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Remarks at Lehigh Carbon Community College and a Question-and-Answer Session in Allentown, Pennsylvania

December 4, 2009

The President. Please, have a seat. Thank you. It is great to see you all. It's good to be back in Pennsylvania. Good to be back in Allentown and Lehigh Valley. This is—lot of wonderful faces here.

There are a couple of people I want to acknowledge. First of all, the great Governor of the great State of Pennsylvania, please give it up for Ed Rendell. We've got an outstanding congressional delegation that's here: Congresswoman Allyson Schwartz is here; Congressman Chris Carney is here; and Congressman Paul Kanjorski is here.

We also have Keith McCall, speaker of the Pennsylvania State House. We've got Ed Pawlowski, mayor of Allentown, but maybe the next Member of Congress. We've got John Callahan, mayor of Bethlehem. I just want to clarify here: Ed's not running; John's running. [*Laughter*] I got those reversed. So don't vote for Ed, because he's—[*laughter*]—I mean, vote for him for mayor. [*Laughter*] John's going to be outstanding—and Don Cunningham, Lehigh county executive.

So it's been about a year and a half since I last visited Allentown and Bethlehem, and I was running for office. And while it was a pleasure to be here as a candidate, it's an honor to be here as your President. It really is.

Pennsylvania helped put me into office. But—[*applause*]—thank you. But even on the most trying days, I want you to know that I'm grateful for the opportunity to serve you in these challenging times for America. And I'm grateful for this chance to get out of Washington—[*laughter*]—and spend the day in the Lehigh Valley, talking with people about this very tough economy.

I just came from Allentown Metal Works, where I had a chance to visit with workers there. And they were working hard not just to forge the heavy machinery that makes this country run, in fact, one of their projects is actually related to the rebuilding of the World Trade Center and the Twin Towers down there. And so you could just tell the extraordinary pride that the workers take in this project. But like so many others across America, these workers have also been doing the best they can to stay afloat in a brutal recession that has hit folks like them hardest of all.

In the 2 years since this recession began, too many members of our American family have felt the gut punch of a pink slip. Eight million Americans have lost their jobs. Every one of us knows somebody who has been swept up by this storm: neighbors who've lost their homes or their health care; friends who've used up their savings or put off their retirement; relatives who've downscaled their dreams or dropped them entirely; young people who aren't sure whether they can afford their college educations. I've heard these stories from every corner of America, and I see them in the letters that I read every single night.

So as we come to the end of this very tough year, I want to do something I haven't had a chance to do that often during my first year in office, and that is to share some modestly encouraging news on our economy. Today the Labor Department released its monthly employment survey and reported that the Nation lost 11,000 jobs in November, which was

about 115,000 fewer than was forecast and is about close to zero, from the perspective of our overall economy. The unemployment rate ticked down instead of up. The report also found that we lost about 160,000 fewer jobs over the last 2 months than we had previously thought. So overall, this is the best jobs report that we've seen since 2007.

And this is good news, just in time for the season of hope. I've got to admit, my chief economist, Christy Romer, she got about four hugs when she handed us the report. But I do want to keep this in perspective. We've still got a long way to go. I consider one job lost one job too many. And as I said yesterday at a jobs conference in Washington, good trends don't pay the rent. We've got to actually grow jobs and get America back to work as quickly as we can.

Now, the journey from here will not be without setbacks or struggles. There may be gyrations in the months ahead. There are going to be some months where the reports are a little better, some months where the reports are worse, but the trendline right now is good. The direction is clear. When you think about how this year began, even before I was sworn in, and we were losing 700,000 jobs a month—a month—today's report's a welcome sign that there are better days ahead. In fact, we were losing more than 700,000 jobs a month, and that's roughly half the size of Philadelphia—each month. Our financial system was on the verge of collapse. Economists were warning of a second great depression. You remember. [*Laughter*]

So from the moment I was sworn into office, I began taking a number of difficult steps to end this economic crisis. And by the way, can I just say, I didn't take these steps because they were popular or because they were particularly gratifying to me—they weren't. You can be sure that when I was running for this office, things like saving the banks and rescuing auto companies were not on my to-do list. They weren't even on my want-to-do list. [*Laughter*] But I did them because they were necessary to save our country from even greater catastrophe.

We also took steps to unlock our frozen credit markets so average Americans could get the loans that they needed to buy a home or a car, to go to college, or start a small business. We enacted measures to stem the crisis in our housing markets, helping responsible homeowners stay in their homes, curbing the decline in home values overall. And we've seen some stabilization in the housing market. We cut taxes. Think about this, because you wouldn't know it from watching the news: The only tax policy we instituted during the course of this year was to cut taxes for 95 percent of hard-working families, just as I promised I would when I ran for President.

And we passed the Recovery Act, which created or saved up to 1.6 million jobs, stopped our freefall, lifted our economy to the point where it's growing for the first time in more than a year. And I was just talking to the Governor before we walked in, and he's got a whole series of charts about how much more steel was produced in Pennsylvania because of the Recovery Act, how much more infrastructure spending is taking place out here, putting people to work doing the work that America needs done.

So today's report is another hopeful sign that these steps that we took, difficult steps, have helped turn the tide. But we've got a lot more work to do before we can celebrate, because even though our economy is now growing again, a lot of companies are still hesitant to hire; they're still worried about hiring.

Now, some of this is because they're still trying to get out of the red brought on by tough times this year, and they're still seeing consumers pull back because people got overextended on their credit cards and those home equity loans suddenly didn't look so attractive. And so people are spending a little bit less.

But part of what's happened, also, among a lot of companies is they figured out how to squeeze more productivity out of the workers that they've got. They're working people longer hours; they're doing more overtime, or not. But either way, they're producing the same amount of product or providing the same services without hiring more people.

And that's something that we're going to have to really work on. Now, it's typical that it takes time for job growth to catch up with economic growth. And it's typical that it takes a little more time to come out of a recession when it comes to hiring. But Americans who've been desperately looking for work for months, some of them maybe for a year or longer, they can't wait. And we won't wait. We need to do everything we can right now to get our businesses hiring again so that our friends and our neighbors can go back to work.

So yesterday at the White House, we had a forum on jobs and growth with leaders from every sector of our economy and every political and economic viewpoint, from the CEO of Google to small-business owners who know our economy as well as anybody. And I wanted to ask them what they needed to start hiring again. And we had a frank discussion about a variety of ideas that helped refine our thinking.

We talked about investments in clean energy to not only create jobs but to make America a global leader in renewable energy technology. We talked about incentives for homeowners for the materials and labor they need to make their homes more energy efficient and a smart electricity grid that saves you money and moves our economy forward.

We talked about additional ways to lift small businesses, which are both the great generator of jobs and the truest reflection of our values. We talked about additional investments in America's roads and bridges and railways and ports. Nobody has been a bigger champion of this than Governor Rendell—rebuilding the critical infrastructure of our economy.

So on Tuesday, I'm going to speak in greater detail about the ideas I'll be sending to Congress to help jump-start private sector hiring and get Americans back to work. But here's the thing, Allentown: We've got to do more than manage our way through this crisis, because long before the recession hit, many of our communities, including communities right here in Pennsylvania, were struggling even when the economy was doing relatively well. Plants were closing; jobs were leaving, especially in manufacturing. For too many families and communities, the recession wasn't a new challenge; it's a permanent one. It's been going on for a decade or more. So in addition to dealing with the immediate crisis that we face today, we've got to face up to the challenges necessary to strengthen our economy for the long term.

That's why I've taken on our broken health insurance system, so that families and businesses won't have to cope with double-digit premium increases year after year. That's why my Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, is taking on our education system, so that our kids can compete in the 21st-century economy. And that's why we are working to upgrade America's most underappreciated asset, community colleges just like this one. That's why we're doing everything we can to spur new industries, like clean energy, to create good, new jobs that won't be sent offshore. And that's why, when the current emergency passes, I'm committed to bringing down the deficits that loom as a threat to our future economic growth.

Now, here's why we have to do all this: Because for decades, Washington avoided doing what was right in favor of doing what was easy, and the middle class took a beating for it. It got papered over because there was a lot of cheap credit out there, so people were just able to keep up by getting more credit cards and taking out more home equity loans, but the long-term

trends were not good. That's what was happening decade after decade. Well, I did not run for President to sweep our messes under the rug with the next election in mind. I ran for President to solve our problems once and for all with the next generation in mind. That's what we're doing right now.

So here's the bottom line. I know times are tough. Michelle and I were talking the other day—there are members of our families that are out of work. We're not that far removed from struggling to pay the bills. Five, 6 years ago, we were still paying off student loans, still trying to figure out, all right, if we pay this bill this month, what do we have to give up next month. We're not that far away from there. But I promise you this: I won't rest until things get better.

I know you may not agree with every decision I make, but I promise I will always tell you the truth about why I'm making these decisions. And I know that we can come together to forge a brighter future so that places like Allentown and Bethlehem and the Lehigh Valley don't just survive, but they thrive. That's why we're here. That's what we're fighting for. And as long as I've got the privilege of being your President, I will always be there, right there with you in the thick of that fight.

So thank you so much, everybody. I appreciate you. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you.

Listen, I've got time, I think, for three questions. Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. All right, I'll make you first just because everybody is very excited about this young man asking a question. And you—we can sit down. It will be three questions. Go ahead. What's your—hold on a second. We've got microphones in there. So there you go. Go ahead.

Reinvigorating the National Economy/Education

Q. Mr. Obama, I really appreciate how you're trying to stimulate the economy to help this country out. And I was just wondering, in LCCC and in college, we've been studying some criminology, and I was wondering if—maybe if you checked out some of the statistics about legalizing prostitution, gambling, drugs, and nonviolent crime in order to stimulate some of the economy? [*Laughter*]

The President. You know, I have to say this: Well, I appreciate the boldness of your question. [*Laughter*] That will not be my jobs strategy. [*Laughter*] But let me say this—what year are you in, in school?

Q. This is my second year in college.

The President. Your second year. I mean, first of all, part of what you're supposed to do in college is question conventional wisdom. [*Laughter*] And so you're doing exactly what you're supposed to be doing—[*laughter*]—which is thinking in new ways about things.

Here's—the truth is that when you look at our economy, in the same way that we used to be an agricultural country and then we moved to an industrial age and then we went from an industrial economy into an information economy, you know, that transition means that manufacturing will never be as high of a percentage of our economy as it was back in the 1950s. It's not just because we're competing overseas; it's also that a factory that used to require a hundred guys to make something, now they can do it with 10 guys with—because of automation and advances in technology.

So there's going to be a shift in our economy. But the capacity for a State like Pennsylvania to make enormous progress on advanced manufacturing, around infrastructure, on the one hand, and green technology, on the other, are still enormous.

I mean, think about it: We've got about $2 trillion worth of—it might even be more than that, Ed; Ed probably knows the statistics—we've got trillions of dollars of infrastructure improvements that need to be made all across the country: roads, bridges, ports. And that's just the old infrastructure. Then we've got a whole new infrastructure that we have to build.

So when we talk about, for example, the smart grid, this is not a complicated concept. We've got basically an old electricity network that leaks electricity—it leaks energy all the time. It's not efficient in the ways that it should be. And if we could create a much more efficient 21st-century grid, we could save huge amounts of energy—10, 15, 20 percent—just in making—just becoming more efficient, and that would create a whole bunch of jobs for people who would have to lay down lines and put up new transmitters and all that good stuff.

The same is true when it comes to clean energy. There is no reason why we shouldn't have the corner on wind turbine technology, on solar panel technology. In fact, some companies that are doing battery and wind and solar technology benefited from the Recovery Act, and they are now hiring people right here in Pennsylvania to do that work.

But in order for us to take advantage of this new future, we've got to make some investments now. We've got to have an infrastructure plan. And something that I've been working with the Governor on is the idea of an infrastructure bank so that instead of us just every 6 years having Congress vote to figure out what our infrastructure is—and there's no real planning to it—that you had a system where we could actually leverage private sector dollars into making investments alongside the public sector, and it wasn't based on who's got the committee chairmanship, but it was based on what are the infrastructure needs that we really have in this country and prioritize them.

When it comes to clean energy, this is a triple-win situation. If we invest now in clean energy and we acknowledge that we've got to change how we do business—for our economy, for oil independence, but also for climate change—then we can clean up our environment, we can free ourselves from dependence on foreign oil so we're not waiting to see what somebody in the Middle East is doing before we know what's going to happen to gas prices here in the United States, and we can put people to work right now. And those jobs can't be shipped out. Those are jobs that have to be done right here in the United States of America.

So that's the strategy that we're pursuing. There's one last component—two other components I just want to mention. People—first of all, I think—I noticed the press yesterday, because we had this jobs forum at the White House, they said, "Obama's finally pivoting to jobs," as if what we haven't been doing for the whole 9 months, from the day I was sworn in and we started talking about the recovery, was all about jobs. But folks' attention spans are short, I understand that. [*Laughter*]

What has happened is a lot of the debate in Washington's been around health care, so people think, well, I guess they must not be working on jobs. No, we've been working on jobs the whole time. Health care is part and parcel with where we need to take our economy. You talk to every small business—how many small-business owners are here? There may be a few. Okay, you talk to any of the folks who raised their hands and you ask them, what happened to your premiums over the last year, 2 years, 3 years. They're not just going up 7 percent or 8 percent; they're going up 25 percent, 40 percent.

Now, if you're a small-business person, and let's say you've got five employees, and you are doing the right thing by them, and you're giving them health insurance, and then you find out that what you're paying suddenly doubled over the course of 2 or 3 or 4 years, that's money that is directly out of your pocket that you could have been reinvesting in your business or hiring more workers.

So us being able to control health care costs and giving small businesses the opportunity to pool with other small businesses and individuals around the country so that they have the same kind of leverage with insurance companies that the big guys have, that's an economic plan. That's part of our jobs growth.

Last point I want to make, and that has to do with education. You know, I was in Asia for a week, and we were mostly talking about trade and how we can increase U.S. exports. I'm tired of just them sending goods into the United States. I want to start sending goods from the United States out there.

And I think there are a lot of opportunities for us to increase exports and increase jobs here in the United States without us spending any money. If we increased U.S. exports, our share of exports to Asia by just 5 percent, we would be creating hundreds of thousands, maybe a million, 2 million jobs, just by opening up new markets.

But I mentioned this yesterday at the jobs summit, and I want to mention it again today. I was having lunch with the President of South Korea, and that country has gone from dirt poverty and now is just booming. I mean, they are doing really well. And I asked him, you know, "What's your biggest challenge in terms of education?" He said, "You know, my biggest challenge is the parents are just too demanding." [*Laughter*] He said, "They're in my office—I've had to import foreign teachers, pay for foreign teachers to come teach English to Korean kids." Because all the parents there think that their kids should be learning English when they're in first grade.

Now, I tell that story to make the point that these folks are serious. They're not—you know, their kids aren't spending a whole bunch of time playing video games or watching TV. They're out there—they're working. They're working in math; they're working in science; they're working in foreign languages. They are preparing themselves to compete.

And so, you know, one of the messages I have is that we are going to have to work just as hard. We can't take for granted that somehow it's just owed to us that automatically we've got the strongest economy. We've got to make sure that each and every one of us are working as hard as we can and working smart in order to create the jobs of the future. All right?

Okay, I've got time for two more questions. I think it's got to be a lady's turn. Right there, yes. How are you? Hold on—we'll—get the mike so we can hear you. Hold on one second—get the mike so we can hear you.

Availability of Financing

Q. I am Susan Kennedy with the Manufacturers Resource Center in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. We're one of the NIST MEP centers across the country, and I've been working with Joelle——

The President. Great.

Q. ——from your office. I have nine manufacturers here with me. One was located right next to your metal works that you visited this morning.

The President. Terrific.

Q. And they all want to know, dyingly, what you will do to loosen up the money for the small businesses and how they can compete more with the things they need to grow their businesses.

The President. Now, you're referring specifically to credit and getting loans from——

Q. Credit—yes.

The President. Is that the main priority that you're concerned about?

Q. Credit, any of you—now, I have nine people here. Anything else you want to add? [*Laughter*]

The President. Oh, so she just kind of—[*laughter*]. You know, this is like where they send the attractive person to hitchhike, right? [*Laughter*] Then the car stops—[*laughter*]—and suddenly, all the other guys come out of the woodwork. [*Laughter*]

Q. She did hand me the microphone, so I'm going to take this opportunity and first thank you for coming to the Lehigh Valley and listening to us here.

The President. Thank you.

Q. Now, President Obama, I do represent one of the 10 CEOs of manufacturing companies here. I'm third-generation, 59-year family business. And by the way, I was in Asia when you were, for other reasons, but this—that's a good segue into what I'd like to discuss, and that is, I wasn't going to Asia because I wanted to be there. I was going to Asia because I had to be there.

You know, manufacturing in this country is changing. Companies need to move and change with it.

The President. Right.

Q. Susan's point about the credit markets is really important. The bottom line is that when our companies have an opportunity—you know, years ago we would take a risk, we would go out, we'd buy the capital equipment, we'd add on to our buildings, we'd hire the necessary people to meet that demand. Today, our concern is, are the banks going to be there with us?

The President. Right.

Q. And we don't feel they are. What's going to change here in the near future to help your plan and get these people to work? Because we're willing—you know, those businesses are still here; those families still talk about it. We need the support.

The President. Good. Well, let me talk about the whole financial sector, because it really relates to what's happening in terms of jobs. When we came in, and even before we came in, everybody remembers the Lehman's crash and what happened right before the holiday season last year. The banks, the hedge funds, the whole financial system had leveraged itself so much—and leveraged means that they took one dollar and they turned it into $30, or at least they pretended that it was 30 or $40, and they were just—or $60—they were just going out and lending like crazy, even though they knew that a lot of these loans really made no sense whatsoever.

So they were lending—part of what drove the housing boom was, it used to be you had to save 20 percent to get money down to get your mortgage. Now suddenly people were putting

no money down. It used to be that you'd get a fixed mortgage of 30 years, and you'd have a steady payment. Now suddenly you only had to pay interest. You didn't have to pay principal.

So that was just in the housing sector, but there were a whole bunch of other sectors of the economy where the same thing was happening. Now, not only were they giving loans to folks that probably in previous eras wouldn't have qualified for loans, but what was also happening was they were then taking those loans and then selling them, they were packaging them, chopping them up as securities, and those securities then would sell for what they weren't worth. They were being certified as grade A investments when they really weren't. So there was just a lot of funny business going on, on Wall Street, and everybody was participating up and down the line because they were all making a lot of money. And frankly, Washington wasn't doing a very good job regulating.

Now, we saw the consequence of this once everybody realized that a lot of this stuff was bogus, that there was no value beneath a lot of these bank loans. Suddenly everybody started running for the doors. And you could have had a complete collapse of the financial markets.

We stepped in to make sure that you did not have the kind of meltdown that could have definitely gotten us into a great depression. And we did so successfully. And by the way, the interventions we've made have turned out to be actually cheaper than we had predicted and more effective than we had predicted.

I mean, here's a little bit of interesting news. You know, everybody thinks that this bank bailout was about $700 billion. The truth of the matter is, is that most of the money going to the banks will probably end up being paid back with interest, and we've already made about, well, several tens of billions of dollars that go right into—for—to pay off deficits because of some of these investments. So we've been successful in stabilizing the financial markets.

Here's the problem, though—I just wanted to give you that background—here's the problem: Having been way too easy in terms of giving credit, now banks have swung in the opposite direction, and they're not giving any credit to some very credit-worthy businesses. They used to say yes to everything, now they're just saying no to everything.

And part of what our message to the banks is, the taxpayers were there for you to clean up your mistakes, you now have a responsibility to be there for the community now that we're bearing the brunt of a lot of these problems that you caused.

In fairness to some of the banks, what they'll tell you is, "Well, the regulators are telling us we've got to build up our capital reserves. We still have some bad loans on our books. There's still a commercial real estate problem that's out there that we've got to be on the lookout for. That's why we're not as aggressive lending as we used to be."

So what we're hoping to do is to work with them and push as hard as we can to say, look, try to get the right balance here. Don't swing from one end to the other. If there's a manufacturer in Pennsylvania, if there's a business in Ohio that is making profits, that has a good idea, that has a customer base, give them a loan on fair terms. And what we're also saying is, is that the Government is willing to step into the breach in some circumstances to help.

So, for example, we've increased our small business lending by about 73 percent through the SBA. That doesn't help everybody that needs help, but it's helping to fill some of the gaps. But I promise you—in fact, I hope to be meeting with the bankers again—I've already met with them a couple of times—sometime before the end of the year to say to them, look, you have a responsibility now, now that we have pulled you back from the brink, to help make sure

that Main Street is actually getting the kinds of loans that it needs. And I am optimistic that we can start next year seeing credit flowing a little more effectively than it's been so far. All right?

Okay, last question. Last question. I'm going to go to that guy right there. That guy right there in the blue shirt. There you go. No, no, this one; this one right here. Too many blue shirts here. [*Laughter*] Right here. I was calling—I didn't see you back there, so I was calling on him.

Financial Regulatory Reforms

Q. Hi, Mr. President. The gentleman over there, he asked a funny question, so I don't really have anything. I wanted to know if my wife had a question——

The President. Oh, see there.

Q. If not, I'd like to pass it off to this nice woman next to me who really has something to say.

The President. Oh, look at that. All right, go ahead, go ahead. Go ahead.

Q. Mr. President, thank you for coming to Lehigh Valley, and I appreciate you taking up the health care reform. I think it's a very important issue.

My question is actually related to what you just ended on, your point, and that is about the investments going on Wall Street. Are you confident that there have been enough safeguards put in place so that we don't run over that cliff again with these irresponsible, risky investments?

The President. No. I made—here's what happens. Okay, let me say this: Congress works incredibly hard, and you guys have a great congressional delegation. But I think they'll testify to the fact that Congress moves, let's say, deliberately. [*Laughter*] I mean, it takes time to get things done in Congress, and it's—the Senate in particular, just because the way of the rules are constructed. These days you need 60 votes for everything because of the filibuster, which it used to be was applied rarely, but now the opposition just evokes it for everything. I mean, you can be trying to pass a bill to rename a post office, and they'll say, no, we need 60 votes for that and we need 2 weeks of debate.

So the reason I point all this out is, is that financial regulatory reform was one of our top priorities at the beginning of the year. We have now gone through a whole series of committees in the House, and the House has passed out its version. But now the Senate has to pass its version. So it's just like the health care bill. It's the same kind of thing.

I know sometimes the public thinks, what are these folks doing? Well, part of it is, is that you've got three or four or five different committees, all who think that they're in charge of the thing. So they all have hearings, and everybody has to talk, and everybody has got to have their amendments. And then the bill in one House gets merged, and the bill in the other House gets merged. And, you know, sometimes it gives you a headache just thinking about it, but, look, that's democracy. That's part of what makes our Government stable is, is it's not easy to get anything done. But it's also what makes it frustrating when we have emergency situations.

Now, we have put forward a very specific set of financial reforms that involve making sure that if you've got these really big companies—the JPMorgans or the Goldman Sachses or these companies that have been called "too big to fail"—well, you know what? If you're that big, then you better have a whole bunch of safeguards so that we don't have to bail you out if you make bad mistakes.

And so that's one part of the reform. Another part of the reform is a consumer watchdog that actually has some teeth, because everybody here has a story to tell about a credit card company that suddenly jacks up your rates, or a loan that had a fine print that you didn't understand and there's a balloon payment someplace. We want to make sure that that regulatory framework is much more effective. We want to set in place mechanisms so that if there is a big bank that is getting into trouble, or for that matter an insurance company like AIG that's getting into trouble, that there's a way of essentially quarantining them so that they don't infect the rest of the financial system.

So there are a series of different provisions. And if we get this package passed, then we will have the safeguard in place to make sure this stuff doesn't happen again.

But I want to tell all of you and anybody who's watching or listening, not surprisingly a lot of the banks and the financial institutions are fighting this, because they want to basically just go back to business as usual. They want to do the same things that they were doing. And you're already starting to see some of these bonus payments coming out. It's like suddenly they've forgotten that we had to yank them out of the fire.

And so it is very important that we get financial regulatory reform done. We're hoping that we can get it done early at the beginning of next year, but the banks are going to be pushing back. You're going to start seeing ads. In fact, I think they already started putting out the ads saying, well, you know, florists and bakeries are suddenly going to be subject to financial regulation. Well, that's not true. That's just not true. But it's the same thing we're dealing with, with health care. The insurance and the drug companies start running millions of dollars' worth of ads saying somehow that this is a Government takeover of health care when all we're trying to do is make sure that if you're buying health insurance on the private marketplace that you're not getting gouged and gypped by the insurance companies. So—all right?

Okay, I'm going to take one more question from that gentleman back there, because what happened was is that he thought he had been called on, and he felt bad, and it turned out this guy didn't really have a question and—[*laughter*]. So go ahead.

Veterans Administration

Q. Good afternoon, sir. My name is Leonard Martin, and I'm currently a student here at LCCC. I'm also from the Army.

The President. For the Army? Where——

Q. I'm also discharged from the Army, sir.

The President. Appreciate your service.

Q. Yes, sir, 3 years. My question, sir, deals with the Veterans Administration. For example, this week, I've called them several times asking questions about the GI Bill. I'm eligible for the post-9/11 GI bill, but I haven't gotten any benefits from them yet. And when I call them, they are often busy, and we get a message saying that we have to call back later on. Sir, could you call them up and ask them—[*laughter*]—and get more people to work with them so we——

The President. All right. Well, first of all, I will—we will get your name—[*laughter*]—you went straight to the top here, so—[*laughter*]—I suspect somebody will be calling you on your cell phone in about 2 seconds. [*Laughter*]

But more importantly, one of my commitments as President was, we are going to whip the VA into shape because when our men and women are serving on behalf of all of us, we've got a

solemn obligation to look after them when they come home. And this 9/11—post-9/11 GI bill, I think, is a great example of it. My grandfather fought in World War II, and then he got his college education on the GI bill. It wasn't just good for him. Because of that whole greatest generation going to college, that built our middle class. And all the things that we've been talking about in terms of science and technology and innovation and clean energy, all that depends on what happens in a place like Lehigh, making sure that people are being trained and constantly upgrading their skills for the future.

So that's what the GI bill's supposed to do. Now, the VA—we've actually increased the budget for the VA by 11 percent last year, which was the largest increase in 30 years, and we'll be increasing it again this year, because we think it's important to play some catchup. Rick Shinseki, who's a great American hero and now the Secretary of the VA, one of his tasks is to upgrade a bunch of the old systems in the VA. The truth of the matter is, you shouldn't have to make a phone call. You should be able to get online. That would be more efficient. And what that tells me is—I mean, the fact that you're having to make the call tells me that we have not fully upgraded our information systems yet the way they need to be upgraded.

But he is really working diligently. We had a lot of work to do on this front. The VA had been somewhat underfunded for a number of years despite the growing amount of demand caused by returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. We are, I think, going to get it in a good place by the time I'm through in Washington. But in the meantime, you'll, I promise, get a return phone call.

Thank you, everybody. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:54 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to Eric E. Schmidt, chief executive officer, Google, Inc.; and President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Lehigh Carbon Community College in Allentown, PA, remarks and a question-and-answer session.

Locations: Allentown, PA.

Names: Callahan, John B.; Carney, Christopher P.; Cunningham, Donald; Duncan, Arne; Kanjorski, Paul E.; Kennedy, Susan C.; Lee Myung-bak; Martin, Leonard; McCall, Keith R.; Obama, Michelle; Pawlowski, Ed; Rendell, Edward G.; Romer, Christina D.; Schmidt, Eric E.; Schwartz, Allyson Y.; Shinseki, Eric K.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : GI bill legislation; Asia : Trade with U.S.; Budget, Federal : Deficit; Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Strengthening efforts; Business and industry : Credit freeze situation; Business and industry : Home loan industry; Business and industry : Manufacturing industry :: Decline; Business and industry : Manufacturing industry :: Improvement; Business and industry : Manufacturing industry :: Strengthening efforts; Business and industry : Small and minority businesses; Commerce, international : U.S. exports, expansion; Economy, national : American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009; Economy, national : Consumer Financial Protection Agency, proposed; Economy, national : Credit markets, stabilization efforts; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Economy, national : Financial regulations, modernization efforts; Economy, national : Market volatility; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges; Education, Department of : Secretary; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and

unemployment : Job losses; Employment and unemployment : Jobs and Economic Growth Forum; Employment and unemployment : Unemployment rate; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies; Energy : Alternative energy products and technologies, U.S. production; Energy : Energy-efficient buildings ; Energy : Foreign sources; Energy : Infrastructure and grid improvements; Energy : Solar and wind energy; Environment : Climate change ; Health and medical care : Cost control reforms; Health and medical care : Employer-based health insurance coverage; Housing : Housing market :: Improvement; Housing : Mortgage refinancing regulations; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Pennsylvania : Allentown :: Allentown Metal Works, Inc.; Pennsylvania : Governor; Pennsylvania : President's visits; Science and technology : Research and development; Small Business Administration : Loan guarantee facility; South Korea : President; Taxation : Tax relief; Transportation : Highway system, modernization efforts; Transportation : Mass transit and rail infrastructure, improvement efforts; Treasury, Department of the : Troubled Asset Relief Program; Veterans : Benefits; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Funding; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Information systems, upgrading delays; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary.

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