

Remarks During a Briefing on Immigration Reform June 26, 2007

Thank you all. Please be seated. Thanks for coming. Thanks for working on an immigration bill that's important for this country. I appreciate your efforts, and I appreciate your time.

I do want to thank Secretary Gutierrez and Secretary Chertoff for their hard work. One of the things I told Members of the Senate was that the administration is going to be involved in crafting a comprehensive bill that's good for the country. And I said, we're going to be more than just giving speeches or using the microphone to proclaim the need for a comprehensive bill. I would send two members plus our staff up to—two members of my Cabinet plus our staff up to work the—to work with the Senators.

And you guys have done a really good job. Thank you for your time. Thanks for your understanding of the complex, carefully crafted piece of legislation that is moving through the Senate. And I—you've done exactly what I asked you to do; that's why you're in the Cabinet. [*Laughter*] I appreciate you all helping work this bill through the Senate.

The first thing that we've got to recognize in the country is that the system isn't working. The immigration system needs reform. The status quo is unacceptable. Most Americans understand that. They say, "Well, we attempted to reform the system in 1986, and the reform didn't work." Our view is, if the status quo is unacceptable, we need to replace it with something that is acceptable, and have been working toward that end with both Democrats and Republicans in the Senate. The reason on the Senate, of course, is that we'll be moving our attention to the House when the Senate passes a comprehensive piece of legislation.

The—I view this as an historic opportunity for Congress to act, for Congress

to replace a system that is not working with one that we believe will work a lot better. In other words, this is a moment for people who have been elected to come together, focus on a problem, and show the American people that we can work together to fix the problem. If you dislike the status quo on immigration, then you ought to be supporting a comprehensive approach to making sure the system works.

And it's a practical approach. The Senate has worked very hard to craft a comprehensive bill. In a good piece of legislation like this—in a difficult piece of legislation like this, you—one side doesn't get everything they want. It's a careful compromise, and many of you have been involved with that compromise.

The problem that this bill recognizes—the bill recognizes that we got to address the problem in a comprehensive fashion. There are people who say, "Well, we've got to do more to protect our border." And they're right, we do have to do more to protect our border. And that's why this bill has a lot of border security measures that will help continue the strategy that we have been implementing over the past year. As a matter of fact, there's a \$4.4 billion direct deposit on enforcement measures. But it's important for our fellow citizens to understand that in order to enforce the border, there has to be a way for people to come to our country on a temporary basis to do work Americans aren't doing. Otherwise, they will continue to try to sneak in across the border.

And therefore, a second aspect of the comprehensive bill is one that addresses the economic needs of our country, and that is a temporary-worker program that will match foreign workers with jobs Americans aren't doing—and notice I say, "temporary-worker program." There are a lot of employers here in this country that worry

about having a workforce that will be able to meet the demands and needs of a growing economy.

There are people who live in our neighborhood and around the world who are desperate to provide food for their families and recognize there are available jobs. And they will do anything to come to our country to work because they want to fight off the poverty and starvation that has affected their loved ones.

It's a powerful incentive to be a mom or a dad to make sure your children don't suffer. That's an incentive. That's an incentive for people here in America; it also happens to be an incentive for people around the world. And therefore, people will be willing to go to extra lengths to avoid border security. They'll be willing to be crammed in the bottom of 18-wheelers. They fall prey to these *coyotes* who smuggle human beings to achieve profit.

When I say the system hadn't worked, the system hadn't worked to enforce our borders like we want. But the system was—also fostered illegal operations that prey upon the human being, and it's not in this Nation's interest that that continue to happen.

And finally, this bill goes to the heart of our values. We have proven that our Nation is capable of assimilating people. And I'm confident that we can continue to be a nation that assimilates. The bill recognizes that English is a part of the assimilation process and wants to help people learn the language in order to be able to take advantage of America.

You know, I've heard all the rhetoric—you've heard it too—about how this is amnesty. Amnesty means that you've got to [you don't have to]* pay a price for having been here illegally, and this bill does [doesn't do]* that. But it also recognizes it's in our Nation's interest to bring people out of the shadows, that there's got to be

a way forward that recognizes there is a penalty for being here illegally, on the other hand, that recognizes that each person has got worth and dignity.

I love a country where people come with dreams and aspirations and through hard work can realize those dreams and aspirations. I'm struck every time I hear—I'm struck about our greatness every time I hear a story about a child taking advantage of a mother's or dad's hard work to realize the blessings of America. I was at the Coast Guard Academy—I've told this story several times—and the number-one cadet talked about his migrant grandfather. This fellow was a Mexican American—or is a Mexican American. The father came from—the grandfather came from Mexico to work hard so that, hopefully, someday, somebody in his family would realize the blessings of America. And it worked.

The country is better off, our soul is constantly renewed, our spirit is invigorated, when people come here and realize the blessings of America. And so the bill that we've worked hard to craft is an important piece of legislation that addresses the needs of a failed system, that says, we're going to change for the better.

I want to thank you all for working hard. We've got a couple of days of hard work ahead of us to get the bill through the first stage of the process, and then, of course, when successful in the Senate, we'll be reconvening to figure out how to get the bill out of the House. It's an important piece of legislation. It's an important time to act for the sake of the country.

Thanks for your time. God bless your efforts. God bless our country. Thank you. Thank you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:01 a.m. in Room 350 of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Ens. Marc A. Mares, USCG.

* White House correction.

Remarks at a Rededication Ceremony at the Islamic Center of Washington June 27, 2007

The President. Imam, thank you very much. Thank you for inviting me. I bring my personal respect to you, sir.

Imam Abdullah Khouj. Thank you, sir.

The President. And I appreciate your friendship. I too want to thank the governors of the Islamic Center. I welcome the Ambassadors. Thank you all for coming. I appreciate other distinguished guests who are here. It is an honor to join you at this rededication ceremony.

As the Imam mentioned, half a century has passed since one of our great leaders welcomed the Islamic Center into our Nation's family of faith. Dedicating this site, President Dwight D. Eisenhower offered America's hand in friendship to Muslims around the world. He asked that together we commit ourselves "to peaceful progress of all men under one God."

Today we gather with friendship and respect to reaffirm that pledge and to renew our determination to stand together in the pursuit of freedom and peace. We come to express our appreciation for a faith that has enriched civilization for centuries. We come in celebration of America's diversity of faith and our unity as free people. And we hold in our hearts the ancient wisdom of the great Muslim poet, Rumi: "The lamps are different, but the light is the same."

Moments like this dedication help clarify who Americans are as a people and what we wish for the world. We live in a time when there are questions about America and her intentions. For those who seek a true understanding of our country, they need to look no farther than here. This Muslim center sits quietly down the road from a synagogue, a Lutheran church, a Catholic parish, a Greek Orthodox chapel, a Buddhist temple, each with faithful followers who practice their deeply held beliefs and live side by side in peace.

This is what freedom offers: societies where people can live and worship as they choose without intimidation, without suspicion, without a knock on the door from the secret police. The freedom of religion is the very first protection offered in America's Bill of Rights. It is a precious freedom. It is a basic compact under which people of faith agree not to impose their spiritual vision on others and, in return, to practice their own beliefs as they see fit. This is the promise of our Constitution and the calling of our conscience and a source of our strength.

The freedom to worship is so central to America's character that we tend to take it personally when that freedom is denied to others. Our country was a leading voice on behalf of the Jewish refuseniks in the Soviet Union. Americans joined in common cause with Catholics and Protestants who prayed in secret behind an Iron Curtain. America has stood with Muslims seeking to freely practice their beliefs in places such as Burma and China.

To underscore America's respect for the Muslim faith here at home, I came to this center 6 days after the 9/11 attacks to denounce incidents of prejudice against Muslim Americans. Today I am announcing a new initiative that will improve mutual understanding and cooperation between America and people in predominately Muslim countries.

I will appoint a special envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference. This is the first time a President has made such an appointment to the OIC. Our special envoy will listen to and learn from representatives from Muslim states and will share with them America's views and values. This is an opportunity for Americans to demonstrate to Muslim communities our interest in respectful dialog and continued friendship.