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For Immediate Release

August 07, 2013

Interview of the President by Jay Leno, The Tonight Show

NBC Studios
Burbank, California

4:34 P.M. PDT

Q Welcome the President of the United States -- Barack Obama. (Applause.)

Welcome back, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. It's good to be back. (Applause.)

Q Well, we're thrilled to have you.

THE PRESIDENT: It is good to be back.

Q And a happy birthday.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much.

Q Happy birthday to you.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. (Applause.)

Q So how did you celebrate Sunday? What did you do?

THE PRESIDENT: I had a bunch of friends come over who I don't see that often from high school and college. And we played a little golf, and then we tried to play a little basketball. And it was a sad state of affairs. (Laughter.)

Q Really?

THE PRESIDENT: A bunch of old guys. Where's the Ibuprofen and all that stuff. (Laughter.)

Q But you're pretty competitive.

THE PRESIDENT: I am pretty competitive. But the day of my birthday -- we do departure photos of people who are transitioning out of the White House. And we let them bring their families and they take a picture in the Oval Office. And this wonderful staff person came in and had a really cute, young son. He looked like Harry Potter, a six-year-old guy. (Laughter.) He came in, he had an economic report for me. He had graphs and everything. (Laughter.) And, he says, "My birthday is in August, too." I said, "Well, how old are you going to be?" He said, "Seven." He said, "How old are you?" I said, "Fifty-two." He said, "Whoa." (Laughter.) Whoa. Whoa. (Laughter.) He looked off in the distance. He was trying to project. (Laughter.)

Q Yes, you can't even --

THE PRESIDENT: You can't go out that far.



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Q You can't grasp that number, no. (Laughter.) Now, I've seen Michelle tease you about your gray hair. You have a bit of silver in your hair. Do you tease back?

THE PRESIDENT: No. (Laughter and applause.) That's why we're celebrating our 21st anniversary. (Laughter.)

Q As I'm married 33 years, I know exactly what you're saying. (Laughter.) I've got to ask you about this. Everyone is concerned about these embassy closings. How significant is this threat?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it's significant enough that we're taking every precaution. We had already done a lot to bolster embassy security around the world, but especially in the Middle East and North Africa, where the threats tend to be highest. And whenever we see a threat stream that we think is specific enough that we can take some specific precautions within a certain timeframe, then we do so.

Now, it's a reminder that for all the progress we've made -- getting bin Laden, putting al Qaeda between Afghanistan and Pakistan back on its heels -- that this radical, violent extremism is still out there. And we've got to stay on top of it. It's also a reminder of how courageous our embassy personnel tend to be, because you can never have 100 percent security in some of these places. The countries themselves sometimes are ill-equipped to provide the kind of security that you want. Even if we reinforce it, there are still vulnerabilities.

And these diplomats, they go out there and they serve every day. Oftentimes, they have their families with them. They do an incredible job and sometimes don't get enough credit. So we're grateful to them and we've got to do everything we can to protect them. (Applause.)

Q This global travel warning, this is for Americans all around the world? Are we telling people don't take that European vacation just yet? What are we saying?

THE PRESIDENT: I think the general rule is just show some common sense and some caution. So there are some countries where you're less likely to experience a terrorist attack. There are some where there are more dangers. And if people are paying attention, checking with the State Department or embassy, going on the website before you travel, find out what kind of precautions you should be taking, then I think it still makes sense for people to take vacations. They just have to make sure that they're doing so in a prudent way.

Q What do you say to those cynics who go, oh, this is an overreaction to Benghazi -- how do you respond to that?

THE PRESIDENT: One thing I've tried to do as President is not over react, but make sure that as much as possible the American people understand that there are genuine risks out there. What's great about what we've seen with America over the last several years is how resilient we are. So after the Boston bombing, for example, the next day folks were out there, they're going to ball games. They are making sure that we're not reacting in a way that somehow shuts us down.

And that's the right reaction. Terrorists depend on the idea that we're going to be terrorized. And we're going to live our lives. And the odds of people dying in a terrorist attack obviously are still a lot lower than in a car accident, unfortunately. But there are things that we can do to make sure that we're keeping the pressure on these networks that would try to injure Americans. And the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing I think about when I go to bed is making sure that I'm doing everything I can to keep Americans safe. (Applause.)

Q It's safe to say that we learned about these threats through the NSA intelligence program? Is that a fair assessment?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, this intelligence-gathering that we do is a critical component of counterterrorism. And obviously, with Mr. Snowden and the disclosures of classified information, this raised a lot of questions for people. But what I said as soon as it happened I continue to believe in, which is a lot of these programs were put in place before I came in. I had some skepticism, and I think we should have a healthy skepticism about what government is doing. I had the programs reviewed. We put in some additional safeguards to make sure that there's federal court oversight as well as congressional oversight, that there is no spying on Americans.

We don't have a domestic spying program. What we do have are some mechanisms where we can track a phone number or an email address that we know is connected to some sort of terrorist threat. And that information is useful. But what I've said before I want to make sure I repeat, and that is we should be skeptical about the potential encroachments on privacy. None of the revelations show that government has actually abused these powers, but they're pretty significant powers.

And I've been talking to Congress and civil libertarians and others about are there additional ways that we can

make sure that people know nobody is listening to your phone call, but we do want to make sure that after a Boston bombing, for example, we've got the phone numbers of those two brothers -- we want to be able to make sure did they call anybody else? Are there networks in New York, are there networks elsewhere that we have to roll up? And if we can make sure that there's confidence on the part of the American people that there's oversight, then I think we can make sure that we're properly balancing our liberty and our security.

Q When we come back, I want to ask you about Russia and Snowden. I hit on something in the monologue which just seems incredible to me, and I want to get your thoughts on that.

More with the President when we come back. (Applause.)

* * *

Q Welcome back to our discussion with President Barack Obama. (Applause.)

Let me ask you about this -- the NSA leaker Edward Snowden. Some call him a whistleblower. What do you call him?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we don't know yet exactly what he did, other than what he's said on the Internet, and it's important for me not to prejudge something.

Q Got you.

THE PRESIDENT: Hopefully, at some point he'll go to trial and he will have a lawyer and due process, and we can make those decisions.

I can tell you that there are ways, if you think that the government is abusing a program, of coming forward. In fact, I, through executive order, signed whistleblower protection for intelligence officers or people who are involved in the intelligence industry. So you don't have to break the law. You don't have to divulge information that could compromise American security. You can come forward, come to the appropriate individuals and say, look, I've got a problem with what's going on here, I'm not sure whether it's being done properly.

If, in fact, the allegations are true, then he didn't do that. And that is a huge problem because a lot of what we do depends on terrorists networks not knowing that, in fact, we may be able to access their information.

Q Let me add -- now, he was a contracted employee.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q And it seems the government has a lot of these. I remember when I was coming up my brother was in ROTC, and in those days, they would take college students, you go into the Army, the Army would train you. This guy is being paid money by an outside firm, living in Hawaii, got the stripper girlfriend. All of a sudden you're all upset with what the government is doing, and you go to another country. I mean, in my era, Daniel Ellsberg stood in the town square and said, "I've got this," got arrested, The New York Times -- I mean, should we go back to not using so many -- whether it's Blackwater or any of these contract -- these people who are Hessians, they get paid?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think you're raising an important issue. We've been trying to reduce the reliance on contractors. Some of the contractors do a great job, and they're patriots and they're trying to support our mission. Sometimes they can do it more efficiently or effectively if they've got some specialized knowledge. But one of the things that I've asked our team to look at is, when it comes to intelligence, should we, in fact, be farming that much stuff out. And there are a lot of extraordinarily capable folks in our military and our government who can do this, and probably do it cheaper, and then benefit from the training that they get so that when they transfer -- (applause) -- they're in a better position.

Q Now, were you surprised that Russia granted Snowden asylum?

THE PRESIDENT: I was disappointed because even though we don't have an extradition treaty with them, traditionally we have tried to respect if there's a law-breaker or an alleged law-breaker in their country, we evaluate it and we try to work with them. They didn't do that with us. And in some ways it's reflective of some underlying challenges that we've had with Russia lately. A lot of what's been going on hasn't been major breaks in the relationship, and they still help us on supplying our troops in Afghanistan; they're still helping us on counterterrorism work; they were helpful after the Boston bombing in that investigation. And so there's still a lot of business that we can do with them.

But there have been times where they slip back into Cold War thinking and a Cold War mentality. And what I

consistently say to them, and what I say to President Putin, is that's the past and we've got to think about the future, and there's no reason why we shouldn't be able to cooperate more effectively than we do.

Q And Putin seems to me like one of those old-school KGB guys.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, he headed up the KGB. (Laughter.)

Q Yes. Well, that's what I mean. Yes, that's what I mean. He has that mentality. I mean, look at this picture here. You two don't look pretty -- (laughter) -- you look like me and the NBC executives. What is going on there? (Laughter.) That doesn't look like a friendly picture.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, the truth is, is that when we have meetings we can have some pretty blunt exchanges and animated exchanges. But he's got -- that seems to be his preferred style during press conferences, is sitting back and not looking too excited. (Laughter.) Now, part of it is he's not accustomed to having press conferences where you've got a bunch of reporters yelling questions at you.

Q Now, the G20 summit is in St. Petersburg next --

THE PRESIDENT: Coming up, right.

Q Are you going to that and will you meet with Putin?

THE PRESIDENT: I will be going to that. I will be going to that because the G20 summit is the main forum where we talk about the economy, the world economy, with all the top economic powers in the world. So it's not something unique to Russia. They're hosting it this year, but it's important for us, as the leading economy in the world, to make sure that we're there -- in part because creating jobs, improving our economy, building up our manufacturing base, increasing wages -- all those things now depend on how we compete in this global economy. And when you've got problems in Europe, or China is slowing down, that has an impact here in the United States.

And I've been saying for the entire tenure of my presidency that my number-one priority at all times is how do we create an economy where, if you work hard in this country, you can succeed. And there are a lot of things that we can do here in this country, but we've also got to pay attention to what's going on outside it.

Q Well, something that shocked me about Russia -- and I'm surprised this is not a huge story -- suddenly, homosexuality is against the law. I mean, this seems like Germany: Let's round up the Jews, let's round up the gays, let's round up the blacks. I mean, it starts with that. You round up people who you don't -- I mean, why is not more of the world outraged at this?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I've been very clear that when it comes to universal rights, when it comes to people's basic freedoms, that whether you are discriminating on the basis of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation, you are violating the basic morality that I think should transcend every country. And I have no patience for countries that try to treat gays or lesbians or transgender persons in ways that intimidate them or are harmful to them.

Now, what's happening in Russia is not unique. When I traveled to Africa, there were some countries that are doing a lot of good things for their people, who we're working with and helping on development issues, but in some cases have persecuted gays and lesbians. And it makes for some uncomfortable press conferences sometimes. But one of the things that I think is very important for me to speak out on is making sure that people are treated fairly and justly, because that's what we stand for. And I believe that that's a precept that's not unique to America, that's something that should apply everywhere. (Applause.)

Q Do you think it will affect the Olympics?

THE PRESIDENT: I think Putin and Russia have a big stake in making sure the Olympics work, and I think they understand that for most of the countries that participate in the Olympics, we wouldn't tolerate gays and lesbians being treated differently. They're athletes, they're there to compete. And if Russia wants to uphold the Olympic spirit, then every judgment should be made on the track, or in the swimming pool, or on the balance beam, and people's sexual orientation shouldn't have anything to do with it. (Applause.)

Q Good enough for me.

We'll be right back. We'll talk about the economy when we come back.

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely.

Q More with President Obama right after this. (Applause.)

* * *

Q Welcome back. We're talking with the President of the United States, Barack Obama.

Hey, let's talk about the economy. Things seem to be getting better, seem to be improving.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, the economy is growing.

Q Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: The unemployment rate has been ticking down, and housing is improving. We've seen the deficit cut in half. Health care costs are actually going up slower than they have in -- any time in the last 50 years. So there are a lot of good trends.

Q Right.

THE PRESIDENT: But I think what folks all across the country would tell you is we've got a lot more work to do. Wages and salaries haven't gone up. Middle-class families are still struggling to make sure they can pay for their kids' college education. They're still concerned about whether they can retire.

And what Washington should be thinking about every single day is how do we make sure we've got an economy where if folks work hard, they can find a good job that pays a decent wage; they can send their kids to college; they've got health care they can count on; they can retire even if they don't get rich -- or even if they're not rich; and that we're creating these ladders of opportunities for people to get into the middle class.

And what's happened over the last 20 years is -- actually longer than that, probably over the last 30 -- is that the gap between those of us at the very top and the vast middle has been growing wider and wider. And some of that is globalization. Some of it is technology. You go to a factory -- you're a car guy -- if you go to an auto plant now, robots, and it's clean as a whistle, and it doesn't employ as many people as it used to. So a lot of those middle-class jobs have gone away.

And what we have to do is make sure that we are investing in infrastructure, research; making sure our kids are educated properly; and an improved and more stable housing market instead of the kind of bubbles that we had before. All those things can really make a difference.

Q You mentioned infrastructure. Why is that a partisan issue? I live in a town, the bridge is falling apart, it's not safe. How does that become Republican or Democrat? How do you not just fix the bridge? (Laughter and applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know. As you know, for the last three years, I've said, let's work together. Let's find a financing mechanism and let's go ahead and fix our bridges, fix our roads, sewer systems, our ports. The Panama is being widened so that these big supertankers can come in. Now, that will be finished in 2015. If we don't deepen our ports all along the Gulf -- places like Charleston, South Carolina, or Savannah, Georgia, or Jacksonville, Florida -- if we don't do that, those ships are going to go someplace else. And we'll lose jobs. Businesses won't locate here.

So this is something that traditionally has been bipartisan. I mean, it used to be Republicans and Democrats, they love cutting those ribbons.

Q Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: And we've got a bunch of construction workers who aren't working right now. They've got the skills. They want to get on the job. It would have a huge impact on the economy not just now, but well into the future. So I'm just going to keep on pushing Republicans to join with us, and let's try to do it.

Part of it is -- what they'll say is, we like infrastructure, but we don't want to pay for it. And one of the things I've been trying to get across here is, is that we don't need a huge government, but we need government doing some basic things, and we should all agree on a sensible mechanism to go ahead and pay for it -- make sure we don't waste money, make sure we're cutting down on permitting times and delays, but let's go ahead and get it done.

Q Would it be possible to do a modern WPA, almost like a America Peace Corps where kids get paid a decent wage, you give them food, and they fix up Detroit, they fix up other cities -- whatever -- they fix bridges? I mean, when you travel this country, you see these great bridges and things that were built by -- and they have the

plaque, the guys that built it in 1932, in 1931.

THE PRESIDENT: And it was incredibly important for not just the economy in the '30s, we use it still -- Golden Gate Bridge, Hoover Dam. It opened up opportunity for everybody. The Interstate Highway System -- think of all the businesses that got created because we put that together.

So it's possible. The question is do we have the political will to do it. And my argument to Congress has been, this is just like your house. You can put off fixing the roof. You can put off doing the tuckpointing. You can put off replacing the old boiler. But sooner or later, you're going to have to fix it, and it's going to be more expensive the longer you put it off. When we've got unemployed folks right now, we should be putting them to work, and it would be good for the entire country. (Applause.)

Q And let me ask you about something I'm seeing. Is it me, or do I see kind of bromance with you and John McCain? (Laughter.) I remember you two had that lovers' quarrel for a while. And, oh, now, you're, oh -- well, you're best friends.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, you know that's how --

Q What happened?

THE PRESIDENT: That's how a classic romantic comedy goes, right? (Laughter.) Initially you're not getting along, and then you keep on bumping into each other. (Laughter.)

Q Yes, but what's -- I mean, what changed? Who saw the light? (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: John McCain and I have a number of philosophical differences, but he is a person of integrity. He is willing to say things regardless of the politics. The fact that he worked hard with a group of Democratic and Republican senators on immigration reform; they passed a bill in the Senate that will make sure that folks who are here illegally have to pay back-taxes and pay a penalty and get to the back of the line, but over time have a pathway to citizenship, and make sure that we're strengthening our borders. He went ahead and passed that even though there are some questions in his own party. So I think that he deserves credit for being somebody who is willing to go against the grain of his own party sometimes. It's probably not good for me to compliment him on television.

Q Yes, yes. (Laughter.) Get a big head.

THE PRESIDENT: But I think that he's an example of a number of Republicans in the Senate, in the House, who want to be for something, not just be against everything. (Applause.) And the more that they can try to move in that direction, I think the better off we'll be.

Q Now, we're going to take a break. I want to talk about Hillary because I know you had lunch with her.

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely.

Q My question -- my question when we come back, who asked who to lunch. (Laughter.) Don't answer. Don't answer. We'll find out more with President Obama right after this. (Applause.)

Q (Applause.) We are back with the President of the United States.

You and Hillary had lunch last -- who invited who to lunch? I'm curious.

THE PRESIDENT: I invited her.

Q Okay.

THE PRESIDENT: And we had a great time. She had that post-administration glow. (Laughter.) You know, when folks leave the White House -- two weeks later, they look great. (Laughter.) But it was a wonderful conversation. By the end of my first term, we had become genuinely close and I could not have more respect for her. She was a great Secretary of State, and I'm very, very proud of the work she did. (Applause.)

Q Did you notice her measuring the drapes or anything like that? (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: No. Keep in mind, she's been there before.

Q Right, that's true. That's true.

THE PRESIDENT: So she doesn't have to measure them.

Q So what's the latest in health care? What's new?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, on October 1st, people are going to be able to sign up if they don't have health care. If you've got health care, you don't have to do anything. The only thing that's happened for people who have health care right now is, is that you've been able to benefit from the fact that we put in place a law so that insurance companies have to spend 80 percent of your premiums on health care, and if they spend it on administrative costs and high CEO salaries, they've got to send you a rebate. And that's been affecting people. (Applause.)

If you've got a kid who has just graduated, doesn't have a job with health care, they can stay on their parent's plan. That's in place right now. Free preventive care and free contraceptive care for young women and families -- all that stuff is in place now. No lifetime limits. (Applause.)

So a lot of consumer protections got put in place. But on October 1st, if you don't have health care right now, you can join what are called these marketplaces and you'll be able to get lower-cost health care. Here in California, it's estimated it will be 20, 30 percent cheaper than what you're already getting. And we'll give you subsidies -- tax credits, essentially -- if you still can't afford it.

So you can go to healthcare.gov and right now you can pre-register essentially and start figuring out is this plan right for you.

Q Well, I was able to get health care from -- the guys who worked at my shop for me are all over 50. They never had health care. And I was able to get it now because you can't be turned down. So thank you for that.

THE PRESIDENT: You can't be turned down because of a preexisting condition. That's part of what we're going to be doing. (Applause.)

Q Something I thought was -- I thought you spoke very eloquently about the Trayvon Martin case and I could tell you were speaking from the heart. And tell me about that.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think all of us were troubled by what happened. And any of us who were parents can imagine the heart ache that those parents went through. It doesn't mean that Trayvon was a perfect kid -- none of us were. We were talking offstage -- when you're a teenager, especially a teenage boy, you're going to mess up, and you won't always have the best judgment. But what I think all of us agree to is, is that we should have a criminal justice system that's fair, that's just. And what I wanted to try to explain was why this was a particularly sensitive topic for African American families, because a lot of people who have sons know the experience they had of being followed or being viewed suspiciously.

We all know that young African American men disproportionately have involvement in criminal activities and violence -- for a lot of reasons, a lot of it having to do with poverty, a lot of it having to do with disruptions in their neighborhoods and their communities, and failing schools and all those things. And that's no excuse, but what we also believe in is, is that people -- everybody -- should be treated fairly and the system should work for everyone. (Applause.) And so what I'm trying to do is just --

Q I agree.

THE PRESIDENT: -- make sure that we have a conversation and that we're all asking ourselves are there some things that we can do to foster better understanding, and to make sure that we don't have laws in place that encourage the kind of violent encounter that we saw there that resulted in tragedy.

Q Let me ask you something -- you told a group of young people that broccoli was your favorite food. (Laughter.) Now, lying to voters is one thing; lying to children, that's -- (laughter and applause) -- well, that is --

THE PRESIDENT: Let me say this --

Q Can you put your right hand on a Bible and say, "Broccoli" -- (laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Let me say this -- I have broccoli a lot. (Laughter.) I mean, no, you can ask my staff.

Q Really?

THE PRESIDENT: It is one of my staples. Me and broccoli, I don't know, we've got a thing going. (Laughter.)

Q Really?

THE PRESIDENT: It goes especially well with burgers and fries.

Q Right, right. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely.

Q And did Michelle make a broccoli cake with broccoli icing?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I won't go that far.

Q Now, did the kids believe you or did they go, "Oh, come on."

THE PRESIDENT: No, they did kind of -- they looked at me. (Laughter.) They had their little pads and pencils, and they were all, "Really?" (Laughter.) "More than chips?" (Laughter.)

But to Michelle's credit, the Let's Move initiative that she's been involved with that has gotten so many folks all around the country doing stuff to help kids exercise and eat right. For the first time in a long time, we've started to see some modest reduction in childhood obesity. So I think it's making a difference. (Applause.)

Q Well, that's good. Really proud of that.

Mr. President, it's been an honor. I know you have to go.

THE PRESIDENT: It was nice to see you.

Q Thank you so much.

THE PRESIDENT: Before we go, well, Jay, I know you're very proud of your car collection.

Q Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, there's one piece that's missing.

Q Cool.

THE PRESIDENT: This is the Beast.

Q The Beast!

THE PRESIDENT: The one I drive in. (Applause.)

Q Oh, look at that. My friend, Ed Wellburn, designed that car. Will you sign the roof?

THE PRESIDENT: I will sign the roof.

Q Oh, cool. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Now, the doors are heavy, so when you're getting in you may need a little help. (Laughter.)

Q I assume the real car will be at my garage after the show. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: There you go, Jay.

Q Very good.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you so much.

Q Mr. President, a pleasure and an honor, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate it.

Q Thank you very much. (Applause.)

END

5:16 P.M. PDT



Home

The White House Blog

Photos & Videos

Photo Galleries

Video

Performances

Live Streams

Podcasts

Briefing Room

Your Weekly Address

Speeches & Remarks

Press Briefings

Statements & Releases

White House Schedule

Presidential Actions

Legislation

Nominations & Appointments

Disclosures

Issues

Civil Rights

Defense

Disabilities

Economy

Education

Energy & Environment

Ethics

Equal Pay

Foreign Policy

Health Care

Homeland Security

Immigration

Refinancing

Rural

Service

Seniors & Social Security

Snapshots

Taxes

Technology

Urban and Economic

Mobility

Veterans

Violence Prevention

Women

The Administration

President Barack Obama

Vice President Joe Biden

First Lady Michelle Obama

Dr. Jill Biden

The Cabinet

White House Staff

Executive Office of the President

Other Advisory Boards

About the White House

Inside the White House

Presidents

First Ladies

The Oval Office

The Vice President's Residence & Office

Eisenhower Executive Office Building

Camp David

Air Force One

White House Fellows

White House Internships

Tours & Events

Mobile Apps

Our Government

The Executive Branch

The Legislative Branch

The Judicial Branch

The Constitution

Federal Agencies & Commissions

Elections & Voting

State & Local Government

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