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Remarks in a Meeting With the National Governors Association

January 31, 2022

[*Vice President Kamala D. Harris made introductory remarks, concluding as follows.*

Vice President Harris. And I will now introduce the President of the United States of America, Joe Biden.

The President. Well, thanks. Thank you very much. Look, I'm going to—[*applause*]—thank you.

Governors, it's truly to have a—it's a pleasure to have you all here. And I'm glad you're having an opportunity—and my Cabinet and overall team is getting a chance to meet you all and know you personally, and engage with you on the—great concern that you have.

You know, the—I had a chance to hear from several leaders of my administration this morning, including former Governors. If you noticed, I hired a lot of Governors and mayors because they know how to get things done. And you have two Governors, sitting to my left here, who are taking on major, major responsibilities.

I remember, when we were out on the trail, Governor Vilsack telling me that the first industry in the world that was going to have net-zero emissions is going to be agriculture, and he was right. At the time, it was a fairly novel idea, but a lot of you picked it up and moved beyond.

And I know that—look, the American Rescue Plan was a lot of money. And it was designed to make sure we could carry the Nation forward in dealing with vaccines, boosters, or creating jobs and keeping schools open and a number of other things.

And, Gov, you said send you money. We have. [*Laughter*] We've sent you a whole hell of a lot of money. And we're going to send you more if you keep using it as well as you have.

And we're talking about the ability to—really, the way I look at it—and I mean this sincerely, and I've said it last night in a more casual way: We are at an inflection point. And we have an opportunity to—America is one of those nations—I think the only nation—that's come out of every crisis stronger than it went into the crisis. And I'm not being—it's not hyperbole. We have had a crisis. We've come out. We've been stronger.

And I think that's where we are again. And I think we have a chance to sort of restate and reassert our world leadership on a whole range of issues and lead the world on everything from the environment to dealing with the issues of immigration, a whole range of issues, Gov.

And—but the American Rescue Plan gives us the resources to do many of those things. And, you know, there's a lot of challenges out there that we're not even talking to directly; today, there's so many. But the surge of gun violence since the start of this pandemic.

I made it clear we should use these funds to combat violent crime as well, including hiring additional police officers and investing in community violence interventions that have been proven to work in communities. And I know you're making those investments in Michigan. I know you're making those investments in New Jersey. You're making those investments in Ohio. A lot of you are making them all over the country.

Another one of the national challenges: We need to bring back workers to better jobs with better pay and better working conditions than the ones that they left. The American Rescue Plan, there was—a major part was $350 billion to allocate to your States and local budgets, as well as

funds for school and for childcare. And we know the difference this has made in jobs. Last year, we had the greatest job growth in American history. And as part of that, State and local jobs grew by 464,000, the most in 20 years.

And, Governor of Hawaii, you've worked—you've talked about the 10,000 State workers that are—you're able to keep on the job thanks to the American Rescue Plan. I'm not sure where you're sitting, but any rate. There you are, Gov. Sorry.

And I know that the education funds helped many of you stay open, keep your schools open, and keep them open safely. There's a lot of money you have there for everything from dealing with ventilation to clean buses—school buses and everything in between. There's no reason why we can't keep our schools open, in my view.

And getting kids to school was an essential step getting our economy back to normal. And we're not quite there yet. But we also know that if people find they can afford childcare, they get back to work as well.

I think we're going to be coming back to you. There's one reason why there's 1.2 million women who were working, who are not in the job market now, because it's hard to get back and the combination of worrying about, is school open, as well as whether or not there's—the cost of childcare. In 43 of your States, you've already gotten relief, with 150,000 childcare providers to help many of them keep their doors open, and at a critical time—the actual physical facilities.

And now we need it even more to get Americans—keep them at work and the essential workers on the job. And that can mean, as some of you used, hero retention bonuses, higher pay, temporary paid leave to combat burnout in essential health care workers, like Delaware, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania have all announced. It can mean paid leave, as is being done in the State of Washington.

But to keep schools open, to keep kids in school, to make up for learning losses, we need to bring back more teachers, more tutors, bus drivers, school nurses. And we're seeing creative efforts in North Carolina, for example, which is providing bonuses for all school employees, and Arkansas, as you know, Gov, which is creating a Tutoring Corps.

And we're seeing States like Kansas and New Jersey and Nevada using funds to expand the pool of counselors and mental health care workers in our schools, which are badly needed, in my view.

And already 27 States have announced they're using over $14 billion in the American Rescue Plan funds to get a head start on rebuilding our Nation's infrastructure. As you said, Gov, you know how to build roads and bridges. Well, we've got a hell of a lot to build, and we're going to build a bunch of them. And also clean water and ports and a whole range of things. We have a lot of opportunity to build back a lot better.

And I think it's really important—it's equally important to make sure we have a well-trained and diverse workforce ready to fill the jobs and careers that my infrastructure law—our infrastructure law is going to help open up wide. And that means using the Rescue Plan funds to support union-based apprenticeships, community college partnerships, on-the-job training in key areas like advanced manufacturing and clean energy, which some of you are doing, and construction. And we're seeing States like Wisconsin, Colorado, Connecticut, North Carolina, Maine, Massachusetts all doing that already.

We have dozens of examples of how important the creative work that is underway as a result of—and we're providing a hell of a lot more flexibility that you all required. I think we've done that. If you haven't, I'd like to hear it today if you don't have enough flexibility.

It's good work you're doing. It is a good start. And we need you to do even more to retain, train, and hire workers. We need to serve our people and expand our economy.

And so, because of—this is chance for us to not only come together and get through this pandemic, it's a chance for us to come through it stronger and ready to build on our progress and deal more Americans in to win the competition of the future.

We are doing better than any nation—any major nation in the world. We've got to keep that—we've got to pick it up. And I can think of no better group of people to pick it up with. It takes State leaders, Federal, business, labor.

I've not—I've never seen as much cooperation that is across the board. There's differences, I know. But there's been a hell of a lot of cooperation across the board, including business and labor pulling together, accelerating efforts, and trying to do a lot more to make sure we get out of this hole.

And so, I want to thank you all for being here. And I know you spoke today with the CDC. You had—not the CDC, but you had the head of my COVID team in here. We've got a way to go on that, in my view, but we're moving. And so, I think it's all about making sure we have the same standards we're applying across the board.

And, you know, as you said, Gov, we're going to try like the devil to keep schools open. Because we do know—study after study, as all of you know and you've done; the great universities in your States have done them—is that, you know, losing a semester can put a kid back a year and a half. And so, there's a whole lot we can—have to do, in my view, to focus. And I think that keeping schools open is a big part of that.

And border security—Gov, we're working a lot with the neighboring countries. A lot to do—there's a lot. I think one of the fundamental things we've got to do in addition to some of the changes we'll make—we won't get into it today—but is that if we figure out why they're leaving in the first place.

It's not like people sit around and say, in Guadalajara: "I've got a great idea. Let's sell everything we have, give it to a coyote to take us across the border and leave us in the desert in a country that doesn't want us, where we don't speak the language. Won't that be fun?"

You know, there are gangs we're working on. There is a whole lot of illegal movement. But there's also a way to begin to deal with the reason they're leaving in the first place. And I'll—we can get into—I'd love to talk with you personally about that a little bit, if I may.

But having said that, why don't I stop and take any questions you all may have. And they tell me I'm supposed to call on Governor Cox first.

[*At this point, reporters were escorted from the room. The meeting continued; no transcript was provided.*]

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:23 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of Energy Jennifer M. Granholm and Secretary of Agriculture Thomas J. Vilsack, in their former capacities as Governors of Michigan and Iowa, respectively; Gov. W. Asa Hutchinson II of Arkansas, in his capacity as Chairman of the National Governors Association, who made remarks prior to Vice President Harris; Gov. David Y. Ige of Hawaii; White House COVID–19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey D. Zients; and Gov. Spencer J. Cox of Utah.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : National Governors Association, meeting.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Cox, Spencer J.; Granholm, Jennifer M.; Harris, Kamala D.; Hutchinson, Asa W. II; Hutchinson, Asa W., II; Hutchinson, W. Asa, II; Hutchison, W. Asa, II; Ige, David Y.; Vilsack, Thomas J.; Zients, Jeffrey D.

Subjects: Agriculture, Department of : Secretary; Arkansas : Governor; Business and industry : Domestic investment, promotion efforts; Children and youth : Childcare, affordability and costs; Diseases : Coronavirus, domestic prevention efforts; Economy, national : Household income and wages; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : School coronavirus prevention efforts, Federal support; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Job training and assistance programs; Energy, Department of : Secretary; Environment : Carbon emissions, reduction efforts; Environment : Conservation :: Promotion efforts; Governors Association, National; Hawaii : Governor; Health and medical care : Health care workers, service and dedication; Health and medical care : Mental health programs and services; Immigration and naturalization : Citizenship; Immigration and naturalization : Illegal immigration; Infrastructure, national improvement efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Community violence intervention programs; Law enforcement and crime : Gang violence, prevention efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Gun violence, prevention efforts; Utah : Governor; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: COVID-19 Response Coordinator; White House Office : Vice President.

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