

Remarks in a Discussion on School Safety in Chevy Chase, Maryland
October 10, 2006

The President. Thank you very much. Thank you all for coming. In many ways, I'm sorry we're having this meeting. In other ways, I know how important it is that we're having this meeting. The violence that has been occurring in our schools is incredibly sad, and it troubles a lot of folks, and it troubled me and Laura. And so I asked Margaret and Al to host a gathering of concerned citizens, the purpose of which is to come up with best practices and just shared experiences so that others might know how to react—to prevent and react to inexplicable and—violence that is hard to imagine.

All of us in this country want our classrooms to be gentle places of learning, places where people not only learn the basics—basic skills necessary to become productive citizens but learn to relate to one another. And our parents, I know, want to be able to send their child or children to schools that are safe places. And the violence we've seen, this is upsetting to a lot of people, and I know it's upsetting to the professionals who are with us. But rather than be upset, it's best for all of us who are responsible for helping folks not only cope but to prevent action from taking place. It's best to be proactive. And that's what this meeting is. And so I want to thank you all for joining.

I got a firsthand report on one of the panels from Laura, who said that—I think if I could summarize your words, it was, like, really interesting and very important. And so I thought what I would do is ask Al and Margaret to begin this session and maybe hear from some of the folks here, and then, if time permitting, hear from you all out in the audience.

Again, I want to thank Margaret and Al for setting this up, and really thank you all for coming and taking an interest. I know we got people from all around the

country, and it's—this is a nationwide effort to help people who are responsible protect our children.

Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. Thank you. Mr. President, thank you for asking Margaret and I to host this important conference. We've had some good panel discussions, as you've already heard already. You've met some of the panelists that we've invited back. And just for our audience, again, we've asked Dr. Marleen Wong, Craig Scott, Fred Ellis, and Sheriff Jeff Dawsy to help us speak with the President about this important issue.

[*At this point, Attorney General Gonzales continued his remarks.*]

The President. I like the Secret Service too, Art. [*Laughter*]

[*Art Kelly, former police chief, New Bedford, MA, made brief remarks.*]

The President. Let me ask you a question, Al—not you, Chief, but—well, I can ask you too. I presume out of this there will be a series of best practices that you will share with principals and schools districts that explain, for example, what people could look for to determine whether or not there's an early warning sign, and then how to respond.

Attorney General Gonzales. Exactly.

The President. Okay, good. Thanks, Chief.

[*Attorney General Gonzales made further remarks, and Jeff Dawsy, sheriff, Citrus County, FL, made brief remarks.*]

The President. Is there an opportunity to share, between sheriffs around the country, how they're dealing with this issue? Does it make sense to have the National Sheriffs' Association contact members, ask for stories, practices, and then condense

them and send them back out so that people can—who probably aren't listening to this will be able to——

Sheriff Dawsy. I think it would be a wonderful initiative. One of the things I learned today was not more about questions but more of solutions. There was many different speakers that came up and told us about different resources to use.

The President. Yes, that's my point.

Attorney General Gonzales. Mr. President, I think that Sheriff Dawsy would say that this program helps him to do his job, which means that I'm sure all the sheriffs around the country would like that kind of program as well, to help them do their job.

The President. That's my point. Yes. So who is responsible for talking to the head of the Sheriffs' Association or the police chiefs to make sure that happens?

Audience member. I'm right here, sir, and it will be done.

The President. Thank you, sir. Very good.

[*The discussion continued.*]

The President. Did you say 81 percent of the students were aware of a violent act?

Fred Ellis. Some of the data that I had heard today from the Secret Service and some of their research, that much information was out there.

The President. It seems like a pretty good opportunity to prevent an attack if 81 percent of the—there's an 81-percent awareness of a potential attack, which then, I guess, would lead to making sure principals explain to students: "When you hear something, please tell me."

[*Mr. Ellis, director, Office of Safety & Security, Fairfax County Public Schools, Centreville, VA, made brief remarks, and the discussion continued.*]

The President. Is it typical of a student that expresses a wish to die, makes that clear to his or her peers and to—if people are attuned to what that means, to pay

attention to somebody who exhibits the behavior that says, "I am depressed, and I want to die"? I mean, is it—it's a pretty strong statement.

Marleen Wong. It's a wonderful question, because there are behaviors and there are expressions of hopelessness that come before that. And so I think we have to do a lot of education with just folks who say, you know, "They've changed. They don't have joy in life," and that this is an early warning sign.

The President. But is it easy to define the behavior that would tip off an adult in a school, or some—a coach or an art teacher that this is the kind of behavior that ought to say to us, we better pay attention to this person, this child?

Ms. Wong. Yes. There's a short list, and actually, the student who sat on the previous panel did an excellent job of naming all of those things. I was so proud of her. I thought she ought to come and do some training with our——

The President. And how many educators do you think that can name—good job, by the way—how many adults do you think around the schools in America can name the traits that would say, we better pay attention to this person?

Ms. Wong. Not enough.

The President. And therefore, what can we do to make sure that people understand what to look for? It seems like to me that a lot of our focus ought to be on preventing. And no question, we ought to worry about recovering, but preventing is—makes the recovery not necessary.

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. Chiarasay, you did such a nice job this morning. Why don't you go to the microphone real quick and tell us the nine signs.

The President. Where are you from, Chiarasay?

Chiarasay Perkins. Mr. President, I'm from Walton County, Florida.

The President. Good. I know your Governor. [*Laughter*]

[Ms. Perkins, student, Walton Senior High School, DeFuniak Springs, FL, made brief remarks.]

The President. That's great. Thank you.

Ms. Wong. Thank you.

The President. Let me ask you a question. From your experience, Marleen, if a teacher were to notice those traits, is it typical that someone would act on them? In other words, I'm just trying to make sure I understand. If a student sees—I mean, a teacher sees a student begin to change clothes and begin to—does a principal and a teacher tend to say, “Well, that's really not my business; it's the parents' business?” In other words, awareness requires, by the way, some kind of response.

Ms. Wong. And I think that varies around the country.

The President. Yes, I'm sure it does.

Ms. Wong. I think that more and more people are beginning to pay attention just because we have paid such a dear price for ignoring some of the warning signs.

The President. So maybe an outcome for this is to encourage—for you to get in touch with the principals' organizations or the teachers' organizations and help—

Secretary Spellings. —them be aware of the warning signs.

The President. And then—I guess there's a certain confidence that has to come with interfering—not interfering, but interceding in a child's life. My only question is, is there hesitancy when an adult says, “Well, maybe this is just the way it's supposed to be,” or, “Maybe it's none of my business”? And the question is, if that's the case—if you can determine that's the case, how do you get people to respond differently?

Secretary Spellings. Cathy Paine from Oregon told us about—where they had an incident there, that there were dozens of signs of this particular shooter and that the full picture didn't become clear until after the incident.

The President. Can you—do you mind sharing that? Thanks, Cathy.

[Cathy Paine, special programs administrator, Springfield School District, Springfield, OR, made brief remarks.]

The President. The whole purpose of this exercise is to help educate and, if there needs to be cultural change inside schools, for teachers to become more aware and more active—or principals—is to try to stimulate these kinds of discussions, obviously, outside of Washington, at the local level or State levels, in the hopes of preventing these from happening in the first place.

Thank you for coming to share your experience and appreciate your sharing your expertise.

Secretary Spellings. One of the people who's been doing that in a very meaningful way is Craig Scott, who has talked all over the country to teenagers and teachers and educators and school leaders. And he has a very powerful story, as you know. His sister, Rachel, was murdered in Columbine.

So, Craig, why don't you share your thoughts.

[Craig Scott, former student, Columbine High School, Aurora, CO, made brief remarks.]

The President. Good job. Whew. Which one of us up here can now talk after that? Thank you. Yes, that's great. You are changing our society. You may not realize it, but thank you—powerful statement.

I'd be glad to hear from people in the audience. [Laughter] Yes, I probably won't be able to hear from all of you in the audience.

That was great, Craig. Thank you. Could I have that?

Mr. Scott. Oh, absolutely.

The President. Thank you. Yes, sir.

*Character Education/Community
Involvement in Schools*

Q. Mr. President, I haven't had this feeling since I was 17, and that's the last time that I asked you a question in Herbert, Texas. I've spoken to hundreds of thousands of people since. Last time I was nervous was when I was 17 in Herbert, Texas, and you were campaigning in Herbert, Texas.

The President. Don't tell them I came in second place in a two-man race. [*Laughter*]

Q. My name is Pete Vargas. I'm the national director for Rachel's Challenge, the program—

The President. Oh, fantastic, Pete.

Q. —that Craig just talked about. And I want to echo something that's very dear to my heart and Darrel, his father, who is sitting right here.

The President. Your dad is there? Where is your dad? Excuse me. Okay, thank you. Raised a good man here.

Q. I talk to thousands of educators every month—our team does—thousands. And one of the things that disturbs me is there's hundreds that say, "Pete, you all have changed the culture of our school." But then there's thousands that say, "It's so hard for us to fit our—we want your program so bad, but we have testing and testing and testing and this and that," and it made me think about something, President. It made me think about growing up—I was going the wrong direction completely. I was stealing; I was doing everything possibly wrong—vandalism, beating up kids. And in seventh grade there was a teacher, Mrs. Muldanado, who touched my heart. In 10th grade, there was a lady that you know from Herbert, Texas, that touched my heart. And in ninth grade my tennis coach touched my heart, and those three people changed my life. And as we—why I believe in what I'm doing so much is Darrel's motto is that if we touch the heart of the kid, the head will follow. If we touch their heart, the

head will follow, and the hands will make the difference.

My question to you today is, I don't want us to look at the warning signs; I want us to eliminate the warning signs.

The President. Right, right.

Q. What can we do—what can we do—and this is echoing Darrel and what Craig just said—what can we do from the government's standpoint to go back to touching the heart of the kid, to teaching character education? Because we hear that all the time about the testing.

The President. I agree. Pete, let me say—first on the tests. Thanks for coming. It's good to see you again. I was probably more nervous than you were when you asked the question. [*Laughter*]

Q. You look the same. [*Laughter*]

The President. I like selected memory. [*Laughter*]

First, in terms of testing, I don't think it's zero sum. I think you can make sure a child learns, and I think you can instill character at the same time. I don't think you have to choose. As a matter of fact, I know we can't say that one doesn't beget the other. I happen to believe that self-esteem comes when a child realizes he or she can read early, at grade level. And I think one of the real problems—[*applause*]*—I think one of the real problems we have, Pete, is a school system across the country that basically gives up on children because we don't measure to determine whether or not they have the skills necessary to read, for example.*

And so I'm concerned about a system that socially promotes children, because I think that at some point in time, that begins to affect a child's vision of the future, and a grim vision of the future may be that which triggers a response that is negative.

Character education is—I know we funded quite a bit of it when I was the Governor of Texas. Let me put the funding issue right on the table. The Federal Government is a limited funder of education,

and I happen to believe that's the way it should be. I don't think it's possible for the people to have expectations that the Government should fund public schools. This is a local responsibility. It's been that way throughout our history. I think it makes sense to do so because it tends to make control of our schools more localized, which I happen to think is the best way to achieve excellence.

And so therefore, not to try to pass responsibilities—although we do have character education grants out of Washington, and we've got school safety grants out of Washington. But the best place to facilitate that kind of initiative, to make sure that character is taught in schools, is at the State level.

Secondly, it's really important, Pete, that people not think government is a loving entity. Government is law and justice. Love comes from the hearts of people that are able to impart love. And therefore, what Craig is doing is—he doesn't realize it—he's a social entrepreneur. He is inspiring others to continue to reach out to say to somebody who is lonely, "I love you." And I'm afraid this requires a higher power than the Federal Government to cause somebody to love somebody. And therefore, it's a—[*applause*]—and therefore, one of the things we can do, though, is to call upon people—we've got the USA Freedom Corps Initiative, for example, that calls on volunteers to take active participation in their communities.

You know, Craig said something interesting. I believe societies change one heart at a time. I don't mean to mimic what you said, but I was actually praising what you said, because that's how it works. And the truth of the matter is, if we really think about it, the primary responsibility, the primary teacher of character is the parent. That is the frontline of enabling our society to be a compassionate, decent place. You wouldn't be sitting here if your mother and father hadn't instilled in you a—something inside your soul that caused you to sit here

in front of the President of the United States and give an unbelievably eloquent testimony about compassion.

And the second line of defense in schools is, obviously, teachers. And the hope is, is that out of this violence and terror comes this notion that teachers have got to be—and by the way, the teachers have got an unbelievably hard job—to not only teach but to show concern and compassion. They've got their own lives to live. They've got their own families to raise many times, and now they've got to deal with yet another family situation, Pete. But yet, nevertheless, that is where the compassion—you notice, you didn't say, "I went to a program." You named three individuals that were heroic in your lives. And that's the way it works.

Now, teaching character matters—no question about it—and there's some great curriculum to do it. But the truth of the matter is, all this need to say, "I love you," comes from your soul. And so hopefully, out of these tragedies will come the sense of communal obligation all throughout our country, for people to take an extra effort to comfort the lonely. That could be a student or a teacher—Pete, in your case, a tennis coach. Still got a backhand? Anyway, thank you, buddy. It's good to see you again.

Yes, ma'am. Oh, yes, sir.

Voluntarism

Q. My name is John Kavelin. Up until yesterday, I was a Walt Disney Imagineer for 16 years, but I have quit that activity to commit myself for the rest of my life to a character education program that my sister, her husband, and I created 15 years ago, on a little island in the Pacific Northwest, called The Virtues Project. And it is exactly what I think many people are looking for because it reaches the heart. It is a multifaith, multicultural effort to simply teach five strategies that help people practice virtues in everyday life.

What we've learned in 85 countries where this is applied is that values are culture specific; virtues are universal to every sacred tradition. So simply practicing virtues in the home, in the school, in the workplace makes a shift in the culture.

And I am offering my love and my admiration for so many good-willed people in this room for bringing this group of people together. It's so exciting. And we're simply here to support whatever is going on.

The President. Yes, thanks for doing what you're doing. See, this is a—our country is blessed by the fact that we have people who stand up and say, "I want to contribute," like you. Just retired yesterday? You don't look a day over 60. Anyway—[laughter].

But see, Craig, what you're doing and what this gentleman is doing will stimulate a lot of—as you said, you've talked to a million kids, or a million people—same with you, sir. I believe that there is no single answer, no single program. It's a mosaic of programs all stimulated because people have decided to do something about the problem. And it's really the uniqueness of the country.

I like to remind our fellow citizens that de Tocqueville recognized this in 1832, the fact that voluntary organizations came together to help solve local problems. And it is—in my judgment, it is this capacity of citizens to take action to solve problems that defines the true greatness of America.

And, Pete, to answer your question about government: Government's role, in many ways, is to stimulate and to encourage and to thank people who have taken it upon themselves to either start character education or go into classrooms and to change society one person at a time.

Yes, sir.

Parent and Community Involvement in Schools

Q. Mr. President, my name is Marvin Nash. I represent the Bullying Hurts Program and the NASH Foundation, which

stands for "No Adolescent Should Hurt," from Cheyenne, Wyoming. I want to let you know that I will be traveling back to Nashville, Tennessee, where Storme Warren, with Great American Country, and Charlie Daniels will be helping me make PSAs to address this issue. Instead of talking about my program though, I want to give my time up to this lady right here. She spent seven—she spent her time with 17 students locked in a closet at Columbine, and she has a question for you. So we're not going to talk about me; we're going to talk about her.

The President. Thank you, buddy. Nice-looking hat.

Q. Mr. President, Madam Secretary of Education, Marleen, Craig, and everybody else, my name is—[inaudible]—and I'm just a regular person. I don't have a radio talk show. [Laughter] And I don't—I'm not in charge of a big, major organization. I am a flight attendant for Frontier Airlines, and I'm shaking right now because I didn't think I was going to get up here. And I'm also a proud, retired teacher from Columbine High School.

And I think everything I was going to say just kind of flew out of my mind. I'm also a professional volunteer, and I am not here to ask for money for any program. When I said "professional volunteer," I don't mean I make money volunteering, but there are a whole group of just regular people like me out there. Even though I retired from Columbine, I have a daughter at Columbine right now who is a junior. I volunteer in the postgrad center there. I volunteer with the cheer squad, the football team, and it doesn't always take a lot of money to get things done. It's little people like me—I don't mean in size. I mean, it's little people like me who get there, little people like us. Like Grand Daddy Wong used to say, "Okay, one stick—you break it one at a time," but if we stick together, we can get it done.

I'm just saying, unless us volunteers—I always have time to volunteer, and I know

other people do too. And it's what Craig was saying, it comes from the heart. President Bush, it's what you were saying. It's what our parents taught us, and it's what we need to teach our kids. It's that—I hope I don't pronounce it wrong—generativity, where we help to make the next generation better. So I'm sorry I forgot what my question was. [Laughter]

The President. What matters is your testimony, not your question. Thank you.

Last question, and I've got to go. Gonzales is also reminding me; actually I'm on a schedule here. I apologize. I'd like to sit here all day listening, and I am inspired that so many came to talk about this subject.

Yes, ma'am.

Character Education in State Curricula

Q. Good afternoon, Mr. President, Madam Secretary. My name is—[inaudible]—and I'm a youth programs director in New York City for a nonprofit called Art of Living Foundation. And like a lot of these wonderful people here, we teach a program in human values and stress management for teenagers and how to handle their negative emotions—which they just don't learn, I'm finding, nowadays. And what I have students constantly asking me is, "Can't this be a class in our school? Can we learn human values and universal ethics that are found in every culture?" But they're not being taught—a lot of times not at home—they're not being taught. And they're definitely not always being taught in schools. There's some amazing public school teachers, but there's also some very stressed-out public school teachers.

The President. Absolutely.

Q. Can this be—is there a way to have a class in public school where students learn stress management, the ability to deal with their own anger, frustration, and violent tendencies, and also to learn human values and actually practice them? Can they receive credit for a class like this? This is what students are asking, and I have

superintendents coming to me saying, "What can you do?"—in our suspension centers—"We'll give credit to students for doing this." Is there a way we can do that?

Secretary Spellings. Well, those are State curriculum issues, and lots of States have included character education or programs like that as part of their required curriculum and give credit for it. But I would commend all those superintendents to their State board of education and put them to work. We had some of that in Texas and gave a lot of credit for peer mentoring and those sorts of things that are so supportive of kids.

The President. I am sorry for those of you standing in line. I know; I apologize.

Q. Time for one more?

The President. Okay, one final guy—go ahead. [Laughter]

Voluntarism

Q. I wanted to explain why I had on a bright red jacket.

The President. Yes, that's why. [Laughter]

Q. I appreciate it.

The President. Thank you for coming.

Q. My name is Michael Wade Smith, and I'm the national president for Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America. We are an in-school, high school, and middle school organization focusing on the family. Our main mission is to promote family as the basic unit of society.

And I'm happy I got to follow up after your question because we are—family consumer sciences—its curriculum in high schools and middle schools is teaching character education, that is teaching youth violence prevention. We're teaching career exploration. Because of our title, Family and Consumer Sciences and Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America, we address every one of the issues that's been presented in the discussions and in this room. And we are willing and wanting to partner with every single person in here to help students get this message out to students. We're about peer-to-peer message

sharing. We want each and every student in our organization, which reaches about a quarter of a million students, to be a lot broader than that. We want to touch every student in America through our programs and through our mission to promote family as the basic unit of society and the values thereof.

So I thank you, Mr. President, Mrs. Bush—

The President. Why the red coat? [Laughter] Just so you got called on? I mean, is there a—[laughter].

Q. I just wanted that. No, our colors in the organization are red and white.

The President. Fabulous.

Q. So all of the officers wear our red jackets.

The President. I, once again, apologize. I've got to get on an airplane. But I do want to thank you all for coming. I hope you have found this interesting. I am a results-oriented person, and I expect from Margaret and Al to make sure that out of all this effort comes some concrete ac-

tion to help people understand what is possible, what is doable, the programs that are working. And the head of the sheriff's department readily sprung to his feet to say, "You can count on me."

The purpose has got to be more than just hoping somebody is listening to TV. The purpose has got to be—out of this—that we share information so that we can save lives, encourage parents, and help people respond.

And I want to thank you all very much for coming. I'm proud you're here. God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:24 p.m. at the National 4-H Conference Center. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida. Participating in the event was Marleen Wong, director, Crisis Counseling and Intervention Services, Los Angeles Unified School District, and director, Trauma Services Adaptation Center for Schools and Communities, Los Angeles, CA.

Remarks at a Reception for Congressional Candidate Michael A. "Mac" Collins in Macon, Georgia

October 10, 2006

Thanks for coming. It's good to be in Macon. Thanks for coming out. One thing about old Mac is, you know where he stands. That's the kind of Congressman you need from this part of the world, and that's the kind of Congressman we need in Washington, DC, straightforward thinker, bringing common sense to the Nation's Capital.

I'm proud to stand here with Mac Collins. I know him well. I've worked with him; I've listened carefully to his ideas. No doubt in my mind he's the best person to represent the Eighth Congressional District from the State of Georgia.

I'm also for him because he married well. Of course, that's why he invited me,

because I married well. [Laughter] And I want you to know, Julie and Mac, that Laura sends her very best to you both. I know she was your first choice for this fundraiser. [Laughter] She's got to be the most patient woman in America. I know we've got some Texans here, and they went to the same college as Laura did. And when she went there, she, frankly, wasn't interested in politics and, I think, didn't care for politicians. [Laughter] Now here she is as the Nation's First Lady, and I firmly believe this country is better off with Laura as the First Lady.