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those. I've sent legislation to Congress to carry out these additional recommendations, and Dr. Peake is going to work with Members from both sides of the aisle to get me a good bill that I can sign into law.

Our Nation has no higher calling than to provide for those who have borne the cost of battle, and we will honor our responsibilities. I am confident in the future of this Department because I have seen firsthand the dedication and character of the men and women who work here. And I am confident that you will have a worthy and strong leader in our new Secretary.

Congratulations, Jim. I appreciate your willingness to serve. And now I ask the Vice President to administer the oath.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:24 a.m. at the Department of Veterans Affairs. In his remarks, he referred to former Senator Bob Dole and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna E. Shalala, Cochairs, President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Secretary Peake.

Remarks on Signing the Mortgage Forgiveness Debt Relief Act of 2007

December 20, 2007

Thank you all for coming. Welcome to the White House. I'm pleased to sign a bill that will help homeowners who are struggling with rising mortgage payments. The Mortgage Forgiveness Debt Relief Act of 2007 will protect families from higher taxes when they refinance their homes. It will help hard-working Americans take steps to avoid foreclosure during a period of uncertainty in the housing market. I want to thank Members of Congress for getting this bill passed. I appreciate it very much. It's been a joy working with you.

I thank my Secretary of the Treasury, Hank Paulson, and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Alphonso Jackson for taking the lead in helping people stay in their homes. I particularly want to thank the chairman of the Finance Committee, Max Baucus, Senator Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, and Senator George Voinovich of Ohio for sponsoring this legislation.

I remember calling you on the phone, telling you that I'm going to propose the same thing you are—talked to George as well—and it's been a joy to work with you.

I want to thank Jim McCrery of the House, Stephanie Tubbs Jones, and Rob Andrews. Appreciate you all being here.

I want to thank the staff who works hard at the Treasury and HUD to make this deal work. Appreciate your hard work.

In recent months, our Nation's housing market has faced serious strains. Home values have fallen in many parts of our country. At the same time, many homeowners with adjustable rate mortgages have seen their monthly payments increase faster than their ability to pay. And now some homeowners face the prospect of foreclosure.

My administration has taken strong steps to help homeowners avoid foreclosure by making it easier to refinance loans. We gave the Federal Housing Administration greater flexibility to refinance loans for struggling homeowners. We helped assemble a private-sector group of lenders, loan servicers, investors, and mortgage counselors called the HOPE NOW Alliance. This group has agreed on a set of industry-wide standards to help those with subprime loans refinance or modify their mortgages, so more families can stay in their homes.

The bill I sign today will help this effort by ensuring that refinancing a mortgage does not result in a higher tax bill. Under current law, if the value of your house declines and your bank or lender forgives a portion of your mortgage, the Tax Code treats the amount forgiven as money that can be taxed. And of course, this makes a difficult situation even worse. When you're worried about making your payments, higher taxes are the last thing you need to worry about. So this bill will create a 3-year window for homeowners to refinance their mortgage and pay no taxes on any debt forgiveness that they receive. And it's a really good piece of legislation. The provision will increase the incentive for borrowers and lenders to work together to refinance loans, and it will allow American families to secure lower mortgage payments without facing higher taxes.

With this bill, Congress has taken a strong step to address the turbulence in the housing market. Yet there's more work to be done. The Congress needs to pass legislation permitting State and local governments to issue tax-exempt bonds for refinancing existing home loans. And Congress needs to pass legislation strengthening the independent regulator of Government-sponsored enterprises like Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, so we can keep them focused on the mission to expand homeownership. Congress needs, as well, to complete work on responsible legislation modernizing the Federal Housing Administration, so that we can give the FHA the necessary flexibility to help hundreds of thousands of additional families qualify for prime-rate financing.

By taking these steps, we can help our homeowners—and we'll help more Americans become homeowners. We want people to have a place they can call their own. After all, it's an essential part of the American Dream. And we want that dream to extend throughout our Nation.

I want to thank the Members for joining us. I wish you all happy holidays. And this is going to make a happy holiday for many homeowners. Thanks for coming.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:05 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. H.R. 3648, approved December 20, was assigned Public Law No. 110–142.

Remarks Following a Visit With Wounded Troops at Walter Reed Army Medical Center

December 20, 2007

Thank you all for joining me. I've just come down from a tour of a couple of the wards up there here at Walter Reed. First, I'm inspired by the quality of health care. Americans may wonder whether or not our troops are getting the best possible health care, and they are. They're not only getting great care from good docs and nurses; they're getting a lot of compassion and a lot of love up in the wards. And so I want to thank you all. General, thank you very much for taking the lead.

This past month is the lowest number of patients being admitted here since '02, and that's good news. It's good news for families who worry about their loved ones in harm's way, and it's good news for the staff here who would like nothing more to be—to have nobody come in here. Every time I come to a facility like this, I count my blessings. And one of the great blessings is to be the President of a country that produces such brave men and women.

And so as we head into the holiday seasons, I ask for the good Lord's blessings on those in harm's way and their families. And I want to thank you again, General, for your hospitality. I appreciate you having me. Thank you. Thank you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:14 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Maj. Gen. Carla G. Hawley-Bowland, USA, commanding general, North Atlantic Regional Medical Command and Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Proclamation 8213—To Implement an Amendment to the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement

December 20, 2007

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

1. On August 5, 2004, the United States entered into the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (the "Agreement") with Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua (the "Agreement countries"). The Congress approved the Agreement in section 101(a) of the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act (the "CAFTA–DR Act") (19 U.S.C. 4011).

2. The Parties to the Agreement entered into an amendment to the Agreement on July 27, August 6, and August 14, 2007 (the "Amendment"). The terms of the Amendment are contained in letters of understanding between the United States and the Agreement countries described in sections