



Remarks by John McCain to the 99th Annual NAACP Convention

By Press Office
July 16, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain delivered the following remarks as prepared for delivery to the 99th Annual NAACP Convention in Cincinnati, OH, today at 11:30 a.m. EDT:

Thank you. Julian Bond, Dennis Courtland Hayes, Roslyn Brock -- I appreciate your kind invitation, and this warm welcome to the NAACP. This is your second invitation to me during my presidential campaign, and I hope you'll excuse me for passing on the opportunity at your convention last year. As you might recall, I was a bit distracted at the time dealing with what reporters uncharitably described as an implosion in my campaign. But I'm very glad you invited me again.

Let me begin with a few words about my opponent. Don't tell him I said this, but he is an impressive fellow in many ways. He has inspired a great many Americans, some of whom had wrongly believed that a political campaign could hold no purpose or meaning for them. His success should make Americans, all Americans, proud. Of course, I would prefer his success not continue quite as long as he hopes. But it makes me proud to know the country I've loved and served all my life is still a work in progress, and always improving. Senator Obama talks about making history, and he's made quite a bit of it already. And the way was prepared by this venerable organization and others like it. A few years before the NAACP was founded, President Theodore Roosevelt's invitation of Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House was taken as an outrage and an insult in many quarters. America today is a world away from the cruel and prideful bigotry of that time. There is no better evidence of this than the nomination of an African-American to be the presidential nominee of his party. Whatever the outcome in November, Senator Obama has achieved a great thing -- for himself and for his country -- and I thank him for it.

As our country has changed these past few decades, so have many of your debates within the NAACP, and within other civil-rights organizations. In the days of separate lunch counters, bullhorns, and fire hoses, the mission was hard and dangerous, but it was easily defined. The advancement of African Americans meant equal protection under law, in a country where the law had simply codified injustice. That cause required the enormous courage and commitment of generations, and a determination to hold this nation to its own creed.

You know better than I do how different the challenges are today for those who champion the cause of equal opportunity in America. Equal access to public education has been gained. But what is the value of access to a failing school? Equal employment opportunity is set firmly down in law. But with jobs becoming scarcer -- and 400,000 Americans thrown out of work just this year -- that can amount to an equal share of diminished opportunity. For years, business ownership by African Americans has been growing rapidly. This is all to the good, but that hopeful trend is threatened in a struggling economy -- with the cost of energy, health care, and just about everything else rising sharply.

As in other challenges African Americans have met and overcome, these problems require clarity of purpose. They require the solidarity of groups like the NAACP. And, at times, they also require a willingness to break from conventional thinking.

Nowhere are the limitations of conventional thinking any more apparent than in education policy. Education reform has long been a priority of the NAACP, and for good reason. For all the best efforts of teachers and administrators, the worst problems of our public school system are often found in black communities. Black and Latino students are among the most likely to drop out of high school. African Americans are also among the least likely to go on to college.

After decades of hearing the same big promises from the public education establishment, and seeing the same poor results, it is surely time to shake off old ways and to demand new reforms. That isn't just my opinion; it is the conviction of parents in poor neighborhoods across this nation who want better lives for their children. In Washington, D.C., the Opportunity Scholarship program serves more than 1,900 boys and girls from families with an average income of 23,000 dollars a

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year. And more than 7,000 more families have applied for that program. What they all have in common is the desire to get their kids into a better school.

Democrats in Congress, including my opponent, oppose the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program. In remarks to the American Federation of Teachers last weekend, Senator Obama dismissed public support for private school vouchers for low-income Americans as, "tired rhetoric about vouchers and school choice." All of that went over well with the teachers union, but where does it leave families and their children who are stuck in failing schools?

Over the years, Americans have heard a lot of "tired rhetoric" about education. We've heard it in the endless excuses of people who seem more concerned about their own position than about our children. We've heard it from politicians who accept the status quo rather than stand up for real change in our public schools. Parents ask only for schools that are safe, teachers who are competent, and diplomas that open doors of opportunity. When a public system fails, repeatedly, to meet these minimal objectives, parents ask only for a choice in the education of their children. Some parents may choose a better public school. Some may choose a private school. Many will choose a charter school. No entrenched bureaucracy or union should deny parents that choice and children that opportunity.

We should also offer more choices to those who wish to become teachers. Many thousands of highly qualified men and women have great knowledge, wisdom, and experience to offer public school students. But a monopoly on teacher certification prevents them from getting that chance. You can be a Nobel Laureate and not qualify to teach in most public schools today. They don't have all the proper credits in educational "theory" or "methodology" -- all they have is learning and the desire and ability to share it. If we're putting the interests of students first, then those qualifications should be enough.

If I am elected president, school choice for all who want it, an expansion of Opportunity Scholarships, and alternative certification for teachers will all be part of a serious agenda of education reform. I will target funding to recruit teachers who graduate in the top 25 percent of their class, or who participate in an alternative teacher recruitment program such as Teach for America, the American Board for Teacher Excellence, and the New Teacher Project.

We will pay bonuses to teachers who take on the challenge of working in our most troubled schools -- because we need their fine minds and good hearts to help turn those schools around. We will award bonuses as well to our highest-achieving teachers. And no longer will we measure teacher achievement by conformity to process. We will measure it by the success of their students.

Moreover, the funds for these bonuses will not be controlled by faraway officials -- in Washington, in a state capital, or even in a district office. Under my reforms, we will entrust both the funds and the responsibilities where they belong in the office of the school principal. One reason that charter schools are so successful, and so sought-after by parents, is that principals have spending discretion. And I intend to give that same discretion to public school principals. No longer will money be spent in service to rigid and often meaningless formulas. Relying on the good judgment and first-hand knowledge of school principals, education money will be spent in service to public school students.

We can also help more children and young adults to study outside of school by expanding support for virtual learning. So I propose to direct 500 million dollars in current federal funds to build new virtual schools, and to support the development of online courses for students. Through competitive grants, we will allocate another 250 million dollars to support state programs expanding online education opportunities, including the creation of new public virtual charter schools. States can use these funds to build virtual math and science academies to help expand the availability of Advanced Placement math, science, and computer science courses, online tutoring, and foreign language courses.

Under my reforms, moreover, parents will exercise freedom of choice in obtaining extra help for children who are falling behind. As it is, federal aid to parents for tutoring for their children has to go through another bureaucracy. They can't purchase the tutoring directly, without having to deal with the same education establishment that failed their children in the first place. These needless restrictions will be removed, under my reforms. If a student needs extra help, parents will be able to sign them up to get it, with direct public support.

Over the years, the NAACP has brought enormous good into the life of our country -- in part by broadening the reach of economic opportunity. There was a time when economists took little if any notice at all of the poverty of black communities. Even in times of general economic growth, many lived in a perpetual recession, and the jobs available didn't promise much upward mobility. Our country still has a lot of progress to make on this score. But with 1.2 million businesses today owned and operated by African Americans, more and more are no longer just spectators on the prosperity of our country. They are stakeholders. As much as anyone else, they count on their government to help create the conditions of economic growth -- and, as president, I intend to do.

Senator Obama and I have fundamental differences on economic policy. But when he describes my plan, I'm not sure his heart is always in it -- so let me have a go at it myself. I believe that in a troubled economy, when folks are struggling to afford the necessities of life, higher taxes are the last thing we need. The economy isn't hurting because workers and businesses are under-taxed. Raising taxes eliminates jobs, hurts small businesses, and delays economic recovery.

Under my plan, we will preserve the current low rates as they are, so businesses large and small can hire more people. We will double the personal exemption from \$3,500 to \$7,000 for every dependent, in every family in America. We will offer every individual and family a large tax credit to buy their health care, so that their health insurance is theirs to keep even when they move or change jobs. And we will lower the business tax rate, so American companies open new plants and create more jobs in this country, instead of going overseas to flee the second-highest tax rate in the world.

My opponent and I have honest differences as well about the growth of government. And it may be that many of you share his view. But even allowing for disagreement, surely there is common ground in the principle that government cannot go on forever spending recklessly and incurring debt. Government has grown by 60 percent in the last eight years, because the Congress and this administration have failed to meet their responsibilities. And next year, total federal expenditures are predicted to reach over three trillion dollars. That is an awful lot for us to be spending when this nation is already more than nine trillion dollars in debt -- or more than thirty thousand dollars in debt for every citizen. That's a debt our government plans to leave for your children and mine to bear. And that is a failure not only of financial foresight, but of moral obligation.

There will come a day when the road reaches a dead-end. And it won't be today's politicians who suffer the consequences. It will be American workers and their children who are left with worthless promises and trillion-dollar debts. We cannot let that happen. As President, I'll work with every member of Congress -- Republican, Democrat, and Independent -- who shares my commitment to reforming government and controlling spending. I'll order a top-to-bottom review of every federal program, department, and agency. We're going to demand accountability. We're going to make sure failed programs are not rewarded ... and that discretionary spending is going where it belongs -- to essential priorities like job training, the security of our citizens, and the care of our veterans.

To get our economy running at full strength again, we must also get a handle on the cost of energy. Under my plan, we will produce more of America's own energy. We will build at least 45 nuclear plants that will create over 700,000 good jobs to construct and operate them. We will develop clean coal technology -- which alone will create tens of thousands of jobs in some of America's most hard-pressed areas. We will accelerate the development of wind and solar power and other renewable technologies, and we will help automakers design and sell cars that don't depend on gasoline. Production of hybrid, flex-fuel, and electric cars will bring America closer to energy independence. And it will bring jobs to auto plants, parts manufacturers, and the communities that support them.

Our country is passing through a very tough time. But Americans have been through worse, and beaten longer odds. The men and women of the NAACP know more than most about facing long odds, and overcoming adversity.

Many of you are veterans of the great civil rights struggles of a generation and more ago. Like my friend John Lewis, some of you have seen enough years to have known Martin Luther King, Jr., and even marched at his side or not far behind in Birmingham, Montgomery, or elsewhere. For all of this, like Dr. King, you were called agitators, trouble-makers, malcontents, and disturbers of the peace. These are often the terms applied to men and women of conscience who will not endure cruelty, nor abide injustice.

Perhaps with more charity than was always deserved, it was Dr. King who often reminded us that there was moral badness, and there was moral blindness, and they were not the same. It was this spirit that turned hatred into forgiveness, anger into conviction, and a bitter life into a great one. He loved and honored his country even when the feeling was unreturned, and counseled others to do the same. He gave his countrymen the benefit of the doubt -- believing, as he wrote, that "returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."

I remember first learning what had happened in Memphis on the fourth of April, 1968, feeling just as everyone else did back home, only perhaps even more uncertain and alarmed for my country in the darkness that was then enclosed around me and my fellow captives. In our circumstances at the time, good news from America was hard to come by. But the bad news was a different matter, and each new report of violence, rioting, and other tribulations in America was delivered without delay. The enemy had correctly calculated that the news of Dr. King's death would deeply wound morale, and leave us worried and afraid for our country. Doubtless it boosted our captors' morale, confirming their belief that

America was a lost cause, and that the future belonged to them.

Yet how differently it all turned out. And if they had been the more reflective kind, our enemies would have understood that the cause of Dr. King was bigger than any one man, and could not be stopped by force of violence. Struggle is rewarded in God's own time. Wrongs are set right and evil is overcome. We know this to be true because it is the story of your cause, and the story of our country.

As much as any other group in America, the NAACP has been at the center of that great and honorable cause. I'm here today as an admirer and a fellow American, an association that means more to me than any other. I am a candidate for president who seeks your vote and hopes to earn it. But whether or not I win your support, I need your goodwill and counsel. And should I succeed, I'll need it all the more. I have always believed in this country, in a good America, a great America. But I have always known we can build a better America, where no place or person is left without hope or opportunity by the sins of injustice or indifference. It would be among the great privileges of my life to work with you in that cause.

Thank you all very much.

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