

Week Ending Friday, April 2, 2004

**Remarks in a Discussion on
Homeownership in Phoenix, Arizona**
March 26, 2004

The President. Thank you all. Thanks a lot. Thank you all very much. I appreciate Doug McCarron's leadership in terms of making sure people have the skills necessary to work in the jobs of the 21st century. Actually, you look like you're dressed the way a president should be—[laughter]—and I'm dressed like a carpenter —[laughter]—which isn't all that bad a deal.

I want to thank you for having me here. I appreciate Mike McCarron for opening up this facility. Thank you, Mike, for inviting us. He invited us here so we can have a discussion on job training skills and homeownership.

Before we have the discussion, I do want to say a couple of things. First, I want to recognize some people in the audience. Two great United States Senators, John McCain and John Kyl, are with us. I don't know if you know this, Doug, but John McCain was telling me on the way over from the airport that he was here when they opened this facility. He told me—he said, "You're going to find a magnificent training facility." He forgot to tell me how magnificent it is. This is quite a place—quite a place. I know you're proud of it.

I appreciate Members of the Congress who are here, J.D. Hayworth, John Shadegg, Jeff Flake, Trent Franks. Thank you all for coming.

It's such an impressive place, they even brought old Ron Lewis from Kentucky, who's a Member of the House, with us. Ron, thank you for being here, glad you came. There he is.

Mr. Mayor, Phil Gordon, is with us. Thanks for coming, Mr. Mayor. I appreciate you being here.

I want to thank members of the Carpenters Union who have opened up this

beautiful facility to us. Thank you for working hard. Thank you for being responsible citizens who love your family and love your country. Most of all, I'm honored to be in your presence. Thanks for building the stage. [Laughter]

Today when I landed, I met a lady named Barbara Lockwood. Barbara, where are you? There she is. Thanks for coming, Barbara. Barbara is a volunteer of Keep Phoenix Beautiful. The reason I bring that up is, communities are really strong when people are willing to volunteer, willing to take time out of their lives to improve the community in which you live. There's all kinds of ways to do so. Keep Phoenix Beautiful is one such idea. Mentoring a child is an idea. Loving a neighbor like you'd like to be loved yourself is an idea on how to make sure your community is good. I know that many of your members work hard on the day job and volunteer to help somebody's life. See, America can change for the better, one heart and one soul at a time.Q03

And the reason I want to bring up Barbara is that she sets such a good example by taking time out of her life to make Phoenix, Arizona, a better place. Barbara, thank you for your service, and thank you for the example you have set for others.

The housing industry is booming, which means more people own their home, and that's positive. It means more carpenters are working, and that's positive. It's an amazing statement to say that, given what this country has been through. We've been through a recession. We've been through an attack on America, and that attack on America affected us. We lost jobs after the attack on America. It also changed our way of thinking about how we look at the world. We used to think oceans could protect us, where we could kind of sit back and see threats gather and could deal with them if we felt like it or ignore

them if we wanted to, because oceans protected us. But that changed on September the 11th.

We're doing everything we can to secure the homeland. I want to thank those who are involved with the first-responders or our police and firefighters for working hard to be ready. But the best way to protect America's homeland is to stay on the offense and bring these people to justice before they hurt us again. *[Applause]* Thank you.

The Nation is strong. We refuse to be intimidated by these killers. And we started to recover, and then we found out that some corporate citizens forgot what it meant to be responsible citizens. You know who I'm talking about, the people who didn't tell the truth to their shareholders and their employees. We passed tough new laws. I want to thank the Members of the Senate who are here and the members of the congressional delegation for joining together to pass tough laws that sends this message: We're not going to tolerate dishonesty in the boardrooms of America. That dishonesty affected us. It was another hurdle we had to cross. It kind of shook the confidence of the people.

And then we had another hurdle we had to cross. As I told you, September the 11th changed how we should view the world. We must deal with threats before they fully materialize. When we see a threat, we've got to deal with it. I looked at the intelligence in Iraq, and I saw a threat. The Congress looked at the same intelligence, and it saw a threat. The United Nations Security Council looked at the same intelligence, and it saw a threat as well. We said to Saddam Hussein, "Everybody thinks you're a threat, so you disarm." We gave him yet another choice. It was his choice to make. We said, "Disarm, for the sake of freedom and peace," and he defied the world again.

And therefore, I had a choice to make: Do I trust the word of somebody who had used weapons of mass destruction on his own people? Do I trust the word of a madman? Or do I take actions necessary to defend America? Given that choice, every time, I will defend this country. *[Applause]* Thank you all.

When you're marching to war to defend the country, it sends a negative signal. If you're a homebuyer, it doesn't instill a lot

of confidence in the future if you think your country is going to war. If you're somebody trying to build homes, marching to war is a negative thought, not a positive thought. Now we're marching to peace. The world is more peaceful.

But these are hurdles we have overcome as a country. Think about these statistics: We're the fastest growing major industrialized nation in the world; the unemployment rate right here in Arizona has gone from 5.9 percent last year to 5.2 percent this year; inflation is low; interest rates are low; manufacturing activity is up. No, this economy has gone through a lot. And you know why? Because the American workers and the American people and the American entrepreneurs are strong, steady, and resolute.

I'm going to tell you another statistic, which is an amazing statistic given what we've been through: Housing starts in 2003 were the highest in a quarter of a century. Homeownership sales were the highest ever. Sixty-eight percent of homeownership—the homeownership rate is the highest ever, and that's fantastic news for America.

We want more people owning their own home. There's nothing like saying, "This home is my home." There's nothing better than somebody over there saying, "Welcome to my home." And we're about to talk to some first-time homeowners. And I want to share their stories with you. They're going to share their stories with me, and you're going to get to hear it.

I do want to talk about a challenge for our country, and there is a minority homeownership gap in America. Not enough minorities own their own homes. And it seems like to me, it makes sense to encourage all to own homes. And so we've done some interesting things. Again, I want to thank the Congress, but we passed downpayment assistance programs that will help low-income folks buy their own home. A lot of times, if you're trying to buy your own home, you never bought one, the downpayment seems like a little much. Some of you know what I'm talking about. It seems to make sense if one of the things we're trying to do is to get—to close the minority homeownership gap and to get 5.5 new—million new minority homeowners into homes over the next 5 years, that we

ought to help with downpayments, and we have.

The State of Arizona is going to have \$2.6 million to help people with downpayments. I proposed that mortgages that have FHA-backed insurance pay no downpayment. That will help 150,000 new homeowners.

What we're trying to do is make it easier for somebody to own a home, and there's practical ways the Government can help. We've got what's called HUD Section 8 programs that are generally rent programs. We've converted those rent programs to self-sufficiency programs, where people are helped to be able to set aside money for downpayments. We're about to hear somebody who has benefited from such program.

We've got HUD's home program that provides grants to States to help counseling. That's really important. Have you ever seen some of the contracts? There's a lot of fine print. And if you've never bought a home before, it kind of makes you nervous to sign off on something with a lot of fine print. There are counselors all over the State of Arizona who are willing to help people understand what it means to sign a contract, to understand what it means when they're buying their first home, what it means to be a homeowner, what the obligations are.

I want to thank the counselors who are here. I want to thank the people who are here who work with first-time homebuyers. We need to make sure that there's affordable houses around the country. That's why I proposed a \$2.5-billion tax credit for rehabilitation of inner-city homes and for the building of affordable homes for low-income citizens. We want homes. We want people owning their own home. Ownership is an important part of the American experience.

One other thing I've done is I've called on private sector mortgage banks and banks to be more aggressive about lending money to first-time homebuyers. And the response has been really good. There's a lot of people in this—our communities around the country that deeply care about the issue of homeownership, and they've been responsive.

Senators Kyl and McCain told me about a fellow named Jerry Bisgrove here in Arizona. He's not a part of a mortgage banking deal. He's just a decent citizen. But like the

mortgage bankers who have helped new time—first-time homeowners, Bisgrove is a successful businessman, evidently, has turned back and said, "I want to help people with affordable housing." It's that kind of effort—effort at the Federal level, effort at the charitable level—that's going to make a big difference in closing the minority homeownership gap, and when we do, America will be a better place.

The thing I like about Doug is he understands that when you give somebody additional skills, it will improve their lifestyle. You see, when a worker becomes more productive, that worker is going to make more money. And we're about to hear a story that verifies that point—Jorge. Anyway—not yet. [Laughter] *Casi*.

But Doug is an innovative leader. And as he mentioned to you, I've had the honor of going to some of his training facilities around the country, and they're impressive. They're impressive because they're so humane, and they take a person who wants to work, give him a little additional help, and they become well-paid, more able to do their duty as a mom or a dad. So, Doug, thanks. I appreciate you having me.

[*Douglas J. McCarron, general president, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, made brief remarks, concluding as follows.*]

Mr. McCarron. Mr. President, the men and women that I represent have shown that they are willing to work hard. They are willing to train hard. And they are willing to compete. Now, I know, Mr. President, over the next few months, you'll hear from advisers and pundits, but speaking for the Carpenters Union, let me tell you, the most important issue for us is jobs.

The President. Doug, let me say something. Yes. The most important issue for me is jobs.

[*Mr. McCarron made further remarks.*]

The President. One of the things I forgot to mention to Doug and to congratulate Doug and the union on was the work at the World Trade Center after September the 11th. A lot of his members went to help clear the rubble. And they went in there, and they

worked long, long hours, and there was not one accident. They did an unbelievable job, and I want to thank you and thank the membership—

Mr. McCarron. That's good union labor, Mr. President.

The President. Good job. All right. Jorge Sotelo. Jorge is a family man, hard-working guy. Jorge, tell us about yourself.

[*Jorge Sotelo, foreman, DPR Construction, Avondale, AZ, made brief remarks.*]

The President. So in other words, let me make sure I understand. Before you came here, what were you doing?

Mr. Sotelo. I was doing the same thing. You know, I was in construction but at less wages. You know, I didn't—

The President. You were just out there working hard and less wages. And how did you hear about this facility?

Mr. Sotelo. They went to the place where we were working before, and they told us about the union. And you say, "Yes, it's time for a change. I want to learn something. I want to—better skills for myself and get a better life for my family."

The President. And so, let me ask you something, Jorge. Were you working during the day and coming here at school at night?

Mr. Sotelo. Yes. After work.

The President. And how long did it take for you to get the skills necessary to get another certification?

Mr. Sotelo. It depends how many hours—we got the program for 18 hours, 20 hours. It's just how many hours you can give me here.

The President. Somebody told me, like this—you bought a home this year.

Mr. Sotelo. Yes.

The President. First home?

Mr. Sotelo. Actually, it was the second home, but it's a better home now.

The President. Better home?

Mr. Sotelo. Yes.

The President. So you upgraded?

Mr. Sotelo. Yes, definitely.

The President. The lesson is, is that you can improve your quality of life if you work hard, one, and two, you're willing to go back to school.

I remember coming to Mesa Community College a while ago. Doug, I think you'll find this interesting. It's the same exact principle that you employ here. And I met a woman who had worked for—as a graphic design artist for 15 years, went back to a Mesa Community College technical training program, graduated, and got out. And in her first year, she made more money than she did after her 15th year as a graphic design artist. She gained skills. She upgraded her ability to be a productive worker, and she improved her quality of life dramatically.

And that's exactly what Jorge did. And that's one of the reasons why we're heralding programs like this. If people are looking for work, you can find work in Phoenix, Arizona. And if you're really interested in improving yourself, you can do so by going to programs such as the one Doug sponsors here or at the one at Mesa Community College.

Now, Emily is with us. Are you ready?

Emily McElhaney. Yes, sir.

The President. Emily McElhaney. How many homes have you owned in your life?

Ms. McElhaney. This is the first one.

The President. Would you mind telling us your story?

[*Ms. McElhaney, first-time homebuyer, Mesa, AZ, made brief remarks.*]

The President. See, this is a story that's repeated all throughout the country. It's a family of five, and they wanted their own home. They want a place to say, "This is my home," a place where they raise their kids, in their own home. And you had trouble with the downpayment—like, you kind of looked at it, "It might be a little too high for us."

So what happened? You went to a HUD home program?

Ms. McElhaney. The Housing for Mesa was able to set us up with a realtor and a lender, and they gave us downpayment assistance to help us through that. And then they walked us through every step of the program and explained all those contracts that we had to sign that you were mentioning earlier.

The President. Slightly intimidating, aren't they?

Ms. McElhaney. Exactly, yes.

The President. It's what we call "the fine print." [Laughter]

Ms. McElhaney. That's right.

The President. And they explained it all to you?

Ms. McElhaney. We had a counselor that was assigned specifically to us. And she, even before we went to the title agency to sign all the papers, she went over each of them with us, because you can't read all of those in that short amount of time, and so we knew what we were signing when we got there.

The President. See, that's a very important part of being a homeowner, is you've got to help people understand what they're doing. I mean, it's an intimidating process. For some, it might seem like a natural process. But here's Emily. She was slightly intimidated by the size of the contract, and a good soul stepped up as a result of probably—I know Federal money helped, probably State money as well—and provided a counseling service. Had the counseling service not been there, in all likelihood—I'm not predicting what you would have done, but I suspect you might not have done it.

Ms. McElhaney. That's correct. We wouldn't have.

The President. Is the counselor here? No.

Ms. McElhaney. Yes, she is.

The President. She is here? Where?

Ms. McElhaney. Edna McLaughlin is right here.

The President. Well, thank you. Thank you. Thank you for doing that. It must make you feel pretty good to know you've helped this family realize their dreams.

Edna McLaughlin. Very good.

The President. Yes. She said, "Very good." [Laughter]

Monica Mims is with us. Hi, Monica.

Monica Mims. Hi.

The President. Hi. Do you own a home?

Ms. Mims. Yes, I do.

The President. How many have you had?

Ms. Mims. This is my first home.

The President. Tell us about yourself.

[Ms. Mims, first-time homebuyer, Mesa, AZ, made brief remarks.]

The President. The Section 8 housing program was a rental program, and it was important to help people rent. But remember, we want people owning. That's what we want. The more people that own their home,

the more carpenters are going to be working. But more importantly, the more people that own their home, the more satisfaction there will be in America, in the American experience.

And so they took the Section 8 program, and what she just told you was they helped her, through Section 8 money, get the credit necessary and the planning necessary and the ability to buy her own place. Section 8 helped with the downpayment a little bit too, didn't it?

Ms. Mims. Yes, they did. What they do is every time you pay your rent, they set a little money aside for you in an account. And that helped me with my downpayment. My downpayment was 3 percent. So as long as you also show that you can save your money, you want to show that you can establish your credit, but you can also show that you can save some money also. So my downpayment, it wasn't that bad, but I was kind of nervous about it.

The President. Yes. The fine print get you, too?

Ms. Mims. The fine print got me. So I went through a lot of classes, the first-time homebuyers class, through Housing for Mesa. And I went through it twice so I could make sure I understood. And they also get you prepared to know what you're going to get yourself into, that you're going to have to pay your water and the sewer and stuff like that, when you're not used to doing that when you live in an apartment.

The President. Right. Practical lessons, maybe some help on budgeting and understanding what it meant to budget.

Ms. Mims. That's correct.

The President. You know, I bet somebody is listening out there and wonders whether or not he or she can buy a home. I bet there's somebody saying, "Gosh, I don't think a homeownership is—even though I want a home, I'm not so sure I'm able to do so." I hope you hear the story of Monica and Emily. These are people that had a dream and found help and are now realizing their dreams. It's the greatness of America, you know that? Jorge is sitting here. He's got a family to raise, gets a little extra help, making more money, got him a second home, upgrading, family is better off.

What we want is we want this dream to be extended to every neighborhood in America. We want people owning their own home. We want people getting the skills necessary to make a living.

Doug, again, thanks for having us. It's an honor to be here. Doug said, "You look a little antsy. Are you heading over to the ranch?" [Laughter] I said, "I'm not telling you, but I'll be fishing tomorrow." [Laughter]

I'm honored to be here. God bless you all, and God bless America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:02 p.m. at the Carpenters Training Center. In his remarks, he referred to Mike McCarron, executive secretary treasurer, Southwest Regional Council of Carpenters; Mayor Phil Gordon of Phoenix, AZ; Jerry Bisgrove, founder, Stardust Foundation; and Edna McLaughlin, director of education and counseling, Housing for Mesa. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

The President's Radio Address

March 27, 2004

Good morning. This week brought good news about homeownership in America. The Census Bureau reported that new home sales in February rose to an annual pace of 1.16 million homes, a 24-percent increase over the past year. This success follows one of the most impressive years in America's housing industry. More homes were sold in 2003 than ever before. Housing starts last year were at their highest level in a quarter century. Rising home values have helped take the wealth of American households to a new record level.

In our growing economy, more Americans can afford a new home. Incomes are rising. The unemployment rate is falling. Mortgage rates are low. And because of tax relief, Americans have more to save, spend, and invest, and that means millions of American families have moved into their first homes.

Our Nation's 68-percent homeownership rate is the highest ever, and our Government is taking steps to make owning a home a reality for more Americans, especially minorities and those with low incomes. In June 2002, I set the goal of adding 5.5 million new

minority homeowners in America by the end of this decade. Since then, more than 1.5 million minority families have moved into houses of their own, and for the first time, most minorities own their own home.

We are building on this progress. I have signed into law the American Dream Downpayment Act, which will help low-income Americans to afford the downpayment and closing costs on their first home. I'm asking Congress to provide an annual \$200 million for this program. That additional money would help an estimated 40,000 low-income families every year become first-time homeowners. I'm proposing that we make zero downpayment loans available to first-time buyers whose mortgages are guaranteed by the Federal Housing Administration. And this will help about 150,000 families buy homes in the first year alone.

Another obstacle to homeownership is the often complicated process of buying a home and getting a loan. My budget for 2005 would more than double funding for housing counseling services from 2001 levels. A house and a mortgage represent a big personal commitment, and we want to prepare more Americans to make that commitment with confidence. To make homeownership attainable for more of our citizens, I have asked Congress to create a tax credit to encourage the construction of affordable homes. Under my proposal, builders will have an incentive to provide an additional 200,000 affordable homes over 5 years for families with low incomes.

And finally, we are encouraging the real estate and mortgage finance industry to join in our efforts in closing the homeownership gap. More than two dozen major companies and organizations have committed to extending more loans to low-income families, financing the construction of more affordable homes, and providing financial counseling to potential buyers. These policies will make a difference in the lives of millions of Americans.

This week, I met with Lori Benavidez, a single mom living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Last November, with the help of a Federal homeownership program, she moved into her first home. Here's what Lori says: "I never thought the day would happen