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Remarks at the National Action Network's Keepers of the Dream Awards Gala in New York City

April 6, 2011

Well, thank you. It's good to be in New York City. Let me begin by acknowledging some very, very special guests: Dr. Richardson, thank you; Charlie Rangel, for your outstanding work on behalf of your constituents; Mayor David Dinkins. Governor David Paterson is here; State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli—DiNapoli, excuse me; this is another one that's hard to pronounce—Stevie Wonder—[*laughter*]; Martin Luther King III; all the Keepers of the Dream honorees with us tonight; and the National Action Network.

It is wonderful to be here as you celebrate your 20th anniversary. Some things have changed a lot since 1991. I told Reverend Al backstage, he's getting skinnier than me. [*Laughter*] He's getting skinnier than Spike. [*Laughter*] But he hasn't lost his sense of style. The other thing that hasn't changed is the National Action Network's commitment to fight injustice and inequality here in New York City and across America. And that's not only a testament to Reverend Sharpton, it's a testament to all of you who are here tonight. I want to commend you for the work that you've done over the last two decades to lift up not only the African American community, but the broader American family. That's what you're about.

The last time I came was in April of 2007, 4 months ago—4 years ago this month. Back then, I had fewer supporters. Most of you couldn't pronounce my name, so Tom, don't feel bad. [*Laughter*] I had a lot fewer gray hairs. I was looking at some pictures; I looked really young back then. [*Laughter*] I said that we were facing extraordinary challenges in this country, but that what was stopping us from solving them wasn't a lack of policies. It wasn't a lack of plans. What was stopping us was a broken politics, a broken politics in Washington, a politics that was all about the next election instead of the next generation, that was all about what we disagreed about instead of what we had in common, a politics that made us cynical about our ability to change this country.

And I said that if you stand with me and believe in what we can do together, if you do what civil rights groups like the National Action Network have always done, if you put your shoulder to the wheel of history, then we can move this country toward the promise of a better day. I told you at the time I wasn't a perfect person, I wouldn't be a perfect President, but what I could commit to was always telling you the truth, even when it was hard, and that I would spend each and every day thinking about you.

And because you made our campaign your own, because you believed in our ability to shape our own destiny, we won that chance to bring about real change. And I said on Inauguration night in Chicago that that was simply the end of the beginning and that now the real business started.

Because I didn't run, and so many of you didn't support me, just to win an election; we won the election so that we could then actually get moving on all the work that had been left undone. Even though we understood, of course, the magnitudes of the challenges we faced, we didn't fully realize until late in the game, probably in the last month of the campaign, that we would be facing the worst recession in generations, a recession that was leaving millions of

Americans without a home, without a job, without hope for the future. And as Reverend Al said, some folks have amnesia about this.

Where are we 2 years later? Our economy has started to grow again. The recovery is gaining momentum. People are finally starting to get hired back. We had to make some tough choices in between. You remember when we decided we had to move to save the American auto industry and everybody said, that can't happen. And then 2 weeks ago, GM just announced that it's going to hire back every single worker that has been laid off, and every U.S. automaker is making a profit. But that wasn't popular. That wasn't popular.

A while back, I visited a small trucking business, and its owner Stephen Neal is one of our country's African American business leaders. And he told me that because of the uptick in our economy, he was buying new equipment and adding more workers. And that's what's happening all across America. In the first 3 months of this year, we've added nearly half a million private sector jobs; nearly 2 million jobs in the last 13 months.

So we're making progress, but we're not there yet. And I want you to know that so long as there are Americans who cannot find work, I will be fighting for jobs, and so long as the gap between the wealthiest few and everybody else keeps on growing, I will be fighting for opportunity. And I know you'll be right there alongside with me.

We are going to keep fighting until every family gets a shot at the American Dream. That's our north star. That's the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning, that's the last thing I think about when I go to bed at night: the hopes and dreams of people who work hard every single day, look after their families, take care of their responsibilities, and just need a little bit of help to make it.

Now, there are Americans of all colors and creeds who are struggling to live out those dreams today. That's part of what our campaign was about, was reminding ourselves that everybody is in this together. Now, what's also true, though, is the unemployment rate for African Americans is almost double what it is for other groups. It's also true that those with the least have been sacrificing the most during this recession. What's also true is that even before the recession hit, too many communities were marked by structural inequalities in health and education and employment that made it profoundly difficult for too many people to get ahead.

You understood that. I understood that. That's part of the reason I ran for President, because I've seen the frustration and the wounded pride in the eyes of folks who've lost their jobs or a father who has to go home and tell his kids that we might not have enough this month, might be losing our apartment this month. I've heard the stories of struggling families who are doing everything right and still, at the end of the month, don't quite have enough to pay the bills. I did not start hearing those stories when I became President. Those are stories that led me to run for President in the first place.

As Reverend mentioned, I got my start tackling the problems of joblessness and hopelessness that afflict so many of our cities and rural communities. I got my start working to bring opportunity to neighborhoods that were full of boarded up houses and shuttered stores, fighting to keep kids off the street, fighting to get them into school, fighting to make sure that they went on to college, fighting to make real the promise of justice in our judicial system.

And these causes of justice and equality and opportunity, they aren't just what led me into politics, they're what led ordinary people to sit down at the front of the bus, to cross that bridge in Selma, to heed a King's call to perfect our Union. They're the heart of what makes us

Americans. That's who we are. And because of your support, they're the causes that I've been carrying since I've been in the Oval Office.

With the help of folks at the grassroots, we passed historic health insurance reform that will not only extend coverage to 30 million more Americans and give Americans more affordable choices, but will narrow the cruel health disparities between African Americans of different backgrounds. That was because of your work.

We passed Wall Street reform that will protect consumers from the kind of predatory lending practices that helped cause this recession. We're rewarding work with an expanded earned-income tax credit. We're tackling poverty with Promise Neighborhoods that build on the great work of Geoffrey Canada up in Harlem. We're making sure our civil rights and antidiscrimination laws are enforced. And if you're interested in learning more, if you want to spread the word about what we're doing not just in the African American community, but all across the country, go to our web site and it will give you a long list of what we've done over the last 2 years, promises made and promises kept.

That's what we've tried to do over these past couple years: advance the causes that make us who we are. But we've still got more work to do. If we're serious about opening up opportunity and making sure America prospers in the 21st century, we're going to have to up our game as a nation. I was talking to Magic right before we came out. I was talking about the Bulls of course. [*Laughter*] He's still picking the Lakers. But he made the point, a young man, Derrick Rose, upped his game, worked hard, and is having an MVP season. Well, we have to do that in classrooms. We have to do that in the workplaces. We've got to do that in our communities and our neighborhoods. Our fathers got to up their games.

If we want to attract new jobs and new opportunities to our shores, we've got to make sure America can outcompete the rest of the world. That's what we mean when we say we got to win the future. It means we got to rebuild our crumbling transportation networks with high-speed rail, upgrade our communications networks with high-speed Internet. It means we're investing in cutting-edge research and technology like clean energy and, most of all, making sure we are giving every one of our children the best possible education. The best possible education is the single most important factor in determining whether they succeed, but it's also what will determine whether we succeed. It's the key to opportunity. It is the civil rights issue of our time.

I know education is important to everybody here, especially Reverend Al. In fact, a while back, he stopped by the White House to talk about education. He was joined by the great mayor of this city, Mike Bloomberg. He was also joined by Newt Gingrich. Newt—hmm. [*Laughter*] Newt said he and Reverend Sharpton were the original odd couple. That's an understatement. [*Laughter*]

But I welcomed them to the White House because I don't think there's anything odd about the two of them coming together around the importance of education. When there is an achievement gap between students of different races and backgrounds, that's not a Democratic problem, that's not a Republican problem, that is an American problem that we have to address. When too many of our schools are failing our children, too many of our kids are dropping out of school, that's not a Black or a White or a Brown problem, that is an American problem. We're going to have to solve that problem. We are all responsible for the education of all of our children.

That starts with parents making sure that we're doing right at home, staying engaged in our child's education, setting high expectation. Without parental responsibility, nothing else we do will matter. But we also know that each of us has a responsibility not just as parents, but as civic leaders, as Americans, to do a better job of educating our children.

And that's why 2 years ago, we started something called Race for the Top. We're saying to States, prove you are serious about improving education—not just for some kids, but for all kids—and if you do, we will show you the money. And for less than 1 percent of what our country as a whole spends on education each year, Race to the Top has led 40 States to raise their standards for teaching and learning and student achievement and developed plans for some of the schools that are underperforming the worst. And all this was done not in Washington, it was developed by Republican and Democratic Governors across the country.

We're going to have to take that same approach when it comes to fixing No Child Left Behind. Instead of measuring students based on whether they're above or below some arbitrary test, we need to make sure our students are graduating from high school ready to—for a career, ready for college. That's what we need to do. Instead of labeling our schools a failure one day and then throwing up our hands and walking away, we've got to refocus on the schools that need help the most. In the 21st century, it's not enough to just leave no child left behind, we've got to help every child get ahead. That's our goal: We've got to get every child on a path to academic excellence.

And we need to make sure that that path leads to a college degree. That's why we ended a system where we were subsidizing banks in the student loan program. They were taking billions of dollars out of the student loan program. We said, why don't we give that to the students directly? That would make sense. So we made college more affordable for millions of students. Millions of students across the country are now getting student loans that they weren't getting before and more loans than they were getting before. That's why we're making it easier to repay student loans, so kids don't graduate, like Michelle and I did, with massive loan payments each month. It was more than our mortgage for 10 years.

It's one of the things I try to remember—I try to remind people when they say, well, you're President now, you're out of touch. I said, listen, it was only a few years ago I was still paying off my student loans. [*Laughter*] And it's true, I don't pump gas now, but I remember what it was like pumping gas. [*Laughter*] I remember. I remember the end of the month. [*Laughter*] I remember that. We appreciate all of you buying the book—[*laughter*]—Michelle and I. [*Laughter*] That's the college fund right there. [*Laughter*] That was not a given.

That's why we're reinvesting in Historically Black Colleges and Universities. That's why we are—[*applause*]—that's why we're upgrading our community colleges that prepare so many working families to succeed in this economy. And by taking all these steps, I'm confident we are going to meet a goal that I set when I took office that I announced in my first State of the Union: By the end of this decade, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. That is something that we can achieve. That's something we can achieve.

That's how we can out-educate countries around the world. That's how we will out-compete. That's how we will win the future in the 21st century.

Now, one thing we won't be able to win is—if some of our people are falling behind, we will not win the future. The only way for America to prosper is for all Americans to prosper. We've seen that in the census that just came out. The face of America is changing. You can't

get away with having a third of our children, half of our children not doing well. Not today, not in the 21st century. All of us—Black, White, Latino, Native American, Asian American, men, women, disabled, nondisabled—in America, we rise and fall together.

An America where the American Dream is within reach of everybody, that's what we've been fighting to build over the last 2 years. That's what the National Action Network has been fighting to build over the past two decades. I know that there are times where the work is frustrating. I know there are times where it is hard. There are times when change can seem painfully slow to come by. There are times where some of you may have said, "You know, I don't know what Obama is doing there." There are times where you lose hope, times when folks in Washington focus on scoring points instead of solving problems. And some of you may just put up your hands and say, "Politics is too tough."

But in those moments when we start asking ourselves if change is possible, you've got to remember what we've done together over the past few years. Remember all the children who will graduate from high school ready for college and beyond. Remember all the Americans who will no longer have to worry about going bankrupt because they got sick. Remember all the families who will no longer be exploited by insurance companies or a credit card company or a mortgage lender.

I'm not asking you to think about what we've already done so you can be satisfied with our progress. I know this isn't the National Satisfaction Network. This is the National Action Network. [*Laughter*] But I am asking you to draw inspiration from the fact that we know change is possible. I am living testament that change is possible. We know we have the ability to put our shoulders to the wheel of history and steer America towards the promise of a better day. We know that we stand on others' shoulders, and step by step, inch by inch, we make progress.

That's what we've been doing. And if you're as committed as I am to continuing to change this country for the better, if you feel the same determination that I do to tackle the problems that we haven't yet met, if you're still willing to believe in what we can do together, I am absolutely confident we will do what you've been doing for the last 20 years. We will build an America where the ideals of justice and equality and opportunity are alive and well, and we will reclaim the American Dream in our time.

So thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:01 p.m. in the Metropolitan Ballroom at the Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers. In his remarks, he referred to W. Franklyn Richardson, chairman of the board, and Rev. Alfred C. Sharpton, Jr., president and founder, National Action Network; former Mayor David N. Dinkins of New York City; former Governor David A. Paterson of New York; entertainers Stevie Wonder and Spike Lee; Stephen W. Neal, president and chief executive officer, K. Neal International Trucks, Inc.; Geoffrey Canada, president and chief executive officer, Harlem Children's Zone; Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Jr., former guard, National Basketball Association's Los Angeles Lakers; Derrick M. Rose, guard, National Basketball Association's Chicago Bulls; and former Speaker of the House of Representatives Newton L. Gingrich.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : National Action Network's Keepers of the Dream Awards gala in New York City.

Locations: New York City.

Names: Bloomberg, Michael R.; Canada, Geoffrey; DiNapoli, Thomas P.; Dinkins, David N.; Gingrich, Newton L.; Johnson, Earvin "Magic," Jr.; King, Martin Luther, III; Lee, Spike; Neal, Stephen W.; Obama, Michelle; Paterson, David A.; Rangel, Charles B.; Richardson, W. Franklyn; Rose, Derrick M.; Sharpton, Alfred C., Jr.; Wonder, Stevie.

Subjects: Action Network, National; Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Improvement; Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Strengthening efforts; Business and industry : Global competitiveness; Children and youth : Fathers, influence; Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Civil rights : Minorities :: Minority rights and ethnic tolerance; Civil rights : Racial equality; Communications : Broadband technology; Economy, national : Financial regulations, modernization efforts; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Income inequality, increase; Economy, national : Poverty, efforts to combat; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Education : American Graduation Initiative; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : Minority students; Education : No Child Left Behind Act; Education : Parental involvement; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Postsecondary education :: College debt, payment and forgiveness options; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges; Education : Postsecondary education :: Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Education : Postsecondary education :: Student loans, elimination of subsidies to private providers; Education : Standards and school accountability; Education, Department of : Race to the Top Fund; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Unemployment rate; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; New York : New York City :: National Action Network's Keepers of the Dream Awards gala; New York : President's visit; Presidency, U.S. : State of the Union Address; Science and technology : Research and development; Sports : Basketball; Taxation : Earned-income tax credit; Transportation : Mass transit and rail infrastructure, improvement efforts.

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