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Take Back America Conference

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PREPARED REMARKS

Senator Stabenow tells us that this administration has a dagger poised at the heart of Medicare. And Bob Borosage says we have to stop them. Will you help us? Will you help us? (Let me hear you! Will you help us?) And hasn't this conference helped restore our confidence that we can stop such outrages and Take Back America!

And we must take back America—or else, four more years.

Four more years of these policies?

The thought is unacceptable.

The normal constraints of the American system of government don't seem to apply to the Bush administration.

The normal constraints of a plurality without a mandate, have not applied to them.

The normal constraints of diplomacy, against unilateralism, have not applied to them.

The normal constraints of the Constitution, are being set aside by them.

We can't accept four more years of these policies.

In the world of John Ashcroft, Donald Rumsfeld, Tom DeLay and Karl Rove, the only effective constraint is an opposition with a mobilized majority and a will to fight back.

Do we have the will to fight back?
YOU BET!!

Based on what we have heard from this terrific conference and the great leadership of Bob Borosage and Roger Hickey, we are building a majority to Take Back America.

Now we need to take the energy and insights laid out here and take it to heart, take it home, and take it out to the country.

To mobilize that majority, we have to tell the truth to the American people. We “Need to speak Truth to Power.”

The truth has been missing in action in American politics. It’s not dead; it hasn’t been taken prisoner, but it is missing, and we have to find it and spread it around.

It’s been missing from the economic debate. The President talks “Jobs, Jobs, Jobs” but his tax package won’t create jobs. The last one didn’t; we’ve lost more than 2 million jobs since he took up residence at 1600 Pennsylvania, over 1.3 million since the 2001 tax cuts were passed. They claimed the \$726 billion package would produce 1.4 million jobs. That’s about \$520,000 in tax cuts for one job. And this is from a crowd that is too stingy to extend unemployment insurance for the long term jobless. Now that’s the truth.

And the truth has been missing from the foreign affairs debate. Need I dwell on the “weapons of mass destruction”? When a presidential visit to France is as tense as a meeting with the Soviet Premier used to be; and when we’re losing popularity contests around the world to tyrants and terrorists, then this crowd has a failed foreign policy. And that’s the truth.

Some might not want to call this President a liar, some, I’m told, like his character. So, if we don’t say he lies, may I say he employs falsifications? Falsehoods? Untruths? Fibbery? Mendacity? Misstatement? Distortion? Prevarication? Subreption? Weasel words? Inventions? Casuistry? Deceit? Flimflam? Humbug?

How about dissembling? Hypocrisy? Sham? Hokum? Concoction?

How about whoppers? Cock-and-bull stories? Howlers, stretchers, and bangers?

How about fraud?

To tell the truth, it’s about time to tell the truth.

There is fundamental truth we have to tell—Not just this year, but truths to change the debate and the power relations in this country.

The right wing has simplified its framework down to three principles: no taxes, traditional values, and military strength.

We need a framework that helps us convey the truth.

The truth is we need a government to do those things that we can’t do for ourselves --- to protect us with justice, to provide for the general health and safety, to build the schools, the libraries, the roads, the public transit, the parks. Yes, we do need charity; but we also need all of us working together for the common good. WE NEED SOLIDARITY.

The truth is that there are problems in how corporations are run. It's not just a few bad apples; it's because they are run for private profit, not the public good. WE NEED TO HOLD CORPORATIONS ACCOUNTABLE.

The truth is that peace is sustained not through unilateral war, but through international interdependence. WE NEED GLOBAL JUSTICE.

And we've got what it takes for a real mobilization to tell the truth.

The partners who built this conference are part of the infrastructure building the New Progressive Majority. Now we read in the papers about organizational rifts. But despite what we read, I know everyone involved is focused on next year's elections with the intensity of a laser beam. Each of them knows that we need to do this together, coordinated and smart.

And if we do it together, but only if we do it together, we can Take Back America.

Those who know me won't be surprised that I think there are three reasons that show we now are building a winning coalition coming out of this conference.

1. From this conference we see a coming together of progressive forces and see our strength and vitality.
2. From this conference, we see the broad agreement on a common message and values.
3. From every speaker we have seen a willingness to be bold and speak that truth to power.

We are going to Take Back America. Why will we take it back?

First, this administration can't deal with the problems this country is facing.

And we need to remember that progressives did win the last Presidential election and we will be smarter this time.

We won't let our votes be stolen at the polling place or at the Supreme Court.

Matthew Dowd, the Republican National Committee pollster, has projected that if the 2000 election were to be re-run in 2004 -- and every demographic group voted the same way -- the demographic changes within America over these 4 years would widen the Democratic margin of victory from half a million to nearly 3 million votes.

We also know we need to fight back in the media and on message—and this is what John Podesta and Hillary Clinton, Harold Ickes and Campaign for America's Future are

each doing in different efforts—creating the echo chamber for progressive ideas. And Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky is organizing a Truth Squad on the Hill to speak truth to power and we can magnify it around the country.

We know we need more emphasis on personal contact—not just media (as important as that is), but member to member, door to door and precinct by precinct. We are all learning from what the AFL-CIO, and EMILY's List and Sierra Club and the NAACP National Voter Fund have done creating a truly integrated voter contact issue campaign.

We know we need to learn from and integrate the new technologies for activism from MoveOn, who is paving the way, and Working Assets and True Majority and others mobilizing on line and in person in lobby days on taxes and judges and the war and raising millions of dollars for candidates from small contributors who are ready to MoveOn.

And we have seen the impact of real mobilization, gaining strength.

On February 15th, we saw an antiwar movement that went from zero to 15 million in just a few months, with an explosion of activity in hundreds of cities at once. And the range of people and of organizations was remarkable from the National Council of Churches and NAACP to NOW and PEACE ACTION and the lively group responding to the Rumsfeld security color alerts called Code Pink! (I have my pink outfit!).

We saw the extraordinary victory of the environmental community on ANWAR, preserving the wildlife reserve. When we organize effectively, we win.

And the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, NAACP along with other civil rights groups are mobilizing against the rollback of affirmative action with up to 30,000 turning out at the Supreme Court demonstration. They are moving for justice.

We have been preparing for the day when the Administration that brought us Attorney General Ashcroft tries to fill its first Supreme Court vacancy. People for the American Way, the Leadership Conference, the Alliance for Justice and so many of you in this room have coordinated the remarkable coalition in opposition to Bush's most ideologically extreme federal judicial nominees. Together we have been successful in pushing the filibuster on two--hopefully going on three--of the worst.

In the states there are victories based on the power of the people.

The Supreme Court's decision last month let Maine implement a program to lower prescription drug costs serves as a reminder that progressive legislators like Chellie Pingree, now the wonderful new head of Common Cause, with organizations including unions and Maine People's Action and Dirigo Alliance can beat even the powerful pharmaceutical lobby.

In Illinois, seniors will save hundreds of thousands of dollars on prescription drugs—thanks to Illinois Citizen Action.

And people won a new state minimum wage of \$6.50 an hour in that state—thanks to the Coalition to Reward Work, put together by ACORN, working with SEIU Local 880 and the State Federation of Labor.

In Los Angeles, they won a strong living wage law and a \$100 Million a year Housing Trust Fund for affordable housing for working families.

In New Jersey, they won one of the strongest anti-predatory lending laws in the country thanks to the Fair Lending Coalition, initiated by Citizen Action including AARP, NAACP, ACORN, the NJ Institute for Social Justice and Legal Services of NJ.

In New Mexico, they won public employee collective bargaining with leadership from unions and also won full public financing of campaigns with leadership from PACE and the Latino community who are also here today.

All across the country, we see the power of the people when organized. You are organizing, you are mobilizing, you are winning. You are the heroines and heroes of the movement and we are on the march.

And we leave this conference committed to march on and to organize. And let us pledge, we will be there.

And we need to continue the march to save Medicare and Medicaid as we heard from Senator Debbie Stabenow.

Now that they've got their tax cut, the next item on the “evil doers” agenda is to pass legislation fast - before July 4th they hope - that will turn the system over to the HMOs and private insurers. We need to make it clear that the choice is between a Medicare system that has never dropped a senior citizen from coverage and private HMOs that have dropped 2 million seniors when they couldn't make enough money. And let us all pledge, that in our states, we will make our calls...we will be there!

There will be a bus ride for immigrant rights in October—a freedom ride initiated by the Hotel and Restaurant Workers, joined by National Council of La Raza, National Immigration Forum, Center for Community Change and so many others and led by the conscience of the Congress, John Lewis. And let us all pledge, that in our states...we will be there!

And the women's movement (NOW, NARAL pro-Choice America, Planned Parenthood, and Feminist Majority) will be calling for the largest demonstrations in the spring for choice and a Supreme Court that will defend that right. And let us all pledge, that we will be there!

And there will be organizing for rights at work—the right to organize for collective bargaining. Nothing is more essential if we are to rebuild the strength of working people to defend themselves. And let us all pledge, that we will be there!

And we leave this conference to go to Vice President Cheney's house for the Millionaire Man and Woman March—we'll all have our tiaras and top hats provided by the Fair Tax Coalition and USAction and the endlessly creative United for a Fair Economy to thank the administration for the billionaire tax cuts starving the states.

And let us pledge, that we will be there!!

These actions are magnified by the thousands around the country. We are on the march. We will be there.

Now we know this is not an easy time.

It is hard because now all the reins of political power are in the hands of forces that would, in the words of Bill Greider, roll back the 20th century.

But we have seen difficult times before.

Look around in this very room. In this room are African-Americans whose grandparents were slaves. In this room are women whose mothers were denied the right to control their own bodies and some who may have faced backroom abortions. In this room are gays and lesbians who lived closeted, afraid for the loss of support of family, of their jobs, and even for loss of their lives for the love they were not allowed to speak. In this room are working women and men whose grandparents never had the time to see their children grow up, before a labor movement won the 8-hour day and its benefits. In this room are people maimed by machinery before there was OSHA. In this room are people who would not have had health care if it were not for Medicare. In this room there are people of every faith and of every class: we are the America of the Mayflower and the America of the slave ship Amistad together, the America of Ellis Island and those who crossed the Rio Grande at the mercy of the coyotes, together. We are the America of Omaha Beach and of the bridge at Selma together, the America of Cesar Chavez and the America of Justin Dart, the father of the Disability Rights movement who died last year. We are together. In this room there are people who have stood together and marched together and who together make this a better country and a better world.

These are important victories. They were worth struggling for. They were worth some people dying for. They are worth living for, to retain.

We have done it before and we can do it again, we need to do it again, we will do it again. And we will never go back. And to this we make our pledge. It is a solemn oath. We will be there.

“There is of course no guarantee of success. Politics is not about observations or predictions. Politics is what we create by what we do, what we hope for and what we dare to imagine. The future will belong to those who have passion, and to those who are willing to make the personal commitment to make our country better.”

Those last four sentences are from the words of Paul Wellstone, who died just days before he surely would have won re-election to the Senate, had he lived.

I first met Paul Wellstone when he was a community organizer, fighting against the power companies in Minnesota and he came to a training session I was running from the Midwest Academy, around 1977. He was a friend and was at the heart of the progressive movement.

He was a leader with courage. He would have applauded your efforts and done all he could to promote them. He would have joined in the pledge to be there. He would be on the Immigration Freedom Ride, in the Pro-Choice March, at the rally at the Supreme Court, in the fight to save Medicare, supporting collective bargaining and marching with us to Dick Cheney’s house after this conference. Our best tribute to his memory is to do exactly as he often charged us--with his great spirit. In the words that he often said at the end of his speeches—and in a style of which this is a weak imitation) “Keep on fighting, keep on marching, Keep on Fighting, Keep on Marching. Keep on fighting, keep on marching”...until we Take Back America.