

# Obama's Oval Office Speech, Translated Unofficially into Plain English

By [Norman Solomon](#)

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*Here is a condensed version of President Obama's speech from the Oval Office on Sunday night, unofficially translated [by Norman Solomon] into plain English.*

I kind of realize we can't kill our way out of this conflict with ISIL, but in the short term hopefully we can kill our way out of the danger of a Republican victory in the presidential race next year.

As a practical matter, the current hysteria needs guidance, not a sense of proportion along the lines of what the *New York Times* just mentioned in passing: "The death toll from jihadist terrorism on American soil since the Sept. 11 attacks — 45 people — is about the same as the 48 killed in terrorist attacks motivated by white supremacist and other right-wing extremist ideologies.... And both tolls are tiny compared with the tally of conventional murders, more than 200,000 over the same period."

While I'm urging some gun control, that certainly doesn't apply to the Pentagon. The Joint Chiefs and their underlings have passed all the background checks they need by virtue of getting to put on a uniform of the United States Armed Forces.

As much as we must denounce the use of any guns that point at us, we must continue to laud the brave men and women who point guns for us — and who fire missiles at terrorists and possible terrorists and sometimes unfortunately at wedding parties or misidentified vehicles or teenagers posthumously classified as "militants" after signature strikes or children who get in the way.

We can't see ourselves in the folks we kill. But I know that we see ourselves with friends and coworkers at a holiday party like the one in San Bernardino. I know we see our kids in the faces of the young people killed in Paris.

Also I know we don't see ourselves in the blameless individuals who have been beheaded by [our ally Saudi Arabia](#), which has executed 150 people this year mostly by cutting off their heads with swords.

Nor should we bother to see ourselves in the people the Saudi government is slaughtering with airstrikes in Yemen on a daily basis. We sell the Saudis [many billions of dollars worth of weapons](#) that make the killings in San Bernardino look smaller than puny. But that's the way it goes sometimes.

I gave a lofty major speech a couple of years ago about how a democratic society can't have perpetual war. I like to talk about such sugary ideals; a spoonful helps the doublethink medicine go down.

Let me now say a word about what we should not do. We should not be drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria. The United States of America has colossal air power — and we're going to use it. No muss, little fuss: except for people under the bombs, now being utilized at such a fast pace that [the warhead supply chain is stretched thin](#).

Yes, we're escalating a bit on the ground too, with hundreds of special operations forces going into Syria despite my numerous public [statements](#) — adding up to [more than a dozen](#) since August 2013 — that American troops would not be sent to Syria. Likewise we've got several thousand soldiers in Iraq, five years after I solemnly [announced](#) that "the American combat mission in Iraq has ended."

But here's the main thing: In the Middle East, the USA will be number one in dropping bombs and firing missiles. Lots of them! It's true that we keep making enemies faster than we can possibly kill them, but that's the nature of the beast.

In Afghanistan too. At the end of last year I ceremoniously [proclaimed](#) that "the longest war in American history is coming to a responsible conclusion" and the United States "will maintain a limited military presence in Afghanistan." But within 10 months I changed course and [declared](#) that 5,500 U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan into 2017.

Midway through this fall — even before the terrorist attacks in Paris — the United States had launched an average of about 50 airstrikes per week in Syria during the previous year, and the *New York Times* [reported](#) that the U.S. military was preparing "to intensify airstrikes against the Islamic State" on Syrian territory.

And according to official Pentagon [figures](#), the U.S.-led aerial bombing in Iraq has topped 4,500 airstrikes in the last year — approaching an average rate of 100 per week.

Our military will hunt down terrorist plotters where they are plotting against us. In Iraq and Syria, airstrikes are taking out some of the latest ISIL leaders, heavy weapons, oil tankers, infrastructure. I've got to tell you that these actions will defeat ISIL, but I've got to not tell you that the airstrikes will kill a lot of civilians while launching new cycles of what gave rise to ISIL in the first place — inflaming rage and grief while serving as a powerful recruitment tool for people to take up arms against us.

In the name of defeating terrorist forces, our air war has the effect of [recruiting](#) for them. Meanwhile, in Syria, our obsession with regime change has propelled us into closely aligning with extremist jihadi fighters. They sure appreciate the large quantities of our weapons that end up in their arsenals.

You don't expect this policy to make a lot of sense, do you?

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