

Remarks at the House Democratic Caucus Issues Conference in Williamsburg, Virginia
February 5, 2009

The President. Thank you, Democrats. Thank you. Please, everybody have a seat, everybody have a seat. It is great to be here with so many friends. Thank you for giving me a reason to use Air Force One. [Laughter] It's pretty nice. [Laughter]

I'm glad to see the House Democratic Caucus is getting by just fine without my Chief of Staff. [Laughter] I don't know how many of you were at the Alfalfa dinner, but I pointed out, you know, this whole myth of Rahm being this tough guy, mean, is just not true. At least once a week he spends time teaching profanity to underprivileged children. [Laughter] So he's got a soft spot.

I want to thank John Larson for inviting me here tonight. This is John's first conference as chairman of the Democratic caucus, so we're both new at this. John, congratulations.

I want to acknowledge the great Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. She is a rock who has proven to be an extraordinary leader for the American people. And I want to thank Nancy and Steny Hoyer and Jim Clyburn and the entire caucus—Xavier Becerra, all the leadership working so hard, all the chairmen like David Obey, who've worked so hard in passing an economic recovery plan that is so desperately needed for our country.

All of you acted with a discipline that matches the urgency and the gravity of the crisis that we face, because you know what's at stake. Every weekend, you go home to your districts and you see factories that are closing and small businesses shutting their doors. You hear from families losing their homes, students that can't pay their tuition, seniors who are worrying about whether they can retire with dignity or see their kids and grandkids lead a better life.

So you went to work, and you did your job. For that, you have my appreciation and admiration. And more importantly, you've got the American people's thanks, because they know it is time to get something done here in Washington.

As we meet here tonight, we know that there's more work to be done. The Senate is still acting. And after it has its final vote, we still need to resolve differences between the House and Senate bills. So we're going to still have to work, and I am going to urge you to complete that work without delay. And I know that Nancy and Steny, all the rest of the leadership is committed to making that happen.

Now, I just want to say this: I value the constructive criticism and the healthy debate that's taken place around this package, because that's the essence, the foundation of American democracy. That's how the Founders set it up. They set it up to make big change hard. It wasn't supposed to be easy. That's part of the reason why we've got such a stable Government—is because no one party, no one individual, can simply dictate the terms of the debate. I don't think any of us have cornered the market on wisdom, or that—do I believe that good ideas are the province of any party. The American people know that our challenges are great. They're not expecting Democratic solutions or Republican solutions; they want American solutions. And I've said that same thing to the public, and I've said that, in a gesture of friendship and good will, to those who have disagreed with me on aspects of this plan.

But what I have also said is, don't come to the table with the same tired arguments and worn ideas that helped to create this crisis. You know, all of us here are imperfect. And everything we do and everything I do is subject to improvement. My Michelle reminds me every day how imperfect I am. [Laughter] So I welcome this debate. But come on, we are not going to get relief by turning back to the very same policies that for the last 8 years doubled the national debt and threw our economy into a tailspin.

We can't embrace the losing formula that says only tax cuts will work for every problem we face, that ignores critical challenges like our addiction to foreign oil, or the soaring cost of health care, or falling schools and crumbling

bridges and roads and levees. I don't care whether you're driving a hybrid or an SUV, if you're headed for a cliff, you've got to change direction. That's what the American people called for in November, and that's what we intend to deliver.

So the American people are watching. They did not send us here to get bogged down with the same old delay, the same old distractions, the same talking points, the same cable chatter. You know, I mean, aren't you all tired of that stuff?

Audience members. Yes! Let's go to work.

The President. They did not vote for the false theories of the past, and they didn't vote for phony arguments and petty politics. They didn't vote for the status quo; they sent us here to bring change. We owe it to them to deliver. This is the moment for leadership that matches the great test of our times, and I know you want to work with me to get there.

Now, if we do not move swiftly to sign the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act into law, an economy that is already in crisis will be faced with catastrophe. This is not my assessment. This is not Nancy Pelosi's assessment. This is the assessment of the best economists in the country. This is the assessment of some of the former advisers of some of the same folks who are making these criticisms right now.

Millions more Americans will lose their jobs. Homes will be lost. Families will go without health care. Our crippling dependence on foreign oil will continue. That is the price of inaction.

This isn't some abstract debate. Last week, we learned that many of America's largest corporations already laid off thousands and are planning to lay off tens of thousands of more workers. Today we learned that in the previous week, the number of new unemployment claims jumped to 626,000. Tomorrow we're expecting another dismal jobs report, on top of the half a million jobs that were lost last month, on top of the half a million jobs that were lost the month before that, on top of the 2.6 million jobs that were lost last year.

For you, these aren't just statistics. This is not a game; this is not a contest for who is in

power and who's up and who's down. These are your constituents. These are families you know and you care about. I believe that it is important for us to set aside some of the gamesmanship in this town and get something done.

Now, I believe—[*applause*]*—*I just want to repeat, because I don't want any confusion here—I believe that legislation of this enormous magnitude, that by necessity we are moving quickly; we're not moving quickly, because we're trying to jamb something down people's throats. We're moving quickly because we're told that if we don't move quickly, that the economy is going keep on getting worse, and we'll have another 2 or 3 or 4 million jobs lost this year.

I'd love to be leisurely about this. My staff is worn out, working around the clock. So is David Obey's staff. So is Nancy Pelosi's staff. We're not doing this because we think this is a lark. We're doing this because people are counting on us. So legislation of this magnitude deserves the scrutiny that it's received, and all of you will get another chance to vote for this bill in the days to come. But I urge all of us not to make the perfect the enemy of the absolutely necessary.

Understand the scale and the scope of this plan is right. And when you start hearing arguments on the cable chatter, just understand a couple of things. Number one, when they say, "Well, why are we spending 800 billion? We've got this huge deficit?" First of all, I found this deficit when I showed up. Number one, I found this national debt doubled, wrapped in a big bow waiting for me as I stepped into the Oval Office.

Number two, it is expected that we are going to lose about a trillion dollars worth of demand this year, a trillion dollars of demand next year because of the contraction in the economy. So the reason that this has to be big is to try to fill some of that lost demand. And as it is, there are many who think that we should be doing even more. So we are taking prudent steps.

But you talk to Ted Strickland and what's happening in Ohio, and you ask him whether they need some relief in terms of the

unemployment insurance rates that are going sky-high, and him having to pick up all kinds of folks who are suddenly seeking food stamps who had been working all their lives, and he'll tell you that this not something that we're just doing to grow Government. We're doing this because this is what the best minds tell us needs to be done. That's point number one.

Point number two: When they start talking about, well, we need more tax cuts, we started this package with a healthy amount of tax cuts in the mix, recognizing that some tax cuts can be very beneficial, particularly if they're going to middle class and working families that will spend that money. That's not me talking; that's the economists talking, who insisted that they're most likely to spend and get that money into circulation and stimulate the economy.

Now, in fact, when we announced the bill, you remember—this is only about, what, 2 weeks ago, when we announced the framework? And we were complimented by Republicans, saying, "Boy, this is a balanced package; we're pleasantly surprised." And suddenly, what was a balanced package needs to be put out of balance. Don't buy those arguments.

Then there's the argument, "Well, this is full of pet projects." When was the last time that we saw a bill of this magnitude move out with no earmarks in it? Not one. And when they—when you start asking, "Well, what is it exactly that is such a problem that you're seeing? Where's all this waste and spending?" Well, you know, you want to replace the Federal fleet with hybrid cars. Well, why wouldn't we want to do that? [Laughter] That creates jobs for people who make those cars. It saves the Federal Government energy. It saves the taxpayers energy.

So then I—then you get the argument, "Well, this is not a stimulus bill, this is a spending bill." What do you think a stimulus is? [Laughter] That's the whole point. No, seriously. [Laughter] That's the point.

So, I mean, I get carried away. [Laughter] We've got to leave some time for questions and answers. Here's the point I'm making: This package is not going to be absolutely perfect, and you can nit and you can pick, and that's the game we all play here. We know how to play that game. What I'm saying is, now we can't af-

ford to play that game. We've got to pull together.

There are going to be some things that don't get included that each of us would like to see included. All of us are going to have to make some sacrifices. And we have to accommodate the interests of a range of people. And the House is going to have to work with the Senate. But let's think big right now. Let's not think small. Let's not think narrowly.

Just as past generations of Americans have done in trying times, we can and must turn this moment of challenge into one of opportunity. The plan that you've passed has at its core a simple idea: Let's put Americans to work doing the work that America needs done.

So this plan will save or create over 3 million jobs, almost all of them in the private sector. This plan will put people to work rebuilding our crumbling roads and bridges, our dangerously deficient dams and levees. This plan will put people to work modernizing our health care system. That doesn't just save us billions of dollars; it saves countless lives, because we'll reduce medical errors. This plan will put people to work renovating more than 10,000 schools, giving millions of children the chance to learn in 21st century classrooms and libraries and labs, creating new scientists for a new future.

This plan will provide sensible tax relief for the struggling middle class and unemployment insurance and continued health care coverage for those who've lost their jobs. And it will help prevent our States and local communities—it will help Governor Ritter and Governor Strickland not have to lay off firefighters and teachers and police. Because when they get laid off, not only do we lose services, but maybe they can't make payments on their home. Maybe they get foreclosed on, and the economy goes down further.

And finally, this plan will begin to end the tyranny of oil in our time: doubles our capacity to generate alternative sources of energy, like wind and solar and biofuels. And it does it in 3 years, saves taxpayers billions of dollars, makes Federal buildings more efficient, saves the average working family hundreds of dollars on their energy bills. After decades of empty

rhetoric, that's the downpayment that we need on energy independence.

Now, there's a lot about running for President that is tough. Especially, I don't miss sleeping in motels and hotels, and I don't miss not being with my kids as much as I'd like. But the best thing about being a candidate—and all of you know this because those Members of Congress who are here, you've run, you know what it's like—you get to see the country. You get to know the character of the American people. Over the last 2 years, I visited almost all 50 States. I've got to admit, the one I missed was Alaska. [*Laughter*] We're going to get there. I've been in so many of your districts. I've passed through towns and cities farms and factories. And I know what you know: People are hurting. I've looked in their eyes. I've heard their stories. I've sensed their deep frustration.

And they're just hoping that we're working for them. They're so strong, and they're so decent, the American people, and those struggles haven't diminished that strength and that decency. And we hold in our hands the capacity to do great things on their behalf. But we're going to have to do it by not thinking about ourselves, not thinking about how does this position me, how am I looking. And we're going to have to just think about how are we delivering for them.

It starts with this economic recovery plan. And soon, we'll take on the big issues like addressing the foreclosure problem by passing a budget, tackling our fiscal problems, fixing our financial regulation, securing our country. And we won't approach these challenges just as Democrats, because we remember the look in the eyes of our constituents. We know even though they've been cynical, that they're thinking, maybe this time is going to be different. They know we've got to overcome all these problems as Americans. And that's why

we have to work in a serious, substantive, and civil way, and we will keep working to build bipartisan support for action.

And I promise you that my door is always open, and my administration will consult closely with each and every one of you, the people's representatives, as we take on these pressing priorities.

And already, you've made a difference. Nancy mentioned—I'm so proud of that day that we signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act—to see Lilly Ledbetter on the stage, representing the American people, representing all the women out there who want their daughters to have the same opportunities as our sons. And then we signed children's health insurance to provide coverage for 11 million and make a downpayment on comprehensive health care reform.

And it wasn't easy. You worked hard to make it happen, which means we can work hard to make sure that we've got jobs all across America and energy independence all across America. And we will not stop until we deliver for our constituents.

That's what the Democratic Party is all about. That's what this caucus is all about. That's what my Presidency is all about.

Thank you, guys. I love you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:28 p.m. at the Kingsmill Resort and Spa. In his remarks, he referred to White House Chief of Staff Rahm I. Emanuel; Gov. Theodore Strickland of Ohio; Gov. William A. Ritter, Jr., of Colorado; and Lilly Ledbetter, former employee, Good-year Tire and Rubber Company plant in Gadsden, AL. He also referred to Public Law No. 111–2, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009; and Public Law No. 111–3, the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act of 2009.