

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Video Teleconference and a Question-and-Answer Session in Chicago, Illinois

August 3, 2011

The President. Hey, guys. How are you? I am beaming in from Chicago. We're having a little birthday celebration in my hometown. But I just want to say thank you to all of you. I can't think of a better group of folks to spend my birthday with.

You may hear the 'L' train in the background. It's passing right next to us. You know, when we started this whole journey back in 2008, the one thing that I was clear about was that this was not going to be about me. This was going to be about us. It was going to be about the values we hold dear as Americans. It was going to be about grassroots folks being empowered, talking about how we can create jobs in our community and improve our schools and make sure our kids have opportunities to go to college and how people can retire with dignity and respect. And those bread-and-butter issues were not going to be settled in Washington. They were going to be settled on the ground, in neighborhoods. And as somebody who cut my teeth as a community organizer, I knew that nothing was more powerful than the American people when they make common cause and they decide that they want to bring about change.

And what was true in 2008 is just as true today. We've obviously been through a lot of battles over the last 2½ years dealing with one of the worst recessions in our history and certainly one of the toughest economic situations in my lifetime. But despite all that, what we've been able to do is to work to make sure that the economy has started recovering. We were able to save over a million jobs through our intervention in the auto industry. We were able to finally get health care done so that families were more secure. We were able to make sure that things like "don't ask, don't tell" got ended and that we were going to make sure that ordinary folks were benefiting from tax cuts, small businesses were benefiting. All those things we could not have done had it not been for you.

And so as we gear back up to fight some tough battles—and you saw this week how tough some of these battles are going to be—it is absolutely critical that all of you stay involved.

And so I want to thank everybody at these house parties, but I want to urge all of you to get involved as a team to start going out not only spreading the message, but also listening to people and finding out what's on their minds and figuring out how we can engage them and get them involved. And that's where these neighborhood teams are so important. We're already had contact with 42,000 individuals face to face across the Nation because of the teams that are activated in the States that are represented on this phone call. We have had 2 million calls made to folks all across the country, contacting them, listening to their concerns, and finding out how they want to get involved in this campaign.

But this is always easier to do as a team and as a group than it is for folks to do this individually. Obviously, I want you to talk to your friends and your family and the Republican uncle that you got who isn't persuaded yet, and you corner him at an event, and you talk issues at the workplace, around the water cooler, having conversations with friends of yours about why it's so important for them to be engaged.

All that's important, but what's most important is when you guys as a team think about your neighborhoods and all the people that may have gotten turned off to politics, may be

disillusioned, maybe are going through a tough time because of this difficult economy. When they know their neighbors, their friends, folks who are—they see at parent-teacher night, when those folks see you, you're the best ambassador we could have. And when you go out as a team, it's going to strengthen your capacity to move people in a direction that could bring about the change we want.

So I just want to emphasize to you how important you are, and I hope that you use this house party, in addition to having some cake—I don't know if you guys have party hats—but in addition to having a good party, I hope you guys talk about how your neighborhood teams can get together and really do some great work on the ground.

We're in for a long battle. We've got 16 months in which we're just going to have to be knocking on doors, making phone calls, turning out voters. But it starts now. It builds now. And it starts with you.

So thank you, everybody, for being part of this. And I think I'm going to get a chance to answer a couple questions before I sign off.

Organizing for America Deputy Director Jeremy Bird. Excellent. Mr. President, thank you so much for joining us. Our first question we're going to take from North Carolina, in Greensboro, North Carolina. And you'll be able to take the question live.

2012 Presidential Campaign/Tax Reform/Military Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan

Q. Hi, Mr. President. Happy birthday!

[*At this point, "Happy Birthday" was sung.*]

Q. It's such a great honor—I'm sorry?

The President. I said you all have great voices.

Q. Oh, thank you. We do our best. It's such a great honor to continue the great work we started in 2008. I want to continue to do great work for you for the next year and a half. While I'm out there canvassing, though, I have difficulty answering some of the detailed questions in regards to taxes and the wars. As one of the best organizers I know, which is you, Mr. President, what type of advice do you have for someone like me?

The President. Well, first of all, I just want to thank all of you guys for the great work you're doing, and I can't wait to see you guys at the convention in North Carolina. It is going to be absolutely outstanding.

But a couple things I'd say. First of all, when you go out and talk to people, I want to make sure that everybody understands you've got to listen as much as you talk. So part of what people want to know is, is that they're being heard. What are their concerns? What are—what's keeping them up at night? What would they like to see happen in Washington?

So making sure we listen, that's really important. The second thing is that we always have to talk about values. People are concerned about issues, but they also want to know what do we stand for. And so if somebody asks about taxes, nobody is really interested in hearing what precise marginal tax rate change would you like to see in the Tax Code. What they want to know is that our campaign stands for a fair, just approach to the Tax Code that says everybody has to chip in and that it's not right if a hedge fund manager is being taxed at a lower rate than his or her secretary. And so that's a values issues: Is the Tax Code fair?

If somebody asks about the war, whether it's Iraq or Afghanistan—if it's Iraq, you have a pretty simple answer, which is all our folks are going to be out of there by the end of the year. If it's Afghanistan, you can talk about—look, we think it's time for us to transition to Afghan lead and rebuild here at home. So again, it's a values issue: Where are we prioritizing our resources?

I think the key is not to get too bogged down in detail, but having said that, the last point I'd make is, it's Jeremy's job to make sure that you guys have good talking points and know the answers to some of these questions. And so when your neighborhood teams start forming, on any given issue, every single week, you should be getting sort of updates in terms of what is going on in Washington. We're going to be rolling out plans to improve our infrastructure and put construction workers back to work. We're going to be rolling out plans to make sure that we continue the payroll tax cut that's put \$1,000 in the pockets of every American on average. So we'll have a bunch of issues, and those will change week to week. And you should be able to get the kind of information that you need that at least gives you enough of a sense of what we're doing and what we care about that you can answer these questions intelligently.

And you know, the last point I'd make: Sometimes it's not so bad to say, "I don't know." So if somebody asks you something about, well, where does the President stand on Cyprus—*[laughter]*—there's nothing wrong with you saying, "I'm not sure, but here's what I can promise you: I'll find out an answer, and we'll make sure to call you back and give you an answer." And people appreciate that. They don't expect you to know the ins and outs of every single policy. But they do expect that you're going to treat them with courtesy and that you're going to get back to them if you don't know the answer to something.

All right? Thank you, guys.

Q. Thank you so much!

Mr. Bird. Thank you, North Carolina. Mr. President, we're going to take one more question, and this question comes from Maureen, who's calling in from Shaker Heights in Ohio. And we're going to turn it over to Maureen and her house party right now.

Maureen.

2012 Presidential Campaign

The President. Hey, Maureen!

Q. Hello. Happy birthday.

The President. Thank you.

Q. I have a question for you. All right, in 2008, I went door to door with my father and with you, and we had a great time. In 2012, I'm going to be recruiting others, and I want them to help me knock doors. And if you were asking someone to volunteer, how would you ask them?

The President. You know, first of all, Maureen, thank you to everybody in Shaker Heights, and thanks to everybody in Ohio for the unbelievable work you guys have already done. That's how we won Ohio.

But I think the main thing is to give people a sense that this campaign is about them and not about just electing a President. It's about being part of a community and going out there

and talking to your fellow members of your community about what values you care about. So make sure that people feel ownership over the process.

And also, make it fun. I mean, I think that if you say to folks, you know what, we're going to go door to door, but at the end of it, we're all going to get together and have a picnic, or come over to your house and talk about the issues that are important to us, and let's bring some kids along, and make it a community event, that makes it a lot more effective.

So I think that asking people to get engaged because the future is going to be determined by this election. We've already seen over this last week just how different the visions are of the two parties in terms of where we should take this country. I think it's very clear who's going to be looking out for working families, who wants to invest in things like education, who wants to make sure that we've got strong social insurance programs like Medicare and Social Security that are going to look after people, but also how do we maintain those in a responsible way.

So you can make the pitch saying, this is really an important moment in our history; we've got to get involved right now. But you also want to make it fun and make them feel like they're part of something larger. A lot of folks just respond to wanting to be with their friends and doing something interesting.

And if you do that, I guarantee you won't get 100 percent takeup because people are busy and they may not be able to go every time. But as the people at your house party know, it turns out it's actually pretty fun to spend some time with people and work on issues that you care about.

So I couldn't be more appreciative of you guys, and I'm really very grateful.

All right, Maureen? Good luck.

Q. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you, guys.

Q. Happy birthday!

2012 Presidential Campaign

Mr. Bird. All right. Mr. President, we'll take one last question, and then we can conclude. Our question came from the question-and-answer pile, from Grand Rapids, Michigan. And the question was, what's the most important thing we as volunteers can do to further your campaign?

The President. Well, we've already talked about it. The most important thing you can do is to be engaged and to reach out to your circle of friends and family, not to try to give them just a laundry list of things that we've already done, but to listen to them and give them a sense that they can make a difference if they get involved.

This democracy works when people get involved. This democracy works when people are paying attention. And this democracy works when people are joining together to make their voices heard. And that's what all of you are all about.

The more you guys are out there engaging people, talking to people, listening to them, asking their ideas, the more this is a bottom-up as opposed to a top-down operation.

One of the great things in 2008 was folks were just starting their own organizations. We had folks in Idaho who just decided out of the—we're going to start a Idaho for Obama. And

we didn't have any staff there, we didn't have any money. And yet they were able to organize an 18,000-person rally just out of their own energy and input, and they owned this thing.

And that's the thing I want to emphasize to all of you. You own this campaign. You own this country. And if you use that power that you've got, then we're going to be able to continue to get all the things done that we want to get done. I know that over the last 2½ years there have been times where people have been frustrated. This past week was a frustrating week. But think about all we've accomplished together. We've been able to start turning around this economy. We've been able to get health care passed. We've been able to make sure that there's an equal day's pay for an equal day's work. We've been able to make sure that children were able to get health insurance that didn't have it before. We've been able to end this war in Iraq in a responsible way.

And so that should give us confidence that we can make happen all the things that are still undone, whether it's making sure that the economy is growing faster and creating more jobs to getting immigration reform passed, to making sure that we've got an energy policy that makes sense in this country and making sure that we've got a Tax Code that's fair and that's just and that we're dealing with our deficits and debt in a responsible way, and it's not all on the backs of middle class families.

Those are things that I know we can accomplish, but this election is going to be a seminal election, in some ways maybe more important than the last one. And with your voices, I'm absolutely confident that we not only can win, but more importantly, we can deliver the change that's needed for the American people.

So I've got to go downstairs. I'm going to have to—there's a big crowd wanting to sing me "Happy Birthday." I don't know if there's cake down there. But I know they've been waiting for me. But I want to say to all of you, thank you for your good wishes. Thanks for your courage. Thanks for your determination and tenacity. And I'm going to see you all, hopefully, when I get to the various States and cities and towns where you guys are gathered.

All right? Have fun. See you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:59 p.m. at the Aragon Entertainment Center. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on August 4. Audio was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

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