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Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a Town Hall Meeting at Casa Azafrán in Nashville, Tennessee December 9, 2014

The President. Thank you, everybody. Everybody, please have a seat. Thank you very much. Everybody, please have a seat, have a seat.

Well, hello, Nashville.

Audience member. *Hola.* [Laughter]

The President. *Hola. Cómo estás?*

Audience member. *Bien, bien.*

The President. *Bien.* Thank you, Renata, for the wonderful introduction. I've brought some friends with me who I think you may know: your Congressmen, Jim Cooper; as well as Congressman Steve Cohen from Memphis is here. And I want to thank—is your mayor still here? Where did he go? There he is right there, doing a great job. The—and his wonderful daughter, we've got to brag about her, she's a junior at Barnard. We decided just to embarrass her. When you're the father of daughters, your job is to embarrass them, and I'm trying to give an assist here. [Laughter]

I want to thank Casa Azafrán for hosting us and for being home to so many organizations that do important work welcoming immigrants to the community. And that's why I've come here today. I won't make a long speech, because I want to have a dialogue, but I wanted to give some remarks at the top.

As Renata mentioned, some people might think Nashville was an odd place to talk immigration. It's not what comes to mind when people think about gateways to America. But as all of you know, Nashville's got one of the fastest growing immigrant populations in the country. "New Nashvillians"—they're from Somalia, Nepal, Laos, Mexico, Bangladesh. And Nashville happens to be the home of the largest

Kurdish community in the United States as well.

"They" are "us." They work as teachers in our schools, doctors in our hospitals, police officers in our neighborhoods. They start small businesses at a faster rate than many native-born Americans. They create jobs making this city more prosperous and a more innovative place. And of course, they make the food better. [Laughter] I know that Tennessee barbeque is pretty popular, but Korean barbeque is pretty good too. [Laughter]

And the point is, welcoming immigrants into your community benefits all of us. And I was talking to your mayor, Karl Dean, on the way over here, and he understands this. He's been a great partner when it comes to preparing immigrants to become citizens.

A couple of weeks ago, I created a Task Force on New Americans that's going to help do this kind of work all across the country. But, as we all know, our immigration system has been broken for a long time. Families who come here the right way can get stuck in line for years. Business owners who treat their workers right sometimes are undercut by competition from folks who are not just hiring undocumented workers, but then underpaying them or not paying them minimum wage or not giving them the benefits that they have earned. Nobody likes the idea of somebody reaping the rewards of living in America without its responsibilities as well. And there are all kinds of folks who want to gladly embrace those responsibilities, but they have no way to come out of the shadows and get right with the law.

And a year and a half ago, a big majority of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents in the Senate, including both of your Senators, passed a bipartisan bill to fix our broken immigration system. And the bill wasn't perfect, but it was a commonsense compromise. It would have doubled the number of Border Patrol agents. It would have made the legal immigration system smarter and faster. It would have given millions of people the chance to earn their citizenship the right way. It was good for our economy. Independent economists estimated that it would not only grow our economy faster, but shrink our deficits faster. And if the House of Representatives had simply called for an up-or-down vote, it would have passed. It would be the law. We'd be on the way to solve—solving this problem in a sensible way. But, for a year and a half now, Republican leaders in the House blocked this simple up-or-down vote.

Now, I still believe that the best way to solve this is by working together to pass the kind of commonsense law that was passed in the Senate. But until then, there are actions that I have the legal authority to take that will help make our immigration system smarter and fairer. And I took those actions last month.

We're providing more resources at the border to help law enforcement personnel stop illegal crossings and send home those who cross over. We're going to focus our enforcement resources on people who actually pose a threat to our communities: felons rather than families and criminals rather than children. We're going to bring more undocumented immigrants out of the shadows so they can play by the rules. They have to pass a criminal background check, pay taxes, contribute more fully to our economy.

So this isn't amnesty or legalization or even a path to citizenship. It—that can only be done by Congress. It doesn't apply to anybody who's come to this country recently or who might come illegally in the future. What it does is create a system of accountability, a commonsense, middle-ground approach. And what we're saying is, until Congress fixes this problem legislatively, if you have deep ties to this country and

you are willing to get right by the law and do what you need to do, then you shouldn't have to worry about being deported or being separated from your kids.

Now, these are the kind of lawful actions taken by every President, Republican and Democrat, for the past 50 years. So when Members of Congress question whether I have the authority to do this, I have one answer: Yes, and pass a bill. [*Laughter*] If you want Congress to be involved in this process, I welcome it, but you've got to pass a bill that addresses the various components of immigration reform in a commonsense way.

And I want to work with both parties to get this done. The day I sign this bill into law, then the executive actions I take are no longer necessary and some of the changes that I've instituted administratively become permanent.

Unfortunately, so far, the only response that we've had out of the House was a vote taken last week to force talented young people and workers to leave our country. Rather than deport students or separate families or make it harder for law enforcement to do its job, we just need Congress to work with us to pass a commonsense law to fix the broken immigration system.

And meanwhile, Washington shouldn't let disagreements on this issue prevent action on every other issue. That's not how our democracy works. Americans are tired of gridlock. We're seeing the economy move forward. We need to build on that. And certainly, my administration is ready to work forward on a whole range of issues.

I do recognize that there are controversies around immigration; there always have been, by the way. Even those who know we need to reform the system may be concerned about not having Congress get it done. And then, there are some folks who worry about immigration changing the fabric of our society or taking jobs from native-born Americans. And I understand those concerns, but as I said, they're not new. As a country, we have had these concerns since the Irish and Italians and Poles were coming to Boston and New York and had the same con-

cerns when Chinese and Japanese Americans were traveling out West.

But what our history and the facts show is that generation after generation, immigrants have been a net-plus to our economy, and a net-plus to our society. And that's what cities like Nashville prove is still the case. And this city proves that we can address these concerns together and make sure that immigration works for everybody: that it strengthens our economy, that it strengthens our communities, that we can talk about some of the tensions and concerns in a constructive way rather than yelling at each other.

And so let me close with a story of somebody who's working to bring people together. David Lubell, who many of you know and who's here today—where's David? Where is he? There is he. So David used to run the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition. And he knew that some folks were skeptical about immigrants changing the face of Nashville. And he also knew, though, that these immigrants were good people. So he saw an opportunity for immigration to unite the city rather than divide it. And in 2005, he started "Welcoming Tennessee," which connects long-term residents in the community with new immigrants. And you'd have dinners and church socials, and at Rotary clubs, and folks got to know each other and maybe feel some empathy and see themselves in new arrivals.

And the conversations weren't always easy, but it created a foundation of mutual understanding and respect. And today, David's initiative is expanding across the country. I think we—you said, David, that we've got these kinds of efforts going on in 42 cities around the country.

This is what makes America exceptional. We welcome strivers. We welcome dreamers from all around the world. And it keeps us young, and it keeps us invigorated, and it keeps us striving and pushing the boundaries of what's possible. And then, we all bind ourselves together around similar ideals, a similar creed. And one generation in, suddenly those kids are already Americans like everybody else, and we

have the same dreams and hopes for them, the same aspirations.

And if we keep harnessing that potential, there's no limit to what this country can achieve. So Nashville is helping to lead the way in getting this conversation right. We hope that if it happens around the country, that eventually it will drift into the House of Representatives—[laughter]—and we're going to get the kind of comprehensive legislation that we need to actually solve this problem.

So with that, let me start taking some questions. Thank you very much, everybody. I appreciate it.

So I've got a microphone here. This is a nice, intimate group. And so there's no rules, really. I'd just ask everybody who wants to speak to raise their hand. I'll call on you one at a time. We've got some microphones in the audience. And why don't you, when you're asking your questions, stand, introduce yourself, tell us a little about yourself, and then ask your question. Try to keep your question relatively brief so, and I'll try to keep my answers relatively brief. [Laughter] I don't always succeed, but I'll do my best. I'm going to take off my jacket because it's warm in here. Is Marvin back there? Okay, we've got some—here we go. Thanks.

All right. Who wants to go first? Yes, right here in the front.

Implementation of the President's Immigration Policies/Continuation of the President's Immigration Policies Under Future Administrations/Need for Comprehensive Immigration Reform Legislation

Q. Hi, Mr. President. Thank you so much for coming to Nashville, and the Latin community love you and welcome you to Nashville.

The President. Thank you.

Q. My question is—and I think this is a concern in the community that—what is going to happen if the next administration decide not to follow what you—

The President. Right.

Q. —the executive action? And I think many of the communities is afraid, are they going to be first in line to deportation because

they give their information? And that would be my question.

The President. Well, I think it's a good question. So let me just—let me go over the mechanics of what's going to happen.

First of all, part of what we're saying is that we can't deport 11 million people, and it would be foolish to try, as well as, I think, wrong for us to try. Congress only allocates a certain amount of money to the immigration system, so we have to prioritize. And my priority is not to separate families who have already been living here, but to try to make sure that our borders are secure, to make sure that people come through the right way, to focus on criminals, focus—those who pose a real risk to our society.

And so what's happened is, is the Department of Homeland Security, which is in charge of the Immigration Services, what it said is, is that we're going to set up priorities in terms of who is subject to deportation. And at the top are criminals, people who've—pose a threat, and at the bottom are ordinary people who are otherwise law abiding. And what we're saying essentially is, in that low-priority list, you won't be a priority for deportation. You're not going to be deported. We're not going to keep on separating families. And that new priority list is—applies to everybody, all 11 million people who are here—I mean, not 11 million; let's say, whatever the number is. So, even if somebody didn't sign up, they're still much less likely to be subject to deportation. That's because we've changed our enforcement priorities in a formal way.

What we're also saying, though, is that for those who have American children or children who are legal permanent residents, that you can actually register and submit yourself to a criminal background check, pay any back taxes and commit to paying future taxes, and if you do that, you'll actually get a piece of paper that gives you an assurance that you can work and live here without fear of deportation. That doesn't apply to everybody, but it does apply to roughly 5 million, about half of what is estimated to be the number of undocumented workers here.

Now, that is temporary. Just like DACA, the program that we put in place for young people who are brought here who otherwise are good citizens, are studying, working, joining our military—we did that several years ago, where we said, it doesn't make sense for us to subject these young people to a deportation risk; they're Americans by—in their heart even if they don't have the right piece of paper. That's temporary as well, although it's been subject to renewal.

And so it's true that a future administration might try to reverse some of our policies. But I'll be honest with you: I think that the American people basically have a good heart and want to treat people fairly. And every survey shows that if in fact somebody has come out, subjected themselves to a background check, registered, paid their taxes, that the American people support allowing them to stay. So I think any future administration that tried to punish people for doing the right thing, I think, would not have the support of the American people.

The real question is, how do we make sure that enough people register so that it's not just a few people in a few pockets around the country? And that's going to require a lot of work by local agencies, by municipalities, by churches, by community organizations. We've got to give people confidence that they can go ahead and register; also make sure that they understand they don't have to hire a lawyer or go to the notary in order to pay for this. Because what we saw during DACA when the young people were given this opportunity, a lot of people signed up, but sometimes, you would see advertisements, "Come and give us \$1,000 or \$2,000 and we'll help you"—you don't have to do that. And so we've just got to build an effective network around the country. And the Department of Homeland Security will be working with local organizations to make sure that people get the right information.

But I think the main response to people that we have to assure them of is that the American people actually are fairminded and want to reward rather than punish people who do the right thing. And if you register, I'm confident

that that's going to be something that allows you to then get on a path to being here in this country with your children and watching them grow up and making a life for yourself, as you already have.

Last point: It still is important for us, though, because this is temporary, to make sure that we keep pushing for comprehensive immigration reform. Without an actual law, an actual statute passed by Congress, it's true that theoretically a future administration could do something that I think would be very damaging. It's not likely, politically, that they reverse everything that we've done, but it could be that some people then end up being in a disadvantageous position. And nobody is going to have a path to actual citizenship until we get a law passed.

Now, the Senate law would call for people to go to the back of the line, so it would take 10, 13 years before they had citizenship, but at least, there was that pathway. That's why we still need a law.

And then there are some areas like, for example, the business sector, a lot of high-tech businesses are still looking for young graduates from computer science programs or physics programs around the country. And instead of being able to recruit them and put them to work, those kids are all going home and starting new businesses and creating jobs someplace else. And that doesn't make any sense. So that's another area where we couldn't do anything administratively about that. We were able to streamline some of the legal immigration system, but we've still got more work to do.

Okay? Good. All right. I'm going to go boy, girl, boy, girl to make sure that it's fair. [*Laughter*] So, right here. Let's get you a mike.

Implementation of the President's Immigration Policies

Q. Thank you. Good afternoon, President. Thank you so much for doing what you did. I'm Salvador Cervantes. I was undocumented for 10 years. In 1996, I took advantage of the amnesty. I want to thank you. I'm a community organizer with the Center for Community Change in Washington, DC, working with the Tennessee

immigrants from the Human Rights Coalition. And I really thank the people from Nashville, Tennessee, for hosting two Chicagoans. Of course, I'm from Chicago too. [*Laughter*]

And my question to you is, thank you for the 5 million, but what about the others? There are millions of people who are going to be in the limbo, at risk of being deported. And the second question is, since talking about confidence, people are skeptical about this, because they are afraid to apply for this. So what is your administration going to do to get the confidence and people to feel safe to apply for this program that you just passed? Thank you.

The President. Okay. Well, I sort of answered the question, but I'll try to answer it one more time. The prioritization in terms of deportation, that applies to everybody, even if you don't do anything. Now, this will take time to get ICE officers at the ground level to understand what these new priorities are and to apply them in a consistent way. And so there are still going to be stories around the country where some family is separated.

Over time, though, we're really going to be pushing to retrain and refocus and reprioritize ICE officers to understand, let's focus on criminals, let's focus on felons, let's not focus on families.

In terms of setting up the system to sign people up to register so they can get an actual piece of paper that says they can work here, that's probably going to take a couple of months. And so that gives us time then to communicate through our community organizations, through our churches, through our cities and towns to make sure that people have good information.

But—so the folks who, as you said, are in limbo, it's true that they're not going to qualify for the DACA-like registration process that I described. They'll still be, if they're law abiding otherwise, if they're working, peaceful, then they're much less likely to deportation now than they would have been in the past. And they don't have to do anything for that. But the registration process, if you qualify, is powerful because you're now able to go to work without

being in the shadows, and you're paying taxes, which is good for everybody, because we want people to be above board and to do things the right way.

And I think that those who register, here's—my belief is, is that when we do get to passing a law, finally, I think those who have taken the time to register, paid taxes, gone through a criminal background check, they've got documentation and proof that they've done all that, they're going to have an easier time then qualifying, I think, for a more permanent legal status because they will have already gone through this screening. And that's one incentive for why people should want to sign up.

But building trust will take time. But that's where you come in, so that's your job. I'm going to work with you. I'll work with Renata, and I'll work with other activists here to make sure it happens. But we're going to have to do this together.

I will point out that you already had incredible courage among young people when we announced DACA. Now, we didn't get a hundred percent of young people who qualified signing up, but we got more than half of the people who were qualified signing up. And slowly then, each person who has the courage to sign up, that creates more confidence across the board. Okay.

All right, it's a young woman's turn now. Yes, go ahead.

Pursuing Citizenship Under Current Law

Q. Hi, Mr. President, and thank you so much for being here with us and giving us this opportunity to speak out our fears. And I would like to ask you—me. My name is Martha Lugo, and I'm with the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition. I'm part of the Migrants Women Committee. And I would like to ask you: People like me that will be—probably benefit from this Executive order, there is a lot of fear still for people that can have the path to a citizen, but not immediately, but if they apply for DAPA, the Deferred Action for Parents, will they face, like, a bar from being in this situation?

The President. No, I think that those who are—look, I would encourage anybody who has another path for legalization to follow that path. But this does not short-circuit whatever other strategies that you're pursuing. If you are already trying to get legal permanent resident status or citizenship through some of the existing laws, then you should feel free to continue that. What this does do is it simply says that it gives you an opportunity to make sure that deportation is not going to happen during this period, which will extend for several years. Okay?

Can Big Marvin get me my cup of tea back there?

[*At this point, White House Advance Associate Jesse Sendroff handed the President a cup of tea.*]

Oh, here it is. All right. This isn't Big Marvin, but he's big. But he's not—[*laughter*].

All right. Gentleman there in the back. You've got a mike right behind you.

Need for Civility in Immigration Debate

Q. I'm a member of the Coalition for Education—Immigration. I'm an immigrant to Nashville. I grew up—Chicago, have lived here the last 12 years.

The President. It's warmer here. [*Laughter*]

Q. I do miss the White Sox.

The President. Yes.

Q. My question is about—one of the many things I appreciate so much about your leadership is the civil way in which you approach the most difficult of problems, in spite of hearing the rancor you do from those who disagree. [*Inaudible*—in a community like this, trying to talk with reason only to be greeted by deep emotion and anger and rhetoric that's demeaning. It's almost as if we need a civility platform for our Nation, an office of civility—maybe for our U.S. Congress. Excuse me, Jim. But I'm serious about, how do we teach young people to act in a civil way if we don't role-model that civility? And how important is that for us to move forward, that we can engage in the kinds of conversations that—in the tone that you present problems?

The President. Well, look, first of all, I don't know anybody more civil than Jim Cooper. The—he is an extraordinary gentleman and always has been, ever since I've had a chance to know him since I came to Washington.

Look, immigration, as I said before, has always elicited passion. Right? And it's ironic because unless you are a member of a Native American tribe, you came here from someplace else—[laughter]—or your people did. And I know that sometimes folks talk about, well, we came here the right way rather than the wrong way. And it's true that previous generations came through Ellis Island or they came through Angel Island or other ways of arriving here.

But I think sometimes we overstate the degree to which that was some really elaborate bureaucratic process. There's a reason, for example, that these days a lot of people named Smith used to be named Smithowsky or Smitharea or whatever it is. What happened is, when they came in somebody just said, "What's your name?" And they stamped them, and they couldn't—if they couldn't pronounce it—you always hear stories about—they Anglicized it. A lot of times people's papers were not necessarily being checked because folks might not have had papers. And who came in and who didn't varied depending on how big of a workforce—or how much industry was looking for new labor and what the political climate was at that particular time.

And so what happens is, is that once folks are here, we kind of forget that we used to be there. And what I try to do when I talk about these issues is just try to put yourself in somebody else's shoes and feel some empathy and recognize that to some degree, if you're an American, somewhere back there, there was somebody who was a newcomer here too. And it wasn't always neat and orderly the way the American population expanded across the West. And if we have that sense of empathy, then maybe that creates civility. That's why the kinds of efforts that we're seeing here in Nashville—just conversations where people get to know newcomers—is so important.

It's interesting, I get—I was telling Steve and Jim—I get about 40,000 correspondence every day. And some of them are just writing to say, "You're doing a great job, keep going." Some of them are, "You are the worst President ever, you're an idiot." A lot of them are just people asking for help.

But more than once—I mean, it's multiple times during the course of my Presidency—I've gotten letters from people who say: "I don't agree with you about anything, I am a Republican. I used to be really angry at you about your immigration posture, and then I found out that my son Jim's best friend Jose was undocumented, and he wasn't going to be able to apply to the local college because he was afraid about being deported. And this is a kid who has played in my back yard and helped me wash my car and been on the ball team with my kid. And I loved this kid, and so I don't think it's right that this young person shouldn't be treated the same way that I'd want someone to treat my son." And I've gotten a lot of letters like that. And they say, "And so, even though I still don't agree with you about anything"—[laughter]—"I do ask you that you give Jose a chance."

And so that's where civility comes from. It's that interaction and personal experience, as opposed to just being able to stereotype somebody one way or the other. Now, it's important, by the way, though, that the civility runs both ways. And I do think—obviously, I've been at the receiving end of people really angry at me about not just these executive actions, but have been ginned up by some of the conservative talk shows that think that I'm usurping my authority, despite the fact that every previous President has exercised the same authority, or they think I'm favoring immigrants over red-blooded Americans. And so that's a lot of the criticism directed at me.

But what's also true is, sometimes, advocates on behalf of immigrants have suggested that anybody who is concerned about the impact of immigration or asks questions about comprehensive immigration reform, that they must be racist or they must be anti-immigrant or they're ignorant. And that's not true either.

I mean, there are people who are good people who actually believe in immigration, but are concerned about rewarding somebody who broke American laws. There are good people who believe in immigration, but are concerned, will new immigrants depress wages, particularly in the low-wage sectors of the economy? Those are legitimate questions, and we have to be just as civil in addressing those questions as we expect people to be when we are talking to them. Because I think the facts are on our side. I think the studies have shown that over time immigrants aren't lowering wages, but in fact improving the economy and, over time, boosting wages and jobs for everyone.

So I would rather just make the argument on the facts, but just because somebody thinks that instinctually doesn't mean that they are bad people. So civility is good, but it doesn't just run one way. And I think the Good Book says, don't throw stones in glass houses, or make sure we're looking at the log in our eye before we're pulling out the mote in other folks eyes. And I think that's as true in politics as it is in life.

Okay. Let's see if I've got any women who want to ask questions. See, I'm going to make sure I'm fair. [Laughter] That young lady in the back right there. Yes, you. [Laughter]

The President's Executive Actions on Immigration/Office of Legal Counsel Determination of President's Legal Authorities/Parents of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Policy Beneficiaries

Q. Hi. My name is Beatrice—[inaudible]—Gatebuke. And I work with FASHA, a non-profit organization that works with refugees and immigrants. And one question I have: Was there a particular reason why the parents of the DACA—the DREAMers, the DACA recipients, were excluded in your new Executive order?

The President. Yes, there is. And it was, the actions I took were bound by the legal authority that the Office of Legal Counsel determined I had in this area. Now, the Office—I don't want to get too technical here, but the Office

of Legal Counsel is a special office in the Department of Justice that is mandated to give me independent judgment not subject to politics or pressure from me about what my legal authorities are.

And so we presented to them the various things that we'd like to do. They were very clear about my legal authority to prioritize and then provide this temporary protection for parents whose children were Americans or—American citizens or legal permanent residents. Because the argument they found compelling and there was a lot of precedent for, was essentially a humanitarian argument, that if we're prioritizing, why would we want to separate families?

The challenge we had in the minds of the Office of Legal Counsel was, if you've already exempted the young people through DACA, and then you bootstrap off of that the capacity to exempt their parents as well, you're not rooted originally in somebody who is either a citizen or a legal permanent resident. So it was a legal constraint on our authority. It was not because we did not care about those parents.

And I know that there are a lot of "DREAM Act" kids who are concerned that their parents may not still qualify. A sizable number do because they have a sibling who ended up being born in the United States. But not all do. This is one more reason why we still need to pass comprehensive immigration reform. Because what we did was to do everything that I could within my legal authority, but not go beyond the legal authority that we possessed. Okay?

This young man right here. Here, I think the mike is coming from behind you.

Immigration Reform/Economic Benefits of Immigration

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. My name is Mohamed Shukri Hassan. We are delighted to have you here in Nashville and in Casa Azafrán. I'm a member of the mayor's New American Advisory Council and also direct a nonprofit that's housed here called AMAC, the American Muslim Advisory Council. And my question to you is that, in 2004, when you gave that speech about—at the Democratic Convention, kind of

alluded to this idea that we are one Nation. There's no black and blue—blue or red America. But when it comes to this issue of immigration, as someone that works in this community, our mantra here in Nashville is, "Nashville for all of us, and Tennessee for all of us."

So to come around that idea for America for all of us, that we don't keep having this conversation—as the President, you have been in this position the past 6 years—what would you say to other Americans who are feeling now on that side even considering the newly elected Congress that are adamant on stopping these steps? Because I've got the privilege of being the—welcoming Tennessee director, and being in those conversations, and inherently, Tennesseans are the nicest people. Those people are in charge of the—[inaudible]—that we used to have those conversations with. But what would you say to the rest of the Nations, who thinks that now new Americans or immigrants are getting this special treatment?

The President. Well, I addressed the Nation when I announced this action, and I made a couple of simple points.

First of all, America is a nation of immigrants, but it's also a nation of laws. And there does need to be accountability if you came here in a way that was not in accordance with the law. The question then becomes, how do you make that person accountable? I mean, one way of doing it is randomly or sporadically separating families, but you don't have uniform enforcement, you're pushing people into the shadows. They may not be paying taxes. They may be taken advantage of by unscrupulous employers. You are using all those resources instead of strengthening borders. And that's not a smart outcome.

The second approach would be to pass laws that say, let's improve the legal system. Because sometimes, people actually would be qualified to come here if the system was just a little smoother, but they end up with a situation where they've got to wait years to be reunited with a family member who's legally here, and the heartache just becomes too great. So we're—in some cases, we're pushing

people into the illegal system because we're not making the legal system smart enough.

We can get people out of the shadows. We can acknowledge, they are our neighbors, our friends, our coworkers. And then, we still have to be serious about border security. And there have been times—I want to be very frank—there have been times where I've had arguments with immigrant rights activists who say, effectively, you know, there shouldn't be any rules, these are good people, why should we have any kind of enforcement like this. And my response is, in the eyes of God, everybody is equal. In the eyes of God, some child in Mexico, Guatemala, Libya, Nepal is the equal of my child.

I don't make any claims that my child is superior to somebody else's child. But I'm the President of the United States, and nation-states have borders. And frankly, because America is so much wealthier than most countries around the world, if we had no system of enforcing our borders and our laws, then I promise you, everybody would try to come here, or if not everybody—maybe you wouldn't have that many Swedes or Singaporeans try to come here—but a whole lot of folks would try to come. And that we couldn't accommodate. And it wouldn't be fair, because there's—you have to have some sort of line. It can't just be—it can't be whoever is able to get in here first, and then, it's sort of first one to win the race. Because sometimes, it's just an accident that one person lives in a country that has a border with the United States, and another person in Somalia, it's a lot harder to get here.

So the idea is, then, that what we try to do is to have a system that resets; that acknowledges—and this is where I think most Americans are. They recognize, you know what, people who are already here—many times they've been here 5 years, 10 years, 20 years, they've got deep roots here, they've shown themselves to be good people, their kids are for all practical purposes Americans—let's just acknowledge they're part of our community, they're part of our society.

But then the tradeoff is, but let's try to make the legal system fairer. And in some cases, that

in high school. And my question to you would be, how can we as young people in our communities get involved to address issues such as immigration or the access to a postsecondary education? What are some things we can do?

The President. Well, if you're here, you must already be involved. Right? Because—[laughter]. You know, getting young people involved in civic life and activism and voting is one of the most important things we can do as a society. Because there are exceptions and there are people who are young at heart and young at mind, but the truth is, you get older, you get stuck in your ways, and you start looking backwards and really focused on what was instead of what could be.

And again, part of the reason America has done so well is because we constantly reimagine ourselves, and we have a youthful culture that says, well, let's—in the words of Robert Kennedy, some people ask why, and we have a tendency to ask why not. And that's good.

Now, young people are also busy with—I've got a couple of young people at home—they have other things that they're interested in. I won't name all of them. Hopefully, some if it is their books and doing their homework. [Laughter] And one of the most concerning things I had about the midterm elections was, young people—the voting rates among young people dropped off drastically.

Young people have tended to vote at very high levels during my Presidential campaigns, but in between, they lose interest. And part of what your peers have to do is to understand that politics and government and policy and all the decisions that are going to shape your lives are not just a matter of one election, but it has to be sustained over time.

And when you think about what's at stake right now, immigration is obviously a major issue. Climate change: I mean, most of those of us who are 50 or over, by the time the problems of a warming climate really hit, we'll be gone, but you'll still be around, and your kids will be here. And if it's having a significant impact on weather patterns and drought and wildfires and flooding and food and migration,

it's not going to be pretty. So you have to get involved now to do something about it.

When we look at higher education costs, I mean, historically, Congress and State legislatures are more attentive to the demands of seniors than they are the demands of young people for one simple reason: Seniors vote, young people don't. If you want State legislatures to increase support for higher education that then can help reduce tuition, then young people have to vote at a higher percentage than just 12 percent of those who vote.

Look at what's happening right now with respect to concerns about bias and law enforcement and policing. I mean, I met with a group of young activists, including several from Ferguson, to talk to them, and I was very impressed with how they presented themselves, and they were very serious and thoughtful. And I told them, I said, listen, I want you to continue to be active, because that's how change happens. You need to be respectful. You need to understand that you're not going to get a hundred percent of the change that is needed, because that's never been how society works, but if you are steady and you sustain it and you push it and you don't get tired or disappointed when you get half a loaf instead of a whole loaf, over time, the country and the world is transformed.

And I'm confident that—I said in an interview recently—America is a more just place, and issues of racial discrimination are lessened today than they were 50 years ago or 20 years ago, but that didn't just happen by accident, that happened because people—especially young people—helped to make it happen. And over time, change occurs, and people adjust to a new reality, and they open their heart and mind to new possibilities. And young people are typically the triggers of that.

So I think when your leaders like—young leaders like you are talking to your friends, you've got to just remind them that you have responsibilities and obligations. And make sure that you serve pizza at the meetings—[laughter]—because free food always helps when getting young people involved in social causes. [Laughter]

All right, Father. Thank you for your patience there, sir. You've got a microphone behind you.

Biblical References to Immigration

Q. Father Joseph Breen, native Nashvillian. I think I speak on behalf of a good number of people, Mr. President, of both parties. Some, you know, may not agree with some of your policies, but I think I can speak for so many who are so proud of you for giving such a great example of a husband, of a father, and doing your very best as a President.

So we are very proud of you, grateful you've come to Nashville. We wish for you—I'm sure on behalf of all of us—a joyful and a blessed Christmas to you.

The President. Well, I appreciate that very much. That's very nice. [Applause] Thank you.

I appreciate that, Father. It's worth considering the Good Book when you're thinking about immigration. I mean—this Christmas season, there's a whole story about a young, soon-to-be mother and her husband of modest means looking for a place to house themselves for the night, and there's no room at the inn.

And as I said the day that I announced these executive actions, we were once strangers too. And part of what my faith teaches me is to look upon the stranger as part of myself. And during this Christmas season, that's a good place to start.

So thank you for your generous comment. But if we're serious about the Christmas season, now is a good time to reflect on those who are strangers in our midst and remember what it was like to be a stranger.

White House aide. Last question.

The President. Last question. That was a pretty good place to end though. [Laughter] I've got to admit. I kind of want to—but I'm going to call on one more person. Gentlemen, you can all put your hands down. I'm going to call on this young lady right here.

Child Migration From Central America to the U.S./Immigration Reform Legislation

Q. Hi, Mr. President. My name is Amanda Donovan. I'm an immigration attorney. And I

wonder, what are the things that you deem necessary for comprehensive immigration reform if Congress does act soon?

The President. Well, the Senate bill is a pretty good place to start. I do think there's more work we can do at the borders. As I said before, it's not just a matter of pouring money down there.

I'll give you one very simple example. You'll recall that some of the politics of this shifted during the summer when these unaccompanied children were here. And there was 2 weeks of wall-to-wall coverage. And we were being invaded by 8- and 12- and 13-year-olds. I mean it was just terrifying, apparently. But it reflected a serious problem. You had smugglers, coyotes, who were essentially taking money from family members here, shuttling these kids up. It wasn't that they weren't apprehended. It wasn't like they snuck through the border. What happened was, they basically presented themselves at the border. They'd come in. And because there are so few immigration judges down there, because we hadn't done a very good job cooperating with Central America and Mexico to deal—go after these smugglers, you'd then have a situation in which the kids would oftentimes simply be released to the family member, and then that was the end of things.

And so one of the things that we've done is—well, several things we did. Number one, the—I met with the Central American leaders down there and said, listen, you can't—you've got to do something to message to families down here: Do not send your children on a dangerous path like this because we don't know how many of them might have gotten killed, gotten abducted, trafficked in some terrible way. We have no way of keeping track of that. So you can't have them take this dangerous journey.

And to their credit, those Central American countries worked with us. We said to Mexico, you've got to do something more about the southern border. They did that. We now have the number of unaccompanied children below the rate that it was 2 years ago. So this was a momentary spike.

But also what we need to do is make sure that we have enough immigration lawyers down there that you can process kids and immigration judges to process kids in a timely fashion, but with due process so that if they have legitimate refugee claims, those can be presented, and if not, then they can be returned home.

So that's not a strict border issue. It's not a fence issue. It's "have you set up a sensible process" issue. So I think that's one pillar.

Second pillar is improving the legal immigration system. I already mentioned this, but I'll just repeat a couple of examples. Somebody who potentially qualifies to be a resident here, forcing them to leave the country and then waiting for years before they come back when they've got family members here, that's just not how the human heart works. It's very hard to expect somebody to do that.

Let's have a more sensible, streamlined system. Let's reduce some of the backlogs that already exist for people who actually qualify, but it's just they're waiting in line so long that they get frustrated. Let's do something for especially talented and skilled people who are graduating. We educate them. Don't—we should be stapling a green card to the graduates of top schools in fields that we know we need. And by the way, we can charge fees that we then use to make sure that American kids are getting the kinds of scholarships and training they need for those same jobs in the future.

We need to do more work. We need to deal with the agricultural sector. I'm generally skeptical when you hear employers say, well, we just can't find any Americans to do the job. A lot of times what they really mean is, it's a lot cheaper if we potentially hire somebody who has just come here before they know better in terms of what they're worth.

But in the agricultural sector, there's truth. We enjoy a lot of cheap fruits and vegetables and food stuffs because of the back-breaking work of farm workers. And we should find a system that is fair, make sure that they are not subject to exploitation, and helps us run the economy. We should make sure that we're cracking down on employers who are purpose-

ly hiring undocumented workers so that they can get around minimum wage laws or overtime laws and so forth.

And finally, as I've discussed this whole afternoon, we should get people out of the shadows. And the Senate bill, I thought, had a sensible approach, which said: You know what, if you've been here a certain amount of time, you've got a clean record, you're willing to submit yourself to a background check, you're willing to pay back-taxes, you're willing to pay a fine, learn English, go to the back of the line—but if you do all that—you can stay here for now, and we're going to put you on a pathway where eventually you can earn your citizenship, although it will be many years into the future because we still have to clear out those folks who did it the right way.

This has—this concept, what I just described, that package—has bipartisan support. It's not that it doesn't have bipartisan support. The challenge is, is that there's a certain segment—primarily within the Republican Party, although in fairness, in the Democratic Party, there are some people who are resistant as well—who just keep on believing this notion of, that's amnesty, that's amnesty.

And what amnesty implies, I think, in the minds of the American people is that you're getting something for nothing, that you're getting over. And when you describe for people that, in fact, you do have to get a background check, you do have to register, you do have to pay fines, you do have to pay back-taxes, then people feel differently. But that's never advertised by opponents. And that's one reason why, by the way, that I've said to immigrant rights groups, you have to describe the responsibility side of this and not just the rights side of this. Because I think sometimes—I appreciate immigrant rights groups—they speak from the heart, and they know the people involved, and they love them, and they want to just do right by them. And I get that.

But this is where you need to look at the other side of the equation. And what people feel like is, you know what, if you're just coming here for nothing—and I don't know that you're paying your taxes—and you broke the

law and now suddenly, I'm paying for your kid's school and your kid's hospitalization, and it feels unfair, at a time when people are already feeling burdened by their own challenges, trying to afford their own kid's college education, or feeling like they're worried about their own retirement.

So the language we use, I think, is important. You have to speak to the fact that, if somebody broke the law—even if they're good people—they've got to be held accountable. And there are going to be responsibilities in-

involved in it. Because if it's just rights and no responsibilities, then people feel resentful.

Does that make sense? All right, guys, I enjoyed spending time with you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:26 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Renata Soto, cofounder and executive director, Conexión Américas; Frances Dean, daughter of Mayor Karl F. Dean of Nashville; and White House Trip Director Marvin D. Nicholson, Jr. He also referred to S. 744.

Statement on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program *December 9, 2014*

Throughout our history, the United States of America has done more than any other nation to stand up for freedom, democracy, and the inherent dignity and human rights of people around the world. As Americans, we owe a profound debt of gratitude to our fellow citizens who serve to keep us safe, among them the dedicated men and women of our intelligence community, including the Central Intelligence Agency. Since the horrific attacks of 9/11, these public servants have worked tirelessly to devastate core Al Qaida, deliver justice to Osama bin Laden, disrupt terrorist operations, and thwart terrorist attacks. Solemn rows of stars on the Memorial Wall at the CIA honor those who have given their lives to protect ours. Our intelligence professionals are patriots, and we are safer because of their heroic service and sacrifices.

In the years after 9/11, with legitimate fears of further attacks and with the responsibility to prevent more catastrophic loss of life, the previous administration faced agonizing choices about how to pursue Al Qaida and prevent additional terrorist attacks against our country. As I have said before, our Nation did many things right in those difficult years. At the same time, some of the actions that were taken were contrary to our values. That is why I unequivocally

banned torture when I took office, because one of our most effective tools in fighting terrorism and keeping Americans safe is staying true to our ideals at home and abroad.

Today's report by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence details one element of our Nation's response to 9/11: the CIA's detention and interrogation program, which I formally ended on one of my first days in office. The report documents a troubling program involving enhanced interrogation techniques on terrorism suspects in secret facilities outside the United States, and it reinforces my long-held view that these harsh methods were not only inconsistent with our values as [a] nation, they did not serve our broader counterterrorism efforts or our national security interests. Moreover, these techniques did significant damage to America's standing in the world and made it harder to pursue our interests with allies and partners. That is why I will continue to use my authority as President to make sure we never resort to those methods again.

As Commander in Chief, I have no greater responsibility than the safety and security of the American people. We will therefore continue to be relentless in our fight against Al Qaida, its affiliates, and other violent extremists. We will rely on all elements of our national

* White House correction.