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Remarks at the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Annual Conference in Orlando, Florida

June 22, 2012

The President. Thank you. *Gracias!* Thank you so much. Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat. Ah, it is good to be back at NALEO. *Que placer estar aqui con tantos amigos.* It is wonderful to see a lot of good friends from all across the country. It is nice to be at Disney World. This is now the second time I've come to Disney World without my daughters. They are not happy with me. [*Laughter*]

I want to thank Secretary Solis for the introduction and for her hard work. She is one of the best Labor Secretaries we have ever had, and she is thinking about you each and every day. I want to thank Sylvia and Arturo for their outstanding leadership. Arturo, happy early birthday. I will not sing—don't worry. [*Laughter*] Welcome to the other side of the hill. [*Laughter*]

And it is especially good to have Ambassador Mari Carmen Aponte here with us. We are very proud of her. When the Senate refused to confirm Mari, I sent her to El Salvador anyway—[*laughter*]—because I knew she was going to do an outstanding job. And she has. And I'm glad to see the Senate finally confirmed her last week. So she's now official.

Last but not least, I want to thank all of you. It's always nice to get out of Washington. It's nice to get a little Florida sunshine. But it's especially nice to see folks who have devoted themselves to serving their communities and their country, who've dedicated themselves to making people's lives just a little bit better each and every day, at every level: school board, State legislatures, county boards. You guys are where the rubber hits the road. And I've had a chance to see many of you in your local communities and hear the stories of all your efforts and all your hopes and all your dreams and also some of your frustrations and the hardships that are taking place.

Yesterday, your featured speaker came here and said that the election in November isn't about two people. It's not about being a Republican or a Democrat or an Independent. It is about the future of America. And while we've got a lot of differences, he and I, on this point I could not agree more. This is about America's future. The defining issue of our time is whether we carry forward the promise that has drawn generations of immigrants to our shores from every corner of the globe, sometimes at great risk, men and women drawn by the promise that no matter who you are, no matter what you look like, no matter where you come from, no matter what your last name, this is a place where you can make it if you try. This is a place where you can make it if you try.

And whether our ancestors arrived on the *Mayflower* or were brought here on slave ships, whether they signed in at Ellis Island or they crossed the Rio Grande, their diversity has not only enriched this country, it helped build the greatest economic engine the world has ever known.

Hungry people, striving people, dreamers, risk-takers. People don't come here looking for handouts. We are a nation of strivers and climbers and entrepreneurs, the hardest working people on Earth. And nobody personifies these American values, these American traits, more than the Latino community. That's the essence of who you are.

All we ask for is that hard work pays off, that responsibility is rewarded, so that if these men and women put in enough effort, they can find a good job, own their own home, send their kids to college, let their kids dream even bigger, put away a little bit for retirement, not go bankrupt when you get sick.

And I ran for this office because for more than a decade, that dream had been slipping away from too many Americans. Before I even took office, the worst economic crisis of our lifetimes pushed it even further from reach, particularly for a lot of Latino communities, which had already faced higher unemployment and higher poverty rates.

So the question is not whether we need to do better. Of course the economy isn't where it needs to be. Of course there's still too many who struggle. We've got so much more work to do. But the question is: How do we make the economy grow faster? How do we create more jobs? How do we create more opportunity? The question is: What vision are we going to stand up for? Who are we going to fight for?

That's what we have to decide right now. That's what this election's about. Who are we fighting for? What vision of America do we believe in?

If America is about anything, it's about passing on even greater opportunity to our children. It's about education. And that's why I expanded Pell grants, which will give an additional 150,000 children in the Latino community a chance to go to college. That's why I've invested in our community colleges, which are a gateway to a good job for so many Hispanic Americans—Americans of every stripe.

That's why schools in almost every State, some in the toughest neighborhoods around, have answered our challenge to raise their standards for teaching and learning—not by teaching to a test, but by expanding creativity and improving curriculums and focusing more on kids who are hardest to reach so that we give every child a fighting chance. That's part of the vision of America that we believe in.

In this country, we believe that if you want to take a risk on a new idea, you should have the chance to succeed. And you shouldn't have to have wealthy parents in order to be successful. Latino-owned businesses have been the fastest growing small businesses, and we've cut their taxes 18 times. We've expanded new loans and new credit so they can grow and they can hire. That's the vision we believe in.

In America, we believe you shouldn't go broke because you get sick. Hardworking people out there—sometimes two jobs, three jobs—still don't have health insurance. If you did have health insurance, insurance companies were able to discriminate against certain patients. That was wrong. It was wrong to let insurance companies just jack up premiums for no reason and to have millions of working Americans uninsured, with the Latino community having the highest rate of uninsured of any community in the country.

So after a century of trying, we finally passed reform that will make health care affordable and available for every American. That was the right thing to do. That was the right thing to do. That was the right thing to do.

Now, we're not done yet. We've got more to do. We need to put more good teachers in our classrooms. We need to get colleges and universities to bring down the cost of tuition to make it more affordable for more young people.

We need to invest in new research and innovation, especially new sources of energy and high-tech manufacturing. We need to put people back to work rebuilding our roads and our

highways and our runways. Construction jobs can have a huge ripple effect in communities all across the country. And nobody knows it better than State and local officials. You know the difference it makes. And with the housing bubble bursting, we've got tens of thousands of construction workers just ready and eager to get to work.

We need to give families in hard-hit housing markets like Florida and Nevada the chance to refinance and save $3,000 a year on their mortgage. That's good for those families. It's good for the housing market. It's good for the surrounding community. There's no reason why Congress hasn't already done it.

Instead of just talking a big game about "job creators," we should give small-business owners a tax break for hiring more workers or for paying higher wages. Instead of rewarding companies that ship jobs overseas, we should take that money and use it to cover moving expenses for companies who are bringing jobs back to America.

On almost every issue of concern to your community, to every community, what's holding us back isn't a lack of big ideas. It's not a lack of technical solutions. By now, just about every policy and proposal has been laid out on the table. What's holding us back is a stalemate, a stalemate in Washington between two fundamentally different views of which direction we should go.

The Republicans who run Congress, the man at the top of their ticket, they don't agree with any of the proposals I just talked about. They believe the best way to grow the economy is from the top down. So they want to roll back regulations and give insurance companies and credit card companies and mortgage lenders even more power to do as they please. They want to spend $5 trillion on new tax cuts, including a 25-percent tax cut for every millionaire in the country. And they want to pay for it by raising middle class taxes and gutting middle class priorities like education and training and health care and medical research.

And that's it. That's it. That's their economic plan. When they tell you they can do better, that's their idea of doing better. When they tell you they know how to fix the economy, that's exactly how they plan to do it. And I think they're wrong. I think they're wrong.

In this country, prosperity has never come from the top down. It comes from a strong and growing middle class and creating ladders of opportunity for all those who are striving to get into the middle class. It comes from successful, thriving small businesses that over time grow into medium-size and then large businesses.

We don't need more top-down economics. What we need is a better plan for education and training and energy independence and innovation and infrastructure that can rebuild America. What we need is a Tax Code that encourages companies to create jobs and manufacturing here in the United States and, yes, asks the wealthiest Americans to help pay down the deficit. That's what's needed.

And what's also needed is immigration reform that finally lives up to our heritage as a nation of laws and as a nation of immigrants and continues the American story of renewal and energy and dynamism that's made us who we are.

I mean, think about it. You and I both know one of America's greatest strengths has always been our ability to attract talented, hardworking people who believe in this country, who want to help make it stronger. That's what keeps us young. That's what keeps us dynamic and energized. That's what makes us who we are.

But our current immigration system doesn't reflect those values. It allows the best and brightest to study here, but then tells them to leave, start companies somewhere else. It punishes immigrants and businesses who play by the rules and fails to address the fact that there are too many who don't. It separates families, and it denies innocent young people the chance to earn an education or serve in the uniform of the country they love.

Now, once again, the problem is not the lack of technical solutions. We know what the solutions are to this challenge. Just 6 years ago, an unlikely trio—John McCain, Ted Kennedy, President Bush—came together to champion comprehensive immigration reform. I, along with a lot of Democrats, were proud to join 23 Senate Republicans in voting for it. Today, those same Republicans have been driven away from the table by a small faction of their own party. It's created the same kind of stalemate on immigration reform that we're seeing on a whole range of other economic issues. And it's given rise to a patchwork of State laws that cause more problems than they solve and are often doing more harm than good.

Now, this makes no sense. It's not good for America. And as long as I am President of the United States, I will not give up the fight to change it.

In the face of a Congress that refuses to do anything on immigration, I've said that I'll take action wherever I can. So my administration has been doing what we can, without the help in Congress, for more than the last—for more than 3 years now. And last week, we took another step. On Friday, we announced that we're lifting the shadow of deportation from deserving young people who were brought to this country as children.

We should have passed the "DREAM Act" a long time ago. It was written by members of both parties. When it came up for a vote a year and a half ago, Republicans in Congress blocked it. The bill hadn't changed. The need hadn't changed. The only thing that had changed was politics. The need had not changed. The bill hadn't changed—written with Republicans. The only thing that had changed was politics. And I refused to keep looking young people in the eye, deserving young people in the eye, and tell them, tough luck, the politics is too hard.

I've met these young people all across the country. They're studying in our schools. They're playing with our children, pledging allegiance to our flag, hoping to serve our country. They are Americans in their hearts, in their minds. They are Americans through and through, in every single way but on paper. And all they want is to go to college and give back to the country they love. So lifting the shadow of deportation and giving them a reason to hope—that was the right thing to do. It was the right thing to do.

It's not amnesty. It falls short of where we need to be; a path to citizenship. It's not a permanent fix. This is a temporary measure that lets us focus our resources wisely while offering some justice to these young people. But it's precisely because it's temporary, Congress still needs to come up with a long-term immigration solution, rather than argue that we did this the wrong way or for the wrong reasons.

So to those who are saying Congress should be the one to fix this—absolutely. For those who say we should do this in a bipartisan fashion—absolutely. My door has been open for 3½ years. They know where to find me. [*Laughter*]

I've said time and again: Send me the "DREAM Act"; I will sign it right away. And I'm still waiting to work with anyone from either party who is committed to real reform. But in the meantime, the question we should consider is this: Was providing these young people with the opportunity for a temporary measure of relief the right thing to do?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. I think it was. It's long past time that we gave them a sense of hope.

Now, your speaker from yesterday has a different view. In his speech, he said that when he makes a promise to you, he'll keep it. Well, he has promised to veto the "DREAM Act," and we should take him at his word. I'm just saying. [*Laughter*]

And I believe that would be a tragic mistake. You do too.

On all these issues—on the investments we need to grow the middle class and leave a better future for our kids, on deficit reduction that's fair and balanced, on immigration reform, on consumer financial protection so that people aren't exploited, whether at a payday loan shop or if they're sending remittances back to their families—on all these issues, Washington's got a long way to go to catch up with the rest of the country.

The whole idea behind the "DREAM Act," after all, was inspired by a music teacher in Illinois. She decided to call her Senator, Dick Durbin, when she discovered that one of her own students was forced to live in the shadows. But even as that idea fell prey to gridlock and game-playing in Washington, it gained momentum in the rest of the country: from every student who marched and organized to keep their classmates from being deported; from every parent who discovered the truth about the child down the street and chose to stand up for them, because these are all our kids; for every American who stood up and spoke out across the country because they saw a wrong and wanted it to be righted, who put their shoulder to the wheel and moved us a little closer toward justice.

That's what's always moved us forward. It doesn't start in Washington. It starts with a million quiet heroes who love their country and believe they can change it.

We all have different backgrounds. We all have different political beliefs. The Latino community is not monolithic; the African American community is not all of one mind. This is a big country. And sometimes, in tough times, in a country this big and busy, especially during a political year, those differences are cast in a bright spotlight.

But I ran for this office because I am absolutely convinced that what binds us together has always proven stronger than what drives us apart. We are one people. We need one another. Our patriotism is rooted not in race, not in ethnicity, not in creed; it is based on a shared belief in the enduring and permanent promise of America.

That's the promise that draws so many talented, driven people to these shores. That's the promise that drew my own father here. That's the promise that drew your parents or grandparents or great grandparents, generations of people who dreamed of a place where knowledge and opportunity were available to anybody who was willing to work for it, anybody who was willing to seize it. A place where there was no limit to how far you could go, how high you could climb.

They took a chance. And America embraced their drive and embraced their courage—said, "Come, you're welcome." This is who we are.

Every single day I walk into the Oval Office, every day that I have this extraordinary privilege of being your President, I will always remember that in no other nation on Earth could my story even be possible. That's something I celebrate.

That's what drives me, in every decision I make, to try and widen the circle of opportunity, to fight for that big and generous and optimistic country we inherited, to carry that dream

forward for generations to come. Because when I meet these young people, all throughout communities, I see myself. Who knows what they might achieve? I see my daughters and my nieces and my nephews. Who knows what they might achieve if we just give them a chance?

That's what I'm fighting for. That's what I stand for.

This fight will not always be easy. It hasn't always been easy. It will not happen overnight. Our history has been one where that march towards justice and freedom and equality has taken time. There will always be plenty of stubborn opposition in the way that says: "No, you can't. No, you shouldn't. Don't even try."

But America was built by people who said something different, who said, "Yes, we can," who said, "*Si, se puede*." And as long as I have the privilege of being your President, I will be alongside you, fighting for the country that we together dream of.

God bless you. Thank you, NALEO. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:43 p.m. at the Walt Disney World Resort. In his remarks, he referred to Sylvia R. Garcia, president, and Arturo Vargas, executive director, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials; Republican Presidential candidate former Gov. W. Mitt Romney of Massachusetts; and Tereza Lee, doctoral student, Manhattan School of Music.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Annual Conference in Orlando, FL.

Locations: Orlando, FL.

Names: Aponte, Mari del Carmen; Bush, George W.; Durbin, Richard J.; Garcia, Sylvia R.; Lee, Tereza; McCain, John S; Romney, W. Mitt; Solis, Hilda L.; Vargas, Arturo.

Subjects: Business and industry : Minority-owned businesses; Business and industry : Small businesses :: Economic impact; Business and industry : Small businesses :: Promotion efforts; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Education : Hispanic students :: Performance and completion, improvement efforts "; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges"; Education : Postsecondary education :: Pell grants; El Savador : U.S. Ambassador; Elections : 2012 Presidential and congressional elections; Florida : President's visit; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Housing : Housing market :: Decline; Immigration and naturalization : American "melting pot" ; Immigration and naturalization : American "melting pot"; Immigration and naturalization : Illegal immigration; Immigration and naturalization : Reform; Labor, Department of : Secretary; National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials; Taxation : Tax Code, reform; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts.

DCPD Number: DCPD201200503.