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Barack Obama

Town Hall Address at Lorain County Community College

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Hello, everybody! Hello, Ohio! Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you. Everybody, please relax. We're going to be here for a little bit. Everybody take a seat -- if you have a seat. It is great to see you -- can everybody please give Jody a big round of applause for the introduction.

Everybody is a special guest, but we've got a few that I just want to mention. First of all, obviously you've got one of the finest governors in the country in Ted Strickland. Please give him a round of applause. My former colleague when he was in the Senate -- nobody fights harder for working people than Sherrod Brown. Give him a big round of applause.

We've got a dynamo pair of members of the House of Representatives, who are so committed to their districts and committed to this state -- Betty Sutton and Marcy Kaptur. I have been having just a wonderful time here in town, and your mayor has just been a really nice person. He and I shared a burger over at Smitty's. Give Bill Grace a big round of applause.

And somebody who I'm hugely impressed with because I'm just so impressed with this institution, and his leadership obviously has been critical to it -- Dr. Ray Church, your school president here at Lorain County Community College.

Well, listen, it is great to be here in Elyria. Thank you so much for the great hospitality, the wonderful reception. Look, it's just nice being out of Washington, let me say. I mean, there are some nice people in Washington, but it can drive you crazy. Am I wrong, Sherrod?



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For two years, I had the privilege of traveling across this country, and I had a chance to talk to people like you, and go to diners and sit in barbershops, and hear directly about the challenges that all of you are facing in your lives, and the opportunities that you're taking advantage of, and all the things that we face together as a nation. And the single hardest thing -- people ask me this all the time -- the single hardest thing about being President is that it's harder for me to do that nowadays. It's harder to get out of the bubble.

I mean, don't get me wrong, the White House is a wonderful place to work. You live above the store, which means I've got a very short commute. I'm having -- I see my daughters before they go to school and I see them at night for dinner, even if I have to go back down to the office. And that makes everything so much better. But the truth is, this job is a little confining, and that is frustrating. I can't just go to the barbershop or sit in a diner. I can't always visit people directly.

This is part of the reason why I've taken to the practice of reading 10 letters, out of the 40,000 that I get, every night just so that I can stay in touch and hear from you. But nothing beats a day where I can make an escape, I break out. And so I appreciate the chance to come here and spend a day.

Before I came here I visited the EMC Precision Machining plant. I saw the great clean energy job training program here at Lorain County Community College. And I'm obviously thrilled to be able to spend some time with you.

Audience: We love you!

Obama: I love you back. Thank you.

Now, look, let's be honest. These are difficult and unsettling times. They're difficult times here in Elyria; they're tough in Ohio; they're tough all across the country. I walked into office a year ago in the middle of a raging economic storm that was wreaking devastation on your town and communities everywhere. We had to take some very difficult steps to deal with that mess, to stave off an even greater economic catastrophe. We had to stabilize the financial system, which, given the role of the big banks in creating this mess, was a pretty tough pill to swallow.

I knew it would be unpopular -- and rightly so. But I also knew that we had to do it because if they went down, your local banks would have gone down. And if the financial system went down, it would have taken the entire economy and millions more families and businesses with it. We would have looked -- we would have been looking at a second Great Depression.

So in my first months in office, we also had to save two of the big three automakers from a liquidation bankruptcy, complete collapse. Some people weren't happy about that, either. I understand that. They felt like if you're in a business, you make a bad decision, you ought to reap the consequences, just like any business would. The problem was, if we let GM and Chrysler simply go under, hundreds of thousands of Americans would have been hurt, not just at those companies themselves, but at auto suppliers and other companies and dealers here in Michigan, up in -- here in Ohio, up in Michigan, all across this country.



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So we said, if you're willing to take some tough and painful steps to make yourself more competitive, we're willing to invest in your future. And earlier this week, we heard that the auto industry planned to make almost 3 million cars and trucks here in North America in the next three months, which is up 69 percent from the first three months of last year.

We also passed a Recovery Act to pull our economy back from the brink. Now, there's been a lot of misunderstanding about this Recovery Act. Sherrod and Marcy and Betty and I were talking about this on the way over here. If you ask the average person, what was the Recovery Act, the stimulus package, they'd say, "the bank bailout." So let me just be clear here: The Recovery Act was cutting taxes for 95 percent of working families -- 15 different tax cuts for working families, seven different tax cuts for small businesses so they can start up and grow and hire. The Recovery Act was extending and increasing unemployment insurance and making COBRA available at a cheaper rate for people who had lost their jobs so they could keep their health care.

We gave aid directly to states to help them through tough times. Ted can testify the help that it provided to the Ohio budget so we wouldn't have to lay off teachers and firefighters and police officers all across this state. And we made the largest investment in infrastructure since the creation of the Interstate Highway System, putting Americans to work rebuilding our roads, bridges, waterways -- doing the work that America needs to be done.

Now, today, because we took those actions, the worst of this economic storm has passed. But families like yours and communities like this one are still reeling from the devastation it left in its wake. At one of the companies, at EMC, where I went today -- wonderful company, passed on through generations -- they have hung on with their precision manufacturing, high value added. They can do things that can't be shipped off to China because they're so attuned to their customers' needs. But they had 77 employees; now they've got 44. They want to start hiring back, but it's going to take a little time. The good news is they're starting to see orders pick up just a little bit.

But it's tough. Folks have seen jobs you thought would last forever disappear. You've seen plants close and businesses shut down. I've heard about how the city government here is starting to cut into bone, not just fat. You can't get to work or go buy groceries like you used to because of cuts in the county transit system.

And this all comes after one of the toughest decades our middle class has faced in generations. I mean, think about what's happened over the last 10 years, even before the crisis hit. This is a decade where some folks made tons of money, but so many others were just pedaling faster and faster, but they were stuck in the same place, sometimes slipping behind. The average wage, the average income over the last decade actually flat-lined; in some cases went down. That was before the crisis.

So, for many of you, even as you found your paychecks shrinking, even as after the crisis you found the value of your biggest asset, your home, falling, the cost of everything else has gone up: the cost of groceries, the cost of sending your kids to college, costs of retirement. And you've also faced the breakneck, unrelenting climb of costs for your health care needs.

Now, here's the message I want you to take away -- and we're going to have a lot of time for questions, but I want to make this absolutely clear. I did not run for President to turn away from these challenges. I didn't run to kick these challenges down the road. I ran for President to confront them -- once and for all.



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I ran for this office to rebuild our economy so it works not just for the fortunate few, but for everybody who's willing to work hard in this country to create good jobs that can support a family; to get wages growing and incomes rising; to improve the quality of America's schools and lift up great community colleges like this one so that people are constantly learning, constantly retraining for the jobs of the 21st century; to make higher education affordable for the children of working families -- and, yes, to deal with the problem of runaway health insurance costs that are breaking family budgets and breaking business budgets and breaking our national budgets.

Now, since this has been in the news a little bit this week, let me say a little something about health care. I had no illusions when I took this on that this was going to be hard. Seven Presidents had tried it, seven Congresses had tried it -- and all of them had failed.

And I had a whole bunch of political advisors telling me this may not be the smartest thing to do. "You've got a lot on your plate: the biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression; two wars. You may not get a lot of cooperation. you're going to have a lot of pushback from the insurance companies and the drug companies. It's complicated. Don't do it."

Now, let me tell you why I did it. I knew that insurance premiums had more than doubled in the past decade. I knew that out-of-pocket expenses had skyrocketed. I knew that millions more people had lost their insurance, and I knew that because of that economic crisis that was only going to get worse. When you lose 7 million jobs, like we lost over the last two years, what do you think happens to those folks' health insurance? What happens when their COBRA runs out?

I took this up because I wanted to ease the burdens on all the families and small businesses that can't afford to pay outrageous rates. And I wanted to protect mothers and fathers and children by being targeted by some of the worst practices of the insurance industry that I had heard time and time again as I traveled through this country.

Now, let me dispel this notion that somehow we were focused on that, and so, as a consequence, not focused on the economy. First of all, all I think about is how we're going to create jobs in this area. All I think about is how do we get banks lending again. I've been doing that the entire year. So have folks like Sherrod and Marcy and Betty. But what I also know is, is that health care is part of the drag on our economy. It's part of the eroding security that middle-class families feel.

So here's the good news: We've gotten pretty far down the road. But I've got to admit, we had a little bit of a buzz saw this week.

Now, I also know that part of the reason is, is that this process was so long and so drawn out -- this is just what happens in Congress. I mean, it's just an ugly process. You're running headlong into special interests, and armies of lobbyists, and partisan politics that's aimed at exploiting fears instead of getting things done. And then you've got ads that are scaring the bejesus out of everybody. And the longer it take, the uglier it looks.

So I understand why people would say, boy, this is -- I'm not so sure about this -- even though they know that what they got isn't working. And I understand why, after the Massachusetts election, people in Washington were all in a tizzy, trying to figure out what this means for health reform, Republicans and



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Democrats; what does it mean for Obama? Is he weakened? Is he -- oh, how's he going to survive this? That's what they do.

But I want you -- I want you to understand, this is not about me. This is not about me. This is about you. This is not about me; this is about you. I didn't take this up to boost my poll numbers. You know the way to boost your poll numbers is not do anything. That's how you do it. You don't offend anybody. I'd have real high poll numbers. All of Washington would be saying, "What a genius!"

I didn't take this on to score political points. I know there are some folks who think if Obama loses, we win. But you know what? I think that I win when you win. That's how I think about it.

So if I was trying to take the path of least resistance, I would have done something a lot easier. But I'm trying to solve the problems that folks here in Ohio and across this country face every day. And I'm not going to walk away just because it's hard. We are going to keep on working to get this done -- with Democrats, I hope with Republicans -- anybody who's willing to step up. Because I'm not going to watch more people get crushed by costs or denied care they need by insurance company bureaucrats. I'm not going to have insurance companies click their heels and watch their stocks skyrocket because once again there's no control on what they do.

So long as I have some breath in me, so long as I have the privilege of serving as your President, I will not stop fighting for you. I will take my lumps, but I won't stop fighting to bring back jobs here. I won't stop fighting for an economy where hard work is rewarded. I won't stop fighting to make sure there's accountability in our financial system. I'm not going to stop fighting until we have jobs for everybody.

That's why I'm calling on Congress to pass a jobs bill to put more Americans to work building off our Recovery Act; put more Americans back to work rebuilding roads and railways; provide tax breaks to small businesses for hiring people; offer families incentives to make their homes more energy-efficient, saving them money while creating jobs.

That's why we enacted initiatives that are beginning to give rise to a clean energy economy. That's part of what's going on in this community college. If we hadn't done anything with the Recovery Act, talk to the people who are building wind turbines and solar panels. They would have told you their industry was about to collapse because credit had completely frozen. And now you're seeing all across Ohio some of the -- this state has received more funds than just about anybody in order to build on that clean energy economy -- new cutting-edge wind turbines and batteries that are going to be going into energy-efficient cars.

Almost \$25 million of our investment went to a plant right here in Elyria that's helping produce the car batteries of the future. That's what we're going to keep on doing for the rest of 2010 and 2011 and 2012, until we've got this country working again.

So long as I'm President, I'll never stop fighting for policies that will help restore home values, to redeem the investment that folks have made. We've seen some of those values return in some places, in some pockets, but it's still tough out there. We're going to have to do more this year to make sure that banks are responsive to folks who are working hard, have been paying their mortgage, but have found themselves in a tough situation.



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I'm not going to stop fighting to give our kids the best education possible to take the tens of billions of dollars we pay banks to act as middlemen on student loans and invest that money in students who actually need it. We don't need the middlemen -- cut them out.

I won't stop fighting to give every American a fair shake. That's why the very first bill I signed into law was the Lilly Ledbetter Act to uphold the principle of equal pay for equal work for men and women alike, especially when families need two paychecks to survive.

So long as I'm President, I won't stop fighting to protect you from the kinds of deceptive practices we've seen from some in the financial sector. That's why I signed a Credit Card Bill of Rights into law, to protect you from surprise charges and retroactive rate hikes and other unfair rules. That's why I'm fighting for a tough consumer financial protection agency to protect you against those hidden overdraft fees that can make a single ATM withdrawal cost 30 bucks. That happened to you, didn't it?

I won't stop fighting to open up government. Now, this is hard to do because we don't control every branch. But I can tell you we have put in place the toughest ethics laws and toughest transparency rules of any Administration in history. In history.

By the way, this is the first Administration since the founding of the country where all of you can find out who visits the White House. First time in history. And that's just one example of how we're trying to constantly open the process.

And so long as I'm President, I won't stop fighting to cut waste and abuse in Washington -- to eliminate what we don't need, to pay for what we do; to rein in exploding deficits that we've been accumulating not just last year but for the last 10.

And I'm going to keep on fighting for real, meaningful health insurance reform. We expanded the Children's Health Insurance Program to include four million kids -- we already did that. But we are also going to fight to hold the insurance industry accountable, to bring more stability and security to folks who are in our health care system. And, yes, I want to make sure that people who don't have health care right now can get some. It's shameful that we don't do that.

Now, these are some of the fights we've already had, and I can promise you there will be more fights ahead. I'm not going to win every round. We're having a fight right now because I want to charge Wall Street a modest fee to repay taxpayers in full for saving their skins in a time of need. We want our money back. We want our money back. And we're going to get your money back, every dime -- each and every dime.

But it's going to be a fight. You watch. I guarantee you when we start on financial regulatory reform, trying to change the rules to prevent what has caused so much heartache all across the country, there are people who are going to say, "Why is he meddling in government?" "Why is meddling in the financial industry?" "It's another example of Obama being big government."

No, I just want to have some rules in place so that when these guys make dumb decisions, you don't end up having to foot the bill. That's pretty straightforward. I don't mind having that fight.



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You know, I said at the beginning how much it means to me to be able to travel this country, and how much it means for me to be here. And that is true now more than ever, because there's no doubt that it's easy to get a pretty warped view of things in Washington. But then you start talking to the guys working on those machines, creating products all across the country, you go into the diner and you meet folks who are raising their kids and working hard and trying to keep things together, and I'm reminded of the strength and the resilience and the perseverance of the American people. I'm reminded of the fundamental character of the Americans that I'm so privileged to serve.

It's that character that has borne our nation through the roughest of seas, a lot rougher than the ones we're going through right now. That's the character that will carry us through this storm to better days ahead. I am confident of that, because of you. And I'm very grateful for all of you taking the time to be here today.

Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Thank you. Thank you.

All right, this young lady right back here. Yes, you. There should be a microphone -- wait till the mic comes so everybody can hear you. Oh, I'm sorry -- that's okay, I'll call on you next. Well, one of you ask your question.

Question: Thank you, Mr. President. It's an honor to be here with you today. I work here in LCCC's financial services office. I am proud to be part of finding pathways for students who attend college. I feel that a college education is a lifeline to the future of our citizens. We greatly appreciate the increase in the Pell Grant, which allowed our neediest students to access a college education. It increased buying power as college costs continue to rise. My question to you is, will your Administration support continued increases to the Pell Grant so that our neediest students have access to higher education?

President Obama: The answer is yes. I want everybody to understand, we made -- and this was the help - - with the help of the members of Congress who are here -- made an enormous investment in higher education, making sure that young people could afford to go to great institutions like this. So we significantly increased the level of each Pell Grant, and we also put more money so that we could have more Pell Grants.

Now, we want to continue to do this. I mentioned during my formal remarks the fact that a lot of banks and financial institutions are still serving as middlemen in the financial aid process, and they take out several billions dollars' worth of profits from that. It turns out that actually it can be administered in such a way where these loans go directly to the students. And if you do that, then you're saving several billion dollars that can then be put back into the system. We want to get that finalized; we want to get that done. That will be an enormous boost.

Now, one thing I have to say, though. Even as we put more money into the Student Loan Program, we are also trying to reach out to university presidents and administrators to figure out how can we reduce the inflation in higher education -- because the fact is, is that the only thing that has gone up faster in cost than health care is -- guess what. Higher education. And the problem is, if we're not thinking about ways to curve the inflation, then even if we put more money in, what that money is buying becomes less and less. And so trying to find creative ways for universities to do more with less is going to be important.



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Now, in fairness to universities and colleges, part of the reason they've been having to jack up their costs is they used to get more support from the state. State budgets got into a hole, and then it became harder, and so they had to make it up on the tuition side. Nevertheless, what is also true, though, is just their general costs of operating have gone up in ways that I think we can improve. So we're going to be working on that as well.

All right? Okay, I've got to call a gentleman, then I got to go back to you because you thought that I called you and I feel bad. All right. This gentleman right here in the tie. Yes, you look sharp.

Question: Mr. President, thank you. It's an honor to stand before you. Thank you. Earlier in your message, you mentioned our transit system. Obviously we do need help and we're in dire need to have some assistance there. But what I didn't hear in anything is your interest in our steel mill. That's a big part of our community and we desperately need help there as well. We just wondered where Washington's stance is on our steel mill. Thank you.

President Obama: Well, I was talking to your mayor about this. Obviously he's a big advocate for manufacturing in the region. I do not have all the details in terms of what's happening at the steel mill at this moment. But what we've done is we've set up an office in the White House just focused on manufacturing -- because it's my view that America's got to make things.

Now, we're not going to make -- I want to be honest. Not all the manufacturing jobs that have gone are going to come back. And if people tell you they are, that's just not true -- because a lot of that has moved to places where the wages are just much lower. And I know that some people say, well, then we should just set up tariffs so that folks can't ship them in. But these days the economy, the global economy is so interconnected that that's just not a practical solution.

The solution is to find -- and I don't know the details of the steel mill here -- but I know that the ones that have been successful, they do what EMC is doing as well, which is you find what's the high-end market. What's the market that involves a lot of technology, specialization, highly trained workers, quick turnarounds to spec so that the customers really feel like they're getting something special and different -- that's how you compete, because that's something that a steel mill in China or in Brazil can't do. They can't compete with you being on the spot working closely with customers.

So finding ways to develop specialty steels and so forth, that's going to be the key. Our manufacturing office will be working with folks here in town to see what we can do.

All right? Thank you. All right, back to this young lady here.

Question: First I want to start by saying that I am very grateful to be here to meet you in person. I absolutely support you and back you. I feel like Rome wasn't built in a day, and I know that everybody is really impatient, but I know that with time things can be turned around. And I believe that your intentions are really honorable in that.

President Obama: I appreciate it.



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Question: I am a single mother of three, and I have two quick issues that are very important to me -- one being that I have a three-year-old, who has just turned three, who got lead poisoning last year and almost died. And I called everyone, including the EPA of Ohio, and I cannot seem to get any response to this.

President Obama: Well, guess what. I guarantee you that somebody from the EPA is going to call you in about -- in about five minutes. Before you sit down, there's going to be a phone call from the EPA.

All joking aside -- and I know you have a second question, but I just want to focus on this -- lead poisoning, a lot of it from lead paint, from older homes all across the country and all across the Midwest is something that we have to be more aggressive on. This is something that I worked on when I was a U.S. senator, when I was a state senator. I'm working on it as President, and I will find out directly from them how they can help not only with your particular situation but what we're doing in this area in terms of lead abatement.

Question: Okay.

President Obama: Okay?

Question: The second thing that I wanted to address to you is the unfair labor laws that they seem to have in some of these industries as far as discrimination and different issues of that nature that don't seem to get addressed from the bigger companies. I have actually worked for Ford -- I'm a full-time student now here at LC, gratefully -- and even when I was working there and I have -- my whole family has actually come up through Ford -- and there's a lot of very unjust situations that come about, but no attorneys will deal with it, no one will talk about it, and it's always pushed under the rug. And I -- I do owe my -- what I have now to Ford because it was what was bread and butter for my family. But at the same time, it's not fair that even at this point my mother still can't retire, she has to continue to suffer.

President Obama: Well, look, let me just say generally, one of the things that my Administration has been able to do over the last year that does not cost money is just enforcing laws that are on the books a little more aggressively, making sure -- I mentioned earlier equal pay for equal work.

We are so past the point where it should be debatable that women get paid the same as men for doing the same job. And it is something that -- especially because there was a -- it was just released I think last week showing that increasingly the wives are making more than the husbands in some circumstances. And whoever is making more, you've got to have two paychecks. So this is not just a "feminist issue" -- you know, sometimes guys say, well, why do I -- why should I care about it? Well, let me tell you something. If your wife is getting paid fairly, that means your family is getting paid fairly. And I want my daughters to be treated the same way as your sons. That's something we shouldn't be arguing about anymore.

All right, gentleman right back here. Yes, it's a guy's turn. Yes, sir.

Question: I'm an inventor, and I hold U.S. patent number 7,397,731.

President Obama: Okay.



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Question: And before I ask my question I'd like to make a sales pitch. If you can use my patent in your next election, I think you can raise a ton of money worldwide. You should take a look at it.

President Obama: All right, we'll take a look. All right.

Question: If you can't use it, the government could use it, and I could build a multibillion-dollar business here in Ohio.

President Obama: All right, we'll take a look at your patent. Go ahead, what's your question?

Question: Yes, okay, it has to do with international patent rights. With all this free trade and trade barriers falling, it's really hard for an individual like me with a global-scope patent to file all over the world and get patent protection everywhere, and having to go overseas to fight infringement. So if you're going to drop trade barriers, maybe you can extend my patent rights to the foreign countries.

President Obama: Well, this is a great question, and this is a huge problem. Look, our competitive advantage in the world is going to be people like this who are using their minds to create new products, new services. But that only helps us and helps you build a multibillion-dollar company if somebody can't just steal that idea and suddenly start making it in Indonesia or Malaysia or Bangladesh with very cheap workers.

And one of the problems that we have had is insufficient protection for intellectual property rights. That's true in China; it's true for everything from bootleg DVDs to very sophisticated software. And there's nothing wrong with other people using our technologies. We just want to make sure that it's licensed and you're getting paid.

So I've given instructions to my trade offices -- and we actually highlight this at the highest levels of foreign policy -- that these are issues that have to be addressed because that's part of the reciprocity of making our markets open. And so when I met with President Hu of China, this is a topic that, at dinner, I directly brought up with him. And -- But as you point out, it's got to be sustained, because a lot of times they'll say, yes, yes, yes, but then there's no enforcement on their end.

And one of the things that we're also doing is using our export arm of the U.S. government to help work with medium-sized businesses and small businesses, not just the big multinationals to protect their rights in some of these areas, because we need to boost exports.

Can I just say, we just went through a decade where we were told that it didn't matter, we'll just -- you just keep on importing, buying stuff from other countries, you just take out a home equity loan and max out your credit card, and everything is going to be okay. And it looked, for a lot of people, like, well, the economy seems to be growing -- but it was all built on a house of cards. That's what we now know. And that's why if we're going to have a successful manufacturing sector, we've got to have successful exports.



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When I went and took this trip to China, and took this trip to Asia, a lot of people said, "Well, why is he going to Asia? He's traveling overseas too much. He needs to be coming back home and talking about jobs." I'm there because that's where we're going to find those jobs, is by increasing our exports to those countries, the same way they've been doing in our country. If we increased our exports -- our share of exports by just 1 percent, that would mean hundreds of thousands of jobs here in the United States. Five percent -- maybe a million jobs, well-paying jobs. So we're going to have to pry those markets open. Intellectual property is part of that process.

All right, great question.

It's a woman's turn now. You guys just put down your hands. Oh, okay, well, this young lady right in front. We've got a microphone over here. You know, I would give it to you if I could reach, but -- go ahead.

Question: I introduce myself. I'm 83 years old. I know I don't look it.

President Obama: You don't. You don't. You look great.

Question: Thank you. I'm very concerned about Social Security. I think there's a few here who are probably living on that or supplementing that. I understand that Congress has given themselves a raise but has denied us COLA for possibly the next three years. At the time of the H1N1 thing, people over 65 were not given the right to have the shot. For some reason or other this health care crisis was left on our senior backs. What can we do about this?

President Obama: Well, let me address all three of your issues, because you're raising actually three separate issues.

First is how do we make sure that Social Security is sustainable over the long term. Social Security is one of our entitlement programs that for now is stable, but will not be if we don't make some changes. Now, here's the good news. Compared to Medicare, Social Security is actually in reasonably good shape, and with some relatively small adjustments, you can have that solvent for a long time. So Social Security is going to be there. I know a lot of people are concerned about it. Social Security we can fix.

Now, in terms of the COLA, the formula -- COLA stands for Cost of Living Allowance, so it's put in place to make sure that Social Security is keeping up with inflation. Here's the problem. This past year, because of the severity of the recession, we didn't have inflation; we actually had deflation. So prices actually fell last year. As a consequence, technically, seniors were not eligible for a Cost of Living Adjustment, to have it go up because prices did not go up in the aggregate. That doesn't mean that individual folks weren't being pinched by higher heating prices or what have you, but on average prices went down.

Here's what we did. Working with these key members of Congress here, we did vote to provide a \$250 one-time payment to seniors, which, when you factored it in, amounted to about 1.8 percent. So it was almost the equivalent of the COLA, even though it wasn't actually the COLA.



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So we didn't forget seniors. We never forget seniors because they vote at very high rates. Not to mention you changed our diapers and things. And so we appreciate that.

The third point that you made had to do with the H1N1 virus. The reason that seniors were not prioritized was because, unlike the seasonal flu shot, H1N1 was deadliest in young people and particularly children. And because the virus came up fairly late in the time frame for preparing flu shots, we had a limited number of vaccines, and we had to decide who gets the vaccines first.

Now, by the way, let me just do a little PSA here. Anybody who has not gotten a H1N1 shot, along with their seasonal flu, I would still advise you to get it, because historically there are two waves of this. Particularly make sure your kids have gotten it, because there have been a significantly higher number of children killed under H1 -- who get H1N1 than those who just get the seasonal flu. It's still a small fraction, I don't want to make everybody afraid. But it's just -- it's a little more serious than the normal seasonal flu.

So it's not that seniors were neglected here. What happened was, according to the science, according to the CDC, it was determined that we had to go to the most vulnerable groups the quickest, and that was children, particularly those who had underlying neurological disorders or immunity disorders.

All right? We haven't forgotten about you. And you don't look 83.

Okay. This young man -- he's been standing up quite a long time. There you go.

Question: Mr. President, my name is Jordan Brown. Can you hear me?

President Obama: Yes.

Question: Okay.

President Obama: Go ahead and give him the mic. I don't want to have him fall over there.

Question: Okay. I don't have a question but I do want to know if I would like -- if I can shake your hand.

President Obama: Well, yes, yes, you'll be able to come up here. If somebody lets you through, I'll definitely give you a handshake. All right, who -- I want to make sure -- you know, there's another young man here so I'll call on him.

Question: I'm 29 years old, and I've never had a job in my life. I went to jail when I was younger. It's like hard to get a job as a felon. Is this -- any programs that hire people with felonies like something that -- because it's sad, it's like -- 29 years old, I'm 29.

President Obama: All right. Jerome --

Question: And also I wanted to -- I'm a poet and I wrote a poem for you and I've been dying to put this poem in your hand.



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President Obama: Okay. Give me the poem. First of all, it's never too late. It's never too late. One of these gentlemen here will hand this poem to me. There you go. I won't read it from the stage but -- because it's --

Question: I'd appreciate it, later when you get back to the White House.

President Obama: But I will definitely think about it.

Look, I'm proud of the fact that you're bringing this up because there are people who've made mistakes, particularly when they're young, and it is in all of our interests to help them redeem themselves and then get on a straight path. Now, I don't blame employers obviously for being nervous about hiring somebody who has a record. It's natural if they've got a lot of applicants for every single job that that's a question that they'd have in their minds. On the other hand, I think one of the great things about America is we give people second chances.

And so what we've tried to do -- and I want to say, this has been a bipartisan effort -- when I was in the Senate, working with Sam Brownback; my Vice President, Joe Biden -- passing a Second Chance Act that helps to fund programs that help the reintegration of ex-felons. It's smart for us to do. You know, sometimes people say, well, that's just coddling people. No; you reduce the recidivism rate, they pay taxes, it ends up being smart for taxpayers to do. I don't know, Jerome, what particular programs may exist in this county, but I promise you I'll find out. And we'll see if we can get you hooked up with one of them. All right?

Okay, right here. Yes. No, no, no. Right here. Yes. Go ahead.

Question: Mr. President, I started a Great Lakes Truck Driving School in 2008 in Lorain County.

President Obama: I'm sorry, what kind of school?

Question: Great Lakes Truck Driving School.

President Obama: Cross driving school? Oh, truck driving school, I'm sorry.

Question: Great Lakes Truck Driving School. Started in 2008. Our first year we trained 287 people and we placed over 70 percent of those people into jobs. At that time there was enough money, through the Workforce Investment Board, to train those people. In the past few months we've had a number of people on a daily basis coming into our school that's unemployed, but there are no training funds for truck driver training. And I want to know why that has changed.

President Obama: Well, the Recovery Act put a huge amount of money into retraining. We are now preparing for next year's budget, and I know that we have actually allocated additional money for retraining. I don't know specifically what's happening that would cause those dollars to dry up with respect to a truck driving school. Let me see if I can find out. I'll have one of my staff get your card, and maybe we can provide you some information.

Question: Thank you very much.



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President Obama: Here's the broader point, though. The story of retraining has become so important. When I went to EMC, the precision tool-making place, there were a group of guys -- and one guy who said I should call him "Jerry the Mechanic." He shakes my hand, and he and his buddy are talking to me. I said, "How long have you been working here?" They said, "Twenty years." And I'd noticed that a lot of the equipment now is all digital and fancy, compared to the old machines on the other side of the building. I said, "Well, did you guys have to get additional training for this?" And they said, "Well, you know what happened was, we used to work in this old plant, and we got laid off. We came here to Lorain Community College and took a six-month, 12-hour-a-day course that completely retrained us, and that's what got us these new jobs, and we've been working for over a decade now at these new jobs."

Now, here's the thing. These guys were -- these guys -- first of all, they weren't plants, as far as I know -- unless the mayor is a lot slicker than I think. But these guys did point out that it was JTPA funds -- job training funds that the federal government and the state and local all work together to make sure that people have access to funds. They also said, though, during that time they were still working eight hours a day because they had found sort of lower-paying jobs just to pay the rent while they were getting retrained. I said, "Okay, so you've been working eight hours and going to class 12 hours?" "Yes." I said, "Well, when do you sleep?" "Well, in between class and taking the shift."

They did this for six months. I tell this story, one, to emphasize how important the college system is in making our workforce prepared for the 21st century. I make the point because, number two, it only works if the government is providing some help for people to finance their educations, their retraining.

But point number three is, even if you've got a great community college, you've got the financing, you've also got to want it. You've also got to want it. Think about these guys -- you work eight hours, you go to class 12 hours, you're working -- you're sleeping in between, doing that for six months. But because they were hungry and they had confidence about their ability to translate their old skills into new skills, they've had steady jobs ever since that allow them to support their families.

Now, that's the partnership between the government, the free market, businesses, individuals -- that's what we're trying to forge. And that's why I get so frustrated when we have these ideological debates in Washington where people start saying how, "Oh, Obama is just trying to perpetrate big government." What big government exactly have we been trying to perpetrate here? We're trying to fund those guys who want to go to truck driving school. We want to make sure that they've got some money to get trained for a job in the private sector.

When we passed the Recovery Act, these aren't all a bunch of government jobs. These are jobs that private contractors contract with the state or the city or the county to build roads and highways, the same way that we built the Interstate Highway System and the Intercontinental Railroad System.

I mean, I understand how people have become mistrustful of government. We don't need big government; we need smart government -- that works and interacts with the private sector to create opportunity for ordinary people. But it can't be this constant ideological argument. People need help. We need to provide them a helping hand. That's what we stand for.



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All right. I've got time for only, unfortunately, one more question. I've been having a great time. But it is a man's turn here. All right. Is that you, Joe? Well, this is a ringer. I'm going to talk -- I'll talk to you separately. This is a friend of mine. People will say, ah, he called on a friend of his. I'll talk to you over to the side here.

Go ahead, this gentleman right here.

Question: Thank you for taking my question. Thank you for coming here. I'm a 52-year-old businessman from Akron, Ohio. I want to create 1,200 jobs. I spend \$60,000 of my own money to do a due diligence, travel to China with a German-designed turbine, and they're producing it now in China. I have rights to North America, primarily the Great Lakes.

Two things that I'm challenged by -- I'm having a very difficult time raising money. I'm not asking for a handout. All I'm asking is loan me the money; I'll account for it, every dollar, I'll pay it back.

Secondly -- and I'm willing to risk millions -- 99 percent of my net worth. The second thing is that GE has a patent -- and I believe in patents. I listened to this gentleman back here, and I can truly appreciate what he's going through. But in this instance, GE inherited this patent from Enron, and it's created a wall so that they won't let people come in and build turbines in the United States. Now, the patent is going to expire very soon. But now they're calling it a royalty but it's really a gate to keep people out.

Is there any programs -- I've talked to Governor Strickland, I've talked to Sherrod Brown, I've talked to Lee Fisher. This company was identified by the city of Akron and Donald Plusquellic's visionary leadership down in Akron. But I want to bring this to the United States. I want to bring these jobs -- and this not about money for me. This is about creating jobs.

I can feel for that gentleman that wants to work. He should have a right to work. God bless him.

President Obama: Let me respond -- first of all --

Question: Is there any -- is there any federal programs that can help me -- I just want to borrow the money to create this factory and create these jobs.

President Obama: Well, obviously I don't know about the particular situation so I'll just speak generally to it. And if you want to get one of my team your card, then maybe they can follow up with you.

But one of the things that we've done -- or one of the things that we've seen coming out of the financial crisis is that banks are still not lending to small businesses enough. The mayor and I talked about this. The business owners that I talked to will confirm this. And if you ask why -- if you ask the banks why, they'll say, well, it's a combination of, in some cases, demand really is down; businesses don't have as many customers as they used to so revenues are down and -- so they don't want to lend. That's some cases. But in some cases what you've got is very profitable businesses that are ready to go, ready to invest, got a proven track record -- the banks feel as if regulators are looking over their shoulder and discouraging them from lending.



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So what I've said to Treasury Secretary Geithner and others is we can't meddle with independent regulators -- their job is to stay apart from politics and make sure the banking system is sound -- but there should be a discussion about whether or not we have seen the pendulum swing too far, where it used to be they'd just lend anybody anything; then they lost all this money and now they won't lend people with good credit anything. That is not good for the economy.

So what we've tried to do is to fill some of these gaps in the meantime. For example, our small business lending through the SBA has actually gone up 70 percent. And we've been waiving fees, increasing guarantees, and what we're trying to do is streamline the process for SBA loans because right now there's just too much paperwork. It's typical government not having caught up with the 21st century. And you can't have a 50-pound application form. People just -- after a while, it's not worth it, in some cases. So we're trying to do all those things.

Now, with respect to patents, again, I don't know the particular situation. I will say this. It's important that we protect internationally intellectual property. It is also important though that we have a patent system that encourages innovation but doesn't just lock in big monopolies that prevent new people from bringing new products into the system.

The worst offender of this problem is actually the drug companies, because they will try to lock in their patents for as long as they can to prevent generics from coming onto the market, and that costs customers billions of dollars. And sometimes the drug company will redesign it so it's a caplet instead of a pill, and then try to get a new patent, to get another seven or nine or 10 years of coverage. That is something that we've got to change. I don't know whether that applies to your particular situation, but we have to have a patent system that doesn't prevent competition. We want a patent system that encourages innovation.

Now, I'm out of time, but I want to say one last thing. First of all, because there's been so much attention focused on this health care issue this week, I just want to emphasize not the myths but the reality of what is trying to -- that both the House and the Senate bill were trying to accomplish, because it's actually very simple. There are a bunch of provisions in it, but it's pretty simple.

Number one, for those of you who have health insurance, we are trying to get in place reforms that make sure you are getting your money's worth for the insurance that you pay for. That means, for example, that they can't impose a lifetime cap where if you really get sick and suddenly there's some fine print in there that says you're not completely covered. We're trying to make sure that there is a cap on out-of-pocket expenses so that you don't find out, when you read the fine print, that you've got to pay a huge amount that you thought you were covered for. We're trying to make sure that if you've got a preexisting condition, you can actually still get health insurance, because a lot of people have been banned from getting health insurance because of a preexisting condition.

One of the provisions -- one of the reforms we want is to make sure that your 26- or 27-year-old could, up until that age, could stay on your insurance, so that once they get out of high school and college, they can stay on their parents' insurance for a few years until they've got a more stable job.



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So you've got all these insurance reforms that we're trying to get passed. Now, some people ask, well, why don't you just pass that and forget everything else? Here's the problem. Let's just take the example of preexisting conditions. We can't prohibit insurance companies from preventing people with preexisting conditions getting insurance unless everybody essentially has insurance. And the reason for that is otherwise what would happen is people would just -- just wouldn't get insurance until they were sick and then they'd go and buy insurance and they couldn't be prohibited. And that would drive everybody else's premiums up.

So a lot of these insurance reforms are connected to some other things we have to do to make sure that everybody has some access to coverage. All right?

So the second thing we've been trying to do is to make sure that we're setting up an exchange, which is just a big pool so that people who are individuals, who are self employed, who are small business owners, they can essentially join a big pool of millions of people all across the country, which means that when you go to negotiate with your insurance company you've got the purchasing power of a Ford or a GM or Wal-Mart or a Xerox or the federal employees. That's why federal employees have good insurance, and county employees and state employees have good insurance, in part is because they're part of this big pool.

And our attitude is, can we make sure that everybody is part of a big pool to drive down costs. That's the second thing we're trying to do.

Third thing we're trying to do is to try to reduce costs overall because the system -- how many of you, you go into the doctor's office, you fill out a form, you get a checkup, you go fill out another form, somebody else asks you for the form you just filled out. Then the doctor fills out a form, you got to take it to the pharmacist. The pharmacist can't read the doctor's -- this is the only industry in the country that still does that, that still operates on paper systems, that still orders all kinds of unnecessary tests.

Because a lot of times, I walk in the doctor, I just do what I'm told -- I don't know what he's doing. I don't know whether this test was necessary or whether we could have had the test that I took six months ago e-mailed to the doctor so I wouldn't have to take another test and pay for another test. Right? So there are all these methods of trying to reduce costs. And that's what we've been trying to institute.

Now, I just want to say, as I said in my opening remarks, the process has been less than pretty. When you deal with 535 members of Congress, it's going to be a somewhat ugly process -- not necessarily because any individual member of Congress is trying to do something wrong, it's just they may have different ideas, they have different interests, they've got a particular issue of a hospital in their district that they want to see if they can kind of get dealt with and this may be the best vehicle for doing it. They're looking out for their constituents a lot of times.

But when you put it all together, it starts looking like just this monstrosity. And it makes people fearful. And it makes people afraid. And they start thinking, you know what, this looks like something that is going to cost me tax dollars and I already have insurance so why should I support this.



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So I just want to be clear that there are things that have to get done. This is our best chance to do it. We can't keep on putting this off. Even if you've got health insurance right now, look at what's happening with your premiums and look at the trend. It is going to gobble up more and more of your paycheck. Ask a chunk of you folks in here who have seen your employers say you've got to pick up more of your payments in terms of higher deductibles or higher copayments. Some of you, your employers just said, we can't afford health insurance at all. That's going to happen to more and more people.

You asked about Social Security. Let me talk about Medicare. Medicare will be broke in eight years if we do nothing. Right now we give -- we give about \$17 billion in subsidies to insurance companies through the Medicare system -- your tax dollars. But when we tried to eliminate them, suddenly there were ads on TV -- "Oh, Obama is trying to cut Medicare." I get all these seniors writing letters: "Why are you trying to cut my Medicare benefits?" I'm not trying to cut your Medicare benefits. I'm trying to stop paying these insurance companies all this money so I can give you a more stable program.

The point is this: None of the big issues that we face in this country are simple. Everybody wants to act like they're simple. Everybody wants to say that they can be done easily. But they're complicated. They're tough. The health care system is a big, complicated system, and doing it right is hard.

Energy. If we want to be energy independent -- I'm for more oil production. I am for -- I am for new forms of energy. I'm for a safe nuclear industry. I'm not ideological about this. But we also have to acknowledge that if we're going to actually have a energy-independent economy, that we've got to make some changes. We can't just keep on doing business the same way. And that's going to be a big, complicated discussion.

We can't shy away from it, though. We can't sort of start suddenly saying to ourselves, America or Congress can't do big things; that we should only do the things that are non-controversial; we should only do the stuff that's safe. Because if that's what happens, then we're not going to meet the challenges of the 21st century. And that's not who we are. That's not how we used to operate, and that's not how I intend us to operate going forward.

We are going to take these big things on, and I'm going to do it, and you're going to do it, because you know that we want to leave a better America for our children and our grandchildren. And that doesn't mean standing still; that means marching forward.

I want to march forward with you. I want to work with you. I want to fight for you. I hope you're willing to stand by me, even during these tough times, because I believe in a brighter future for America.

Thank you, everybody. God bless you.