

CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

TAKE BACK AMERICA 2007

**REMARKS OF
SENATOR BARACK OBAMA (D-IL)**

TUESDAY, JUNE 19, 2007

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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MR. : Brothers and sisters, we're about to begin. (Applause.) Today is Juneteenth, the day that the word of the end of slavery got to Texas. (Applause.) And it gives me great pleasure to introduce America's Future's board chair and winner of this year's lifetime leadership award, to introduce Senator Barack Obama, please welcome Roger Wilkins. (Applause.)

ROGER WILKINS: I wish I could see you. (Laughter.) You all sound wonderful. The words that I speak today are not in my capacity as chair of the Institute for America's Future; they are my own words from my own heart. These clearly are the times that try Americans' souls. Every thinking person knows that our country is on several wrong tracks: the war in Iraq, policies that comfort the rich and savage the poor, the failure to repair the entitlement programs that provide a safety net for ordinary people, contempt for working people and their unions. Not since 1932 has an election occurred with the nation mired in as much muck as will face the person elected in 2008.

In 1932, the country was in a similar posture and there was a candidate who, despite a governorship, people thought was a little lightweight. They said he was riding the coattails of famous cousin Teddy, but Teddy was from the family seed in Oyster Bay and this fellow was only from the Hudson Valley. And you know what they asked about him? Is he Roosevelt enough? This time mirrors that time.

We need vision, direction, moral compass, command of yourself, intellect, and the ability to deal easily with very smart associates and to learn from them. The qualities of the candidate whom I am presenting to you today – command of self, if you've had a complicated life story, Kenya, Kansas, Indonesia, Hawaii, Columbia, Harvard, the South side of Chicago – (applause) – somebody who does that and thinks hard about it is a man in full. It's been almost eight years since we've had an intellect in the White House – (laughter, applause) – if the presidency of the Harvard Law Review doesn't tell you that this candidate has a good mind, you don't know much about this country.

And the ability to work with talented people, harnessing their brain power to accomplish things: Harvard Law Review, again. A connection to the life of the nation: this man finished Columbia University and where did he go? He went into inner city, the South side of Chicago, to organize communities of poor people to increase the value of their lives. This is – (inaudible, applause). Question is can this candidate accomplish things that his daddy didn't give him. (Applause.)

In the Illinois Senate, he accomplished health care, campaign finance, welfare reform, expanded health insurance, and tax relief for working families. In the United States Senate, ethics reform, transparency in government, and alternative energy sources. The question for 2008 is who's got the stuff to lead us out of the quagmire? Intellect: Obama's got the stuff. (Applause.) Good sense about big things: Obama was against the war and he didn't have to have somebody to tell him what the facts were; his moral

compass told him this was a bad and stupid war. (Applause.) Moral vision: he's got a view of the inner city on up. He's worked on ethics codes both in Illinois in the Congress of the United States and his goal is universal health care for all Americans. (Applause.) So vision, leadership, strength, deeply involved in the American scene, and I want to tell you a secret from me to you: this man is black enough. I guarantee you. (Applause.)

I give you Senator Barack Obama. He's got the stuff. (Applause.)

(Music plays.)

SENATOR BARACK OBAMA (D-IL): Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. It is good to be back. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you very much. Oh, this looks like a progressive majority to me – (applause) – right here. Yeah. It looks like folks are ready to back America. (Applause.) Take it back. I want to begin by thanking Roger Wilkins for not only that extraordinary introduction, but for his lifetime of leadership on behalf of progressive causes. Give it up for Roger Wilkins. (Applause.)

I have to say, though, that Roger is not the most talented member of the Wilkins family. Elizabeth Wilkins, who's on my campaign staff, is out there somewhere. Elizabeth, we appreciate you. I want to thank Robert Borosage for his terrific work and Roger Hickey for their terrific work on behalf of progressive causes all across the country. Thank you so much. (Applause.) And all of you, activists from all across the country – (applause) – I am appreciative of you. You are what makes democracy work. It's going to be because of you that we take our country back. (Applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Beat the GOP!

SEN. OBAMA: Beat the GOP, all right.

AUDIENCE: Beat the GOP! Beat the GOP! Beat the GOP!

SEN. OBAMA: Okay. (Chuckles.) There you go. I agree with that. All right, we got you. Give them a round of applause. (Applause.) All right. So you know, it's now been a little over four months since we began this campaign and everywhere we've been, whether it's Oakland or Cleveland, Atlanta or Austin, we've been getting these inspiring, humbling crowds, thousands of people, 20,000 people in Austin, 20,000 people in Atlanta, 12,000 people in Oakland. For a lot of people who are coming out, it's the first time they've ever attended a political event in their lifetimes. (Applause.) And you know, I would love to take all the credit myself; I would love to say it's just because I'm so fabulous – (laughter) – that everybody's turning out. But I know that's not the reason they're coming out.

The reason they're coming out is because there's something in the wind out there; there's something stirring. There's a hunger in this country right here and right now, a longing for something new that we haven't seen in years. People are hungry to turn the

page and write a new chapter in American history. And whenever I stop to think about it, I'm reminded of what got me into public service in the first place, because often times I see young people in the audience and I say to myself, I remember when. I'm an old man now, but I remember what it was like when I was first realizing that I had to get involved, that I had a role to play in making a better America.

The year after college, I decided to move to Chicago because I'd been inspired by the – (applause) – Chicago in the house – yeah, I had been inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, the image of young people, straight-backed, clear-eyed, people who decided that they were going to lay their lives on the line. They were going to march, they were going to sit on behalf of a more just, more free America. But I had been too young to participate so I looked for some other outlet for that idealism. And this was at a time when factories were closing all across the Midwest; tens of thousands of people were being laid off. They were boarding up homes and businesses all across the region.

And on the South side of Chicago where neighborhoods were struggling to rebuild after the closing of these steel plants, a group of churches had come together and decided that they could make a difference. And they got their little money together and it was such a little money that all they could afford to hire was me. (Laughter.) And the salary was \$12,000 a year plus enough money to buy an old beat-up car. And I drove to Chicago – didn't know a soul out there – and I took the job and I became a community organizer. (Applause.) And we went to work setting up job training programs for the unemployed and after school programs for youth and bringing city services to neighborhoods that had been neglected. And block by block, we turned those neighborhoods around. And it was the best education I ever had because I learned in those neighborhoods that when ordinary people come together, they can achieve extraordinary things. (Applause.)

So later when I finished law school, I turned down the corporate job offers and I came back to Chicago to continue the work I started on. I organized a voter registration drive and signed up 150,000 new voters to help Bill Clinton get elected in 1992. (Applause.) I joined a civil rights practice to make sure that women and minorities were getting a fair shake on the job. I started teaching constitutional law because unlike some occupants of the White House, I actually believe in the Constitution. (Applause.)

And after a few years, people started coming up to me and telling me I should run and a State Senate seat opened up, so I jumped into the race. And I shook every hand I could and I passed out flyers to whomever would take them, PTA meetings and block parties and barber shops and beauty shops. And every where I went, I'd get a couple questions. One, people would say, you know, you seem like a nice young man, you've done all this great work, you've been a community organizer and you teach at a law school, you're a civil rights attorney, you could be making a lot of money, you're a family man, why go into something dirty and nasty like politics? Why do it? And I understood the question and the cynicism that was beneath the question.

We all understand it, even those of us who are involved in politics; we understand that we've seen politics in this town become not a mission, but a business. Politics has never been pure, but there's a sense that over the last several years, the race for money and influence and power has left the hopes and concerns of most Americans in the dust. You're worried about how you'll pay for college or health care or save for retirement, but when you turn on the TV or open the newspaper, all you see from Washington is another scandal or petty argument or the persistent stubbornness of a president who refuses to end this war in Iraq. (Applause.) And so we get discouraged. Half of us don't vote. The half of us who do vote were voting against somebody instead of voting for something.

And as we turn away from this kind of politics and cynicism and frustration, we know what fills the void: the lobbyists, the influence peddlers with the cash and connections, the ones who've turned government into a game that only they can afford to play. It's the pharmaceutical companies that get to write our drug bills while the price of prescriptions skyrocket for the rest of us. It's the oil lobbyists that get to meet with the same White House that silences the scientists who've warned us about the destruction of our planet. You know who I'm talking about. You know who I'm talking about. They write the checks and you get stuck with the bills. They get the access; you get to write a letter. They think they own this government, but we are here to tell them today that our government is not for sale and we are taking it back, right here and right now. (Applause.) We are taking it back.

People tell me I haven't spent a lot of time learning the ways of Washington. But I promise you this: I've been here long enough to know the ways of Washington must change. (Applause.) The cynicism we feel about what politics can achieve today is no accident. It has to do with the failure of leadership; it has to do with the philosophy that has been peddled in this town for the last six years, a philosophy of trickle down and on your own that says government has no role in solving the challenges we face and so it shouldn't even try, a can't do, won't do, won't even try style of government.

It's a theory that's easy to talk about when you're playing politics in Washington, but harder to defend when you actually see what it does to the average American. I met a family in Iowa City a few weeks ago with a small business of 15 years who's now facing bankruptcy because of their medical bills. They're telling me and all the folks in Washington that they need help. And what we're telling them back is they're on their own. I spoke with workers in Newton just yesterday, Newton, Iowa, who were watching their Maytag plant close down, their jobs get shipped overseas. Try telling them to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Try saying tough luck to the families who still don't have homes in New Orleans or the 45 million Americans without health care or the 15 million children born into poverty in the richest nation on earth. (Applause.)

This is not who we are. This is not how America has persevered. That's not what we're about. That's not how we persevered through war and depression, through struggles for civil rights and women's rights and workers' rights. We've come this far as a nation because we believe in a different kind of politics, because we believe in a different vision for America. We believe that we rise or fall as one people. We believe

that we each have a stake in each other, that I am my brother's keeper, that I am my sister's keeper. (Applause.) We believe that what happens to that family in Iowa without health insurance or those Maytag workers in Newton; that matters to us even if it's not our family, even if it's not our job. When we leave them to fend for themselves, it impoverishes all of us.

When we see veterans here in Washington, D.C., the nation's capital, foraging through dumpsters because they're homeless because they didn't get the services they needed when they come home, that diminishes all of our patriotism. Don't talk about supporting the troops and then leave them to fend for themselves after they've served our country, after the photo op, after the political sloganeering. Stop doing that. (Applause.)

In the face of our cynicism and our doubts in the power and the influence we see in Washington, we are here because we believe that a better America is possible. The time for can't do, won't do, won't even try style of politics is over. The time for a selfish politics is over. The time for a politics of fear is over. (Applause.) The time of politics of division is over. It is time to turn the page on that kind of politics and start a new kind of politics.

Some of my more cynical friends in the media tease me from time to time because they say, he's always talking about hope, he's out there peddling hope again, he's a hope-monger. (Applause, laughter.) I talk about hope because I've seen it's power. I've seen the power of hope, the power of faith. No one thought that those South side neighborhoods that I was working with as a community organizer had a chance when I got there, but we worked together, we banded together black and white and Latino and Asian. (Applause.) And we kept working and we taught people to stand up to their government when it was standing up for them.

When I got to the Illinois State Senate, people said it was too hard to take on the issue of money in politics, our state had too long a history, too many entrenched interests. But I knew then that we had the people of Illinois on our side. I even found a few folks on the other side of the aisle who were willing to listen. And we passed the first major ethics reform legislation in 25 years. (Applause.) People told me I couldn't reform a death penalty system that had sent 13 innocent people to death row, but we did that. (Applause.) They doubted whether we could put government back on the side of average people, but we put tax cuts in the pockets of working families who needed them instead of the folks who didn't need them. And I passed healthcare reform that insured another 150,000 children and parents who didn't have health care. (Applause.)

I know that change is possible. I know where hope leads us. The only reason I'm standing here before you is because of hope. On paper, it's impossible that I am here as a United States senator running for president – (applause) – I know what's possible in America. I know that turning the page is possible. (Applause.) And when I talk about hope, it isn't just the rhetoric of a campaign; it's been the cause of my life, a cause I will work for and fight for every single day as your president – (applause) – here in the United States of America.

Now, let's be clear. It's not enough just to change parties in this election. I understand Beat the GOP; I like that saying. But if we hope to truly transform this country, we have to change our politics, too. It's time to turn the page on how we've been doing business as well. It's time to turn the page on health care, to bring together unions and businesses, Democrats and Republicans, and to let the insurance and drug companies know that while they get a seat at the table, they don't get to buy every chair. (Applause.)

I have a universal health care plan and I know the other candidates are going to have their plans. My plan will cover every American and cut the cost of a typical family's premium by up to \$2,500 a year. It's a plan that lets the uninsured buy insurance that's similar to the kind members of Congress give themselves, because my attitude is that my boss (as the ?) taxpayer shouldn't have a tougher time getting health insurance than I should. And if you can't afford that, you'll get a subsidy to pay for it. And it goes further than any other proposed plan in cutting the cost of health care by investing in technology and preventive care so that children are getting regular check ups instead of having to go to the emergency room for treatable illnesses like asthma – (applause) – and by breaking the stranglehold of the drug companies and the insurance industries – we are tired of them dictating our health care markets – and helping businesses and families shoulder the cost of the most expensive conditions so that an illness doesn't lead to bankruptcy.

And I promise you this: I will sign a universal health care plan that covers every American by the end of my first term as president. (Applause.) We don't need to wait eight years or 10 years or 15 years. We need to do it by the end of the next president's first term, by the end of my first term as president of the United States. (Applause.) We can do that.

It's time to turn the page on education, to move past the slow decay of indifference that says some schools can't be fixed, that says some kids just can't learn. As president, I will launch a campaign to recruit and support hundreds of thousands of new teachers across the country – (applause) – because the most important part of any education is the person standing in front of the classroom. It's time to treat teaching like the profession that it is. It's time to pay our teachers what they deserve. (Applause.) Pay them more money.

And when it comes to developing the high standards we need, it's time to stop working against our teachers and start working with them. Teachers don't go in to education to get rich. They don't go in to education because they don't believe in their children. They want their children to succeed, but we've got to give them the tools. Don't have a bill called No Child Left Behind and then leave the money behind for No Child Left Behind. (Applause.) Invest in early childhood education. Invest in our teachers and our children will succeed.

It's time to turn the page on energy, to break the stalemate that's kept our fuel efficiency standards in the same place for 20 years, to tell the oil and auto industries that they must act, not only because their future's at stake, but because the future of our country and our planet is at stake. As president, I will place a cap on carbon emissions and require companies who can't meet the cap to buy credits from those who can, which will generate billions of dollars to invest in renewable sources of energy and create new jobs and even a new industry in the process. I'll put in place a low carbon fuel standard that will take 50 million cars worth of pollution off the road. I'll raise the fuel efficiency standards for our cars and trucks because we know we have the technology to do it and it's the time to do it.

And by the way, when I talk about fuel efficiency standards, you know, it's easy to make that speech in California. So what I did was I went to Detroit and I had a whole bunch of auto executives sitting right there when I said it and I didn't get a lot of applause lines, but that doesn't matter because it's the right thing to do. And the American people will appreciate honesty and leadership and talking straight to them about what's needed. (Applause.)

It's time to turn the page for all those Americans who want nothing more than to have a job that can pay the bills and raise a family. Let's finally make the minimum wage a living wage. (Applause.) Let's tie it to the cost of living so we don't have to wait another 10 years to see it rise. Let's put the jobless back to work in transitional jobs that can give them a paycheck and a sense of pride. Let's help our workers advance with job training and lifelong education. Let's invest in infrastructure, broadband lines, and rural communities and in inner cities. Let's give jobs to ex-offenders – (applause) – because we believe in giving a second chance to people. (Applause.) And let's finally allow our unions to do what they do best and lift up the middle class in this country once more. (Applause.)

When you head to Capitol Hill in a little bit to rally for the Employee Free Choice Act, say it loud enough so that the folks on the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue can hear you. In this country, we believe that if the majority of workers in a company want a union, they should get a union. (Applause.) That's not complicated. That's the right thing to do. We can do it. We can do all of these things.

But before we do, we have to begin by turning the page and ending this senseless war in Iraq. (Applause.) I am proud that I stood up in 2002 and urged our leaders not to take us down this dangerous path. I've said it before and I'll say it again: this is a war that should have never been authorized, a war that should have never been waged. So many of us knew back then, even when it wasn't popular to say so. (Applause.) We knew back then this war was a mistake. We knew back then that it was dangerous diversion from the struggle against terrorists who attacked us on September 11th. We knew back then that we could find ourselves in an occupation of undetermined length and undetermined costs with undetermined consequences. But the war went forward. And now we've seen those consequences and we mourn for the dead and the wounded.

I was in New Hampshire the other month when a woman told me that her nephew was leaving for Iraq. We were in a town hall meeting and she stood up and as she started telling me how much she'd miss him and how much she was worried about him, she began to cry. And she said to me in front of this crowd, she said, I can't breathe, I want to know, Senator, when am I going to be able to breathe again. It is time to let this woman know she can breathe again. It's time to start bringing our troops home, not a year from now or a month from now, but now. (Applause.)

I introduced a plan in January that would have already started bringing our troops home by now, with the goal of bringing all combat brigades home by March 31st, 2008. Now, we know the president vetoed a bipartisan plan just like that one a few weeks ago. And I'm proud I voted against giving a blank check to the man who said he sees keeping our troops in Iraq for as long as we have kept them in Korea. But we can't give George Bush the last word here. We are 16 votes away in the Senate from ending this war, a comparable number in the House. We need to keep turning up the pressure on all those Republican congressmen and senators who refuse to acknowledge the reality that the American people know so well. (Applause.) We will call them; we will knock on their doors; we will bring our troops home. It is time to bring this war to a close; it is time to recognize there's no military solution to the problems in Iraq. It is time to turn the page. (Applause.)

And when we do that, when we do that, we can stand before the world and remind them that America is still the last best hope on earth. This president may occupy the White House, but for the last six years, the position of leader of the free world has remained opened, unfilled. It's time to fill that role once more. (Applause.) Imagine standing before the world and saying, we want to work with you, not against you, on climate change; we want to work with you, not against you, to deal with the crisis of global AIDS or the spread of weapons of mass destruction. We need to say to the world, America cannot meet the threats of this new century alone, but the world cannot meet them without America. It's time for us to lead and say we want to work with you to deal with the issues of global poverty so that every child around the world has a stake, not in chaos and anarchy and violence, but in opportunity and prosperity and order.

And while we're at it, why don't we close Guantanamo and restore the right of habeas corpus, because that's how we lead, not with the might of our military, but the power of our ideals and the power of our values. It's time to show the world we're not a country that ships prisoners in the dead of night to be tortured in far off countries. We're not a country that runs prisons which locks people away without ever telling them why they're there or what they're charged with. We're not a country which preaches compassion to others while we allow bodies to float down the streets of major American cities. That's not who we are. (Applause.)

We're America. We're a nation that liberated a continent from a mad man, that lifted ourselves from the depths of depression, that won civil rights and women's rights and voting rights for all our people. We're the beacon that has led generations of weary travelers to find opportunity and liberty and hope on our doorstep. That's who we are.

Back in March, I was down in Selma, Alabama. We were celebrating the 42nd anniversary of the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Some of you know the story. You had a group of ordinary folks – housekeepers, doormen, Pullman porters – decided that they were going to march for voting rights and they gathered at Brown Chapel and set forth to the state capital. And when they got to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they saw horses and tear gas and dogs and billy clubs and they were trampled and gassed and beaten. And John Lewis, my colleague in the Congress – (applause) – was almost beaten within an inch of his life. And they staggered back from that bridge, bloody, beaten, and I'm sure that on that day some people lost hope. They said, you know, we're not going to be able to deal with Jim Crow, we can't overcome separate and unequal; the powers and principalities are arrayed against us, we don't have a chance.

But an amazing thing happened in the ensuing days. Millions of people around America looked at what had happened. They saw it on the television screens, people just like you, and they turned to their fathers and their mothers, they turned to their brothers and their sisters, they said, that's not who we are, that's not what we believe in. That's not the America that we love. And in subsequent days, thousands of people, thousands, poured into Selma, into this tiny town, and they joined this mighty stream of marchers and swept aside the horses and the tear gas and the billy clubs, rendered them irrelevant, because every time people were knocked down, they got back up. Every time they got gassed, they came back. Every time they were turned back, they kept on marching. (Applause.) And finally they crossed over and it was called Bloody Sunday.

But that same year, because of those marches, Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And it was a powerful thing for me to stand on that bridge, next to John Lewis and other people whose names are written in the history books. And I understood they had marched for me. Forty years earlier, they didn't know who I was; I was a four-year-old kid in Hawaii. They didn't know me personally, but they knew of me, of the next generation of Americans, what it might be like if they didn't take those risks, if they hadn't marched. I understood at that moment that I stood on their shoulders, that I couldn't have conceived of running for the United States Senate, couldn't have conceived of running for president, had it not been for these folks. (Applause.)

And when I came back from that celebration, some people who had saw me make a speech on CSPAN or CNN, they patted me on the back, they said, oh, you know, that was a wonderful speech, Barack, that was a wonderful celebration of African American history. And I said, no, you don't understand, that wasn't a celebration of African American history, that was a celebration of American history – (applause) – because that is our story. It reminds us of a simple truth, a truth I learned all those years ago as an organizer in Chicago, a truth that you carry by being here today, that in the face of impossible odds, people who love their country can change it.

I am confident about my ability to lead this country. I know where I want to take America, but I know that I can't do it without you. I can't do it myself. This campaign that we're running has to be about your hopes. It has to be about your dreams and what

you will do, because there are few obstacles can withstand the power of millions of voices calling for change. That's how change has always happened, not from the top down, but from the bottom up. That's how we brought an end to the scourge of slavery; that's how we brought an end to Jim Crow. That's how women got the right to vote. That's how we brought an end to the Vietnam War. That's how we'll bring an end to the Iraq War. That's exactly how you and I will change this country.

If you want a new kind of politics, it's time to turn the page. If you want an end to the old divisions and the (stale ?) debates and the scorekeeping and the name calling, it's time to turn the page. If you want health care for every American and a world class education for all our children, if you want energy independence, if you want an end to this war in Iraq, if you believe America is still that last best hope on earth, it's time to turn the page. It's time to turn the page for hope. It's time to turn the page for justice. It's time to turn the page and write the next chapter in the great American story. Let's begin this work; let's do it together. Let's turn the page and create a progressive majority. Thank you very much everybody. Thank you. Thank you, guys. (Applause.)

(Music plays.)

(END)