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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

November 21, 2014

Remarks by the President on Immigration

Del Sol High School

Las Vegas, Nevada

12:50 P.M. PST

THE PRESIDENT: Hello, Las Vegas! (Applause.) Good to see you again -- you were here two years ago. (Applause.) It's good to be back at Del Sol High School -- go Dragons! (Applause.)

Let me just say that whenever I fly to Vegas on Air Force One, the plane is a little more crowded. (Laughter.) For some reason, folks want to come to Vegas. But today it was also crowded with a whole bunch of people who have been passionate about making sure America always remains a nation of immigrants, including your Senator, Harry Reid; the leader of the Democrats in the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi; some extraordinary members of Congress who have been leading on immigration reform -- they are doing unbelievable work, and I want to just name a couple of them -- and if I forget somebody, make sure I don't get into trouble -- from left to right, we've got Xavier Becerra, Ben Lujan, Luis Gutierrez, Dina Titus, Steve Horsford, and Bob Menendez. (Applause.) We've got the son-in-law of Cesar Chavez and a hero to farmworkers in his own right, Arturo Rodriguez. (Applause.)

And I just want to -- and since we're on farmworkers, a legend, somebody who has just been a great friend to working people all across the country, Dolores Huerta. Love you. (Applause.)

I'm so inspired by the introduction by Astrid. Last night, I spoke directly to the American people about immigration, and you heard me talk about Astrid. And if you watched her introduction just now, you heard her talk a little bit about herself.

She was brought here as a little girl, and grew up believing in America and in her identity as an American, just like Malia or Sasha. And then as she grew up, she found out that she was undocumented, which meant she couldn't do all the things her friends could do. She feared that she and her brother could be separated from their dad. And then one day, she decided to start advocating for her fellow DREAMers, and to stand up for her family, and to fight to make a difference in this country that she loves.

And part of what makes America exceptional is that we welcome exceptional people like Astrid. (Applause.) It makes us stronger. It makes us vibrant and dynamic. It makes us hopeful. We are a nation of immigrants, and that means that we're constantly being replenished with strivers who believe in the American Dream. And it gives us a tremendous advantage over other nations. It makes us entrepreneurial. It continues the promise that here in America, you can make it if you try, regardless of where you come from, regardless of the circumstances of your birth.

Our immigration system has been broken for a very long time -- and everybody knows it. As Americans, we believe in fairness -- the idea that if we work hard and play by the rules, we can get ahead. But too often, the immigration system feels fundamentally unfair. You've got families who try to come here the right way but sometimes get separated, or stuck in line for years. You've got business owners who are doing the right thing by their workers, offering good wages and benefits, and then you've got companies that are ignoring minimum wage laws or overtime laws, taking advantage of undocumented immigrants, and as a consequence, undercutting the employers who are doing the right thing.

All of us take offense to the idea that anybody can reap the rewards of living in America without its responsibilities. And folks like Astrid and Astrid's parents, who desperately want to make amends, embrace the responsibilities of living here -- they're forced to either live in the shadows or risk having their families torn apart.

We've known about this for years. And we've known we can do better. And for years, we haven't done much
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about it. Well, today, we're doing something about it. (Applause.)

Now, when I took office, I committed to fixing this broken system. And I began by doing what I could to secure our borders, because I do believe in secure borders. And over the past six years, illegal border crossings have been cut by more than half. Don't let all the rhetoric fool you. There was a brief spike this summer in unaccompanied children being apprehended at the border, but it was temporary, and the number of such children is now actually lower than it's been in nearly two years. Overall, the number of people trying to cross our border illegally is at its lowest level since the 1970s, when I was in high school -- and I've got gray hair now. (Laughter.) So it's been a long time.

And nearly two years ago, I came here, Del Sol High School, right in this gymnasium -- (applause) -- and I said that the time had come for Congress to fix our broken immigration system. And I laid out some basic principles for reform that a lot of different parties could agree on. And what was remarkable was the consensus that started to develop. We had business leaders and labor leaders, and evangelical leaders, and law enforcement leaders; we had Republicans and we had Democrats and independents -- and they all said that, yes, we should secure our borders, we should bring our legal immigration system into the 21st century, and then, once and for all, we should give the 11 million people living in the shadows a chance to make amends and earn their citizenship the right way.

So those were our principles. We laid them out. We were very clear. (Applause.) And after I laid out those principles, we then went to work with Congress. And we started in the Senate. And you ended up with a big majority of Democrats and Republicans and independents all coming together in the Senate to pass a bipartisan bill based on these principles.

The Senate bill wasn't perfect; it was a compromise. That's how things work in Congress. That's how things work in a democracy. Not everybody was satisfied with every provision, but it was a good, solid, common-sense bill that would have made our immigration system a lot better.

It would have doubled the number of border patrol agents. So for those who wanted more border security, that was in the bill. It would have made the legal immigration system smarter and fairer. It would have given the opportunity for young people who are talented and who have gotten a degree -- maybe in computer science or some technical field -- to stay here and work, and contribute, and create a business, and create more jobs.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you, Mr. President!

THE PRESIDENT: You're welcome. (Applause.) And it would have given millions of people that chance to get right with the law. But it wasn't just a gift -- they would have had to pay a fine. They would have had to learn English. They would have had to get to the back of the line. They would have had to pay back taxes.

It was a sensible bill, and all these members of Congress, they worked on it and were supportive of it. And independent experts -- not me -- people who analyze the economy for a living, they said that over two decades, the new law would grow our economy, shrink our deficits. In other words, it would help to solve some big problems in a bipartisan way. And nobody was happier than me. And when it passed the Senate, we said, all right, let's send it over to the House, we've got the votes in the House. We've got Democrats and Republicans who were prepared to vote for it in the House. (Applause.)

It has now been 512 days -- a year and a half -- in which the only thing standing in the way of that bipartisan bill and my desk so that I can sign that bill, the only thing that's been standing in the way is a simple yes-or-not vote in the House of Representatives. Just a yes-or-no vote. If they had allowed a vote on that kind of bill, it would have passed. I would have signed it. It would be the law right now.

These leaders right here tried to make it happen. Nancy Pelosi kept on saying to John Boehner, let's just call the bill, see where it goes. There are Republicans who worked hard on this bill too, and they deserve credit. Because even though it wasn't necessarily popular in their party, they knew it was the right thing to do.

But despite that, the party leadership in the House of Representatives would not let it come forward. And I cajoled and I called and I met. I told John Boehner, I'll wash your car, I'll walk your dog -- (laughter) -- whatever you need to do, just call the bill. That's how democracy is supposed to work. And if the votes hadn't been there, then we would have had to start over. But at least give it a shot -- and he didn't do it.

And the fact that a year and a half has gone by means that time has been wasted. And during that time, families have been separated. And during that time, businesses have been harmed. And we can't afford it anymore.

Las Vegas, I have come back to Del Sol to tell you I'm not giving up. I will never give up. I will never give up. (Applause.) I will not give up.

AUDIENCE: Si se puede! Si se puede! Si se puede!

THE PRESIDENT: So we're not giving up. We're going to keep on working with members of Congress to make permanent reform a reality. But until that day comes, there are actions that I have the legal authority to take that

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will help make our immigration system more fair and more just. And this morning, I began to take some of those actions. (Applause.)

So I talked about -- I thought -- I talked about what I could do based on talking to all the legal experts, talking to the Office of Legal Counsel. And not everything that we want to do we can do, but they told me what we could do. And I wasn't going to sit idly by and not do at least what I was authorized to do.

So first, we're providing more resources to law enforcement so they can stem the flow of illegal crossings at our border and speed up the return of those who do cross over. I want to repeat that -- border security is important.

Second, we're making it easier for high-skilled immigrants, graduates, entrepreneurs to stay and contribute to our economy. (Applause.)

Third, we're going to take steps to deal responsibly with millions of undocumented immigrants who are already here. (Applause.) Now, as I did last night, I want to spend some extra time talking about the third step, because this is the one that brings up the strongest passions on both sides.

The truth is, undocumented workers broke our immigration laws. They didn't follow the rules in terms of how they were supposed to come. And I believe they should be held accountable. And some have proven to break other laws. Some are dangerous. That's why over the past six years, deportations of criminals are up 80 percent. And that's why we'll keep focusing enforcement resources on actual threats to our security. But that means felons, not families. That means criminals, not children. It means gang members, not moms who are trying to put food on their -- on the table for their kids. (Applause.)

So essentially what we're doing is what law enforcement does every day. We've got limited resources, and so we're going to prioritize who are the folks who should be subject to removal, and that means that we've got to make sure that we've got clear rules in terms of how we're enforcing the law.

But even as we focus on deporting criminals, the fact is, millions of immigrants, they live here. And many of them have been here a very long time. And they're found in every state, and they're of every race and every nationality. I know a lot of people focus on the Latino community, but the truth is that --

AUDIENCE MEMBER: -- does not qualify!

THE PRESIDENT: -- the truth is that they're not just --

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Inaudible.)

AUDIENCE: Si se puede! Si se puede! Si se puede! (Applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Inaudible.)

THE PRESIDENT: That's right, not everybody will qualify under this provision. That's the truth. And -- that's the truth. That's why we're still going to have to pass a bill. That's why we're still going to have to pass a bill. (Applause.)

So listen, I heard you, and what I'm saying is, we're still going to have to pass a bill. This is not -- this is a first step. It's not the only step. We're still going to have to do more work. (Applause.) So let -- I've heard you. I've heard you, young man. I've heard you, and I understand. I've heard you. But what I'm saying is, this is just a first step. So, young man, I'm talking to a lot of people here. I've been respectful to you, I want you to be respectful to me, all right? Okay. (Applause.)

Now, understand that not everybody who comes here is Latino. Sometimes that's the face of immigration. Let me tell you, I'm from Chicago. (Applause.) And we've got some Irish immigrants whose papers aren't in order. We've got some Polish immigrants whose papers are not in order. We've got some Ukrainian folks. Down in Florida we've got some Haitian folks. This is not just a Latino issue, this is an American issue. (Applause.) This is an American issue.

And what we have to do is be honest -- that tracking down, rounding up, and deporting millions of people is not realistic. That's not who we are. Most undocumented immigrants are good, decent people. They have been here for a long time. (Applause.) They work, often in the toughest, most low-paying jobs. They're trying hard to support their families. They worship at our churches. Their kids go to school with our kids. (Applause.)

So the fact is that -- even Republicans who say that they don't want to pass this bill that was passed by these legislators, they're not serious about trying to deport 10, 11 million people. That's all rhetoric. Now, what we do expect is that people who are here play by the rules. You shouldn't get rewarded for cutting in line.

So we've offered the following deal: If you've been in America for more than five years; if you have children who are American citizens or legal residents; if you register, you pass a background check, you are willing to pay your

fair share of taxes -- then you're going to be able to apply to stay in this country temporarily without fear of deportation. You can come out of the shadows, get right with the law. (Applause.)

Now, let's be clear on what this deal is, and what it isn't. This action doesn't apply to anybody who has come to this country recently. You can't show up for a week and then suddenly apply -- you can't. Because borders mean something. It doesn't apply to anybody who might come illegally in the future. While I support a path to citizenship -- and so do all these legislators here -- this action doesn't grant citizenship, or the right to stay permanently, or receive the same benefits that citizens receive -- only Congress can do that. All we're saying is we're not going to deport you and separate you from your kids. (Applause.)

Now, if you've taken responsibility, you've registered, undergone a background check, you're paying taxes, you've been here for five years, you've got roots in the community -- you're not going to be deported. And I know some critics call this action amnesty. It's not amnesty. Amnesty really is the system we've got today. You've got millions of people who are living here, but they're not obliged to pay their taxes or play by the rules, and then politicians just use the issue to scare people and whip up votes at election time.

So they want to keep the system as is -- people living in the shadows, maybe providing cheap labor, not subject to any worker protections, and then you pretend like you're being tough on immigration. That's not the right way to do it. That's the real amnesty, just talking, leaving the broken system the way it is.

The bottom line is, mass amnesty would be unfair. But mass deportation would be both impossible and contrary to our country's character. That's not who we are. That's not who we are. (Applause.)

So what we are offering is accountability. It is accountability. It's a common-sense, middle-ground approach. If you meet the criteria, you can come out of the shadows, you can get right with the law. If you are a criminal, you're going to be deported. If you plan to enter the United States illegally, your chances of getting caught and sent back are going up.

And for those who don't qualify under this rule, we're still going to need legislation. But the actions I've taken are not only lawful, they're the kinds of actions taken by every Republican President and every Democratic President for the past half century. (Applause.) Ronald Reagan took action to keep families together. The first President Bush took action to shield about 40 percent of undocumented immigrants at the time. This isn't something I'm doing as if it's never been done. This kind of thing has been done before.

So when members of Congress question my authority to make our immigration system work better, I have a simple answer: Pass a bill. (Applause.) Pass a bill. Nobody is stopping them from passing a bill. (Applause.)

AUDIENCE: Pass a bill! Pass a bill! Pass a bill!

THE PRESIDENT: I mean, I got to admit, these days I don't always listen to all the commentary -- (laughter) -- but I understand that some of them are already saying that my actions "sabotage" their ability to pass a bill and make immigration work better. Why? I didn't dissolve parliament. That's not how our system works. (Laughter.) I didn't steal away the various clerks in the Senate and the House who manage bills. They can still pass a bill. I don't have a vote in Congress -- pass a bill. You don't need me to call a vote to pass a bill. Pass a bill.

Because the actions I've taken are only a temporary first step. I don't have the authority to do some really important reforms. We should be creating new programs for farmworkers. We should be adding visas for the high-tech sector. We should be creating a pathway to citizenship. But only Congress can do that.

The House could still pass the bipartisan Senate bill before the end of the year. (Applause.) They still have time. They've still got -- what are you guys schedule to be in for, another four weeks. Right after Thanksgiving call the bill. It's been sitting there. And if they don't want to pass that bill, then I pledge to work with Republicans and Democrats next year to pass a more permanent legislative solution. And the day I sign that bill into law, then the actions that I've taken will no longer be necessary. And I'll give everybody credit. I'll be happy to have John Boehner and Mitch McConnell alongside Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi and Luis Gutierrez and Bob Menendez and all these folks -- we'll all have a nice signing ceremony.

So I just want to emphasize this issue. Because I hear some people say, well, we're in favor of immigration reform, but we don't think that it should be done without Congress. Well, Congress, go ahead and do it.

And meanwhile, Washington should not let disagreements over one issue be a dealbreaker on every issue. That's not how our democracy works. Congress certainly should not shut down the government again over this. Because Americans are tired of gridlock. We are ready to move forward. And we don't want to -- and we just want sensible, common-sense approaches to problems.

Now, this debate deserves more than the usual politics, because for all the back and forth in Washington, as I said last night, this is about something bigger. This is about who we are. Who do we want to be?

America is not a nation that accepts the hypocrisy of workers who mow our lawns, make our beds, clean out bedpans, with no chance ever to get right with the law. We're a nation that gives people a chance to take

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responsibility and make amends, and then create a better future for their kids.

America is not a nation that should be tolerating the cruelty of ripping children from their parents' arms. We're a nation that values families, and we should work together to keep them together. (Applause.)

America attracts talent from all around the world. We educate the world's young people in our universities, and then we just send them home, even if they're wanting to start a business or they've got some specialized skill. We just send them home, and then they compete against us. We should be encouraging the best and the brightest to study here and stay here, and invest here, and create jobs here and businesses here, and industries here. You look at Silicon Valley -- 30, 40 percent of the companies that we now take for granted that have changed our lives, they were started by immigrants. (Applause.)

So that's what this issue is all about. And that's why it deserves reasoned and thoughtful and compassionate debate. And that's why we have to focus not on our fears, we've got focus on our hopes.

You know, every day we receive thousands, tens of thousands of letters and emails at the White House. And as you can imagine, for the past few days, a lot of them have been about immigration. They've come from good, decent people on both sides of this debate. And I want to -- I want everybody here to understand, there are folks who are good, decent people who are worried about immigration. They're worried that it changes the fabric of our country. They're worried about whether immigrants take jobs from hardworking Americans. And they're worried because they're feeling a lot of economic stress, and they feel as if maybe they're the ones paying taxes and nobody else is taking responsibility. So they've urged me not to act.

And I hear them. And I understand them. But you know, I've also got a lot of letters and emails reminding me why we had to act -- from American family members of hardworking immigrants who feared their families could be torn apart; from DREAMers who had proudly stepped out of the shadows and were willing to live without fear, even though it was a big risk for them; from Republicans who don't agree with me on everything, but are tired of their party refusing to vote on reform.

One Republican who wrote me said this -- he said he supported my decision, and he said -- and I'm quoting -- "I believe that a human being, created in the very image of Almighty God, is the greatest resource that we have in this country." (Applause.)

We're not a nation that kicks out strivers and dreamers who want to earn their piece of the American Dream. We're a nation that finds a way to welcome them. We make them earn it, but we welcome them in as fellow human beings, fellow children of God. And we harness their talents to make the future brighter for everybody.

We didn't raise the Statue of Liberty with her back to the world, we did it with her light shining as a beacon to the world. And whether we were Irish or Italians or Germans crossing the Atlantic, or Japanese or Chinese crossing the Pacific; whether we crossed the Rio Grande or flew here from all over the world -- generations of immigrants have made this country into what it is. It's what makes us special. (Applause.)

And whether we fled famine, or war, or persecution; whether we had the right documents, or connections, or skills; whether we were wealthy or poor -- we all shared one thing, and that was hope that America would be the place where we could finally build a better life for ourselves and for our children, and for future generations. Hope that America is the place where we could make it.

That's what makes us Americans. It's not what we look like. It's not what our last name is. It's not where we come from. It's not how we pray. What makes us American is a shared commitment to an ideal that all of us are created equal, all of us have a chance to make our lives what we will.

For generations, America -- by choice and Americans by birth have come together to renew that common creed and move this country forward that brought us to this moment. That is the legacy that we now have to deliver to the next generation.

Thank you, Nevada. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

END

1:22 P.M. PST