

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Fundraiser in New York City June 23, 2011

The President. Hello, New York! Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Everybody, please have a seat. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Thank you, Jonathan, for your service to this country and for continuing to fight for what this country stands for, even after you had to take off the uniform.

I also want to recognize the extraordinary performance of Audra McDonald. I like hearing her sing. I want to thank our emcee for this evening, Neil Patrick Harris. Everybody knows that Neil is openly terrific. *[Laughter]*

Couple of other acknowledgments: Christine Quinn, the New York City council speaker, is here; a great friend of mine who helped move the process forward to make sure that “don’t ask, don’t tell” got done, Patrick Murphy is in the house; the DNC treasurer, Andy Tobias, is here—I think they like you, Andy; and I want to thank the cochairs of the LGBT Leadership Council. Thank you so much. This is just an extraordinary event.

It is wonderful to be back in New York. I see a lot of new faces, but also a lot of friends who I have known for a very long time. Many of you knew me before I had gray hair. *[Laughter]* Malia and Sasha says it makes me look distinguished; Michelle says it makes me look old. *[Laughter]*

Now, being here with all of you, I can’t help but think back to election night 2½ years ago. We were in Grant Park; some of you were there. Beautiful night. Culmination of an extraordinary journey, a campaign that had drawn on the hard work and support of people all across the country, men and women who believed that change was possible, who believed that we didn’t have to accept politics as usual, who believed that we could once again be a country that lived up to our highest aspirations, not our lowest common denominators. And it was a perfect night, and we were feeling pretty good, I got to admit.

But what I said then at Grant Park was that this was not the end of the road, it was just the beginning. And I said that the journey was go-

ing to be long and it was going to be difficult and there were going to be times where we stumbled, that the climb was going to be steep. Now, we didn’t know exactly how steep it was going to be. *[Laughter]* But we knew that it wasn’t going to be easy to rebuild the middle class after a decade of stagnant incomes and rising costs, a decade where a lot of Americans felt like that dream was slipping away.

We knew it wasn’t going to be easy to end two wars and restore America’s leadership around the world. We knew it wasn’t going to be easy to fix our immigration system, to reform our health care system, to transform our energy policy, to educate our young people for the demands of a global economy. We did not think it was going to be easy.

And I said that night, I did not run for President to do easy things. I ran because I believed that as a nation it was time for us to do the hard things. It was time for us to do the big things, even if it took time, even if sometimes it was going to be frustrating. I said I was not going to let politics or the typical Washington games stand in our way, because it had held us back for too long. That’s what led to the mess that we were dealing with in the first place.

So over these past 2½ years, I’ve had some tough calls to make. I had some tough calls as soon as I took office. We had to prevent a financial system from falling apart and dragging the economy into depression. We had to pass reforms to stop abuses in the financial system and prevent future crises. We had to rescue the auto industry. I did not think I was going to be an auto CEO. *[Laughter]* Even though there were a lot of people who said, let them go, let more than a million jobs vanish, allow two of America’s iconic companies to be liquidated and sold off for parts, we said, no, we’re going to have to step up, we’re going to have to deal with it.

But even as we took these emergency steps, we started tackling all the challenges that we had talked about during the campaign, all the things that were standing in the way of the

American Dream. Because that's why I ran, that's what the campaign was about. That's why you supported me, because we believed in an economy that didn't just work for those at the top, but worked for everybody, where prosperity was shared from the machinist on the line to the manager on the floor to the CEO in the boardroom.

We worked so hard in 2008 because we believed that we have to define our success not just by stock prices or corporate profits, but whether ordinary folks can find a good job, whether they can afford a middle class life, whether they can pay the mortgage and take care of their kids and save some money for their child's college education or their own retirement and maybe have a little left over to go to a movie or dinner or even a play—since we're in New York. *[Laughter]*

That's why we cut taxes for middle class families and ended subsidies to the banks for student loans to make college more affordable. That's why I was proud to sign a bill to make sure women earn equal pay for equal work, a basic principle. That's why we're promoting manufacturing and homegrown American energy, because that's what will lead to jobs that pay a decent salary. That's why we're standing up a new consumer bureau with just one responsibility: looking out for ordinary folks in the financial system so they're not cheated. That's why we passed health reform, so that nobody in the richest nation on Earth ever has to go bankrupt because they or somebody in their family get sick. That was the right thing to do.

We waged that long campaign in 2008 because we believed it was time to end the war in Iraq. And that is what we are doing, ending the war in Iraq. We removed a hundred thousand troops from Iraq already, ended combat missions there. We're on track to bring the rest of our troops home by the end of this year.

I ran for President because I believed we needed to refocus our efforts in Afghanistan, and we're doing this too. We pummeled Al Qaeda. We took out bin Laden. And because of our progress and the extraordinary sacrifices of our troops, we're now fulfilling the commitment I made to start reducing our troops this

month so that Afghans can take responsibility for their own security.

I also ran because we now live in a world where America is facing stiff competition for good jobs. There are rapidly growing nations like China and India. They're hungry; they're on the move. And for a long time, we were told that the best way to win this competition was to undermine consumer protections, undermine clean air and clean water laws, hand out tax breaks to millionaires and billionaires, and everything would work out just fine. It did not work out well. In fact, if you look at our history, you'll see that philosophy has never worked out very well.

America was built on the hard work of people and the ingenuity of our businesses. But we also built a system of free public high schools and sent a generation to college on the GI bill. We constructed railroads and highways that spanned a continent. We invested in research and technology, and we sent a man to the Moon, and we discovered lifesaving medicine. We launched the Information Age, creating millions of jobs along the way. That's how you build a nation. That's how you build a strong middle class. And that's what we need to do today.

There is an important debate in Washington right now about cutting the deficit. And it is absolutely critical that we cut the deficit. Like families all across America, Government has to live within its means. And I'm prepared to bring down our deficit by trillions of dollars; that's "trillions" with a "t."

But I won't reduce our deficit by sacrificing the education of our young people. We can't stop medical research being done by our scientists. We can't stop building the infrastructure that made this country great. I'm not going to sacrifice clean energy at a time when our dependence on foreign oil has caused Americans so much pain at the pump. That doesn't make any sense. In other words, I will not sacrifice America's future.

What makes America great is not just the scale of our skyscrapers or our military might or the size of our GDP. What makes us great is the character of our people. Yes, we are rugged individualists, and we are self-reliant, and

that's part of what makes us Americans. We don't like being told what to do. But what also makes us who we are is we've got faith in the future and we recognize that that future is shared, the notion that I'm my brother's keeper, I'm my sister's keeper. My life is richer and stronger when everybody in the country has some measure of security, everybody has got a fair shot at the American Dream. That's what makes us great. That's our vision for America.

It's not a vision of a small America. It's a vision of a big America, a compassionate America, and a bold and optimistic America. And it's a vision where we're living within our means, but we're still investing in our future. And everybody is making sacrifices, but nobody bears all the burden. An America where we live up to the idea that no matter who we are, no matter what we look like, we are connected to one another.

That's what led many of us to fight so hard, to knock on so many doors and maybe harangue some of our friends, this belief that it was up to each of us to perfect this Union. It was our work to make sure that we were living up to a simple American value: We're all created equal—all created equal.

Ever since I entered into public life, ever since I have a memory about what my mother taught me and my grandparents taught me, I believed that discriminating against people was wrong. I had no choice; I was born that way—[laughter]—in Hawaii. And I believed that discrimination because of somebody's sexual orientation or gender identity ran counter to who we are as a people, and it's a violation of the basic tenets on which this Nation was founded. I believe that gay couples deserve the same legal rights as every other couple in this country.

And that's—now, there was such a good recitation earlier by Neil that I feel bad repeating it, but let me just—it bears repeating. [Laughter] This is why we're making sure that hospitals extended visitation rights to gay couples, because nobody should be barred from their bedside because their partner—the bedside of their partner in a moment of pain or a moment of need. Nobody should have to produce a le-

gal contract to hold the hand of the person that they love.

It's why we launched the first comprehensive national HIV/AIDS strategy, providing a roadmap not only to providing treatment and reducing infections, but also embracing the potential of new, groundbreaking research that will help us bring an end to this pandemic.

That's why I ordered Federal agencies to extend the same benefits to gay couples that go to straight couples wherever possible. It's why we're going to keep fighting until the law no longer—

Audience member. Marriage!

Audience member. Marriage! Marriage! Marriage!

The President. I heard you guys. [Laughter] Believe it or not, I anticipated that somebody might ask—[laughter].

Where was I? [Laughter] That's why we're going to keep on fighting until the law no longer treats committed partners who have been together for decades like they're strangers.

That's why I have long believed that the so-called Defense of Marriage Act ought to be repealed. It was wrong. It was unfair. And since I taught constitutional law for a while, I felt like I was in a pretty good position to agree with courts that have ruled that section 3 of DOMA violates the Constitution. And that's why we decided, with my Attorney General, that we could no longer defend the constitutionality of DOMA in the courts.

Now, part of the reason that DOMA doesn't make sense is that, traditionally, marriage has been decided by the States. And right now I understand there's a little debate going on here in New York—[laughter]—about whether to join five other States and DC in allowing civil marriage for gay couples. And I want to say that under the leadership of Governor Cuomo, with the support of Democrats and Republicans, New York is doing exactly what democracies are supposed to do. There's a debate; there's deliberation about what it means here in New York to treat people fairly in the eyes of the law.

And that is—look, that's the power of our democratic system. It's not always pretty.

There are setbacks. There are frustrations. But in grappling with tough and, at times, emotional issues in legislatures and in courts and at the ballot box, and yes, around the dinner table and in the office hallways, and sometimes even in the Oval Office, slowly but surely we find the way forward. That's how we will achieve change that is lasting, change that just a few years ago would have seemed impossible.

Now, let me just say this. There were those who doubted that we'd be able to pass a hate crimes law. Occasionally, I got hollered at about that. After a decades-long fight, we got it done, bringing us closer to the day when nobody is going to be afraid to walk down the street because they're gay or transgender.

There were those said we couldn't end "don't ask, don't tell." And I remember having events where folks hollered out at events. [Laughter] But we passed the repeal. We got it done. We're now moving forward with implementing it. So we're no longer going to demand brave and patriotic Americans live a lie to serve their country.

Folks like Captain Jonathan Hopkins, who led a platoon into northern Iraq during the initial invasion and quelled an ethnic riot and earned a Bronze Star with valor. He was discharged, only to receive e-mails and letters from his soldiers saying, if they had known he was gay all along—that they had known he was gay all along and they still thought he was the best commander they had ever had.

That's how progress is being won here in New York, around the country. Day by day, it's won by ordinary people who are striving and fighting and protesting for change and who, yes, are keeping the pressure up, including pressure on me. And by men and women who are setting an example in their own lives: raising their families, doing their jobs, joining the PTA, singing in church, serving and sacrificing for this country overseas, even as they are not always granted the full rights of citizenship they deserve here at home.

Last year, I received a letter from a teenager growing up in a small town, and he told me he was a senior in high school, and that he was proud to be the captain of a club at his school,

and that he was gay. And he hadn't told his parents. He hadn't come out. He was worried about being mocked or being bullied. He didn't think it was safe to, in his words, "openly be myself." But this 17-year-old also looked towards the day when he didn't have to be afraid, when he didn't have to worry about walking down the hallway. And he closed his letter by saying: "Everyone else is considered equal in this country. Why shouldn't we be?"

So yes, we have more work to do. Yes, we have more progress to make. Yes, I expect continued impatience with me on occasion. [Laughter] But understand this—look, I think of teenagers like the one who wrote me, and they remind me that there should be impatience when it comes to the fight for basic equality. We've made enormous advances just in these last 2½ years. But there are still young people out there looking for us to do more, to help build a world in which they never have to feel afraid or alone to be themselves. And we know how important that is to not only tell them that it's going to get better, but to also do everything in our power to ensure that things actually are better.

I'm confident that we will achieve the equality that this young person deserves. I'm confident that the future is bright for that teenager and others like him and that he can have the life that he wants and that he imagines.

There will be setbacks along the way. There will be times where things aren't moving as fast as folks would like. But I know that he'll look back on his struggles and the struggles of many in this room, as part of what made change possible, part of what it took to reach the day when every single American, gay or straight or lesbian or bisexual or transgender, was free to live and love as they see fit.

And we can look at the progress we've made in the last 2 years, to the changes that were led not by Washington, but by folks standing up for themselves or for their sons or for their daughters, fighting for what's right. Not just change on behalf of gay Americans, but for everybody looking to fulfill their version of the American Dream. Whether it's the students working their way through college or the work-

ers heading to factories to build American cars again or the energy entrepreneurs testing bold ideas, the construction crews laying down roads, the small-business owners and scientists and inventors and builders and all those Americans who faced hardship and setbacks, but who never stopped believing in this country, its capacity to change, who are helping each and every day to rebuild this Nation so that we emerge from this period of struggle stronger and more unified than ever before.

And that's the story of progress in America—that's what all of you represent—of the stubborn refusal to accept anything less than the best that this country can be. And with

your help, if you keep up the fight, and if you will devote your time and your energies to this campaign one more time, I promise you, we will write another chapter in that story. And we are going to leave a new generation with a brighter future and a more hopeful future. And I'll be standing there, right there with you.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you, everybody. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:59 p.m. at the Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers. In his remarks, he referred to actor Neil Patrick Harris.

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Thank you. Thank you, everybody. It's great to be here. Everybody, please have a seat. It's me, it's true. [*Laughter*]

It is wonderful to see all of you. Thank you so much for coming here tonight. To the host committee, who have generally been supportive of me since I had no gray hair. [*Laughter*] I was telling people the other day, Malia and Sasha think I look distinguished; Michelle thinks I look old. [*Laughter*]

But I'm thrilled to be here tonight, and I appreciate all of you taking the time to have what I hope is a good conversation, but also the wonderful support that you've shown.

What I'd like to do is to speak very briefly at the top, and then I want to spend as much time as possible just exchanging ideas and answering questions.

When I was elected—I think back to 2008 and Grant Park, and it was a beautiful night—I said to people, this is not the end, this is the beginning, and that we were going to have a steep hill to climb. I had gotten into the race because of this profound belief in America, but also because there was a huge gap between what I thought America could be and where we were; that we had seen a decade where incomes and wages had stagnated. We had seen the absence of any coherent energy policy that would free ourselves from dependence on for-

eign oil and help to clean up the planet. Our education system, there was a lot of talk about reforming it, but we hadn't made the kind of progress that would allow us to be competitive in the 21st century.

There seemed to be a lack of pragmatism when it came to thinking about regulation and how we make a health care system that works for people and where we're getting a better bang for the buck.

And so I knew that all these things were going to be difficult. I have to say, I didn't always anticipate how difficult, because at the time when we were campaigning, we didn't realize that we were already entering what would turn out to be the worst recession since the Great Depression; that we'd lost 4 million jobs before I was even sworn in; and we'd lose another 4 million jobs in the 4 or 5 months after my Inauguration, but before any of our economic policies had a chance to take effect.

So we have spent the last 2½ years cleaning up a big mess. We've stabilized the financial system, and the markets have recovered a large part of what they had lost, which is important not just for Wall Street, but is important for people across the country and the economy as a whole. Capital is flowing again. Businesses who are large or medium size are able to access capital and invest it in plants and equipment