

determined to rebuild, you now see just a school that is doing much better than it was ever doing before the storm. So to all the parents and the community leaders who have helped rebuild, we are so grateful to you.

But my main message is for the students here. So I want everybody just for a second, listen up, real quiet. I think some of you know a little bit about me. You know, when I was growing up I didn't have my father at home; he had left us. We weren't rich. We didn't have a lot. But the one thing that my mother and my grandparents told me was that if I worked hard in school, if I loved to read and I loved math and I loved science and I studied hard, there wasn't anything that I couldn't do.

Now, just from meeting the young people here today I can tell that there're so many bright, smart, promising students here. But, you know, there are a lot of distractions out there. A lot of you think, "Well, you know, I don't want to study; I'm just going to play basketball." Or, "I don't want to study; I'm going to be a rap star."

I want all of you to know that the most important thing you can do for yourselves and for your community and for your country is to work hard in school and to treat each other with respect and treat yourself with respect,

because I'm confident that if you all work very hard, then there's no reason why you can't be a doctor or a lawyer. There's no reason why you can't be the Secretary of Education or a principal of a school. There's no reason why you can't be a Congressman or a Senator. Maybe you can be the President of the United States. All right?

So I just got a promise in there—I want a promise from every single one of you that you guys are going to work hard in school each and every day. Give me that promise. You promise?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. You give me a pinkie promise?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. Pinkie promise. All right, you know, that's a big promise there. So I'm counting on you guys. I'm going to come back and check on you guys to make sure you've all been working hard. All right? Okay.

And I also just want you to know that Michelle and Malia and Sasha and our dog Bo—everybody says hello, and everybody wishes you well. All right, thank you, guys. All right.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:31 p.m.

Remarks at a Town Hall Meeting and a Question-and-Answer Session in New Orleans

October 15, 2009

The President. Hello, New Orleans! Back in the Big Easy—it's good to see you all. Thank you. Thank you for the warm welcome. Please, everybody have a seat who can have a seat here. If you don't have a seat, then make yourself comfortable.

It is so good to see all of you. I've got a couple of—[*applause*—]thank you. I've got some special folks who are with us here today, so I just want to make sure that I announce them all. First of all, I want to thank Chancellor Tim Ryan and all of the staff here at the University of New Orleans for their outstanding work. I want to thank the Governor of the great State of Louisiana, Bobby Jindal, who is here.

[*At this point, some audience members began to applaud while others began to boo.*]

The President. No, no, I like—Bobby is doing a good job.

Audience members. Boo!

The President. Hey, hey. Hold on a second. Bobby, if it makes—hold on. Bobby, first of all, if it makes you feel any better, I get that all the time. [*Laughter*] And the second point is that even though we have our differences politically, one thing I will say is this person is working hard on behalf of the State, and you've got to give people credit for working hard. He's a hard-working man.

We've got our senior Senator from the great State of Louisiana, Mary Landrieu. We've got our Lieutenant Governor—I don't know if he's related—his name is Mitch Landrieu. We've got an outstanding Member of Congress, Charlie Melancon. And we've got our newest member of the Louisiana delegation, Joe Cao, from this district, with his beautiful daughter.

Joe, what's your daughter's name?

Representative Joseph Cao. Betsy.

Betsy? She is adorable. Hey, Sophia, how are you doing? [*Laughter*] Yes, those are some cute kids. They look like mom. [*Laughter*] That's mom right there. There you go, well, she's gorgeous, like your daughters. I'm big on daughters.

We've got the mayor of New Orleans; Ray Nagin is in the house. This is a feisty crowd here. [*Laughter*] House Speaker Pro Tem Karen Carter Peterson is here. Senate President Joel Chaisson is here.

And we've got just some wonderful members of my Cabinet, who have been down here non-stop, trying to make sure the Federal Government is a good partner on the recovery process: Secretary Janet Napolitano of the Department of Human—Homeland Security; Secretary Shaun Donovan of HUD; Secretary Arne Duncan of Education. Arne is—was supposed to be sitting right here. I don't know where he is; he was right behind me. Chairwoman on the White House Council on Environmental Quality, which is very important in terms of restoring wetlands, Nancy Sutley is right here.

And finally, just I want to say thank you to Reverend Phoebe Roaf for the invocation, Maggie Calmes for leading the pledge, and Shamarr Keith Allen on the horn, playing the national anthem.

All right. Good to be back in the Crescent City.

Audience member. Love you!

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

It's always an inspiration to spend time with men and women who have reminded the rest of America what it means to persevere in the face of tragedy, to rebuild in the face of ruin. And Katrina may have swept through the city, but it did not destroy this community, and that is because of you, the people of New Orleans.

It has now been just over 4 years since that terrible storm struck your shores. And in the days after it did, this Nation, and all the world, bore witness to the fact that the damage from Katrina was not caused just by a disaster of nature, but also by a breakdown of Government, that Government wasn't adequately prepared, and we didn't adequately respond.

Now, I saw the consequences of this failure during my visit here as a Senator and then as a candidate for President. So when I took office as President, one of the first things I did was tell my Cabinet and senior staff that our Gulf Coast rebuilding efforts and our disaster response efforts were going to be top priorities for this White House. I wanted to get it right, and I wanted us to be ready.

And so far, I'm pleased to report that we've made good progress. We've got a long way to go, but we've made progress. Over the last 9 months, we have sent more Cabinet members to this region than almost anywhere in the country, not just to make appearances, but to listen, and to learn, and help you move forward. As we've continued this recovery effort, I've made it clear that we're not going to tolerate the usual turf wars between agencies. So we've prioritized coordination between all levels of Government. We put in place innovative review and dispute resolution programs to get projects moving forward quickly. We've freed up over \$1.5 billion in recovery and rebuilding assistance that had been tangled up in redtape for years.

And this assistance is allowing us to move forward together with projects that were stalled across the Gulf Coast: projects rebuilding and improving schools, investing in public health and safety, repairing broken roads and bridges and buildings. And this effort has been dramatically amplified by the Recovery Act, which has put thousands of Gulf Coast residents back to work.

On the housing front, we're tackling the corruption and inefficiency that plagued the New Orleans Housing Authority for years. We've also been able to dramatically cut the number of people who are still in emergency housing. We're moving forward—we're moving families towards self-sufficiency by helping homeowners

rebuild and helping renters find affordable options.

On the education front, I just visited Martin Luther King Charter School, the first school to reopen in the Ninth Ward and an inspiration for this city. We've also worked to be a better partner and free up funding that has allowed places like this university right here, the University of New Orleans and the Southern University of New Orleans to rebuild. We're looking for ways to be more flexible, so New Orleans can build the school system it deserves. And because a lot of your public schools opened themselves up to new ideas and innovative reforms, we're actually seeing an improvement in overall achievement that is making the city a model for reform nationwide. That is good news, thanks to the hard work being done right here in New Orleans.

When it comes to health care, we've invested in supporting health centers and recruiting more primary care providers and nurses and other medical professionals to fill the shortage left by Katrina. We remain committed to building a new VA medical center in downtown New Orleans so we can better serve and care for our veterans. And to help fight crime, we're helping to hire cops and rebuild jails.

So that's what we're doing in terms of rebuilding and recovery. But we're also focusing on preparedness and response so that history does not repeat itself. We are committed to making sure that a disaster like Katrina does not happen again. And that means in Washington, a focus on competence and accountability. And I'm proud that my FEMA Director, Craig Fugate, has 25 years of experience in disaster management in Florida, a State that's known its share of hurricanes. And I think Republicans and Democrats will testify to his skill and experience.

We have put together a group led by Shaun Donovan and Janet Napolitano to study disaster recovery across the country, to figure out how to do it better. Across the country, we're improving coordination among different agencies, we're modernizing our emergency communications, we're helping families plan for a crisis.

And here on the Gulf Coast, we're working to make sure this region is protected in the event of a 100-year storm. We've already seen 220 miles worth of levees and flood walls repaired, and we are working to strengthen the wetlands and barrier islands that are the first line of defense for the Gulf Coast. This isn't just critical to this region's physical protection, it's critical to our environment, it's critical to our economy. That's why we're establishing an interagency working group that will be responsible for coordinating our restoration efforts across the gulf at all levels of government.

Now, even with all the action we've taken and all the progress we've made, we know how much work is left to be done. Whether you're driving through New Orleans, Biloxi, or the southern part of Louisiana, it's clear how far we have to go before we can call this recovery a real success. There are sewers and roads still to repair. There are houses and hospitals still vacant. There are schools and neighborhoods still waiting to thrive once more. And so I promise you this: Whether it's me coming down here or my Cabinet or other members of my administration, we will not forget about New Orleans. We are going to keep on working. We are not going to forget about the Gulf Coast. Together, we will rebuild this region and we will rebuild it stronger than before. It is going to be stronger than before.

I know that for a lot of you, the questions and concerns you have aren't limited to the Recovery Act and the efforts that have taken place here on the Gulf. You're also wondering about the recovery effort that's taking place throughout America. Because an economic storm hit about 9 months ago, 10 months ago, that caused this recession that is as bad as anything we've seen since the Great Depression. Obviously, it hasn't left behind the death and destruction that Katrina and Rita left behind, but it's caused incredible pain and hardship for communities all across this country, communities that have seen too many jobs disappear, too many businesses close, too many middle class families who are just barely making it.

These families are the backbone of America; they're the ones who built this country and

made it great—you—and keep this country going each and every day. And so you deserve leaders in Washington who are willing to work as hard as you work, who are willing to fight for your futures.

That's why our goal is not just to rebound from this recession, it's to build an America that works for everybody, where everyone who's looking for work can find a job, not just a temporary job, but a permanent job that lasts from year to year, season to season. We want an economy where our stock market is not only rising again but our businesses are hiring again, and people's incomes are going up again. We're not going to rest until we get there.

Now, the Recovery Act we passed earlier this year has helped stop the bleeding; everybody agrees on that. It's put tax cuts in the pockets of working families and small businesses. It extended unemployment insurance and health insurance to people who've been laid off. It's saved or created hundreds of thousands of jobs in the private sector. And it made sure that teachers weren't being laid off and police officers weren't being laid off in states that were hemorrhaging because of lost tax revenue.

But the Recovery Act is just the start. If we want a recovery that lasts, if we want an economy that really grows again, we've got to rebuild stronger than before, just like you're doing here in New Orleans. We need to come together and meet the challenges that were with us before this recession hit: schools that weren't closing before the recession. That means building a clean energy economy that can lead to millions of new jobs and new industries. That means building an education system that equips every citizen with the skills and training they need to compete with any worker in the world. That means building a health care system that finally offers security to those who have insurance and affordable options to those who don't.

Let me say, we're going to get it done. We're going to get it done. Too many Americans have waited too long for this to happen. We are going to pass health care reform by the end of this year with the help of Mary Landrieu, with the help of Charlie Melancon, and maybe with the help of Joe Cao, we're going to get health care done this year.

Now, just in case any of you were wondering, I never thought any of this was going to be easy. [Laughter] You know, I listen to sometimes to these reporters on the news, "Well, why haven't you solved world hunger yet?" [Laughter] "Why isn't everybody—it's been 9 months. You know, why isn't there—" You know? I never said it was going to be easy.

What did I say during the campaign? I said is, change is hard. And big change is harder. And after the last 9 months, you know, I wasn't kidding. [Laughter] I wasn't kidding about it being hard. But you notice I wasn't kidding, I don't quit. We get this stuff done. We keep on going until we get it done. I don't quit. Let me tell you, those folks who are trying to stand in the way of progress? They're all—let me tell you, I'm just getting started. I don't quit. I'm not tired. I'm just getting started. [Applause] That's right. We're just getting started.

Audience members. Yes we can! Yes we can! Yes we can!

The President. Thank you. All right. See? I'm getting all—you're getting me fired up.

I think it is important for those folks to understand I'm just ready to go. We're just going to keep on going. And the reason is, is because there are too many folks out there who are having a tough time—to get tired. The easiest thing in the world would be to just say, "Okay, well, I don't want any controversy; let me take the path of least resistance." But that means that the same folks who were struggling before we got elected are going to keep on struggling. People, if they had high premiums on their health care before, they're going to have even higher premiums after. That's not why I applied for the job.

The challenges we face, both here on the Gulf Coast and throughout America, they're big, they're complex challenges. They don't lend themselves to easy answers or quick fixes. Meeting them requires diligence, and perseverance, and patience.

It also requires more than just government programs and policies. It requires a renewed spirit of cooperation and commitment among our citizens, a renewed sense of responsibility to ourselves and to one another, which is why it's important, whether you're dealing with a

Republican or a Democrat, that we are maintaining civility, that we are listening to each other, that we are willing to find areas of common ground and cooperation.

It's the same spirit that took hold of this city and this region in the days after Katrina, a spirit that has sustained you to this day. You didn't get tired. As hard as it was, you're still out there, still working hard, still rebuilding, still committed to your city.

I've talked a lot today about what steps we've taken at the Federal level to help the Gulf Coast recover and rebuild. But the true story is this community's unbending resilience. That doesn't start in Washington; it starts right here, in the reborn neighborhoods of New Orleans. It begins with the men and women who waded into deep water or climbed onto rooftops and risked their own lives to save people they'd never met before. It begins with the doctors and nurses who stayed behind to care for the sick and the injured without equipment, without electricity, like our Nation's Surgeon General, Dr. Regina Benjamin, mortgaged her house, maxed out on her credit cards so she could reopen her clinic and help care for victims of the storm.

All the volunteer firefighters from this city who recently traveled to Iowa to help another community recover from the devastation of a tornado, they went because they still remember when New York City firefighters who'd been through 9/11 came down to New Orleans to help folks out here after Katrina.

The story of this city's resilience begins with all the men and women who refused to give up on their homes, who stayed to clean up and rebuild, not just their own homes or their own yards or their own lives, but their neighbors' too.

Here at the University of New Orleans and at other colleges and universities in this city, this year's graduating class will be the first class that chose to apply to a New Orleans school after Katrina. Think about that. They knew what had happened here, they knew how much work was still left to be done, but they chose to come anyway. They wanted to be here.

Of all the signs of progress I've mentioned today, that's the most powerful: the idea there's still people coming to this city—especially young people—who are committed to its future, who are ready and willing to withstand what storms may come, eager to rebuild something better in place of what was. That's the kind of commitment and determination we need at this moment, not just here in New Orleans, but all across America. And if we can harness that spirit, I have no doubt that we will succeed in meeting our greatest challenges.

And I am grateful to all of you because I know that you are here because you believe in the possibilities of remaking America to become what it can be. Thank you very much, everybody. Appreciate you. Thank you.

All right. We're going to take some questions now. Now, here's—hold on a second. I'm going to get a sip of water.

Audience member. [Inaudible]

The President. Excuse me? Well, it's nice to see you. [Laughter]

All right. Everybody can sit back down. We're going to take some questions. Now, here's what we're going to do, is we're going to just—whoever has a question, raise their hand. I'm not going to be able to get to every single person. I'm going to go girl, boy, girl, boy, so you all don't—[laughter]—so nobody gets mad at me. And if—there are people with microphones in the audience, so when I call on you, if you can wait until you get the microphone and introduce yourself so that we know who you are. All right? I'll start with that gentleman in—right there.

Reverend, good to see you. You look good today.

Education

Q. Thank you, sir. I'm Reverend Smith from Rayville, Louisiana. And Mr. President, my question is that we have 30 percent dropout rate in the United States. And in my community, what we feel like in our community—we don't knock private schools, and we don't knock other schools, but in our community we took our dropout rate from a 13 percent to a .8. And we have a 97 percent attendance rate.

The President. That's excellent.

Q. We don't have any gangs in our schools. And our graduation rate went up from a 64 percent this year to a 73.5. And that's a concern to me, in the United States that we are losing so many young men, not only Afro American men, but all men.

And my question to you is that I know that my secretary of state—and I support you and him—we should not look at just different schools, but we should look at all of our children in all of our schools and target that, because no one school does not have all problems. We have problems.

The President. Well, look, there's a reason why I went to visit Martin Luther King Charter School, because as I said before, a good-news story about New Orleans—let's face it, the schools weren't working for the children of New Orleans before the storm. And what has happened is, is that this community has actually used the crisis as an opportunity to start rebuilding and try and experiment with new ways of learning.

One of the things that we did in the Recovery Act that got very little attention at the time, but I think is one of the most important things we did, is we said, we're going to help schools on construction, we're going to put money into the State so that the Governor doesn't have to lay off—or the local school districts don't have as big of a problem in terms of their budgets.

But what we also did was we set up something called Race to the Top, and what Race to the Top said is we're going to set aside \$5 billion that States can compete for. But here is the deal: In order to compete for it, you've got to make sure that you're showing us how are you reducing the dropout rate and improving performance in low-performing schools; how are you improving teacher quality and really emphasizing teachers, because that's the most important thing in a school, is teachers, and are we giving them the support and the training that they need; how are you keeping effective data so that we know what's going on in these schools and people—kids aren't falling through the cracks.

So there are a whole series of things that we are initiating to try to be a good partner with

States and local school districts, to raise our expectations, but also give them the tools.

I mean, one of the problems with No Child Left Behind was that it had a bunch of tests and had, I think, legitimately high expectations, but it didn't always follow through with the tools that schools needed in order to actually achieve these goals that had been set. So we want to provide those resources.

Now, Reverend, I think you'll agree with me when I say that I can work hard, States can work hard, city can work hard, every Government official can work hard to try to improve our schools, but if our parents don't insist on excellence from their children we won't succeed.

So that's why when I visited the school today—beautiful kids, I mean, they were just charming and smart, and they're sitting there and introducing themselves and describing all their projects, and they were very proud of their school—you could tell that the adults had invested in making sure that they understood they were important and they were special, but we also had high expectations of them. They were sitting still, they were—"yes, sir," "yes, ma'am." Just that home training makes a big difference.

Now, not every child is going to get the support they need at home, let's face it. But all of us, in one way or another, in our communities can be supportive of our children, helpful in making sure that they've got somebody, an adult that they can look up to. It can be in the church, it can be in a community center, but really giving our young people that kind of support, that's so—that's at least as critical—I would argue more critical—than what Government is going to do.

So that's a challenge not just to me, that's a challenge to all of us. Everybody has got to be involved.

All right? Okay, it's a young lady's turn; this young lady right here, you. [*Laughter*]

Domestic Violence Against Women

Q. Hi, Mr. President. My name is Narkise Barack.

The President. Is that right? Wow! [*Laughter*] You and me. [*Laughter*]

Q. And I'm a single mom of three daughters. I have my eldest here, she's 12 years old.

The President. Hey, you. What's her name?

Q. Yasmine.

The President. Yasmine? That's a nice name.

Q. Yes. And she goes to Lusher, which is one of the top schools here.

The President. Excellent.

Q. My question has to do with an article that came out today in the Times Picayune in which it reported that Tom Perrelli, the Associate Attorney General, was lauding local non-governmental and governmental agencies in the effort to help women who were victims of domestic violence.

I know—I don't know if you know, but the rates of domestic violence rose quite dramatically after Katrina and have continued to rise. And one of the problems is we've got agencies that are helping women with things like therapy and food and help with their children. The problem is that our legal aid clinics—Tulane, Loyola, NoLAC—all of these clinics have been so overburdened with cases that have to do with Katrina, that a lot of people can't get access to legal help.

Now, the segment of the population that's most suffering from this are women, and by extension, children. You can sit in court in Jefferson Parish, in Orleans Parish, for a whole day and watch a whole docket of cases, and not a single woman has legal counsel. So I wanted to ask you—I know that you and Mr. Biden have been supporters of the Violence Against Women Act, and I was wondering what you can do to ensure that women in southeast Louisiana have their civil rights protected and their due process protected.

The President. Well, the—it's a great question. As I mentioned, speaking broadly, obviously, there continue to be concerns about crime in the region, post-Katrina. And not only have we helped to fund Mayor Nagin and others to be able to rehire cops and rebuild police stations and so forth, but also to build a more effective judicial system, because that goes with it. We've set up a violent crimes task force that is up and running and coordinates between the FBI and all the various local and State agencies.

So there are a range of steps that we've taken generally to address crime. But I think you're making a really powerful point, which is that when it comes to domestic violence, oftentimes that's underreported because women don't feel that they have the support they need in order to step out from those situations. The issue of legal representation is still a big problem.

So what I'd like to do is to learn more specifically about what's happening here. I will ask—I'll probably ask Tom Perrelli, since you mentioned him, who is deputy attorney general, to make sure that he investigates specifically how we can work more effectively with the legal aid organizations down here to provide more support.

So thank you for bringing that to my attention. That's great.

All right. It's a man's turn. It's a man's turn. I want to make sure—that gentleman right back there. No, no, you—yes, you, right there.

Gulf Coast Recovery

Q. Good afternoon. My name is Gabriel Bornay from here in New Orleans. My question is regarding FEMA reimbursements. [Laughter] Why is it 4 years after Katrina we're still fighting with the Federal Government for money to repair our devastated city? Delgado Community College, the largest vocational educational institution in the region, recently had to turn away 1,500 students because FEMA is only offering \$19 million to repair buildings that suffered \$40 million in damage.

We have also been without a full-service public hospital for the last 4 years because FEMA—[applause]—it's very popular. We've been without a full-service hospital for the last 4 years because FEMA is offering \$350 million less than the true damage costs incurred. I mean, I expected as much from the Bush administration, but why are we still being nicked and dimed in our recovery?

The President. Well, look, let me say this. First of all, I will say to every single person in the gulf region, you could not have a better FEMA Director than we have right now. And I think our agency is working around the clock

to clear up redtape and to eliminate bureaucracy.

On backlogs that go back years, now, as I said, the—I know since a lot of these problems have been going on since Katrina happened, people understandably feel impatient. On the other hand, these things were not all going to be fixed tomorrow. So we are working as hard as we can as quickly as we can to process through many of these issues.

Now, you mentioned, for example, Charity Hospital. We are committed to working with the city and the State to make sure that we have world-class health facilities here in New Orleans. But what is also true is that there are all sorts of complications between the State, the city and the Feds in making assessments on the damages.

Now, I wish I could just write a check——

Audience member. [Inaudible]

The President. You say, “why not?” Well, you know, there’s this whole thing about the Constitution and Congress and—[laughter]—not to mention the fact that, you know, I’m always—you know, one of the interesting things you find out about being President is everybody will attack you for spending money, unless you’re spending it on them. You notice that? [Laughter] So we’ve got to go through procedures.

But here’s the good news. For example, on Charity Hospital, I know the State has agreed to go through an arbitration process that Mary Landrieu helped set up that is designed to cut through and avoid a long, tangled mess, so that we can actually start rebuilding and providing services. Janet Napolitano has done a great job in creating a bunch of alternative mechanisms to resolve these disputes. And Janet, how many have we—what is it, 76 of these disputes that we’ve already resolved? At least, right? That’s part of the reason why we sprung loose \$1.4 billion of money that had been held up for years. Now, that may not be—sound like a lot of money to you, but it’s real money.

So I guess my point is this: I make no excuses for the fact that Federal Government did not work effectively with State and local governments immediately in the aftermath of the storm to make sure that everybody got the help

they needed right away. And we are still working through the backlog of problems that exist. But you know, I will say that I think not only Democrat Mary Landrieu, but also, I think, Republican Governor Jindal will tell you that our team is outstanding, they are working really hard all the time to try to get these things resolved as quickly as possible. And my expectation is, is that by the time that my term is over, you guys are going to look back and you’re going to say, this was a responsive administration on health care, on housing, on education, that actually made sure that the money flowed and that things got done the way they were supposed to get done.

All right. It’s a lady’s turn. I’m going to—all right, the sister friend right here called out, so we’ll get a mix here—right here. Latina.

Immigration Reform

Q. Yes. *Buenas tardes.*

The President. *Buenas tardes.*

Q. My question is, there’s a lot of cases that have been mothers losing their children because of immigration. And the kids are lost in the system. I don’t think that’s fair. I know, you know, immigration is illegal, but we have to keep the families together. What is going to happen?

The President. Well, the—first of all, you’re right that this is heartbreaking. The way to solve it is to solve our immigration problem more broadly. In the short term, Janet Napolitano is also in charge of immigration. She’s got a lot of stuff on her plate, by the way; give Janet Napolitano a big round of applause. She’s working hard.

In the short term what we’re trying to do is to apply our immigration laws in a humane way that recognizes you don’t want to just snatch a child from a mother. If the child is a U.S. citizen, even if the mother may not be, it’s a very complicated problem. But the way sometimes this has been administered I don’t think any of us would feel good about in terms of reflecting American values. All right, you’ve got a small child that suddenly gets sent into some foster care system, and the mother is sent away. So we’ve got to deal with that short-term issue.

The long-term problem, though, is the fact that we are a nation of laws and we are a nation of immigrants. So we believe in immigration. The vast majority of folks here, you all came from someplace else. And I don't have a lot of sympathy to folks who suddenly, once they're in, don't want anybody else to come in. That doesn't make sense to me.

But we're also a nation of laws. And that means that when there are people in Mexico City waiting in line and paying their fees and doing everything right, and they are having to wait for years, and then other folks are coming in without waiting in line, that's not fair. And it's not fair to them, and it's also putting enormous burden on, for example, our borders. And it's often unsafe. A lot of people die at those borders trying to cross them.

So what we're trying to do is to create a mechanism for comprehensive immigration reform that would have some basic principles. Number one, we would strengthen the borders. That has to be done. Number two, we would be serious about going after employers who are purposely hiring undocumented workers, because they don't want to pay a minimum wage or they don't want to pay them overtime or what have you.

You know, everybody talk—you know, you have these raids where they go in and they grab some undocumented workers. Yes, they broke the law, but, you know, they're just trying to feed their families. Go after these big companies that are purposely hiring those folks, because they're the ones who are actually taking advantage of the system. So that's the second thing.

The third thing then is we've got to figure out—we've got several million—it's estimated, let's say, somewhere between 10 and 15 million undocumented workers who live here. And they've been here for a long time and many of them have children here who are going to schools and are now U.S. citizens. And what I've said is the notion that somehow you are going to send all those folks back, you're going to line up a whole bunch of buses, and by the way, they're not all from Mexico—they're from Ireland, they're from Poland, they're from Ghana—because that's an-

other stereotype, I think, that often gets promulgated.

Now, they have broken the law. So what I've said is, let's acknowledge they've broken the law, they've got to pay a fine, they've got to learn English, they've got to jump through a whole bunch of hoops, pay back-taxes. But let's give them a pathway whereby they can get right, they can get legal. And then that way we will not have these kinds of situations where families are potentially being pulled apart.

But it's—you've got to combine the two things. You know, sometimes there are those on the left who want immigration reform, but they don't want to acknowledge the fact that, well, we've got to strengthen our borders. And you can't just do one without the other. On the other hand, there are some folks who just say, "Just crackdown on the borders," but they pretend like somehow we're going to send back 12 million people, and we're not.

So let's just get serious about this and solve the problem. And I think that we've got an opportunity to solve it in the next year or two. All right? Thank you very much.

Okay, it's a guy's turn. It's a man's turn. The guy is trying to flash his credentials here. [Laughter] This gentleman right here, you. Yes, sir, right there.

Health Care Reform

Q. Good afternoon, Mr. President.

The President. Good afternoon. What's your name, sir?

Q. Elliot LaBeaud, New Orleans all the way.

The President. There you go. Nice to meet you, sir.

Q. Welcome to New Orleans.

The President. Thank you, sir.

Q. My question is regarding health care reform. For years—well, I'm on Social Security and so is my wife, Peggy.

The President. Hey, Peggy. [Laughter] She's very attractive.

Q. Thank you. [Laughter] We've just celebrated our 50th anniversary.

The President. Hey, give a round.

Q. Thank you. Thank you. Regarding health care reform, we've been on Social Security for

a while. And every year up until now the Social Security Administration has announced inflationary increases. My question is this, is that what can health care reform do, or what will it do to help reduce the cost of Part B? Because Part B takes away what increases we've gotten in the past.

The President. Well, first of all, let me point out that under the formula Social Security would not see a COLA this year, an automatic COLA increase because we've actually had deflation, right? Costs have gone 6 percent. But because of the hardships that folks on fixed income have still experienced, I've been supportive of the idea that a one-time \$250 payment to seniors would be an appropriate approach which would approximate—would come out to about 1.8-percent increase. Okay. So that just deals with the issue of what's going on with Social Security.

In terms of Part B and rising costs generally, here's what we believe health reform would do. First of all, it would contain costs generally—and this is not now our assertion, this is the assertion of the Congressional Budget Office, which is nonpartisan—that it would start lowering costs across the board because it would change how we use our medical system. Our medical system is so inefficient. We get five tests when we only need one. We have paperwork and bureaucracy all through the system. You go into a doctor, you have to fill out five forms. But you notice, this is the only area of the economy that's not digitalized. It's very easy for you—for the credit card companies to find you and send you your bill, but somehow you can never get a decent bill that makes sense and that you can read in health care because of all the paperwork involved.

So there are ways that we can streamline the system that will reduce costs, and that will help control costs not just in the private sector, but also for Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid.

Now, the other thing that is important is that one of the biggest costs for seniors is prescription drugs. And we are estimating that we can save a minimum of \$80 billion, and it may be more, that will help close the doughnut hole on prescription drugs for seniors under Medicare.

If you combine these various savings that would affect both Part B and Part D, then we actually believe that over the long term you would not see health care costs going up at 8 percent when your Social Security check is only going up 2 or 3 percent.

But the only way we achieve that is if we reform the health care system to slow health care inflation. And this is why—for those of you out there who wonder, "Well, what's in it for me? I've already got health insurance, I can see why if I didn't have health insurance that I'd want health insurance reform, but I've got health insurance through my job and it's working pretty well. Why do I want health insurance reform?" Well, here's why. I just told you that last year, inflation actually went down, I mean, we had deflation. Not so in health care. In health care, costs went up 5.5 percent. Your employers are experiencing increases of 15 percent on their premiums, 20 percent, their share that they pay for you. You may not see it in your paycheck, but they're paying it. And it's going up 15 percent, 20 percent, 30 percent.

How long do you think it's going to be before employers start saying, I can't afford this, so I'm either going to drop coverage for my workers or I'm going to start charging a lot higher out-of-pocket costs? That's already happening, isn't it? How many people have seen their costs go up on their health care bills?

So it's—your premiums have doubled, the average family's premiums have doubled over the last 10 years, and it is a certainty—this is not speculation, it is a certainty—that if we do nothing your premiums will double again over the next 10 years. It might only take five for them to double. And it is going to eat a larger and larger part of your paycheck. So even if you've got health insurance reform, we've got to control costs over the long term.

Now, you've heard a lot of funny tales about this health care reform bill, so let me just be clear here. Nobody is talking about cutting benefits under Medicare. Nobody is talking about somehow forcing you under Government plans to lose the health insurance that you have. All we're talking about is giving you some options, some better choices, and more security in the health insurance that you have, so they can't

drop you when you get sick, so you can still get health insurance with a preexisting condition, so you don't have huge, high out-of-pocket costs, so your employer, if you work for a small business, can go into an exchange and pool with other small businesses and other individuals to get a better deal from the insurance companies.

You know, nothing is harder right now to getting insurance than if you are self-employed or you work for a small business, because what happens is, you don't have enough workers for the insurance company to really want your business. So what we're going to do is we're going to set up an exchange; that means, suddenly you've got a million people bargaining instead of one. And that means you're going to get a better deal, and that means insurance companies who want the business of all those individuals and those small businesses are going to want to compete.

And by the way, I just want to warn you, even though we now have every committee in Congress having voted out a bill and we're closer than we've ever been, this is when the insurance companies are really going to start gearing up, because now they're—their stock went down when the Senate Finance Committee voted out that bill. Now they're getting nervous and they—by the way, they have been wildly profitable over the last decade, and this is when you're going to start seeing a whole bunch of those ads. And I just—if it says, you know, some funny named group out there that you can't really identify, you know, Americans for Good Health Care or something, but you've never heard of them before, it's probably a front group for the insurance industry. And don't let them fool you, we're going to get this done. We're going to fight for it.

All right? Okay, that was a man, wasn't it? Right there, all right. This young lady right there, right there. I broke your heart? Oh, come on. [Laughter] Go ahead, right here.

Environment

Q. Good afternoon, President Obama.

The President. Hi. What's your name?

Q. Okay. My question—

The President. What's your name?

Q. My name is Davida.

The President. Davida?

Q. Yes, sir.

The President. Hey, Davida.

Q. How are you?

The President. I'm good. [Laughter]

Q. Okay. President Obama, I'm not an environmentalist, and I'm not a scientist, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out that something is wrong in the environment if it's October, and the weather is as it is. [Laughter] I recently—I'm a Louisiana native, and I recently moved back home from California, where there, it was a big push for going green and environmental policies.

The President. Right.

Q. Here there isn't even a recycling program that's free in home. [Applause]

The President. Okay, all right, all right. Go ahead. Go ahead.

Q. My question for you is, in the midst of all the other important things such as health care, education, domestic violence, and all those things that you do have on your plate—and I recognize that—how can we make—or how can you, as the leader of the Government, make environmental policies more effective?

The President. Okay, well, the—it's a great question. Nancy, if I get into trouble let me know, because this is one of my top environmentalists; she knows what she's talking about.

Well, look, let me talk about some very specific things that we can do, and then let me speak overall about what a huge challenge it's going to be. We have already invested through the Recovery Act in probably the biggest clean energy investment in American history. I mean, we are providing tax breaks to businesses that are creating wind power and solar power and renewable energy. We are providing funding for the retrofitting of buildings that—so that they become more energy efficient. We are looking at weatherization programs where we can hire young people who don't have jobs to go in and start insulating buildings that will save people's energy bills over the long term.

So there are a lot of specific things that could be done both at the Federal level and at the State level. And I'll be honest with you,

I'm not familiar enough with what's being done specifically here in Louisiana, so that's why all these folks here have been taking notes. And I am sure that they will want to report back to you. [Laughter] They're going to want—you should give them your names, and they're going to—your name and your address and they will send you all the information about what's being done, because I'm sure they're doing some things here locally. [Laughter] No, I'm confident.

But, look, here's both the broader challenge and the broader opportunity. The challenge is that there's almost no dispute among serious scientists that climate change is real, and if the planet keeps on getting warmer and water temperatures keep on rising, there's almost no dispute among scientists that that means worse hurricanes, more frequently, more violent, and other shifts in weather patterns that are going to create drought and famine and displacement not just here, but around the world. We're pretty sure about that.

The second thing we know is that we used to be about 30 percent dependent on foreign oil; we're now about 70 percent dependent on foreign oil, which means that we just send billions of dollars over to somebody else, basically ship out their wealth. Now, Louisiana is an oil State; the Gulf Coast is, obviously, very important to our energy independence. And Mary Landrieu and others have been battling to make sure that Louisiana continues to build on its energy treasures.

But the fact of the matter is, is that if we don't think about using energy more efficiently, then we're not going to solve the climate change problem and we're not going to solve the energy independence problem.

Now, here's the good news, is that coming out of this recession, we're going to need a whole bunch of new areas of industry to employ people. And clean energy offers probably the best opportunity to become a huge engine for economic growth and innovation in our economy.

So what I think we need to do is to increase our domestic energy production. I'm in favor of finding environmentally sound ways to tap our oil and our natural gas. I'm in favor of—there's

no reason why, technologically, we can't employ nuclear energy in a safe and effective way. Japan does it and France does it. And it doesn't have greenhouse gas emissions, so it would be stupid for us not to do that in a much more effective way.

But the most important thing we can do is to also develop new sources of clean energy and drastically ramp up our energy efficiency. And so I'm going to be pushing legislation after health care; I can't do it all at once. We've already got some progress out of the House; we're going to have some more progress to be made in the Senate. There are going to be disagreements, and I'll be honest with you, folks in Louisiana, a lot of whom are employed by the energy industry, sometimes are going to be suspicious about, well, how does this affect oil and how does this affect gas. And that's legitimate. That's part of the give-and-take process of our democracy. But I ultimately am convinced that we should be able to put together a package that puts people back to work, makes us more energy independent, and saves our planet in the process.

And I'm looking for partners from Government, but this is also an area where Government alone can't do it. You've got to be involved.

Audience member. [Inaudible]

The President. There you go—this guy right here, he says he's ready to go. You know, for you to think about how are you using energy at home, how are you using energy in your businesses, are you buying long-lasting lights? Are you installing insulation that saves on your energy bills? All those things cumulatively make a huge difference.

There was an article today in the New York Times about the fact that one of the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases is all the natural gas leaks at factories. And it turns out that if producers would actually seal up those leaks, not only would it be great for the environment, but they'd also make money because that's money going out of their pockets from all those leaks.

So there's just a bunch of commonsense stuff that we could do that would make a huge difference. But frankly, everybody has got to chip in,

and the transition is going to take some time. And people don't like change sometimes. They're comfortable doing the things they're doing. I know a whole bunch of you guys—it took a long time before you decided that Hummer didn't make much sense when gas was 3.50 an hour [a gallon],^o you know. [Laughter] You know, you like that big car until that gas went up to 4 and you said, "Man!" [Laughter]

All right. I've got time for one more question. It's a man's turn, isn't it? It's a guy's turn. Okay, here's—this young man, right here. I'm going to let him use my special mike. Hey, this is a big guy—don't go "aww." Come on, man, I mean, this is a—all right, what's your name?

The President's Popularity

Q. Terrence Scott.

The President. Terrence Scott. What do you have to say?

Q. I have to say, why do people hate you and why—they supposed to love you, and God is love and—

The President. That's what I'm talking about. [Laughter] Come on. That's what I'm talking about. Terrence, I appreciate that. What grade are you in?

Q. Fourth.

The President. You're in fourth grade? Well, now, first of all, I did get elected President, so not everybody hates me. Now, I don't want you to—[laughter]. I got a whole lot of votes. I want to make sure everybody understands. But you know, what is true is if you were watching TV lately, it seems like everybody is just getting mad all the time. And, you know, I think that you've got to take it with a grain of

salt. Some of it is just what's called politics, where once one party wins then the other party kind of gets—feels like it needs to poke you a little bit to keep you on your toes. And so you shouldn't take it too seriously.

And then sometimes—as I said before, people just—I think they're worried about their own lives. A lot of people are losing their jobs right now. A lot of people are losing their health care, or they've lost their homes to foreclosure. And they're feeling frustrated. And when you're President of the United States, you know, you've got to deal with all of that. That's exactly right. And, you know, one—you get some of the credit when things go good, and when things are going tough, then you're going to get some of the blame and that's part of the job.

But you know, I'm a pretty tough guy. Are you a tough guy? You look like you're pretty tough. And so you've just got to keep on going even when folks are criticizing you, because as long as you know that you're doing it for other people, all right? So thank you. You're a fine young man. I appreciate you. All right. Give Terrence a big round of applause.

All right, everybody. I love you. Thank you. Thank you, New Orleans. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:15 p.m. at the University of New Orleans. In his remarks, he referred to Hieu "Kate" Hoang, wife of Rep. Anh "Joseph" Quang Cao; Phoebe Roaf, associate rector, Trinity Episcopal Church in New Orleans, LA; Surgeon General-designate Regina M. Benjamin; James Davis, economic development director, Rayville, LA; and Associate Attorney General Thomas J. Perrelli.

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Dinner in San Francisco, California

October 15, 2009

Thank you. Thank you. Please, everybody, have a seat. Now, I am not going to spoil a good dinner with a long speech. [Laughter]

But there are some big thank yous that I've got to say.

^o White House correction.