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Remarks on Border Security at the University of Texas at El Paso

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 The University of Texas
 (Remarks as Prepared)

I want to thank the University of Texas at El Paso for the opportunity to be here. I also want to recognize UTEP President Diana Natalicio, Congressman Silvestre Reyes and El Paso Mayor John Cook

The last time I was on campus we had just launched the Southwest Border Initiative – an unprecedented effort by the Obama administration to bring focus and intensity to Southwest border security, coupled with a reinvigorated, smart and effective approach to enforcing immigration laws in the interior of our country.

We are almost two years into that strategy and the verdict is in: our approach is working. We have strengthened the Southwest border in a way that many would not have thought possible. And our partnership with Mexico on border security is strong.

That's not to say we still don't face challenges. We are deeply concerned about the drug cartel violence taking place in Mexico. We know that these drug organizations are seeking to undermine the rule of law in Northern Mexico and that we must guard against spillover effects into the United States.

Nonetheless, it is inaccurate to state, as too many have, that the border is overrun with violence and out of control. This statement—often made only to score political points—is just plain wrong.

Not only does it ignore all of the statistical evidence, it also belittles the significant progress that effective law enforcement has made to protect this border and the people who live alongside it.

I know this border well. I was raised in New Mexico. I have spent most of my adult life in Arizona as the U.S. Attorney, Attorney General, and as a two-term Governor.

I have walked the border, flown it, ridden it on horseback, and worked with border communities from Brownsville to San Diego for the better part 18 years as a public official. So I speak from personal experience when I say that the Southwest Border Initiative is the most comprehensive and dedicated effort to strengthen border security that we have ever deployed.

The border, as a whole, is simply not the same as it was two years ago, or even one year ago – in terms of the manpower and resources and technology; in terms of the relationships we've built with our federal, state, local and tribal partners; and in terms of our strong partnership with Mexico.

A Safe, Secure Border Zone

So, what's our goal? Our goal is to have a safe, secure border zone that is also hospitable to and fosters legal trade, travel and immigration.

Our goal recognizes that the border is not simply a line on a map. It is an entire area, extending into both countries. Moreover, a safe, secure border zone requires vigorous enforcement of our nation's immigration laws in the interior of our country as well.

Security starts along the border by leveraging every law enforcement asset and coordinating them in a way that acknowledges that our approach in El Paso may differ from a tactic in San Diego.

Enforcement in the interior of our country must be aggressive and smart. This means going

after criminals and employers who knowingly hire illegal workers, as we have, and doing so in a way consistent with our values and our priorities.

Finally, our border policy should foster legitimate trade, travel, and immigration, accommodating the movement of commerce, from which the U.S. and our Mexican allies derive trade and tourism revenue, and which drives hundreds of thousands of jobs.

In a nutshell, that's our philosophy, that's how we do it, and those are our goals.

This common sense approach, coupled with the tireless dedication of the thousands of men and women on the frontlines, has achieved historic decreases in illegal immigration; unprecedented increases in the seizure of drugs, weapons, and contraband; and record numbers of deportations of individuals in the U.S. illegally – both overall and in terms of criminal aliens. This approach has also led to strengthened and increased partnerships with Mexico on trade and travel and an increase in associated trade revenue.

The Southwest Border Initiative

It was clear from the outset of this Administration that we needed a reinvigorated approach to border security and immigration enforcement.

In March, 2009, we launched the Southwest Border Initiative:

- We increased the size of the Border Patrol to more than 20,700 agents today, which is more than double the size it was in 2004.
- We doubled personnel assigned to Border Enforcement Security Task Forces, which work to dismantle criminal organizations along the border.
- We increased the number of ICE intelligence analysts along the border focused on cartel violence. In all, a quarter of ICE's personnel are now in the region – the most ever.
- We quintupled deployments of Border Liaison Officers to work with their Mexican counterparts.
- And we began screening southbound rail and vehicle traffic looking for the illegal weapons and cash that are helping fuel the cartel violence in Mexico.

With the aid of \$600 million supplemental requested by the Administration and passed by the Congress in the summer of 2010, we're continuing to add technology, manpower, and infrastructure to the border. That includes:

- Adding 1,000 new Border Patrol Agents;
- Adding 250 new CBP officers at our ports of entry;
- Adding 250 new ICE agents focused on transnational crime;
- Improving our tactical communications systems;
- Adding two new forward operating bases to improve coordination of border security activities; and
- Adding additional CBP unmanned aircraft systems. In fact, we've now instituted Predator Unmanned Aircraft System coverage along the entire Southwest border – from the El Centro Sector in California to the Gulf of Mexico in Texas.

President Obama authorized the deployment of 1,200 National Guard troops who are now actively assisting us in our work along the border.

We announced \$150 million in Operation Stonegarden funds in 2009 and 2010 to help local law enforcement jurisdictions along the border pay for things like overtime. \$123 million went to Southwest border states – more than ever before.

In partnership with the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Department of Defense, we have achieved initial operational capability for the new Border Intelligence Fusion Section within the El Paso Intelligence Center.

And we're continuing to work with Mexico to develop an interoperable, cross-border communications network that will improve our ability to coordinate law enforcement and public safety issues.

Additional Steps and Reforms

Beyond these measures, in recent months we've undertaken additional actions I'd like to talk about today. They are designed to bring greater unity to our enforcement efforts, expand coordination with agencies including the Departments of Defense and Justice, and improve response times. For example, we have begun creating joint commands within Customs and Border Protection where previously they didn't exist. This means that instead of having the Border Patrol, Air and Marine, or Field Operations all reporting to different bosses within the same area of operation, they will now report to a single commander. The unified command structure is now in place in Arizona.

We're also improving coordination with the military where our missions overlap on the Southwest border.

As part of the Southwest Border supplemental, CBP has developed new Mobile Response Teams to give us new surge capabilities to send Border Patrol into a particular area of the border.

As we take these steps, we're also bringing better fiscal discipline to border security by doing away with expensive yet ineffective systems like SBI-net, otherwise known as the "virtual fence."

This program began in 2005 as an attempt to provide a single unified technology, consisting of fixed cell towers constructed along the entire border. But the program was consistently over budget, behind schedule, and simply not delivering the return on investment needed to justify it.

We're now redirecting SBI-net resources to other, proven technologies – tailored to each border region – to better meet the operational needs of the Border Patrol.

This new technology deployment strategy is already well under way with resources invested through the Recovery Act and on the ground in communities along the border. It includes non-intrusive inspection equipment at the ports of entry, and tested, commercially available technologies such as thermal imaging devices, ultra-light detection, backscatter units, mobile radios, cameras and laptops for pursuit vehicles, and Remote Video Surveillance System enhancements.

Southwest Border Results

Taken as a whole, the additional manpower, technology and resources represent the most serious and sustained action to secure our border in our nation's history. And it is clear from every key measure that this approach is working.

Border Patrol apprehensions – a key indicator of illegal immigration—have decreased 36 percent in the past two years, and are less than half of what they were at their peak.

As we've continued to combat illegal crossings, violent crime in border communities has remained flat or fallen in the past decade. And studies and statistics have shown that some of the safest communities in America are right here at the border.

Four of the top big cities in America with the lowest rates of violent crime are in border states – San Diego, Phoenix, Austin, and right here in El Paso.

Violent crimes in Southwest border counties have dropped by more than 30 percent and are currently among the lowest in the Nation per capita. And crime rates in Nogales, Douglas, Yuma and other Arizona border towns have remained essentially flat for the past decade, even as drug-related violence has dramatically increased in Mexico.

Let me add some additional perspective. Imagine if the sheriff of a large county – representing millions of residents from big cities and rural communities – told you that he was able to reduce crime, as measured by apprehension statistics, by 36 percent. You'd probably ask how he did it. Then you'd tell him to keep up the good work.

Or, if the police chief of an American city of seven million people – which is about how many people live in our border counties - was able to do the same thing with crime levels, this would be considered a big success.

So, let's stick with the facts and numbers when we talk about where we are at the Southwest border. And we've matched the decreases in apprehensions with increases in seizures of cash, drugs, and weapons.

Over the past two fiscal years, we've seized 35 percent more illegal currency [\$282 million total], 16 percent more illegal drugs [7 million pounds total], and 28 percent more weapons [6,800 total] compared to the previous two years.

We need to be honest with the people we serve about what is and what isn't happening in our border communities. As I've said, we know challenges remain, but significant progress has been made. And that is echoed by leaders in local communities.

Two weeks ago, mayors and their representatives from 13 border cities met during a two-day summit in Tucson. Newly elected Mayor Arturo Garino from Nogales, Arizona told his local newspaper that he went to the meeting to tell his colleagues how Nogales, though one of Arizona's safest cities, gets unfairly portrayed as a dangerous place to live and do business. He quickly learned that his city wasn't alone.

He said, "What I found out from the mayor from Laredo, and the mayor from Brownsville, and

Mayor Sanders from San Diego is that they have the same thing, and almost everybody is hurting economically because of that perception.”

We need to be up front and clear about what’s really happening along our borders. Our border communities are safe. We also need to send an unmistakable message to those who would threaten the safety and security of our border communities and feed this negative perception.

So today I say to the cartels: Don’t even think about bringing your violence and tactics across this border. You will be met by an overwhelming response. And we’re going to continue to work with our partners in Mexico to dismantle and defeat you.

And that message extends to anyone considering coming across that border illegally – whether a smuggler, a human trafficker, or an unlawful immigrant seeking work. There are more Border Patrol agents on that border than ever before. There are more customs officials. There is more technology. Do not throw in your lot with the cartels or the criminal organizations – because the likelihood of getting caught - and the consequences of doing so - are higher than ever before.

Interior Enforcement

As I said before, what happens at the border is inseparable from immigration enforcement that arises in our country’s interior.

Our approach to the enforcement of immigration laws is guided by a common sense premise that is based on sound prosecutorial practice: implement the measures that best protect public safety and produce the most significant results.

This approach focuses on identifying criminal aliens and those who pose the greatest risk to our communities, and prioritizing them for removal.

It involves making sure employers have the tools they need – like E-Verify – to maintain a legal workforce, and face penalties if they knowingly and repeatedly violate the law.

It involves having an immigration detention system that recognizes the basic differences between immigration violators – from families with small children to hardened, violent criminals and gang members – and treats them as such. And it includes having enough federal prosecutors and judges in our judicial system to handle the border-related workload.

Let me pause here for a moment to note that earlier this month, we lost one of our best and most respected federal judges as a result of the tragic shootings in Tucson. Judge John Roll, who served as a chief judge for the District of Arizona, was a fine jurist, a strong advocate for an effective immigration system, and a good friend. One of his last acts was to work with Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords to get more judges assigned to the Southwest border to deal with the increasing caseload that has resulted from our unprecedented enforcement efforts. He will definitely be missed.

Our interior enforcement efforts, just as they are at the border, are achieving major results.

In both fiscal years 2009 and 2010, Immigration and Customs Enforcement removed more illegal immigrants from our country than ever before, with more than 779,000 removals nationwide in the last two years. But most importantly, more than half of those we removed last year – upwards of 195,000 – were convicted criminals, the most ever removed from our country in a single year. That’s a more than 70 percent increase in removal of criminal immigrants from the previous administration.

This surge in criminal apprehensions and removals didn’t happen by accident. Since we just don’t have the resources to remove every single individual who is in the country illegally, like any good prosecutor’s office or law enforcement organization, we set priorities and focus on those who present the biggest danger to communities.

One of the most important steps in this regard is the Secure Communities program, which has helped us identify and remove tens of thousands of criminal aliens in state prisons and local jails by running their fingerprints against federal immigration databases when they get booked into the system.

We have expanded Secure Communities from 14 jurisdictions in 2008 to more than 1,000 as of this week, including all jurisdictions along the Southwest border. We expect to reach complete nationwide deployment by 2013.

We’ve also stepped up labor enforcement, arresting a record number of employers last year who knowingly hire illegal immigrants.

ICE has significantly expanded its use of I-9 audits, which are used to investigate employers suspected of using illegal labor. Since January 2009, ICE has audited more than 3,580 employers suspected of hiring illegal labor, debarred 235 companies and individuals, and

imposed approximately \$54 million in financial sanctions – more than the total amount of audits and debarments than during the entire previous administration.

We've strengthened the efficiency and accuracy of E-Verify to assist employers in abiding by the law. This program continues to grow by more than 1,000 businesses a week, demonstrating its strength.

In addition, we have continued to reform our immigration detention system, making it easier for families and attorneys to locate people in custody, and implementing new detention standards to ensure consistency across the country.

And we've improved our legal immigration process in many ways – making our systems more customer-friendly and efficient. We are now processing applications for naturalization and other critical immigration benefits in record time, meeting or exceeding the goals we've established. And we've put more information and resources on-line.

As we've done this, we've focused on growing the economy by expediting lawful trade and travel with America's second largest trading partner. We've done that by continuing to expand trusted traveler programs, making infrastructure improvements to our ports of entry as part of the Recovery Act, and streamlining and modernizing our customs processes.

That's our Southwest border record. It's the result of the hard work of thousands of Border Patrol and ICE and CBP agents and officers, as well as our federal, state, and local partners. And they deserve our nation's thanks and recognition.

Future of Border Security

While this progress is important, we know there is more to be done.

So where do we need to go in the future? As important, how should we define success as we move forward?

We need to agree on what we mean by a secure border, and what our expectations are for achieving this goal.

A secure border does not mean a sealed border with no commerce; it does not mean a border without challenges. When you have a two thousand mile border encompassing some of our country's most rugged terrain, there will always be challenges.

Just as no major city or town will ever eliminate all crime, neither will we be able to resolve every issue, every time, all at once, along the border.

The reality is that our Southwest border counties are home to 7 million people and thousands of people legally cross that border every day. Yet others are determined to cross the border illegally no matter what, even at risk to their own lives.

But it does not follow, however, that American border communities are "out of control," or overrun with violence. To the contrary, the numbers don't lie. And the numbers that are supposed to go up have gone up, and the numbers that are supposed to go down have gone down.

Let me be clear: violence, whether at the border or anywhere in this country, is tragic, and it is unacceptable.

Before Christmas, I attended the funeral of a Border Patrol agent who was killed in the line of duty. Unfortunately he wasn't the first.

Our men and women in uniform encounter danger every day, and they put their lives on the line, for our sake and for our country. We owe them every tool and every resource in our arsenal so that they can safely and successfully do their jobs. But we also owe them our gratitude. I know each of you in this room joins me in applauding their service.

That's why none of us can stand silent when the public dialogue dishonors the memory and the service of these heroes by misstating the facts and unfairly politicizing border issues.

And when something happens, we unite. We bring the perpetrators to justice. We work together to solve problems. That's what we do best and that's who we are as Americans.

At the end of the day, we will set priorities with the resources we are given by Congress. We do not have the resources to station a Border Patrol agent every few feet along our 2,000 mile border. Nor do we have the resources to find and deport every person who is in our country illegally.

This latter point is one of the many reasons why Congress needs to take up reforms to our immigration system to address long-standing, systemic problems with our immigration laws. President Obama is firm in his commitment to advancing comprehensive immigration reform,

and I'm personally looking forward to working with Congress to move the ball forward.

But the Southwest Border Initiative is working.

Illegal immigration is decreasing. Deportations are increasing. Crime rates are dropping. And this work will only get stronger with comprehensive immigration reform.

So I want to thank you, and I want to thank the men and women who are working day and night to protect and defend our country, often at great personal risk. Let's not undercut them and the great work they do every day, here in El Paso and across the country.

We owe them our continued support and gratitude, and a border and immigration system that works. Thank you.

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