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Remarks on Immigration Reform in Omaha, Nebraska

June 7, 2006

Thanks for the warm welcome. It's great to be back in Omaha. I'm a little—I just wish the timing were a little better—[*laughter*]—Senator. If I'd only delayed my trip, we'd have been able to watch the College World Series again. [*Laughter*]

But I couldn't delay it, for this reason: This country is debating an important issue. It's an issue about our soul and our character. It's an issue that relates to people that are in our country. It's the immigration issue. And I don't think this issue can wait for a baseball game or a baseball tournament; it needs to be addressed now. And I'm honored to be here in Omaha, Nebraska, right here in the middle of our country, to talk about a vital issue that affects us all.

Before I came here to give the speech, I went to the Juan Diego Center. It's right down the road, if you haven't been there. It's run by Catholic Charities. By the way, Catholic Charities is one of the most important battalions in the army of compassion. It's full of—[*applause*]—it's a center of love and compassion. It's a place where volunteers come to reach out to somebody who could use a little extra help, and those volunteers ask nothing in return.

I saw a place where people are learning to speak English and learning the civic lessons of what it means to be an American citizen. I sat around a table with entrepreneurs, people from different countries, all of whom are bound by a common dream of owning their own business; people who are willing to work hard to put food on the table for their families and to realize a dream. It was such an inspiring conversation for me.

One such person I met was Salvador Pina. He's a new American citizen who had a dream; he wanted to own his own business. And Salvador went to the Juan Diego Center and said, "Can anybody here help me?" For some of us, we take it for granted that it's easy to understand what forms to fill out or what worker compensation means or how do you pay your sales tax. But for some, they need a little extra help. They don't need to be inspired to dream big dreams, but they need help to realize those dreams.

He—Salvador received a $10,000 loan from Catholic Charities. That's not exactly a microloan, but it's help. In other words, he said, "Can you help me? I'll work hard for whatever you do to help me, but can you give me—lend me a hand, brother?" And Catholic Charities did, and today he owns his own business. He's the proud owner of Pina Auto Repair. By the way, if you're looking for a good man to fix your car—[*laughter*]—give old Salvador a chance.

So what's it like? He said, "I've been working hard." I said, "Do you employ anybody?" He said, "Yes, I've started with just me, and now I've got three employees." That's what America is all about, isn't it, one person with a dream helping others to provide an employment opportunity. Salvador owns his own building. That's what we want in America. We want to encourage an ownership society, where a person like Salvador who started with nothing can say, "Welcome to my business, and I own my building; come on into the building I own, and here are the three people I'm employing."

When you hear people like me talk about assimilation, that's what we're talking about, helping people assimilate into America, helping us remain one Nation under God. So I want to thank Catholic Charities for their good work, and I want to thank a dreamer like Salvador for coming here, obeying the law, and working hard to achieve the American Dream.

When I get back to Washington, I'm going to sign an Executive order creating a task force on the new Americas. This task force is going to be led by our Secretary of Homeland Security, Chertoff. It's going to work to help people at the grassroots level expand the teaching of English and civics and history instruction programs, to help others assimilate into America.

We want to—I'm going to create—I've also signed legislation creating an Office of Citizenship at the Department of Homeland Security to promote knowledge of citizens' rights and responsibilities. In other words, one aspect of making sure we have an immigration system that works, that's orderly and fair, is to actively reach out and help people

assimilate into our country. That means, learn the values and history and language of America. And for those of you who are wondering how you can help our country, volunteer to be a part of such an assimilation process, just like the volunteers at Catholic Charities are doing.

I appreciate the Governor being here. Mr. Governor, thank you and Sally for coming. You're kind to take time out of your schedule to say hello to the old President. [*Laughter*] Getting older by the minute, by the way. [*Laughter*] I'm not supposed to talk about myself, but in a month, I'm turning 60. For you youngsters, I want to tell you something. When I was your age, I thought 60 was really old. [*Laughter*] It's all in your mind. It's not that old; it really isn't. Right, Senator Hagel? [*Laughter*]

I want to thank Chuck Hagel for his leadership on this issue, this immigration issue. You see, you can make the choice in Washington, DC, whether you want to be a leader or whether you want to kind of lay back and see how things work out and then take a position. You can go to Washington to solve problems, or you can go to Washington to hope those problems go away. Senator Hagel is one of the type of people that said, "I'm going to go to Washington to take a lead on this issue." This problem isn't going away; it needs to be fixed now, and I want to thank Chuck Hagel for his leadership on this important issue.

I'm proud to be here with one of the most decent men in the United States Congress, a man who's got a huge heart, a compassionate fellow, a person who didn't have to go into public service, but said, service to a nation you love and a State you care about is an important lesson for others to realize—and Tom Osborne is one of the fine, fine Americans.

I want to thank the Lieutenant Governor, Rick Sheehy, and the secretary of state, John Gale. Thank you all for coming today.

I'm glad we're at a community college. And I thank Jody McDowell and the board and the teachers who are here, welcoming me here. This is a—[*applause*]. I don't know if the people of Omaha realize what an important asset you have in your community college system. I certainly understand it. Community colleges are a really important part of making sure America remains a competitive nation.

I remind our fellow citizens, particularly those who look to the future and get nervous and say, "Well, we can't compete," or, "There's no way for America to be the economic leader of the world. There's just too much competition"—I simply just don't believe that. I tell people, "Let's don't fear the future; let's shape it." And one way we can shape the future is to make sure people have the skills necessary to fill the jobs of the 21st century, and one of the best places for people to learn the skills of the 21st century is at a community college.

Community colleges are practical. They design curriculum that meets the needs of today's world. So when people come here, they come here to learn a set of skills so they can go out and get a job and be a contributor to our society. Maybe the best way for me to describe how important a community college is, is to tell you a quick story about Heather Fowler. Where is Heather? There you are. You got a lousy seat, but that's okay. [*Laughter*] She should have had a better seat because she's the president of the community college. Heather has got, I think, the toughest job in America, and that is being a single mother raising two children. It's particularly tough since one of her daughters is nearly 16. [*Laughter*] I know what it's like.

She's the president. She had been out of school for 16 years. She had been working to raise her family, but she realized that she needed to come back to enhance her skills. So guess where she came—right here. And she's graduating with a nursing degree. See, she had the initiative to say, "I may have been dealt a tough hand, but I'm going to play it with all my strength and all my might, and I'm going to take advantage of that which is available." The community colleges makes advantages available to people.

Heather, I want to thank you for your dedication; I want to thank you for your example. If anybody is listening out there and you're wondering whether or not you can find a place to enhance your skills so you can get a higher paying job, so you can become a more productive worker, which means more pay for you, take the heart of

the president of this school—take the lesson to heart. Heather Fowler shows what's possible here at the community college system. And I'm honored, Heather, you let me use you as an example to encourage others to come to this fine place of learning.

I want to thank Scot Adams. He tolerated me. He's the fellow who is the executive director of Catholic Charities who took me on the tour—great tour guide.

I want to thank—I've got two messages for you from Washington, one from the Secretary of Agriculture—[*laughter*]—Johanns; he's doing fine. [*Laughter*] He's doing really good. As a matter of fact, he remembers where he came from. That's an important part of Washington; it's important that you go up there and serve but never forget where you came from. And Mike Johanns knows where he came from, and he's doing an excellent job as the Secretary of Agriculture.

And Laura sends her best, by the way. She's a—I checked in with her this morning. I'm an early riser, maybe a little too early for her in this case. But she's doing good, really good. And I'm proud to call her wife, and I hope you all are proud to call her First Lady. She's a fine person.

We talked about the importance to help people assimilate into our society. This is what's happened throughout the ages here in America. People have learned to assimilate. You know, I like to remind people, when we think about this immigration debate, the first thing people have got to remember is, we are a nation of immigrants, that we've had this debate before in American history. This isn't the first time the United States of America has had to take a look at our nature and our soul and our history.

I'm here to talk about a comprehensive immigration reform package, one part of which is to help people assimilate. The reason I want a comprehensive reform package is because I want whatever we do to work. And in my judgment, the definition of "work" is: We want a border that's safe and secure; we want rule of law to prevail; and we want the American Dream to flourish. We're a nation of laws, and we want to uphold those laws. We're also a compassionate nation that treats people decently, and the two are not in conflict. That's what's important for our fellow citizens to understand. The two are not in conflict.

I know you probably look at Washington and think it's impossible to develop a consensus in Washington, DC. It probably seems that way, doesn't it, when you pay attention to all the sharp elbows being thrown and the people opinionating and screaming and hollering and calling each other names. But there is a consensus emerging on this issue. I remind the folks, I was down—one reason I'm red-faced is, I was down on the border yesterday in Laredo. It was about 106. But I reminded people that last fall, when I moved around the country on this issue, there wasn't any legislation at all. As a matter of fact, it was in doubt as to whether or not people even wanted to talk about the issue. You could hear them saying in Washington, "Two thousand-six is an election year; maybe we don't want to take on this issue."

But some of us in Washington said, "Well, you got to take on the issue." There's a problem. It's not working. The system is not working; the borders aren't secure; we got people living in the shadows of our society, and that's not right. People don't have trust in the border. The Federal Government is doing its job on the border, and at the same time, we got a whole industry sprung up of smugglers and document forgers and people who are using people like chattel, and that's not fair, and that's not right, either.

And so since then, since when I was—went down there to the border for the first time to bring up the issue, the House passed a bill. And then I mentioned the Senate passed a bill with Chuck's leadership there. So there's progress. You can't get a piece of legislation out that I can sign unless you get both bodies to move.

And so now we're in what's called a conference committee, and there's a consensus developing. Listen, all of us in America agree we've got to secure our border. That's the job of a Federal Government. You want to know who's coming into your country and why; that's what you want to know. We have a responsibility to enforce the border.

And we're making good steps toward that. First thing is, you've got to have Border Patrol agents to enforce the border. And by 2008, we will have doubled the number of

Border Patrol agents to 18,000 Border Patrol agents. And these are people who are highly-trained people, whose job it is to respect the law, to be able to ascertain if somebody's coming into this country illegally or not. See, their job is to make sure the border is open for tourism and legal traffic and shut down for drugs and narcotics and smugglers.

And I was out there to the training plant in Artesia, New Mexico, by the way, yesterday, and there's some fine people serving our country. They really are hard-working, decent folks who volunteered and said, "I want to serve the United States of America in the Border Patrol." And since 2001, we've apprehended and sent back 6 million people trying to get in the country.

People are working hard to defend our border, and so therefore, we're going to double the number of Border Patrol agents. And until we get them stood up, in my judgment, it made sense to send some National Guard folks down there—not to be the law enforcement arm of the Border Patrol but to man the phones and radars and help build the roads, to complement the Border Patrol so that the Border Patrol stays on the frontline of enforcing the border. And once we get the Border Patrol up and running, the Guard can go back to doing what they're doing. But it makes sense to tell the American people that we understand our obligation, and we're going to do our job of enforcing the border.

This is a long border. I mean, it's hard to enforce. And therefore, we need to have good technology down there—cameras and infrared devices and unmanned aerial vehicles and high-tech—high-density corridors, some fencing—just so the Border Patrol can do its job. That's what the American people expect, and we're going to modernize our border, and Congress agrees on that.

The other problem we got along the border is that when people get stopped who are illegally trying to come in the border, a lot of them just get sent back into society. That's not a good system. There's something wrong with this system. In other words, you got people down there enforcing the law, and somebody gets apprehended, and they send them to an immigration holding deal, and they say, "Look, check back after 45 days, with us, please." Well, they're not checking back after 45 days. That's called catch-and-release.

Most of the people we catch are Mexican citizens, and they're sent back to their country immediately. But a lot of folks from Central America, for example, are caught, and since we didn't have enough detention beds, places to hold them until they're able to be sent back to their country, people were let out in society. And that demoralized our Border Patrol. It basically said to the American people, "We're not serious about enforcing our border."

And so we're ending the practice of catch-and-release by increasing the number of facilities for people to be compassionately held until they're able to be sent back to their countries. And I'm working with the countries to encourage their leaders to accept back those who have been caught trying to sneak into our country.

Look, the strategy is this: The strategy is to say, once people understand that they can't come into our country illegally and they'll be sent home when they try to, then they're not going to try in the first place. That's part of the strategy.

However, I want you to know that I don't believe we can enforce our border without having a rational way for people to come here to do work that Americans are not doing. It's called a temporary-worker plan. A temporary-worker plan recognizes that—two things: One, there are jobs Americans aren't doing—they're just not—and yet there's a need. We got employers who are looking for employees to do a certain kind of work. And the second aspect is, you've got to understand family values don't stop at the Rio Grande River. There are a lot of hard-working, decent people who want to put food on the table for their families. And therefore, they're willing to get in the back of an 18-wheeler or walk across a hot desert to work.

And that's part of the phenomenon you're seeing, you see, and you can't enforce the border like the American people expect us with just Border Patrol and technology alone. So long as there's that strong desire for people to improve their lives, to do whatever it takes to come to America to work, it's going to make it really hard to enforce that border. And so the best way to do it is to have a

plan so people don't feel like they got to sneak in. We ought to have a plan that says, "You can come in legally for a limited period of time—you can come in and do work Americans are not doing, and then you go home. But you can take that money you made and help your family." That's what we ought to have.

See, when people are trying to sneak across the border, it makes it hard to enforce the border. When people can come here in a rational way that saves their lives as well as takes pressure off the border, it will enable us to be able to tell the American people we got a better way of doing the job they expect us to do, which is enforce the border.

I strongly support a temporary-worker program. I think most people in Congress understand the rationality of a temporary-worker program. I guarantee you, many employers here in the State of Nebraska, people in the agricultural sector, people in the hospitality sector, understand the need to have a rational plan that will enable them to have somebody here on a temporary basis to do the jobs Americans aren't doing.

We all agree that we need to uphold the law when it—oh, by the way, in order to get one of these cards, something I'm about to describe to you, you got to pass a criminal background check. In other words, we want to know who's coming into the country and why they're coming in the country, and we want to help meet an economic need as well as a humanitarian need.

I repeat to you, America should not tolerate a system that has encouraged *coyotes* to flourish. *Coyotes* are the unscrupulous that take a human being who desires to improve his or her life and stuffs them in the back of an 18-wheeler. And in my judgment, a temporary-worker program would put *coyotes* out of business, and society would be better off without them.

We agree in Washington that we need to enforce laws when it comes to hiring illegal workers. See, it's against the law in America to hire an illegal worker. That's what the law says. You can't hire—you can't uphold the law, however, when people are showing up with forged documents. How can you expect your employers to say, you're here legally or not legally, when employers are not document verifiers? And so therefore, a temporary-worker program has got to have a tamper-proof identification card that shows somebody is here legally and so the employer knows that they're not breaking the law.

It makes sense to me to say to our employers, "Sure, you ought to be able to hire somebody, but just make sure they're legally here. And here's a system that encourages you to be able to know that you're hiring somebody who is legally here."

The big issue facing Washington is what to do with people that have been here for quite awhile. That's really, I think, the ultimate stumbling block, when you think about it. There's serious disagreement on the issue around the country. First of all, we've got to recognize that there are people who have been here that are newly arrived, and then there are people who have been here for, say, a decade, who have paid their taxes and built a home and raised a family. So the question is, what do you do, what do you do as a society?

The debate really—much of the debate I'm sure you're hearing from is either amnesty or deportation, both of which I'm against. Amnesty means you're automatically a citizen. I don't think that makes sense. It's not fair to those who have waited legally. We got a lot of people waiting to be citizens here, and they've done—they've adhered to our laws, and they're in line—they're in the citizenship line. And I think it would be unfair to those who have been here legally to say to those who have been here illegally that these folks get ahead of you in line. That doesn't make any sense to me, if we're a country that's going to uphold laws.

On the other hand, it makes no sense at all to say we can find people and run them out of the country. For some, I guess that sounds appealing. It's impractical. It's not going to work, and it's not necessary, in my judgment. It's not the right thing to do.

The right thing to do is to recognize that if you've been here illegally, that there ought to be a cost for doing so, but also recognize there are decent, hard-working people that have contributed to our society at the same time. And so I believe here's a way to work out—work through this problem. One is to

say, you got to pay a fine for being here illegally. You've got to learn the English language. In other words, you got to pay—repay a debt to society and learn the skills necessary to assimilate into our society. Show us you've been working hard. In other words, there's a way to verify your contributions to our society. And then, if you want to be a citizen, you can get in line to be a citizen, but not at the head of the line—you get to get at the back of the line.

And to me, that is a humane, decent way of addressing a very difficult problem that Congress is going to have to wrestle with. I believe we ought to differentiate between those who've been here for a long period of time and those who are newly arrived. I know we need to treat people with respect and dignity. I think the best way to assure the American people that we're a nation of laws and a compassionate nation at the same time is to say, "Pay your debt to society, and if you choose to be a citizen, you can; just you wait in line at the back, not in the beginning."

See, there are lines for people who want to become a citizen, and they're based upon nationality. And Congress can determine the length of the line if they want. If the line is too long for Irish people or people from different countries or Mexicans, then increase the number of green cards. If the people are worried about the number of citizens all of a sudden becoming eligible for citizenship, you can decrease the number of green cards. But in the meantime, we need to treat people with respect.

This is a tough debate for America; it really is. It's a tough debate because it's one in which the language can sometimes send the wrong signals about what we're about. People are very emotional about this issue. And my admonition to people who are concerned about the immigration debate is to remember that language can send signals about who we are as a nation, that harsh, ugly rhetoric on the debate tends to divide our country. It tends to forget the values that have made us great.

The values that made us great is that we're a nation that have been united by common ideals, proud of our history, proud of our flag, understanding of the need to have a common language, and at the same time, a society whose soul has been uplifted constantly by the fact that people have come to our country to realize a dream—the dream of working hard and improving their lot in life, the dream of putting food on the table, and at the same time, hoping the child goes to college, the dream of owning their own businesses. That's uniquely American. It enables me to say to the American people that "one Nation under God" means something. And we must never lose that spirit.

For people in Washington, DC, now's the time to get something done. It's important for our elected leaders to understand, if you're going to address the issue of immigration, you've got to address all aspects of the immigration. It's got to be a comprehensive bill if we want there to be an effective bill.

People say, "Well, you know, Mr. President, it looks impossible that something's going to happen." I disagree. American people want something to happen. They expect us as people elected to office to work together to get something done in a positive way. That's what they expect of us. And I'm going to continue traveling this country reminding the people that we have got an opportunity to put together a comprehensive package to reform the system to make it work, a system that will enforce our border and a system that will reinforce our values.

I want to thank you for giving me a chance to come and talk to you about this important issue. I'm really glad to be back in Omaha, Nebraska. May God bless you all, and may God continue to bless our country.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:32 a.m. in the Metropolitan Community College—South Omaha Campus. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Dave Heineman of Nebraska and his wife, Sally; and Jo Ann C. "Jody" McDowell, president, and Heather Fowler, student ex officio, Metropolitan Community College.

Executive Order 13404—Task Force on New Americans

June 7, 2006

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, and in order to strengthen the efforts of the Department of