

Thank you. Thank you Roger Hickey and Bob Borosage for bringing us all together today and thank you for your leadership in the cause of a more progressive America.

My friends, we meet here today at a time where we find ourselves at a crossroads in America's history.

It's a time where you can go to any town hall or street corner or coffee shop and hear people express the same anxiety about the future; hear them convey the same uncertainty about the direction we're headed as a country. Whether it's the war or Katrina or their health care or their jobs, you hear people say that we've finally arrived at a moment where something must change.

These are Americans who still believe in an America where anything's possible - they just don't think their leaders do. These are Americans who still dream big dreams -they just sense their leaders have forgotten how.

I remember when I first ran for the state Senate - my very first race. A seat had opened up, and some friends asked me if I'd be interested in running. Well, I thought about it, and then I did what every wise man does when faced with a difficult decision: I prayed, and I asked my wife.

And after consulting with these higher powers, I threw my hat in the ring and I did what every person on a campaign does - I talked to anyone who'd listen.

I went to bake sales and barber shops and if there were two guys standing on the corner I'd pull up and hand them literature. And everywhere I went I'd get two questions:

First, they'd ask, "Where'd you get that funny name, Barack Obama?" Because people just couldn't pronounce it. They'd call me "Alabama," or they'd call me "Yo Mama." And I'd have to explain that I got the name from my father, who was from Kenya.

And the second thing people would ask me was, "You seem like a nice young man."

You teach law school, you're a civil rights attorney, you organize voter registration, you're a family man - why would you wanna go into something dirty and nasty like politics?"

And I understood the question because it revealed the cynicism people feel about public life today. That even though we may get involved out of civic obligation every few years, we don't always have confidence that government can make a difference in our lives.

So I understand the cynicism. But whenever I get in that mood, I think about something that happened to me on the eve of my election to the United States Senate.

We had held a large rally the night before in the Southside of Chicago, which is where I live. And in the midst of this rally, someone comes up to me and says that there's a woman who'd like to come meet you, and she's traveled a long way and she wants to take a picture and shake your hand.

And so I said fine, and I met her, and we talked.

And all of this would have been unremarkable except for the fact that this woman, Marguerite Lewis, was born in 1899 and was 105 years old.

And ever since I met this frail, one-hundred-and-five-year-old African-American woman who had found the strength to leave her house and come to a rally because she believed that her voice mattered, I've thought about all she's seen in her life.

I've thought about the fact that when she was born, there weren't cars on the road, and no airplanes in the sky. That she was born under the cloud of Jim Crow, free in theory but still enslaved in so many ways. That she was born at a time for black folks when lynchings were not uncommon, but voting was.

I've thought about how she lived to see a world war and a Great Depression and a second world war, and how she saw her brothers and uncles and nephews and cousins coming home from those wars and still have to sit at the back of a bus.

And I thought about how she saw women finally win the right to vote. And how she watched FDR lift this nation out of fear and send millions to college on the GI Bill and lift millions out of poverty with Social Security. How she saw unions rise up and a middle-class prosper, and watched immigrants leave distant shores in search of an idea known as America.

She believed in this idea with all her heart and she saw this progress around her and she had faith that someday it would be her turn. And when she finally saw hope breaking through the horizon in the Civil Rights Movement, she thought, "Maybe it's my turn."

And in that movement, she saw women who were willing to walk instead of ride the bus after a day of doing somebody else's laundry and looking after somebody else's children because they walked for freedom. And she saw young people of every race and every creed take a bus down to Mississippi and Alabama to register voters because they believed. She saw four little girls die in a Sunday school and catalyze a nation.

And at last - at last - she saw the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

And she saw people lining up to vote for the first time - and she got in that line - and she never forgot it. She kept on voting in each and every election because she believed. She believed that over a span of three centuries, she had seen enough to know that there is no challenge too great, no injustice too crippling, no destiny too far out of reach for America.

She believed that we don't have to settle for equality for some or opportunity for the lucky or freedom for the few.

And she knew that during those moments in history where it looked like we might give up hope or settle for less, there have always been Americans who refused. Who said we're going to keep on dreaming, and we're going to keep on building, and we're going to keep on marching, and we're going to keep on working because that's who we are. Because we've always fought to bring all of our people under the blanket of the American Dream.

And I think that we face one of those moments today.

In a century just six years old, our faith has been shaken by war and terror, disaster and despair, threats to the middle-class dream, and scandal and corruption in our government.

The sweeping changes brought by revolutions in technology have torn down walls between business and government and people and places all over the globe. And with this new world comes new risks and new dangers.

No longer can we assume that a high-school education is enough to compete for a job that could easily go to a college-educated student in Bangalore or Beijing. No more can we count on employers to provide health care and pensions and job training when their bottom-lines know no borders.

Never again can we expect the oceans that surround America to keep us safe from attacks on our own soil.

The world has changed. And as a result, we've seen families work harder for less and our jobs go overseas. We've seen the cost of health care and child care and gasoline skyrocket. We've seen our children leave for Iraq and terrorists threaten to finish the job they started on 9/11.

But while the world has changed around us, too often our government has stood still. Our faith has been shaken, but the people running Washington aren't willing to make us believe again.

It's the timidity - the smallness - of our politics that's holding us back right now. The idea that some problems are just too big to handle, and if you just ignore them, sooner or later, they'll go away.

That if you give a speech where you rattle off statistics about the stock market being up and orders for durable goods being on the rise, no one will notice the single mom whose two jobs won't pay the bills or the student who can't afford his college dreams.

That if you say the words "plan for victory" and point to the number of schools painted and roads paved and cell phones used in Iraq, no one will notice the nearly 2,500 flag-draped coffins that have arrived at Dover Air Force base.

Well it's time we finally said we notice, and we care, and we're not gonna settle anymore.

You know, you probably never thought you'd hear this at a Take Back America conference, but Newt Gingrich made a great point a few weeks ago. He was talking about what an awful job his own party has done governing this country, and he said that with all the mistakes and misjudgments the Republicans have made over the last six years, the slogan for the Democrats should come down to just two words:

Had enough?

I don't know about you, but I think old Newt is onto something here. Because I think we've all had enough. Enough of the broken promises. Enough of the failed leadership. Enough of the can't-do, won't-do, won't-even-try style of governance.

Four years after 9/11, I've had enough of being told that we can find the money to give Paris Hilton more tax cuts, but we can't find enough to protect our ports or our railroads or our chemical plants or our borders.

I've had enough of the closed-door deals that give billions to the HMOs when we're told that we can't do a thing for the 45 million uninsured or the millions more who can't pay their medical bills.

I've had enough of being told that we can't afford body armor for our troops and health care for our veterans and benefits for the wounded heroes who've risked their lives for this country. I've had enough of that.

I've had enough of giving billions away to the oil companies when we're told that we can't invest in the renewable energy that will create jobs and lower gas prices and finally free us from our dependence on the oil wells of Saudi Arabia.

I've had enough of our kids going to schools where the rats outnumber the computers. I've had enough of Katrina survivors living out of their cars and begging FEMA for trailers. And I've had enough of being told that all we can do about this is sit and wait and hope that the good fortune of a few trickles on down to everyone else in this country.

You know, we all remember that George Bush said in 2000 campaign that he was against nation-building. We just didn't know he was talking about this one.

Now, let me say this - I don't think that George Bush is a bad man. I think he loves his country. I don't think this administration is full of stupid people - I think there are a lot of smart folks in there. The problem isn't that their philosophy isn't working the way it's supposed to - it's that it is. It's that it's doing exactly what it's supposed to do.

The reason they don't believe government has a role in solving national problems is because they think government is the problem. That we're better off if we dismantle it - if we divvy it up into individual tax breaks, hand 'em out, and encourage everyone to go buy your own health care, your own retirement security, your own child care, their own schools, your own private security force, your own roads, their own levees...

It's called the Ownership Society in Washington. But in our past there has been another term for it - Social Darwinism - every man or women for him or herself.

It allows us to say to those whose health care or tuition may rise faster than they can afford - life isn't fair. It allows us to say to the child who didn't have the foresight to choose the right parents or be born in the right suburb - pick yourself up by your bootstraps. It lets us say to the guy who worked twenty or thirty years in the factory and then watched his plant move out to Mexico or China - we're sorry, but you're on your own.

It's a bracing idea. It's a tempting idea. And it's the easiest thing in the world.

But there's just one problem. It doesn't work. It ignores our history. Yes, our greatness as a nation has depended on individual initiative, on a belief in the free market. But it has also depended on our sense of mutual regard for each other, of mutual responsibility. The idea that everybody has a stake in the country, that we're all in it together and everybody's got a shot at opportunity.

Americans know this. We know that government can't solve all our problems - and we don't want it to.

But we also know that there are some things we can't do on our own. We know that there are some things we do better together.

We know that we've been called in churches and mosques, synagogues and Sunday schools to love our neighbors as ourselves; to be our brother's keeper; to be our sister's keeper. That we have individual responsibility, but we also have collective responsibility to each other.

That's what America is.

And so I am eager to have this argument not just with the President, but the entire Republican Party over what this country is about.

Because I think that this is our moment to lead.

The time for our party's identity crisis is over. Don't let anyone tell you we don't know what we stand for and don't doubt it yourselves. We know who we are. And in the end, we know that it isn't enough to just say that you've had enough.

So let it be said that we are the party of opportunity. That in a global economy that's more connected and more competitive - we are the party that will guarantee every American an

affordable, world-class, top-notch, life-long education - from early childhood to high school, from college to on-the-job training.

Let it be said that we are the party of affordable, accessible health care for all Americans. The party that won't make Americans choose between a health care plan that bankrupts the government and one that bankrupts families. The party that won't just throw a few tax breaks at families who can't afford their insurance, but modernizes our health care system and gives every family a chance to buy insurance at a price they can afford.

Let it be said that we are the party of an energy independent America. The party that's not bought and paid for by the oil companies. The party that will harness homegrown, alternative fuels and spur the production of fuel-efficient, hybrid cars to break our dependence on the world's most dangerous regimes.

Let it be said that we will conduct a smart foreign policy that battles the forces of terrorism and fundamentalism wherever they may exist by matching the might of our military with the power of our diplomacy and the strength of our alliances. And when we do go to war, let us always be honest with the American people about why we are there and how we will win.

And let it be said that we are the party of open, honest government that doesn't peddle the agenda of whichever lobbyist or special interest can write the biggest check. The party who believes that in this democracy, influence and access should begin and end with the power of the ballot.

If we do all this, if we can be trusted to lead, this will not be a Democratic Agenda, it will be an American agenda. Because in the end, we may be proud Democrats, but we are prouder Americans. We're tired of being divided, tired of running into ideological walls and partisan roadblocks, tired of appeals to our worst instincts and greatest fears.

Americans everywhere are desperate for leadership. They are longing for direction. And they want to believe again. A while ago, I was reading through Jonathan Kozol's new book, *Shame of a Nation*, which tells of his travels to underprivileged schools across America.

At one point, Kozol tells about his trip to Fremont High School in Los Angeles, where he met a girl who tells him that she'd taken hairdressing twice, because there were actually two different levels offered by the high school. The first was in hairstyling; the other in braiding.

Another girl, Mireya, listened as her friend told this story. And she began to cry. When asked what was wrong, she said, "I don't want to take hairdressing. I did not need sewing either. I knew how to sew. My mother is a seamstress in a factory. I'm trying to go to college. I don't need to sew to go to college. My mother sews. I hoped for something else."

I hoped for something else.

I've often thought about Mireya and her simple dream and all those before her who've shared that dream too.

And I've wondered - if she is lucky enough to live as long as 105-year-old Marguerite Lewis, if she someday has the chance to look back across the twenty-first century, what will she see? Will she see a country that is freer and kinder, more tolerant and more just than the one she grew up in? Will she see greater opportunities for every citizen of this country? Will all her childhood hopes be fulfilled?

We are here tonight because we believe that in this country, we have it within our power to say "yes" to those questions - to forge our own destiny - to begin the world anew.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is our time.

Our time to make a mark on history.

Our time to write a new chapter in the American story.

Our time to leave our children a country that is freer and kinder, more prosperous and more just than the place we grew up.

And then someday, someday, if our kids get the chance to stand where we are and look back at the beginning of the 21st century, they can say that this was the time when America renewed its purpose.

They can say that this was the time when America found its way.

They can say that this was the time when America learned to dream again.