

As the High Holidays begin, we look back on all the moments during the past year that give us reason to hope. Around the world, a new generation is reaching for their universal rights. Here in the United States, we've responded to our challenges by focusing on the things that really matter: friendship, family, and community.

But this last year was also one of hardship for people around the world. Too many of our friends and neighbors continue to struggle in the wake of a terrible economic recession. And beyond our borders, many of our closest allies, including the State of Israel, face the uncertainties of an unpredictable age.

That is why my administration is doing everything we can to promote prosperity here at home and security and peace throughout the

world, and that includes reaffirming our commitment to the State of Israel. While we cannot know all that the new year will bring, we do know this: The United States will continue to stand with Israel, because the bond between our two nations is unshakable.

As Jewish tradition teaches us, we may not complete the work, but that must never keep us from trying. In that spirit, Michelle and I wish you and your families and all who celebrate Rosh Hashanah a sweet year full of health, happiness, and peace.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President's remarks were videotaped at approximately 4:35 p.m. on September 23 in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast.

## Remarks at an "Open for Questions" Roundtable Question-and-Answer Session

September 28, 2011

*Yahoo! Inc. Editor-in-Chief for U.S. Hispanic and Latin America Jose Siade.* Ladies and gentlemen, *señoras y señores*, welcome to "Open for Questions" with President Obama. I'm Jose Siade from Yahoo! en Español, your host today, coming to you from the White House. I'm honored to be joined today by industry colleagues Karine Medina from MSN Latino and Gabriel Lerner from AOL Latino and HuffPost LatinoVoices.

And sitting next to me, a man that needs no introduction, President Barack Obama.

*The President.* Thank you so much, Jose. Thank you for having me.

*Mr. Siade.* Thank you very much, sir, for sitting down with us today. We received hundreds of questions from our audience—from our U.S. Hispanic audience across the country. And we've brought some of those questions in today so you can address them.

*The President.* Excellent. Look forward to it.

### *Immigration Reform*

*Mr. Siade.* Very well. Let's jump into the first question, from Claudia in California: "President Obama, there are many illegal

aliens currently in the U.S. that can contribute much to the country and cannot do so because of their status. What are you currently doing and what still needs to be done in order to reform immigration laws and solve this issue?"

*The President.* Well, I appreciate this, Jose. Obviously, this is an issue that I've been working on for years. When I was in the U.S. Senate, I was a cosponsor of comprehensive immigration reform. I have voted for comprehensive immigration reform. And our administration consistently has supported the basic concept that we are a nation of laws, but we're also a nation of immigrants, and that immigrants continually have strengthened America's economy, America's culture, and that we have to create a system that works for all of us.

The way to do that is to be serious about border security, and we have been. We've put more resources in border security than anything that's been done in previous administrations. But what we've also said is, is that for those persons who are here, we have to make sure that we provide a pathway to earning a legal status in this country. They have broken the

immigration laws, so they may have to pay a fine, learn English, take other steps. But to create a pathway so that they can get out of the shadows and contribute to society in a more effective way is something that I consider to be a top priority. And we can do it in a way that is compatible with our tradition of everybody being responsible and following the law.

Now, to do that, we've got to get legislation through Congress. And in the past we've seen bipartisan support for comprehensive immigration reform. Unfortunately, over the last several years what you've seen is the Republican Party move away from support of comprehensive immigration reform.

It used to be that we had a lot of Republican sponsors for the "DREAM Act," which would allow young people who have grown up here as Americans and did not break laws themselves, but rather, were brought here by their parents—they should be studying, serving our military, contributing to our society, starting businesses. We used to have Republican co-sponsors for the "DREAM Act." Now we don't.

So our biggest challenge right now: The vast majority of Democrats are supportive of comprehensive immigration reform, but given that the Republicans control the House of Representatives and that we need 60 votes in the Senate, our key approach is trying to push Republicans to get back to where they were only a few years ago. The—in the meantime, what we're trying to do is to manage the enforcement of our inadequate immigration laws in a way that is humane and just.

So we've tried to emphasize making sure that we're focusing on violent criminals, people who are a threat to society and a threat to our communities, for deportation and sending a clear signal that our enforcement priority is not to chase down young people who are going to school and who are following all the other laws and are trying to make a contribution to society. But until we get an actual comprehensive immigration law passed through Congress, we're going to continue to have some of the problems that we've been seeing.

### *Immigration Policy Enforcement/Immigration Reform*

*Gabriel Lerner of AOL Latino and HuffPost LatinoVoices.* Just to follow up, Mr. President, you just mentioned enforcement of immigration laws in the subject of deportations, and you said that many of those—or it's aimed at criminals. But until now, and until recently, it hadn't been just criminals, or a majority of criminals, those that have been deported. And also, you have been deporting much more immigrants than the previous administration did in 8 years. So laws didn't change; enforcement was done even then. Why that emphasis on deportation during your administration?

*The President.* Actually, what happened—if you look at the statistics, two things happened. Number one is, is that there was a much greater emphasis on criminals rather than noncriminals. And there's been a huge shift in terms of enforcement, and that began as soon as I came into office. That change has taken place.

Secondly, the statistics are actually a little deceptive, because what we've been doing is with the stronger border enforcement, we've been apprehending folks at the borders and sending them back. That is counted as a deportation, even though they may have only been held for a day or 48 hours, sent back—that's counted as a deportation. So we've been much more effective on the borders. But we have not been more aggressive when it comes to dealing, for example, with "DREAM Act" kids. That's just not the case.

So what we've tried to do is within the constraints of the laws on the books, we've tried to be as fair, humane, just as we can, recognizing, though, that the laws themselves need to be changed. And I've been unwavering in my support of changing the laws so that we're strong on border security, we're going after companies that are taking advantage of undocumented workers—paying them subminimum wages and not respecting workplace safety laws—but also saying that we've got to have a pathway to citizenship and for legal status for those who are already here and have put roots down here and are part of the fabric of our community,

because we actually believe that they can contribute to our economy in an effective way.

The other thing that we want to emphasize is, for those who have an ambition to start a business—entrepreneurs, young people who have gotten college degrees or advanced degrees—for us to train them here in the United States and then send them back to start businesses elsewhere makes absolutely no sense. The history of many of our biggest businesses is they were started by immigrants who came here seeking opportunity. And we want to make sure that, both in terms of people who are here doing jobs that other folks may not want to do, but also people who have extraordinary training and can create jobs for all Americans, that we are giving both of those folks opportunities.

*National Economy/Job Creation/Education/Infrastructure and Technology Investment*

*Karine Medina of MSN Latino.* So my first question comes from Esther Polanco, and it was submitted on MSN Latino: “Mr. President, your proposed jobs bill addresses tax breaks for small businesses and the repair of infrastructure like roads and bridges. But that seems like a short-term solution to a much larger problem. With the unemployment rate among Latinos at 11.3 percent across the Nation, what do you plan to do for the remainder of your term, and if reelected, to ensure that large factories and Fortune 1000 companies begin hiring again?”

*The President.* Well, obviously, we’re going through the worst financial crisis and recession since the Great Depression. It has been a worldwide phenomenon; it’s not just here in the United States. And some of the challenges that we’ve had over the last several months actually have to do with the fact that in Europe we haven’t seen them deal with their banking system and their financial system as effectively as they needed to. The changes that have taken place in the Middle East sent oil prices up, and that gave a shock to the world economy. So there are a lot of forces at work here that we have to address.

But my main goal has consistently been to get the economy growing again and putting people back to work. Now, we’ve created more than 2 million jobs over the last 18 months in the private sector. The problem is we lost so many during the recession back in 2007, 2008 that we still haven’t gotten back to where we need to be, and unemployment is still far too high.

What the jobs act does is a couple of things. Number one, it, yes, puts people back to work rebuilding roads, bridges, schools. Those infrastructure projects could employ a lot of construction workers—including a lot of Latino construction workers—who were laid off after the housing bubble burst. And so that could significantly reduce unemployment in that sector.

It says that we’re going to rehire teachers. And the Latino community obviously is deeply concerned about education. A lot of schools are understaffed in Latino communities where the young population, the youth population, is growing rapidly. Putting teachers back to work is not only good for employment, but it’s also good for training our young people.

The tax breaks that we give—there are 250,000 Latino small businesses. They hire a lot of people. And if they are getting significant tax breaks, that gives them more capital; it allows them to expand their businesses, grow, and potentially hire more workers. And the bill also addresses summer jobs for disadvantaged youth. It also provides unemployment insurance for those who are still looking for work.

So this is not a small piece of business. It’s estimated that if we pass the jobs bill, we would expand the gross domestic product by about 2 percent, and you would see 1.9 million people, potentially, find jobs as a consequence of this bill. So it would significantly reduce the unemployment rate.

You’re right, though, that the long-term challenge is how do we create an economy that is more competitive, more productive, and is employing more people. And to do that, we’ve got to improve our education system, which is why we place such a big emphasis on reform, particularly targeting those schools that are

underperforming. And disproportionately Latino and African American youth are dropping out of high school at a time when it's very hard to find a job if you don't have not only a high school degree, but also some advanced training. So that's been a big emphasis.

Because of the work that we did to change how the student loan program worked—instead of going through banks, it's now going directly to students—we've freed up about \$60 billion that we're going to be able to provide for Pell grants and scholarships. And as a consequence, we've actually seen the Latino college enrollment rate go up significantly over the last couple of years.

We're still going to have to rebuild our infrastructure. Even though what we've slated is just what we can do over the next year, year and a half, we probably have a 10-year project of rebuilding our roads, bridges, airports, schools. And a sustained effort at investing in our infrastructure could put a lot of people back to work and make us more competitive over the long term.

And then we have to continue to emphasize exports. The United States historically was a manufacturing base: We made things here, and we sold them elsewhere. Over the last 15 years, we have been consuming, importing from China and other places, but the manufacturing has been done there. And what we need to do is start moving manufacturing back here to the United States, particularly in cutting-edge areas like, for example, advanced vehicles, more efficient cars that are built here based on electric technology, for example. That's going to be a growth industry; we need to develop those.

So there's not going to be one single silver bullet. We're going to have to keep on investing in research and development, making sure technology is developed here. We've got to emphasize exports, infrastructure. The most important thing we can do, though, is make sure that our young people are trained, because companies today are going to be locating where there's the most skilled workforce. And making sure that Latino students, who are going to be the largest growing group in the United States—they're the ones who are going to

be the workforce of the future, along with African Americans and Asian Americans, as well as White Americans—all—making sure that every single one of those young people is trained and equipped for this economy of the future, that's the most important thing we can do to get companies to locate here and hire here.

#### *Immigration Policy Enforcement/Immigration Reform*

*Mr. Lerner.* Mr. President, this is a great opportunity for Latinos to ask you questions directly, and this type of question have come repeatedly. So just to complete the subject—and you mentioned border security as tough. Mr. Hugo Sanchez—and I'm sure that's his name—he says: "Mr. President, I'm a naturalized American citizen, and as such, an immigrant. What happened to the investigation of the many violations and challenges to the Federal Government by Sheriff Joe Arpaio in Maricopa, Arizona?" Let me just add that this investigation started March 2009. It is high time to have maybe a resolution on that.

*The President.* Well, I have to be careful about commenting on individual cases. That's handled typically by the Department of Justice or these other agencies. What I will say is this, that the approach that's been taken to immigration in Arizona, I think, has not always been as productive as it's been.

As you know, we challenged the Arizona law that was supported by the sheriff because we thought that there was a great danger that naturalized citizens, individuals with Latino surnames, potentially could be vulnerable to questioning; the laws could be potentially abused in ways that were not fair to Latino citizens in Arizona.

So rather than comment on the individual case, what I would say is this: that we can't have a patchwork of 50 States with 50 different immigration laws. We can't have a situation in which individual counties are trying to enforce their own immigration laws rather than having a national approach. We think it is very important for the Federal Government to be serious about border security, to go after companies that are taking advantage of undocumented

workers, and to provide a pathway for legal status for immigrants. That is a comprehensive approach that needs to be taken. We are going to push hard for it. I have been pushing hard for it, and I'm going to keep pushing hard for it.

The most important thing for your viewers and listeners and readers to understand is that in order to change our laws, we've got to get it through the House of Representatives, which is currently controlled by Republicans, and we've got to get 60 votes in the Senate. And right now we have not gotten that kind of support—sadly, because only a few years ago, as I said, you had some Republicans who were willing to recognize that we needed to fix our immigration system. George Bush, to his credit, recognized that we needed to fix our immigration system. Ronald Reagan understood that immigration was an important part of the American experience. Right now you have not that kind of leadership coming from the Republican Party. We want to partner in a bipartisan way to get this problem solved, and I'm going to keep on pushing to get it done.

#### *Bullying and Harassment Prevention Efforts*

*Mr. Siade.* This question comes from—[inaudible]—in Florida: “Since bullying is increasing in an alarming way in the U.S., what can be done to avoid further discrimination or bullying within various racial groups, particularly for Hispanic kids in school?”

*The President.* I think it's a really important question. We actually had the first-ever conference on bullying here in the White House, because for young people it's hard enough growing up without also then being subject to constant harassment. And the kind of bullying that we're seeing now, including using the Internet and new media, can be very oppressive on young people.

So what we've tried to do is to provide information and tools to parents, to schools, to communities to push back and fight against these kinds of trends. And a lot of the best work has actually been done by young people themselves who start antibullying campaigns in their schools, showing how you have to respect ev-

eryone, regardless of race, regardless of religion, regardless of sexual orientation. And when you get a school environment in which that's not accepted by young people themselves, where they say, we're not going to tolerate that kind of bullying, that usually ends up making the biggest difference, because kids react to their peer group more than sometimes they do adults.

And what we need to do is make sure that we're providing tools to schools and to young people to help to combat against bullying, and it's something that we'll continue to work on with local communities and local school districts as well.

*Mr. Lerner.* So you're going to have a conference on bullying in the White House?

*The President.* We already did. We had it; it was probably 4 or 5 months ago. And we brought in nonprofit groups, religious leadership, schools, students themselves. And they have now organized conferences regionally, around the country, so that we can prevent this kind of bullying from taking place.

#### *Mexico*

*Ms. Medina.* So the next question comes from Yreka, California, and was asked by Mike: “Is there anything the United States can do to strengthen the Mexican economy? Could we form a stronger partnership with Mexico that would result in less illegal immigration and lowered expense of Border Patrol?”

*The President.* Well, I think it's very important to recognize, as the question recognizes, that if we can strengthen the Mexican economy, then people have less incentive to look for work in the United States. We welcome immigration, but obviously, a lot of people in Mexico would love to stay home and create businesses and find jobs that allowed them to support their family if they could, but the Mexican economy has not always been able to generate all the jobs that it needs.

This is a long-term challenge. The Mexican economy is very integrated to the world economy and the U.S. economy, so they were affected by the recession very badly themselves. I have a great relationship with President Calderon, and

we have looked for a whole range of ways that we can improve cross-border trade. For example, we've been focused on how we can change the border's infrastructure so that goods are flowing more easily back and forth.

Ultimately, though, the Mexican economy is going to depend also on changing some of the structures internally to increase productivity, to train the workforce there, so education in Mexico is going to be also very important. Part of what's happened is—in Mexico is, is that a lot of people have been displaced from the agricultural sector and they've moved to the cities. They don't have the skills, necessarily, for the higher skilled jobs that exist in urban areas. And so an education agenda in Mexico is also important, just as it is here in the United States.

But we very much want to work with Mexico around their development agenda, because the more they are able to generate industry and businesses in Mexico, to some extent that's probably going to be one of the best solutions for the immigration pressures that we've been seeing over the last decade or so.

#### *Defense of Marriage Act*

*Mr. Lerner.* Mr. President, on the Defense of Marriage Act, also called DOMA, this comes from Kevin in North Carolina. He says: "I'm a gay American who fell in love with a foreigner. As you know, due to DOMA, I'm not permitted to sponsor my foreign-born partner for residency. And as a result, we are stuck between a rock and an impossible situation. How do you intend to fix this? Waiting for DOMA to be repealed or struck down in the courts will potentially take years. What do binational couples do in the meantime?"

*The President.* Well, we made a decision that was a very significant decision, based on my assessment of the Constitution, that this administration would not defend DOMA in the Federal courts. It's not going to be years before this issue is settled. This is going to be settled fairly soon, because right now we have cases pending in the Federal courts.

Administratively, we can't ignore the law. DOMA is still on the books. But we have

said—is even as we enforce it, we don't support it, we think it's unconstitutional. The position that my administration has taken I think will have a significant influence on the court as it examines the constitutionality of this law. And once that law is struck down—and I don't know what the ruling will be—then addressing these binational issues could flow from that decision potentially.

I can't comment on where the case is going to go. I can only say what I believe, and that is, is that DOMA doesn't make sense. It's unfair. I don't think that it meets the demands of our Constitution. And in the meantime, if—I've already said that I'm also supportive of Congress repealing DOMA on its own and not waiting for the courts. The likelihood of us being able to get the votes in the House of Representatives for DOMA repeal are very low at this point so, truthfully, the recourse to the courts is probably going to be the best approach.

#### *Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act*

*Mr. Lerner.* Me again. On the "DREAM Act" that you mentioned before, and this is, like, a statement from Cesar in New York City. He says: "Mr. President, I am an undocumented law graduate from New York City. I'm just writing to say that your message that you do not have a dance partner is not a message of hope. A real dancer goes out on the dance floor and takes out his or her dance partner. You're just waiting. You have the facts, numbers, dollars, and votes on the side of granting administrative relief for DREAMers. We are doing our part. It is time to do yours, Mr. President."

*The President.* I just have to continue to say this notion that somehow I can just change the laws unilaterally is just not true. We've—we are doing everything we can administratively. But the fact of the matter is there are laws on the books that I have to enforce. And I think there's been a great disservice done to the cause of getting the "DREAM Act" passed and getting comprehensive immigration passed by perpetrating the notion that somehow, by myself, I can go and do these things. It's just not true.

Now, what we can do is to prioritize enforcement, since there are limited enforcement resources, and say, we're not going to go chasing after this young man or anybody else who's been acting responsibly and would otherwise qualify for legal status if the "DREAM Act" passed.

But we live in a democracy. You have to pass bills through the Legislature, and then I can sign it. And if all the attention is focused away from the legislative process, then that is going to lead to a constant dead end. We have to recognize how the system works and then apply pressure to those places where votes can be gotten, and ultimately, we can get this thing solved. And nobody will be a stronger advocate for making that happen than me.

#### *Cuba*

*Ms. Medina.* This next question is about Cuba, and it comes from—[inaudible]—in Florida: "What is your position regarding Cuba and the embargo? What should the Cuban people expect from you and your Government during the remainder of your term and in the future if you're reelected?"

*The President.* Well, what we did with respect to Cuba was recognize that the Cuban people now have not enjoyed freedom for 50 years, and everywhere else in the world you've been seeing a democratization movement that has been pressing forward. Throughout Latin America, democracies have emerged from previously authoritarian regimes. The time has come for the same thing to happen in Cuba.

Now, what we've tried to do is to send a signal that we are open to a new relationship with Cuba if the Cuban Government starts taking the proper steps to open up its own country and its own—and provide the space and the respect for human rights that would allow the Cuban people to determine their own destiny.

I changed the remittance laws so that family members could more easily send money back to Cuba, because that would give them more power and it would create a economic space for them to prosper. Within Cuba we have changed the family travel laws so that they can

travel more frequently, as well as laws that relate to educational travel.

And so we've made these modifications that send a signal that we're prepared to show flexibility and not be stuck in a cold war mentality dating back to when I was born. On the other hand, we have to see a signal back from the Cuban Government that it is following through on releasing political prisoners, on providing people their basic human rights, in order for us to be fully engaged with them. And so far, at least, what we haven't seen is the kind of genuine spirit of transformation inside of Cuba that would justify us eliminating the embargo.

I don't know what will happen over the next year, but we are prepared to see what happens in Cuba. If we see positive movement, we will respond in a positive way. Hopefully, over the next 5 years, we'll see Cuba looking around the world and saying, we need to catch up with history. And as long as I'm President, I will always be prepared to change our Cuba policy if and when we start seeing a serious intention on the part of the Cuban Government to provide liberty for its people. But that's always my watchword, is—are we seeing freedom for the Cuban people to live lives of opportunity and prosperity. If we are, then we'll be supportive of them.

*Mr. Lerner.* Those conditions will suffice: human rights, free political prisoners? No demand for a change in the economic structure, for example?

*The President.* Well, it's very hard to separate liberty from some economic reforms. If people have no way to eat other than through the government, then the government ends up having very strict control over them, and they can be punished in all sorts of ways for expressing their own opinions. That's not to say that a condition for us releasing the embargo would be that they have a perfect market system, because obviously, we have trade and exchanges with a number of countries that fall short of a liberal democracy.

But there is a basic, I think, recognition of people's human rights that includes their right to work, to change jobs, to get an education, to start a business. So some elements of freedom

are included in how an economic system works. And right now we haven't seen any of that.

But let me just say this. Obviously, if we saw a release of political prisoners, the ability for people to express their opinions and to petition their Government, if we saw even those steps, those would be very significant, and we would pay attention, and we would undoubtedly reexamine our overall approach to Cuba if we saw a serious movement in that direction.

### *Border Security*

*Mr. Siade.* Mr. President, this question comes from Karina in Ohio: "Mr. President, what is your strategy to stop the flow of weapons bought with drug money in the U.S. and then sent to Mexico, especially after what happened in Operation Fast and Furious?"

*The President.* Well, this is a great challenge, and I've been the first one to admit—I've said this publicly in bilateral meetings with President Calderon—that there's a two-way street in terms of the problems of transnational drug operations. The Mexican Government I think has been very courageous in taking on these cartels, at great cost, obviously, with respect to violence in Mexico. That's the right thing to do.

We have to be a more effective partner in both reducing demand for drugs here in the United States and for stemming the flow of weapons and cash that help to finance and facilitate these cartels. So we're working very hard to have a much more effective interdiction effort of south to north—or north to south traffic than we have in the past, so we are checking southbound transit to try to capture illegal guns, illegal cash transfers to drug cartels. It is something that we have been building over the last couple of years. It's not yet finished.

And there's going to be more work to do.

Part of the issue here obviously is budgetary. At a time when the Federal Government is looking for ways to save money, we're going to have to figure out ways to operate smarter and more effectively in our investigations without a huge expansion of resources because those resources aren't there.

### *Combating Drugs and Narcotics*

*Mr. Siade.* And in terms of the demand here in the U.S.—

*The President.* Well, with respect to—

*Mr. Siade.* —what kind of efforts?

*The President.* With respect to the demand in the U.S., our drug czar here in the United States I think has done a very good job working with schools and local communities, working with local law enforcement to try to continue to reduce drug demand. One of the things that I've always believed is that—and this is reflective of my administration's policy—is, is that we can't just think about this as a law enforcement issue, we also have to think of it as a public health issue.

If you think about the enormous changes that have been made in terms of people's use of tobacco, for example, that wasn't because of—they were arrested, it was also because young people were taught that smoking was bad for your health, it didn't make you cool. There were public service announcements. Right? So I think taking a comprehensive approach that includes interdiction and law enforcement, but also takes into account public health strategies, treatment.

A lot of cities around the country, if you decide that you want to rid yourself of drugs, you may have to wait 3 months, 6 months to get into a local treatment program. Well, that's not going to be particularly effective. So what we've been trying to see is can we get more resources into treatment, more resources into a public health approach, even as we continue to target the cartels, the drug kingpins, those who are really responsible for perpetrating the drug trade in communities across the country.

### *Education Reform*

*Ms. Medina.* From Jose Joga, from here, Washington, DC: "President Obama, what do you believe is the greatest challenge that the Hispanic community faces in this country, and what can we do better to prepare our children to take full advantage of the great opportunities this country offers?"

*The President.* I think the biggest challenge for all of us, but this is especially true in the

Latino community, is improving our education system. And part of that is the effort we're making in schools. So, for example, we have a program called Race to the Top, where we've been saying we'll give extra money to States and school districts that are improving teacher training and making schools more accountable. It's resulted in over 40 States changing their laws to adopt to best practices in education.

We put forward an additional \$4 billion that is being used to target those schools that have a severe dropout problem or the worst performing schools. A lot of them are Latino or African American. And, for example, I was in a school in Miami where they completely—they changed their principal, they changed a third of their staff, they changed their curriculum. They had a complete makeover, extreme makeover. And now graduation rates have gone way up. More kids are taking AP classes and college prep classes.

So a lot of the work has to be done in terms of reforming how education is delivered. We need to improve the construction of schools. My jobs bill includes building and repairing schools. And there—especially in the Latino community, where there's a large youth population, you're seeing overcrowded schools, kids learning in trailers. That's not sending a good signal to people about the importance of education. So passing this jobs bill can be very important in terms of improving the school, the physical plant, but also putting teachers back in the classroom.

But finally, so much of school performance also has to do with attitudes at home with parents and in the community. And a strong message that I send to all students, but especially Latino and African American students, who tend to drop out at higher rates or fall behind faster, is the day is gone when without an education you can somehow get a job that supports you. Even if you're not going to a 4-year college, needing to get some advanced training at a community college, even if you want to work in a factory today, you now have to know computers, you have to have math skills, you have to be able to communicate effectively.

So telling our children, you have to turn off the TV, stop playing the video games, do your homework, aspiring to excellence in education, that's the issue that probably we have to work on. And there's no quick fix there. I mean, that's a 10-year, 20-year project. It's not a 6-month project. But if we can make significant changes there, then I think that the future prospects for our kids are going to be very strong.

#### *Political Involvement of Hispanic Americans*

*Mr. Lerner.* Mr. President, on the—your opinion on the state of integration of Latinos in our political life, this question comes anonymous. I'm sure it's not from the person we are talking about: "With the prospect now of a Romney-Rubio ticket or a Rick Perry-Rubio ticket or a Bachmann-Rubio ticket, do you think it's time for an Hispanic Vice President and maybe President after that?"

*The President.* I am absolutely certain that within my lifetime we will have a Latino candidate for President who is very competitive and may win. You just look at the demographics, right? I mean, the Latino population is growing faster than any other population. You look at a State like Texas, where it will, within my lifetime, be majority Latino. With numbers comes political power.

Now, the challenge, I think, politically for Latinos across the country is, are folks registering? Are they voting? And we still have not seen the kinds of participation levels that are necessary to match up the numbers with actual political power. And my hope is, is that in 2012, in 2016, in 2020 you continually see participation rates increase more and more for Latinos, and that will inevitably lead to both parties, I think, being more responsive to Latino issues.

If you're voting at a low rate, then you are giving up some of your power. If you're voting at a high rate, then you're going to have more influence. And that's true of every single group. The political system tends to be more responsive to the needs of seniors than it is to the needs of youth. And there's just one reason for that: because seniors vote at much higher

rates than young people do. And the same is going to be true with respect to Latino voters. If they are voting at high rates, then not only will you elect more Latino officials, but non-Latino officials will also be more responsive.

#### *Health Care*

*Mr. Siade.* Mr. President, this question is from—[inaudible]—in Florida: “How do you propose to improve health care in the U.S. and ensure that all Hispanics have affordable access to it?”

*The President.* Well, the—I don’t just propose, we’ve actually done. I mean, my—the Affordable Care Act, the health care reform that we passed in 2010, is going to provide 30 million people who didn’t have health insurance access to health insurance. A disproportionate number of those people will be Latinos, who are the most likely to not have health insurance. So this is hugely important to the Latino community.

Even now, already, even though the law will not be fully implemented until 2013, you already have evidence that over a million young people are now having health insurance through their parents’ coverage, and so their insurance levels have increased. People with preexisting conditions in various States are able to access health care for the first time.

But ultimately, what we’re going to be doing is setting up by 2013—so in the next year and a half, 2 years—we are going to be having exchanges where everybody who doesn’t have health insurance will be able to buy the same kind of health insurance that Members of Congress get. And if they can’t afford it—the premiums—then they will get subsidies, they will get help from the Government in order to be able to purchase that insurance. And that will make a huge difference in the Latino community.

And if you have insurance, then you are less likely to develop preventable diseases. The rates of diabetes and heart disease and other preventable diseases in the Latino community are way too high, so having regular checkups, preventive care, all that can actually, over the

long term, reduce our costs of care because people don’t show up at the emergency room; they’ve actually been able to treat their potential illnesses much earlier.

#### *Puerto Rico*

*Ms. Medina.* So this is probably the last question because we are running out of time. So it comes from Jose Serrano, and it’s about Puerto Rico: “Mr. President, during your visit to Puerto Rico, you mentioned that the Congress will consider action on the island’s status as soon as there is a clear winner from the voters. What percentage of votes or what other requirements are needed in order to establish a clear winner from a referendum?”

*The President.* Well, I don’t have a particular number in mind. The—I think that the key here is that the status of Puerto Rico should be decided by the residents of Puerto Rico. And so the issue for us is if the plebiscite, if the referendum that takes place in Puerto Rico indicates that there’s a strong preference from a majority of the Puerto Rican people, I think that will influence how Congress approaches any actions that might be taken to address status issues.

If it’s split down the middle, 50–50 or 51–49, then I think Congress’s inclination is going to be not to change, but to maintain the status quo until there’s a greater indication that there is support for change. But what the task force that I put forward did, I think, was to examine all the arguments on every side, to do so in a fair way, unbiased way, not trying to put the thumb on the scale, and say that a well-structured plebiscite, a well-structured referendum in Puerto Rico could help determine this.

And I think what we’ve also recommended, although this has not yet been adopted, is that if it’s inconclusive, then we can set up a process here in Congress that would lead to further examination of what our options would be. But for now, the most important thing, I think, is to see if there’s a clear sense of direction from the Puerto Rican people themselves. If they continue to be divided, it’s hard to imagine that Congress is going to be wanting to impose a single solution on the island.

### Social Security

*Mr. Lerner.* Mr. President, this question came pretty repeatedly. On Social Security—[inaudible]—from New York. He asks: “I would ask *mi Presidente*, because he’s my *Presidente*, when are you going to give us a stimulus on our retired person’s check?” And Teresita from Piney Creek, North Carolina, adds: “We have not received anything additional in 2 years, but everything we buy or need keeps increasing really fast.”

*The President.* Well, this is a question that I always get from Social Security recipients as well. The way Social Security is set up is each year there’s a cost-of-living adjustment. But over the last 2 years, because of the recession, inflation didn’t really exist in the aggregate. So even though one particular good or gas prices might have gone up a little bit, when you looked at the basket of goods, there wasn’t a lot of inflation over the last 2 years. That’s why the cost-of-living adjustment did not kick in.

And I think people think that this was a decision somehow that was made by us. It’s actually something that just happens automatically. We expect that people will be getting a cost-of-living adjustment this year because there has been some significant inflation, particularly in

food and fuel prices. So the expectation is that this year you’ll get it. You didn’t get it in the last 2 years, not because I didn’t want to give it to you, but because the law said that if there’s no inflation, then you don’t get it.

We had actually proposed in Congress to provide a \$250 one-time check to seniors to help accommodate the difficult times that they were having, but we couldn’t get it passed through Congress.

*Mr. Siade.* Mr. President, that’s all the time that we have with you here today.

For everyone watching at home, if you missed part of the conversation, you can go online later on today and watch the on-demand version of the conversation.

From everyone here at the table and on behalf of everyone who sent in their questions online, I’d like to thank you, Mr. President, for spending the last hour with us.

And, everyone watching online, *muchas gracias y hasta pronto*.

*The President.* Thank you so much, everybody. I enjoyed it.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:40 a.m. in the Map Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former President George W. Bush.

### Remarks at Benjamin Banneker Academic High School September 28, 2011

Hey! Thank you. Thank you very much. Everybody, please have a seat. Well, Madam President, that was an outstanding introduction. [Laughter] We are so proud of Donae for representing this school so well.

And in addition, I also want to acknowledge your outstanding principal, who has been here for 20 years—first as a teacher, now as an outstanding principal—Anita Berger. Please give her a big round of applause. I want to acknowledge, as well, Mayor Gray is here, the mayor of Washington, DC, is here. Please give him a big round of applause. And I also want to thank somebody who is going to go down in history as one of the finest Secretaries of Education that we’ve ever had, Arne Duncan is here.

Now, it is great to be here at Benjamin Banneker High School, one of the best high schools not only in Washington, DC, but one of the best high schools in the country. And—but we’ve also got students tuning in from all across America. And so I want to welcome you all to the new school year, although I know that many of you already have been in school for a while. I know that here at Banneker, you’ve been back at school for a few weeks now. So everything is just starting to settle in, just like for all your peers all across the country. The fall sports season is underway. Musicals and marching band routines are starting to shape up, I believe. And your first big tests and projects are probably just around the corner.