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Newsroom

Remarks of Senator Barack Obama to the National Council of La Raza

Miami, FL | July 22, 2007

I have been running for President now for a little over five months. And in that time, I have been inspired by crowds tens of thousands of people strong - many who have come out for the very first political event of their lifetime. We have seen more Americans sign up and contribute so far than any other campaign in history. They are young and old, Republican and Democrat, white, and Black, and Latino.

I'd like to take the all the credit here myself, but as my wife reminds me every day, I'm just not that great.

The real reason that so many people are coming out and signing up is because they see in this campaign the potential for the change Americans are so hungry for. It's not just the kind of change you hear about in slogans or from politicians every few years; it's the kind of bottom-up, grassroots movement that can transform a nation.

La Raza has always represented this kind of movement. You didn't get your start as some top-down interest group in Washington, you got your start standing up for the dreams and aspirations of Latinos in farm fields and barrios all across America.

You got your start almost forty years ago in places like southern California, where farm workers and their children were beaten because they asked for the right to organize - because they believed that picking grapes all day in the hot sun should be rewarded with a decent wage and protection from deadly pesticides.

And when a man named Cesar Chavez saw this injustice, he knew it wasn't right and so he went about organizing those workers. And one fateful day he decided to draw the eyes of the nation to their cause by sitting down for a hunger strike. He went without food for twenty-five days, and at one point he received a telegram from an Atlanta preacher who was busy leading his own strike of sanitation workers all the way in Memphis, Tennessee.

The telegram from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Cesar Chavez said this: "As brothers in the fight for equality, I extend the hand of fellowship and good will and wish continuing success to you and your members... Our separate struggles are really one. A struggle for freedom, for dignity, and for humanity."

Our separate struggles are really one. It was a belief that Dr. King repeated often when he would say that an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. It means that the Civil Rights Movement wasn't just a movement of African-Americans, but Latino Americans, and white Americans, and every American who believes that equality and opportunity are not just words to be said but promises to be kept. The Civil Rights Movement was your movement too, and its unfinished work is still the task of every American.

Our separate struggles are really one. If there's a child stuck in a crumbling school who graduates without ever learning how to read, it doesn't matter if that child is a Latino from Miami or an African-American from Chicago or a white girl from rural Kentucky - she is our child, and her struggle is our struggle.

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It doesn't matter if the injustice involves a brown man who's badgered into proving his citizenship again and again or a black man who's pulled over because the car he's driving is too nice - it's injustice either way and we all have a role in ending it.

Whether you're one of the 45 million Americans without health care in this country, or the one in five African Americans, or the one in three Latinos, it will take all of us to stand up to a drug and insurance industry that spent \$1 billion in lobbying to block health care reform. That's the kind of movement we need in America.

It won't be enough to change parties in this election if we don't also change a politics that has tried to divide us for far too long. Because when we spend all our time keeping score of who's up and who's down, the only winners are those who can afford to play the game - those with the most money, and influence, and power.

That's why right now, the experience we need in the next President is the proven ability to bring people to the table and get things done. We need a leader who's willing to tell the lobbyists and special interests that while they get a seat at that table, the days of them buying every chair are over.

I'm running for President because I have been that kind of leader my entire life.

I was too young to participate in the Civil Right Movement, but I was inspired by leaders like King and Chavez to become a community organizer. Almost twenty-five years ago, I was hired by a group of churches on the South Side of Chicago to help turn around neighborhoods that had been devastated by the closing of nearby steel plants.

I knew that change wouldn't be easy, but I also knew it would be impossible without bringing folks together and building a movement within the community. So I reached out and formed coalitions between Latino leaders and Black leaders on every issue from failing schools to illegal dumping to unimmunized children. And together, we made progress. We set up job training and after school programs, and we taught people on the South Side to stand up to their government when it wasn't standing up for them.

But I didn't stop there. When all the cynics said it wasn't possible, I kept building coalitions and making progress throughout my eight years in the Illinois state Senate.

They told me I couldn't reform a death penalty system that had sent 13 innocent people to death row. But we did that. They told me that trying to pass new racial profiling laws to protect black folks and brown folks would stir up too much controversy. But we did that too. And they doubted whether we could put government back on the side of average people - but we put \$100 million worth of tax cuts in the pockets of the low-income workers and passed health care reform that insured another 150,000 children and parents.

So I want you to remember one thing, because you'll be hearing from a lot of candidates today. When I talk about hope; when I talk about change; when I talk about holding America up to its ideals of opportunity and equality, this isn't just the rhetoric of a campaign for me, it's been the cause of my life - a cause I will work for and fight for every day as your President.

I will be a President who remembers that our separate struggles are really one. I will never walk away from the tough battles or the difficult work of bringing people together. And I will never walk away from the 12 million undocumented immigrants who live, work, and contribute to our country every single day.

There are few better examples of how broken, bitter, and divisive our politics has become than the immigration debate that played out in Washington a few weeks ago.

So many of us - Democrats and Republicans - were willing to compromise in order to pass comprehensive reform that would secure our borders while giving the undocumented a chance to earn their citizenship.

We knew that the American people believe that we are a nation of laws - that we have a right and duty to protect our borders. And we should also crack down on employers who hire undocumented workers so that we can protect jobs and wages.

But the American people also know that we are a nation of immigrants - a nation that has always been willing to give weary travelers from around the world the chance to come here and reach for the dream that so many of us have reached for. That's the America that answered my father's letters and his prayers and brought him here from Kenya so long ago. That's the America we believe in.

But that's the America that the President and too many Republicans walked away from when the politics got tough. Now, there are plenty of people opposed to immigration reform for principled reasons that I happen to disagree with. But this time around, we saw parts of the immigration debate took a turn that was both ugly and racist in a way we haven't seen since the struggle for civil rights.

Well we didn't walk away from injustice then and we won't walk away from it today. I'll keep fighting, and I'll keep attending immigration rallies, and I'll keep believing that we can have a civil debate about immigration where we begin to recognize ourselves in one another. And when I'm President, I will put comprehensive immigration reform back on the nation's agenda and I will not rest until it is passed once and for all.

But you and I know that the struggle we share goes far beyond immigration. We don't expect our government to guarantee success and happiness, but when millions of children start the race of life so far behind only because of race, only because of class, that's a betrayal of our ideals. That's not just a Latino problem or an African-American problem; that is an American problem that we have to solve.

It's an American problem when Latinos are the most likely to be uninsured even though they make up a disproportionate share of the workforce. It's an American problem when one in four Latinos cannot communicate well with their doctor about what's wrong or fill out medical forms because there are language barriers we refuse to break down. It's an American problem that our health care system is broken and it's time to fix it once and for all.

I have a universal health care plan that will cover every American and cut the cost of a typical family's premiums by up to \$2500 a year. It's a plan that lets the uninsured buy insurance that's similar to the kind members of Congress give themselves. If you can't afford that, you'll get a subsidy to pay for it. And it goes further than any other proposed plan in cutting the cost of health care by investing in technology and preventive care, breaking the stranglehold the drug and insurance industries have on the health care market, and helping business and families shoulder the cost of the most expensive conditions so that an illness doesn't lead to a bankruptcy. And I promise you this - I will sign this universal health care plan by the end of my first term in office as your President. Count on it.

It's also time for this country to keep the promise of a world-class education for every child, because it's an American problem when nearly half of all Latino students do not receive a high school diploma. It's an American problem when too many of these students who want to learn English don't have the resources to learn English and are punished as a result.

Let's give our kids everything they could possibly need to have a fighting chance. Let's not pass a law called No Child Left Behind and then leave the money behind. Let's finally invest in what makes the most difference in any child's education - the person standing in the front of the classroom. As President, I will launch a campaign to recruit hundreds of thousands of new teachers across the country, and I'll pay them like the professionals they are. And let's make sure any child who comes here and studies here and does well in school gets the same chance to attend a public college as anyone else. I helped pass the DREAM Act in Illinois, and I will do the same as President.

And there's one other thing we can do. For millions of Latinos and other Americans, the cornerstone of the American Dream is the ability to own your own home. You work hard for it, and you save for it, and you're willing to sacrifice to buy it.

But there is an army of lenders and brokers out there who are ready and willing to take advantage of your hopes and cheat you out of your dream. They lurk in your neighborhoods and sometimes they even come into your churches and they offer you these subprime mortgage loans. They make them sound easy and affordable and they tell you to ignore the fine print and ask you to sign on the dotted line.

Your first couple of payments are ok, but then after months go by, the cost of your monthly payment starts jumping. Then it jumps some more. Pretty soon you're paying almost all of your income on your housing payments. And eventually, you're forced to foreclose on your dream. And the worst part is that the lenders knew this would happen from day one.

A recent report showed that 2.2 million sub-prime loans made in recent years have failed or will end in foreclosure, costing homeowners as much as \$164 billion. Latinos hold up to 40 percent of these mortgages. African Americans hold over half. This is no accident. These loans are discriminatory, they are dishonest, and it's time for us to treat these fraudulent lenders like the criminals that they are.

When I am President, I will make law the legislation I've already introduced that would crack down on lenders and brokers found guilty of fraud by increasing enforcement and creating new criminal penalties.

We'd also do more to protect homeowners from fraud in the first place by providing them counseling so they get the advice they need both before and after they buy their home. We'll even create an easy-to-read, easy-to-understand measurement called the HOME score that lets you figure out exactly what a mortgage will cost you both initially and down the road. No one should get tricked into losing their home so that some loan shark can make a profit, and I will make sure of that as your President. We can do that.

You know, a couple of years ago, right around the time of the first immigration debate, I attended a naturalization workshop at a church in Chicago. I walked down the aisle of the church and met people who were clutching their American flags, waiting to be called up so they could start the long process of becoming citizens.

At one point, a little girl came up to me and asked me for my autograph. She said her name was Cristina, that she was studying government, and wanted to show the autograph to her third grade class. I told her parents they should be proud of her. And as I watched Cristina translate my words into Spanish for them, I thought for a moment about Dr. King's telegram to Cesar Chavez, and I knew that, in the end, our separate dreams are really one as well. It's the dream my father had when he arrived here from Kenya. The dream Cristina's parents had for her. And the dream that I have for my own two daughters.

I chose a career in public service almost twenty-five years ago because each night that I tuck them in, I realize that their chances in life depend on our ability to create a country where what they look like and where they come from has no bearing on what they can become. That's what has guided my life's work, and if you give me the chance, that's exactly the kind of country I will work for as your President. I ask you to give me that chance. Thank you.

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