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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: 99th Annual Convention of the NAACP

Cincinnati, OH | July 14, 2008

It is always humbling to speak before the NAACP. It is a powerful reminder of the debt we all owe to those who marched for us and fought for us and stood up on our behalf; of the sacrifices that were made for us by those we never knew; and of the giants whose shoulders I stand on here today.

They are the men and women we read about in history books and hear about in church; whose lives we honor with schools, and boulevards, and federal holidays that bear their names. But what I want to remind you tonight - on Youth Night - is that these giants, these icons of America's past, were not much older than many of you when they took up freedom's cause and made their mark on history.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was but a 26-year old pastor when he led a bus boycott in Montgomery that mobilized a movement. John Lewis was but a 25-year old activist when he faced down Billy clubs on the bridge in Selma and helped arouse the conscience of our nation. Diane Nash was even younger when she helped found SNCC and led Freedom Rides down south. And your chairman Julian Bond was but a 25-year old state legislator when he put his own shoulder to the wheel of history.

It is because of them; and all those whose names never made it into the history books - those men and women, young and old, black, brown and white, clear-eyed and straight-backed, who refused to settle for the world as it is; who had the courage to remake the world as it should be - that I stand before you tonight as the Democratic nominee for President of the United States of America.

And if I have the privilege of serving as your next President, I will stand up for you the same way that earlier generations of Americans stood up for me - by fighting to ensure that every single one of us has the chance to make it if we try. That means removing the barriers of prejudice and misunderstanding that still exist in America. It means fighting to eliminate discrimination from every corner of our country. It means changing hearts, and changing minds, and making sure that every American is treated equally under the law.

But social justice is not enough. As Dr. King once said, "the inseparable twin of racial justice is economic justice." That's why Dr. King went to Memphis in his final days to stand with striking sanitation workers. That's why the march that Roy Wilkins helped lead forty five years ago this summer wasn't just named the March on Washington, and it wasn't just named the March on Washington for Freedom; it was named the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

What Dr. King and Roy Wilkins understood is that it matters little if you have the right to sit at the front of the bus if you can't afford the bus fare; it matters little if you have the right to sit at the lunch counter if you can't afford the lunch. What they understood is that so long as Americans are denied the decent wages, and good benefits, and fair treatment they deserve, the dream for which so many gave so much will remain out of reach; that to live up to our founding promise of equality for all, we have to make sure that opportunity is open to all Americans.

That is what I've been fighting to do throughout my over 20 years in public service. That's why I've fought in the Senate to end tax breaks for companies that ship jobs overseas and give those tax breaks to companies that create good jobs here in America. That's why I brought Democrats and Republicans together in Illinois to put \$100 million in tax cuts into the pockets of hardworking families, to expand health care to 150,000 children and parents, and to end the outrage of black women making just 62 cents for every dollar that many of their male coworkers make.

And that's why I moved to Chicago after college. As some of you know, I turned down more lucrative jobs



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because I was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and I wanted to do my part in the ongoing battle for opportunity in this country. So I went to work for a group of churches to help turn around neighborhoods that were devastated when the local steel plants closed. And I reached out to community leaders - black, brown, and white - and together, we gave job training to the jobless, set up afterschool programs to help keep kids off the streets, and block by block, we helped turn those neighborhoods around.

So I've been working my entire adult life to help build an America where social justice is being served and economic justice is being served; an America where we all have an equal chance to make it if we try. That's the America I believe in. That's the America you've been fighting for over the past 99 years. And that's the America we have to keep marching towards today.

Our work is not over.

When so many of our nation's schools are failing, especially those in our poorest rural and urban communities, denying millions of young Americans the chance to fulfill their potential and live out their dreams, we have more work to do.

When CEOs are making more in ten minutes than the average worker earns in a year, and millions of families lose their homes due to unscrupulous lending, checked neither by a sense of corporate ethics or a vigilant government; when the dream of entering the middle class and staying there is fading for young people in our community, we have more work to do.

When any human being is denied a life of dignity and respect, no matter whether they live in Anacostia or Appalachia or a village in Africa; when people are trapped in extreme poverty we know how to curb or suffering from diseases we know how to prevent; when they're going without the medicines that they so desperately need - we have more work to do.

That's what this election is all about. It's about the responsibilities we all share for the future we hold in common. It's about each and every one of us doing our part to build that more perfect union.

It's about the responsibilities that corporate America has - responsibilities that start with ending a culture on Wall Street that says what's good for me is good enough; that puts their bottom line ahead of what's right for America. Because what we've learned in such a dramatic way in recent months is that pain in our economy trickles up; that Wall Street can't thrive so long as Main Street is struggling; and that America is better off when the well-being of American business and the American people are aligned. Our CEOs have to recognize that they have a responsibility not just to grow their profit margins, but to be fair to their workers, and honest to their shareholders and to help strengthen our economy as a whole. That's how we'll ensure that economic justice is being served. And that's what this election is about.

It's about the responsibilities that Washington has - responsibilities that start with restoring fairness to our economy by making sure that the playing field isn't tilted to benefit the special interests at the expense of ordinary Americans; and that we're rewarding not just wealth, but the work and workers who create it. That's why I'll offer a middle class tax cut so we can lift up hardworking families, and give relief to struggling homeowners so we can end our housing crisis, and provide training to young people to work the green jobs of the future, and invest in our infrastructure so we can create millions of new jobs.

And that's why I'll end the outrage of one in five African Americans going without the health care they deserve. We'll guarantee health care for anyone who needs it, make it affordable for anyone who wants it, and ensure that the quality of your health care does not depend on the color of your skin. And we're not going to do it 20 years from now or 10 years from now, we're going to do it by the end of my first term as President of the United States of America.

And here's what else we'll do - we'll make sure that every child in this country gets a world-class education from the day they're born until the day they graduate from college. Now, I understand that Senator McCain is going to be coming here in a couple of days and talking about education, and I'm glad to hear it. But the fact is, what he's offering amounts to little more than the same tired rhetoric about vouchers. Well, I believe we need to move beyond the same debate we've been having for the past 30 years when we haven't gotten anything done. We need to fix and improve our public schools, not throw our hands up and walk away from them. We need to uphold the ideal of public education, but we also need reform.

That's why I've introduced a comprehensive strategy to recruit an army of new quality teachers to our communities - and to pay them more and give them more support. And we'll invest in early childhood education programs so that our kids don't begin the race of life behind the starting line and offer a \$4,000 tax credit to make college affordable for anyone who wants to go. Because as the NAACP knows better than anyone, the fight for social justice and economic justice begins in the classroom.

But it doesn't end there. We have to fight for all those young men standing on street corners with little hope for the future besides ending up in jail. We have to break the cycle of poverty and violence that's gripping too many neighborhoods in this country.

That's why I'll expand the Earned Income Tax Credit - because it's one of the most successful anti-poverty measures we have. That's why I'll end the Bush policy of taking cops off the streets at the moment they're needed most - because we need to give local law enforcement the support they need.

and much more!

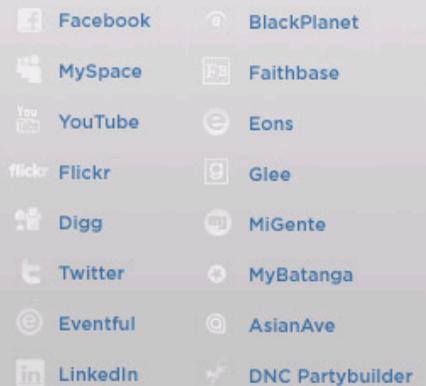
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That's why we'll provide job training for ex-offenders - because we need to make sure they don't return to a life of crime. And that's why I'll build on the success of the Harlem Children's Zone in New York and launch an all-hands-on-deck effort to end poverty in this country - because that's how we'll put the dream that Dr. King and Roy Wilkins fought for within reach for the next generation of children.

And if people tell you that we cannot afford to invest in education or health care or fighting poverty, you just remind them that we are spending \$10 billion a month in Iraq. And if we can spend that much money in Iraq, we can spend some of that money right here in Cincinnati, Ohio and in big cities and small towns in every corner of this country.

So yes, we have to demand more responsibility from Washington. And yes we have to demand more responsibility from Wall Street. But we also have to demand more from ourselves. Now, I know some say I've been too tough on folks about this responsibility stuff. But I'm not going to stop talking about it. Because I believe that in the end, it doesn't matter how much money we invest in our communities, or how many 10-point plans we propose, or how many government programs we launch - none of it will make any difference if we don't seize more responsibility in our own lives.

That's how we'll truly honor those who came before us. Because I know that Thurgood Marshall did not argue Brown versus Board of Education so that some of us could stop doing our jobs as parents. And I know that nine little children did not walk through a schoolhouse door in Little Rock so that we could stand by and let our children drop out of school and turn to gangs for the support they are not getting elsewhere. That's not the freedom they fought so hard to achieve. That's not the America they gave so much to build. That's not the dream they had for our children.

That's why if we're serious about reclaiming that dream, we have to do more in our own lives, our own families, and our own communities. That starts with providing the guidance our children need, turning off the TV, and putting away the video games; attending those parent-teacher conferences, helping our children with their homework, and setting a good example. It starts with teaching our daughters to never allow images on television to tell them what they are worth; and teaching our sons to treat women with respect, and to realize that responsibility does not end at conception; that what makes them men is not the ability to have a child but the courage to raise one. It starts by being good neighbors and good citizens who are willing to volunteer in our communities - and to help our synagogues and churches and community centers feed the hungry and care for the elderly. We all have to do our part to lift up this country.

That's where change begins. And that, after all, is the true genius of America - not that America is, but that America will be; not that we are perfect, but that we can make ourselves more perfect; that brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand, people who love this country can change it. And that's our most enduring responsibility - the responsibility to future generations. We have to change this country for them. We have to leave them a planet that's cleaner, a nation that's safer, and a world that's more equal and more just.

So I'm grateful to you for all you've done for this campaign, but we've got work to do and we cannot rest. And I know that if you put your shoulders to the wheel of history and take up the cause of perfecting our union just as earlier generations of Americans did before you; if you take up the fight for opportunity and equality and prosperity for all; if you march with me and fight with me, and get your friends registered to vote, and if you stand with me this fall - then not only will we help close the responsibility deficit in this country, and not only will we help achieve social justice and economic justice for all, but I will come back here next year on the 100th anniversary of the NAACP, and I will stand before you as the President of the United States of America. And at that moment, you and I will truly know that a new day has come in this country we love. Thank you.

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