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Take Back America Conference
Campaign for America's Future / Institute for America's Future

Opening Address
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PREPARED REMARKS

Good afternoon,

My name is Robert Borosage, co-director of the Campaign for America's Future.

It's my pleasure to welcome you all to the Take Back America conference.

Here's what you can expect. This conference will detail the radical agenda of Bush, Frist and Delay – and the self-described movement of conservatives and corporate special interests to which they are beholden.

We aren't going to pull punches. At a time when Americans were looking for unity and bipartisan cooperation in Washington, Bush, Frist and Delay have purposefully pursued a partisan and radical agenda that is opposed to the needs and the desires of American people. It is time to take off the gloves.

Second, we are going to outline elements of a common sense progressive reform agenda that is vital to America's future.

Third, we will hear from the new energy and new organizations, and discuss the strategies that are central to building a progressive citizens' movement that can take this country back.

You'll also hear from many of the announced candidates for the presidency. We are over a year and half away from the next presidential election, a lifetime in politics. We aren't endorsing one or another. We asked them not to do campaigning or fundraising. You've heard of the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries. You've heard of the money primary -- the race for money that precedes them. Well consider this part of the idea primary. We want them to lay out their ideas, their views on what the priorities of this country should be.

Taking back America isn't about the next election, or gaining a thin majority in one house of Congress, or even the White House.

We've got to build a progressive movement for reform – passionate, armed with ideas, driven by a vision of what could be, with the capacity to communicate those ideas and engage citizens across this country.

You can steal a presidential election, but you can't steal the taking back of America. You have to mobilize a movement, put forth a compelling argument and build an enduring majority for reform.

What makes this gathering special is you. You are activists who care about making this country better. You come from across the country, from different organizations and different tribes. USWA is here. USAction is here. 1199 is here. Moveon.org is here. These and other partners have helped bring you here to share the ideas and energy vital to our future.

In this conference, you'll hear from extraordinary new organizations that have grown up – like Moveon.org that is helping to pioneer web-based activism.

You'll hear the aggressive new plans of critical groups, like the AFL-CIO, Emily's List, and progressive majority.

You'll hear about the issues that should define the debate over the next months -- making this economy work for working people, affordable health care for all, the right to high quality public education, the Apollo initiative for energy independence. The need to repel the drive to pack our courts with right-wing judicial activists.

To set up our discussion today, I just want to make three large points.

1. At a time when this country faces new challenges, the "movement conservatives" that dominate Washington are part of the problem, not part of the solution.
2. They are out of step with the needs and the desires of the American people
3. To take back America, we need to build a new independent movement for progressive reform that drives its issues and concerns into the electoral process.

Over the past two years, America has witnessed a stunning reversal in fortune. We've gone from peace and prosperity to war and recession. We've suffered the worst terror attack on us soil in history,

The most costly stock market collapse,

The worst corporate crime wave since the gilded age,

The worst trade deficits ever,

The greatest inequality and worst gap between CEO salaries and worker wages ever.

The worst state and local fiscal crisis in half a century. And at the federal level, we've gone from the largest budget surpluses to the largest deficits virtually overnight.

American families pay the price. Wages down, unemployment up. Health care broken. Retirement plans shattered. Kids in schools where classes are doubling in size as teachers are laid off, after-school programs slashed, in some places going to four-day weeks or cutting weeks from the school year.

President Bush says he is not responsible for our travails. He is a hapless onlooker, a victim of events. And to some extent that is true. The president did not cause the recession, or the stock market crash, or 9/11.

But Americans are looking for solutions, not excuses. And for working families, Bush's policies are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Declining wages and rising inequality are accelerated by his relentless war on labor, his opposition to minimum wage, the attack on overtime and the forty-hour week, and tax giveaways to the wealthy.

His health care plan is a payoff to the drug companies and the insurance companies, and blocks effective action against soaring health care costs.

After the stock market crashed, workers discovered that corporations dramatically slashed their contributions to worker retirement in the switch from guaranteed pensions to private savings plans. Now Bush wants to do the same with social security and Medicare, using privatization as a cover for slashing government's contribution.

This president wants to build schools in Iraq but not in the US, and broke even his own promise on funding for education. Any president who pushes extra tax breaks for millionaires while teachers are being laid off is turning his back on America's future.

The reality is that conservative policies have dominated the last two decades of us policy. Many of the challenges we face -- corporate crime, inequality, trade imbalance, declining wages, overcrowded schools, public squalor -- are the consequences -- intended or unintended -- of those policies. And more of what got us into this fix is not likely to get us out.

After 9/11, this nation unified behind this president. He earned the support of people for assault on Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. And the gratitude of most Iraqis, however fleeting, for toppling the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. But this president has purposefully scorned bipartisan policy, or national unity government. Bipartisan

cooperation, said Grover Norquist, one of the right-wing strategists close to the administration, is “a form of date rape.”

Instead, Bush has given his administration over to the most extreme reactionary elements of his party, while embracing a brazen crony capitalism to reward those who pay for that party.

Zealots who want to use tax cuts to eviscerate government’s capacity to act drive his fiscal policy. Don’t take my word for it. The very establishment and conservative financial times editorial page says, “the lunatics are in charge of the asylum.” His judicial appointments are vetted by federalist society extremists who seek reactionary judicial activists to disembowel government’s authority to act, overturning not only women’s right to choose and civil rights, but the new deal itself, eliminating government’s authority to protect consumers, workers or the environment. As cas sunstein of the conservative university of Chicago law school put it, “they want to restore the status quo ante from about 1934...it’s a radical agenda.”

Bush’s foreign policy is given over to neo-conservative ideologues who openly champion pre-emptive war and a new American imperial order, while turning their backs on fifty years of bipartisan support for alliance and international cooperation. As Ted Sorenson, respected advisor to John Kennedy put it, this is not a “new realism,” but an expression of “the arrogance of power and the ignorance of history.” And more important, a policy that is likely to isolate Americans more and make them less safe.

Much of the rest is simply special interest corruption -- an energy policy defined by and for big oil, a prescription drug policy by and for the drug companies, an environmental policy catering to the polluters’ lobby.

Today, of course, the president is popular, basking in success of war in Iraq, the courage and skill of US soldiers in the field.

But Bush’s agenda is not popular.

On issue after issue, when given a clear choice, a broad majority of Americans favor a far different course than that pursued by this administration. Americans want to save social security and Medicare, not privatize them. They prefer investment in schools and health care over more tax breaks. They want to hold corporations accountable, raise the minimum wage and empower workers, rather than allow corporate self-regulation. They want to protect the environment rather than cut back on environmental regulation. Americans are with us, not with him.

The president and Karl Rove, his political guru, know this. So Bush doesn’t trumpet his conservatism the way Reagan and Gingrich did. Instead, he drums on patriotism, dresses up like a reformer on domestic issues and resorts to Orwellian distortions and straight up lies to disguise his policies. With money, special interest support, and the formidable right-wing political machine, Bush and Rove may just get by for time. But

deception and disguise are no way to forge an enduring majority coalition. We are at the end of their era, not the beginning of it.

That's why those who counsel Democrats to cut loose their loyalists and drift to prevailing right-wing winds have it wrong. We need a big argument about the direction of this country – and progressives would benefit most from forcing it.

To drive that debate, Democrats would do well to learn from how the new right responded to life the political wilderness in the mid-1970s, when Nixon was in disgrace and Democrats controlled everything. At that moment, new right strategists decided not to drift to the center but to build an independent capacity to drive their message, their values and their movement into the political debate. They sought to take over the Republican Party from green-eyeshade moderates and make it their vehicle. They built the Heritage Foundation, an openly right-wing propaganda center. They invested in the moral majority, galvanizing the right-wing evangelical movement. They built a network of conservative PACs, led by the national conservative political action committee. They mobilized a movement that transformed not only the Republican Party but national political debate as well.

Today, conservatism is failing to meet the challenges facing the country. And the excesses of the self-described “movement conservatives” that dominate this administration are generating an impassioned response from those under attack – workers, women, minorities, environmentalists.

Now progressives must build the independent capacity to drive this energy into the political debate. And force a large debate about this country's direction and about fundamental issues.

In recent months, this effort has begun. The Campaign for America's Future was proud to join with Moveon.org and the Fair Taxes for All Coalition to generate literally hundreds of thousands of faxes and emails and phone calls challenging the president's demand for tax cuts for millionaires while teachers are being laid off across the country.

Emily's List is reaching out to other groups to join in a major voter registration and education effort. Progressive Majority, the new kid on the block, is now building to train and recruit the next generation of Paul Wellstones, political leaders who see themselves, like Paul, as part of a movement.

Unions have led new efforts to register, and educate voters and engage them on issues. This summer will see the freedom rides for immigrants, pushing for justice for these too often exploited workers. And people from a range of groups are gearing up for the coming fight on the future of our courts.

Those who say we should bite our lips, duck and cover have it wrong. It is time to stand up and to fight back.

We gather confident in the knowledge, as Dr. King taught us, that the moral arc of history is long but it bends towards justice.

After this long period of conservative rule, they are rich in money and impoverished in ideas. They are literally part of our problem, not our solution.

Time, as Paul Wellstone said in one of his last speeches

Not to duck. Not to hide. Not to bite our tongues or bide our time.

Time to stand up. To speak out. To assert our values. Our ideas. Our energy. This is our country. Our people. We won't allow them to drive us apart. Won't allow them to divide by class and race. Won't allow them to distract us from the real challenges needed to make America better.

It is time to take back America. Let's get to it.