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Take Back America Conference

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

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Thanks, Jeff [Faux]. Guys, there's a lot of energy in this room. There's a lot of energy in this room. You can feel the electricity; I felt it yesterday, and I feel it today. I know that mobilizing progressive voices is like herding cats. I know that Roger [Hickey] and Bob [Borosage] deserve a lot of credit for pulling this off. Getting this many progressive voices in the same room focused in the same direction on the issues that matter is an extraordinary accomplishment. So they get a lot of play for that. Secondly, the Leadership Conference. I'm glad Jeff didn't forget the plug, you've heard the website. The Leadership Conference really is the nation's premier civil and human rights coalition. We've got over 180 national organizations working together to advance civil and human rights policies.

The truth is, civil rights issues are often thought of as issues of the past. But we know that civil rights are about things like preserving the integrity of the federal courts. We've heard that this morning. We know that it's about making sure that there is an education system that in fact, does provide equal opportunity for every American child. You know, that's what it's about. We know that it's about protecting the right to vote in a fundamental way. We can never have another election like we had in 2000 and we've got to be committed to making that happen. All of us have to be committed to making that happen. It's about making sure that every American is treated fairly and that we use civil rights and measure them by a single yardstick. So if we guarantee the right to work based on the fact that people should be evaluated based on their performance on the job, not by their skin color or their agenda, then we have to also guarantee the right to work for gays and lesbians and people whose sexual orientation may be different than the majority. That's what civil rights is about, and that's who we are.

We stand for two propositions. One, in coalition there is strength. If you're not working in coalition, you can't win. That's just the nature of the world today. We have the greatest, most diverse representative democracy. If you are not forging a political unity, you can't expect to win representing this many individuals. Secondly, you have to have an affirmative, aggressive agenda, just like you play defense. Playing defense is not enough. You have to be able to focus on the future. You've got to be able to offer something positive as an alternative to the negative messages that bombard us everyday. So we stand for those two propositions.

Now, I'm going to take a slightly different tactic from some of my colleagues on the panel and it's not that we have a different view, but I want to emphasize a slightly different point. I believe in the power of representative democracy. I have lived long enough to see this country go from a segregated system that represents the worst of apartheid, to a system that at least has the prospect of delivering the Constitutional promise to all its citizens. So I know that there is power in the spirit of people working together to achieve goals.

I believe in the power of bi-partisanship. I know, you know, that Democrats have been the catalysts for social change over the last 40 years. But every civil rights bill that's been enacted in this country has required not only Democratic votes, but also the votes of moderate Republicans. And unless you are able to forge a unity around these important issues, you can't advance your affirmative agenda. You can play defense, but you can't advance your affirmative agenda. We know that both of those are necessary.

I also know, however, that something fundamentally different is happening in the country today. Ideological extremism on the right makes achieving bi-partisanship more difficult than ever before. And in some instances, it's almost impossible to accomplish. You can't have bi-partisanship when one side is playing hardball and the other side is playing softball. You can't have bi-partisanship on that basis. You can't do it. You can't have bi-partisanship when one side treats you like a tornado treats a trailer park and on the other hand, asks you to disarm unilaterally. You can't have bi-partisanship on that basis. You can't have bi-partisanship when a leading thinker on the right, Grover Norquist, says, "bi-partisanship is like date rape." You can't have bi-partisanship in that situation. Bi-partisanship can only be achieved when you know that you can fight back and prevent the other side that has an ideologically driven agenda, from accomplishing what you know represents a roll back in everything you stand for.

Recently the Leadership Conference published a report entitled, "The Bush Administration Takes Aim: Civil Rights Under Attack." You can pick it up off of our website. It brings together what is both an overt game plan, but also what is happening just beneath the surface that most Americans never see, but that affects us in very direct ways. My colleagues have already talked about the importance of judicial appointments. I'm not going to beat that issue into the ground. But the real question is not just who sits on these courts, it's an ideological agenda to enact new policies based on principles of states' rights that cut back on the ability of Congress to do what it needs to do to remedy discrimination. When courts start making 5-4 decisions that cut back on the Americans with Disabilities Act or the Violence Against Women Act or cutting back while prohibiting discrimination under the Civil Rights Act of '64 or making it harder to advance our goals on behalf of all the interests we represent. That's what judges are now being appointed to the bench and that's why standing up as Ralph [Neas], and as Senator Edwards, and as Howard Dean have said, is really so important. We've got to be able to do that.

Secondly, we've got to look at what's happening around the coordinated strategy of using cages and regulation that the administration is quietly undermining, as well as its power to use litigation strategy to cut back on the goals that we want to accomplish. We know that when you look at every issue, you have to be able to see not only what's happening on the surface, but what's happening underneath. We fought the Bush Administration tax cuts, not because we are experts in tax policy, but because we know and we've seen it before that driving up the deficits was intended to limit the ability of government to respond to the problems of ordinary people. That if you don't have the money in the federal budget, how do you prohibit discrimination? How do you protect the environment? How do you stand up on behalf of women? That's why the tax cuts became such a high policy issue.

While we're looking at regulation, let me give you some quick examples. The Bush administration has declared war on the American worker and labor unions. When they attacked ergonomic regulations and talked about them as junk science, did they ever talk to the women and men who shuck oysters on the Eastern shore or who pluck chickens, and look at their fingers? Gnawed by rheumatoid arthritis because of repetitive stress injuries time after time? Antonin Scalia should be ashamed of himself and we did the right thing by talking about why he shouldn't be confirmed. When the administration uses regulations to undermine Title IX of the education amendments of '72 that protect women and girls in schools and in institutions of higher education. The fact that you have so many women here today as progressive activists, as the head of national organizations standing up on equal footing with men and demanding progressive change, is in large measure because of Title IX. Don't let him get away with cutting that back! Don't let him get away with it.

When he uses litigation strategy like the Michigan case to talk about why America doesn't need Affirmative Action. They say if you're really concerned about that, fund primary education at the level needed to achieve equal educational opportunities. And don't talk about cheating No Child Left Behind some \$6 billion and giving every millionaire the break that's built into the tax policy and say you're the education President. That's nonsense.

The report goes on and it lays it out in great detail and I encourage you to take a look at it, because I'm going to sum it up in this way. Look, this is a great conference, I've heard wonderful speeches, I leave energized, I'm pumped up, I'm ready to do some work. But the bottom line is, talk without a game plan and strategy is not to me what it's about. You know, it's not about that. You have got to be able to organize, you have got to be able to strategize. You have got to be able to articulate a message that people want to hear and that gets to them where they live so that they understand what's at issue. And you have to be able to deliver. You've got to win. So if you can't pull that together, this becomes meaningless in terms of a real exercise in political power. That's why this conference is important. We have to strategize, develop a coalition of all the interests we represent and stand up and say, we will Take Back America because we *are* America! We are the people that represent the ordinary rank and file of American workers everyday and we know what the interests we represent really want in terms of

good government and values that are consistent with who we are under our Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Thanks, guys, I appreciate it.