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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Opening of Competitiveness Summit

Pittsburgh, PA | June 26, 2008

In a few minutes, we'll open this up to a discussion about the changes that America must make to compete in the global economy. I'm honored to be joined by leaders from government and the grassroots; from business and labor; from academia and the non-profit sector. Because for America to succeed, we'll have to join together to harness the energy and ingenuity of the American people. This morning, I'd like to talk about how we're going to do just that.

For the last three weeks, I've been traveling around the country, talking about how we can change our economy so that it works for the American people. I've also been listening.

I met with parents in Wisconsin who struggle to afford the groceries to let their family eat well, or the gas that takes them to and from work. I talked to a man in Missouri whose wife works two jobs and has arthritis that costs \$1,500 a week to care for. I heard from a student in Minnesota who has done everything that's been asked of her, but worries that she won't be able to take her final tests because she's maxed out her student loans. Stories like these can be found all across the country, because far too many Americans are working hard and doing their part, but still can't keep pace.

It's time for us to recognize that these individual stories connect to a larger American story. All of us have a stake in our common prosperity. When folks are struggling out on Main Street, that pain is going to trickle up to Wall Street. And just as we must provide relief to Americans who are struggling, we also have to recognize that we're failing to put ourselves in a position to compete in the global economy. Our country faces new challenges to our leadership in this young century. Our kids will grow up facing competition from their counterparts in Beijing and Bangalore. If we don't change course, there's no guarantee that the American Dream will be there for my daughters – or your sons – as it was there for us. America risks falling behind.

If we remain dependent on oil from dictators, we'll endanger our security, imperil our planet, pay more at the pump, and sit on the sidelines while the jobs of the future are created abroad.

If we can't give every child in America the chance to get a world-class education, we'll cripple their ability to make a living in a knowledge-based economy, and watch China and India move ahead in the race for the 21st century.

If we can't control skyrocketing health care costs, we'll confront a mounting moral crisis, and a major anchor on the ability of American business to compete.

If we don't rebuild our crumbling roads, rail bridges and electrical grid, we'll see our standard of living suffer, while we leave our communities less safe from terror or natural disaster.

And if we don't invest in and encourage innovation, we could cede America's historic role as the engine of growth, and progress, and discovery for the entire world.

These challenges are real. How we deal with them will shape the prosperity of every single American, and the future of America's leadership in the 21st century. Now, it falls to us to look at these problems, and to see the possibility embedded within them. It falls to us to do what generations of Americans have done before, and to remake the world as it should be.

My opponent in this campaign has served this country with honor, and I look forward to debating him on these issues. Because we have a very different view of the choices that America needs to make. He has supported and would continue – an agenda that has failed to keep pace with the challenges of the 21st



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century. I believe we must move in a new direction.

If we have the courage to commit to change, the American people can not just seize – but shape – the opportunities of the global economy. Together, we can author our own story. Together, we can pursue a 21st century leadership agenda that's focused on five areas: energy, education, health care, infrastructure, and innovation.

Success will not come from Washington – it must come from the dynamism, determination and ingenuity of the American people; through new partnerships between states and cities, the public and private sector; and through the active involvement of the American people. But we also know that for our country to succeed, Washington has to change. Because at moments of great economic transformation, government must serve as a catalyst for change – to leverage all of the sectors of American society that are represented here today.

This can be the moment when we make a truly national effort to end our addiction to oil. Just as Roosevelt invested in an Arsenal of Democracy and Kennedy took us to the moon, we can be the generation that achieves energy security, grows our economy, and saves our planet. American Presidents have been calling for this kind of effort since Nixon. But now is the time to act. We could have made that choice in 2000, but instead we got secret task forces and greater energy dependence. And we've watched as countries like Brazil and Germany have created hundreds of thousands of jobs. We have failed to act, and we've fallen behind.

I've proposed investing \$150 billion in a green energy sector to create five million new jobs – good jobs that can't be outsourced. But this must merely be a spark for American industry and innovators to develop alternatives to oil and gas, and to create a new energy economy. If we do this, the great assembly line manufacturers of the 20th century can turn out cars that run on renewable energy. The dictators who hold our security hostage will see their leverage disappear along with their revenue. The oceans will no longer rise, and our planet will be preserved. That's what we must do as a centerpiece of our competitiveness strategy as a nation.

This can be the moment when we make an historic commitment to education. Because we cannot be satisfied until every child in America – and I mean every child – has the same chance to get a world-class education that we want for our own children.

We need to commit \$10 billion to give every child access to quality, early childhood education. But we also need a 50-state strategy that reaches down to the grassroots. To have successful schools, we need to recruit an army of new teachers, and provide them with better pay and more support – but we also have to develop new curricula and renewed accountability. To lift up our children, we need a national commitment – but we also need parents to get up off the couch, turn off the TV, and to read to their children. And to educate the best workforce in the world, a college education should be the birthright of every American – but we also have to ask our young people to invest in America through service, and we should work with our Community Colleges to provide new skills and lifelong learning. That's what we must do to extend the American Dream.

This can be the moment when we finally come together to make health care affordable and accessible for every single American, and lower costs for all American families.

Here in Pittsburgh, we've seen the advances that can be made when we see the opportunities embedded in providing health care. We can create a future where medical records are electronic, enhancing care and lowering costs. We can invest in new cures and put a new emphasis on prevention, so that we have a healthier and more productive population. We can forge new alliances between business and labor to ensure that workers are covered, and that corporations are no longer saddled with rising costs. That's how we're going to care for our people and help American businesses compete.

This can be the moment when we make a generational commitment to rebuild our infrastructure. That's what Teddy Roosevelt did when he brought together leaders from the public and private sector to plan for 20th century infrastructure. That's what we must do here in the 21st.

Washington can seed this effort. That's why I've proposed putting \$60 billion into a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank to rebuild our roads and bridges, our rail and ports. This must leverage the kind of private investment that can create millions of jobs and remake our communities. Years from now, we could drive on new roads, depend on safe bridges and stronger levees, and connect our cities with high speed rail. We can begin the investment in a smart electrical grid to power electric cars and transmit clean energy across the country.

And we can achieve the simple goal of making sure that every American has access to the high speed broadband – no matter how much money you have, or where you come from, you should have access to this technology. That's what we must do to make sure that America runs on a strong, fair and efficient foundation.

And this can be the moment when we invest in the science and innovation that will shape our future. Because in a technology-driven economy, America must always stay on the cutting edge.

That means reversing a trend where we devote a smaller and smaller share of our national resources to Research and Development. An innovation agenda must commit to funding basic research and making



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the R&D tax credit permanent. It must also exempt start-ups from capital gains taxes, and remove bureaucratic barriers to entrepreneurs – for instance, by making our patent process more efficient and reliable. We need the discoveries of tomorrow to be made in our labs and universities – at Pitt and Carnegie Mellon. We need the success stories of tomorrow – the next Google, or the next Microsoft – to take place here in America.

This agenda is ambitious. It will take resources in the wake of policies that have run up our debt. But the answer to our fiscal problems is not to short-change investments in our ability to compete – investments that are vital to long-term growth. To stop mortgaging our children's future, we need to eliminate waste in existing programs, end the Iraq War, generate revenue by charging polluters for their emissions, and put an end to corporate loopholes and tax cuts for the wealthy. We can have a smarter government that pays its way while investing in our country's future.

That is how Washington must change to become a catalyst for growth. Because in cities and towns across America, I know that the American people are ready to rise to the challenge of a new moment – they just haven't been asked. It's time for that to change. Because there is nothing that Americans can't do when we choose to rise together.

For two hundred and fifty years, that is what has been done here in Pittsburgh. This is where U.S. Steel became the first billion dollar corporation, and turned out more steel at the dawn of the Cold War than the entire Soviet Union. And just as that output built our cities and laid down the rails that connected them, the work that created that wealth was the foundation of a middle class where each generation's opportunities could extend a little further, and each individual's story could advance the larger American story. Many of the steel mills are gone. But this American city has found new opportunity through health care and IT; through finance and universities. Now, we must connect that local innovation and ingenuity to a national strategy.

The American story is never static. But as we move from one chapter to the next, we must always remember that our national greatness is advanced when we act on our fundamental goodness. America succeeds when the playing field is level and open, and people don't fall behind; when government is not an obstacle, but a catalyst for shared prosperity; when we come together to find new ways to expand the horizon of opportunity for each and every American. And with your help, that is the kind of America I want to build as President of the United States.

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