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Take Back America Conference

Campaign for America's Future / Institute for America's Future

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It is a great honor to be here, I am pleased. Earlier today, I was with my 14-year-old son as he was getting his awards in graduating from the 8th grade and then I came here. I have asked my staff not to prepare remarks for this because I am receiving the award for grass-roots organizing, and not the fact that I am the Secretary of State.

If I may share with you, I am from a small town – Clinton, Kentucky – one stoplight. My grandmother, who died about 16 or 17 months ago at 105 years old, used to say to me all the time, "remove not thy ancient landmarks." I didn't know what my grandmother was talking about until about 18 months ago when I accepted my call to the ministry. But I now tell you that I am an organizer because when someone was hungry, I don't recall my mother telling me to go to the mayor or to the City Council. She said, "feed them." I don't recall when someone didn't have any place to stay—I remember going up at my grandmother's funeral just 16 to 17 months ago realizing that people who I'd called my cousins and uncles, were not really my cousins and uncles, but because they needed a place to live, they lived with me.

I recall every now and then when my grandmother would say that somebody is sick and they need some help, we would just collect some money. It never was going to City Hall or to the City Council members. I became an organizer because somewhere, I remember that my grandmother said "don't always feed them, but teach them to fish."

I became an organizer some kind of way because I realized that when I look at those that are locked out, I am looking at my cousins and my uncles and sometimes, I am looking at myself. I didn't just come up here and get elected to Secretary of State. Every now and then along my journey I got lost and I got stopped and I didn't make the best grades in the world. But every now and then, if someone just needed to move a little further, I recall giving them a hand.

I recall in Morehead State University, a campus of 6,000, only 98 African-Americans, caught up and confused about being in the middle of Appalachia and all I wanted was just some hair products! And not understanding an, not understanding that at the end of the day they were fighting a different plight than these 98 African-Americans were fighting.

But somewhere I became an organizer because I realized that it wasn't the Appalachians that were my problem. In order for them to get what they wanted, in order for me to get what I wanted we had to come together. And lo and behold, things ain't been the same since African-Americans and Appalachians at Morehead State University started moving in the same track.

I was speaking to someone earlier today because I left the Democratic National Committee this afternoon. I joined Donna Brazile, and Minia Amore (sp), and Alexis Herman. And trying to figure out what had gone wrong with the party that I grew up with. What had gone wrong?

Y'all, I ain't going to preach this sermon here today, I ain't going to act like Jesse Jackson, my mentor. But I want to tell you before I leave that I'm an organizer because I'm frustrated. I'm an organizer because about two weeks ago I was in Mississippi trying to understand the plight of Fannie Lou Hamer. And I realized, sitting at Tupelo, Mississippi in the campus, reading her papers, what she said, "Is it too late?" Sitting there on the campus of this college university in 2003 and saying, "Fannie, but I'm still where you are. I'm still where you were some 35 years ago. Sick and tired of being sick and tired."

I chose to be an organizer because in the spirit of Fannie Lou Hamer and African-Americans around this country, I might tell y'all something y'all don't really know so you might pull a pencil and piece of paper out and get it right. We are frustrated. We are not frustrated because we can't come to hotels and sit and drink coffee and wine with you. We're frustrated because there are African-Americans out there in rural Mississippi and in Camden, New Jersey and Los Angeles that really don't understand what we're doing here today. They wouldn't know the difference between Wellstone, that stone, and somebody else's stone and all the goodness that they do. There's a locked out community out there, there's a locked out community that fought hard in Florida, for the President of the United States of America.

I'm almost getting ready to get in trouble so I'm getting ready to just slow down a little bit. There's a community in Florida where all they wanted to do was continue the legacy for the President that they cared so much about, Bill Clinton. And they just went to the polls, they just showed up to continue the legacy. And somewhere somebody failed to count the votes. Now they ain't sitting in no meeting contemplating in a church trying to figure out whether they were white boys that had a "D" on their chest, or white boys that had an "R" on their chest. They just believed somebody didn't count their votes.

I'm an organizer because I'm going to count those votes next year. Now we going to count them, we're going to count the votes. I'm an organizer out there because I don't believe that technology can get too fancy that I get confused about the close of the poll, about a chad. I'm an organizer out there because everyone that needs to come to the polls should have a way. Transportation. If they need to walk, they need to drive, they need to have some transportation. But I'm an organizer, not because I believe that there needs to be a communication vehicle. I'm an organizer because I believe that there are

folks out there that can't feed themselves, don't have a place to live if they looked everyday. I believe that there are people out there that work two part-time jobs and have no health care. I'm an organizer out there guys—I'm getting caught up, I don't get to do a lot of this in New Jersey—I'm a bureaucrat now and the Republicans won't let me do this! They won't let me do this! But I'm an organizer out there and I guarantee you, that the Governor of New Jersey and myself and every Democrat, we're going to make sure that around this country, that every African-American, every Hispanic, every Asian-American, every American finds a way to the polls and makes sure that what is happening in Washington today does not continue to happen. That's why I'm an organizer. Thank you.