

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks at West Wilkes High School in Millers Creek, North Carolina
October 17, 2011

The President. Hello, Millers Creek! It is good to be here in Millers Creek. It is great to be back in North Carolina. You know, if—I know it's a little warm out here, so if anybody wants to take their jacket off, please feel free. Some of you guys loosen your ties there.

I am thrilled to be here with all of you. I want to thank all the Blackhawks who are here. I want to thank the Blackhawks band. I want to thank the Struttin' Hawks.

I want to especially thank Dr. Stephen Laws for the great introduction, but also for his service. He's about to retire soon, so give him a big round of applause. The Blackhawks principal, Dr. Wayne Shepherd, is here. And I know that there are a few Mountaineers here as well, so—[*applause*]. I also want to thank your Lieutenant Governor, Walter Dalton, and the mayor of North Wilkesboro, Robert Johnson.

Now, I'm down here today because I decided it was time to get out of Washington. I wanted to hit the open road and come visit some of the most beautiful parts of this great country of ours. We just had an unbelievable drive. We came across from Asheville, stopped in Marion for some barbecue, went to the general store in Boone to buy some candy. Halloween is coming up, so I had to stock up a little bit. [*Laughter*] Saw the mountains, saw some lakes, saw all the wonderful people in this part of the country.

And somebody asked me, why do you come back to North Carolina so much? I say, I—there is just something—the people of North Carolina are so nice. They are nice people, they are gracious, and they are kind. And even the folks who don't vote for me are nice. So I love North Carolina. But I also thought it would be good to hear from all of you, because it seems as if your voices aren't being heard in Washington right now.

This is a tough time for a lot of Americans. Here in North Carolina, a lot of folks have spent months looking for work. Others are doing their best just to scrape by. You give up nights with the family to save on gas or make the mortgage, folks postponing their retirement so they can send their kids to college.

Now, I think we all understand most of these problems were not caused overnight. We've been dealing for—some of these problems for a decade now: manufacturing leaving America to go overseas; we've had a health care system that didn't work and put burdens on families and businesses; we haven't had an energy policy in this country that makes sense and frees ourselves from dependence on foreign oil; our schools haven't done everything they need to to make sure our young people are trained and colleges become more affordable for too many young people.

So there are a lot of challenges that we won't solve overnight because they weren't caused overnight. It's going to take time to rebuild an America where hard work is valued and responsibility is rewarded. It's going to take time to rebuild an America where we restore a sense of security for middle class families and opportunity for folks who are trying to get into the middle class, an America with an economy that's built to last and built to compete, where we are out-educating and out-innovating and out-building every other nation on Earth. That's what we've got to build. And we've got to build an economy that works for everybody, not just some people. Not just the folks at the top, but for everybody.

Rebuilding this America will take time. But there are things we can do right now to put people back to work, things we can do right now to help middle class Americans get ahead, things we can do right now to give our economy the jolt that it needs.

So this is why I sent Congress awhile back the "American Jobs Act."

Audience member. Pass this bill!

The President. Now—pass this bill. We need to pass this bill. Let me tell you about this bill. Somebody was just asking me about this bill. I said, look, this is the kind of bill that in the past would have been supported by Democrats and Republicans. It's completely paid for. It asks folks like me, who have been incredibly blessed, to pay a little bit more so that—to pay our fair share—folks making a million dollars or more—so that we can help folks who are struggling to get by.

Independent economists have said this jobs bill would create nearly 2 million jobs, grow the economy by nearly two extra percentage points. And that's not—that is not my opinion. That is not the opinion of somebody who works for me. That's the opinion of people whose job it is to analyze these things. Economists have said this would put people back to work.

But there are some folks in Washington who just aren't listening. Last week, all the Republicans in the Senate got together and blocked the jobs bill. They refused to even debate it. Now, keep in mind, one poll showed that about 63 percent of Americans support the ideas in this jobs bill. So why is it that a hundred percent of Republicans in the Senate voted against it? It doesn't make any sense. It doesn't make any sense.

Somebody asked me—we had a wonderful reporter come here, Dave Wagner from Charlotte, and he asked me, well, people tell me this is kind of a Republican area, so why would you come here instead of going to where there are a whole lot of Democrats?

I said, look, this is an American jobs act. It's not the Democratic jobs act. It's not the Republican jobs act. It's the "American Jobs Act." We need to pass it.

Now, I want to be fair here. So to be fair, it turns out the Republicans, they've got their plan too. Ours is called the "American Jobs Act," so they started out calling theirs the "Real American Jobs Act." I said, all right, you don't get points for originality, but let's see what you got. [*Laughter*]

We took a look. It turns out the Republicans' jobs plan boils down to these ideas: they want to gut environmental regulations, they want to roll back Wall Street reform so that we end up with the same financial system we had that got us into this mess in the first place, and they want to repeal health care reform so that 30 million people won't have health insurance. That is what they call their "Real American Jobs Act." It's inspiring stuff. [*Laughter*]

So let's do a comparison. We can do a comparison here. The Republican plan says that what's standing between us and full employment are laws that keep companies from polluting our air and our water. Our plan, on the other hand, says let's put construction workers back to work rebuilding our roads and bridges and schools. Let's put teachers back in the classroom where they belong. Let's make sure that we're not laying off police officers and firefighters, and let's help veterans get a job after they have defended this country.

Their plan says we'll be better off if 30 million Americans don't have health insurance. Our plan says we'll be better off if we give a tax cut to virtually every small business and every worker in America. Their plan says we need to go back to the old days when Wall Street wrote

its own rules. Our plan says we need to make it easier for small businesses to grow and to hire and to push this economy forward.

Now, remember I said—here's the kicker. Remember I said that these independent economists had evaluated our plan. We presented it, not folks who work for us. We said, all right, what do you think this will do? They said, this will create up to 2 million jobs; that will grow the economy. One of the same economists took a look at the Republican plan, and you know what they said? They said, well, this isn't going to do much to help the economy in the short term; it could actually lead up to losing jobs, not gaining them. So much for their jobs plan.

So I'll let you decide which is the real American jobs plan. Because the fact is we face a choice in this country right now. I want to work with Republicans in any way possible to create jobs right now. And the fact is—let me say this—let me say this. I have bent over backwards. I have shown myself to be willing again and again to try to cooperate with Republicans. I've tried so hard to cooperate with Republicans, Democrats have been getting mad at me. *[Laughter]* But the reason I have is because my attitude is, when we're in a time that's difficult, we can't afford to play politics. When we're in a time that's difficult, we should try to find common ground.

Just last week, Congress passed a bipartisan trade agreement with Korea that will allow us to sell more goods into that country. Now, we've got a bunch of Hyundais and Kias here. I think that's fine. But I want to see some Koreans driving Fords and Chryslers and Chevys—open up those markets.

So my attitude is, it's been—it's way overdue for us to stop trying to satisfy some branch of the party and take some commonsense steps to help America and to create jobs and to help the middle class.

And that's why, even though they said no the first time, we're going to give them another chance. I think maybe the first time, because we had it all in one bill, maybe they didn't study it all properly. Maybe they didn't know what they were voting against. So we're going to chop it up into some bite-sized pieces and give them another chance to look out for your jobs instead of looking out for their own jobs.

So first thing we're going to do is, this week Congress is scheduled to take a vote on whether we're going to put hundreds of thousands of police officers and firefighters and teachers back on the job. Well, are we going to help State and local governments who are under a severe budget crunch make sure that they are not laying off teachers at a time when we know we've got to excel in education?

All over the country and right here in North Carolina folks are losing their jobs. Nearly 2,000 classroom positions have been eliminated this school year. And here at West Wilkes High I know some teachers weren't rehired, you've had to increase class sizes, and there's almost no money for things like textbooks. This makes no sense. I can tell you the last thing a superintendent wants to do is to lose good teachers. Your Governor has been fighting against education cuts as well. It's unfair to our kids. It undermines our future.

How are we going to compete when countries like Korea and Germany who are hiring teachers and preparing their kids for the global economy, and we're laying off teachers left and right? One North Carolina teacher said, "We didn't cause the poor economy; if anything, we built the good parts." And he's absolutely right. Our teachers built the good parts of this

economy. They give our kids a chance to compete. They give our kids a future. That's why we've got to look out for them. And this jobs bill does it.

My jobs plan would mean more than 13,000 education jobs here in North Carolina. So when the Senate votes this week, you all have to tell them it's time to put our teachers back to work.

We're going to give Members of Congress a chance to vote on the other components of the bill, so we're going to ask them to vote on whether construction workers should sit idly by while China is building the newest roads and bridges and airports or whether we should put our construction workers back to work rebuilding America so that we can compete in the 21st century. That's a choice that Congress is going to have to make.

Congress is going to have to make a decision whether they decide to help unemployed Americans who are struggling or whether we should make sure that we give them the experience and support that they need to get back in the workforce and build a better life.

We'll ask Congress whether we should stand pat and let people like me take advantage of corporate loopholes and pay less in taxes, or should we ask folks like me to pay my fair share so that we give tax cuts to middle class families and small businesses?

These are the choices that Members of Congress are going to have to make in the coming weeks. And if they vote against these proposals, if they vote against taking steps that we know will put Americans back to work, they've got to explain not to me, but to you, why they're doing it. They don't have to answer to me, but they do have to answer to you. You sent them there. They're going to have to come down here to North Carolina and tell kids why they can't have their teachers back. They're going to have to look construction workers in the eye and tell them why they shouldn't be rebuilding roads and bridges and airports. They're going to have to explain to working families why their taxes are going up while the richest Americans and largest corporations are getting a sweet deal.

So that's where you guys come in. Some of these folks are just not getting the message, so I've got to make sure your voices are heard. I need you to give Congress a piece of your mind. Tell these Members of Congress that they don't work for special interest, they don't work for lobbyists, they work for you. And if they're not delivering, you need to let them know. And I don't know whether you're going to get on the phone or you're going to tweet them or write them a letter or pay them a visit, but tell them to do the right thing. Tell them what's at stake here.

There are too many of our fellow Americans hurting, and you can't stand by and do nothing. Now is the time to act. And by the way, there's going to be an election, and we're going to have a convention right here in North Carolina. But that convention is 11 months away. The election is 13 months away. And folks can't afford to wait that long.

They can't sit around just listening to a bunch of political arguments. They need action, and they need it now. Because folks are living paycheck to paycheck. There are folks who are living week to week. And I don't accept the idea that in the face of that kind of hardship that we're going to stand by and do nothing. That's not who we are. We are Americans. And you know what, we keep working at things until we get them fixed.

Yes, we had a problem with the financial crisis, and the economy is not where it needs to be, but we can fix it. We just got to stay on it. We got to be persistent. We got to keep on trying things until folks are back to work and the economy is growing again. And we've got to muster

that spirit right now: a "can do" spirit. Not a "no we can't" spirit, but a "yes we can" spirit. We don't need a "why we can't" attitude, we need a "why we can" attitude.

I know that sometimes everybody watches television, and you see what's going on in Washington, and you get discouraged. But I just want you to remember that we've been through tougher times before. This is a country that's been through a Revolutionary War, a Civil War. We got through slavery. We got through a depression. We got through World War I. We got through World War II. We have been through tougher times before. We are going to get through this, and we're going to get through it together. Because Americans don't quit.

So let's meet this moment. Let's get to work. And let's show the world once again why the United States of America is the greatest nation on Earth.

God bless you. God bless North Carolina. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:08 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Stephen C. Laws, superintendent, Wilkes County Schools; and Gov. Beverly E. Perdue of North Carolina.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : West Wilkes High School in Millers Creek, NC.

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