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President Discusses War on Terror and Operation Iraqi Freedom
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News Release

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[...]

Q Okay. My question is, since 9/11, one of the key things that we need is immigration reform, including comprehensive immigration reform that is right now in front of Senator Specter's committee in the Judiciary. There are two principles I'm hoping that you would support: One, the good people, the engineers, the PhDs, the doctors, the nurses, the people in the system who have followed the rules, will go to the head of the line in any form of immigration reform. That's Title IVz of the bill.

Secondly, the illegals who have not followed the rules -- I understand the debate, I appreciate your statements about immigration reform, but isn't it better that we know who they are, have them finger-printed and photographed, and allow some form of 245I to come back so --

THE PRESIDENT: Tell people what that is. Tell people what 245I is.

Q Okay -- 245I is a partial amnesty program that expired back in 2001, in fact, was going to be voted on on 9/11, unfortunately. But those -- it was a small segment of the illegal population where they would pay the \$1,000 fine and, for example, coming in illegally, then marrying an American citizen, could somehow legalize their status.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay. Let me give you some broad principles on immigration reform as I see them. First of all, we do need to know who's coming into our country and whether they're coming in illegally, or not legally -- legally or not legally -- and whether they're coming in or going out. And part of reforms after September the 11th was a better system of finding out who's coming here.

Secondly, we have a big border between Texas and Mexico that's really hard to enforce. We got to do everything we can to enforce the border, particularly in the south. I mean, it's the place where people are pouring across in order to find work. We have a situation in our own neighborhood where there are way -- disparities are huge, and there are jobs in America that people won't do. That's just a fact. I met an onion grower today at the airport when I arrived, and he said, you got to help me find people that will grow onions -- pluck them, or whatever you do with them, you know. (Laughter.) There are jobs that just simply aren't getting done because Americans won't do them. And yet, if you're making 50 cents an hour in Mexico, and you can make a lot more in America, and you got mouths to feed, you're going to come and try to find the work. It's a big border, of which -- across which people are coming to provide a living for their families.

Step one of any immigration policy is to enforce our border in practical ways. We are spending additional resources to be able to use different detection devices, unmanned UAVs, to help -- and expand Border Patrol, by the way, expand the number of agents on the border, to make sure we're getting them the tools necessary to stop people from coming across in the first place.

Secondly, part of the issue we've had in the past is we've had -- for lack of a better word -- catch and release; the Border Patrol would find people sneaking in; they would then hold them for a period of time; they'd say, come back and check in with us 45 days later, and then they wouldn't check in 45 days later. And they would disappear in society to do the work that some Americans will not do.

And so we're changing catch and release. We're particularly focusing on those from Central America who are coming across Mexico's southern border, ending up in our own -- it's a long answer, but it's an important question: How do we protect our borders, and at the same time, be a humane society?

Anyway, step one, focus on enforcing border; when we find people, send them home, so that the work of our Border Patrol is productive work.

Secondly, it seems like to me that part of having a border security program is to say to people who are hiring people here illegally, we're going to hold you to account. The problem is our employers don't know whether they're hiring people illegally because there's a whole forgery industry around people being smuggled into the United States. There's a smuggling industry and a forgery industry. And it's hard to ask our employers, the onion guy out there, whether or not he's got -- whether or not the documents that he's being shown that look real are real.

And so here's a better proposal than what we're doing today, which is to say, if you're going to come to do a job an American won't do, you ought to be given a foolproof card that says you can come for a limited period of time and do work in a job an American won't do. That's border security because it means that people will be willing to come in legally with a card to do work on a limited basis, and then go home. And so the agents won't be chasing people being smuggled in 18-wheelers or across the Arizona desert. They'll be able to focus on drugs and terrorists and guns.

The fundamental question that he is referring to is, what do we do about -- there's two questions -- one, should we have amnesty? And the answer, in my judgment, is, no, we shouldn't have amnesty. In my judgment, granting amnesty, automatic citizenship -- that's what amnesty means -- would cause another 11 million people, or however many are here, to come in the hopes of becoming a United States citizen. We shouldn't have amnesty. We ought to have a program that says, you get in line like everybody else gets in line; and that if the Congress feels like there needs to be higher quotas on certain nationalities, raise the quotas. But don't let people get in front of the line for somebody who has been playing by the rules. (Applause.)

And so, anyway, that's my ideas on good immigration policy. Obviously, there's going to be some questions we have to answer: What about the person who's been here since 1987 -- '86 was the last attempt at coming up with immigration reform -- been here for a long period of time. They've raised a

family here. And my only advice for the Congress and for people in the debate is understand what made America. We're a land of immigrants. This guy is from Hungary, you know. (Applause.) And we got to treat people fairly. We've got to have a system of law that is respectful for people.

I mean, the idea of having a program that causes people to get stuck in the back of 18-wheelers, to risk their lives to sneak into America to do work that some people won't do is just not American, in my judgment. And so I would hope the debate would be civil and uphold the honor of this country. And remember, we've been through these periods before, where the immigration debate can get harsh. And it should not be harsh. And I hope -- my call for people is to be rational about the debate and thoughtful about what words can mean during this debate.