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Newsroom

Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Changing the Odds for Urban America

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It's been four decades since Bobby Kennedy crouched in a shack along the Mississippi Delta and looked into the wide, listless eyes of a hungry child. Again and again he tried to talk to this child, but each time his efforts were met with only a blank stare of desperation. And when Kennedy turned to the reporters traveling with him, with tears in his eyes he asked a single question about poverty in America:

"How can a country like this allow it?"

Forty years later, we're still asking that question. It echoes on the streets of Compton and Detroit, and throughout the mining towns of West Virginia. It lingers with every image we see of the 9th Ward and the rural Gulf Coast, where poverty thrived long before Katrina came ashore.

We stand not ten miles from the seat of power in the most affluent nation on Earth. Decisions are made on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue that shape lives and set the course of history. With the stroke of a pen, billions are spent on programs and policies; on tax breaks for those who didn't need them and a war that should've never been authorized and never been waged. Debates rage and accusations fly and at the end of each day, the petty sniping is what lights up the evening news.

And yet here, on the other side of the river, every other child in Anacostia lives below the poverty line. Too many do not graduate and too many more do not find work. Some join gangs, and others fall to their gunfire.

The streets here are close to our capital, but far from the people it represents. These Americans cannot hire lobbyists to roam the halls of Congress on their behalf, and they cannot write thousand-dollar campaign checks to make their voices heard. They suffer most from a politics that has been tipped in favor of those with the most money, and influence, and power.

How can a country like this allow it?

No matter how many times it's asked or what the circumstances are, the most American answer I can think of to that question is two words:

"We can't."

We can't allow this kind of suffering and hopelessness to exist in our country. We can't afford to lose a generation of tomorrow's doctors and scientists and teachers to poverty. We can make excuses for it or we can fight about it or we can ignore poverty altogether, but as long as it's here it will always be a betrayal of the ideals we hold as Americans. It's not who we are.

In this country - of all countries - no child's destiny should be determined before he takes his first step. No little girl's future should be confined to the neighborhood she was born into. Our government cannot guarantee success and happiness in life, but what we can do as a nation is to ensure that every American who wants to work is prepared to work, able to find a job,

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and able to stay out of poverty. What we can do is make our neighborhoods whole again. What we can do is retire the phrase "working poor" in our time. That's what we can do, because that's who we are.

The challenge is greater than it has been in generations, but that's all the more reason for this generation to act. One in every eight Americans now lives in poverty, a rate that has nearly doubled since 1980. That's an income of about \$20,000 a year for a family of four. One in three Americans - one in every three - is now classified as low-income. That's \$40,000 a year for a family of four.

Today's economy has made it easier to fall into poverty. The fall is often more precipitous and more permanent than ever before. You used to be able to find a good job without a degree from college or even high school. Today that's nearly impossible. You used to be able to count on your job to be there for your entire life. Today almost any job can be shipped overseas in an instant.

The jobs that remain are paying less and offering fewer benefits, as employers have succeeded in busting up unions and cutting back on health care and pensions to stay competitive with the companies abroad that are paying their workers next to nothing.

Every American is vulnerable to the insecurities and anxieties of this new economy. And that's why the single most important focus of my economic agenda as President will be to pursue policies that create jobs and make work pay.

This means investing in education from early childhood through college, so our workers are ready to compete with any workers for the best jobs the world has to offer. It means investing more in research, science, and technology so that those new jobs and those new industries are created right here in America. And while we can't stop every job from going overseas, we can stop giving tax breaks to the companies who send them there and start giving them to companies who create jobs at home.

We can also start making sure these jobs keep folks out of poverty. When I'm President, I will raise the minimum wage and make it a living wage by making sure that it rises every time the cost of living does. I'll start letting our unions do what they do best again - organize our workers and lift up our middle-class. And I'll finally make sure every American has affordable health care that stays with you no matter what happens by passing my plan to provide universal coverage and cut the cost of health care by up to \$2500 per family.

All of these policies will give more families a chance to grab hold of the ladder to middle-class security, and they'll make the climb a little easier.

But poverty is not just a function of simple economics. It's also a matter of where you live. There are vast swaths of rural America and block after block in our cities where poverty is not just a crisis that hits pocketbooks, but a disease that infects every corner of the community. I will be outlining my rural agenda in the coming weeks, but today I want to talk about what we can do as a nation to combat the poverty that persists in our cities.

This kind of poverty is not an issue I just discovered for the purposes of a campaign; it is the cause that led me to a life of public service almost twenty-five years ago.

I was just two years out of college when I first moved to the South Side of Chicago to become a community organizer. I was hired by a group of churches that were trying to deal with steel plant closures that had devastated the surrounding neighborhoods. Everywhere you looked, businesses were boarded up and schools were crumbling and teenagers were standing aimlessly on street corners, without jobs and without hope.

What's most overwhelming about urban poverty is that it's so difficult to escape - it's isolating and it's everywhere. If you are an African-American child unlucky enough to be born into one of these neighborhoods, you are most likely to start life hungry or malnourished. You are less likely to start with a father in your household, and if he is there, there's a fifty-fifty chance that he never finished high school and the same chance he doesn't have a job. Your school isn't likely to have the right books or the best teachers. You're more likely to encounter gang-activities than after-school activities. And if you can't find a job because the most successful businessman in your neighborhood is a drug dealer, you're more likely to join that gang yourself. Opportunity is scarce, role models are few, and there is little contact with the normalcy of life outside those streets.

What you learn when you spend your time in these neighborhoods trying to solve these problems is that there are no easy solutions and no perfect arguments. And you come to understand that for the last four decades, both ends of the political spectrum have been

|| talking past one another. ||

It's true that there were many effective programs that emerged from Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. But there were also some ineffective programs that were defended anyway, as well as an inability of some on the left to acknowledge that the problems of absent fathers or persistent crime were indeed problems that needed to be addressed.

The right has often seized on these failings as proof that the government can't and shouldn't do a thing about poverty - that it is a result of individual moral failings and cultural pathologies and so we should just sit back and let these cities fend for themselves. And so Ronald Reagan launched his assault on welfare queens, and George Bush spent the last six years slashing programs to combat poverty, and job training, and substance abuse, and child abuse.

Well, we know that's not the answer. When you're in these neighborhoods, you can see what a difference it makes to have a government that cares. You can see what a free lunch program does for a hungry child. You can see what a little extra money from an earned income tax credit does for a family that's struggling. You can see what prenatal care does for the health of a mother and a newborn. So don't tell me there's no role for government in lifting up our cities.

But you can also see what a difference it makes when people start caring for themselves. It makes a difference when a father realizes that responsibility does not end at conception; when he understands that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child but the courage to raise one. It makes a difference when a parent turns off the TV once in awhile, puts away the video games, and starts reading to their child, and getting involved in his education. It makes a difference when we realize that a child who shoots another child has a hole in his heart that no government can fill. That makes a difference.

So there are no easy answers and perfect arguments. As Dr. King said, it is not either-or, it is both-and. Hope is not found in any single ideology - an insistence on doing the same thing with the same result year after year.

Hope is found in what works. In those South Side neighborhoods, hope was found in the after school programs we created, and the job training programs we put together, and the organizing skills we taught residents so that they could stand up to a government that wasn't standing up for them. Hope is found here at THEARC, where you've provided thousands of children with shelter from the streets and a home away from home. And if you travel a few hours north of here, you will find hope amid ninety-seven neighborhood blocks in the heart of Harlem.

This is the home of the Harlem Children's Zone - an all-encompassing, all-hands-on-deck anti-poverty effort that is literally saving a generation of children in a neighborhood where they were never supposed to have a chance.

The philosophy behind the project is simple - if poverty is a disease that infects an entire community in the form of unemployment and violence; failing schools and broken homes, then we can't just treat those symptoms in isolation. We have to heal that entire community. And we have to focus on what actually works.

If you're a child who's born in the Harlem Children's Zone, you start life differently than other inner-city children. Your parents probably went to what they call " Baby College", a place where they received counseling on how to care for newborns and what to expect in those first months. You start school right away, because there's early childhood education. When your parents are at work, you have a safe place to play and learn, because there's child care, and after school programs, even in the summer. There are innovative charter schools to attend. There's free medical services that offer care when you're sick and preventive services to stay healthy. There's affordable, good food available so you're not malnourished. There are job counselors and financial counselors. There's technology training and crime prevention.

You don't just sign up for this program; you're actively recruited for it, because the idea is that if everyone is involved, and no one slips through the cracks, then you really can change an entire community. Geoffrey Canada, the program's inspirational, innovative founder, put it best - instead of helping some kids beat the odds, the Harlem Children's Zone is actually changing the odds altogether.

And it's working. Parents in Harlem are actually reading more to their children. Their kids are staying in school and passing statewide tests at higher rates than other children in New York City. They're going to college in a place where it was once unheard of. They've even placed third at a national chess championship.

So we know this works. And if we know it works, there's no reason this program should stop at the end of those blocks in Harlem. It's time to change the odds for neighborhoods all across America. And that's why when I'm President, the first part of my plan to combat urban poverty will be to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone in twenty cities across the country. We'll train staff, we'll have them draw up detailed plans with attainable goals, and the federal government will provide half of the funding for each city, with the rest coming from philanthropies and businesses.

Now, how much will this cost? I'll be honest - it can't be done on the cheap. It will cost a few billion dollars a year. We won't just spend the money because we can - every step these cities take will be evaluated, and if certain plans or programs aren't working, we will stop them and try something else.

But we will find the money to do this because we can't afford not to. Dr. King once remarked that if we can find the money to put a man on the moon, then we can find the money to put a man on his own two feet. There's no reason we should be spending tens of thousands of dollars a year to imprison one of these kids when they turn eighteen when we could be spending \$3,500 to turn their lives around with this program. And to really put it in perspective, think of it this way. The Harlem Children's Zone is saving a generation of children for \$46 million a year. That's about what the war in Iraq costs American taxpayers every four hours.

So let's invest this money. Let's change the odds in urban America by focusing on what works.

The second part of my plan will do this by providing families the support they need to raise their children. I'll pass the plan I outlined last year that will provide more financial support to fathers who make the responsible choice to help raise their children and crack down on the fathers who don't. And we'll help new mothers with their new responsibilities by expanding a pioneering program known as the Nurse-Family Partnership that offers home visits by trained registered nurses to low-income mothers and mothers-to-be.

This program has been proven to reduce childhood injuries, unintended pregnancies, and the use of welfare and food stamps. It's increased father involvement, women's employment, and children's school readiness. It's produced more than \$28,000 in net savings for every high-risk family enrolled in the program. It works, and I'll expand the program to 570,000 first-time mothers each year.

The third part of my plan for urban America is to help people find work and make that work pay.

I will invest \$1 billion over five years in innovative transitional jobs programs that have been highly successful at placing the unemployed into temporary jobs and then training them for permanent ones. People in these programs get the chance to work in a community service-type job, earn a paycheck every week, and learn the skills they need for gainful employment. And by leaving with references and a resume, often times they find that employment.

Still, even for those workers who do find a permanent job, many times there's no way for them to advance their careers once they're in those jobs. That's why we'll also work with community organizations and businesses to create career pathways that provide workers with the additional skills and training they need to earn more money. And we'll make sure that public transportation is both available and affordable for low-income workers, because no one should be denied work in this country because they can't get there.

To make work pay, I will also triple the Earned Income Tax Credit for full-time workers making the minimum wage. This is one of the most successful anti-poverty programs in history and lifts nearly 5 million Americans out of poverty every year. I was able to expand this program when I was a state Senator in Illinois, and as President I'll do it again.

The fourth part of my plan will be to help bring businesses back to our inner-cities. A long time ago, this country created a World Bank that has helped spur economic development in some of the world's poorest regions. I think it's about time we had something like that right here in America. Less than one percent of the \$250 billion in venture capital that's invested each year goes to minority businesses that are trying to breathe life into our cities. This has to change.

When I'm President, I'll make sure that every community has the access to the capital and resources it needs to create a stronger business climate by providing more loans to small

businesses and setting up the financial institutions that can help get them started. I'll also create a national network of business incubators, which are local services that help first-time business owners design their business plans, find the best location, and receive expert advice on how to run their businesses whenever they need it. And I will take steps to help close the digital divide and increase internet access for cities so that urban America is just as connected as the rest of America.

The final part of my plan to change the odds in our cities will be to ensure that more Americans have access to safe, affordable housing. As President, I'll create an Affordable Housing Trust Fund that would add as many as 112,000 new affordable units in mixed income neighborhoods. We'll also do more to protect homeowners from mortgage fraud and subprime lending by passing my plan to provide counseling to tenants, homeowners, and other consumers so they get the advice and guidance they need before buying a house and support if they get in to trouble down the road. And we will crack down on mortgage professionals found guilty of fraud by increasing enforcement and creating new criminal penalties.

What this agenda to combat urban poverty attempts to do is not easy, and it will not happen overnight. Changing the odds in our cities will require humility in what we can accomplish and patience with our progress. But most importantly, it will require the sustained commitment of the President of the United States, and that is why I will also appoint a new director of Urban Policy who will cut through the disorganized bureaucracy that currently exists and report directly to me on how these efforts are going; on what's working and what's not.

Because in the end, hope is found in what works.

The moral question about poverty in America - How can a country like this allow it? - has an easy answer: we can't. The political question that follows - What do we do about it? - has always been more difficult. But now that we're finally seeing the beginnings of an answer, this country has an obligation to keep trying.

The idea for the Harlem Children's Zone began with a list. It was a waiting list that Geoffrey Canada kept of all the children who couldn't get into his program back when it was just a few blocks wide. It was 500 people long. And one day he looked at that list and thought, why shouldn't those 500 kids get the same chance in life as the 500 who were already in the program? Why not expand it to include those 500? Why not 5000? Why not?

And that, of course, is the final question about poverty in America. It's the hopeful one that Bobby Kennedy was also famous for asking. Why not? It leaves the cynics without an answer, and it calls on the rest of us to get to work. I will be doing exactly that from the first day I become your President, and I ask you all to join me in getting it done. Thank you.

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