

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Phoenix Awards Dinner

September 17, 2016

The President. Hello, CBC! Thank you, Don, for the great work you are doing and that kind introduction.

Audience member. We love you!

The President. I love you too.

I want to thank the CBC Foundation, Chairman Butterfield, members of the Congressional Black Caucus, and the whole CBC family. It's always good to be with the "Conscience of Congress." I also want to congratulate tonight's honorees, beginning with Charlie Rangel, a founding member of the CBC, an outstanding public servant who as we just talked about, we'll be riding off into the sunset together; Representative Marcia Fudge; Robert Smith; the Mother Emanuel family; and your Trailblazer Award recipient, my friend, a champion for change, Secretary Hillary Clinton.

Now, there's an extra spring in my step tonight. I don't know about you guys, but I am so relieved that the whole birther thing is over. [*Laughter*] I mean, ISIL, North Korea, poverty, climate change—none of those things weighed on my mind—[*laughter*]—like the validity of my birth certificate. [*Laughter*] And to think that with just 124 days to go under the wire, we got that resolved. [*Laughter*] I mean, that's a boost for me in the home stretch. In other breaking news, the world is round, not flat. [*Laughter*] Lord.

This is, of course, my last CBC dinner as President. Next time I show up, I have to buy a ticket. [*Laughter*]

Audience member. No, you don't!

The President. Now, don't get me wrong though. We've still got so much work to do, and we're sprinting all the way through the tape. But the days are winding down. I've noticed that whenever Michelle or I travel around the country, folks come up and they say, oh, we're so sad to see you go. And I really appreciate that. And Michelle says, "That's right." [*Laughter*] She gave a speech yesterday. A bunch of young people were chanting "Four more years," and she said, no, no, no. [*Laughter*] She's ready. [*Laughter*]

But we do want to take this opportunity just to say thank you; to say thank you for your support over the years, to say thank you for your friendship, to say thank you for your prayers. I mean, as I just look across this auditorium, there are so many people here who lifted us up, who steadied us when things got tough.

When we began this journey coming on 10 years now, we said this was not about us. It wasn't about me. It wasn't about Michelle. It wasn't just to be a Black President or the President of Black America. We understood the power of the symbol. We know what it means for a generation of children, of all races, to see folks like us in the White House. And as Michelle says, we've tried to be role models, not just for our own girls, but for all children, because we know they watch everything we do as adults. They look to us as an example. So we've taken that responsibility seriously. And I've been so blessed to have a wife and a partner on this journey who makes it look so easy and is so strong and so honest and so beautiful and so

smart. But we're all—we're just thankful because you guys have lifted us up every step of the way.

Now, we know, however, that what matters most for our community is not just the symbol, not just having an African American President. It's having a President who's going to do his or her darnedest to make the right decisions and fight the right fights. And think about the fights that we've waged together these past 8 years. Together, we fought our way back from the worst recession in 80 years: turned an economy that was in free fall, helped our businesses create more than 15 million new jobs. We declared that health care is not a privilege for a few, but a right for everybody; secured coverage for another 20 million Americans, including another three million African Americans. Our high school graduation rate is at an alltime high, including for African American students. More African Americans are graduating from college than ever before.

Together, we've begun to work on reforming our criminal justice system: reducing the Federal prison population, ending the use of solitary confinement for juveniles, banning the box for Federal employers, reinvigorating the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, pushing to make sure police and communities are working together to make sure that our streets are safe and that our law is applied equally. We're giving opportunities for kids so that they don't get in the criminal justice system in the first place. And I want to thank all of you who've helped us reach nearly 250 "My Brother Keepers" communities across the country.

And just this week, we learned that last year, across every race and age group in America, incomes rose, and poverty fell. Folks' typical household incomes rose by about \$2,800, which is the fastest growth rate on record. Lifted 3.5 million people out of poverty, including one million children, the largest one-year drop in almost 50 years.

By so many measures, our country is stronger and more prosperous than it was 8 years ago. And none of it's been quick. None of it's been easy. None of it has come without a fight. And so much of our work remains unfinished. But then, we knew that we would not solve all of our challenges in one year or one term or even one Presidency, not even in one lifetime, because we understand better than anybody that this is the story of America, that the project of America is never finished. It is constantly a work in progress.

And what has always made us unique is our capacity to change: our conviction that change doesn't come from some ruler, but it comes from the bottom up, from us, from the actions we take, whether it's women seeking the right to vote, or a young John Lewis leading a mighty march in Selma. We do our part to slowly, steadily, make our union a little bit more perfect. We know that. And that's what we've done these past 8 years. And now that's what we have to keep on doing.

You may have heard Hillary's opponent in this election say that there's never been a worse time to be a Black person. [*Laughter*] I mean, he missed that whole civics lesson about slavery and Jim Crow and—but we've got a museum for him to visit. So he can tune in. [*Laughter*] We will educate him. [*Laughter*]

He says we've got nothing left to lose, so we might as well support somebody who has fought against civil rights and fought against equality and who has shown no regard for working people for most of his life. [*Laughter*] Well, we do have challenges, but we're not stupid. We know the progress we've made, despite the forces of opposition, despite the forces of discrimination, despite the politics of backlash. And we intend to keep fighting against those forces.

When Governors refuse to expand Medicaid that hits the folks most in need, we'll fight.

Audience member. That's right!

The President. When folks block an increase to the minimum wage or refuse to expand paid family leave or won't guarantee equal pay for equal work that hurts the pocketbooks of every family and African American families, we will fight. When we're not investing in the schools that our kids deserve, when one group of Americans is treated differently under the law, when there are those who somehow think it's wrong to make sure that folks have access to affordable housing or are unwilling to do what it takes to make sure our veterans get the benefits that they've earned or aren't helping to sign folks up for health insurance, we will not stop our march for justice. We will not stop pushing for the security and prosperity of all people. That doesn't stop with my Presidency. We're just getting started.

And when people—when across this country in 2016, there are those who are still trying to deny people the right to vote—

Audience member. That's right!

The President. We've got to push back twice as hard. Right now, in multiple States, Republicans are actively and openly trying to prevent people from voting: adding new barriers to registration, cutting early voting, closing polling places in predominantly minority communities, refusing to send out absentee ballots, kicking people off the rolls, often incorrectly.

This should be a national scandal. We are—we were supposed to have already won that fight. We're the only advanced democracy in the world that is actively discouraging people from voting.

Audience member. That's right!

Audience member. It's a shame!

The President. It's a shame. And then, they try to justify it by telling folks that voter fraud is rampant. Between 2000 and 2012, there were 10 cases of voter impersonation nationwide. Ten. People don't get up and say, I'm going to impersonate somebody and go vote. *[Laughter]* They don't do that.

Meanwhile, some of the same folks who are trying to keep you from voting turn a blind eye when hundreds of thousands of people are killed by guns. Imposing voter ID restrictions so that a gun license can get you on the ballot, but a student ID can't—apparently more afraid of a ballot than a bullet.

Audience member. Come on!

The President. So, no, our work is not done. But if we are going to advance the cause of justice and equality and of prosperity and freedom, then we also have to acknowledge that even if we eliminated every restriction on voting, we would still have one of the lowest voting rates among free peoples.

Audience member. That's not good!

The President. That's not good. *[Laughter]* That is on us.

And I am reminded of all those folks who had to count bubbles in a bar of soap, beaten trying to register voters in Mississippi, risked everything so that they could pull that lever. So if

I hear anybody saying their vote does not matter, that it doesn't matter who we elect, read up on your history. It matters. We've got to get people to vote.

In fact, if you want to give Michelle and me a good sendoff—and that was a beautiful video—but don't just watch us walk off into the sunset, now. Get people registered to vote. If you care about our legacy, realize everything we stand for is at stake. All the progress we've made is at stake in this election. My name may not be on the ballot, but our progress is on the ballot. Tolerance is on the ballot. Democracy is on the ballot. Justice is on the ballot. Good schools are on the ballot. Ending mass incarceration, that's on the ballot right now.

And there is one candidate who will advance those things. And there's another candidate whose defining principle, the central theme of his candidacy, is opposition to all that we've done.

Audience member. That's right!

Audience member. Preach!

The President. There's no such thing as a vote that doesn't matter. It all matters. And after we have achieved historic turnout in 2008 and 2012, especially in the African American community, I will consider it a personal insult, an insult to my legacy, if this community lets down its guard and fails to activate itself in this election. You want to give me a good sendoff? Go vote! And I'm going to be working as hard as I can these next 7 weeks to make sure folks do.

Hope is on the ballot. And fear is on the ballot too. Hope is on the ballot, and fear is on the ballot too.

A few days ago, Michelle and my mother-in-law and the girls and I, we snuck over and got an early look at the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. We looked at the shackles that had been used to bring folks over. We saw the shacks where slaves had been trying to make a way out of no way. And then, with each successive level, we saw the unimaginable courage and the struggles and the sacrifices and the humor and the innovation and the hope that led to such extraordinary progress, even in our own lifetimes.

And it made us proud. Not because we had arrived, but because what a road we've had to travel. What a miracle that despite such hardship, we've been able to do so much. And I know everybody in this room understands that that progress is not inevitable. Its sustainment depends on us. It's not just a matter of having a Black President or First Lady. It's a matter of engaging all of our citizens in the work of our democracy.

It was that slave who said, you know what, despite the risk of a lash, I'm going to learn how to read. It's Harriet Tubman saying, despite the risk to my life, I'm going to free my people. It's Fannie Lou Hamer saying, despite the ostracism, the blowback, I'm going to sit down here in this convention hall, and I'm going to tell people what it's like to live the life I've lived. I'm going to testify to why change needs to come.

Audience member. That's right!

The President. It's a young John Lewis saying, I'm going to march despite those horses I see in front of me.

All those ordinary people, all those folks whose names aren't in the history book, they never got a video providing a tribute to them—that's why we're here. That's how progress is sustained. And then, it's a matter of electing people to office who understand that story, who

feel it in their hearts, in their guts, and understand that government can't solve all our problems but it can be a force for good.

To experience this incredible new monument, this museum, is to be reminded we're just a small part of a long chain, generation after generation, striving against the odds. What an inspiration they are. And what an inspiration all of you are, especially the young people who are here.

That's why I'm still fired up. [*Laughter*] That's why I'm still ready to go. And if you are too, if you're ready to continue this journey that we started, then join me. Register folks to vote. Get them to the polls. Keep marching. Keep fighting. Keep organizing. If we rise to this moment, if we understand this isn't the endpoint, this is the beginning, we're just getting going, we're just getting moving, then I have never been more optimistic that our best days are still ahead.

Thank you for this incredible journey, CBC. God bless you. God bless this country that we love. We love you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:26 p.m. in Hall D at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to R. Donahue "Don" Peebles, chairman of the board of directors, Congressional Black Caucus Foundation; Rep. G.K. Butterfield, in his capacity as the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus; Robert F. Smith, founder, chairman, and chief executive officer, Vista Equity Partners; Democratic Presidential nominee Hillary Rodham Clinton; Republican Presidential nominee Donald J. Trump; and his mother-in-law Marian Shields Robinson. He also referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Phoenix Awards dinner.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Butterfield, G.K.; Clinton, Hillary Rodham; Fudge, Marcia L.; Lewis, John R.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Peebles, R. Donahue; Rangel, Charlie B.; Robinson, Marian; Smith, Robert F.; Trump, Donald J.

Subjects: Civil rights : Racial equality; Congress : Congressional Black Caucus; Congressional Black Caucus Foundation; Economy, national : Household income and wages; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Poverty; Education : High school graduation rate; Education : Postsecondary education :: College opportunity, expansion efforts; Elections : 2016 Presidential and congressional elections; Elections : Voter participation; Environment : Climate change; Health and medical care : Insurance coverage and access to providers; Health and medical care : Medicare and Medicaid; Law enforcement and crime : Criminal justice system, reform efforts; North Korea : Nuclear weapons development; Smithsonian Institution : National Museum of African American History and Culture; Terrorism : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; White House Office : "My Brother's Keeper" initiative.

DCPD Number: DCPD201600608.