



[Briefing Room](#)

[Your Weekly Address](#)

[Speeches & Remarks](#)

[Press Briefings](#)

[Statements & Releases](#)

[White House Schedule](#)

[Presidential Actions](#)

[Executive Orders](#)

[Presidential Memoranda](#)

[Proclamations](#)

[Legislation](#)

[Pending Legislation](#)

[Signed Legislation](#)

[Vetoed Legislation](#)

[Nominations & Appointments](#)

[Disclosures](#)

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 12, 2011

Remarks by the President at Forum on American Latino Heritage

THE PRESIDENT: Hello, everybody! (Applause.) Thank you so much. Thank you, everybody. Everybody, please have a seat. (Applause.) Welcome to Washington. It is an honor to be here with so many leaders and thinkers who've come together for one reason: to celebrate Latino culture, and honor the contributions that so many Latinos have made -- and continue to make -- to our nation.

I want to begin by thanking Sergeant First Class Petry for that introduction. Three months ago, I was honored to present Sergeant Petry with our nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor. And we are so proud of him. (Applause.) He is an inspiration to all of us. And he is the latest in a long line of Latino heroes to wear America's uniform. So I was mentioning to him that I went to Walter Reed this week to visit some of our wounded warriors, and a number of them remarked on how they had had a chance to meet Sergeant Petry -- he had gone by to talk to some of those guys. And seeing him in uniform, proud, doing what he does, inspired them and made them certain that they were going to pull through. And so that's the kind of effect he's having on people each and every day. And we're really proud of him. So, thank you very much. Thank you. (Applause.)

I also want to recognize the members of Congress who are here. I want to thank my dear friend and outstanding Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, for organizing this forum. (Applause.) Whenever Ken is asked how long his ancestors have been in this country, he says, "Oh, about 400 years." (Laughter.) So his roots go way back -- just like I know many of yours do.

And that's what today is all about. Diversity has always been America's strength. We are richer because of the men and women and children who've come to our shores and joined our union. And we are better off because of the ideas that they've brought, and the difference that they've made, and the impact they've had on our lives.

And nowhere is that more true than with the Latino community. Right now, there are 54 million Americans of Latino descent -- one-sixth of our population. Our neighbors, our coworkers, our family, our friends. You've helped us build our cities, grow our economy, defend our country. And today, for the first time in history, there is a Latina in my Cabinet and a Latina on the bench of the highest court in the land. (Applause.) Hilda Solis is doing an outstanding job.

Now, this forum is about celebrating that heritage, because too often the achievements of Latinos go unrecognized. And there are achievements that have been hard-won. We know life hasn't always been easy for Latinos in this country, and still isn't. The land of opportunity hasn't always been the land of acceptance. But the fact that Latinos have done so much and come so far is a

testament to the vision that has sustained you. It's a vision that says, maybe I never had a chance to get a good education, but I want my daughter to go to college, maybe get a second degree. Maybe I started out working in the fields, but some day I'll own my own business. Maybe I wasn't born in this country, but I'll sign up to fight for it. Maybe I have to make sacrifices, but those sacrifices are worth it if it means a better life for my family.

That's the story of parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents -- that determination, that perseverance, that sense of what is possible that has kept the American Dream alive and well in the Latino community. And more than any one person or any one story, those are the values that we have to remember today.

We need to remember those values because times are especially tough right now, and they've been tough for a while. For the better part of a decade, we've seen the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, the middle class get squeezed. That was before the crisis that began in Wall Street and made its way to Main Streets all across America, making it harder for people to find jobs, harder for families to keep their heads above water.

And the Latino community knows this better than most. The unemployment rate among Latinos is one of the highest in the country. And right now, too many families are struggling just to get by. That's not right. I ran for President for the same reason many people came to this country in the first place: Because I believe America should be a place where you can always make it if you try; a place where every child, no matter what they look like, where they come from, should have a chance to succeed.

I still believe in that America. I believe we can be that America again. The truth is, the problems we face today were a long time coming and solving them will take time. In a global economy, it will require us to have the best-educated workforce, the strongest commitment to research and innovation, the most reliable communications and transportation networks.

But with so many people hurting today, there are things we can do right now to make a difference. There are things we should do right now to put more people back to work and to restore a sense of security and fairness that's been missing for too long.

So that's why I put forward the American Jobs Act. That's why I sent Congress a jobs bill made up of the kinds of proposals that, traditionally, Democrats and Republicans have supported. Independent economists who do this for a living have said the American Jobs Act would lead to more growth and nearly 2 million jobs next year. No other jobs plan has that kind of support from actual economists -- no plan from Congress, no plan from anybody.

But apparently, none of this matters to Republicans in the Senate. Because last night, even though a majority of senators voted in favor of the American Jobs Act, a Republican minority got together as a group and blocked this jobs bill from passing the Senate. They said no to more jobs for teachers; no to more jobs for cops and firefighters; no to more jobs for construction workers and veterans; no to tax cuts for small business owners and middle-class Americans.

Now, a lot of folks in Washington and the media will look at last night's vote and say, well, that's it. Let's move on to the next fight. But I've got news for them: Not this time. Not with so many Americans out of work. Not with so many folks in your communities hurting. We will not take no for an answer. (Applause.)

We will keep organizing and we will keep pressuring and we will keep voting until this Congress finally meets its responsibilities and actually does something to put people back to work and improve the economy.

We'll give members of Congress a chance to vote on whether they think that we should keep teachers out of work -- or put them back in the classroom where they belong, teaching our kids.

They'll get a chance to vote on whether they think that construction workers should stay idle while our roads and bridges are falling apart -- or whether we should put these men and women back to work rebuilding America.

Republicans say that one of the most important things we can do is cut taxes. Well, they get a chance to vote on whether we should cut taxes for middle-class families, or let them go up. This job would cut taxes for virtually every worker and small business in America; 25 million Latinos would benefit. If you're a small business owner who hires a new worker or raises wages, you'd get another tax cut. If you hire a veteran, like Sergeant Petry, you'd get another tax cut. Anybody who fights for our country should not have to fight for a job when they come home. (Applause.)

Now, I know some folks in Congress blocked this jobs bill because of how it's paid for. Well, we already agreed to cut nearly \$1 trillion in government spending. We've offered to cut even more in order to bring down the deficit. But we can't just cut without asking those of us who've been most fortunate in our society to pay our fair share. And that's not about punishing success; it's about making choices. If we want to create jobs and close the deficit, and invest in our future, the money has got to come from somewhere.

And so we've got to ask ourselves a question: Would we rather keep the tax code with its loopholes exactly as they are for millionaires and billionaires -- or do you want construction workers to have a job rebuilding roads and bridges and schools? Because you know a lot of our kids in the

community are learning in trailers right now. Why wouldn't we want to put people back to work rebuilding those schools? Would you rather fight for special interest tax breaks, or do you want to fight for tax cuts for small businesses and middle-class families in your neighborhood? I think I know the answer.

In the end, this is a debate about fairness and who we are as a country. It's a debate about what we believe in; what kind of country do we want to be. When Michelle and I tuck our daughters into bed at night, we think about the fact that we are only where we are because somebody who came before us met their responsibilities. They put the America Dream within our reach. They made sure that there were student loan programs out there, and they made sure that there were decent schools out there, that there were opportunities for everybody. That's the reason all of you are here today -- because somebody made an investment 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago, 40 years ago, to ensure that you had a chance at success.

Those aren't white or black or Latino or Asian or Native American values. Those are American values. Now it's up to us -- this generation -- to do our part to invest now so that the next generation has a shot.

These are tough times, and a lot of people are living week to week, paycheck to paycheck, even day to day. They need action, and they need it now. They want Congress to work for the people who elected them in the first place. They want Congress to do their job.

So I need your help. I'm going to need -- you are opinion leaders all across the country. I need you to email and tweet, and fax and write letters, and get on the phone, meet face to face. Remind members of Congress who they work for. Remind them what's at stake here. The time for games and politics is over. Too many in this country are hurting for us to stand by and do nothing.

This jobs bill will help the Latino community right now, and it will help the larger American community right now. We all have a stake in this recovery, and it's up to every single one of us to fight for a better future.

In 1966, Cesar Chavez was struggling to bring attention to the treatment of farm workers in California, and he received a telegram from a friend who knew a little something about standing up for justice. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote, "As brothers in the fight for equality, I extend the hand of fellowship and goodwill. We are with you in spirit and in determination that our dreams for a better tomorrow will be realized."

And here in America, we are united by more than the color of our skin or the language that we

speak. We are joined together by a shared creed, a shared set of values. We're connected by the future we want for ourselves and our children. And we determine our own destiny here. Whether your ancestors came from a -- came over on a slave ship, or crossed the Rio Grande, or were here long before the country was founded, we're in this together. And we have the opportunity right now to determine our own destiny.

So I hope you will join me in helping us meet this moment. Let's get to work putting the American people back to work. And let's show once again why the United States of America remains the greatest nation on Earth.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

END 11:52 A.M. EDT



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