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Take Back America Conference

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

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Wow. Hey, isn't this conference great? Isn't it great? Thank you, Campaign for America's Future, for doing this tremendous service to all who are here and to this country and to our future. It's really something. I walked into this conference and I saw so many faces that I have seen on the frontlines of so many issues over so many years, and it's wonderful, not only to be able to share ideas and strategies, but to be able to share our spirit and renew and encourage one another during these very difficult times, facing this extraordinary challenge that we all face. It's wonderful and important for us to come together, to get caught up, to renew ourselves and to prepare ourselves for the great challenge ahead.

If you ask our allies - those who joined us on the streets of our cities around the world just a few months ago to protest the American-led invasion of Iraq - "What is the single most important thing that we, as Americans, can do to promote a just and secure planet?" They will tell you - and from my experience, they will tell you unanimously - defeat George W. Bush and send the neo-cons that he has given the ship of state packing.

But I want to be very sober this afternoon about the challenge that we have in front of us as progressive activists. The fact is that George W. Bush will be re-elected and we will be subjected to four more years of extraordinary recklessness and an incredibly dangerous foreign policy if the public's confidence in his ability to lead on national security and foreign policy issues persists through the 2004 elections. If you look at those polling numbers - what Americans are telling researchers - it's sobering. There are those who argue that, with the polls indicating Americans strongly favor the Bush administration and the Republican party on national defense and foreign policy issues, and with the Democratic party deeply divided on these issues - notwithstanding some of the comments that one might hear from candidates before a progressive audience - Democratic candidates for public office in 2004 should stick to non-defense and non-foreign policy issues, such as health care, education and the economy, where Democrats hold an advantage. I argue that they are wrong, that ignoring national security is a grave error, that candidates can win the day on education and healthcare and jobs and any number of other important issues. But if the American electorate believes that the Bush administration and its Republican allies as the best hope for

keeping America safe, they will re-elect the President and keep a Republican Congress in power, despite their positions on so many issues.

In light of this conventional wisdom, we - as progressives and as anti-war activists - have a grave responsibility to present a vigorous and sustained political challenge to the radical militaristic policies of the Bush administration and the neo-cons who direct it. And we have a further obligation to present to the American people a coherent and credible alternative to the dangerous policies of this administration. We have two very important assets going for us.

Number one: we have an extraordinarily large and highly-committed base of support that took to the streets in Washington and New York and Chicago and Los Angeles and all across this country and took to the streets of Washington to demand that American politicians listen to the American people on the issue of war and peace and an invasion of Iraq. There are tremendous assets that we have to tap and energize and mobilize.

Secondly, we have a large number of what pollsters call "persuadable voters" who, according to these polls, were with us in very large numbers before the invasion. Once the invasion occurred, they rallied behind the troops and the Commander in Chief, and their numbers reflected them supporting the President. But if you look closely at that research, you learn that these very same Americans had very grave doubts about an occupation of Iraq, about the long-term consequences and risks of defying the international community and breaking international law and working against the United Nations Security Council. It is our responsibility to address those swing persuadable voters, take advantage of those doubts and open minds and bring those voters home to our side in November of 2004.

Now, the people participating in this conference know very well about the enormous and growing threats to national and world security. There is, of course, the anger and the frustration of those who have been manipulated and sold the bill of goods about the promise of globalization and the prosperity and opportunity it would provide to all the people of the world. Expectations were raised. And the tremendous poverty and misery and inequality turns to bitterness when they think of those expectations. You see, they didn't have the experience that we did, of trickle-down economics. Some of them actually bought this idea that free-trade could create opportunity and hope. The widening gap between the haves and have-nots, the global north and south and the misery and hopelessness and frustration that it breeds are a threat to everyone's security.

Then there's the scourge of AIDS. There's the relentless assault on the environment. There are oppressive regimes, including those whom we have and continue to support, that preside over enormous poverty and misery, and brutally suppress any non-violent means of challenging their absolute power. And there's civil unrest and civil wars in places like the Congo that have claimed over 3.3 million lives out of a population of 54 million, as the world turns its back. These are threats to our security.

But we, as political operatives engaging in combat in 2004 electoral sweepstakes, need to take on and address those fears that are foremost in people's minds. The past two years have been marked by color-coded alert levels. The airwaves are full of talk of terrorists engineering new diseases and disseminating deadly agents through air ventilation systems. Health workers are encouraged to get smallpox vaccines. Cities engage in elaborate drills to prepare for an attack. We hear about the hostile, irrational, and fanatical North Korean leadership, brazenly pursuing nuclear weapons in defiance of the United States and the rest of the world, conflicts simmering in South Asia and the Middle East threaten to pull us in, and we hear about all these stories, day in and day out, on the airwaves of America. No wonder countless Americans today feel insecure and worried, not just about their jobs or about their healthcare or about their financial security, but also about their physical security.

This presents us with an opportunity and an obligation to tell the American people how and why the reckless policies of the Bush administration are undermining their security. Or to ask the American people, in much the same way Katrina [vanden Heuvel] just did and the way Ronald Reagan asked Jimmy Carter in his campaign against him a few years ago, are we safer today than we were before a military invasion and occupation of Iraq? Are we safer today than we were before the implementation of the Bush administration's so-called national security strategy?

The United States' invasion and occupation of Iraq is, in many ways, a trial run for what this administration calls a new norm in international relations. This new norm is the doctrine of preventive war that the administration announced explicitly in its national security strategy, and that it has expounded and built upon ever since. It holds that the United States has the right to attack any country that it claims to be a potential threat - not an actual threat, not an imminent threat, but a potential threat. The new strategy stresses offensive military intervention, preemptive first strikes and proactive counter-proliferation measures against so-called rogue states and other enemies. By rejecting the notion of working within international law, by rejecting the policies of deterrence and collective security, the Bush administration is pursuing a vision in which the United States is not only the world's policeman, but the world's military dictator, answerable only to itself. Does the invasion of Iraq and this new norm of the Bush national security strategy make this country safer? Let's start with the lessons that other nations, including those that are called the Axis of Evil, are taking from this trial run, this new norm of international relations.

The administration believed that this invasion of Iraq would send a cautionary tale: one false move and you will suffer the same fate as the Iraqi leadership. Well, the fact of the matter is, it is having precisely the opposite effect. The message to other nations is clear: you had better develop nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction immediately, or you too will be vulnerable to a United States preventive war. This is what North Korea's Foreign Minister had to say after the invasion of Iraq began, and I am quoting: "To allow disarmament through inspections does not help avert a war, but rather, sparks it." The statement concludes that "only a tremendous military deterrent force can prevent attacks on states the United States does not like." Meanwhile, the

Iranian nuclear program continues to speed ahead. Does this make America safer? What if the doctrine of preemption that holds that one nation can attack another if it believes the other nation poses a potential threat to its security is embraced by bitter enemies with their fingers on the trigger of nuclear weapons like India and Pakistan? What if it is embraced by North Korea? Does this make America and the world safer?

The fact is that the administration will find that North Korea and its massive arsenal pointed at Seoul is not such easy prey for US military might, and it will find that Iran's nuclear program cannot be stopped by attacking its facilities, many of which we can't even locate, and that there is no chance that Iranians would welcome United States troops as liberators. The Bush doctrine rests on the notion that the American public will accept the costs and risks of an American military empire and the United States as world cop. Before the invasion of Iraq, the administration was reluctant to discuss what the invasion of Iraq would lead to - a full-scale occupation for an indeterminate amount of time and an indeterminate cost. Nor was it willing to talk about the fact that, unlike the first Gulf War, which was sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council, and where 90 percent of the costs were paid by our allies, the American people will have to shoulder 90 percent of the monetary costs of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, not to mention the ongoing loss of American lives and innocent Iraqis, due to the extraordinary arrogance and short-sightedness of this administration when it came to occupying as a military power this desperate and volatile country.

The President took our nation to war on the basis of two specious arguments. First and foremost was that this war was necessary to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. The President said, and his administration told the American people repeatedly, about Iraq's vast weapons programs with "thousands of tons of chemical and biological weapons that could kill millions of people."

US and British forces have now occupied the entire country for more than two months. They have so far failed to turn up evidence of any chemical or biological weapons, let alone the massive programs we were assured existed. The Iraqi regime's failure to use any such weapons - even at the point of its own destruction - argues that either they did not have any useable biological or chemical weapons, or they concluded that their use would be ineffective. Whatever the reality, it demonstrates that Iraq did not pose an imminent threat to the region, to the world or to the United States, and that a tough inspection regime, given time and resources, could have adequately addressed the threats posed by Iraq's weapons programs by the United Nations.

The second claim was that the United States was combating terrorism by overthrowing Saddam Hussein and occupying the country. Iraq and 9/11 were repeatedly spoken of almost in the same breath by the President and his administration. American soldiers reportedly inscribed the names of 9/11 victims on the missiles and bombs they launched against hapless Iraqi conscripts, buildings, homes and marketplaces.

I'd like to read you a quote from the mother of Captain Tristan Aiken, a US soldier who lost his life in Iraq. "He was doing his job. He had no choice, and I am proud of who he

was. But it makes me mad that this whole war was sold to the American public, and to the soldiers, as something it wasn't. Our forces have been convinced that Iraqis were responsible for September 11, and that's not true." Of course, she's right. It's well known that a plan for regime-change in Iraq predated 9/11. The attacks on that day provided a political opening to push the administration's new foreign policy. And the more time goes by, the more clear it becomes that the invasion of Iraq was based upon a lie - a lie about links to Al Qaeda, a lie about weapons of mass destruction, a lie about the enormous risks and consequences of the United States defying international opinion and international law. The most important decision that a government can make - the life and death decision of war and peace - cannot be allowed to be based on a lie. The Bush administration needs to be held accountable by the American people.

Okay, I have taken too long. What are we to do? Well, two things. First of all, we need a credible, very sophisticated and focused public campaign, filled with communication and action that relentlessly challenges this administration on all the points to which they are most vulnerable. And while no single item may turn the tide before this electorate, the cumulative effect of such an effort over an eighteen month period of time could create the doubts required to move persuadable voters out of the Bush column. We've got to do it. We've got to do it.

Secondly, we need a focused and sophisticated a very robust electoral campaign that includes both non-partisan public education on these issues and a very firm, committed and energetic electoral campaign on the ground. It needs to be based upon the need to activate and organize all those people who joined us on the streets of America and joined us on the streets of Washington, and we need to mobilize them into political action; getting on the phones, knocking on doors, hitting the streets and talking to the American people - community by community, neighborhood by neighborhood, block by block - and then maximizing the turnout of those persuadable voters who come into our camp. There is no substitute. We know how to do this. We know how to do this. We have been working for so long and so hard with so little. We can direct this energy and focus it on this election and on this electorate and bring America back. We can do it. We can do it.

Martin Luther King also said, "I do not believe our nation can be a moral leader of justice, equality and democracy if it is trapped in the role of a self-appointed world policeman." Abraham Lincoln said, "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. As our case is new, so must we think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we can save our country." We are at a perilous time, much like he was.

It is time, my fellow anti-war activists and progressives and Democrats, to disenthrall ourselves from the notion that we cannot and should not address national security issues in the days, weeks and months leading up to the 2004 election. We must disenthrall ourselves from the idea that we have to compromise or be quiet on the fundamental values and principles that we believe in and that move us and that move this country when they can hear them and see them and feel them like we do. We must

disenthrall ourselves from the idea that we cannot engage in this 2004 election with this message and with this vigor and with this commitment, and not win. We can. We must. And we will. Thank you very much.