

Obama Presses Hispanic Caucus Agenda

'I will do everything in my power — to make the DREAM Act a reality'

BY BARACK OBAMA

Washington Convention Center
Washington, D.C.
September 14, 2011
8:24 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Hello, everybody. Buenas noches. (Applause.) Thank you so much. Thank you, everybody. Please, please, have a seat. I want to thank Congressman Gonzalez, Senator Menendez for your outstanding leadership. I want to thank the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute for inviting us here this evening. It is wonderful to be back with all of you to help kick off Hispanic Heritage Month.

Now, before I begin, I want to acknowledge a few people who are with us here tonight. We are honored to be joined by Her Royal Highness Princess Cristina of Spain. (Applause.) We are honored to be joined by our first Latina Supreme Court justice, Sonia Sotomayor. (Applause.) I want to recognize House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi — (applause) — our great friend and champion, as well as congratulate Secretary Ken Salazar and Secretary Hilda Solis for their awards tonight and for their outstanding work. (Applause.)

I also want to give a special shout-out to my friend Rey Decerega, the program director here at CHCI. Not many people can give the President of the United States stitches on his lip and get away with it. (Laughter.) Rey is in unique company. (Laughter.) I sent him a photograph of the moment, as he was throwing his elbow at me, and said, he's the only person who ever did that and the Secret Service did not arrest. (Laughter.) And I hear he's pretty tough off the basketball court, too.

Finally, I want to thank all the members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus here tonight. And I also want to apologize for them because they spent last week listening to me talk. So you probably thought you could escape this by coming to this dinner.

But I'm here because we're at a critical time for our country. The fight we're having right now — the

fight to put more Americans back to work, to make our country stronger in the long run, to prove that we can get something done here in Washington — this fight could not be more important for the people in this room, for the Latino community, and for millions of Americans who need help.

I don't have to tell you these are tough times. You know how hard this recession has hit families — especially Latino families. You know the sacrifices that folks are making every single day just to pay the mortgage, or fill up the car, or to keep the lights on, keep kids in school.

These are families in Los Angeles and San Antonio and Miami. But they're also families in Decatur and Des Moines. As I said when I spoke here last year, problems in the Latino community are problems for the entire American community. Our future is tied to how well the Latino community does. The reverse is also true — when our country is hurting, everyone feels the pain.

Right now, most Americans — whether they are black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American — they're working hard to meet their responsibilities. All they want in return is for that hard work to pay off. And they want those of us in Washington to meet our responsibilities, and do our part to make their lives just a little bit easier, to create those ladders of opportunity.

And that's why, last week, I asked Congress a simple question: In the face of a national emergency, can we finally put a stop to the political circus and actually do something to help the economy? (Applause.) Can we restore some of the fairness and the security that has defined this nation since our founding?

I believe we can, and I believe we must. And that's why, on Monday, I sent the American Jobs Act to Congress and asked them to pass it right away. (Applause.) The proposals in this legislation have, in the past, been supported by Democrats and Republicans. And all of it will be paid for.

And the idea behind this bill is simple: to put more people back to work and put more money into the pockets of those who are working. It will create more jobs for

construction workers and teachers and veterans and the long-term unemployed. It will give tax breaks to companies who hire new workers, and to small business owners, and to the middle class. And it will help restore confidence in our economy so businesses will invest and hire.

Passing this jobs bill will put people to work rebuilding our decaying roads and our bridges, and will repair and modernize 35,000 schools by fixing roofs, insulating windows, and installing science labs and high-speed Internet, and getting our kids out of trailers — (applause) — all throughout the community, especially in the Latino community, where our children — the population is growing fastest.

At a time when countries like China are building high-speed rail lines and gleaming new airports, we've got over a million unemployed construction workers — many of them Latino — who could be doing the same thing right here in the United States. That's not right. It's time for us to fix it. And that's why Congress should pass this bill right away. (Applause.)

Passing this jobs bill will put thousands of teachers in every state back to work helping our kids compete with their peers around the world. Because at a time when teachers are being hired in countries like South Korea, we can't be laying them off in San Diego or Philadelphia — not when our children's future is at stake. Let's put teachers back in the classroom where they belong. (Applause.)

Passing this jobs bill will cut taxes for small business — including 250,000 Latino-owned businesses. And it will give companies a tax credit if they hire American veterans, because if you risk your life serving this country, you shouldn't have to worry about finding a job when you get home. This is our chance to help make it right. (Applause.)

Passing this jobs bill will give hundreds of thousands of disadvantaged young people a summer job next year. And their parents, who desperately want to work, will have more ladders out of poverty. That's why Congress needs to pass this bill right now.

Passing this jobs bill will give companies up to a \$4,000 tax credit if they hire someone who's been looking for a job for more than six months. It will build on a program in Georgia that takes the people who collect unemployment insurance and gives them temporary work as a way to build up their skills while they look for a permanent job. And this plan will also extend unemployment insurance for another year — and that benefits over one million Latinos and their families. They need help, and it would be a huge blow to our economy if these families stopped spending money on necessities.

Let's pass this bill and keep that from happening. (Applause.)

And finally, passing this jobs bill will give the typical working family a \$1,500 tax cut next year. Money that would have been taken out of your paycheck will now go into your pocket; 25-million Latino workers will benefit. Some folks have been working pretty hard in Congress to keep tax breaks for wealthy Americans. The least they can do is fight just as hard for the middle class and people at the bottom. Let's get this done. Let's make sure that ordinary folks get some relief as well. (Applause.)



President Barack Obama addressed the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, September 14, 2011.

So this is what the American Jobs Act is all about: New jobs for construction workers and teachers, veterans, young people, long-term unemployed. Tax credits for middle-class families and for small businesses. And we'll pay for it — all of it — in a way that not only covers the cost of the plan but helps to bring down our debt and our deficits over the long term.

I'll be talking more about how we're going to pay for this plan on Monday, but the bottom line is it has to be done in a balanced way where everyone shares the sacrifice and nobody is asked to bear the whole burden.

We need to make more spending cuts on top of the trillion dollars of cuts I've already signed into law, and that's going to be tough. We need to make modest adjustments to programs like Medicare and Medicaid that will help preserve them for the next generation while protecting current retirees. But we also need to make some real choices when it comes to our tax code — choices

about what kind of country do we want to be.

Instead of asking middle-class families to bear even more of a burden, let's ask big corporations to give up tax loopholes that small businesses don't get. (Applause.) Instead of telling seniors "you're on your own," let's make sure our wealthiest citizens aren't paying taxes at a lower rate than their secretaries. That's not right. (Applause.) In this country, everybody should be getting a fair shake, and everybody should be paying their fair share. That's who we are as Americans. That's who we have to be now.

A jobs bill that puts Americans back to work; a balanced approach to pay for it that will lower our deficit in the long run — these are the steps Congress needs to take right now to put our country on a stronger footing. But we also know we've got to do more. If we're going to continue to grow our economy at a time when companies can set up shop anywhere in the world, we've got to do more; we've got to look a little further down the road.

And that starts with giving our children the best opportunity to succeed — something I know Latino families are focused on every single day. Because if we're going to out-build and out-innovate every other country on Earth, the most important thing we can do is make sure that every single young person in this country has an opportunity to thrive. The most important investment we can make is in education. (Applause.)

That's why we launched the Race to the Top initiative — which now reaches almost one-quarter of our country's Latino students — to help encourage schools to do the very best with our kids: Identify and support students before they drop out; implement effective bilingual education programs; make English Language Learners a priority.

We have strengthened Pell Grants and we're investing in community colleges that help teach the skills that companies need. And that's part of the reason why the number of young Latinos enrolled in college rose by 24 percent in the last year. They can actually afford to go to school because of the help that members of Congress who are here tonight helped deliver. (Applause.) We've got more Latinos attending college than ever before. And even though we're not there yet, we are going to do everything in our power — I will do everything in my power — to make the DREAM Act a reality. (Applause.)

This has been a long and frustrating road for all of us. Republicans helped write the DREAM Act because they knew it was the right thing to do for our country. That was a while back. But then last year, we passed the DREAM Act through the House only to see it blocked

by Senate Republicans. And now, for the first time in a decade, the bill doesn't have a single Republican co-sponsor. Not one. Nothing about the need for the legislation changed. Nothing about the language in the legislation changed. The only thing that changed was politics in Washington.

That's heartbreaking. It's heartbreaking to see innocent young people denied the right to earn an education or serve in our military because of their parents' action and because of the actions of a few politicians in Washington. It's heartbreaking to see these incredibly bright, gifted people barred from contributing to our country and to our economy.

Because the truth is, reforming our immigration system is crucial for our economic future. This country was built and sustained by people who risked everything because they believed in the idea of America — the idea that anybody with a dream and a willingness to work can make a life for themselves here. (Applause.) That is part of the American Dream. That's the essence of the American Dream. (Applause.)

That's why it doesn't make sense that we educate more foreign-born workers than any country in the world, but our broken, outdated immigration system often sends them home to invent and build and grow their companies someplace else. It doesn't make any sense that immigrant workers are forced into the shadows, earning unfair wages, at the same time that businesses are breaking the rules and getting away with it, while those that follow the rules get punished.

We need an immigration policy that works, one that meets the needs of our families and our businesses while honoring our tradition as a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws. Because no matter what you may hear, in this country there is no "us" or "them." There is only "us." One nation, under God, indivisible. (Applause.) And immigrants are part of that American family and a source of our strength. (Applause.)

Now, as I mentioned when I was at La Raza a few weeks back, I wish I had a magic wand and could make this all happen on my own. There are times where — until Nancy Pelosi is speaker again — (applause) — I'd like to work my way around Congress. (Applause.) But the fact is, even as we work towards a day when I can sign an immigration bill, we've got laws on the books that have to be upheld. But as you know as well as anyone that — anybody else, how we enforce those laws is also important. That's why the Department of Homeland Security is applying common-sense standards for immigration enforcement. And we've made progress so that our enforcement policies prioritize criminals who en-

danger our communities, not students trying to achieve the American Dream. (Applause.)

But we live in a democracy, and at the end of the day, I can't do this all by myself under our democratic system. If we're going to do big things — whether it's passing this jobs bill, or the DREAM Act, or comprehensive immigration reform — we're going to have to get Congress to act. I know Nancy Pelosi is ready to act. I know the CHC is ready to act. But we got to get more folks in Congress to act. It's time to stop playing politics and start listening to the people who sent us to Washington in the first place — because the rest of America is way ahead of us on this.

So everybody here tonight, keep the heat on me, keep the heat on Nancy, the rest of the Democrats. We feel good about where we're at. But if we're being honest, we know the real problem isn't the members of Congress in this room. It's the members of Congress who put party before country because they believe the only way to resolve our differences is to wait 14 months till the next election.

And I've got news for them. The American people don't have the luxury of waiting 14 months. (Applause.) Some of them are living paycheck to paycheck; month to month; day to day. Others want to go to college right now. They want to defend their country right now. And that's why I'm asking everybody in the Latino community — not just here, but all across the country — lift up your voice. Make yourself heard. If you think it's time to pass a jobs bill that will put millions of Americans back to work, call on Congress to do the right thing.

If you think it's time to give businesses the incentive to hire, and put more money into your pockets, make

yourself heard. Tell Congress to do the right thing. And if your congressman or woman is already on the right page, talk to somebody else's congressman. (Laughter.)

If you think it's time to stop the political games and finally pass the DREAM Act and reform our immigration system, pick up the phone, get on the computer — tell your representatives in Washington the time is action — the time for action is now. We can't wait. Not when so much is at stake.

These are difficult times. But, remember, we've been through worse. And think about everybody here — your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents — they struggled in ways we can't even imagine to deliver that American Dream to you. We've always been a nation full of vision, a bold and optimistic America that does big things. We don't have a cramped vision. We don't try to exclude. We try to embrace and bring people in to this idea of America.

It's a vision where we live within our means, but we invest in our future; where everybody makes sacrifices, but nobody has to bear the burden alone, and everybody shares in our success; where we live up to the idea that no matter what you look like, no matter where you come from, no matter what your surname — whether your ancestors landed at Ellis Island, or came over on a slave ship, or crossed the Rio Grande — we are all connected, and we all rise and fall together. (Applause.)

That's the America I believe in. That's the America that you believe in. That's the America we can once more have, as long as all of us are working together. (Applause.)

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

But amnesty is a bad word. That's why we called it legalization....

It's not perfect [IRCA], but 2.9 million people came forward. And for many years after, I'd be in a restaurant somewhere and they'd come out of the kitchen and say, viva Simpson. I said, I like that. Sing it again.

And I loved that. And to me, that was worth it all. I don't, you know, I don't suck my thumb and go into a corner. You know, it wasn't what I wanted, but it was better than nothing. And now they haven't done nothing.

—Alan Simpson

What would be the best Christmas present to the American people is pictures of concrete being poured.

—Tom Tancredo

(on the passage of the "Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act," U.S. House of Representatives, December 2005)