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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama at Labor Day Rally

Manchester, NH | September 03, 2007

I have been running for President now for a little more than six months. And everywhere we've gone we've seen these huge crowds just like this one. We saw 10,000 in Iowa City. 20,000 in Austin. 20,000 in Atlanta.

It's not just the numbers themselves that are so inspiring. It's the people behind those numbers. They're young and old; black and white, Latino, Asian, and Native American. They're Democrats and Independents and more than a few Republicans. Many are showing up to the very first political event of their lifetime.

The conventional thinking in Washington tells us that we're a country divided into Red States and Blue States; that we're doomed to fight the same tired partisan battles over and over again. They tell us we can't come together to take on big challenges like health care, or energy, or education; that we can't agree on what America should be, so we might as well settle for the way America is right now.

But these crowds tell me something else. They tell me that when it comes to what's wrong with this country, the American people are not the problem. The American people are the answer.

We're here today - you and I - because we believe in what this country can be. In the face of war, we believe there can be peace. In the face of despair, we believe there can be hope. In the face of a politics that's shut us out, that's told us to settle, that's divided us for too long, we believe we can be one people, reaching for what's possible, building that more perfect union.

That's why we're here.

We know we need a new direction. And that change begins with an end to the Bush-Cheney Administration. Their years haven't just been bad years for Democrats. They've been bad years for America.

We've seen the triumph of ideology over reason; of cronyism over competence. We've seen the Constitution of the United States treated as a nuisance instead of the founding document of our democracy. We've seen policies that have widened the divide between Wall Street and Main Street and marginalized organized labor at a time when American workers need a voice most. We've seen fellow citizens abandoned on rooftops after a storm. And we've seen a disastrous war in Iraq that should never have been authorized and never been waged.

But we also know that, as bad as George Bush has been, it's going to take more than a change of parties in the White House to truly turn this country around. George Bush and Dick Cheney may have turned divisive, special-interest politics into an art form, but they didn't invent it. It was there before they got to Washington, and if you and I don't stand up and challenge it, it will be there long after they leave.

And so we face a choice in this election.

Do we continue the cynical math that says it's a winning strategy to divide our country in two, and simply ignore the half that doesn't agree? Or do we find our stake in each other as Americans, united again by a sense of common purpose and a common destiny?

Do we continue the conventional Washington thinking on foreign policy that led us to this tragic war in Iraq? Or do we recognize the challenges of a new world, and engage with friends and foes in a way that restores America's moral leadership and security?

Do we continue to allow lobbyists to veto our progress? Or do we finally put our national interests ahead of the special interests, and address the concerns people feel over their jobs, their health care and their children's future?

That's why I'm running for President of the United States.

Because to meet America's challenges, changing parties isn't change enough. We need something new. We need to turn the page.

There are those who tout their experience working the system in Washington - but the problem is that the system in Washington isn't working for us and hasn't for a long time.

Think about it. We've been talking about the health care crisis in this country for decades. Yet through Democratic and Republican Administrations we've failed to act. And you know why - because the drug and insurance industry has spent over a billion dollars on lobbying in the past ten years alone to block reform. We've heard promises of energy independence for decades, yet every year, the oil and gas lobbyists use their clout and their money to keep us addicted to fossil fuels.

Too many in Washington see politics as a game. And that is why I believe this election cannot be about who can play this game better. It has to be about who can put an end to the game-playing. The times are too serious; the stakes are too high. And the change that's required, this new spirit of responsibility and honesty; of seriousness and sacrifice, starts with you. It starts with millions of people across this country, coming together to demand something better.

I have never seen politics as a game. From the day I decided to become a community organizer on the South Side of Chicago over two decades ago, I have always seen politics as a mission - as the way we hold this country up to our highest ideals. And when we've fallen short of those ideals, it's this sense of mission that has compelled Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs to put aside their differences and push their shoulder against the wheel of history in search of a better day.

It's this sense of mission that led my grandfather to enlist after Pearl Harbor and sent my grandmother to a bomber assembly line. It's what led thousands of young people I'll never know to sit at lunch counters and brave fire hoses so that we all might be free. It's what led my father to keep writing letters until someone answered his prayer and gave him his ticket to America. And it's what led me to those poor neighborhoods in Chicago, so that I could do my part to help folks who had lost jobs and lost hope when the local steel plant closed.

It's politics as a mission. And if you don't spend your whole life in Washington, it becomes easier to remember what this means. The other day I got head to out to California because the Service Employees' Union had organized an event where I would walk in the shoes of one of their members for a day. And so I woke up at five a.m. and met up with this sixty-one-year-old woman named Pauline Beck who was a home care worker. Every day of her life she wakes up and she takes care of two foster children who do not have a family of their own. Then she goes to work and she takes care of an eighty-seven-year-old amputee. And so I went with her to work, and we scrubbed the floors and we did the laundry and cleaned the rooms.

It was one of the best days I've had on the campaign so far. Because it reminded me of what we're doing here. Listening to this humble woman talk about the hardships of her life without a trace of self-pity, glad she could be of some service to somebody, just wanting a little bit more pay to take care of those kids, a little more security for her retirement, maybe a day off once in awhile to rest her tired back, I was reminded that for all the noise and the pettiness coming out of Washington, what holds this country together is this fundamental belief that we all have a stake in each other - that I am my brother's keeper; that I am my sister's keeper. And that must express itself not only in our churches and synagogues or in our personal lives, but in our government too.

Now, when the folks in Washington hear me speak, this is usually when they start rolling their eyes. "Oh, there he goes talking about hope again. He's so naive. He's a hope peddler. He's a hope-monger."

Well I stand guilty as charged. I am hopeful about America. Apparently the pundits consider this a chronic condition, a symptom of a lack of experience.

I used to wonder what they meant, this whole experience argument, because I've been fighting for people as a public servant for over two decades - as a community organizer, a civil rights lawyer, a constitutional law professor, a state Senator, and a U.S. Senator.

But then I came to realize that to this bunch, only the years you spend in Washington count. Only time in Washington translates into wisdom.

I think they are wrong about that. Recent history suggests otherwise. There were a couple of guys named Cheney and Rumsfeld who had two of the longest resumes in Washington and they led us into the worst foreign policy fiasco in our history. Time served doesn't guarantee judgment. A resume does nothing about character.

So let me tell you about a different kind of experience - the experience I bring to this race.

My experience tells me that real change and progress comes not by dividing, but by bringing people together to get things done - like when I worked with police officers and civil rights advocates to reform a death penalty system that had sent thirteen innocent people in Illinois to death row. Or when I worked with Republicans and Democrats to expand health care for 150,000 Illinoisans, or put \$100 million worth of tax cuts in the pockets of working families. Or when I worked with my Republican colleague, Dick Lugar, to pass a law securing dangerous weapons in the old Soviet Union.

My experience tells me that real change and reform come when we're willing to put the people's interests before the special interests and partisan interests. That's what I did in Illinois when I took on money in politics and passed the first ethics reform in twenty-five years, and that's what I did in Washington when I passed a law that earned me the cold shoulder from leaders of both parties - for the first time in history, Washington lobbyists will have to disclose who they're raising money from and who in Congress they're funneling it to.

My experience tells me that real change and security come when we're willing to make foreign policy decisions based not on what's popular in Washington, but what's right for America - based on a real understanding of the world. That's why I resisted the tide in my campaign for the US Senate and opposed the war in Iraq from the start. As we saw then, longevity in Washington is no guarantee of good judgment.

So let's be clear - there are a lot of people who have been in Washington longer than me; who have better connections and go to the right dinner parties and know how to talk the Washington talk. Well I might not have the experience Washington likes, but I believe I have the experience America needs right now. Hope and change are not just the rhetoric of a campaign for me. Hope and change have been the causes of my life. Hope and change are the story of our country. And we're here today to continue that story.

We're here to infuse the old Washington politics with a new sense of mission - to unite people around a common purpose. To rally Americans around a common destiny. We aren't just here to win an election. We are here to transform a nation.

I do not accept that in the richest nation on Earth we have to stand by while 47 million Americans have no health care and millions more are on the verge of bankruptcy because of their medical bills. My mother died of ovarian cancer in the prime of her life and do you know what she was most worried about in those final months? She was between jobs when she was diagnosed and she wasn't sure whether insurance would cover her treatment. So I know what it's like to see a loved one suffer because of a broken health care system. I know that it's wrong. And I know that's not who we are.

When I am President, we will have universal health care in this country by the end of my first term in office. It's a plan that will cover every American and cut the cost of a typical family's premiums by \$2500 a year. And I will not let the drug and insurance companies spend another billion dollars to block reform - because people like my mother shouldn't have to worry about bankruptcy every time they get sick. We're better than that.

I do not accept that we have to keep sending \$800 million a day to hostile nations because of our addiction to foreign oil - a dependency that fuels both sides of the war on terror and is melting the polar ice caps in the bargain. We can meet our moral obligation to future generations and halt the march of global warming.

I have a plan to raise our fuel standards that's won the support of some lawmakers who had never supported raising fuel standards before. And I didn't just give a speech about it in front of some environmental audience in California - I went right to Detroit and said it in front of a group of automakers. Now I have to admit - the room was pretty quiet. But I did it because I don't think we're going to get anywhere in this country by just telling everyone what they want to hear. We have to tell people what they need to hear. We have to tell people the truth. And you shouldn't expect anything less from your President.

I don't accept that we can't give every single child in America a world-class education. We know countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow. But it's bigger than that. The America we believe in isn't a country where millions of children are robbed of their opportunity by failing schools. And the answer isn't just a snappy slogan.

To truly leave no child behind, we have to make a genuine commitment to educational opportunity for all, from cradle to adulthood. This country should be focusing on the most important part of any child's achievement - the person standing at the front of the classroom. As President, I will launch a campaign to recruit an army of new teachers, and we'll pay them better, and give them more support, and help them reach high standards by working with them, not working against them. I will invest in early childhood education so that every child has the best possible start in life. And while we're at it, let's finally make a college degree affordable and available to every American, and bolster our community colleges to help educate and train America's workers. We can do that.

I do not accept that the American Dream is a thing of the past. On this Labor Day, let's give American workers more than a parade. Let's give them policies that actually value their work. Let's provide them with a living wage. Let's allow our unions do what they do best again - organize our workers and lift up our middle-class. And let's stop giving tax breaks to the companies who send them overseas and start giving them to companies who create jobs right here in America. We can do this.

Finally, I do not accept an America that has lost its moral standing in the community of nations. Today there is no greater mission than keeping America safe and restoring America's image in the world.

That starts with ending this war. I opposed the war in Iraq from the start. I said then that Iraq was the wrong battlefield; that we would find ourselves mired in a lengthy civil war, diverting our attention from Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. And I introduced a plan back in January that would have gradually and responsibly removed all combat troops from Iraq by March 30th, 2008. The President vetoed a plan just like this last spring, but we will be debating the war again next week. Now is the time to keep the pressure on all those Republican Senators and Congressmen who continue to support the President's failed course. We can end this war without George Bush. And if we don't, then it will be the first thing I do as President of the United States.

But the change that is needed extends beyond ending the war. To repair the damage, to meet the dangers and seize the opportunities of this new century, the old formulas will not do. We need to turn the page on the Bush-Cheney policy of not talking to leaders we don't like. That doesn't make us look tough. It makes us look arrogant. I'm not afraid that I'll lose a propaganda battle with a bunch of dictators. Strong countries and strong Presidents shouldn't be afraid to talk to our adversaries to tell them where America stands. That's why I will - because that's how tough, principled and smart diplomacy works.

I want to go before the United Nations as President and say, "America's back." It's time for America to lead again. It's time to fight on the right battlefield in rooting out al Qaeda. It's time to lead by building schools in the Middle East that teach math and science instead of hatred. It's time for us to close Guantanamo and restore the right of habeas corpus. It's time to show the world that we are not a country that ships prisoners in the dead of night to be tortured in far off countries. That we are not a country that looks away while innocents are slaughtered in Darfur. That we are not a country that runs prisons which lock people away without ever telling them why they are there or what they are charged with.

That is not who we are.

We are the last, best hope of Earth. We are the nation that liberated a continent from a madman, that lifted ourselves from the depths of Depression, that won Civil Rights, and Women's Rights, and Voting Rights for all our people. We are the beacon that has led generations of weary travelers to find opportunity, and liberty, and hope on our doorstep. That's who we are. And that's who we can be again.

I am reminded every single day that I am not a perfect man. I will not be a perfect President. But I can promise you this - I will always tell you what I think and where I stand. I will be honest with you about the challenges we face. I will listen to you when we disagree. And most importantly, I will open the doors of government and ask you to be involved in your own democracy again.

I know what I'm asking is hard. I know that politics and politicians have disappointed you so many times before, to the point where sometimes it seems easier to just tune out and walk away. But what you have to remember is that when you walk away, the same old politics wins

every time. That's what all the people who benefit from politics as a game are counting on.

That's why we need you. That's why I can't do this alone. I am not just asking you to trust in my ability to change this country - I'm asking you to trust in yourself. In your own instincts. In your own sense of possibility. In your own sense of what's right. I'm asking you to bet on us, on our capacity to do what previous generations have done - to lift our sights, to join together and forge a better future for our children and grandchildren. Make this campaign the vehicle for your hopes and your dreams; for your sense of what America is and what America can be. And if you're willing to work for it and fight for it and bring others to this cause, if after this rally you decide to go sign up twenty more people or volunteer to knock on doors or serve as a precinct captain, then I believe that this time will finally be different from all the rest.

And so I'm asking you - if you believe it's time to challenge the Washington politics that have let us down and shut us out and made us settle; if you believe it's time to restore a sense of mission to our politics and a sense of possibility to America; if you want a country that no longer sees itself as a collection of Red States and Blue States; if you want a President who can lead a United States of America, then I ask you to believe in this campaign; I ask you to believe in yourself, I ask you to believe again in the dream that we call America.

As prepared for delivery

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