

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

**Remarks at a Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Dinner in
Rockville, Maryland**

October 18, 2010

Good evening, everybody. Thank you so much. It is wonderful to see all of you. Rajeev and Seema and your wonderful children, thank you for your extraordinary hospitality and bringing your mom, who I love. It's wonderful to see her. And, Seema, your parents—it's wonderful to meet them as well.

I want to, before I begin, just say that, Maryland, you are graced with two of the finest Senators in the United States Senate in Barbara Mikulski and Ben Cardin. We are so proud of them. Everything that I've been able to accomplish over the last couple of years has been because I had just great partners. And these are two of the best partners, and they were also wonderful colleagues when I was in the United States Senate. And so I am just truly blessed to have them with me.

Rajeev's introduction was so eloquent, I almost don't want to add to it. But I think that he touched on the essence of what this upcoming election is about and what this historical moment is about.

Most of us here came from someplace else, or our parents came from someplace else, or our grandparents, our great-grandparents came from someplace else. And they were inspired by a particular idea, this idea of America. As wonderful as the land is here in the United States, as much as we have been blessed by the bounty of this magnificent continent that stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific, what makes this place special is not something physical. It has to do with this idea that was started by 13 Colonies that decided to throw off the yoke of an empire and said, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that each of us are endowed with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

And that idea, over the course of 200-plus years, evolved into an understanding—not just here in America, but around the world—that in the United States, if you were willing to make the effort, if you're willing to apply the energy that your parents applied when they came here, if you were willing to make sacrifices for the future and not just think about short-term gain, that somehow it would be possible for you to achieve dreams that someplace else you might never imagine possible.

And that American Dream is what inspired me and, I suspect, inspired Barbara and Ben, to get into public service, because what we understood was that although the essence of the American Dream is that each individual can succeed, what underwrites that dream is also the understanding that we're all in this together and that it's incumbent upon us to make sure that we're creating the climate, the environment, the opportunity for everybody to succeed, not just some people to succeed. There's no caste system in the United States of America. Anybody who is willing to make the effort can succeed.

And part of why this is such an important historical moment is, frankly, over the last decade, that idea that ended up creating this emerging middle class that became the engine of our economic growth and the envy of the world has been pretty hard hit. Obviously, it's been hard hit by this recession, but I want to go before the recession. The period from 2001 to 2009,

every middle class family lost about 5 percent of its income. During that same period, job growth was more sluggish than it had been at any time since World War II. There was a sense on the part of, I think, a lot of ordinary Americans that no matter how hard they tried, it was becoming more and more difficult to make it.

And the things that helped to make America the envy of the world—our infrastructure, our education system, our health care systems—all those things had become—had begun to break down in pretty substantial ways, so that whereas we used to rank number one in the proportion of college graduates, by 2009, 2010, we ranked 9th or 10th. Our students now rank—15-year-olds typically rank 21st in science and 25th in math in the world, where we used to be number one.

Our health care system was broken, wildly expensive, leaving 30 million without health insurance and burdening families, businesses, and the Federal Treasury, as well as State treasuries.

Our infrastructure, which used to be the best in the world, suddenly we have bridges that are falling apart, airports that are outdated and making a very unpleasant experience for those of you who still have to travel through commercial flights. I've got to admit I've got my own plane now, so it's a little easier for me. [*Laughter*]

And so when I ran for President 2 years ago, we already knew that we had to change direction, that we had to deal with some of these fundamental challenges that we've been putting off for years: education, energy, health care, infrastructure. We had to make sure that we were creating an environment in which people could, in fact, succeed, and they were rewarded for their hard work and their responsibility, not for reckless risk-taking, not for short-term thinking.

This was all before the crisis hit—the worst financial crisis that we've experienced since the Great Depression. So my first job, Barbara's first job, Ben's first job when we got back in—when I was sworn in, in January of 2009, we had lost 4 million jobs in the 6 months that preceded me being sworn in; 750,000 the month that I was sworn in; 600,000 the month after that; 600,000 the month after that. My first job was to stop the crisis.

And we did that. And sometimes that took some unpopular decisions. But I wasn't elected to do what was easy, I was elected to do what was right. And so since that time, over the course of 20 months, whereas we were—the economy was shrinking when I took office, the economy is now growing again. Where we were losing jobs, we've now seen 9 consecutive months of public sector job growth—of private sector job growth.

So not only did we deal with the crisis, but we also started finally making progress on all those things that we've been putting off. So Rajeev talked about clean energy and the efforts of his company. One of our first tasks in the Recovery Act was figuring out how do we not only boost demand and make sure that we're dealing with this crisis, but also how do we invest in some long-term thinking. And so we made the largest clean energy investment in our history.

Then we said if we really want to jump-start education, what do we need to do? And we started something called Race to the Top, that is now investing in competition in States all across the country, making sure that they're focused on proven mechanisms to boost math learning and science learning and make sure that we've got the best possible teachers in the classroom.

And then we said, well, how do we make sure that every young person can go to college once they get through that high school? And we shifted billions of dollars that were going to banks in the form of unwarranted subsidies, and we took that money and we made sure that that money was going directly to student loans and Pell grants so that young people would never feel as if they were barred from opportunity simply because they didn't come from a wealthy family.

And, yes, then we took on health care because we understood that if we didn't start taking it on now we would continue to see a system in which we were subsidizing a system that wasn't working for too many Americans and too many businesses. And because of those efforts we now can say to the American people that if you don't have health insurance you're going to be able to get health insurance that's affordable. And if you do have health insurance, then insurance companies are going to have to treat you fairly. And in the process, we're going to start making the system overall more efficient so that suddenly doctors and hospitals are thinking in more innovative ways about how we can improve system deliveries, and we suddenly are investing in health information technology, so instead of having multiple tests, you can take one test and have it e-mailed to every doctor and specialist that you're dealing with, and that over time we're going to bring down the cost of health care for everybody.

All these efforts we made because we had folks like Ben and Barbara there who were willing to think not about the next election, but about the next generation. And that's a hard thing for politicians to do because we live in an environment in which politics has become meaner and coarser than it used to be; where millions of dollars of negative ads are thrown at candidates; where, frankly, what used to be a spirit of occasional bipartisanship in order to get things done has now given way to constant partisanship, so that over the last 2 years, we've had Republicans not supporting us even on issues that they used to sponsor simply because these were issues that we supported.

So it's not easy for elected officials to think long term. And yet, because of the challenges we face, because of the emergency situation we were in, that's what we saw a whole bunch of legislators do. And I couldn't be prouder of what we accomplished together over the last 2 years.

What we also know, though, is our work is unfinished. We were just talking about clean energy. The fact of the matter is, we still don't have an overarching energy policy that makes sense for the future—for the 21st century. So we've got to make more investments in innovation, in research and development in clean energy, because I want the solar panels and the wind turbines and the biodiesel and other clean energy approaches that are available. I want those investments made right here in the United States of America. And in order for us to do that, I've got to have a Congress that again is willing to think long term.

We've still got a lot more work to do with respect to education reform. And when I see my Republican colleagues suggesting that we might cut education spending by 20 percent, at a time when I know that China and South Korea and Germany are not cutting education by 20 percent. They understand this is going to be the single most important determinant of how well we're able to compete in the 21st century. And I know that I've got to have some partners in Congress who understand what's at stake.

We've got to rebuild our infrastructure. We just got started with the Recovery Act. Even though I know that there's a lot of road work being done all across the country and here in Maryland as well, we still have \$2 trillion worth of infrastructure that's crumbling, unattended to, that we're going to have to rebuild. And what an opportunity—at a time when interest rates

are low, when contractors are coming in under budget, people are desperate for work, construction workers have been laid off because the housing bubble burst—for us to put those folks back to work doing the work that America needs done.

We've still got to get control of our deficit in a serious way. And that's going to require more than just platitudes, it's going to require tough choices. And the question is going to be do we have people in place who are making those choices not based on what's politically expedient or what special interests are lobbying for, but rather what's good for America over the long term.

So we've got a lot of work to do. I try to explain to folks who, in a town like Washington where everybody is watching the polls day to day and everybody is obsessed with sort of short-term thinking, I try to explain, we're just in the first quarter. We've got a big chunk of the game left to play. And I need to have teammates who are thinking about that story that Rajeev told, that essential part of America that we have to make sure is there for the next generation, for these young people, an America in which everybody has opportunity.

And that's what this election is about. That's the choice in this election. Now, this is a difficult political environment right now. Unemployment is still 9.6 percent. And that means it doesn't matter how good of a job you've done, people want to know what are you going to do now.

And the way I've been describing it around the country, it's as if the Republicans drove the economy into the ditch. And Barbara and Ben and me, we've gone into the ditch, and we've been pushing the car out. [Laughter] And we finally got the car out, and the Republicans suddenly tap us on the shoulder and say, "Well, we want the keys back," after not having lifted a finger to help us get the car out of the ditch. And we have to explain to them, "Well, you know, you can't have the keys back because you don't know how to drive." [Laughter] You can drive with us. You can—we'll have to put you in the backseat. [Laughter]

But it's still a challenging environment. And so the support that you're providing is going to make a difference in us making the case for why we've got to keep moving forward, why we can't go backwards, why we can't go back to the economic policies that resulted in this mess in the first place.

And I am absolutely confident that if all of you are talking to your friends and talking to your neighbors and talking to your coworkers, if we have the resources to be able to get our message out—not just here in Maryland, but all across the country—that the American people, they still want to dream big. They still believe in that story that Rajeev told because they know that it was true for their family as well. It's been true for generations of Americans.

I'll close just by telling a quick story about the highlight not just of my day but probably of my week, maybe of my month.

We hosted a science fair today at the White House. This is the first time that we'd ever hosted a science fair at the White House. And the reason we did it was because I kept on having over these championship basketball teams and football teams. We had the Alabama Crimson Tide. We had the New Orleans Saints. We had the Los Angeles Lakers. And it's a lot of fun having these great sports teams come by. And I said, but how about all these kids who are involved in science and math and engineering? Why aren't we celebrating them?

So we hosted this science fair. And they actually set up exhibits in the State Dining Room. And this was just a sampling of some of the young people that we'd invited. And you walk

through, and at each booth, you met the most amazing young people you would ever care to meet.

There was a team from Tennessee that had designed a self-powered water filtration plant. It had a water wheel on it, and it ran the battery that then filtered the water. And they explained that up in the Appalachian regions, a lot of homes still didn't have clean water and this was a cheap way to do it. For a thousand bucks, you could provide all the water that 60 or 70 families needed. Just designed it—high school kids.

You had robots that were running around doing all kinds of things. [*Laughter*] And there was a family—young children who had emigrated from Turkey that were now in public schools here, and they had designed a whole town that would be more energy efficient and had created a whole model for how it could be done.

And then there was this—the last person I spoke to was a young woman, looked like she was of Chinese heritage, lived in Dallas, 16 years old. When she was a freshman in high school, she studied biology and became interested in life sciences and became interested in cancer research. So she decided during the summer to teach herself chemistry—[*laughter*—taught herself chemistry and designed as a science project exploration of the development of a new cancer drug, based on some experimental cancer drugs that are currently being put together that involve injecting the drug and then it's activated by light. And it allows a more localized treatment that isolates the cancer cells—kills the cancer cells, but leaves the healthy cells untouched.

And the problem is clinical trials and treatments have shown that it's okay for skin cancer and other diseases where they're close to the surface, but it's harder to penetrate. Bottom line is she decided she was going to design a new drug that would work better for harder-to-reach cancers, having taught herself chemistry—[*laughter*—at 16 years old.

She went on to win the international science competition. And now she and her teacher, her high school science teacher, are being approached by laboratories all across the country who want to collaborate with them in thinking about this new potential breakthrough cancer drug.

So I'm talking to her, pretending like I understand everything that she's saying. [*Laughter*] And I'm thinking to myself, think about what this means. You've got the portrait of Lincoln in the State Dining Room looking down over us. You've got an African American President named Barack Obama. You've got a young Chinese American girl, 16 years old, who is designing cancer drugs, having taught herself chemistry in high school. That idea of America is alive and well. But we have to nurture it, and we have to sustain it.

And for all the meanness of our political season and the yelling and nonsense that we see day in and day out on television, that is something that is worth remembering, because I think sometimes during difficult times, some of us may get discouraged or lose heart.

I don't want you to be discouraged. Just think about those young people, think about the young people who are here. Think about Rajeev and his family and Seema and her family, and think about Barbara and Ben and their families, when they emigrated. That story continues. We just have to build on it. We have to have confidence in it.

And we have to remember that as long as we're unified as opposed to divided, as long as we think towards the future and not just toward the present, that America will prosper and that the 21st century will be the American century, just as the 20th was.

Thank you so much, everybody. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:03 p.m. at the Sharma residence. In his remarks, he referred to Rajeev Sharma, chief executive officer, ABSi Corporation, and his wife Seema; White House Science Fair student participants Mathilda Lloyd of Kingston, TN, Samuel Snodgrass and Sonja Solomon of Oak Ridge, TN, and Amy Chyao and her chemistry teacher, Vashka Desai, of T.H. Williams High School in Plano, TX. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 19.

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