

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Fundraiser

May 16, 2011

Thank you, everybody. Thank you. Well, it is wonderful to see so many old friends and a few new friends here. Let me, first of all, say that you don't have to sleep my campaign, but the eating and breathing part I agree with. *[Laughter]*

Let me tell you, I feel extraordinarily confident, in part because of the great friends here who—some of you have been with me since 2007, when nobody could pronounce my name. *[Laughter]* I also feel enormous confidence because we have an extraordinarily dynamic new DNC chair in Debbie Wasserman Schultz. And I think she is going to do an outstanding job. So we are very proud of her.

I want to spend most of my time just having a conversation with you. But I thought maybe I'd tell you a little bit about the trip that I took today. I went to Memphis, Tennessee. And some of you may know Memphis has gone through some tough times. They had flooding that had displaced about 1,500 people. And so we had a chance to meet with some folks whose homes had been overrun with water. And they described—apparently, with water comes frogs and snakes. I didn't realize the snake part. Michelle would not have been happy—*[laughter]*—to know that there were snakes along with this water.

But what was remarkable was how the community had come together and they had organized over a hundred churches to help take people in. And we met with some of the first-responders, some of whom were volunteers. And it was an extraordinary testimony to the American spirit.

And then I gave a commencement address at Booker T. Washington High School. Now, Booker T. Washington has some very prominent alumni and has been an institution in Memphis for quite some time. But the community surrounding Booker T. had fallen on hard times, in south Memphis. And just a few years ago they had a 50-percent graduation rate. Half the kids dropped out of school. This is one of the toughest neighborhoods in the country. I think—has the highest poverty rate of any place, just about, in Tennessee, one of the highest crime rates in the Nation.

And every kid that you met had some extraordinary story. The young man who introduced me—his father had been killed when he was 4 years old after getting shot 22 times. He was born with a hole in his heart and had to have it repaired over a lengthy period of time when he was very young.

And every young person you met—single mom, struggled, lived in housing projects in Memphis. But because of a dynamic principal, because of some of the reforms that had been initiated in Tennessee, supported by the work we're doing at the Federal Government, they had now lifted their graduation rate to 90 percent.

They had started organizing AP courses in math and science in the school. And I will tell you, I could not have been more moved or prouder to see these young people receive their diplomas, because you knew how hard they had worked and how much they had overcome to get to where they were.

And it speaks to something that Debbie mentioned, which is what our vision of the country is. I gave a budget speech a while back, and I made the point that the budget debates that we're having right now are not just about numbers. It's about deficit; it's about debt; it's about how we organize a government that lives within its means. And that's absolutely critical. It's, by the way, as critical for progressives as it is for anybody, because if we want to have a strong foundation for us to provide opportunity in the future, we've got to make sure that we got our deficit and our debt under control.

But part of what this budget debate is also about is what's our vision for America. Who are we as a people? Who are we as a nation? And what I explained was, is that in the America that I want to see 20 years from now, 30 years from now, 40 years from now, we are building on the basic precept that anybody in this country can make it if they try. That Malia and Sasha will make it, but those kids that I spoke to today, they'll make it too. That your children will make it, but those kids in Anacostia will also have a chance.

And in order for us to make sure that that opportunity is available for everyone, it means we're going to have to make ourselves more competitive, because we now face a 21st-century economy that is not like the economy that we grew up in. And it means we're going to have to make investments in education and step up our game and increase our college graduation rates. It means we've got to rebuild our infrastructure. We used to have the best infrastructure in the world, and we no longer do. And that will put us over the long term at a competitive disadvantage. And by the way, we can put a lot of people to work, doing the work that America needs done, rebuilding roads and bridges, but also broadband lines and a smart grid and high-speed rail.

It means that we've got to make sure that we are investing in basic science and research to maintain our competitive edge over the long term. It means that we have a safety net that is smart and lean and efficient, but is there for people, so that if they've worked hard all their lives, by the time they arrive at their golden years they know that they've got health care that they can count on, and they know that they've got a basic floor that Social Security provides.

It means that we have an energy policy so that our economy is not subject to the whims of the spot oil market. It means we've got an immigration system that works for all of America, one that observes our tradition as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants.

Now, we've made extraordinary strides over the last 2 years in moving the country in that direction. We averted a great depression because of the actions we took. We made sure that we have an auto industry that has now turned a profit—all three Big 3 automakers—and hired back workers that nobody thought was possible. We have made extraordinary progress in investing in clean energy—largest investment in clean energy in our history.

We've made the largest investment in education in our history. We haven't just put more money into our education system, but we've demanded accountability and reform, and in some cases, broken some china within the Democratic Party, saying that this is too important for us to be held back by dogma and ideology.

We've removed 100,000 troops from Iraq and made sure that we've got a strategy in Afghanistan that will allow us to transition to Afghan lead, and that means then that we can focus not only on the extraordinary opportunities that present themselves in the Middle East, but also focus on rebuilding here at home.

And along the way we've made sure that you can serve in our military regardless of who you love and made sure that we had two strong women on the Supreme Court, because you can never have enough women on the Supreme Court.

So I'm extraordinarily proud of what we've accomplished. But we've got more work to do. Even on the things that we've already accomplished—like financial regulatory reform, to make sure that we don't have the kind of financial meltdown that we almost experienced in 2008—we've got to implement that law.

On health care, we achieved what had eluded this country for a hundred years: putting in place a structure so that nobody will go bankrupt when they get sick, everybody has access to affordable health care. But we've got to make sure that it gets implemented and that we follow through.

And so, when I spoke at Grant Park back in what seems a long time ago—[laughter]—I had no gray hair back then—[laughter]—I told everybody that wasn't the end, that was the beginning. We're just a quarter of the way through, and we've got to make sure that we finish our task.

We've got to make sure that when we talk to our kids and when we talk to our grandkids, we can say, you know what, we ran the race, we finished the job. And we won't have solved every problem in this country and we can rest assured that that next generation will have challenges that we can't even imagine yet, but we will be able to say to them with conviction that we are passing on to them an America that is stronger and more vibrant, that is as compassionate and generous, and can still do big things, the kind of America that all of us imagine.

And that's worth working for. That's worth fighting for. And I'm ready to fight alongside with you. All right? Thank you very much, everybody. Good. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:59 p.m. at the St. Regis Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Alisha Kiner, principal, Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis, TN.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Democratic National Committee fundraiser.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Kagan, Elena; Kiner, Alisha; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Sotomayor, Sonia M.; Wasserman Schultz, Debborah; Wasserman Schultz, Deborah.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, repeal; Budget, Federal : Deficit and national debt; Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Improvement; Communications : Broadband technology; Democratic Party : Democratic National Committee; District of Columbia : Democratic Party event; Economy, national : Financial regulations, modernization efforts; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Poverty rate, increase; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : High school dropout rate; Education : Postsecondary education :: College dropout rate; Education : Standards and school accountability; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: Promotion efforts; Energy : Infrastructure and grid improvements; Energy : National energy policy; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Immigration and naturalization : Reform; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Judiciary : Supreme Court :: Associate Justices; Natural disasters : Tennessee, flooding; Science and technology : Global competitiveness;

Social Security and retirement : Social Security program; Tennessee : Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis; Tennessee : President's visit; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts.

DCPD Number: DCPD201100356.