

Remarks to Reporters in Coconut Creek, Florida May 9, 2006

The President. I want to thank you all for joining us. I'm proud to be here with Secretary Leavitt. We're traveling the country reminding people that there's a fantastic opportunity for our seniors, and that is, Medicare now offers a prescription drug benefit that will save people a lot of money.

We just visited with some of our citizens inside there, and they're talking about significant savings. And that's what we want; we want our seniors to be able to have modern medicine. So far a lot of seniors have signed up. It's coming down the stretch toward the May 15th deadline; we want everybody to sign up. We want people to understand that they're going to save a lot of money when it comes to prescription drugs.

And I appreciate Secretary Leavitt's hard work. One of the things that our seniors have got to understand, that if you qualify for extra help in the program, if you're a low-income senior that qualifies for extra help, the May 15th deadline doesn't apply to you; you'll have time to take a look—we want everybody signing up. And if you're a low-income senior, you get—the Government pays about 95 percent or more of your prescription drug benefit. So it's worthwhile for people to look.

I want to thank groups like the AARP, NAACP, many in the faith community, community-based groups, all for working hard to educate seniors as to what's available. This is a good deal for America's seniors, and I'm proud to have signed a law to modernize Medicare, and I'm proud to be working with Michael.

I also want to thank Congressman Foley and Congressman Clay Shaw for joining us. They're strong backers of Medicare reform. They were informing me that a lot of their citizens have signed up. In south Florida, people are taking advantage of this program. And I strongly urge people to take a look and see what's available.

[At this point, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services Michael O. Leavitt made brief remarks.]

The President. Thank you all for joining us. Thank you all very much, I appreciate it.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:53 a.m. at Broward Community College. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Secretary Leavitt.

Remarks on the Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit and a Question-and-Answer Session in Sun City Center, Florida May 9, 2006

The President. Thanks for coming. Please be seated. Thanks for the warm welcome. It's great to be here in Sun City Center. Brother Jeb said, "If you want to come to a really good place, come here." First of all, I think it's a pretty neat deal when you get introduced by your brother, par-

ticularly since he's such a good Governor. We both share the same political adviser—Mom. [Laughter] I don't know if Mother is still telling you what to do, Jeb, but she's certainly telling me what to do all the time. [Laughter]

And both of us married well. The first lady of Florida is a fantastic woman, and so is the First Lady of the United States. Laura sends her very best. She sends her love. Yesterday she represented us in Costa Rica. They inaugurated a new President, and they sent the word back—please send the best in your family. [*Laughter*] So we sent Laura.

I'm also proud to be joined by Congressman Adam Putnam. Where's Adam? There he is. Thank you. He's a smart guy. He's a smart person, and he's a good guy to work with, and I appreciate you being here, Adam.

I want to thank the WCI Communities' leadership and staff for having me here.

What I thought I would do is spend a little time talking about the new Medicare program. The reason I'm doing this, because I want people to sign up. And then I'll answer some questions, if you have some. And then I'm going to go over to Orlando and do the same thing tomorrow morning—just like I did earlier in south Florida. And the reason why I'm doing this is because we have changed Medicare for the better, but sometimes change creates anxieties. In other words, people say, "Well, maybe I don't want to change. I kind of like it the way things are." And—but we have a duty to educate people and give them a chance to see what's available, and that's what I'm doing. That's what you want your President to do.

First thing, let me give you a little history. As you know, Medicare was signed by one of my predecessors—happened to be from the State of Texas, Lyndon Baines Johnson. And it's a vital program. It's a program that has worked. It's a necessary program. Medicare is a commitment of the Federal Government. And once you make a commitment, it seems like to me, it makes sense to make the commitment a good commitment. In other words, you want it to work. You want it to be a modern, excellent program.

Medicare had done a—provided a lot of comfort for a lot of people, but it was getting old and stale; it needed to be reformed. And one reason it needed to be reformed is because it did not provide prescription drug coverage. And you know that. In other words, Medicare would pay for a surgery, say, like ulcer surgery, for \$28,000 but wouldn't pay \$500 for the prescription drugs that would have prevented the ulcer in the first place. See, medicine had changed with the advent of prescription drugs, but Medicare hadn't.

So I thought it made sense to make Medicare work better, to keep our commitment to our seniors. And we passed legislation that modernized Medicare, and we are now explaining to people what the modernized system means. Nobody is going to say, "You've got to sign up for this," but I think we have a duty to say to people, "Please take a look at it. Take a look and see what's available."

The first thing that's in the new system I think is important is that every senior now entering Medicare is eligible for a "Welcome to Medicare" physical exam. That wasn't the case prior to the reform. Now it is. And that makes a lot of sense, it seems like to me, to say, "Here's a physical for you." The best way to cure disease is to anticipate it and prevent it from happening in the first place, is to be able to catch illnesses early through screenings. Part of a modern, effective health care says that we'll encourage prevention. Helping to prevent disease is going to be a really important part of a modern system, whether you're on Medicare or not on Medicare; whether you're a guy like me, or whether you're a person who's eligible for Medicare.

There is a new prescription drug coverage in Medicare. And that's important for people to understand. The prescription drug coverage, first of all, helps all seniors pay for prescription drugs, no matter how they've paid before. In other words, everybody should take a look at the prescription drug coverage.

Secondly, what's interesting about the new program is it provides choices for seniors. You know, I knew that when we put—laid out the idea of giving seniors choices, it would create a little confusion for some. I mean, after all, up to now there hadn't been much—many choices in the system. And all of a sudden, a senior who feels pretty good about things says, "Here's old George W. or Mike Leavitt or Jeb or somebody say, 'Take a look.' " And all of a sudden, 40 choices pop up.

The reason why we felt it was necessary to provide choices is because we want the system to meet the needs of the consumer. The more choices you have, the more likely it is you'll be able to find a program that suits your specific needs. In other words, one size fits all is not a consumer-friendly program. And I believe in consumers. I believe in trusting people. I did know that there would be some worries about having to choose from 40 different plans, but I thought it was worth it because I know that 40 different plans here in Florida will mean that each individual can tailor a plan to meet his or her needs. And I thought that was important.

So how do we handle the 40 different programs? Well, we encouraged all kinds of people to help. AARP is helping, NAACP is helping, sons and daughters are helping, faith-based programs are helping people sort through the programs to design a program that meets their needs. I readily concede some seniors have said, "There are so many choices, I don't think I want to participate." My advice is, there is plenty of help for you.

Thirdly, seniors with the highest drug costs are going to get extra help in this modernized Medicare. We have catastrophic protection for the first time. And that's important. Drug costs over \$3,600 a year will be—any costs over that will be picked up by 95 percent for the Federal Government. It's called catastrophic care. Part of the reason you modernize medicine this way is to give people peace of mind.

You know that if you sign up for the program and something goes terribly wrong and your prescription drug bills skyrocket, the Government is there to help, after \$3,600. And that's important for families and its important for our seniors, to have that notion that there's stopgap insurance, that there's help beyond a certain level of costs.

And third—and fourthly, there's extra help for low-income seniors. If you qualify as a low-income senior—this is about a third of our seniors here in America—the prescription drug coverage includes little or no premiums, low deductibles, no gaps in insurance. On average, the Government will pay more than 95 percent of the cost for prescription drugs for low-income seniors.

It's really important for people to take a look and see whether or not there's a program that meets your needs. A lot of people are signing up. There's about 42 million folks eligible for Medicare in the United States, a little more than that. More than 31 million thus far have signed up. That's a lot. In other words, since January, people have said, "I think I'm going to take a look and get involved in this new program."

There's 6 million more who have an alternative source of coverage. In other words, they're plenty happy with the plans they have. And this program—by the way, nobody forces anybody to do anything. You know, this is our country; you're free to choose. So there's 37 million of the little more than 42 million people that have got coverage, and we're working hard to sign up the remaining eligible seniors. And they're signing up—a lot of people signing up, as we head toward a May 15th deadline.

I want to make this very clear. If you are eligible for extra help, if you're a low-income senior, the May 15th deadline does not apply to you. In other words, you can apply after May 15th without penalty. And that's important for low-income seniors to understand. We want everybody to sign up.

We want people to understand that there are really good benefits for—the average senior is going to save one-half on his or her cost—one-half on the cost of prescription drugs.

We were meeting, as I said, in south Florida earlier, and some of the stories down there for people who signed up were really strong stories—people saving money, people got a little extra money in their pocket. The system is modernized, and it saves you money. And that's what we want. Now, some say, "It's too good to be true." If you haven't looked at the program, take a look. Take a look. I think you're going to find what I said is true.

The other interesting thing that's happened is—just so the people out there who are wondering whether or not this is cost-effective, whether or not this makes sense to do—first of all, I think it makes a lot of sense to do. We don't want seniors choosing between food and medicine. We're a compassionate society. Secondly, because there's competition for you—in other words, somebody said, here's some different options for you, the average premium seniors pay for the prescription drug benefit is \$25 a month on average. And that's down from an anticipated cost of \$37 a month. In other words, when somebody bids for your business, it tends to be—it helps on price.

In Florida, the lowest cost option is about \$10 a month. There are many zero-dollar premium Medicare advantage plans available for our seniors to choose from. The program is saving seniors a lot of money. And as a result of people competing for your business, it's saving the taxpayers money. In other words, people said, "Well, it's going to cost X." Well, it's costing 20 percent less. This is a good deal for America's seniors.

And so over the next week, Secretary Leavitt and myself and others in the administration are reminding people that there's a good opportunity for you. And so I would suggest, if you haven't signed up yet, if

you're living in Florida and watching this TV program—or anywhere in the country watching the TV program, I'd call 1-800-MEDICARE, and there's somebody there who'll help you. Or if you've got some—if you're computer-literate or have a friend who's computer-literate, get on the web page, medicare.gov, and take a look—take a look at what's available.

Seniors all across the country are saving money because of this plan. It's—if you're a son or a daughter and your mom or dad is eligible for Medicare and he or she hasn't signed up, I believe the son or a daughter has a duty to help the mom or dad understand what's available. That's what sons and daughters are supposed to do. That's called love. And a loving son or daughter should take a look and help their folks realize what's possible, help design a drug benefit program that meets your mom or dad's needs.

Churches all across the country are reaching out—synagogues, people from different faiths understand that it makes sense to help their parishioners realize the benefits of this plan. I mentioned earlier AARP, NAACP, groups all across the country are out trying to find the folks who haven't signed up yet and encourage them to do so. And so that's why I'm here. I'm here doing my duty as Educator in Chief. [Laughter] It's to say to people from around this part of the world and those who may be watching over the airwaves, this is a good deal for the American seniors. And it's the right thing to do for the Government. If the Government makes a promise, we want to make sure that promise lives up to what we've told you. We've said, we're going to get you a modern health care system, and we have.

And that's what I've come to talk about. I'll be glad to answer any questions anybody has on any subject that may be on your mind. But in the meantime, thanks for letting me come by, and God bless.

All righty—[applause]—no, no—thank you. I'll be over—we'll get a little picture-taking in a minute. Yes, sir.

Availability of Literature on Medicare Benefits

Q. I find there's a dearth of literature about the new program. I just don't see any pamphlets or books around, which there should be.

The President. True.

Q. Secondly, I want to ask, if you do sign up, and I don't know what it's all about—I'm, truthfully, computer-fearful and so I'm not—I'm computer-illiterate. And I'd like to know, when—if I do sign up, can I quit, can I get out of it?

The President. Yes, you can. [Laughter] I think if you sign—first of all, that's a great question. Literature—there's all kind of literature. I can't answer the question as to why—

Q. I haven't seen it.

The President. No, I know, there's not any—you haven't seen it yet, I know. But I will try to find out why you haven't seen any here. Secondly, you're not alone when it comes to saying, "I'm a little frightened about getting on the computer." You're not the only person I've heard say that. And therefore, one of the things that centers such as this do is provide help with people who are computer-illiterate. And it's—with somebody explaining how it works and what you're watching, I think you'll find it to be a lot less intimidating than you think.

And thirdly, I wouldn't sign up, if I were you, unless you were comfortable that it saves you money. This is an add-on to Medicare. It is a part of Medicare. It's called Medicare Part D. In other words, the rest of Medicare exists, but what this does is it provides an additional benefit. And as I said, across the country, people are saving half on their prescription drug bills. People say to me, "Well, I'm feeling pretty healthy, and I'm not taking a lot of prescription drugs; I'm not going to sign up." My advice is, sign up, because you

don't know when you're going to have to start taking prescription drugs.

But at the very minimum, take a look. You seem like an inquisitive person, somebody who wants to know the facts, and there should be people here at this center that will help you find the facts out front. And there's going to be some literature, I hope—there is? Brother said there's literature. Now, there had better be literature, because the man—[laughter]—the man in the hat is going to walk out there, and if he doesn't see any literature, I'm cooked. [Laughter] Good looking hat too.

Yes, sir. Thank you for your question.

Iran

Q. Mr. President, my question concerns the Iranian situation.

The President. Yes.

Q. I'm very worried about it, and I don't think I'm alone. I know that you and Secretary Rice and Ambassador Bolton are doing everything humanly possible to unite the global community in persuading the Iranians that getting the bomb is not in their own interest. And even if you get the Chinese and the Russians to come around eventually on meaningful sanctions, my fear is it's liable to take so long it will be too little and too late. So I assume there's a good possibility, given their attitude, they're going to get the bomb. And my question is, if they do, what next?

The President. Yes. First of all, it's a great question, because he is bringing to the front here a question of international significance. Our objective is not to let them get the bomb, first of all. And I am an optimistic person and, therefore, believe—I'm going to rephrase your question a different way: How are you going to stop them from getting it in the first place—not what are you going to do if they get one.

And the first goal—first of all, all options—the first option and the most important option is diplomacy. As you know, I've

made the tough decision to commit American troops into harm's way. It's the toughest decision a President can ever make, but I want you to know that I tried diplomacy. In other words, a President has got to be able to say to the American people, diplomacy didn't work. And therefore, the first choice, and a choice that I think will work with the Iranians, is diplomacy. And I believe we can accomplish this through diplomacy.

Any diplomatic effort must have a common goal. And the common goal here is precisely what you said, sir, which is the Iranians should not have a nuclear weapon or the capacity to make a nuclear weapon.

Now, that wasn't always the case during my Presidency. In other words, people have come together around that goal. And the countries that have come around that goal are not only our allies in Europe but China and Russia agree. So the first step toward good diplomacy is to have different countries agree to a common goal, which is that the Iranians should not have the capacity and/or a nuclear weapon. So that's positive.

Secondly, we're now working on the tactics as to how to convince the Iranians through—to get rid of their ambitions through a united front. And so what you're watching play out—by the way, because we live in a transparent society, everything, of course, is in the newspapers—which is fine; that's healthy. But that's not the case when you're dealing with a nontransparent society.

And so we got six countries—Condi was up there dealing with them last night, sitting around the table saying, how are we going to achieve our common goal? So what you're watching is, of course, all the guessing and speculating about the different positions of the six countries sitting around the table. But I believe that through hard work, we will continue to keep people bound together because there is a common interest to prevent the Iranians from getting that weapon. They understand—the countries understand the danger inherent

with the Iranians having a weapon. They understand the consequences of a nuclear Iran, particularly when you have a President who's threatening people.

And so we're at an early stage of diplomacy at this point in time. And one of the options, of course, is to go to the United Nations Security Council. And once in the United Nations Security Council, we're trying to reach—what does the resolution say. My objective—and thank you for your kinds words about Condi and myself working hard to keep the common front. It's very important for the Iranians to know they will be isolated in the world; that the rest of the world, much of the world, shares the same demands that those of us who are heading the—involved in the negotiations say.

But you're right; this is a very difficult issue. And we will continue to work through diplomatic channels to make it clear that we mean what we say. And obviously, part of making the diplomacy work is, what will be the consequences if the Iranians decide maybe not to listen to the rational demands of the world? And you mentioned one, economic sanctions. But we're—and I'm not going to comment on that, because I think it's very important for good negotiators to keep their cards close to the vest, and then at the appropriate time, make it clear what our intentions are.

This is a serious issue; it's taking a lot of our time, as it should. Ultimately, of course, I would hope that an American President is able to say to the Iranian people, "You're free, and we look forward to having good relations with you." Liberty has got an amazing way of changing the world. I speak to a group of people who know that better than most. You have seen liberty transform the world during your lifetime. You've seen—and one of my favorite ways of explaining the effects of liberty and my belief in what liberty can do is to explain the relationship I have with the Japanese Prime Minister.

I bet I've got some World War II vets here. I'll bet there's some people who know World War II vets, who are here. I bet people are here who know somebody who was called into action to fight the Japanese in World War II. And today I can—I report to you that the Japanese Prime Minister is my friend in keeping the peace. And there's a reason why—is because after World War II, one of my predecessors, Harry S. Truman, had the belief that the United States should help that country, our enemy, become a democracy, not styled—an American-style democracy but a Japanese-style democracy. And because of the faith in the capacity to freedom to change people's way of thinking, because he felt strong to that conviction, today, a Japanese-style democracy is a friend of America.

Freedom has the capacity to change enemies into friends. And so in the long run, the best way to deal with problems such as the Iranian problem is to encourage people to be free. And the fundamental question is, do people want to be free? And the cornerstone of my foreign policy is my strong belief that freedom is universal. People desire to be free.

One of the lessons that your generation has taught our generation is that staying strong to the values that America subscribes to—human rights, human dignity, the universality of freedom—has changed parts of the world in incredible ways. Just look at Europe—this is a long answer—[laughter]—to an important question. And the reason I'm framing it this way is I want you to understand how I think about laying the foundation of peace so we can deal with not only the issue that you asked about, sir, but other issues that will inevitably come up during the course of the 21st century.

But freedom has the capacity to lay the foundations for peace, and we must not lose sight of the historical examples. Take Europe, for example—there was two major conflicts in Europe, World War I and World War II. Today, Europe is whole,

free, and at peace because democracies don't war. It's one of the historical lessons.

And so in the short term, on the issue you described, we will keep our diplomacy going. We'll be knitted up as best as we possibly can with different—with as many nations as possible—six of them at the table last night in New York, by the way. And in the meantime, it is—we will continue to advance the freedom agenda.

Good question. Yes, sir.

Health Care Reform

Q. Thank you. First, let me say, I think a lot of people will be helped by this program.

The President. They will—

Q. A lot of people will be helped by the Medicare Part D program.

The President. Oh, thank you.

Q. But I think there's major deficiencies in it that I think we'd like to hear some comments from you on. The first major issue—I think the program is going to be a lot more expensive both to the user and to the taxpayer than it needs to be, because we don't allow Medicare to negotiate directly with the pharmaceutical companies. This could wind up costing the taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars over the next 10 years.

Another thing, the insurance companies are allowed to change their formulary once a person is in the program; a person is not allowed to get out until the end of the year. This is a legalized bait and switch operation by the insurance companies. How many of them are doing it, I don't know, but it's a danger for our seniors.

Third, I have a report here from Families USA indicating that the poorest people that are affected by this program are not being helped.

The President. Well, I just—

Q. Not helped—either they're not signed up, they're not being helped compared to the benefits they were getting under a combination of Medicare and Medicaid.

So, finally, I think there are several major changes that should be made in the program. Number one, let Medicare negotiate with the pharmaceutical companies. Number two, stop the formulary switch. If we do that, by reducing the costs, I think we can possibly reduce the size or even eliminate the doughnut hole that people are exposed to.

The President. Okay, thanks.

Q. And I think—[laughter]. One last thing—okay. If we don't bring our costs down this way, we're never going to control health care costs in the U.S. And we're subsidizing the pharmaceutical companies, and we're subsidizing health costs in every other country around the world, because every other country negotiates directly with the pharmaceutical companies.

The President. Yes, I'll be glad to give you some comments. First of all, if a senior takes a look at the program and doesn't think it saves his or her money, they shouldn't sign up.

Secondly, in terms of the low-income seniors, I don't know what the report is that you cite—people cite reports all the time. I will tell you this, that a lot of people are working hard to find the low-income seniors, to give them the chance to sign up for an incredibly beneficial program—including AARP, the NAACP, as I mentioned. I've met with their representatives. They realize this is a good deal for low-income seniors. But if your premise is right, that the low-income senior won't benefit from the program, they shouldn't sign up to it. I just strongly disagree that this isn't good for low-income seniors.

Thirdly, one of the reasons why—we're trying to make individual choice available for seniors, as opposed to having the Federal Government making the decisions on behalf of seniors. And so the idea of having the Federal Government negotiate price keeps the Federal Government squarely in the middle of the program. There's a philosophical difference, evidently, between me and you. All I can tell you is, is that the

program is costing less than anticipated, and this program is going to benefit a lot of seniors because there is more choice for seniors.

Now, the idea of, "This won't help us control health care costs," one, I disagree with that. I think more choices for consumers, the better off we are.

Secondly, health care costs are on the rise. A lot of it has to do with these lawsuits that are driving good doctors out of practice, that are causing people to practice defensive medicine, and running up the premiums for consumers. We need to modernize health care, as well, by introducing information technology so that, kind of, the system of writing files by hand, which leads to errors and inefficiency, is replaced by a modern system of information technology.

Thirdly, we need transparency in pricing. People need to know that which they're purchasing and the quality of that which they purchase so that consumers are able to make more rational decisions.

Fourthly, at the center of the health care needs to be the doctor-patient relationship—not bureaucracy, either government or private bureaucracy. And that's why I'm such a strong believer in health savings account, which are now being—now available for a lot of folks in America.

So I think you and I may have a different vision of health care. I thank you for bringing it up, but, look, if people don't like it, they don't have to sign up for it. People have got the right to pick what they want to pick. And therefore, I know you would agree with me in saying that seniors ought to take a look and see whether or not it meets their needs.

Thank you, sir, very much. I appreciate that.

Yes, ma'am.

Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit May 15th Deadline

Q. Mr. President—[inaudible]—to live in this country, and I'm very proud of it.

The President. Good. Where were you from initially?

Q. East Germany.

The President. Very good.

Q. I've been through a lot, and I appreciate this country. And also I just signed up—I belong to AARP supplement, and I just signed up for Medicare Complete Choice Rx United Healthcare with zero monthly premium, and I'm saving 140 some dollars a month.

The President. Good.

Q. Thank you.

The President. How long have you been in the country?

Q. I've been in this country longer than I lived in Germany because I was in East Germany, and we had a lot of problems. You couldn't speak up for anything. My brother was arrested. My sister almost was, for saying something. So I got out pretending I'm performing at the opera house in Nuremberg, and I broke my contract interest, and I stayed in West Germany. And I've been here since 1959. And I'm an American citizen. I'm very proud of it.

The President. Great. Welcome.

Q. Thank you.

The President. Yes, ma'am. By the way, I met with Chancellor Angela Merkel the other day, and she was—she, too, was raised in East Germany. It's interesting to be dealing with a world leader who was raised in a Communist country. She brings an interesting perspective to the idea of people being free. I mean, she understands freedom as well as anybody understands freedom. And she's going to be a—she's a good ally and a good person. When I see her, I'll tell her I saw you. [Laughter]

Q. Welcome, Mr. President. Thank you for coming here. One of my questions is, May 15th, I believe, is the sign-up date.

The President. Yes.

Q. If people cannot make a decision by May 15th, will they be penalized, or will there be another time period where they can sign up?

The President. It depends upon whether you're a—eligible for extra benefits, a low-income senior or not. If you're a low-income senior, there will be no penalties. If you're not a low-income senior, sign up before May 15th.

Q. Oh, okay. So then there will be—there will not be another sign-up date?

The President. You can continue to sign up, but there won't be sign-up at the same rates at which you could—the same rates at which you'll get your prescription drug benefits prior to May 15th. Deadlines are important. Deadlines help people understand there's finality, and people need to get after it, you know? And so the idea is, there's the deadline. Now, low-income seniors, as I mentioned to you, will be able to sign up after May 15th without penalty.

Let's see—yes, ma'am.

Q. I appreciate everything you've said. I think you're great.

The President. Thank you. Well, we'll leave it at that. [Laughter]

Q. No, I'm just like your mother. I do want to suggest—this is a community. Our motto is "Neighbors Helping Neighbors." We're volunteers. There are many, many seniors here who need help. We procrastinated and finally made the decision to sign up through AARP, because you can always change. And if they start increasing costs, we'll change to another one. You can have influence on people you buy from more than if the Government is handling it. And so I appreciate your approach.

However, I would beg, not for myself—because there were logjams; they were shuffling the phone calls directly to Medicare. I got an ID number; my husband got, in the afternoon, a confirmation number. No one knows whether they're actually recorded. The Internet was so bogged down, you couldn't get information, because everyone is doing it at the last minute. Now, when we pay our taxes, there's a deadline. But we can apply for a 6-months reprieve. I think—[laughter]—

The President. I think I know where you're headed. [Laughter]

Q. All right, I don't have to continue it. We could go out and help our neighbors. There's a Medicare bus—we just found out this week—going to a Catholic church in Tampa to help people sign up. There's a Medicare bus going to a hospital in Sarasota, but we didn't think about getting one to come here for our people, and we need some time to give them some help. Thank you.

The President. Yes, I appreciate that, thanks. In other words, what you're saying is, there's a lot of people beginning to come in at the last minute, and you're afraid they're not going to be able to access the system and/or have their numbers and names filed properly before May 15th. I'll check with the local people to make sure that—see what the strategy is in dealing with that.

Yes, ma'am. There you go.

Medicare Benefits for Individuals With Disabilities

Q. Is this the same Medicare plan—

The President. You're doing fine, just keep cranking it up.

Q. Is this the same Medicare plan for people that are on disabilities?

The President. Disabilities, yes. It applies to people with disabilities as well.

Q. So if you're under 65—then I would have to still go and apply under this?

The President. For the additional help, yes, ma'am.

Q. For additional help on this. And also, I just want to say, thank you very much for the way that you run the Government with the beliefs of—your Christian beliefs and not letting others bring you down when you're standing behind on your beliefs. It's very important. All the Christians stand behind you.

The President. Thank you. Yes, ma'am.

Trade/Energy

Q. —be able to tell you from the same point of view that I'm very concerned about the growing fields, the products that are now being sent and brought back from other countries, that we've eroded our own economics in America, that we're too trusting of other countries, instead of being able to build up from within. And it's a very great concern, because we live in this area—being Ruskin—a tomato growing area for the State of Florida—going into other countries, other States than Florida. We've lost our fields. We're losing the orange groves. We're losing so much that this whole country was built on, and we're now relying on beef from Australia. We're relying on produce from South America. We're now looking at China to come in and supplement Hewlett Packard and all these other companies that have now said, "We can't afford to keep the Americans employed." This is a very big concern for me, at my age, let alone for the kids who are coming up behind me.

The President. You know, it's an interesting—that's a very interesting question. She—or statement—there's a lot of people that are concerned about a global world in which there is fierce competition. My attitude about this is that I don't think we ought to fear the competition; I think competition is good and healthy. But I think we ought to be smart about how we deal with it. In other words, one of the options to deal with that global fear is to wall ourselves off; is to say, we're not going to accept products; is to go through protectionism; is to say, we'll put high tariffs on products because we don't want other people selling their product in the American market. That's one way to deal with your concern. And it's—I, frankly, think that would lead to economic problems for the country.

I am, as you know, a person who believes in free trade. I also believe in making sure companies treat us fairly—in other words,

so that we can compete on a level playing field. And so here's some ideas as to how to deal with it. And by the way, yours is not an isolated concern. It's a legitimate question for policymakers—is, how do you deal—how can you assure us that we can continue to be the economic leader of the world with such competition?

Wait, let me finish. Let me finish my answer. And here's some practical things to do. One, make sure our children have got the job skills necessary—the skills necessary to fill the jobs of the 21st century. One of the things that Brother Jeb has done is he's brought strong accountability in the public schools to make sure that there's high standards and people are measured. And when we find failure, you do something about it, so that we're just not shuffling kids through the system.

And I want to extend those high standards and extra help for Title I students who may not be measuring up to standards in math and science. Because I'm going to tell you what's going to happen in a global world, that if we do not educate our children with the skills necessary to fill the jobs of the 21st century—math, science, engineering—jobs that will help lead this country forward—if we don't do that, the jobs are going to go to other countries. The good, high-paying jobs are going to go to other parts of the world.

So step one is education. Step two is to make sure we're always the leader in innovation and research and development. And the way to do that is to spend Federal money, which we're going to do, in the basic sciences, as well as make sure the research and development tax credit which encourages the private sector to invest in research and technology, make sure that's a permanent part of the Tax Code. In other words, make sure America is the leader in innovation. If we're not the leader in innovation, other countries will be the leader of innovation. So there's competition. We can try to wall ourselves off, but it will still be a competitive world.

Thirdly, we got to do something about energy. The gas prices, as you know, are affecting you; they're high. Part of the reason why they're high is because the price of crude oil is high, and part of the reason the price of crude oil is high is because the demand for crude oil has been outstripping supply. And I'm not sure supply will ever catch up with demand in the short term, so one of the things we need to do is to figure out how to drive our cars differently—different fuels like ethanol grown right here in—the core product of which can be grown right here in Florida.

Hybrid automobiles is the second. And we've got incentives in Federal law that provides incentives for people to buy hybrids. Hybrids mean you're running on a combination of electricity and gasoline. And I'll tell you an interesting breakthrough that's about to come, though, because of research as a result of the Federal Government and private sector, is that we're going to have batteries that will be able to last for the first 40 miles when somebody drives. That's good for urban America, for example. A lot of people don't drive 40 miles in a day. It would be pretty good if they could drive those first 40 without using gasoline.

We got to be wise about our energy policy. I happen to believe in nuclear power. I believe in nuclear power—I know nuclear power is renewable, and it protects the environment. We got to make sure we continue to develop technologies that allow us to burn coal in environmentally friendly ways. Solar technology is becoming more advanced, and the Government is helping with the research there.

My point to you is that on the energy front, we've got to be wise if we're going to compete. We got to do something about junk lawsuits that are making it hard here in America not only for the medical profession but for the business sector, if we want to compete. We got to keep taxes low if we want to compete. If we want to compete in the future, we got to do something

about Social Security. Social Security is fine for you. You all are in good shape. It's fine for my generation, but it's not so fine for the people who are going to be trying to pay for my generation. And it's time to put aside all that business—the political business in Washington, DC—and come up with a solution so younger generations of Americans—[*applause*]. My answer to the country is, we shouldn't fear the future; we ought to shape it.

And the alternative is to shut ourselves off, and I think that would be a huge mistake. It's really interesting when you look at the 1920s. During that period of time, the American people became isolated with high protective tariffs, and it eventually was part of the reasons why we had a Great Depression. And I think we always must be mindful of the lessons of history.

Anyway, excellent question. Thanks for giving me a chance—you're not through yet, I take it. [*Laughter*] You want to debate?

Alternative Fuel Sources/Energy

Q. Forty years ago—

The President. Go ahead.

Q. Forty years ago, we had the red flag flying about the oil shortage. We were all told, let's do something. That was 40 years ago. Solar power was supposed to be the future for us. The Government was participating and literally supplying people with the money to put solar power into their homes. It all stopped. Why don't we continue to look at these resources instead of now stopping people because they can't get to their jobs—

The President. No, no, say that again. Look at what now?

Q. Why don't we continue to look at these sources of solar power—

The President. We are.

Q. —these houses around here, literally, if you put up a solar power panel, somebody is coming up to say, "Hey, wait a minute. It's not okay." Down in Fort Myers, they did it 20 years ago, so it has

been accepted, and it's fine. But 40 years ago, we had these red flags flying—

The President. Yes.

Q. —why did we waste 40 years? Now we're scared.

The President. No, I appreciate—I actually am not—I don't think "scared" is the right word to describe how I feel. I feel that we need to rise to the challenge. I'll remind you, in 2001, the price of crude oil was like \$17 a barrel, is one reason why. In other words, it—the low price of crude oil kind of lulled people into a sense that maybe things we're going to—the supply would be greater than demand. But it also made it more difficult for alternatives to compete.

And I'm not sure what you mean, people aren't encouraged to put up solar panels. I think people can put up solar panels if they want to. But the interesting thing about—and we're spending research money on advanced solar technology. In other words, there's not going to be "a" answer for diversifying away from foreign sources of oil. There's going to be a series of answers on a series of fronts that will enable this country to diversify away from oil, and we need to. I completely agree we need to. And the question is, are we spending money at the Federal level to do so? And the answer is, absolutely. Since I've been President, we've spent about \$10 billion on ways to help us diversify away from oil, through research and development.

Yes, sir.

Hurricanes

Q. We put out a patent to control hurricanes, and we sent it to—[*laughter*—Senator Burr, and he thought it was great, and he—

The President. Give him a mike that works, please. [*Laughter*]

Q. We sent it to Senator Burr, and he thought it was great, and he gave it, I understand, to Karl Rove.

The President. What now? I missed your question, sir.

Q. A patent to control hurricanes.

The President. To control hurricanes?

Q. Right.

The President. Where were you last year?

[*Laughter*]

Q. I'm here this year, okay. And Senator Burr thought it was good enough, from North Carolina, and he gave it—I understand it was given to Karl Rove, okay. We want—we tried to get in touch with you, and we hope you get the description of this patent, because we feel sure it's the one thing that can stop hurricanes when they're young and vulnerable, okay. We can get at them, and we're using the coldest thing in the universe to do it. And planes—it's all planned on just how to do it, from MacDill or anywhere. And so we hope you get to read this. I gave it to a guy named Ryan here, that's an associate of yours, and I hope he gives it to you.

The President. Okay, good. What's his name?

Q. My name is Luther Hoffman. We sent you a letter, but I guess it may not have gotten through.

The President. Well, you know—[*laughter*].

Yes, sir.

Gasoline

Q. Yes, sir, can you hear me okay?

The President. Yes, sir.

Q. You mentioned gas prices, and I think everybody understands that this is being driven by economic imperatives. What I don't understand—what seems to violate common sense—is why the oil companies are also reporting record profits. It doesn't seem like people should get rich on somebody else's misery.

The President. Well, my attitude is, is that I believe in the markets; I believe in private enterprise; but I also believe people ought to reinvest. You know, we haven't built a refinery in this country since the early 1970s, not one refinery. And guess what? When you have shortage of supply and demand stays strong, price goes up.

So part of the reasons why we've got high gasoline prices is because the price of crude oil has gone up.

Part of it also is because we're not increasing the supplies of gasoline for the consumers. And so my call to the energy companies is: Reinvest in America; expand refinery capacity; build new ones. Part of the problem, though, is our own fault. We've got a lot of rules and regulations that prevent there to be—that stop people from investing capital in refinery expansion. So one of the things I'm working with Congress is to relax these regulations.

I mean, if we've got a problem, let's address it square on and figure out where the problem is. And there is a bottleneck when it comes to this paperwork. And we've got to be less regulatory in America to increase the supply of gasoline for our people.

We've got another problem, in that in a lot of States, they require different kind of fuel blends, which means that it's hard. When you have to change your gasoline supply on a seasonal basis to have specialized blends, it causes supply disruptions. And disruption in supply causes prices to go up.

And so I don't believe the Federal Government ought to be taking over businesses; I don't believe that. But I do believe that the Federal Government ought to be encouraging people to spend profits here in America, to build pipeline and expand capacity for the sake of consumers.

Yes, ma'am. We're kind of running out of air time, here, because I've got to go to Orlando. Brother, you need to get back to work. They're paying you a lot of money, and you're just sitting there. [*Laughter*]

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge/Oil

Q. First of all, Mr. President, I want you to know that you are in our prayers on a daily basis.

The President. Thank you.

Q. We pray for you and your Cabinet. Secondly of all, I would like to ask one

question about the Alaskan pipeline. My understanding is that most of that supply does not come to the United States, and I would like to know why that goes to other countries rather than to where it's needed here, so that we can——

The President. You mean the crude oil coming down the pipeline?

Q. Yes, sir.

The President. I don't know where it goes, to be honest with you. Sorry. I can find out. [Laughter]

Q. Okay. Could we just divert a little bit of that our direction, please? [Laughter]

The President. I thought you were going to ask, how come we don't have the gas pipeline coming down yet, because there's a lot of untapped oil and gas up there that can be explored in environmentally friendly ways. And I think we ought to be drilling in ANWR—it's called ANWR. I know we can do it and protect the environment at the same time. And I know there's a lot of untapped gas up there that we ought to get down through pipeline as well. I don't know where all the oil goes coming out of the pipeline now. I'll try to find out for you.

Okay, final question. Yes, sir.

Social Security Reform

Q. Morning, Mr. President.

The President. How are you?

Q. I'm a retired New York City fireman.

The President. Yes, sir.

Q. I appreciate the love and affection that you showed New York City after 9/11 on behalf of all them people that passed away at that time——

The President. Yes, thanks.

Q. ——and the 343 firemen, my brother firemen that died there that day. I think you're doing a fantastic job, and we'll always love and respect you.

You said before you'd like a solution for Social Security. I have it right here in my hand, Mr. President.

The President. I'll meet you right there at the corner, and you can hand it to me.

Q. I'd love to. [Laughter]

The President. The hurricane guy can show up here with his answer too. [Laughter]

Q. I wrote a solution to the Social Security reform a year ago. I sent it to every Congressman, every Senator, every newscaster, every station throughout this country. I sent 794 letters out, and I got about 5 replies. I think what's happening with Social Security is a disgrace. It's not going to affect us, like you say, but it's going to affect us because we're the parents of the baby boomers.

The President. That's right.

Q. And we're also the grandparents of the boomers' babies. [Laughter] And we're worried about them.

The President. Yes. I tell you what. I'm fixing to thank everybody and you stand right there.

Q. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. And I'm—I tell you what I'm——

Q. Please give me two minutes with this letter.

The President. I'm going to get the photographer to take a picture of you handing me that letter.

Q. Thank you, sir.

The President. And that way I'll remember who you were when you handed it to me. [Laughter]

Q. I'll always remember you, Mr. President.

The President. Thanks for being a firefighter.

God bless, everybody. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:09 a.m. at the Kings Point Clubhouse. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida, and his wife, Columba; President Oscar Arias Sanchez of Costa Rica; Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan; and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Remarks Following a Visit to a Fire Station in Sun City Center May 9, 2006

The President. Jeb and I just were briefed by the firefighters here about the dry conditions that are creating hazards for the people—and Kelley, I appreciate your briefing. He was in charge of putting out that fire yesterday that consumed 450 acres. They think it was caused by a spark out of one of the utility lines.

I've always been impressed by those who are willing to get out and fight the fires and save lives and save property. I'm surrounded by people who made a career out of that. And I want to thank them for their dedication to service. I want to thank them for the briefing about the threat we find ourselves in; we've got dry and windy conditions.

The good news for the people of Florida is they've got people who are willing to serve and willing to put their lives at risk and willing to fight fires. There's one going on right now, as we speak. Kelley was briefing us on the equipment and manpower that's in place fighting the fire. This is one of these difficult periods for the State of Florida, in dealing with the climatic conditions as they are.

Obviously, the people need to be real careful, they need to be careful about starting fires, they need to be careful about throwing used cigarettes out, and they need to be mindful these are dangerous conditions. And they ought to be thoughtful about how to conduct their lives so they don't put others in the positions where a fire could destroy them or their property.

Do you want to say something, Jeb?

Governor Jeb Bush. Well, other than the fact, as the President said, it's actually right that if someone throws a cigarette out on the Interstate, it could create—first of all, it's a loss of life and property and puts a lot of people at risk. And it's a felony in our State. So we want to make sure that no fires are started because of human error or negligence or malfeasance.

The President. Anyway, I want to thank you all for joining me.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:59 p.m. at Sun City Center Fire Station No. 28. In his remarks, he referred to Vincent Kelley, captain, Hillsborough County Fire Rescue.

Remarks in a Discussion on the Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit in Orlando, Florida May 10, 2006

The President. Please be seated. Thank you. Thanks for letting me come by to say hello. I'm thrilled to be back in the State of Florida. Yesterday I checked in with my brother—[laughter]—to make sure everything is going all right. I'm real proud of Jeb. He's a good, decent man, and I love him dearly.

I also checked in with Laura this morning, to see how she's doing. She sends her

best to all of you all. She's doing just great, by the way.

I'm here to talk about Medicare. We've got an exciting program and an exciting opportunity for people to improve their lives. So this is an educational forum. This is a chance not only to speak to the folks here but to those who may be watching on TV about a really interesting opportunity for the seniors all around our country to