citizen and political activist Safia Taleb al-Suhail, both of whom were guests of the First Lady at the President's State of the Union Address on February 2. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Proclamation 7871—American Red Cross Month, 2005

February 28, 2005

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

Americans have a long history of rising to meet humanitarian challenges, and the American Red Cross is a leader in these efforts. Since 1881, the American Red Cross has met disaster with compassion and courage. During American Red Cross Month, we honor this dedication and reaffirm the importance of volunteering time and contributing resources to make our communities and the world better.

From offering blood drives and lifesaving courses to providing disaster relief services at home and abroad, American Red Cross employees and volunteers work countless hours to care for those in need and serve a cause greater than self. As a result of the recent tsunami in the Indian Ocean, over 150,000 lives were lost and many more were left homeless and without food and water. The American Red Cross swiftly dispatched relief workers to assist those affected, and to distribute supplies, counsel survivors, and help people return home.

Here at home, the American Red Cross helps support our troops by transmitting emergency messages to members of the Armed Forces and their families. In this past year, the Red Cross has also contributed significantly to relief efforts for hurricanes in Florida, flooding in Western Pennsylvania, wildfires in the Western United States, and mudslides in California. These good works provide hope and healing to those dealing with profound loss and demonstrate the character of the American Red Cross.

Now, Therefore, I, George W. Bush, President of the United States of America and Honorary Chairman of the American Red Cross, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim March 2005 as American Red Cross Month. I commend the efforts of American Red Cross employees and volunteers, and I encourage all Americans to donate their time, energy, and talents to support this organization's humanitarian mission.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand this twenty-eighth day of February, in the year of our Lord two thousand five, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twenty-ninth.

George W. Bush

[Filed with the Office of the Federal Register, 10:26 a.m., March 2, 2005]

NOTE: This proclamation was published in the *Federal Register* on March 3.

Remarks at the White House Faith-Based and Community Initiatives Leadership Conference

March 1, 2005

Thank you all. Thank you for coming. Please be seated. Thanks for coming. Thank you for the warm welcome. It is great to be here with leaders from around our country who are leading our Nation's faith-based and community groups.

I am here to talk about my continued commitment to faith-based and community groups because I'm firmly committed to making sure every American can realize the promise of our country. It is said that faith can move mountains. Here in Washington, DC, those helping the poor and needy often run up against a big mountain—[*laughter*]—called bureaucracy. And I'm here to talk about how to move that mountain so that we can reach out and partner with programs which reach out to people who hurt.

You know, one of the tests of character for America is how we treat the weakest of our citizens. Interesting test, isn't it? What are we doing in Government to help people who need help? Part of the test of Government is to understand the limitations of Government. Government—when I think about

Government, I think about law and justice; I really don't think about love. Government has got to find ways to empower those whose mission is based upon love in order to help those who need love find love in society. That's really what we're here to talk about.

I was talking earlier with some of our leaders, and I was reminding them that I think de Tocqueville, the Frenchman who came to America in the early 1800s, really figured out America in a unique way when he said that "Americans like to form association in order to help save lives. Americans formed association in order to channel the individualistic inputs of our society to enable people to serve a cause greater than themselves."

Really, what we're doing is we're carrying on that philosophy today, a vision and philosophy that I think makes America a unique country and gives us, those of us responsible for helping lives, a unique opportunity to empower people, encourage people, partner with people to save lives in America. And that's what we're here to talk about today.

I want to thank the members of my administration who've joined us, because the efforts to partner with faith-based and community programs require a commitment by all of us in the administration, not just the President or not just the people in the White House Office but people throughout Government.

Margaret Spellings—Madam Secretary, thank you for coming. I appreciate you. She's the Secretary of the Department of Education. I see my friend Robert McCallum, who's the Associate Attorney General for the Department of Justice. Thank you for coming, Robert. Hector Barreto is the Administrator for the Small Business Administration. Yes, there is a connection between faith- and community-based groups and business. It's called helping make sure the entrepreneurial spirit and entrepreneurial know-how reaches every corner of America.

I want to thank David Eisner, the CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, for joining us. And I want to thank Stephen Goldsmith, sitting right next to David, who's the Chairman. I want to appreciate everybody else who is here from my administration. Make sure you get back to work right after the speech is over. [*Laughter*]

I appreciate three Members of the United States Congress who have joined us: Congressman Mike Ferguson from New Jersey; Congressman Mark Green from Wisconsin; and Congressman Jim Ryun from Kansas. I'm not interested in jogging—[*laughter*]—if you know what I mean.

I appreciate the leaders in the armies of compassion—one of my favorite phrases, the armies of compassion. It's a strong word, isn't it? I want to thank the generals and sergeants and privates—[*laughter*]—who are here from the armies of compassion. Thank you all for taking time out of your day to come and hopefully be reassured that this initiative is one that has got a lot of momentum and impetus and reassured that we want to help change America.

I appreciate the fact that many in this room have come from many different faiths and traditions. The Faith-Based Initiative is not about a single faith. In this country we're great because we've got many faiths, and we're great because you can choose—whatever faith you choose or if you choose no faith at all, you're still equally American. It's one of the great traditions of America that we will always hold sacred and always should hold sacred.

But no matter what your faith is, we're united in the conviction that to whom much is given, much is expected, and that the liberty and prosperity we enjoy, the great freedom we enjoy in America, with that freedom comes an obligation to reach out to brothers and sisters who hurt. And so I recognize—and the first point I want to make is, I recognize the great work faith organizations are doing in this country. In other words, I stand here in confidence knowing that this initiative makes sense because I'm a results-oriented guy, and faith organizations are achieving results we want.

I just met Curtis Jones. He was an 11-year-old boy from one of our Nation's Capital's rough neighborhoods. And he walked into the doors of UNIQUE Learning Center. A volunteer would tutor and mentor Curtis for the next 7 years. I just asked Curtis about the volunteer. He said he was the local judge. Think about that. It's interesting, isn't it? You've got a really busy person; he's on the bench; and so he decides to tutor Curtis for

7 years, not 7 days, 7 hours, 7 minutes, but 7 years. All those who helped Curtis, particularly the mentor, must have taken great joy when they realized Curtis graduated from Penn State University with a degree in telecommunications. Where are you, Curtis? There you go.

The mentors and the folks at the Learning Center get a lot of credit. As Curtis said, "I wouldn't be here—I wouldn't be where I am today without the Learning Center." But Curtis, never forget that ultimately it was your decision. You made the choice. You decided to receive help and then aim big and get your degree. And I congratulate you. I'm proud of you, as is everybody else. But it's important for people to know there are stories like this all across America. This isn't just a story for Washington, DC; this is a story where lives have been transformed because somebody has put their arm around somebody who hurts, somebody out of a faith-based organization or community-based organization, and said, "What can I do to help you, Curtis? What can I do to make sure that you can, with your choice, have an opportunity to realize the dreams of America?"

And the goal is to bring the healing touch, like Curtis found at the UNIQUE Center, to lives all across America. That's what we're here to talk about today.

Unfortunately, there are some roadblocks, such as the culture inside government at the Federal, State, and local level that is unfriendly to faith-based organizations. One of the keys to solving a problem and achieving a goal is to recognize roadblocks and then have the will to remove those roadblocks. But there is a cultural problem. You know, it's manifested itself, for example, when the Federal Government denied a Jewish school in Seattle emergency disaster relief because the school was religious. That's an indication that there's a roadblock. We have a cultural problem when FEMA money—we're going out to help lessen the effects of a disaster that hurt—hit, and all of a sudden, the school was denied Federal money because of the nature of the school.

Or for example, the Federal Government—when I came in office, I found out the Federal Government was threatening to cut off funds for an Iowa homeless shelter. The shelter was receiving money from the Federal Government, and the shelter was doing good work. The shelter was helping to meet an objective, which was to provide housing for the homeless, but they were threatening to cut off money because the governing board was not sufficiently secular. Think about that. It kind of defeats the purpose of a faith-based organization, doesn't it, when the Government says, "We will design the board of directors for you." It's a process world we live in, oftentimes, in the Nation's Capital. Instead of focusing on the results, instead of asking the question, "Was this homeless shelter working," they asked the question, "Tell me about the board of directors you've got."

And so today, after 4 years of work, we continue to confront this culture, a culture of process instead of results, head on. And the goal is, over the next 4 years, to change the culture permanently so faith- and community-based organizations will be welcomed into the grantmaking process of Government. That's the goal.

I like to ask questions. The job of a President is to call people and say, "How are we doing?" Part of my job is to be the accountability person in the White House, you know, "Are we making progress?" So let me give you some of the progress that has been made in terms of achieving our goal, which is a hopeful America for every person. Today, 10 Federal agencies have got faith-based offices, 3 of them set up last year. In other words, a lot of money comes out of these different bureaucracies, and in order to make sure people feel comfortable accessing the grantmaking process, and/or that the bureaucracy itself is fair in enabling faith-based organizations to apply, there's an office in these different bureaucracies. You know, Housing and Urban Development has got one; Margaret has got one; McCallum's organization, the Justice Department, has got one.

And so I've not only said, "You must have one," I then asked, to make sure, "How are they working? How are you changing the rules on Federal contracting?" And the answer is universally, "Yes, we have, to make sure that faith-based bidders are not being

unfairly shut out of the competition for Federal money." That was the first thing I looked for in these offices, "Tell me whether or not people are allowed to apply for money on an equal basis."

I want to call attention to my friend Jim Towey. Towey is in charge of the Faith-Based Office in the White House. His job is to answer your questions, to hold meetings such as this. His job is to answer my questions. [*Laughter*] He did such a good job, he got a promotion in the White House, so that the man who works full-time to help others feed the hungry can feed his own five children. [*Laughter*] Towey, by the way, interestingly enough—he's probably tired of hearing me say this, but I find it an interesting comment about our society—Jim Towey was Mother Teresa's lawyer. Think about that. [*Laughter*] Maybe we're a little too litigious in America. [*Laughter*]

Anyway, he did a heck of a job being a lawyer, and he's doing a fine job of judging faith-based groups by their results. And that's important for our society to do. We ought to judge faith-based groups by results, not by their religion. And that's part of the cultural change that we're working on here.

Since 2003, the administration has increased grants to faith-based organizations by 20 percent. That's a positive development. That's the kind of news that I like to hear, particularly when those faith-based programs are changing America one soul at a time. Last year, 10.3 percent of all Federal grants—those are grants coming out of Washington; those are not formula-based grants to States—10 percent of those grants went to faith-based organizations. That's up from 8.1 percent. So I asked Towey, I said, "How are we doing?" He said, "Well, the percentage of grants to faith-based programs has grown, and that's good." Ten percent isn't perfect. Ten percent is progress. That means about $2 billion in grants were awarded last year to religious charities. That's a start. And so, 6 months from now, I'm going to say, "Jim, how are we doing?" Then he's going to call the faith-based offices, and he's going to say, "The President wants to know how you're doing." [*Laughter*]

I also asked the question, "Are we encouraging social entrepreneurship in America?" That's one of my favorite words. Think about it: social entrepreneurship. Oftentimes, you think about entrepreneurship, you think about starting a business or balance sheets or income statements. There's a different kind of income statement in life, and that's the income statement of the heart, the balance sheet of the heart. And so I like to talk about social entrepreneurship, those courageous souls who are willing to take a stand in some of the toughest neighborhoods in America to save lives.

So what we want to know is, what I want to know is, are we helping increase the number of new groups, small groups, first-time appliers for Federal money? Are we doing that? Are we getting beyond those great, courageous faith-based programs that have been providing help for a long period of time? Are we reaching beyond the Salvation Army or the Catholic Charities, the fantastic pillars of the faith-based program? And the answer is, we are.

Let me give you an example. The Peacemaker Family Center in Miami is a small ministry of the Trinity Church that helps low-income and unemployed families. Towey visited there, so he's telling me on the way over in the limousine, that this is a desperate part of Miami—that this program is in a desperate part of Miami. And yet, in the midst of desperation is a little beacon, a light. And so the center received a $50,000—seed money, it's called—from the Compassion Capital Fund mini-grant program. It's the first Federal funding the organization had ever received.

And so the pastor there is a woman named Linda Freeman, and says that the funding, the mini-grant, was the turning point for her program—exactly what Jim Towey and I were hoping to hear. Why? Because the center was able to raise—was able to hire a writer for grants with that money. In other words, the center was able to take a leap forward in terms of being able to convince others that the program was worthwhile, leveraged the grant, and has expanded from 3 employees to 25 employees in a quick period of time. That's exactly what we hope happens.

So this little program, in a dark neighborhood, had three employees. Think about that. It was somebody with an idea, somebody who

heard a call, not from Government but from a higher authority, to try to help people in need. And so they had a program with three people. Three people—I mean, it's a small program but working hard to save any life they could save. And so the mini-grant enabled the person, Linda, to leverage, to hire somebody to help in the grantmaking process, to expand their scope, to get more notice. And obviously, more help is coming in, not from the Federal Government, from local government—local charities, so they're now up to 25 people, and they're expanding, helping to achieve the goal, which is to save as many lives as possible. It's the Federal goal, State goal, local goal, universal goal for America to help people realize the great promise of the country.

And so I asked the question, "How many programs like Linda's did we help last—over the last 2 years?" And it's 600—600 programs. So we're beginning to fuel social entrepreneurship. Those are the kinds of questions I will continue to ask, you'll be happy to hear, in order to help us achieve the objective.

So we've making progress. There's more to do. And I want to talk about four steps that we intend to take and will take—not "intend" to take, "will" take over the next 4 years to achieve our goal of helping the poor and the needy.

The first step will be to expand individual choice when it comes to providing help for people who hurt. I believe citizens in a free society must make responsible choices about their lives every day. And by giving those who look for help the opportunity and the responsibility to choose the help that's best for them, we'll not only give them better care but we'll put them on the path to productive citizenship.

Now, we are expanding individual choice in programs in Washington. And the first place that we really worked hard to expand that choice is—that my administration has, is in the drug treatment programs. It is—there's all kinds of ways to quit drinking, but one of the most effective ways to quit drinking is for a person to make a choice to go to a place that changes your heart. If you change your heart, then you change your habits.

The idea in the Access to Recovery program was to direct resources to the individual—there's some 100,000 a year who aren't able to get help for their alcohol and drug issues—to let them make the choice about the program that suits their needs. See, that's how it works. It says, "We will fund you, and you choose. If you think a—kind of the classic clinical approach will work for you, give it a shot. If you think the corner synagogue will work for you"—like the synagogue I saw in Los Angeles that's saving life after life after life because of a belief in the Almighty—"give it a shot. But you get to make the choice."

And so, giving an example, there's the Meta House in Milwaukee, is a nonprofit that specializes in treating women addicts. And the people of the Meta House know better than a lot of other type of programs that kicking addiction is never easy, and they've got what they call a "tough love" program. This is their approach. It's not a universal approach; it happens to be their approach, tailormade to what they think will work.

And one mother said, as a result of this approach, of "tough love," admitting you've got an addiction—they make people stand up and say, "I've got an addiction," and they talk about what amends they're going to make—says—and I love this quote—she says, she feels like she has "an angel on her shoulder." Isn't it an interesting description about a tough love addiction program for somebody who says—who's made the choice—in other words, she was given the coupon that's redeemable where she chooses. She chose the Meta House in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And as a result of that, she said, "I feel like I've got an angel on my shoulder." It's an inspirational program that makes people feel like they've got an angel on their shoulder as they're trying to recover from alcohol or drugs.

And so what I want to do is apply this concept of individual choice beyond just the alcohol and drug rehabilitation programs, such as mentoring programs or housing counseling or traditional—transitional housing programs or after-school programs or homeless services. And so I've asked the Cabinet officers and their faith-based and community offices to come up with ways to expand individual

choice into how their departments can implement this philosophy.

Now, I understand people are skeptical about this approach, because they say, you know, "People in need don't want it." Or the other classic excuse is, "People in need are not sophisticated to make the choices for themselves." I firmly reject that point of view. This approach has worked, by the way.

President Bush—former President Bush, affectionately known as Number 41—[*laughter*]—introduced choice in the childcare and development block grants to States. In 1990, he started to implement this philosophy. And it turns out that when you analyze the results of that decision, that American parents decided they liked making the decisions as to where they send their children to child care.

Today, more than 80 percent of the money in this program that goes out the door is in the form of individual coupons. In other words, consumer demand was quite large when it came to saying, "I'd like to make the choice where my child goes, where I put my child, not you, Government." And these were people from all walks of life, by the way. These are the people that some say aren't sophisticated enough to make the choice. Parents are sophisticated enough to decide what's best for their children, and the Government has got to realize that.

The second step is to continue to build our culture of compassion by making sure State and local agencies do not discriminate against faith-based and community-based programs when they hand out Federal dollars. In other words, one of the roadblocks to full implementation of this initiative is to not only make sure the Federal Government responds positively but the State and local governments do as well.

Let me give you an example of part of the issues that faith-based programs face at the State and local government. Janesville, Wisconsin, authorized the Salvation Army to use Federal funds to help purchase a small apartment building to use for transitional housing for the homeless. The city council wisely said, "Why don't we go to an expert? The Army—the Salvation Army has done this for years. They know what they're doing." And that was good news. The bad news is, is that when it approved the funding, the city added a provision declaring that religious ceremonies are not to be conducted on the site initiated by the Salvation Army. That doesn't make any sense, to tell a faith-based provider that they cannot practice the religion that inspires them in the work of compassion.

And so when we learned what happened there with the city council, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the office we set up, sent a letter informing the city that as long as the religious services were not funded with Federal money—in other words, the money was not—Federal money was not used to proselytize—and participation was voluntary, the city had no right to tell the Salvation Army that the price of running a center was to give up its prayers. It's an important concept that you just heard. I mean, it's a—and fortunately, the Janesville city council reversed its previous stand.

Now, we've got to continue to encourage State and community and local governments to not discriminate against faith-based programs, to welcome faith-based programs, to understand a faith-based program will not use money to proselytize, that faith-based programs fully understand that participation in any religious ceremony is voluntary, but that the governments have got to understand that faith-based programs can help Governors and mayors achieve the common goal that we all share, which is a hopeful America for every single citizen. That's an important objective of this administration. And one of the roadblocks, frankly, happens because some States and some local governments receive formula grants—all of them receive formula grants from the Federal Government, but they haven't opened up those grants to competitive bidding.

And so, yesterday, when I spoke to the Governors, I urged them to set up faith-based offices in their Governors' offices. Now, half of the Governors have done so. And if you're in a State where your Governor hasn't, I would urge you to get the Governor to say, "Wait a minute," to the State bureaucracies, "Allow faith-based and community-based groups to bid on Federal money that has been sent down by formula to the States." In other words, we've talked about the Federal grantmaking process, but a lot of money goes out of Washington, DC—

about $40 billion of it—through formula grants. And to me, that's an area where the faith-based community ought to have the chance to bid as well. There's about a hundred mayors have set up faith-based offices, so that's progress. Half the States, 100 cities—we're making progress to make sure that this initiative is accepted at the Federal, State, and local governmental level.

Third step is to get Congress to pass charitable choice legislation. The legislation guarantees in law that faith-based organizations are treated equally when they compete for Federal dollars, and it also protects their religious independence in hiring workers. Charitable choice is something I've supported every year, and every year it's got stuck. There's kind of a consistent pattern there. [*Laughter*]

And so I acted. I signed an Executive order that said that all faith-based groups should have equal access to Federal money. In other words, instead of waiting for Congress to pass charitable choice legislation, I said that a group with a cross on the wall or a rabbi on the board of a faith-based program would not be excluded from the awarding of Federal grants. That's what the initiative said; it said, "Since Congress isn't moving, I will." And that Executive order still stands, but I believe that Executive order ought to be codified into Federal law, and Congress needs to act this year to do so. I think it's important.

Faith-based organizations also need a guarantee they will not be forced to give up their right to hire people of their own faith as the price of competing for Federal money. There are some in our society in the faith community that say, "Why would I want to interface with Government?" And we've got to rid people of that fear. In other words, if we want this program to be effective and to save lives, people have got to say, "Interfacing with Government will not cause me to lose my mission." And part of Towey's job and part of the faith-based offices—the job of the faith-based offices is to go around the country assuring people about the new culture in Washington, DC.

One of the key reasons—and it's important for people here in Washington to understand—one of the key reasons why many faith-based groups are so effective is a commitment to serve that is grounded in the shared values and religious identity of their volunteers and employees. In other words, effectiveness happens because people who share a faith show up to help a particular organization based on that faith to succeed. And that's important now for people in Washington to understand.

The right of religious groups to hire within their faith is included in Title VII of the landmark Civil Rights Act. But Congress has sent conflicting signals about whether that right still applies when a group gets Federal funding. When it comes to drug treatment and aid to needy families, Congress has included language in law that affirms their right to preserve their religious identity in their hiring decisions—the "their" being the faith-based groups. Congress has affirmed that right.

When it comes to programs such as the Workforce Investment Act, Congress has required faith-based groups to forfeit the right. In other words, we're seeing mixed signals. Conflicting laws and regulations discourage faith-based groups. The purpose is to remove roadblocks, to encourage people to participate, not discourage people.

And so I want this issue resolved. Congress needs to send me the same language protecting religious hiring that President Clinton signed on four other occasions. And they need to do it this year. And if we can't get it done this year, I'll consider measures that can be taken through executive action.

The fourth step in advancing a culture of compassion is in ridding the Federal Tax Code of provisions that can discourage charitable giving. Today, a retired American who wants to donate a portion of his or her IRA to charity first pays taxes on the money withdrawn. In other words, "I want to give some money. I've retired. I've got an IRA. I feel compassionate. I want to help an organization that's changing lives. I want to be a part of achieving your goal for America, and so, therefore, I'm going to give you some money, but I have to pay tax on it first."

So we've decided to do something about that, and my 2006 budget includes a proposal that will allow all retirees to make contributions to charities from their IRAs tax-free.

It's a simple change, but it's a substantive change to law. And I believe it will help encourage giving. Listen, America is a generous country, and a lot of people give. They don't need the tax law to encourage tithing, for example. But it always helps on the margin to have good tax law. [*Laughter*]

We've also got another interesting provision in the 2006 budget, and I appreciate the Members of Congress being here to listen to this. It would allow greater deductibility for food donations at a time when food pantries are having trouble keeping their shelves filled. And we're doing a better job of managing surpluses in America. In other words, technology is—and the agricultural sector is coming down, so the ag community does a better job of managing surpluses in America. It's harder to get those surpluses, since there aren't—the surpluses are smaller, to the food pantry, so we've got a problem. And plus, current law discriminates against farmers or ranchers or small businesses or restaurants who do not get the same break, tax break, that some corporations get, and that's not right.

And so the proposal would encourage more food donations by expanding and increasing the deduction of all taxpayers, large and small, sole proprietorships, incorporated, all who are engaged in a trade or a business, that can claim deductions for food donations. It's a practical thing to do, isn't it? I mean, if food pantries are having trouble getting food, why not have the Tax Code encourage people to give food? And so Congress needs to work on helping us help those who want to be generous anyway with a little help in the Tax Code.

It's important for our fellow citizens to understand that the efforts that I've spoken about today do not involve the Government establishing religion. The State should never be the church, and the church should never be the State. And everybody in America understands that.

Anybody who accepts money from the Federal Government, any faith provider, cannot discriminate based on religion. It's an important concept for our fellow citizens to understand, that no one in need will ever be forced to choose a faith-based provider. That's an important concept for people to understand. What that means is if you're the Methodist church and you sponsor an alcohol treatment center, they can't say only Methodists—only Methodists who drink too much can come to our program. [*Laughter*] All drunks are welcome, is what the sign ought to say—welcome to be saved, so they become sober.

When the Government encourages the helping hand offered by the armies of compassion, it is important to understand that Government is acting through common sense, that Government is doing what you would want it to do, saying, "Can we achieve results? How best to achieve an objective?"

The goals that we've set here in our Nation, which is a compassionate country for everybody, to bring light where there's darkness, to help people who struggle, that goal—they are large. I mean, these goals are large goals; I mean, really big goals, important goals. And it's important for our fellow citizens to understand that to achieve those goals, we need all the help we can get. And the best help you can find, in my judgment, is the help from the armies of compassion, those brave soldiers who on an hourly basis answer a universal call to love a neighbor just like they would like to be loved themselves.

I can't think of a better motto for an army, to love a neighbor just like you'd like to be loved yourself. And I can't think of a better role for Government, to say we stand with that army. We stand ready to help energize that army. We want that army to succeed because we want every American from every background in every neighborhood to realize the full promise of this blessed country.

I want to thank you for being generals, lieutenants, sergeants, and privates in the army of compassion. Thank you for giving me a chance to lay out an agenda for the next 4 years that will invigorate this incredibly important initiative of Government.

May God bless you, and may God bless your work.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:11 a.m. at the Omni Shoreham Hotel.

Remarks in a Discussion on Job Training in Arnold, Maryland

March 2, 2005

The President. I appreciate the warm welcome. Thanks for coming. Please be seated. Thank you all. Go ahead and be seated; we've got some work to do. We're here to talk about an important issue, and that is how to make sure people get the skills necessary to fill the jobs of the 21st century. That's what we're here to talk about.

No better place to talk about that than at a community college which is working, and we're here at a good community college. I want to thank Marty Smith. She is one of our panelists. As you can see, we've got a distinguished panel. You're about to hear some interesting stories that I think will pertain to—will make why I believe the community college system is vital to the future of our country real evident to you.

The Governor is here. How about that? Governor Ehrlich, appreciate you coming. And we've got Kendel, First Lady. And we've got Drew. Mom and Dad here?

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr. Mom and Dad are here.

The President. Mom and Dad—still listening to Mom, aren't you?

Governor Ehrlich. Absolutely.

The President. Yes, so am I. [*Laughter*] Laura sends her best. She's back at the White House. She wants to say hello to her friends in Maryland. She's doing great. She and I are going to go Pittsburgh next week to talk about her initiative, which I embrace wholeheartedly, and that is how to help young men realize the great promise of this country, how to fight off the temptation to join gangs and instead join society as a productive citizen. Part of that is to make sure the education system works well. So we're here on an education mission, really, to make sure education is relevant.

I want to thank Jim Fielder, who's the secretary of labor for the State of Maryland. I appreciate you being here, Jim.

A couple of things I want to say. First of all, freedom is on the march. It's a profound period of time. Our Secretary of State is returning from her trip to Europe. I will visit with her tomorrow afternoon. I talked to her on the phone yesterday. I applauded the press conference she held with the Foreign Minister from France, where both of them stood up and said loud and clear to Syria, "You get your troops and your secret services out of Lebanon so that good democracy has a chance to flourish."

The world is working together for the sake of freedom and peace. The world is speaking with one voice when it comes to making sure that democracy has a chance to flourish in Lebanon and throughout the greater Middle East. And when democracies take hold, the world becomes more peaceful; the world becomes a better place for our children and our grandchildren. So I look forward to continuing to work with friends and allies to advance freedom, not America's freedom but universal freedom, freedom granted by a Higher Being.

I also appreciate the good growth of our economy in places like Maryland. Governor, you get—deserve a lot of credit for creating conditions where the entrepreneurial spirit is strong.

Governor Ehrlich. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. You've got an unemployment rate of 4 percent in the State of Maryland. That speaks volumes about good leadership. We've got a national unemployment rate of 5.2 percent. The fundamental question is, how do we keep growing? And so I look forward to working with Congress to continue to advance commonsensical lawsuit reform.

We did something on class-action lawsuits. Republicans and Democrats got together and said, "Wait a minute. We've got a problem. The scales of justice are not balanced, so let's balance them with reasonable reform." We got a good class-action bill to my desk, which I signed. Now it's time for Congress to do something on asbestos, to get good reform to make sure that job creators and people who are harmed—job creators are able to create jobs and people who are actually harmed by asbestos get the settlements they're due.

Congress needs to continue to work on legal reform, including legal reform to make sure good doctors aren't run out of practice. We need medical liability reform.