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Address by Senator John Edwards on Restoring our Democracy

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Keene, New Hampshire
October 13, 2007

Thank you. Good to see all of you.

There's been a lot of talk up here in New Hampshire about change lately. But change is just a word when it's not backed up by real action. Anybody can say it. It's what you do that shows whether you really mean it.

To actually create change, we should start by telling the truth.

Here's the truth: the system in Washington is broken. Money is corrupting our democracy. Lobbyists and the special interests they represent are pouring millions of dollars into the system, and stopping the change we need dead in its tracks.

Our founding fathers intended our government to do the will of the people. But today, it's doing the will of the special interests instead.

The cynics say that it will always be this way. They say that the kind of big, bold change we need today can't be achieved, and we just shouldn't try.

But you can't listen to them. We've done it before, and we can do it again. Throughout our history, there have been times when good people have had to take the power back from the powerful interests. This is one of those times.

A century ago, the system was broken, too. Powerful business interests established control over the biggest sectors of the American economy. Men like Rockefeller and Carnegie colluded to control prices, eliminate competition, and manipulate the free market in the name of their own narrow interests.

Then as now, the American people knew the system was broken. And they had the same choice that we have today: accept it, or demand change.

We all know what happened. They demanded change, and elected a leader named Theodore Roosevelt to deliver it.

Because of Roosevelt's leadership, the coming decades were known as the "American Century," and in it we built the biggest, strongest, most prosperous middle class in history.

Today, once again, powerful special interests have established control over our democracy. But what we face today is not a monopoly of control over our economy - it is a monopoly of influence over our government.

We can fix this broken system, as generations before us fixed the problems they faced in their time. But we need a leader who won't accept the corruption in Washington. We need a leader strong enough to say "No" to money from lobbyists and special interests. We need a leader who will fight for the big change we need to see.

To clean up our government, you have to do two things. You have to be committed to changing the system. And you have to run a campaign that does not take money from lobbyists or special interests - so you are not beholden to the people who are corrupting our system by the time you get to Washington.

You can't do one without the other. You have to do both. In this election, more than any other, the candidate who stands with the special interests will lose.

I have fought the special interests my entire life. As a lawyer, I defended hard-working Americans during the toughest times of their lives against the big corporations that were trying to victimize them.

As a United States Senator, I unseated a corrupt Republican incumbent in a red state - because the voters knew that I would fight for them, and not the special interests.

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2 SPREAD THE WORD

3 CONTRIBUTE

4 Grassroots FUNDRAISING TODAY

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Town Hall Meeting with John Edwards
Jan 16, 2008
Reno, Nevada

Town Hall Meeting with John Edwards
Jan 16, 2008
Las Vegas, Nevada

Now, I am running for president to end the corrupt system in Washington, and return the power of this government back to the hard-working people of America.

And I am refusing to take money from lobbyists and special interests – because if there’s one thing I’ve learned out here on the campaign trail, it’s that the American people are looking for more than just talk about change. They are looking for a leader who will back up their words with action.

The American people are sick and tired of business as usual. The status quo and the Washington establishment will not get us the change we need.

When I was in Congress, I saw what business as usual looked like. Sometimes it’s blatant – like the time current House Minority Leader John Boehner handed out checks from big tobacco companies to lawmakers on the floor of the House of Representatives. Or the time someone offered \$100,000 to Congressman Nick Smith’s son’s campaign in exchange for a vote.

But usually, it’s more subtle. The influence peddlers buy seats at the table where decisions are made. They explain their special needs to politicians, in their offices and at cocktail parties. And they surround them with hand-picked experts who will back up their case.

The problem is that one side of the argument usually has all the money and all the manpower. It’s like a courtroom where only one side of the case is being argued.

If you want to see how the special interests get their way, just look at the universal health care bill that Senator Clinton tried to get passed in the 1990s. At first, the American people supported her proposal. But then the health insurance companies deployed armies of lobbyists to Capitol Hill to pressure lawmakers. They spent millions of dollars on television ads. And they won.

I believe Senator Clinton deserves credit for her effort. Her plan wasn’t perfect, but it included a lot of good ideas. The place where she and I differ is the lessons we’ve learned since then.

She seems to think that you should still give lobbyists a seat at the table. I think if you give them a seat at the table, they’ll eat all the food.

She seems to think you can talk about ending the influence of lobbyists, but still take millions of dollars from them. I believe that if you are serious about ending the influence of lobbyists, you have to stop taking their money.

When I challenged her on this, she responded by defending the system. I don’t think you can talk about changing America, and then turn around and defend the broken system in Washington.

And I think if you are going to talk about ending the influence of special interests, you can’t turn around and hold a fundraiser where you bring the special interests together with the very lawmakers they are trying to influence.

This is the poster child for what is wrong with politics today. Politicians try to have it both ways: they talk about changing the system, but then conduct business as usual.

The American people need a president who will be straight with them – who will be honest about the greatest challenges our government faces. And one of the most important of those is the looming Social Security crisis. First, Senator Clinton said she would just wait for things to get better. Now, she has apparently told some people that she really supports my idea of asking people who make more than \$200,000 a year to contribute a little more.

I don’t believe open government means popular answers in public and honest candor in private.

Part of the reason the system is broken is that the special interests are winning many fights behind the scenes, before the American people ever hear about them.

Just a few days ago, the hedge fund industry won a behind-the-scenes war to kill a bill that would have plugged a loophole that funnels billions of dollars into the pockets of some of the highest-paid people in America.

The hedge fund industry hired more than 20 lobbying firms – corporate Republicans and corporate Democrats. At the same time, they stepped up their campaign contributions, to remind politicians what they would be missing if they didn’t play along.

Of course, Congress dropped the bill, and left the loophole wide open. This happens all the time in Washington. Measures that lobbyists oppose just fall off the schedule.

Look at the debate over global warming. Earlier this year, over 2,000 of the world’s top

My Vote, My Voice Deadline
Jan 16, 2008
National

Town Hall Meeting with John Edwards
Jan 17, 2008
Henderson, Nevada

Rally with John Edwards in Los Angeles
Jan 17, 2008
Los Angeles, Calif.

NEWS HEADLINES

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Edwards Statement In Honor Of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday

Daytona Beach News Journal: Edwards Inspires Confidence

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cient scientists released a report that concluded with at least 90 percent certainty that global warming is happening, and that man-made greenhouse gases are a major cause.

This is the same group that is sharing the Nobel Prize with Vice President Al Gore. But the facts in their report were not the facts that the big oil companies wanted to hear. So a conservative think tank funded by ExxonMobil offered scientists \$10,000, plus travel and other expenses, to undermine the facts in the report to politicians on Capitol Hill. It was no wonder that the energy bill that passed Congress did not include a cap on greenhouse gas emissions.

Are you seeing a pattern here? The American people want change. But the special interests see change as a threat to their profits. So they hire lobbyists, step up their campaign contributions – and block the change that people want. In Washington, that’s the way the game is played.

Well, I say it’s time we end this game. This government belongs to the American people. It’s time we put the power back in their hands. That is why today, I am proposing the One Democracy Initiative, to end the power of the special interests, restore our democracy, and start building One America.

The first thing we have to do is cut off special interests’ ability to influence campaigns with their money, and increase the power of regular people.

Right now, any individual can donate up to \$2,300 to a campaign. That means candidates are spending their time glad-handing with the tiny fraction of Americans who can write a \$2,300 check. As president, I would rewrite the rules to put small donors in charge by matching the first \$100 of donations at a rate of 8-to-1. Under my plan, two \$100 checks will be worth the same as one \$1,000 check – and no one will be allowed to give more than \$1,000.

But I will not stop there. With all the money that is flooding into this race, you would think it was an auction, not an election. I have decided to take public financing – which will help my campaign raise money from small donors, and make a statement about my independence from big donors.

This is another place where Senator Clinton and I part ways. We have both said we support the public financing of campaigns as the best way to get special interest money out of our elections. I have backed up my words with actions, and challenged her to do the same.

She hasn’t yet, but I hope she will. If she is not going to take public financing, I believe the American people deserve to know why she says she believes in the public financing system, but will not participate in it.

Unlike Senator Clinton, I have also never taken a dime from federal lobbyists or political action committees, because I know that money comes with strings attached. I think that should be the rule, not the exception. As president, I will prohibit all candidates and federal office holders from accepting contributions from lobbyists.

All this money is making it extremely difficult for non-wealthy candidates to run. I believe that a high-school teacher here in Keene, or a nurse in Manchester, should have the same opportunity to run for Congress as a lawyer from North Carolina. I believe everyone should have the same chance to run for office as I had.

But today, the cost of even a congressional campaign is climbing into the millions. Unfortunately, our broken system helps create the perception that to run for office, you either need to be very wealthy or willing to be very bought by the special interests.

As president, I will fix this by creating a public financing option for Congressional candidates that would give all candidates equal budgets and equal airtime. That way, regular Americans just like the people in this room can run for office without having to cozy up to big contributors.

We also need to restore confidence in our democracy. In America, everyone’s vote should count the same. But after the vote-counting fiascos of recent years, we need to reassure people that their vote will be counted correctly. As president, I will require that all voting machines, including electronic ones, use paper ballots that can be verified by voters.

We also need to make sure that all of our citizens are able to participate in our democracy, and have the representation they deserve. We need to end the disenfranchisement of residents of Washington, D.C., and give D.C. residents a vote in Congress. We also need to end the disenfranchisement of former prisoners who have served their time. And we need to end the voter suppression and intimidation that has

been reported in recent elections.

I believe in the wisdom of the American people, and I think the more power they have in our democracy, the better our country will be. That's why every two years, I will ask one million citizens to come together to tackle our toughest issues in local forums across the nation.

These Citizen Congresses will combine old-fashioned town halls with 21st century technology. They will give regular Americans a chance to speak to each other, and to their elected officials in Washington, without the filters of interest groups and the media.

Like so much of what Washington needs, this idea of grassroots democracy is already working out in the real world, in towns just like this one.

Right here in New Hampshire, the Portsmouth Study Circle has brought hundreds of regular people together for over a decade to work out issues – from school redistricting to ending racial profiling to the city's 10-year plan. And the November 5th Coalition is working to raise awareness of local democracy and promote a new generation of citizen-centered work.

That is the promise of our democracy: that everyday, hard-working Americans and their families can come together and exercise their democratic power to change this country for the better.

But to give them that power, we need to do more than just clean up our elections. We also need to break the link between K Street and Capitol Hill.

The bread and butter of wealthy lobbyists are earmarks – taking money from the U.S. Treasury and sending it directly to their clients through spending bills. Top lobbyists earn millions this way. I will end that practice with a constitutional version of the line-item veto, where the president can require an up or down vote on any spending item he deems irresponsible or inappropriate

We also need to close the revolving door between Capitol Hill and K Street. I will reinstate the five-year ban on lobbying by former top government officials. President Bill Clinton passed that ban, but then he cancelled it in his last days in office. I will reenact it by statute so no president can rescind it again.

We also need to bar federal lobbyists from setting policy over their former industries. When I'm president, there will be no more foxes guarding the henhouse. If you want to see whether another candidate really stands for change, ask them whether they will do the same.

The way Washington is rushing to do the bidding of special interests these days, you would think that they were the ones that made America great. But they're not. The hard-working men and women of America, like the people in this room, are the ones who made this country great.

I've talked a lot about what I will do as president to fix the broken system in Washington. But you all have a role to play in this, too.

The status quo will only continue if you let it. It will continue if you look the other way while people defend a system we all know is broken. It will continue if you settle for replacing a bunch of corporate Republicans with a bunch of corporate Democrats.

The status quo will continue if you let it – but it will change if you demand it.

That is why I am challenging you today: be vigilant. Remember that democracy does not defend itself. Every generation has to fight to fulfill the promise of America – of a nation where everyone is equal, and the government responds to the will of the people.

We are the great nation we are today because the generations that went before us stood up and fixed our democracy when it was broken. Today, that responsibility falls on all of us.

My youngest daughter, Emma Claire, is 9 years old. Many of you may have children or grandchildren around that age.

If we join together, starting today, and demand change, think about how different this country could be by the time they are out of high school.

We could be living in an America where every man, woman and child is guaranteed high-quality health care.

An America where we are finally working to halt global warming, develop clean fuels and end our addiction to foreign oil. An America on the road to ending poverty, with the American dream becoming a new reality for millions of hard-working Americans. An America where we have restored our moral leadership in the world.

But to reach that America tomorrow, we need to rise to the challenges we face today. No matter what the cynics say, if we join together and fight for real change, we can restore our democracy, and make our government work again.

So don't settle for more of the same. Don't settle for a broken system that ignores your cries for change.

Demand better. Let's be the generation that restores our democracy. Let's be the generation that returns the power of our government back to the people. Let's be the generation that restores our nation to greatness. Let's be the change we want to see.

This is our government. This is our America. And this is our moment to take it back. Stand with me today. And together, we can change this country.

Thank you, and God bless.