

Remarks at the Betty Ann Ong Chinese Recreation Center in San Francisco, California

November 25, 2013

The President. Hello, everybody! Well, hello, San Francisco! It is great to be back in California. It is great to be with all of you. I love San Francisco. You've got great food. You've got great people, beautiful scenery, no more super villains because "Batkid" cleaned up the streets. Love "Batkid." [*Laughter*]

I want to start by thanking Geetha for the wonderful introduction and the great work that she's doing. Give her a big round of applause. I want to thank your Mayor, Ed Lee. Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom. I want to recognize some wonderful Members of Congress who are fighting every day for the people of California: Mike Honda, Eric Swalwell, Judy Chu. They are all doing great work every single day.

We have a special guest, Janet Napolitano, who is now overseeing the entire UC system and going to be doing a great job. We miss her back in Washington, but she is going to be outstanding leading the University of California.

Now, before I begin, I want to say a few words about the news from the weekend. I'm here to talk about immigration reform, but I'm also here in my capacity as Commander in Chief, and this weekend, together with our allies and our partners, the United States reached an agreement with Iran on a first step towards resolving our concerns over its nuclear program.

Now, some of you may recall that when I first ran for President, I said it was time for a new era of American leadership in the world, one that turned the page on a decade of war and began a new era of our engagement with the world. And as President and as Commander in Chief, I've done what I said. We ended the war in Iraq; we brought our troops home. Usama bin Laden met justice; the war in Afghanistan will end next year.

And as the strongest, most powerful nation on the face of the Earth, we've engaged in clear-eyed and principled diplomacy—even with our adversaries—in order to begin to destroy Syria's chemical weapons and to place the

first real constraints in a decade on Iran's nuclear program. Because I firmly believe in what President Kennedy once said. He said, "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate." I believe that. And this diplomacy, backed by the unprecedented sanctions we brought on Iran, has brought us the progress that was achieved this weekend.

For the first time in a decade, we've halted the progress on Iran's nuclear program. Key parts of the program will be rolled back. International inspectors will have unprecedented access to Iran's nuclear-related facilities. So this will help Iran from building a nuclear weapon. And over the coming months, we're going to continue our diplomacy, with the goal of achieving a comprehensive solution that deals with the threat of Iran's nuclear program once and for all.

And if Iran seizes this opportunity and chooses to join the global community, then we can begin to chip away at the mistrust that's existed for many, many years between our two nations. None of that is going to be easy. Huge challenges remain. But we cannot close the door on diplomacy. And we cannot rule out peaceful solutions to the world's problems. We cannot commit ourselves to an endless cycle of conflict. And tough talk and bluster may be the easy thing to do politically, but it's not the right thing for our security. [*Applause*] It is not the right thing for our security.

Now, this progress, and the potential it offers, reminds us of what is possible when the United States has the courage to lead, not just with the force of arms, but with the strength of our diplomacy and our commitment to peace. That's what keeps us strong. That's what makes us a beacon to the world. That's how I'll continue to lead so long as I'm President of the United States.

And that spirit—not just what we can criticize or tear down or be against, but what we can build together—that's what brings me here today. Because it's long past time to fix our

broken immigration system. We need to make sure Washington finishes what so many Americans just like you started. We've got to finish the job.

And it's fitting that we're here in Chinatown, just a few miles away from Angel Island. In the early 1900s, about 300,000 people—maybe some of your ancestors—passed through on their way to a new life in America. And for many, it represented the end of a long and arduous journey; they'd finally arrived in a place where, they believed, anything was possible.

And for some, it also represented the beginning of a new struggle against prejudice in a country that didn't always treat its immigrants fairly or afford them the same rights as everybody else. Obviously, Asians faced this, but so did the Irish, so did Italians, so did Jews. And many groups still do today.

That didn't stop those brave men and women from coming. They were drawn by a belief in the power of opportunity, in a belief that says, maybe I never had a chance at a good education, but this is a place where my daughter can go to college. Maybe I started out washing dishes, but this is a place where my son can become mayor of San Francisco. Maybe I have to make sacrifices today, but those sacrifices are worth it if it means a better life for my family.

And that's a family story that will be shared by millions of Americans around the table on Thursday. It's the story that drew my great-great-great-great-grandfather from a small village in Ireland and drew my father from a small village in Kenya. It's the story that drew so many of your ancestors here: that America is a place where you can make it if you try.

And here's something interesting: Today, more than one in four residents born outside the United States came here from Asian countries, many through our family immigration system. They're doctors, business owners, laborers, refugees. This rec center's namesake, Betty Ong, was a hero on 9/11. But she was also the daughter of immigrants who grew up not far from here. And we're honored to have her family with us here today.

But too often, when we talk about immigration, the debate focuses on our southern bor-

der. The fact is, we're blessed with immigrants from all over the world who've put down roots in every corner of this country. Here in San Francisco, 35 percent of business owners are immigrants, and your economy is among the fastest growing in the country. That's not an accident. That's the impact that our talented, hard-working immigrants can have. That's the difference they can make. They're hungry, and they're striving, and they're working hard, and they're creating things that weren't there before.

And that's why it is long past time to reform an immigration system that right now doesn't serve America as well as it should. We could be doing so much more to unleash our potential if we just fix this aspect of our system.

And I know out here in California that you watch the news and you share the country's not very sunny view of Washington these days. For the last few months, you've seen a lot of headlines about gridlock and partisan bickering, and too often one faction of one party in one House of Congress has chosen courses of action that ended up harming our businesses or our economy or our workers. Or they want to refight old political battles rather than create jobs and grow the economy and strengthen the middle class or take 40 more votes to undermine or repeal the Affordable Care Act—[laughter]—instead of passing a single serious jobs bill, despite the fact that Americans want us to focus on jobs and business and growth. And by the way, thousands of Californians are signing up every day for new health care plans all across this State.

So even as we're getting this darn website up to speed—[laughter]—and it's getting better—States like California are proving the law works. People want the financial security of health insurance. And even if you're already insured, reach out to a friend or neighbor who's not and help them get covered.

But when it comes to immigration reform, we have to have the confidence to believe we can get this done. And we should get it done. And by the way, most Americans agree. The only thing standing in our way right now is the

unwillingness of certain Republicans in Congress to catch up with the rest of the country.

Now, I met the other day with the CEOs of some of America's business—biggest companies. And I'm positive, not all of them voted for me. [*Laughter*] I'm pretty sure. Maybe some of them, but definitely not all of them. But the thing they wanted to talk about, their top priority was the fact that we invite the brightest minds from around the world to study here—many of them enrolled in the University of California system—and then we don't invite them to stay. We end up sending them home to create new jobs and start new businesses someplace else. So we're training our own competition, rather than invite those incredibly talented young people, like Geetha, to stay here and start businesses and create jobs here.

I hear from folks who have been separated from their families for years because of green card backlogs, desperately want their loved ones to be able to join them here in America. I hear from young DREAMers who are Americans through and through in every way but on paper, and they just want a chance to study and serve and contribute to the Nation that they love.

I talk to business owners who play by the rules, but get frustrated because they end up being undercut by those who exploit workers in a shadow economy: aren't getting paid overtime; aren't required to meet the same obligations. And so those companies end up losing out on business.

Right now I'm seeing brave advocates who have been fasting for 2 weeks in the shadow of the Capitol, sacrificing themselves in an effort to get Congress to act. And I want to say to Eliseo Medina, my friend from SEIU, and the other fasters who are there as we speak, I want them to know, we hear you. We're with you. The whole country hears you.

And there are plenty of leaders—Democrat and Republican—who don't think it's fair that we've got 11 million people in this country, including more than a million from Asia, with no real way to come forward and get on the right side of the law. It's not smart. It's not fair. It doesn't make sense. And we have kicked this

particular can down the road long enough. Everybody knows it.

Now, the good news is, we know what the solutions are. There is bipartisan hope of getting it done. This year, the Senate passed an immigration reform bill by a wide, bipartisan majority, and it addresses the key issues that need to be addressed. It would strengthen our borders. It would level the playing field by holding employers accountable if they knowingly hire undocumented workers. It would modernize our legal immigration system so that we eliminate the backlog of family visas and make it easier to attract highly skilled entrepreneurs from beyond our borders. It would make sure that everybody plays by the same rules by providing a pathway to earned citizenship for those who are living in the shadows, a path that includes passing a background check and learning English and paying taxes and a penalty and getting in line behind everyone trying to come here the right way.

And each of these pieces would go a long way towards fixing our broken immigration system. Each of them has been supported by Democrats and Republicans in the past. There's no reason we can't come together and get it done.

And what's more, we know the immigration reform that we're proposing would boost our economy and shrink our deficits. Independent economists have said that if the Senate bill became law, over the next two decades, our economy would grow by \$1.4 trillion more, and it would reduce our deficits by \$850 billion more.

And you don't have to be an economist to figure out that workers will be more productive if they've got their families here with them, they're not worried about deportation, they're not living halfway around the world. This isn't just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do.

Of course, just because something is smart, fair, good for the economy, and supported by business, labor, law enforcement, and faith leaders—[*laughter*]—Democratic and Republican Governors, including the Governor of this State—just because all that is in place doesn't mean we'll actually get it done, because this is

Washington, after all, that we're talking about and everything is looked through a political prism. And look, let's be honest, some folks automatically think, well, if Obama's for it, then I've got to be against it even if I was—before that, I was for it.

But I want to remind everybody, to his great credit, my Republican predecessor, President Bush, was for reform. He proposed reform like this almost a decade ago. I was in the Senate. I joined 23 Senate Republicans back then supporting reform. It's worth remembering that the Senate bill that just passed won more than a dozen Republican votes this past summer. And some of them even forget that I'm—sometimes, people forget, I'm not running for office again. Michelle doesn't forget. [Laughter] So you don't have to worry about this somehow being good for me. This is good for the country. It's the right thing to do for the American people.

And I believe, ultimately—not always in the short term—but ultimately, good policy is good politics. Look at the polls right now, because the American people support immigration reform by a clear majority. Everybody wins if we get this done. So there's no reason we shouldn't get immigration reform done right now. None. If there is a good reason, I haven't heard it.

And by the way, if there's a better plan out there than the one that Democrats and Republicans have already advanced together, if there are additional ideas that would make it even better, I'm always willing to listen to new ideas. My door is always open. But right now it's up to Republicans in the House to decide if we can move forward as a country on this bill. If they don't want to see it happen, they've got to explain why.

The good news is, just this past week, Speaker Boehner said that he is “hopeful we can make progress” on immigration reform. And that is good news. I believe the Speaker is sincere. I think he genuinely wants to get it done. And that's something we should be thankful for this week. And I think there are a number of other House Republicans who also want to get this done. Some of them are hesitant to do

it in one big bill, like the Senate did. That's okay. They can—it's Thanksgiving; we can carve that bird into multiple pieces. [Laughter] A drumstick here—[laughter]—breast meat there. But as long as all the pieces get done soon and we actually deliver on the core values we've been talking about for so long, I think everybody is fine with it. They're not worried about the procedures, they just want the result.

But it's going to require some courage. There are some members of the Republican caucus who think this is bad politics for them back home. And they're free to vote their conscience, but what I've said to the Speaker and others is, don't let a minority of folks block something that the country desperately needs. And we can't leave this problem for another generation to solve. If we don't tackle this now, then we're undercutting our own future.

So my message to Congress is, rather than create problems, let's prove Washington can get something done. This is something that has broad-based support. We've been working on it for a decade now. This reform comes as close as we've gotten to something that will benefit everybody, now and for decades to come. And it has the potential to enrich this country in ways that we can't even imagine.

And I'll just give you one example to wrap up. Andrew Ly is here today. Where's Andrew? He's around here somewhere. There he is. Now, Andrew has got an amazing story. Andrew grew up in Vietnam, and he and his four brothers tried three times to flee to the United States. Obviously, the country was going through all kinds of difficulties. So three times, they tried; three times, they failed. On the fourth try, their boat, filled with 140 refugees—is that right, Andrew?—was attacked by pirates.

But the Lys and their family eventually made it to Malaysia, and then they eventually made it here to San Francisco. And they learned English, and they worked as handy-men, and they worked as seamstresses. And eventually, Andrew and his brothers earned enough money to buy a small bakery. And they started making doughnuts, and they started selling them to Chinese restaurants. And with

a lot of hard work and a little luck, the Sugar Bowl Bakery today is a \$60 million business. [Applause] Right?

So these humble and striving immigrants from Vietnam now employ more than 300 Americans. They're supplying pastries to Costco and Safeway and almost every hotel and hospital in San Francisco. And I don't know if Andrew brought me any samples, but—[laughter]—they must be pretty good. [Laughter]

And Andrew says: "We came here as boat people, so we don't take things for granted. We know this is the best country in the world if you work hard." That's what America is about. This is the place where you can reach for something better if you work hard. This is the country our parents and our grandparents and waves of immigrants before them built for us. And it falls on each new generation to keep it that way. The Statue of Liberty doesn't have its back to the world. The Statue of Liberty faces the world and raises its light to the world.

When Chinese immigrants came to this city in search of Gold Mountain, they weren't looking just for physical riches, they were looking for freedom and opportunity. They knew that what makes us American is not a question of what we look like or what our names are—because our—we look like the world. I mean, you got a President named Obama. [Laughter] What makes us American is our shared belief in certain enduring principles, our allegiance to a set of ideals, to a creed, to the enduring promise of this country.

And our shared responsibility is to leave this country more generous, more hopeful than we found it. And if we stay true to that history—if we get immigration reform across the finish line, and it is there, just within our grasp; if we can just get folks in Washington to go ahead and do what needs to be done—we're going to grow our economy, we're going to make our country more secure, we'll strengthen our families, and most importantly—

Audience member. Mr. Obama—

The President. —most importantly, we will live up—

Audience member. I need your help. My family has been separated for Thanksgiving.

The President. —most importantly, we will live up to our character as a nation.

Audience member. I have not seen my family Thanksgiving week because my families are separated. I need your help. There are thousands of—

The President. That's exactly what we're talking about here.

Audience member. —undocumented immigrants that are torn apart every single day.

The President. That's why we're here.

Audience member. So, Mr. President, please use your Executive order to halt deportations for all 11.5 undocumented immigrants in this country right now.

The President. What we're trying—

Audience member. We agree—

Audience member. Obama! Obama! Obama!

Audience member. —that we need to pass comprehensive immigration reform. At the same time, we have a—you have a power to stop deportation for all—

The President. Actually, I don't.

Audience member. —undocumented immigrant families in this country.

The President. And that's why we're here.

Audience member. So, please, I need your help.

The President. Okay—

Audience member. Stop deportations!

Audience members. Stop deportations! Stop deportations!

The President. Thank you. All right.

Audience members. Stop deportations! Stop deportations!

The President. What I'd like to do—no, no, don't worry about it, guys. Okay, let me finish.

Audience members. Stop deportations! Yes, we can! Stop deportations!

The President. How about—these guys don't need to go.

Audience member. [Inaudible]

The President. Let me finish. No, no, no, let—he can stay there. Let me—[applause]. Hold on a second. Hold on a second.

So I respect the passion of these young people because they feel deeply about the concerns for their families. Now, what you need to know, when I'm speaking as President of the

United States and I come to this community, is that if, in fact, I could solve all these problems without passing laws in Congress, then I would do so.

But we're also a nation of laws. That's part of our tradition. And so the easy way out is to try to yell and pretend like I can do something by violating our laws. And what I'm proposing is the harder path, which is to use our democratic processes to achieve the same goal that you want to achieve. But it won't be as easy as just shouting. It requires us lobbying and getting it done.

So the—[*applause*]. So for those of you who are committed to getting this done, I am going to march with you and fight with you every step of the way to make sure that we are welcoming every striving, hard-working immigrant who sees America the same way we do: as a country where no matter who you are or where you—what you look like or where you come from, you can make it if you try.

And if you're serious about making that happen, then I'm ready to work with you. But it is going to require work. It is not simply a matter of us just saying we're going to violate the law.

That's not our tradition. But the great thing about this country is we have this wonderful process of democracy, and sometimes, it is messy, and sometimes, it is hard, but ultimately, justice and truth win out. That's always been the case in this country; that's going to continue to be the case today.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:55 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to Miles Scott, a 5-year-old cancer patient who, with the help of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, was given an opportunity to be the superhero "Batkid" for a day in San Francisco, CA; Geetha Vallabhaneeni, chief executive officer, Luminix Inc.; former Secretary of Homeland Security Janet A. Napolitano; Eliseo V. Medina, executive vice president, Service Employees International Union; Gov. Edmund G. "Jerry" Brown, Jr., of California; former President George W. Bush; and Andrew Ly, chairman, president, and chief executive officer, his brothers Binh, Sam, and Paul Ly, vice presidents, and his brother Tom Ly, vice chairman, Sugar Bowl Bakery.

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Fundraiser in San Francisco November 25, 2013

The President. Hello, San Francisco! Well, hello, hello, hello! Thank you. Thank you. Everybody, have a seat, have a seat. Have a seat. It is good to be back in San Francisco! Love this place.

Audience member. I love you!

The President. I love you back. [*Applause*] I love you back.

I always have fun in San Francisco. There's always something going on. Just even in the rope line—[*laughter*—I had some folks sing to me, had a guy who took a photo with me with the shoes with the little toes in them. [*Laughter*] I am sure that's the first time that's ever happened to a President. And they looked very comfortable. But that doesn't happen in Chicago. [*Laughter*] There have been at least five protests that I don't know what they're protesting, but they're yelling something.

[*Laughter*] That's sort of par for the course in San Francisco. [*Laughter*] I knew it was something.

Part of the reason, though, that I love coming here is because I've got such great friends. And I just want to acknowledge them, although I'm sure they've already been acknowledged. First of all, your outstanding mayor, Ed Lee, is here. Give Mayor Lee a big round of applause. You've got your wonderful AG, your attorney general; Kamala Harris is here. Outstanding Members of Congress: Mike Honda is here; Eric Swalwell is here; Barbara Lee is here. [*Applause*] Barbara Lee!

I want to thank our cohosts Nicola Miner and Robert Mailer Anderson. Give them a big round of applause. And their fabulous children who are here and, I think, didn't go to school today. But that's okay. [*Laughter*]