

## Beyond the Politics of Fear

Fordham University  
Lincoln Center Campus, New York, NY  
October 2, 2007

I want to begin by painting a picture for you. These are the words spoken recently by some of our political leaders here in New York.

Here's a quote from the minority leader of the State Assembly: "Osama bin Laden is somewhere in a cave with his den of thieves and terrorists, and he's probably sabering the cork on some champagne right now, saying 'hey, that governor's really assisting us.'"

Here's one from his colleague in the State Senate: "The people of this great state didn't elect [Spitzer] to allow terrorists to go unchecked, and that's what he's doing... We'll be setting ourselves up for a worse disaster than 9/11... God forbid, terrorists strike again and there are 30,000 people dead. I'm not trying to be alarmist. I'm trying to be realistic."

But then the clouds parted and we heard from a voice truly trying to be realistic:

"We have hundreds of thousands of aliens here, and I'm not sure it serves the public good to deprive them of their ability to go to school, to go to work, to do the kinds of things you have to do to lead a normal life."

That quote came from the State Senate Majority Leader. Refreshing—a common sense approach that faces reality on the ground.

Too bad it didn't last. The next day, the Senate Majority Leader did an about-face, reversing himself and coming out against the policy change he thought just one day before made perfect sense. What are we now to believe? That it is in fact in the public interest to deprive hard working New Yorkers of "their ability to go to school, to go to work, to do the kinds of things you have to do to lead a normal life?"

Switching political contexts, here's a quote that, in a moment, I will argue comes from a very similar place as the ones I just read. Just recently, a U.S. Senator called our effort to provide health insurance to uninsured children a fight "between freedom and socialism." He went on to say, "We're turning this country into a socialistic style of government that takes away people's freedom. This is one more step down the path to European-style socialism." In this case, instead of terrorism, they're exploiting the fear of socialism, even claiming that our very freedom is at stake in our effort to insure more children.

What is happening here? What is fueling this kind of rhetoric?

What has happened is that the politics of fear and selfishness has replaced the politics of common sense and mutual responsibility.

At all levels of government, we are witnessing knee-jerk reactions to sound policies that have no business being politicized or polluted by fear-mongering rhetoric.

Over the past six-and-a-half years, New Yorkers and all Americans have seen how dangerous this type of politics can be. But we will not back down or flinch in the face of such ugly politics and allow it to keep us from doing what is morally and practically right.

Rather, we must have the courage to take a stand and press forward with a positive agenda for change that puts the interests of all New Yorkers first.

So what was all of that rhetoric actually referring to? Once you break through it all, the policies that are actually at stake here are expanding access to driver's licenses in a secure and responsible way, and making sure every child has health insurance.

Reasonable people can disagree about how to approach these issues. What I object to is that rather than engage on the merits they march out the parade of horrors—exploiting our fears of *isms* like terrorism and socialism to incite the public.

Let me walk through each of these issues that have drawn such hysterical responses because they are important issues, and they deserve to be judged on the merits.

### **Access to Licenses**

Take the driver's license issue.

The simple fact is, increasing access to driver's licenses, tied to increased anti-fraud security measures, is good for public safety and good for homeland security.

The facts are undeniably clear:

- The fact that unlicensed drivers contribute to five times as many deadly accidents as licensed drivers. It is unlicensed drivers—not immigrants—that are a threat to public safety.
- The fact that we must take steps to increase the security of our license.
- And the fact that bringing people out of the shadows and into the system will create records that will help law enforcement solve and prevent crimes—including terrorism.

Unfortunately, ignoring this public safety rationale, partisans quickly seized on our policy change.

They equated immigrants to terrorists, and, with this unsubstantiated connection made, they brought in the tragedy of 9/11 for good measure. As we have seen, 9/11 has been the excuse for so much bad policy, yet some have called on it one more time to strike fear in the public

consciousness. In an instant, they took a common sense public safety measure and warped it completely.

And, if they are going to bring 9/11 into this, they should at least get their facts straight. The 9/11 Commission concluded that an immigration status requirement for licenses would not have prevented the 9/11 attacks. In fact, four of the five states that issued the terrorists licenses and identity documents had immigration status requirements at the time.

Moreover, in their long list of recommendations to make licenses more secure, the 9/11 Commission specifically did *not* recommend that states impose restrictions based on immigration status. What the 9/11 Commission *did* recommend was a series of steps to strengthen the security of the license system—many of which we are implementing as part of this policy change.

Let me describe some of these steps:

- Undocumented immigrants will not be able to get a license in the over-the-counter manner that lawful residents currently go through. Instead, they will submit six points of identification to a central Document Verification Unit in DMV – the first of its kind in the nation – where specially-trained staff will verify their validity.
- We will also require all undocumented immigrants to present a current and valid foreign passport with photo identification—passports that can be scanned and verified using new, state-of-the-art document scanning machines.
- And DMV will implement new photo-comparison technology that will compare the photograph of every applicant against the database of photographs in the current system to make sure an applicant is not able to get more than one license fraudulently.

Taken together, this new regime of anti-fraud security measures will make New York State’s licensing process the most secure in the nation.

What some also ignore is that homeland security will actually be strengthened as we bring people out of the shadows and into the system—a chance to bring an entire population of people into a database that, when necessary, can be used to help law enforcement agencies track down criminals—including terrorists. In fact, law enforcement agencies were able to use the information from the driver’s licenses of the 9/11 terrorists to figure out where they had been, how they had moved around and who had helped them.

Now, reasonable people disagree about what security measures need to be taken and how they should be implemented. In fact, we are working with Mayor Bloomberg and his administration to address any concerns they may have. That type of discussion on the substance is productive.

What deserves to be condemned are the hysterical allegations that have no basis in fact and are only intended to prey upon the public’s fears.

For example, in addition to shouting “terrorism” and “another 9/11,” these opponents also claim that expanding driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants will now enable them to vote. This is plainly false; undocumented immigrants will still not be U.S. citizens, and only U.S. citizens are able to vote, just as before. The only way your license factors into the equation is to prove your identity, not your citizenship.

They have claimed that you and I will now not be able to use our driver’s licenses at airports. Wrong again; in fact, you and I could go to LaGuardia right now and use the very license in our pockets. Only in May 2013, when the federal government imposes the travel restrictions of the REAL ID Act, will residents all across the country have to get new, federally-approved licenses. And remember, that was the reality before we made these changes.

At the end of the day, we are not talking about letting more people into this country. We are talking about being practical about those who are already here. Until the federal government fixes our immigration system, we have to deal with the reality that up to 1 million undocumented immigrants live in New York. And they’re not going away simply because they can’t get a driver’s license, health care or access to emergency medicine like chemotherapy.

We don’t have the luxury of ignoring reality. We can’t ignore the reality that when hundreds of thousands of people don’t have a driver’s license, it puts everyone in danger. We can’t ignore the reality that when hundreds of thousands of people live in the shadows, it makes the public less safe and law enforcement’s job much harder. And finally, we can’t ignore the reality that when hundreds of thousands of people don’t have a driver’s license, they suffer and we as a society suffer.

### **Health Insurance for All Children**

The SCHIP fight that we have been waging is another example of how the politics of fear has gotten in the way of doing what is morally and practically right.

Together with the State Legislature, we established an historic plan to make health insurance available to every child in New York—a cornerstone of our patient-first health care agenda and a building block toward universal coverage.

The plan was backed by Democrats and Republicans; business and labor; doctors and patients; health care providers, experts and advocates alike, showing the unity around a common purpose that is all too rare in politics.

But then the Bush Administration slammed the door on our plan—and on New York’s children. Instead of increasing coverage for children, President Bush actually proposed reducing it.

The reason? As the President himself put it: “I mean, people have access to health care in America. They can just go to the emergency room.”

It is this kind of selfish politics of “not my problem” that has led to the health crisis we have today. There are 400,000 uninsured children in New York. To put this in perspective, if they

were to gather in one place, they would form the second-largest city in the state—larger than Rochester, Albany and Binghamton combined.

To deny these children coverage is not only morally wrong—after all, the very measure of a civilized nation is the way it treats its children, our most precious resource and our very future—it is profoundly bad public policy.

Denying children health coverage during their formative years leaves them far more vulnerable to preventable diseases, which—in addition to compromising their health, their education and their opportunities in an increasingly competitive economy—costs patients, government and taxpayers far more to treat in the future.

Yet how did the President and his cohort respond? Not with substantive criticisms about SCHIP—which was enacted by a Republican Congress and enjoys bipartisan support today.

Rather, they responded with fear-mongering rhetoric. This time, rather than playing upon the public's fear of terrorism, they played upon the fear of another *ism*.

Remember the Senator who said we were making a choice between “freedom and socialism?” This is what his colleague had to say about our efforts to insure all children: “If people want socialism, if they want the federal government to pay for all of our health care needs, let's just go ahead and become a socialist government.”

The White House agreed, calling our plan “socialized-type medicine.”

The point is that none of these arguments have anything to do with the substance of what we're actually proposing. SCHIP has nothing to do with socialism. The government would be the payer, not the provider of care, and families would have a range of private plans to choose from. But instead of engaging on the merits, the right wing has pulled out socialism from their parade of horrors in order to frighten the public.

As Senator Chuck Grassley, a member of the President's own party, put it: “This bill is not socialized medicine...Screaming ‘socialized medicine’ is like shouting ‘fire’ in a crowded theater. It is intended to cause hysteria that diverts people from reading the bill, looking at the facts.”

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Let me close by making one point perfectly clear: No amount of hysterical rhetoric will prevent us from doing what is right.

No amount of scare tactics that equate immigrants with terrorists will keep us from implementing changes to our driver's license system that we know are needed to increase public safety and homeland security.

And no amount of fear-mongering will keep us from fighting for health insurance for every child. In fact, just yesterday, I announced that a bi-partisan coalition of 8 states, led by New York, will sue the Bush Administration to nullify their destructive rules. Together, we are going to win this fight, and provide health insurance to every child in need.

Look at what we're really talking about here. We want to make our roads safer and bring more people into the system and they're talking about terrorism. We want to insure more children and they're talking about socialism.

I'm not going to run from the fight just because the other side decides to demagogue it. Too much is at stake.

Reasonable people will have different points of view about public policy. I get that. We are going to be—as we have been—open to all arguments that are based on the merits. In fact, I believe good public policy can *only* occur as the result of a vigorous debate between different perspectives.

But what we are *not* going to accept is hysterical rhetoric that preys upon the public's fears. Over the past six-and-a-half years, this type of politics has dragged our country down. People are sick of it, I am sick of it, and I believe that New Yorkers and all Americans are ready for a new type of politics. Let's rise above the rhetoric and press forward with a positive, reality-based agenda for change—an agenda for One New York—that puts the interests of all New Yorkers first.

Thank you.

[As prepared for delivery]