

CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

TAKE BACK AMERICA 2006

MONDAY, JUNE 12, 2006

**WASHINGTON HILTON HOTEL
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

11:00 A.M. -12:15 P.M. OPENING PLENARY

SPEAKER:

**BIKO BAKER,
NATIONAL HIP HOP POLITICAL CONVENTION**

*Transcript by:
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.*

ROBERT BOROSAGE: Now to comment on all this and to give us a take from different angles of vision – one of the things that was notable about 2004 was the new energy among young people. The increase in voting among young people was the largest of any group in our country, and a significant part of that was new energy that came out of very new voices.

Our next speaker, Robert Biko Baker, is the co-founder of contrabandit.com, a frequent contributor –

MR. : Biko!

(Laughter.)

MR. BOROSAGE: – a rock star – a frequent contributor to the nation’s hip hop magazines. He’s currently involved in a campaign against violence, a strategic effort to quell interpersonal violence among the hip-hop generation. And we invited him here because he was an organizer and a key force in the National Hip Hop Political Convention. Baker.

(Applause.)

BIKO BAKER: How you guys doing?

(Cheers.)

They said I came from the hip-hop generation, how you guys doing?

(Cheers.)

All right, all right. Before I begin, I would like to thank the organizers of the event: Nasa Troutman (ph), Dan Gross (ph), Bob, and especially Natalie Shear (sp), who came and rescued me when I couldn’t check into the hotel yesterday. (Laughter.) I’m honored to be part of this distinguished panel. I’m a little bit nervous; this is unusual place. I don’t usually talk to audiences like this so I’m going to need your energy all right. Can I get your energy?

(Cheers, applause.)

All right! A couple months ago a friend of mine, Cari Mosley (ph), who is probably the one that shouted my name – we were actually in a cab in Pittsburg and after a few minutes –

MR. : (Off mike.)

MR. BAKER: All right. After a few minutes of small talk with the cab driver about gas prices, he turned around and said, this country needs a revolution. I grew up in hyper segregated Milwaukee. This was the first time that a middle-aged blue collar white male had ever said anything like that to me. I was like, whoa. (Laughter.) We thought it was an isolated incident but the very next day we got in the cab and it was like the same thing, a different cab driver. And I think that really says what George Bush is doing to this country.

But I really shouldn't have been surprised because throughout my travels of the last couple of years, I'm learning that most Americans are progressive, and I think Stan's poll highlights this. But once you get past those one or two signature issues that conservatives always fall back to on crunch time, most Americans tend to identify with our values, progressive values.

MS. : Woo!

MR. BAKER: That's right. (Laughter.) We got a progressive right there. I love the energy in this room. Because at the end of the day, most Americans know why they're getting higher gas prices, most Americans know that we're fighting an immoral war in Iraq, most Americans want their kids to get the best education that the country can provide, and most Americans want to go to the emergency room without having to spend a week's worth of their salary.

(Applause.)

But, unfortunately, we've allowed the right to use these two – two or three wedge issues to separate us from our people. And the only reason why they've been able to separate us is because the progressive movement doesn't have strong relationships with the people in – on the ground, and it's a lack of confidence, as Stan talked about.

We've allowed our relationship in these communities to be based on the episodic nature of campaigns, so that we go in during election time and we start to talk to people. People are, you know, on my block looking at you like you're crazy; knock my door six times and it doesn't mean I'm going to come vote for you guys.

About the curse, unfortunately, because we have the – what my father would call half-assed relationships, we're always forced to defend oppositions on these hot button issues, and we never really get to talk about why voting for progressives is in the people's self-interest because at the end of the day it's extremely difficult to talk why – about why George Bush's energy policy is destroying the earth in minute television ads; it's even harder when we go the door and we have 30 seconds raps. Maybe we can get our hands on – a hold of the Al Gore slideshow, it might be – make it a little bit easier, though.

(Applause.)

It's especially hard to talk to young voters and people of color that way because we're the most skeptical people on the planet, right. We know when someone's lying to us and we like to use this catch phrase: we like to keep it real. And I'm preaching to the choir right now, but since the civil rights movement, we've let – we've let the conservative movement use this fear, right, that these two or three issues are really based upon fear and not based upon reality or practicality.

And I can only talk about it from my perspective, but this fear has had a devastating effect on young people and especially people of color. In my city specifically, the right has created such fear around the hip hop generation that they privatize schools, right, you only privatize schools when you don't want to really deal with the students in them. They closed many of our public parks. There used to be a park that I go to go swim; it's now a grass lot. And they increased the police presence in inner-city neighborhoods -- so much so, that the Republican county supervisor recently said, of two weeks ago, that we're going to arrest anyone who even thinks about committing crime. I'm going to repeat it again; we're going to arrest anyone that even thinks about crime. Now if you've thought about anything illegal raise your hand.

(Cheers, laughter.)

To me that sounds sort of fascist, right? It sounds very fascist.

(Applause.)

There's a good article in June's Harper's Magazine by Kevin Baker; it talks about the myth of fear. But the only reason why he can get away with saying those types of things is because the people on the ground, the progressive folks, don't have relationships with the community. But the reality of the situation is that we're going to build those relationships.

As an organizer – (applause) – thank you. As an – (chuckles) – I always tell this when I do trainings, I'm like – I tell the youth that I train that you're only an organizer because you're cocky and you think you can change the world.

So I have a couple solutions that I'm going to give you guys. There's a number of books that talk about this, but I think the best one is Lisa McGirr's "Suburban Warriors," where you get a clear sense of how the right built their base 30 years ago by going to the ground and actually talking to people. They went to the coffee clutches, they went to the soccer games, and they hosted Tupperware parties. How many of you guys have been to a Tupperware party? Mom used to do them all the time.

But fortunately for the progressive movement there are dozens of groups who are doing this very same thing with young people across the country. They're building infrastructure for our movement. Groups like the National Hip Hop Political Convention – any Hip Hop Convention folks people here? Thank you. All right. The League of

Young Voters, League of Young Voters. There's a group in Detroit called Detroit Summer.

And the young people for – are building these relationship with these organic people; these organic relationships with the people on the ground because we know that you have to stay in the faces of your friends, you have to stay in the faces of your family, and you have to stay in the faces of your neighbors and classmates, if you want them to get – become politically active.

It's also funny – I was part of the Campaign Corps' first ever new organizing institute directed by Zack Exley (ph), Internet Grove's Zac Exley, and we're learning increasingly that you can even use technology to keep these relationships and stay in the face of people.

And as someone who has worked on campaigns before, I know that sometimes older progressives look at some of these new strategies, like list building at the clubs – night clubs, or voting holding registration jobs at black barber shops is sort of weird, sort of ineffective, not all the way the most quantitatively effect, but this is no different than the coffee clutches, right? This is no different than the Tupperware parties; this is no different than a soccer game. We're building long lasting relationships with the folks on the ground.

And just an example of this from my home city of Milwaukee, during the 2004 election, we went on the ground and we tried to register people. We would go to the block and say, oh, register with us, you know, vote for progressives down the slate. And they looked at us like, man, get out of here homie. Part of that was because there was dozens of groups voting reg in 2004; Wisconsin was a swing state so we had all the 527s. But part of that was because we didn't have organic relationships with the people. They weren't familiar with us, like, you've lived here your whole life and now you're just starting to talk about voting. You must be getting a paycheck.

(Laughter.)

Fast forward two years later, and just this last week we had a women who works with us going into a nightclub and register 50 people in little over an hour, right? Fifty people. (Cheers.) And that was simply because our relationship; we had built a relationship and our message was familiar. We weren't foreign to the people. They knew who we were – who we are. We had good name recognition.

Of course, these relationships have to be built over time. It's not as quick and easy as buying that ad or that 30-second sound bite, and it's not as easy as sending out a mailer. You have got to get your hands dirty. You got to get on the ground. But we really shouldn't expect it to be easy, should we?

It's taken nearly 30 years. We had a little bit – we had a brief spell in the 90s, I like to call the Clinton year – the Clinton era, but it's taken nearly 30 years for the

conservative movement to get to a point where it's not a tipping point. And the only way that it's going to ever tip over the edge -- and this is very important, the only way that it's going to tip over the edge is if young people and people of color push them over -- (applause) -- because as Bob and Stan have said, we have to take advantage of this time and start mobilizing and building relationship with the folks like that cab driver who I met in Pittsburg. Thank you.

(Applause.)

(End of remarks.)