

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Fundraiser in New York City
March 29, 2011

The President. Hello, everybody. Hello, New York. Hello, Harlem. It is good to be here tonight. Hey, you, how did you get up there so high? [*Laughter*] She——

I've got some acknowledgements I need to make. Everybody here is important, but there are a few people I want to mention.

First of all, we are in the district of somebody who helped us to deliver on a historic legislative session over the last couple of years and has been a leader here for a very long time—he doesn't like to remember how long it's been—but Congressman Charlie Rangel is in the house.

We've got your outstanding attorney general; Eric Schneiderman is here. The former mayor of New York City David Dinkins is in the house. Several of Harlem's outstanding leaders: a great friend and one of my earliest supporters here in New York City, Senator Bill Perkins is in the house; Assemblyman Keith Wright is here; Councilwoman Inez Dickens is here.

And finally, I just want to say how thankful I am for our Democratic National Committee chairman. I think some people obviously have seen Tim Kaine on television and know that he was a Governor of the great Commonwealth of Virginia. What some of you may not know is Tim was the first person—the first elected official outside of the State of Illinois—to endorse my candidacy for President.

He made that announcement as Governor of Virginia, in Richmond, former seat of the Confederacy. And this is back in February of 2007, when most people could not pronounce my name. [*Laughter*] And there was not a big political upside to endorsing me at that point. But he decided to do it because he thought it was the right thing to do and because we shared a set of values about why to get into public service and who we were fighting for and the kind of America we were fighting for.

And I say all this because there have been some rumors swirling around that Tim might decide to plunge back into electoral politics. And if he does, I want even people up here to be paying attention and to be rooting for him because he is not just a leader for Virginia, he is a leader for America. And I'm very thankful to him. Thank you, Tim.

Now, we meet here tonight, after as challenging a 2 years as America has gone through in our lifetimes. And when we started this journey 3 or 4 years ago, we understood that America was at a turning point. We understood that the wheels of history were churning and that the old ways of doing business couldn't help us to get to where America needed to be. It couldn't make us more competitive. It couldn't make us more energy independent. It couldn't ensure that our kids were learning and able not only to go to college, but also advance in careers.

We knew that how we approached international policy—trying to stand on our own without thinking about how we could mobilize the international community as a force multiplier—that that was not going to work given the incredible number of challenges that we faced. And most of all, I guess, we understood that unless we changed our politics, unless we changed how we did business, that the same problems that we had been talking about decade

after decade would perpetuate themselves; that we had to undergo a transformation in how we thought about citizenship and how we thought about each other; and that we had to get beyond some of the old divisions that were holding us back as a people.

And so what our campaign tried to do was to resuscitate that notion that there's something fundamental that binds us together, despite all our differences. You look out on the room today, we've got people from every possible walk of life. And that's part of what makes New York City such an incredible place. And so what we wanted to do was adapt to the times—adapt to the 21st century—but also remind ourselves that there are some old-fashioned, timeworn values that whether your forebears landed at Ellis Island or they came here on a slave ship or they crossed the Rio Grande or however they got here; they typically had a commitment to hard work and a commitment to community and a commitment to family and a willingness to dream big dreams and a patriotism that was not rooted in ethnicity, but was rooted in a creed and a set of ideals and a belief that in America anything was possible. That's what brought us together as a campaign.

And what we then tried to do is to translate, in concrete terms, what would that mean in terms of policy. Well, it would mean that we were educating our kids not just to be outstanding workers and outstanding entrepreneurs, but also outstanding citizens. It meant that we had to make sure that we had an energy policy that not only protected the planet, but also ensured our long-term security because it ratcheted down our dependence on foreign oil. It meant that we finally had, in a nation as wealthy as ours, a health care system that was rational and smart and did not leave millions of people uninsured or at risk of bankruptcy just because a family member got sick.

We had to make sure that the ideals of equality and justice had real meaning and that we didn't just stand pat on the progress that we had made during my lifetime, but in fact, we kept on making progress so that 50 years from now people would look back and they'd say, this is a more just and a more equal place for everybody. It's exciting, isn't it? *[Laughter]*

So here's the deal, people. We haven't finished our task. We've still got some work to do.

There have been times where we had to make some really tough decisions, really unpopular decisions, digging ourselves out of this incredible economic hole that we were in. We had to stabilize the financial system. That wasn't always popular. We had to save the U.S. auto industry, and everybody said that wasn't going to work. And I just want to report that GM just announced it's hiring every single one of the workers that they'd laid off before we took office.

But when you look back on the track record of accomplishments over the last 2 years, I think you can go down that list of commitments we made to each other—not just commitments I made, but commitments we made to each other about the kind of country we want to be—and I think we've got some things that we can be proud of.

We passed health care reform, and it is going to make life better for millions of Americans. We pulled this economy out of the ditch, and just in this last year alone, over a million and a half jobs have been created, and we're going to keep on creating more. We made sure that we finally got rid of that archaic policy, "don't ask, don't tell," because we wanted to make sure that every American who wants to serve can serve.

We raised fuel efficiency standards on cars and invested in record amounts in clean energy. Because we want to make sure that wind energy and solar panels and all the incredible promise of a new energy future starts right here in the United States of America.

So we can go down the list domestically, and then we can talk internationally. Obviously, that's been on a lot of our minds lately. And we are grateful to our men and women in uniform who have implemented so many difficult policies under such incredibly difficult conditions. And whether it's helping the people of Haiti or it's helping the people of Japan, whether it is being on the right side of history in the Middle East and North Africa or making sure that innocents who are seeking their freedom aren't slaughtered by tyranny, what we've been able to do is to once again form the kind of American leadership that brings people together, as opposed to drives them apart, and that renews old alliances and creates new coalitions.

So we've gotten a lot of stuff done. But right now what's on my mind is what hasn't gotten done yet. We're going to have to fix a broken immigration system, and that not—that is not yet complete. And we've got to make sure that, even as we're securing our borders, we also recognize that we are a nation of immigrants and that we want everybody to be able to partake in the American Dream.

We've got to rebuild our crumbling infrastructure. I mean, New York looks pretty good, but we've got a lot of work to do on bridges and sewer systems, but also on the new infrastructure of a new age, making sure that we've got the best broadband systems and the best wireless systems and the smart grids and the high-speed rails that will help move people and goods and services and information all throughout this great country of ours.

We still have a lot of work to do on energy. You know, tomorrow I'm going to give an energy speech. The last time gas prices were this high was in 2008 when I was running. And you remember what was going on right back then. The other side kept on talking about "drill, baby, drill." That was the slogan.

What we were talking about was breaking the pattern of being shocked at high prices and then, as prices go down, being lulled into a trance, but instead, let's actually have a plan. Let's, yes, increase domestic oil production, but let's also invest in solar and wind and geothermal and biofuels, and let's make our buildings more efficient and our cars more efficient. Not all of that work is done yet, but I'm not finished yet. We've got more work to do.

We're going to have to work to get our deficit under control. I inherited a big debt and a big deficit. And regardless of how we assign fault, all of us are responsible to work together to try to make sure that we can actually, in good conscience, be able to tell our children and our grandchildren we didn't leave a mountain of debt to them.

And that's going to require some hard choices, and it's going to require us not just telling the American people what they want to hear, but telling them what they need to hear. And I think the American people are ready for that, but it's not going to be easy. And if we're serious about winning the future, then all of us are going to have to recognize that we've got to have a government that lives within its means, that's investing in the things that we have to invest in to win the future, which means that we're going to have to cut out some things that we don't need, even if they're nice to have.

So if you go down this list and you say, not bad for 2 years work, the one thing that I want everybody here to understand is that I am as hopeful, if not more hopeful, now than I was when I was running.

You know, I did a bunch of network interviews today to talk about what we're doing in Libya and why what happens in the Middle East is so important to us and why those images coming from Tahrir Square in Egypt speak directly to who we are as a people and that

ultimately our long-term security will be because a new generation of leadership in that region recognizes we aspire for them to have opportunity and to be successful.

And Diane Sawyer, I think it was, she started listing out, well, let's see, two wars that you've dealt with, a couple of earthquakes, nuclear situation in Japan, H1N1 virus, worst recession since the Great Depression. "No wonder you look old," she said. [*Laughter*]

Audience member. You look great! [*Laughter*]

The President. No, she actually did not say, "No wonder you look old." [*Laughter*] But I do appreciate you saying that I look great. [*Laughter*] I need encouragement too once in a while. [*Laughter*]

But no, what she said was, well, you know what, how do you kind of—when you get up in the morning, how do you stay focused and motivated? Don't you want to just pull the covers over your head sometimes?

And what I said was that after 2½ years in this job, or close to 2½ years, the thing that continually keeps me going is my complete confidence in the American people.

You know, they—there's a lot of talk about how divided America is and how frustrated and angry, and in some cases, people make arguments that especially the next generation, somehow they're apathetic or they're not involved. I don't see that. I mean, what I see are people who every day are doing the right thing by their families, by their communities. They're getting up, they're going to work, or they're out there pounding the pavement looking for work. They're managing budgets under incredible strain, but they're doing so with grace and good humor.

I see people who, day in and day out, are making sure that—we got some—

[*At this point, there was an interruption in the audience.*]

The President. Do we have somebody here to just—we don't need—we've got—somebody is always following me around, so they'll be fine. It's just, next time you guys come, make sure to eat or drink ahead of time.

But what I see in the American people is just a core goodness and a core decency that expresses itself in so many different ways each and every day. But that spirit, it's got to be expressed not just in the workplace, not just on the Little League field, or in church or a synagogue or a mosque. It also has to be expressed in our politics.

And so the biggest thing that we haven't gotten done and the thing that I'm going to ask all of you to be part of over the next couple of years, we still have a big job to do in transforming our politics, to make sure that we can have robust debate and real policy differences, but we never forget that what binds us together is always stronger than what drives us apart and that for all the differences in race and region and ethnicity and background, we are all Americans, and we believe in a set of fundamental principles, truths that we hold self-evident. That is going to be as much of the unfinished business that we focus on over the next couple years as anything that we do. And having friends like you who are here and ready to commit to that vision, that too makes me extraordinarily confident.

So thank you so much, everybody. I love you. Let's go to work. Yes we can.

Audience members. Yes we can!

The President. Yes we can. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:51 p.m. at the Studio Museum in Harlem. In his remarks, he referred to Diane Sawyer, anchor, ABC's "World News with Diane Sawyer".

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Democratic National Committee fundraiser reception in New York City.

Locations: New York City.

Names: Dickens, Inez E.; Dinkins, David N.; Kaine, Timothy M.; Perkins, William; Rangel, Charles B.; Sawyer, Diane; Schneiderman, Eric T.; Wright, Keith L.T.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: Promotion efforts; Armed Forces, U.S. : "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, repeal; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Budget, Federal : Deficit and national debt; Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Improvement; Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Strengthening efforts; Communications : Broadband technology; Democratic Party : Democratic National Committee; Diseases : Global influenza outbreak; Economy, national : Credit markets, stabilization efforts; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Egypt : Democracy efforts; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: Promotion efforts; Energy : Domestic sources; Energy : Energy efficiency and weatherization :: Homes and buildings; Energy : Foreign sources; Energy : Fuel efficiency standards, strengthening efforts; Energy : Gasoline, oil, and natural gas costs; Energy : Infrastructure and grid improvements; Energy : National energy policy; Foreign policy, U.S. : Humanitarian assistance programs; Fuel efficiency standards, strengthening efforts; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Immigration and naturalization : Reform; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Japan : Nuclear power plants in Fukushima; Libya : No-fly zone :: U.S. military forces; New York : Democratic Party events; New York : President's visits; Transportation : High-speed rail lines, development and expansion; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts.

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