

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Phoenix Awards Dinner

September 27, 2014

Hello, CBC! Thank you so much. Everybody, have a seat. It is good to be with you here tonight. If it wasn't black tie, I would have worn my tan suit. *[Laughter]* I thought it looked good. *[Laughter]*

Thank you, Chaka, for that introduction. Thanks to all of you for having me here this evening. I want to acknowledge the members of the Congressional Black Caucus and Chairwoman Marcia Fudge for their outstanding work. Thank you, Shuanise Washington, and the CBC Foundation for doing so much to help our young people aim high and reach their potential.

Tonight I want to begin by paying special tribute to a man with whom all of you have worked closely with; someone who served his country for nearly 40 years as a prosecutor, as a judge, and as Attorney General of the United States: Mr. Eric Holder. Throughout his long career in public service, Eric has built a powerful legacy of making sure that equal justice under the law actually means something, that it applies to everybody, regardless of race or gender or religion or color, creed, disability, sexual orientation. He has been a great friend of mine. He has been a faithful servant of the American people. We will miss him badly.

This year, we've been marking the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act. We honor giants like John Lewis, unsung heroines like Evelyn Lowery. We honor the countless Americans, some who are in this room—Black, White, students, scholars, preachers, housekeepers—patriots all, who, with their bare hands, reached into the well of our Nation's founding ideals and helped to nurture a more perfect Union. We've reminded ourselves that progress is not just absorbing what has been done, it's advancing what's left undone.

Even before President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law, even as the debate dragged on in the Senate, he was already challenging America to do more and march further, to build a Great Society, one, Johnson said: "where no child will go unfed, and no youngster will go unschooled. Where no man who wants work will fail to find it. Where no citizen will be barred from any door because of his birthplace or his color or his church. Where peace and security is common among neighbors and possible among nations." "This is the world that waits for you," he said. "Reach out for it now. Join the fight to finish the unfinished work." To finish the unfinished work.

America has made stunning progress since that time, over the past 50 years, even over the past 5 years. But it is the unfinished work that drives us forward.

Some of our unfinished work lies beyond our borders. America is leading the effort to rally the world against Russian aggression in Ukraine. America is leading the fight to contain and combat Ebola in Africa. America is building and leading the coalition that will degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group known as ISIL. As Americans, we are leading, and we don't shy away from these responsibilities, we welcome them. That's what America does. And we are grateful to the men and women in uniform who put themselves in harm's way in service of the country that we all love.

So we've got unfinished work overseas, but we've got some unfinished work right here at home. After the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, our businesses have now created 10 million new jobs over the last 54 months. This is the longest uninterrupted stretch of job growth in our history. *[Applause]* In our history. But we understand our work is not done until we get the kind of job creation that means everybody who wants work can find a job.

We've done some work on health care too. I don't know if you've noticed. Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, we've seen a 26 percent decline in the uninsured rate in America. African Americans have seen a 30 percent decline. And by the way, the cost of health care isn't going up as fast anymore either. Everybody was predicting this was all going to be so expensive. We've saved \$800 billion in Medicare because of the work that we've done, slowing the cost, improving quality and improving access. Despite unyielding opposition, this change has happened just in the last couple of years.

But we know our work is not yet done until we get into more communities, help more uninsured folks get covered, especially in those States where the Governors aren't being quite as cooperative as we'd like them to be. You know who you are. It always puzzles me where you decide to take a stand to make sure poor folks in your State can't get health insurance even though it doesn't cost you a dime. That doesn't make much sense to me, but I won't go on on that topic. We've got more work to do.

It's easy to take a stand when you've got health insurance. *[Laughter]* I'm going off script now, but—*[laughter]*—that's what happens at the CBC.

Our high school graduation rate is at a record high, the dropout rate is falling, more young people are earning college degrees than ever before. Last year, the number of children living in poverty fell by 1.4 million, the largest decline since 1966. Since I took office, the overall crime rate and the overall incarceration rate has gone down by about 10 percent. That's the first time they've declined at the same time in more than 40 years. Fewer folks in jail. Crime still going down.

But our work is not done when too many children live in crumbling neighborhoods, cycling through substandard schools, traumatized by daily violence. Our work is not done when working Americans of all races have seen their wages and incomes stagnate, even as corporate profits soar; when African American unemployment is still twice as high as White unemployment; when income inequality, on the rise for decades, continues to hold back hard-working communities, especially communities of color. We've got unfinished work. And we know what to do. That's the worst part, we know what to do.

We know we've got to invest in infrastructure and manufacturing and research and development that creates new jobs. We've got to keep rebuilding a middle class economy with ladders of opportunity so that hard work pays off and you see higher wages and higher incomes and fair pay for women doing the same work as men and workplace flexibility for parents in case a child gets sick or a parent needs some help. We've got to build more Promise Zones partnerships to support local revitalization of hard-hit communities. We've got to keep investing in early childhood education. We want to bring preschool to every 4-year-old in this country. And we want every child to have an excellent teacher. And we want to invest in our community colleges and expand Pell grants for more students. And I'm going to keep working with you to make college more affordable. Because every child in America, no matter who she is, no matter where she's born, no matter how much money her parents have, ought to be able to fulfill her God-given potential. That's what we believe.

So I just want everybody to understand, we have made enormous progress. There's almost no economic measure by which we are not better off than when I took office. Unemployment down. Deficits down. Uninsured down. Poverty down. Energy production up. Manufacturing back. Auto industry back. But—and I just list these things just so if you have a discussion with one of your friends—[laughter]—and they're confused. Stock market up. Corporate balance sheet strong. Hey, in fact, the folks who are doing the best, they're the ones who complain the most. [Laughter] So you can just point these things out.

But we still have to close these opportunity gaps. And we have to close the justice gap: how justice is applied, but also how it is perceived, how it is experienced. Eric Holder understands this. That's what we saw in Ferguson this summer, when Michael Brown was killed and a community was divided. We know that the unrest continues. And Eric spent some time with the residents and police of Ferguson, and the Department of Justice has indicated that its civil rights investigation is ongoing.

Now, I won't comment on the investigation. I know that Michael's family is here tonight. I know that nothing any of us can say can ease the grief of losing a child so soon. But the anger and the emotion that followed his death awakened our Nation once again to the reality that people in this room have long understood, which is, in too many communities around the country, a gulf of mistrust exists between local residents and law enforcement.

Too many young men of color feel targeted by law enforcement, guilty of walking while Black or driving while Black, judged by stereotypes that fuel fear and resentment and hopelessness. We know that, statistically, in everything from enforcing drug policy to applying the death penalty, to pulling people over, there are significant racial disparities. That's just the statistics. One recent poll showed that the majority of Americans think the criminal justice system doesn't treat people of all races equally. Think about that. That's not just Blacks, not just Latinos or Asians or Native Americans saying things may not be fair. That's most Americans.

And that has a corrosive effect, not just on the Black community; it has a corrosive effect on America. It harms the communities that need law enforcement the most. It makes folks who are victimized by crime and need strong policing reluctant to go to the police because they may not trust them. And the worst part of it is, it scars the hearts of our children. It scars the hearts of White children who grow unnecessarily fearful of somebody who doesn't look like them. It stains the heart of Black children who feel as if no matter what he does, he'll always be under suspicion. That is not the society we want. It's not the society that our children deserve. Whether you're Black or White, you don't want that for America.

It was interesting, Ferguson was used by some of America's enemies and critics to deflect attention from their own shortcomings overseas, to undermine our efforts to promote justice around the world. They said, well, look at what's happened to you back home.

But as I said this week at the United Nations, America is special not because we're perfect; America is special because we work to address our problems, to make our Union more perfect. We fight for more justice. We fight to cure what ails us. We fight for our ideals, and we're willing to criticize ourselves when we fall short. And we address our differences in the open space of democracy, with respect for the rule of law, with a place for people of every race and religion, and with an unyielding belief that people who love their country can change it. That's what makes us special, not because we don't have problems, but because we work to fix them. And we will continue to work to fix this.

And to that end, we need to help communities and law enforcement build trust, build understanding, so that our neighborhoods stay safe and our young people stay on track. And under the leadership of Attorney General Eric Holder, the Justice Department has launched a national effort to do just that. He's also been working to make the criminal justice system smarter and more effective by addressing unfair sentencing disparities, changing Department policies on charging mandatory minimums, promoting stronger reentry programs for those who have paid their debt to society.

And we need to address the unique challenges that make it hard for some of our young people to thrive. For all the success stories that exist in a room like this one, we all know relatives, classmates, neighbors who were just as smart as we were, just as capable as we were, born with the same light behind their eyes, the same joy, the same curiosity about the world, but somehow, they didn't get the support they needed or the encouragement they needed, or they made a mistake, or they missed an opportunity; they weren't able to overcome the obstacles that they faced.

And so, in February, we launched "My Brother's Keeper." And I was the first one to acknowledge, government can't play the only, or even the primary, role in the lives of our children. But what we can do is bring folks together, and that's what we're doing—philanthropies, business leaders, entrepreneurs, faith leaders, mayors, educators, athletes, and the youth themselves—to examine how can we ensure that our young men have the tools they need to achieve their full potential.

And next week, I'm launching "My Brother's Keeper" Community Challenge, asking every community in the country—big cities and small towns, rural counties, tribal nations—publicly commit to implementing strategies that will ensure all young people can succeed, starting from cradle, all the way to college and a career. It's a challenge to local leaders to follow the evidence and use the resources on what works for our kids. And we've already got a hundred mayors, county officials, tribal leaders, Democrats, Republicans signed on. And we're going to keep on signing them up in the coming weeks and months. But they're going to need you—elected leaders, business leaders, community leaders—to make this effort successful. We need all of us to come together to help all of our young people address the variety of challenges they face.

And we're not forgetting about the girls, by the way. I've got two daughters, I don't know if you noticed. [*Laughter*] African American girls are more likely than their White peers also to be suspended, incarcerated, physically harassed. Black women struggle every day with biases that perpetuate oppressive standards for how they're supposed to look and how they're supposed to act. Too often, they're either left under the hard light of scrutiny or cloaked in a kind of invisibility.

So in addition to the new efforts on "My Brother's Keeper," the White House Council for Women and Girls has for years been working on issues affecting women and girls of color, from violence against women to pay equity, to access to health care. And you know Michelle has been working on that, because she doesn't think our daughters should be treated differently than anybody else's sons. I've got a vested interest in making sure that our daughters have the same opportunities as boys do.

So that's the world we've got to reach for—the world where every single one of our children has the opportunity to pursue their measure of happiness. That's our unfinished work. And we're going to have to fight for it. We've got to stand up for it. And we have to vote for it. [*Applause*] We have to vote for it.

All around the country, wherever I see folks, they always say: "Oh, Barack, we're praying for you. Boy, you're so gray. Look, you've got all gray haired; you're looking tired." [*Laughter*] "We're praying for you." Which I appreciate. [*Laughter*] But I tell them, after President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, he immediately moved on to what he called "the meat in the coconut," a voting rights act bill. And some of his administration argued that's too much, it's too soon. Movement know—but the movement knew that if we rested after the Civil Rights Act, then all we could do was pray that somebody would enforce those rights.

So whenever I hear somebody say they're praying for me, I say thank you. Thank you. I believe in the power of prayer. But we need more than prayer. We need to vote. [*Applause*] We need to vote. That will be helpful. It will not relieve me of my gray hair, but it will help me pass some bills. [*Laughter*]

Because people refused to give in when it was hard, we get to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act next year. Until then, we've got to protect it. We can't just celebrate it, we've got to protect it. Because there are people still trying to pass voter ID laws to make it harder for folks to vote. And we've got to get back to our schools and our offices and our churches, our beauty shops, barber shops, and make sure folks know there's an election coming up, they need to know how to register, and they need to know how and when to vote.

We've got to tell them to push back against the cynics, prove everybody wrong who says that change isn't possible. Cynicism does not fix anything. Cynicism is very popular in America sometimes. It's propagated in the media. But cynicism didn't put anybody on the Moon. Cynicism didn't pass the Voting Rights Act. Hope is what packed buses full of freedom riders. Hope is what led thousands of Black folks and White folks to march from Selma to Montgomery. Hope is what got John Lewis off his back after being beaten within an inch of his life and chose to keep on going.

Cynicism is a choice, but hope is a better choice. And our job right now is to convince the people we're privileged to represent to join us in finishing that fight that folks like John started. Get those souls to the polls. Exercise their right to vote. And if we do, then I guarantee you we've got a brighter future ahead.

Thank you, God bless you. Keep praying. But go out there and vote. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:06 p.m. at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to A. Shuanise Washington, president and chief executive officer, Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc. He also referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization.

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Economy, national : Income inequality, increase; Economy, national : Poverty :: 2013 child poverty rate, decline; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : High school dropout rate and prevention programs; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges; Education : Postsecondary education :: Pell grants; Education : Teachers; Elections : Voter participation; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Unemployment rate; Health and medical care : Cost control reforms; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Health and medical care : Insurance coverage and access to providers; Health and medical care : Medicare and Medicaid; Iraq : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; Justice, Department of : Attorney General; Law enforcement and crime : 2014 crime rate, decline; Law enforcement and crime : Sentencing requirements, reform; Russia : Relations with Ukraine; Ukraine : Russia, role; United Nations : General Assembly; White House Office : "My Brother's Keeper" initiative.

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