And I got some very interesting ideas about some of the barriers that we continue to put in place that make it harder for people to readjust and make it more likely that they get back in trouble. And we want to clear away as many of those barriers as possible.

I will tell you that listening to their stories also reminded me of how out of proportion and counterproductive so much of our sentencing in—when it comes to our drug laws are, both at

the Federal level and the State level. And I am very grateful for the bipartisan conversations that have been taking place in Congress.

I am still hopeful that we can get criminal justice reform done. It does not make sense for a nonviolent offender—drug offender to be getting 20 years, 30 years, in some cases life imprisonment. That's not serving anybody. It's not serving taxpayers, it's not serving public safety, and it's damaging families. And I'm very grateful that Speaker Ryan and others have expressed an interest in starting to call these bills and seeing if we can get them moving before this Congress adjourns.

I am going to continue to emphasize the importance of pardons and commutations going forward. Today we commuted 61 additional individuals who are deserving and who I believe will be looking at the people sitting here at this table as models and inspiration for what is possible in their lives, that will mean that, at this point, I will have commuted 268 [248]^{*} sentences, which is more than the previous 6 Presidents combined.

But we're not done, and we're going to keep on working on this until I leave. It's something that I'm going to keep on working on even after I leave the Presidency, because I—some of you know we had a Easter Prayer Breakfast with ministers, pastors from all around the country of all denominations in which we read Scripture and were reminded of Jesus' teachings. And at the heart of my faith, and what I believe is at the heart of the American ideal is, is that we're all imperfect. We all make mistakes. We have to own those mistakes. We have to take responsibility and learn from those mistakes. But we as a society have to make sure that people who do take responsibility and own and learn from those mistakes are able to continue to be part of the American family. It's the right thing to do. It's the smart thing to do.

And I just appreciate the testimony of all the people here at this table, because it gave me a great lift. Made me feel inspired. And I'm really, really proud of them.

All right?

Q. Mr. President—

The President. Thank you.

Employment Opportunities for Former Prisoners

Q. —what message would you have for employers who—

White House staffer. Thank you, pool—[inaudible].

The President. No, no, no I want to take this one. Go ahead.

Q. What message would you have for employers who perhaps would like to give people like the folks you're meeting with today a second chance?

The President. Well, many of the people sitting at this table described with incredible gratitude the employers who did give them that chance. And what I think employers will find is that if they are willing to look past mistakes that often were made when these individuals were 20, 21, 23, and now they are older and more mature, you'll end up getting really hard, really loyal workers.

And I've heard that repeatedly from employers, that if they are willing to take a chance on somebody, they will be rewarded by somebody who is grateful and will go above and beyond

^{*} White House correction.

the call of duty. But unfortunately, we have a lot of barriers in a lot of companies. This is part of the reason why, at the Federal level, we have instituted a banning of the box. Because so often, that prevents somebody from even meeting a felon, because all they see is there's a record there, and don't have a chance to hear somebody's story and get a measure of the man or the woman and their ability to do the job.

I am very supportive of us generally eliminating that as a screening function. I think employers are going to have to continue to recognize that there are some particular issues surrounding persons who are ex-offenders that may have to be accommodated. They may have to meet with their probation officer occasionally and so forth.

But uniformly, when I've talked to employers who take a chance—and that includes, by the way, this establishment, which is one of the reasons that we decided to have lunch here, Busboys and Poets, burger was excellent—[laughter]—but what is also true is, is that they've given a number of ex-offenders a chance and do not screen using that box to find out at the front end whether somebody should get an interview or now.

What they'll find is they'll find—they will get somebody who is driven and understands how precious it is just to have a chance to be useful and to do good work. And the kindness that employers show, I think, will be returned manyfold. So I hope that that's a practice among private sector employers and public sector employers that begins to spread. All right?

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:32 p.m. at Busboys and Poets restaurant. In his remarks, he referred to Charlotte, NC, resident Ramona Brant; Washington, DC, resident Norman O. Brown; Dublin, CA, resident Angie Jenkins; Atlanta, GA, resident Serena D. Nunn; Richmond, VA, resident Kemba N. Smith; Charles County, MD, resident Michael D. Short; former President George W. Bush; and Dixie Emmert, wife, and Jessie Emmert, daughter, of Iowa City, IA, resident Phillip A. Emmert.

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Names: Brant, Ramona; Brown, Norman O.; Bush, George W.; Clinton, William J.; Emmert, Dixie; Emmert, Jessie; Emmert, Phillip A.; Jenkins, Angie; Nunn, Serena D.; Ryan, Paul D.; Short, Michael D.; Smith, Kemba N.

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