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President's Remarks to the Travel Pool at Laredo Border Patrol Sector Headquarters

Laredo Border Patrol Sector Headquarters
Laredo, Texas

[In Focus: Immigration](#)

3:23 P.M. CDT

THE PRESIDENT: It's good to be in my home state with my home governor. Governor Perry understands, like I understand, the need to enforce this border. He also understands what I understand -- that in order to do so we've got to have a comprehensive plan.

I started my day earlier in New Mexico, where I saw the training facility that is going to put out enough Border Patrol to be able to tell the American people we will have doubled the Border Patrol since 2001. That's a really important part of our strategy, to train more Border Patrol agents to help those that are working hard already to do their job. But we need to make the border technologically advanced as well.

We just saw some of the remote cameras that are in place that will help the Border Patrol be able to do its job better. But more than that, we've got to have a comprehensive approach, and that includes a temporary worker plan that says you can come and do a job Americans aren't doing if you pass a criminal background check, for a period of time. And then once you finish that time, you go home.

We also have got to make sure that we deal with the problem of people who have been here for a long period of time. Some people say, throw them out of the country. That doesn't make any sense. You just can't throw them out of the country. Others say, give them amnesty -- and that doesn't make any sense. And the reason why giving them automatic citizenship doesn't make any sense, it will encourage others to come. So what we ought to do is say to somebody who's been here for a while, if you pass a background check, a criminal background check, you've shown that you've worked here for a while, you paid a penalty -- that you can apply for citizenship, but you get at the back of the line, the citizenship line, not at the front.

A comprehensive plan is necessary to help these good folks do their job. And I'm going to keep calling on Congress to think about a comprehensive plan. We agree on a lot of stuff. A lot of the elements of this plan have got common agreement. Now it's time for folks to set aside politics and get the job done on behalf of the American people.

Nedra, have you got a question?



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President's Remarks

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Q Yes, sir. Can you respond to Iran's initial reaction to the incentives package today?

THE PRESIDENT: Why don't you tell me what it was?

Q Well, the top negotiator said --

THE PRESIDENT: You know I've been in Artesia?

Q Right. I was. But the top negotiator said that the package contained positive steps, but there were some ambiguities, but the talks were constructive.

THE PRESIDENT: I think that's positive. I want to solve this issue with Iran diplomatically. And I think that -- I appreciate Javier Solana carrying a message to the Iranians that America, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany -- the main group of negotiators -- wants this problem to be solved. And so we will see if the Iranians take our offer seriously.

The choice is theirs to make. I have said the United States will come and sit down at the table with them, so long as they're willing to suspend their enrichment in a verifiable way. Sounds like a positive response to me.

Steve.

Q Sir. In Somalia, sir, it appears to have fallen to Islamic militants. Is there a need for international peacekeepers there? What do you think has happened there?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I talked to Secretary of State Rice about this subject yesterday. And, obviously, when there's instability anywhere in the world, we're concerned. There is instability in Somalia. The first concern, of course, would be to make sure that Somalia does not become an al Qaeda safe haven, that it doesn't become a place from which terrorists can plot and plan. So we're watching very carefully the developments there and we will strategize more when I get back to Washington as how to best respond to the latest incident there in Somalia.

Yes.

Q President Bush --

THE PRESIDENT: Where are you from, here?

Q Laredo Morning Times.

THE PRESIDENT: It's nice to be back here.

Q Very nice to meet you, too.



THE PRESIDENT: Rick and I were talking about the first time I came here after I had won governor -- he had already been in office for a while -- the Washington Day Parade, and I remember it fondly. It's good to be back in Laredo.

Q It's good to have you here, sir. Are you all -- are you hoping to -- a lot of people say that the answer for immigration is to -- well, one group is saying that the quotas need to be raised for the amount of legal documented workers that can come in. Is that part of your proposal?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, the framework I've outlined recognizes that Congress has got the right to regulate what they call green cards. And if Congress thinks that the line for citizens from Mexico is too long, they can increase the number of green cards. If they think it's -- or they can shorten -- increase the number of green cards. If they think it's too short, they can eliminate the number of green cards. In other words, they can control the flow of people from a particular part of the country.

What I want is people who have been here for a while to be able to have the choice -- if they pay a fine; if they learn the English language; if they've proven they worked; to be able to get in the citizenship -- in the potential citizenship line -- but at the back of it. See, they don't get to be in the front. The people who have been here legally are in the front of the line. They get to wait in line. And if Congress wants to shorten the line, they increase the number of green cards.

Q And I guess for those that haven't been here that long, do you favor deportation of those?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I believe that -- as I've said in my remarks, that there ought to be a difference between those folks who have been here for a period of time -- like for those who own a home or have got a family established, or have had a job for a long period of time -- and those who have arrived recently. Those people ought to be given a temporary worker card for a limited period of time. And when the time is up, they need to go home. That's what a temporary worker is -- it's not a permanent worker card, it's a temporary worker card.

And Congress needs to determine the length -- the proper length of time. Right now one consideration is three years with a three year renewal. And what that will do is that will help people who are looking for somebody to do a job Americans aren't doing find workers. It'll also mean that somebody doesn't have to sneak across the border. We've got Border Patrol agents chasing down people who are trying to sneak across and do work Americans aren't doing. So it seems like it makes sense to me to -- "here, you can come to our country on a temporary basis, to do a job, and when the time is up you get to go home." That's how you enforce the border. You enforce the border with more Border Patrol agents, better technology and a rational way to treat people who are coming here to do work Americans aren't doing.

That's one of the reasons I've come down here to Laredo, as well as Artesia, is I want to talk to these Border Patrol agents. And I want to assure them that we're listening to what they need to get their job done. Our job in government is to say to people who are risking their lives and working hard is, what do you need to get the job done. And that's why I've been coming down here and we'll keep coming down here. And Congress needs to get a bill done.

Yes, sir.

Q Mr. President, you spoke about progress earlier today in Artesia. You said that you feel it's progress that both the Senate and the House have both taken up the issue of immigration. What concrete progress can you point to, in terms of winning over the conservatives in your party who still stand pretty firmly against the idea of any path to citizenship for immigrants?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, one thing is it's conceivable you could have been asking me how come you can't get any chamber in Congress to pass a bill. And so progress -- what I'm telling the American people is, is that from last fall to now we've got two bills out there. That's progress.

What else is progress is a common understanding, one, we've got to enforce the border; two, that people need to be treated with respect; three, that there needs to be assimilation; four, that we need to hold employers who break the law to account; five, there needs to be some way to deal with people who are here to work on a temporary basis; and, six, ultimately, we're going to have to do something about people who've been here for a long period of time. In other words, people understand those are the principles that we've got to work on.

There's no question this is a difficult issue for some in Washington, D.C. But my job is to continue calling people to account and say we've got to work together to get a bill done. And one way to do it is to come right down here on the front lines of border enforcement and say to the United States Congress: There are people working hard on behalf of this country and we owe them a comprehensive piece of legislation so they can do their job. And I'm going to keep doing it.

Yes, ma'am. Where are you from?

Q ABC News.

THE PRESIDENT: ABC News? I suggest getting a little sun screen.

Q I know. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: I'm always looking out for my fellow citizens. (Laughter.)

Q Thank you. Last summer you set a deadline for Congress before their August recess to pass things like the energy bill. Are you going to put such a deadline on an immigration bill --

THE PRESIDENT: My attitude is, is that in order for these people to be doing their job they need a bill as soon as possible. I'm looking forward to getting that conference, seeing the conference get together. You know, people -- there are people making statements, and that's important for people to set out there, say things and kind of set their markers. The conferences have a way of working things out. And I'm going to be continuing to urge people to work things out in conference.

They haven't yet sat down as a conference yet, but they will pretty soon. And that will give us a pretty good feel for whether or not attitudes are hardened to the point nothing can get done. I don't think so. I think the people want something done in America. If you look at the -- you know what people are saying, they're saying let's get something done in a comprehensive way. And I believe we can get something done. No question it's hard work, but that's all the more reason to work hard to get it done. I recognize some people in Washington would rather duck the hard issue, but that's not the way I am and that's not the way most people in Congress are. They want to get the job done, so we should keep working on it.

Okay, thank you all -- unless you want to stand out here a little longer. (Laughter.) You're back again.

Q Mr. President, I'm sorry, one last question.

THE PRESIDENT: That's fine. I'm glad to be working with the local press.

Q Thank you so much. Some people say that Mexico needs to do a whole lot more to just create more jobs that pay a more decent wage for its people,

and that America should help Mexico by investing more or providing more development funds. Is that -- what do you think about that, and do you have any kind of proposals for that?

THE PRESIDENT: I think the people that say that the long-term solution to immigration is for people to be able to find work in Mexico -- they're right. And that's why I've been a strong supporter of NAFTA.

One of the interesting things about the border here that I don't think a lot of Americans are aware, but I know those of us who grew up in Texas are aware of it, is that this part of the world used to be really poor. Up and down the Rio Grande Valley there was a lot of impoverished people. Laredo is a booming town -- I mean, it's thriving, it has really changed a lot. And one of the main reasons why is because of trade with Mexico. On the other side of the border, the border states are prosperous states.

So to answer your question, the first thing is to promote free and fair trade between Mexico and the United States. Trade enhances wealth and provides opportunities for people.

The problem is in Mexico is that the opportunities you can find here on the border don't extend to the south of the country. And so, therefore, a lot of the Mexicans that we're finding at the border are people coming up from the south trying to find work so they can put food on the table. And I've talked to President Fox about this very issue. And I know Rick has talked to President Fox about this issue. And that is, what more can we do with Mexico to encourage economic development south of the northern tier states.

President Fox, the last time I saw him, said that there are 100,000 vacant jobs in northern Mexican states. I think that's really interesting. And I said, what are we going to do about it? And the issue is education. The issue is to make sure that people in the interior and the south of the country have got enough education, enough skills so they can fill those 100,000 jobs.

So to answer your question, economic development works through free and fair trade, as well as helping put an education system in place that makes sense. And that's Mexico's responsibility; that's their job. But we can help and we work with Mexico all the time. I know Texas has got all kinds of collaborative programs with Mexico to help their education system.

Yes, Steve. Are you enjoying the heat? (Laughter.)

Q It's not so bad.

THE PRESIDENT: Because you've got a fine looking hat on there. (Laughter.)

Q Thanks, sir. The word "amnesty," the critics seem to be able to just label this an amnesty and get away with it. I mean, are you having trouble fighting back that impression? Is it sinking in to people that this isn't amnesty and it's --

THE PRESIDENT: Look, if you're one of these types of people that basically say, you know, throw them out -- then you just use the word "amnesty," just toss it around. You know, amnesty is something nobody is for in America. I'm not for it. But in order to frighten people, you just say the word "amnesty."

On the other hand, you can't kick people out of this country. You can stop people from coming in, but there have been people here in this part of the world, for example, been here for a decade -- honest, hard-working citizens doing jobs Americans aren't doing, providing for their families, they own their home.

And the fundamental question is, how do you treat them with respect and, at the same time, have a system that's fair and orderly and respects our laws.

So my attitude is on that, if a person wants to apply for a citizenship they've got to pay a fine first -- they have broken the laws of the United States and they need to pay a fine. Then they've got to prove they've got a clean criminal record, paid their taxes and work. And then they can apply for citizenship, but they're at the back of the line. See, there's a line of people waiting to become a citizen, and they need to get at the back of the line, not at the front of the line. And that's how I think we can have an orderly system. That's not amnesty.

Amnesty is: okay, everybody who is here, you're a citizen. That's amnesty. And I'm not for that. I think it would be a mistake. And I recognize some people are for that. The reason I think it's a mistake is that, one, there are people who played by the rules here in America, law abiding citizens who applied for citizenship, who are in line to become a citizen. They've adhered to all our laws; they're here legally; and they're in line and they ought to be at the head of the line. And if you say to somebody who has been here illegally, "you're an automatic citizen," then that means they're not the head of the line, it means somebody jumped in front of them who had broken our laws.

Secondly, if people are granted amnesty -- in other words, the government would say "you're automatically a citizen," there's going to be another 8 million people trying to get in this country because a lot of people want to be citizens of the United States. It's a great honor to be a citizen of this country. It's a great tribute to our country, by the way, that people are willing to come here to work and to live. We're the land of the free, we're the land of the opportunity. And, yet, we've got to control our border. So therefore to say to some group of people "you're an automatic citizen" would increase the likelihood of a lot of other people trying to come back in here so they can become a citizen automatically. And, therefore, I'm against amnesty.

And I understand words in politics and words trying to frighten people. But the comprehensive approach I've outlined, when people think about it, makes a lot of sense and you can't -- all five need to go together in order to be able to do the job of enforcing the border.

I've enjoyed this, and I hope you have.

END 3:39 P.M. CDT

Return to this article at:

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/06/20060606-7.html>

