

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks at a Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Reception in Chicago, Illinois

May 22, 2014

Hello, hello, hello! Hello, everybody. Well, it's good to be in Chicago. Good to be home, now that it's warmed up. [Laughter] It was a rough winter. But, you guys, you look like you survived it, you're not any worse for wear.

Let me begin by thanking Michael and Tanya. I did not know what a significant role I played in—[laughter]—making sure that this thing worked out. I was wondering, how did Michael get such a beautiful woman? And now I realize, he was basically dropping my name—[laughter]—and said, yes, the President is my great buddy and—[laughter]—and so now I know, now I understand. But thank you so much to both of you for hosting us in your beautiful home.

And I also want to acknowledge two people who are doing great work every single day. One of the best public servants we have is the Senator from the great State of Colorado, who is here and also heads up the Democratic Committee to make sure that we hang on to the Senate, Michael Bennet is in the house. So give Michael a big round of applause. Yay, Michael!

And of course, part of the reason we're here is because we have somebody who not only has always been fighting the good fight on behalf of working families here in Illinois and across the country, but also happens to be somebody who, when I first went to the Senate, taught me so much and has been such a great and loyal friend. He is somebody whose integrity shines through on everything he does. So please give a big round of applause to our own Dick Durbin. Dick Durbin. Dick Durbin.

Now, I'm looking around and I see a lot of friends, and all of you look the same, and I look like Morgan Freeman. [Laughter] So the job has been wearing me down a little bit, I admit, gray hair and all that. But Michelle still thinks I'm cute. She's not ready to trade me in yet. [Laughter] But whenever I come to Chicago and I see great friends, it reminds me of why I got into politics, because a lot of people here played a role in me becoming a State senator, becoming a U.S. Senator and ultimately becoming President.

I know that the Manilows are here, for example. They hosted something for me when nobody knew me. And they're just one of many people here who have tracked my career. And the values I carried with me to the White House are the values that so many of you taught me.

Michael talked about his American Dream, and let's face it, not everybody achieves that dream to the same degree that Michael does. But the basic impulse of coming here and thinking that this is a land of opportunity and if I work hard and I've got good ideas and I take responsibility, then I can make it, regardless of where I'm from, what my last name is, what God I worship—that's the essence of who we are. That's the essence of Chicago. That's the essence of America.

And when I first came into office, obviously, we were in the midst of the worst recession since the Great Depression, losing 800,000 jobs a month. Over the last 4 years, we've created 9.5 million jobs. The unemployment rate has come down, and housing has recovered. The auto industry has come back. The deficits have been cut in half. We have dug our way out of the rubble of that crisis.

The challenge we have, though, is that for too many families around the country, that recovery has not translated into higher incomes or higher wages. We're still having trouble making sure that they can finance a child's college education. We're still trying to figure out, how am I going to retire. There are still too many people out of work, and there are too many folks who are working full time, but at the end of the month, have a tough time paying the bills. We still have challenges making sure that every child in America is getting a first-class education. And we still have challenges with an immigration system that is broken and depriving us of enormous talent, one of our greatest strengths as a country. Climate change remains a generational challenge that we've got to tackle boldly. And unfortunately, we've got a Congress that right now just can't seem to get anything done.

Now, you'll hear if you watch the nightly news or you read the newspapers that, well, there's gridlock, Congress is broken, approval ratings for Congress are terrible. And there's a tendency to say, a plague on both your houses. But the truth of the matter is that the problem in Congress is very specific. We have a group of folks in the Republican Party who have taken over who are so ideologically rigid; who are so committed to an economic theory that says if folks at the top do very well, then everybody else is somehow going to do well; who deny the science of climate change; who don't think making investments in early childhood education makes sense; who have repeatedly blocked raising a minimum wage so if you work full time in this country, you're not living in poverty; who scoff at the notion that we might have a problem with women not getting paid for doing the same work that men are doing.

They, so far, at least, have refused to budge on bipartisan legislation to fix our immigration system, despite the fact that every economist who's looked at it says it's going to improve our economy, cut our deficits, help spawn entrepreneurship, and alleviate great pain from millions of families all across the country.

So the problem is not Dick Durbin. The problem is not Michael Bennet. The problem is not that the Democrats are overly ideological, because the truth of the matter is, is that the Democrats in Congress have consistently been willing to compromise and reach out to the other side. There are no radical proposals coming out from the left. When we talk about climate change, we talk about how do we incentivize through the market greater investment in clean energy. When we talk about immigration reform there's no wild-eyed romanticism. We say we're going to be tough on the borders, but let's also make sure that the system works to allow families to stay together, and that we're attracting talent like Michael who constantly replenish the American Dream.

When we talk about taxes, we don't say we're going to have rates in the 70 percent or 90 percent when it comes to income like existed here 50, 60 years ago. We say let's just make sure that those of us who have been incredibly blessed by this country are giving back to kids so that they're getting a good start in life, so that they get early childhood education, so that struggling middle class families are able to finance their education, and that if a talented young person wants to go into teaching or wants to become a social worker, that they're not burdened by hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of debt.

Health care: We didn't suddenly impose some wild, crazy system. All we said was let's make sure everybody has insurance. And this made the other side go nuts, the simple idea that in the wealthiest nation on Earth, nobody should go bankrupt because somebody in their family gets sick, working within a private system.

So when you hear a false equivalence that somehow, well, Congress is just broken, it's not true. What's broken right now is a Republican Party that repeatedly says no to proven, time-

tested strategies to grow the economy, create more jobs, ensure fairness, open up opportunity to all people.

Which leads me to the reason we are here tonight: I need a Congress that works. And that means I need a Democratic Senate. And it would be helpful to have a Democratic House. Now, you all know this so I'm preaching to the choir. But here's the challenge we have: Democrats are not perfect, and it turns out, one of our great imperfections is, we have a congenital tendency not to vote in midterm elections.

I don't know what it is. Presidential elections, we're all in. In 2008, you all went crazy; 2012, you still went crazy. High turnout, we're motivated, donors are involved, people are active, folks are knocking on doors, people making phone calls. And then the midterm comes, and we fall asleep.

That cannot happen in this election because the stakes are too high. And I say this mindful that in every election somebody says how high the stakes are. But think about what's at stake right now. Think about it. If we do not hang on to the Senate and make gains in the House we may not get immigration reform done, which means we could have another 3, 4 years in which we're being deprived of talent we're training here in the United States; they go back home and start businesses someplace else. There are Michael Polks right now in universities that have the possibility of creating businesses here, but may end up going back home because we have a broken immigration system. That's what's at stake.

Basic research: We're on the cusp of discovering—when it comes to brain research, we've invested in a brain initiative that could discover cures for Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, debilitating diseases, and as our population ages, it's going to be more and more important. And yet if you look at the Republican House budget, it slashes the very research that promises to provide cures to families all across America and could potentially create entire new industries in this country.

Energy: We've doubled fuel efficiency standards on cars, doubled the production of clean energy. Solar has gone up three times since I came into office, new generation of wind power 10 times. We're making enormous progress. But if we don't have a Congress that has that same vision that we should be out in front, ahead, when it comes to the race for 21st-century energy sources, then we're going to be stuck doing the same thing we've been doing forever. And that means that we cannot stop the trends towards higher emissions and higher greenhouse gases and global warming.

And I know it's hard to talk about global warming here in Chicago—[laughter]—after this winter. But everybody here understands that it's changing weather patterns that are at stake here, with potentially devastating, catastrophic consequences.

Minimum wage, equal pay for equal work, the Supreme Court—all these issues are at stake in the midterms, not in the Presidential election. You have a President who is fighting for you in the White House. What you do not have right now is a Congress that can function.

And I want to make clear, by the way, because I'm in the Land of Lincoln: The problem is not the Republican Party, per se. I want a functioning, coherent, reasoned-based Republican Party. And if they've got slightly different ideas than mine, I am happy to sit down and work them out. I'm talking about a very specific faction of the Republican Party that's taken over and cannot get anything done.

Harry Truman used to talk about the "do-nothing" Congress. This Congress has done less than the "do-nothing" Congress that Harry Truman talked about. I'm serious.

So the bottom line is, we have to feel a sense of urgency in this election. And that means that every one of you, many of whom are great supporters and have backed me for a long time and are happy to come to Michael and Tanya's house and participate, it means I need you to push a little further than you're doing right now. I'm going to need you to help to activate and mobilize folks throughout this town and your contacts across the country to say it is not good enough simply to sit back and complain. Cynicism is not an option. Cynicism is not wisdom.

I've now been President for a little over 5 years; I've got 2½ years to go. I will make every moment count. It has been the great privilege of my life. But it's interesting, the longer I'm in this job the more I feel as if we get one moment, one life to really make a difference on behalf of Malia and Sasha and Michael and Tanya's kids and all of our kids and grandkids. And the time goes by really quick. And if we fritter away opportunities on stuff that we know is right, that we know is right—if we don't fight for it, understanding that there are going to be times where we have setbacks and progress is never smooth—if we're not willing to really dig down and make things happen at this moment, then they don't happen.

So I don't take my job for granted. But I hope you don't take for granted the opportunities that brought Michael to these shores and allowed him to succeed. We have to fight for that stuff. And we're on the right side on every single issue and the majority of the American people agree with us on every single issue. But we've got to make sure those folks go out to vote. We've got to make sure we get our message out. And the only way we do that is if all of you are active and involved in this election. Don't wait till 2016. I need you to be active in this election.

I've run my last campaign. But I'm going to be working just as hard in this one as I was in 2008 and 2012, because my goal in running for President was never simply to have the title. My goal was to get something done. And I cannot do it alone.

So I want to thank all of you for everything you've done for me, but I'm asking you, I need you to it for a Democratic Senate and a Democratic House. And if you feel that same sense of urgency, we're going to continue to make change not just through my Presidency, but for years to come.

Thank you so much, everybody. God bless you, God bless America, and God bless Chicago!

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:54 p.m. at the residence of Michael and Tanya Polsky. In his remarks, he referred to actor Morgan Freeman; attorney, real estate developer, and philanthropist Lewis Manilow and his wife Susan; and Alan and Gabriel Polsky, children of Mr. and Mrs. Polsky. Audio was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee fundraisers :: Chicago, IL, reception.

Locations: Chicago, IL.

Names: Bennet, Michael F.; Durbin, Richard J.; Freeman, Morgan; Manilow, Lewis; Manilow, Susan; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Polsky, Alan; Polsky, Gabriel; Polsky, Michael; Polsky, Tanya

Subjects: Civil rights : Wage equality; Climate change; Congress : Bipartisanship; Democratic Party : Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Economy, national : Improvement; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Elections : 2014 congressional elections; Elections : Voter participation; Energy : Fuel efficiency standards, strengthening efforts; Energy : Solar and wind energy; Environment : Climate change; Health and medical care : Affordability and costs; Health and medical care : Research and development; Illinois : Democratic Party events; Illinois : President's visits; Immigration and naturalization : Reform; Labor issues : Minimum wage; Taxation : Tax Code, reform.

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