

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks to the National Conference of State Legislatures
March 20, 2009

Thank you so much. Please, everybody have a seat. Thank you so much. It is wonderful to see so many of you, a lot of old friends who I saw on the campaign trail, had a chance to meet all across the country, and I'm glad we're now gathered together to try to actually get something done.

You know, over the last 2 years during the course of this campaign, one of the things that I saw was how dedicated each and every one of you are to making sure that your States and your constituencies are well served by State government. And part of my job as President is to ensure that we're a good partner with you, because you're where rubber hits the road; you're where people actually see the benefits of a good education and high-quality health care, transportation, energy plans that actually make sense.

And so the purpose, the goal of this meeting is to ensure that we are all on the same page, because our folks are counting on it. And it's helpful for me also to talk to you because you guys see things from outside of Washington. And the more I can break out of the bubble, the better off I am.

Over the last 2 days, I've been traveling in California, talking with Americans about the challenges they're facing as a result of this economic crisis. And these are challenges that all of you know very well. You're on the frontlines of this recession. It's your States that are struggling with shrinking revenues; your budgets are being cut; services that your families depend on in a moment of need are being placed under tremendous strain. And as a former State legislator, I know how difficult your work can be and how important it is to have a strong partner in Washington. I want you to know I'm committed to being that kind of partner.

And that's why we're taking unprecedented steps not just to help your States make it through these difficult times, but to make sure that you come out stronger on the other end, more prosperous than you were before. That's the purpose of the budget that I'm submitting to Congress. It's a budget that makes hard choices about where to save and where to spend. Because of the massive deficit we inherited and the cost of this financial crisis, we are having to go through the books line by line, page by page, so that we can cut our deficit in half by the end of my first term and reduce it by \$2 trillion over the next decade.

What we will not cut are investments that will lead to real growth and prosperity over the long term. That's why our budget makes a historic commitment to comprehensive health care reform. That's why it enhances America's competitiveness by reducing our dependence on foreign oil and building on a clean-energy economy. And that's why it makes a downpayment on a complete and competitive education for every child in America from the cradle up through the time that they get a career. In short, our budget will strengthen each of our 50 States for generations to come.

And that's also the purpose of the Recovery Act that I signed into law last month. It's a plan that will not only help States and painful budget cuts, but also make a meaningful difference in the lives of Americans across this country. Because of what we did, there will be teachers in the classroom and police on the beat who otherwise wouldn't be pursuing their essential missions. Because of what we did, neighborhood health clinics are creating jobs and

providing affordable care to those who need it. And because of what we did, 95 percent of hard-working families will receive a tax cut, a tax cut that they'll see in their paychecks starting on April 1st. So altogether we expect to create or save 3.5 million jobs, 90 percent of which are in the private sector.

It's the most sweeping recovery plan in our Nation's history, and with a plan of such size comes an obligation to be vigilant with every dime that we spend. That will require all of us—me, Joe, each of you—to hold yourselves accountable. It will require a new level of transparency in how we invest taxpayer dollars. It will require a new sense of responsibility here in Washington, but also in the 50 States. And that's a standard that we've sought to uphold from the very beginning.

That's why I asked Joe to ensure that we are implementing our Recovery Act quickly and implementing it well. That's why I've appointed a proven and aggressive Inspector General to help prevent waste and fraud before it happens and root it out when it does. And that's why, on the very day I signed our Recovery Act into law, we launched a web site called recovery.gov, so that Americans can see where their tax dollars are going and make sure we're delivering results. And 46 States have launched their own web sites—linked to recovery.gov—to help people keep track of how money is being spent down to the local level.

Today, as part of our continuing efforts to make government more accountable, we're taking the next step in implementing the Recovery Act. I'm issuing a directive that will provide guidelines to Federal agencies for what does and what does not constitute an acceptable use of taxpayer money, guidelines that will help ensure that we are proving ourselves worthy of the great trust the American people have placed in us.

That starts with a fundamental commitment. Decisions about how Recovery Act dollars are spent will be based on the merits. Let me repeat that. Decisions about how Recovery money will be spent will be based on the merits. They will not be made as a way of doing favors for lobbyists.

Any lobbyist who wants to talk with a member of my administration about a particular Recovery Act project will have to submit their thoughts in writing, and we will post it on the Internet for all to see. If any member of my administration does meet with a lobbyist about a Recovery Act project, every American will be able to go online and see what that meeting was about. These are unprecedented restrictions that will help ensure that lobbyists don't stand in the way of our recovery.

And this plan cannot and will not be an excuse for waste and abuse. Whenever a project comes up for review, we're going to ask a simple question: Does it advance the core mission of the Recovery Act? Does it jumpstart job creation? Does it lay the foundation for lasting prosperity?

The initiatives that will get priority will be ones that have demonstrated how they meet this test, initiatives that maximize the number of jobs we are creating so we can get the most bang out of every taxpayer buck, initiatives that help make health care more affordable and rebuild our crumbling roads and bridges or provide other enduring benefits to the American people.

Now, no plan is perfect. And I can't stand here and promise you that not one single dollar will slip through the cracks. But what I can promise you is that we will do everything in our power to prevent that from happening, which is why we're building on the provisions in the Recovery Act to forbid the use of these funds to build things like dog parks. Now, let me be

clear. I don't have anything against dog parks. *[Laughter]* I intend to get a dog. *[Laughter]* What I do oppose is building them with funds from the Recovery Act, because that's not how we'll jumpstart job creation, and that's not how we'll put our economy on a firmer footing for the future.

And because I'm not willing to ask all of you to do what I'm not willing to do myself, we're going to set an example here in the White House. Now, I'll give you an example. Recently, a proposal was submitted requesting Recovery Act funds to modernize old electrical and heating systems in the East Wing of the White House. Now, this is a much-needed project that's long overdue, and I hope Congress funds it in the future. But because this request does not meet the high standards that I have set, because it will not create many jobs or advance our recovery, it will not be funded under the Recovery Act.

So the rules I'm putting in place today will help create a new culture of accountability. And I'm pleased that the U.S. Conference of Mayors has committed to joining us in this effort. I don't need to remind you that the American people are watching what we do. They need this plan to work. They're skeptical, and understandably, because they've seen taxpayer dollars frittered away before. They expect to see their hard-earned money spent efficiently. And this extraordinary moment requires extraordinary responsibilities on all our part. There's little room for error here, especially in a time for crisis.

You know, during World War II, a largely unknown Senator grew concerned that waste, corruption, and scandal threatened to choke off our Nation's war efforts before they'd truly begun. Congress didn't think a whole lot of the matter and granted him far less money than he'd asked for, but this little-known Member of Congress named Harry Truman had the courage of his convictions. So he traveled all across the country, gathered information, holding hundreds of hearings and issuing dozens of reports, and when it was all over, he had saved billions of dollars and deterred corruption and bolstered America's confidence in the conduct of the war.

What Harry Truman understood was that spending tax dollars wisely isn't just about keeping our books straight, it's about fulfilling our obligations as keepers of the public trust. And while I do not know how long the road to recovery will be, I do know that we're in a fight right now to get this economy back on track. And if we act with the same sense of responsibility that Harry Truman showed during wartime all those years ago, and if we build a partnership that stretches from the statehouse to the White House, then we'll turn this economy around and the American people will emerge from this crisis stronger than we were before.

So thank you very much. I'm looking forward to working with you. Thank you, guys.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:55 p.m. in Room 350 of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Vice President Joe Biden; and Interior Department Inspector General Earl E. Devaney, Chair, Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included remarks by Vice President Joe Biden.

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