

Remarks Following a Meeting With the House Republican Conference May 7, 2008

I'm pleased to be joined by the Republican House leadership. These are dear friends of mine who are committed to doing what's right for the country.

I just met with the Republican caucus, the House, and I want to share some thoughts with you. First of all, we are committed to a good housing bill that will help folks stay in their house, as opposed to a housing bill that will reward speculators and lenders. There's a House alternative that will do the right thing for the American people when it comes to housing.

I will veto the bill that's moving through the House today if it makes it to my desk. And I urge Members on both sides of the aisle to focus on a good piece of legislation that is being sponsored by Republican Members.

Secondly, we talked about gasoline prices. No doubt about it, we're deeply concerned about the high price of gasoline, which means that the United States Congress should not pass legislation that makes it harder to increase the supply of crude oil as well as increase the supply of gasoline. What they should do is allow for the construction of refinery and for environmentally friendly domestic exploration.

And if—the truth of the matter is—Congress were that concerned about the consumers, they ought to make sure that they make the tax relief we passed a permanent part of the Tax Code.

We talked about the supplemental that's moving. I told the Members I support \$108 billion supplemental without any strings and that we're going to work toward that goal.

I talked about the Colombia free trade agreement. The Speaker stopped the bill from moving. All we ask is that it be given an up-or-down vote. The bill is in our economic interests. If you're worried about the economy, then you got to recognize that

opening markets for U.S. goods and services will help strengthen the economy. And if you're worried about the security in our neighborhood, turning our back on a strongly like President Uribe will be—is bad national security policy. And the Speaker has got to let this bill come to the floor for an up-or-down vote.

And finally, we talked about FISA. That's the ability for our intelligence folks and folks on the frontline of protecting America to have the tools necessary to stop Al Qaida from attacking us. And the fact that the Democrat leadership refuses to let this vote come to the floor is bad for our national security. This vote will pass—this bill would pass. It has passed the Senate, will pass the House, thanks to the leadership of the Members up here as well as discerning Democrats. And yet the leadership refuses to let it come up. And the country is at greater risk as a result of not having a modernized FISA bill.

And so those are the issues we discussed. It's a positive agenda. It's an agenda that speaks to the economic interests of the people. It's an agenda that speaks to the national security interests of the people. And it's agenda that recognizes that we can find the wisdom of the American people in their souls, in their hearts. We listen carefully to what they think, and we respond in a way that meets their needs.

And so thank you all for coming. Proud to work with you, and enjoyed visiting today. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:06 a.m. on the North Portico at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Alvaro Uribe Velez of Colombia.

Remarks to the Council of the Americas May 7, 2008

Thank you all. Please be seated. Bill, thank you for the kind introduction. Thanks for giving me a chance to come by and see that the Secretary of State's dining room is a lot better than the President's dining room. [Laughter] I'm honored to be here. I'm pleased to be with the Council of Americas again. I appreciate what you do to promote personal and economic freedom throughout the region, throughout the Americas. I appreciate your strong concern about the need for liberty to be spread, liberty in forms of government and liberty in forms of economies.

I am honored to be here with the Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, better known in the neighborhood as *Senorita Arroz*. [Laughter] I'm pleased to be with Carlos Gutierrez, the Secretary of Commerce, Susan Schwab, the U.S. Trade Representative. I'm thrilled to be here with Susan Segal, the president and CEO of the Council of Americas; a dear family friend, former member of the Cabinet of—in 41, Robert Mosbacher; Mack McLarty as well—people who care a lot about the region. Thank you for joining us here. I'm also pleased to be here with Ministers, representatives, Ambassadors from the Governments of Canada, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. Honored you all are here.

The foundation of a good foreign policy is good relations with your neighbors. A peaceful and secure neighborhood is in the interest of the United States of America. And so I want to talk to you about the hemisphere we share, the challenges we face, and the aggressive work that the United States is doing to help make the Americas a place of hope and liberty.

In recent decades, there have been positive developments in Latin America. Countries have moved away from an era of dictatorships, era of civil strife. Unfortunately, today, some countries in the region are see-

ing a resurgence of radicalism and instability. And one nation in the region remains mired in the tyranny of a bygone era, and that is Cuba.

Yesterday I had a fascinating opportunity to speak with a leading Cuban dissident, a former political prisoner, and a wife of a man who is held in a Cuban prison simply because he expressed his belief that all people should live in a free society. Video conferencing is one of the great wonders of the 21st century. And to be able to sit in the White House and talk to these three brave souls in Havana was an inspiring moment for me. It reminded me about how much work the United States has to do to help the people in Cuba realize the blessings of liberty.

It also reminded me of a couple of things: One, that there's an eternal truth when it comes to freedom; that there is an Almighty, and a gift of that Almighty to every man, woman, and child, whether they be American, *Cubano*, or anywhere else, is freedom; and that it's going to take the courage and determination of individuals such as the three I met with to help inspire the island to embrace freedom.

The Cuban Government recently announced a change at the top. Some in the world marveled that perhaps change is on its way. That's not how I view it. Until there's a change of heart and a change of compassion and a change of how the Cuban Government treats its people, there's no change at all. The regime has made empty gestures at reform, but Cuba is still ruled by the same group that has oppressed the Cuban people for almost half a century. Cuba will not be a land of liberty so long as free expression is punished and free speech can take place only in hushed whispers and silent prayers. And Cuba will not become a place of prosperity just by