Thank you. I appreciate that warm welcome Mayor Cortez. It is good to see another friend, and the coalition’s president, Mayor Foster. I’ll get in trouble if I start recognizing all the local officials because I know I will leave one out. Although I have to recognize my Aggie buddy Adrian Arriaga. Ever since that football game after Thanksgiving my watch has been stuck on the time 12 to 7. (if no one laughs: Aggie joke.)

I just recently returned from the inauguration of Mexican President Felipe Calderon. Governor Schwarzeneggar and I had seats in the balcony. Fortunately, the chairs up there are all bolted down. But what better place to sit during a fight than next to the Terminator. While right now the spotlight is on the protests and seeming instability in Mexico, I think history will look back at this last election, and the democratic transfer of power, and see this as a time when democracy in Mexico started to take root. Yes, there were a few fights, but heck, we had those when I was on the Texas House floor. But dissent and protests are a part of free societies, and Mexico is becoming increasingly free, increasingly open, and it is my hope it will become increasingly prosperous.

Why? Because a more prosperous Mexico is directly tied to a more prosperous Texas. It is encouraging to me that the average Mexican wage has gone up from $3,800 to $8,000 over the last six years, that in the same span of time Texas surpassed California as the leading exporting state in the nation, and that much of that trade crosses both ways on Texas roads and rail lines coming from, or going to, Mexico. But it goes beyond trade ties. We are neighbors bound by more than a common economy, but also a common culture and a common future. And just so no one is unclear on my position: good neighbors do not foster fear and engage in divisive appeals, they seek solutions.

We have just concluded an election year that was heavy on immigration rhetoric and light on comprehensive solutions. Divisive appeals do nothing to solve problems even if they do score temporary political points. It is time Washington got one of the central messages of this election: when it comes to immigration and border security, get the job done! We cannot wall off the border and solve anything. Strategic fencing in certain urban areas to direct the flow of traffic makes sense, but building a wall across the entire border is a preposterous idea. Imagine the sheriff of Presidio County, Danny Dominguez, and his four or five deputies patrolling 130 miles of a border wall. The only thing a wall would most certainly accomplish is an increase in the ladder
making industry. Washington needs to seek real solutions that protect our economy, that take migrant workers out of the shadows by giving them an ID and allowing them to cross freely, and that at the same time recognizes the rule of law and the importance of not rewarding those who break our laws. Our economy is impacted greatly by migrant workers. Let's create a guest worker program that takes those workers off the black market and that legitimizes their economic contributions without doing the same for their citizenship. I would rather know who it is that crosses our border legally to work, than not know who it is that crosses our border illegally to work. We can have immigration reform that doesn't compromise our security, and we can have security that doesn't compromise our economy. That's my goal, and it is time Washington shared it.

Let me also be clear, however, about something I said many times during the campaign: there is no such thing as immigration reform without true border security. Let's face it, as long as the temptation exists, certain employers will bypass a guest worker program if they can, and avoid paying taxes and certain benefits for those employees. That's why we have worked closely with border sheriffs to increase patrols, put more law enforcement boots on the ground, and shut down drug and human smuggling operations that exploit our porous border at will. Among the millions of people who cross illegally into this country every year, the vast majority are economic migrants seeking hope and opportunity. I recognize this. But we cannot be naïve and think that criminal gangs and even terrorists have not, and will not, exploit our porous border. I do not want what happened in New York and Washington on 9/11 to one day happen to Houston, or Dallas or Brownsville. The safety of our citizens remains a paramount concern of my administration.

Of course, so does the free flow of people and products on a transportation system built for the 21st Century rather than the previous one. I support the use of new technologies and improved infrastructure at our border crossings. I share your desire to unclog your city centers with truck traffic, which is one of the reasons I am proud there is a multi-modal rail system in McAllen that moves truck loads off the roads and onto trains. I hope you will join me this session in support of funding a rail relocation fund that can make your rail crossings safer and your local economy stronger. In a global, just-in-time economy, we cannot have commerce sitting at crossings or crammed on roads built in the 1950’s because the end result will be jobs, opportunity and revenue that goes somewhere else. We need logistics solutions that get products to market on time and employees to work on time. I hope to work with you as a governor who has shown a deep commitment to transportation solutions.

Of course, there is no shortage of challenges facing the border region. I haven’t even touched on the needs of colonias, education or healthcare. Though I will say on that last subject I was very happy to see a steep increase statewide in childhood immunizations. We have worked together to bring healthcare specialists back to the border, and I know that by working together we can address other great challenges, including the rate of the uninsured. We can achieve what we conceive. It is time to raise our sights when it comes to the health, wealth and well-being of the border region. I want to be a partner in progress and prosperity for this vital region of our state. I look forward to working with your many talented legislators. The best is yet to come. Thank you, and God bless you all.