

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Fundraiser in New York City
September 20, 2011

The President. Hello, everybody! Hello, New York! I'm in a New York state of mind. Thank you. Thank you. What do you think about Michelle Obama? She's not bad.

Everybody please have a seat. Have a seat. Did you notice how she's getting cuter? [Laughter] She is remarkable, and it is the reason that I've got remarkable kids. I have improved my gene pool. [Laughter] And it is true, this is the closest we get to a date—which I'm going to have to fix in about 14 months. [Laughter]

It is wonderful to see all of you. Thank you so much for being here tonight in this spectacular setting. There are a couple of people I want to make sure to acknowledge: First of all, the remarkable Alicia Keys—thank you so much, Alicia, for your performance; one of the finest public servants in the country, Mayor Cory Booker; the outstanding former mayor of New York City, David Dinkins; the New York City public advocate, Bill de Blasio; and my dear friend, the DNC Treasurer, Andy Tobias. We love Andy.

Now, the truth is, this is not my idea of a date night. Normally, our dates don't end with me being before 400 of our closest friends. But it is wonderful to be here. And I'm here because I need your help. I need your help, just like I needed your help in 2008. In fact, I need your help to finish what we started in 2008.

Back then, we started this campaign not because we thought it was a sure thing; I just want to remind everybody of that. The odds were not good. This was not going to be a cakewalk. My name was Barack Hussein Obama. [Laughter] You didn't need a poll to know that might be an issue. [Laughter] But we forged ahead because we had an idea about what this country is, what it has been, and what it can be.

Most of the people in this room—many of our parents, our grandparents—we grew up with a faith in an America where hard work and responsibility paid off, and if you stepped up, and if you did your job, and if you were loyal to your company, that loyalty would be rewarded with a decent salary and good benefits; you might get a raise. And you had an assurance that life would be better for your kids and your grandkids.

Over the last decade—over the last couple of decades, that faith was shaken. Seemed as if the rules changed. The deck kept getting stacked against middle class Americans, and nobody in Washington seemed willing or able to do anything about it. And in 2007, all of this culminated in a once-in-a-lifetime economic crisis, a crisis that's been much worse and much longer than your average recession, something that most of us have never seen in our lifetimes. And from the time I took office, we knew that because this crisis had been building for years, it was going to take us years to fully recover.

So the question now is not whether people are still hurting; of course, people are still hurting. As Michelle was saying, I read letters and e-mails every night. I talk to people when I'm out on the road. Their stories are heartbreaking: men and women who've poured their lives into a small business, perhaps a business that's been in their family for generations, suddenly closed; folks who have to cross off items from the grocery list so that they can pay for gas to get to the job—if they've got a job; parents who postpone retirement so that their children don't have to drop out of college; fathers who write to me and say, "Do you know what it's like to

have to come home and explain to your family that you've lost your job, and then spend months after months looking for a job, and those resumes go unanswered, and how you start losing confidence in yourself and you don't want to look your kids in the eye?"

The question is not whether this country is going through hard times. The question is, where does this country go next? We can go back to the ideas we tried in the last decade, where corporations got to write their own rules and the most fortunate among us got all of our tax breaks, and jobs got shipped overseas, and incomes and wages flatlined as the cost of everything went up, and this society became less equal, and opportunity was diminished for too many. Or we can build the America we talked about in 2008, an America where everybody gets a fair shake, and everybody does their fair share.

And that is what this election is about. That's what we've spent the last 2½ years fighting for. Every decision I've made, all the work that we've done, has been based on a simple idea. And that is that everybody should have a shot, and burdens should be shared, and opportunities should be shared. And even in the midst of crisis, those were the values that guided us.

So when we wanted to save the auto industry from bankruptcy, there were a lot of Republicans in Congress who fought us tooth and nail, said it was a waste of time and a waste of money. But we did it anyway. And we saved thousands of American jobs. And we made sure taxpayers got their money back. And today, the American auto industry is stronger than ever, and they're making fuel-efficient cars stamped with three proud words: Made in America.

When we wanted to pass Wall Street reform to make sure a crisis like this never happens again, lobbyists and special interests spent millions to make sure we didn't succeed. And we did it anyway. And we passed the toughest reform in history that prevents consumers from getting ripped off by mortgage lenders or credit card companies, which is why, today, there are no more hidden credit card fees, no more unfair rate hikes, and no more deception from banks.

And most of the Republicans voted against it. But we made it happen. And we were able to cut \$60 billion in taxpayer subsidies to big banks, and use those savings to make college more affordable for millions of kids all across this country who want to go to college. And instead of giving more tax breaks to the biggest corporations, we cut taxes for small businesses and middle class families.

The first law I signed was a bill to make sure that women earn equal pay for equal work, because I've got daughters, and I want to make sure they've got the same chance as our sons. And yes, we passed health care reform so that no one in America will go bankrupt because they get sick, because this is the United States of America and we're better than that.

One other thing we did that is worth mentioning tonight, in particular—I just met backstage with young Americans who were discharged from the military because of "don't ask, don't tell." As of today, that will never happen again. As of today, no one needs to hide who they are to serve the country that they love—as of today.

All of these were tough fights. But they're making a difference all across the country. And we've got more fights that we've got to win. We've got a long way to go to make sure that everybody in this country gets a fair shake, that the vision that mobilized us in 2008 is realized: making sure that every American has a chance to get ahead. And that's where I need your help.

We've got a lot of work to do. About a week ago, I sent to Congress a bill called the "American Jobs Act." Some of you might have heard about this. As I said before a joint session

of Congress, every proposal in there has been supported by Democrats and Republicans in the past. Everything in it will be paid for. It will put people back to work. It will put more money back in the pockets of working people. And Congress should pass that jobs bill right away.

We've got millions of constructions workers who don't have jobs right now. This bill says, let's put those men and women to work rebuilding our roads and our bridges and our highways and our schools. I don't want the best airports and the fastest railroads being built in China. I want them here in the United States of America. There's work to be done, workers ready to do it. We've got to tell Congress to pass this jobs bill now.

Now, in places like South Korea, they can't hire teachers fast enough, call teachers, nation-builders. They know that educating their children is the key to competing in a global economy. Here, we're laying off teachers in droves. It's unfair to our kids. It undermines their future. And if we pass this jobs bill, thousands of teachers in every State will be back in the classroom where they belong. That's why we've got to tell Congress to pass this jobs bill.

If we pass this bill, companies will get tax credits for hiring American veterans. We ask these men and women to suspend their careers, leave their families, risk their lives to protect this country. They should not have to beg for a job when they come home.

The jobs act will cut taxes for virtually every worker in America, cut taxes for every small-business owner, give an extra tax cut to every small business who hires more workers or gives their workers an increase in wages.

So don't just talk about America's job creators, do something for America's job creators. Don't make a pledge that you'll never raise taxes, except when it comes to middle class taxes or when Obama proposes a tax cut. Be consistent. Pass this jobs bill.

Now, a lot of folks in Congress have said we're not going to support any new spending that's not paid for. I agree. I think that's important. So yesterday I laid out a plan to pay for the "American Jobs Act" and that brings down our debt over time. It adds to the \$1 trillion in spending cuts that I already signed this summer, makes it one of the biggest spending cuts in history. But it's phased in so that it doesn't hurt our recovery now. It's a plan that says if we want to close this deficit and we want to pay for this jobs plan, then we've got to ask the wealthiest Americans and the biggest corporations to pay their fair share.

Now, the Republicans say they're in favor of tax reform. Let's go. Let's reform this Tax Code. And let's reform it based on a very simple principle: Warren Buffett's secretary should not be paying a higher tax rate than Warren Buffett. It's a simple principle.

In the United States of America a teacher or a nurse or a construction worker who makes \$50,000 a year, they shouldn't pay a higher tax rate than somebody pulling in 50 million. It is not fair. It is not right. It has to change. And the vast majority of Americans agree that it has to change.

Nobody wants to punish success; that's what you hear when they try to respond to what should be some pretty obvious logic. Nobody wants to punish success in America. That's what's great about America, our belief that anybody can make it if you try. Anybody can open a business, have a great idea, go out there and make millions, make billions. This is the land of opportunity. It's why people came to New York. All I'm saying is that those who have done well, including the majority of people here tonight, we should pay our fair share in taxes, contribute to the Nation that made our success possible, pass it on, pass on opportunity.

And I think most wealthy Americans would agree if they knew that this would help us grow the economy and deal with the debt that threatens our future, and put people back to work.

See, I got some amens right here.

Audience members. Amen!

The President. This is a completely unbiased sampling. [*Laughter*]

Now, you're already hearing the Republicans in Congress dusting off the old talking points. You can write their press releases. "Class warfare," they say. You know what, if asking a billionaire to pay the same rate as a plumber or a teacher makes me a warrior for the middle class, I wear that charge as a badge of honor. I wear it as a badge of honor. Because the only class warfare I've seen is the battle that's been waged against middle class folks in this country for a decade now.

Look, this is what it comes down to, this is about priorities. It's always been about priorities. It's always been about choices. If we want to pay for this jobs plan and close the deficit and invest in our future, the money has to come from somewhere. Don't tell me that you want good schools, don't tell me that you want safe roads, don't tell me that you believe in medical research, and then refuse to pay for it.

We've got to make choices. Would you rather keep tax loopholes for oil companies, or do you want to put construction workers and teachers back on the job? Would you rather keep tax breaks for millionaires and billionaires, or do you want to invest in new schools, in medical research, in training more engineers? Should we ask seniors to pay thousands of dollars more for Medicare, or should we ask the biggest corporations to pay their fair share? That's what this debate is about. It's what's at stake right now.

This notion that the only thing that we can do to restore prosperity is to let corporations write their own rules and give tax breaks to the wealthiest few and tell everybody else that you're on your own—this idea that the only way we compete in a global economy in the 21st century is to make sure that we've got cheap labor and dirty air—that's not who we are. We're better than that. That's not the story of America. We are rugged individualists. We are self-reliant. It's been the drive and initiative of our workers and our entrepreneurs that has made this economy the engine and the envy of the world. But there has always been another thread that says we're in this together, we are connected.

There are some things we can only do together as a nation. And that is not a Democratic idea or a Republican idea; that's been an American idea. Lincoln believed in that idea, and Eisenhower believed in that idea, and FDR believed in that idea.

That's why this country gave millions of returning heroes, including my grandfather, the chance to go to college on the GI bill. That's why a place like New York City has enjoyed the incredible vibrancy, because people thought 20, 30, 40 years ahead. Let's build a park in the middle of this metropolis. It costs money, but it will make this city special. Let's invest in great universities. It might cost a little bit, but think about all those young minds that are going to be shaped, what wonders they're going to create.

It's the reason Michelle and I had the chance to succeed beyond our wildest dreams. Look at where we came from: a little Black girl on the South Side of Chicago, a little mixed kid in Honolulu. [*Laughter*] A single mom—[*applause*]. We're only here because somebody passed on this incredible notion, this exceptional American idea that it doesn't matter where you come

from; it doesn't matter who you're born to. If you're willing to put in the effort, if you're willing to make sacrifices, you got a shot. You got a chance.

I was on a bus tour, through Iowa and Minnesota and my home State of Illinois, rural country—corn everywhere, beans—[laughter]—small towns. And we'd roll through on that bus, through these little towns, and everybody would be lining up along the road. And these were rural communities, conservative—many of them I probably didn't get a lot of votes. But everybody was lined up: little kids with the American flags; grandparents out in their lawn chairs; people waving; guys standing out in front of the auto shop, wiping their hands off, waving in their overalls. And we stopped by a high school football game, talked to the coach, went by a public school, met with some of the kids. And for all the venom and all the shouting in Washington, you've got this incredible sense, sort of, you've got a sense of what the core of America is all about, this incredible decency and optimism, and the belief that, no matter how tough things are sometimes, somehow, if we pull together, we're going to get through it.

And in these little towns, by the way, all across the Midwest, suddenly you'll see Black faces and Brown faces. And in the country you can see new waves of immigrants, sort of filling in pockets of towns that previously had been aging, and whole new generations are starting all over again, building this incredible country. And what's amazing is you come here to Manhattan, and as you're driving by and you look at the faces, you sense that same spirit, that same striving, hopeful energy. Everybody just thinking, you know what, we're going to make this happen. We've got big dreams. We're not going to think small.

Those things are connected. This country, as divided as it seems sometimes, that core idea is there. And that's what we tapped into in 2008. It wasn't me; it was all of you. It was the country insisting that we can do better than this. And all that "hopey, changey stuff," as they say—[laughter]—that was real. That wasn't something worth being cynical about. That was real. You could feel it. You knew it.

It's still there, even in the midst of this hardship. But it's hard. When I was in Grant Park that night, I warned everybody, this is going to be hard. This is not the end; this is the beginning. And over the last 2½ years, we've had some tough times. And understandably, over time, people sometimes, they get discouraged, and they lose sight of what launched us on this thing in the first place. They start feeling discouraged, and the whole "Hope" poster starts kind of fading. [Laughter]

But I tell you what. You travel around the country, you talk to the America people, that spirit is still there. It gets knocked around. I get knocked around. But it's there, and it's worth fighting for. It's worth fighting for. And that's why I need your help, because I need everybody out here to be willing to fight for it. I need everybody here to understand that America was not built by any single individual. We built it together. And we always have been one Nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. And we have been a nation of responsibilities to ourselves, but also responsibilities to one another. And we've got to meet those responsibilities right now.

So maybe some people in Congress would rather settle these differences at the ballot box. I'm ready to settle them at the ballot box. I intend to win this next election because we've got better ideas. We've got better ideas. But in the meantime, that's 14 months away, and the American people don't have the luxury of waiting that long.

So let's get to work right now. Let's act right now. Let's pass that jobs bill. Let's reform the Tax Code. Let's fix some schools. Let's rebuild our roads. Let's put teachers back to work. Let's

invest in our basic research. Let's invest in America. Let's rebuild America. Let's think big. Let's dream big. Let's shake off the discouragement and the depression. Let's get to work. Let's get busy.

I'm ready to fight. I hope you are too. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:40 p.m. at Gotham Hall. In his remarks, he referred to entertainer Alicia Keys. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of the First Lady. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on September 21.

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