

Remarks on Immigration Reform and an Exchange With Reporters

June 15, 2012

The President. Good afternoon, everybody. This morning Secretary Napolitano announced new actions my administration will take to mend our Nation's immigration policy to make it more fair, more efficient, and more just, specifically for certain young people sometimes called "Dreamers."

Now, these are young people who study in our schools, they play in our neighborhoods, they're friends with our kids, they pledge allegiance to our flag. They are Americans in their heart, in their minds, in every single way but one: on paper. They were brought to this country by their parents—sometimes even as infants—and often have no idea that they're undocumented until they apply for a job or a driver's license or a college scholarship.

Put yourself in their shoes. Imagine you've done everything right your entire life—studied hard, worked hard, maybe even graduated at the top of your class—only to suddenly face the threat of deportation to a country that you know nothing about, with a language that you may not even speak.

That's what gave rise to the "DREAM Act." It says that if your parents brought you here as a child, you've been here for 5 years, and you're willing to go to college or serve in our military, you can one day earn your citizenship. And I have said time and time and time again to Congress that—send me the "DREAM Act," put it on my desk, and I will sign it right away.

Now, both parties wrote this legislation. And a year and a half ago, Democrats passed the "DREAM Act" in the House, but Republicans walked away from it. It got 55 votes in the Senate, but Republicans blocked it. The bill hasn't really changed. The need hasn't changed. It's still the right thing to do. The only thing that has changed, apparently, was the politics.

Now, as I said in my speech on the economy yesterday, it makes no sense to expel talented young people, who, for all intents and purposes, are Americans—they've been raised as Americans, understand themselves to be part of this country—to expel these young people who want to staff our labs or start new businesses or defend our country simply because of the actions of their parents or because of the inaction of politicians.

In the absence of any immigration action from Congress to fix our broken immigration system, what we've tried to do is focus our immigration enforcement resources in the right places. So we prioritized border security, putting more boots on the southern border than at any time in our history. Today, there are fewer illegal crossings than at any time in the past 40 years. We focused and used discretion about whom to prosecute, focusing on criminals who endanger our communities rather than students who are earning their education. And today, deportation of criminals is up 80 percent. We've improved on that discretion carefully and thoughtfully. Well, today we're improving it again.

Effective immediately, the Department of Homeland Security is taking steps to lift the shadow of deportation from these young people. Over the next few months, eligible individuals who do not present a risk to national security or public safety will be able to request temporary relief from deportation proceedings and apply for work authorization.

Now, let's be clear: This is not amnesty; this is not immunity. This is not a path to citizenship. It's not a permanent fix. This is a temporary stopgap measure that lets us focus our

resources wisely while giving a degree of relief and hope to talented, driven, patriotic young people. It is——

Q. [Inaudible]

The President. ——the right thing to do.

Q. ——foreigners over American workers.

The President. Excuse me, sir. It's not time for questions, sir.

Q. No, you have to take questions.

The President. Not while I'm speaking.

Precisely because this is temporary, Congress needs to act. There is still time for Congress to pass the "DREAM Act" this year, because these kids deserve to plan their lives in more than 2-year increments. And we still need to pass comprehensive immigration reform that addresses our 21st-century economic and security needs, reform that gives our farmers and ranchers certainty about the workers that they'll have; reform that gives our science and technology sectors certainty that the young people who come here to earn their Ph.D.s won't be forced to leave and start new businesses in other countries; reform that continues to improve our border security and lives up to our heritage as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants.

Just 6 years ago, the unlikely trio of John McCain, Ted Kennedy, and President Bush came together to champion this kind of reform. And I was proud to join 23 Republicans in voting for it. So there's no reason that we can't come together and get this done.

And as long as I'm President, I will not give up on this issue, not only because it's the right thing to do for our economy—and CEOs agree with me—not just because it's the right thing to do for our security, but because it's the right thing to do, period. And I believe that eventually enough Republicans in Congress will come around to that view as well.

I believe that it's the right thing to do because I've been with groups of young people who work so hard and speak with so much heart about what's best in America, even though I knew some of them must have lived under the fear of deportation. I know some have come forward, at great risks to themselves and their futures, in hopes it would spur the rest of us to live up to our own most cherished values. And I've seen the stories of Americans in schools and churches and communities across the country who stood up for them and rallied behind them, and pushed us to give them a better path and freedom from fear, because we are a better nation than one that expels innocent young kids.

And the answer to your question, sir—and the next time I'd prefer you let me finish my statements before you ask that question—is this is the right thing to do for the American people——

Q. [Inaudible]

The President. I didn't ask for an argument. I'm answering your question.

Q. I'd like to——

The President. It is the right thing to do——

Q. [Inaudible]

The President. ——for the American people. And here's why——

Q. ——high unemployment——

The President. Here's the reason: because these young people are going to make extraordinary contributions and are already making contributions to our society.

I've got a young person who is serving in our military, protecting us and our freedom. The notion that in some ways we would treat them as expendable makes no sense. If there's a young person here who has grown up here and wants to contribute to this society, wants to maybe start a business that will create jobs for other folks who are looking for work, that's the right thing to do. Giving certainty to our farmers and our ranchers, making sure that in addition to border security, we're creating a comprehensive framework for legal immigration, these are all the right things to do.

We have always drawn strength from being a nation of immigrants, as well as a nation of laws, and that's going to continue. And my hope is that Congress recognizes that and gets behind this effort.

All right. Thank you very much.

Q. What about American workers who are unemployed while you import foreigners?

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:09 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former President George W. Bush.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Immigration reform; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: White House.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Bush, George W.; McCain, John S.; Napolitano, Janet A.

Subjects: Congress : Bipartisanship; Defense and national security : Border security; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Homeland Security, Department of : Secretary; Immigration and naturalization : Deportation rates; Immigration and naturalization : Reform; Mexico : Border with U.S., infrastructure and security.

DCPD Number: DCPD201200483.