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Mitt Romney Delivers Remarks At The NAACP Convention

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Location

Boston, MA
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Mitt Romney today delivered remarks at the NAACP Convention in Houston, Texas. The following remarks were prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Bishop Graves, for your generous introduction. Thanks also to President Ben Jealous and Chairman Roslyn Brock for the opportunity to be here this morning, and for your hospitality. It is an honor to address you.

I appreciate the chance to speak first – even before Vice President Biden gets his turn tomorrow. I just hope the Obama campaign won't think you're playing favorites.

You all know something of my background, and maybe you've wondered how any Republican ever becomes governor of Massachusetts in the first place. Well, in a state with 11 percent Republican registration, you don't get there by just talking to Republicans. We have to make our case to every voter. We don't count anybody out, and we sure don't make a habit of presuming anyone's support. Support is asked for and earned – and that's why I'm here today.

With 90 percent of African-Americans voting for Democrats, some of you may wonder why a Republican would bother to campaign in the African American community, and to address the NAACP. Of course, one reason is that I hope to represent all Americans, of every race, creed or sexual orientation, from the poorest to the richest and everyone in between.

But there is another reason: I believe that if you understood who I truly am in my heart, and if it were possible to fully communicate what I believe is in the real, enduring best interest of African American families, you would vote for me for president. I want you to know that if I did not believe that my policies and my leadership would help families of color -- and families of any color -- more than the policies and leadership of President Obama, I would not be running for president.

The opposition charges that I and people in my party are running for office to help the rich. Nonsense. The rich will do just fine whether I am elected or not. The President wants to make this a campaign about blaming the rich. I want to make this a campaign about helping the middle class.

I am running for president because I know that my policies and vision will help hundreds of millions of middle class Americans of all races, will lift people from poverty, and will help prevent people from becoming poor. My campaign is about helping the people who need help. The course the President has set has not done that – and will not do that. My course will.

When President Obama called to congratulate me on becoming the presumptive Republican nominee, he said that he, "looked forward to an important and healthy debate about America's future." To date, I'm afraid that his campaign has taken a different course than that.

But, in campaigns at their best, voters can expect a clear choice, and candidates can expect a fair hearing – only more so from a venerable organization like this one. So, it is that healthy debate about the course of the nation that I want to discuss with you today.

If someone had told us in the 1950s or 1960s that a black citizen would serve as the forty-fourth president, we would have been proud and many would have been surprised. Picturing that day, we might have assumed that the American presidency would be the very last door of opportunity to be opened. Before that came to pass, every other barrier on the path to equal opportunity would surely have come down.

Of course, it hasn't happened quite that way. Many barriers remain. Old inequities persist. In some ways, the challenges are even more complicated than before. And across America -- and even within your own ranks -- there are serious, honest debates about the way forward.

If equal opportunity in America were an accomplished fact, then a chronically bad economy would be equally bad for everyone. Instead, it's worse for African Americans in almost every way. The unemployment rate, the duration of unemployment, average income, and median family wealth are all

worse for the black community. In June, while the overall unemployment rate remained stuck at 8.2 percent, the unemployment rate for African Americans actually went up, from 13.6 percent to 14.4 percent.

Americans of every background are asking when this economy will finally recover – and you, in particular, are entitled to an answer.

If equal opportunity in America were an accomplished fact, black families could send their sons and daughters to public schools that truly offer the hope of a better life. Instead, for generations, the African-American community has been waiting and waiting for that promise to be kept. Today, black children are 17 percent of students nationwide – but they are 42 percent of the students in our worst-performing schools.

Our society sends them into mediocre schools and expects them to perform with excellence, and that is not fair. Frederick Douglass observed that, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” Yet, instead of preparing these children for life, too many schools set them up for failure. Everyone in this room knows that we owe them better than that.

The path of inequality often leads to lost opportunity. College, graduate school, and first jobs should be milestones marking the passage from childhood to adulthood. But for too many disadvantaged young people, these goals seem unattainable – and their lives take a tragic turn.

Many live in neighborhoods filled with violence and fear, and empty of opportunity. Their impatience for real change is understandable. They are entitled to feel that life in America should be better than this. They are told even now to wait for improvements in our economy and in our schools, but it seems to me that these Americans have waited long enough.

The point is that when decades of the same promises keep producing the same failures, then it’s reasonable to rethink our approach – and consider a new plan.

I’m hopeful that together we can set a new direction in federal policy, starting where many of our problems do – with the family. A study from the Brookings Institution has shown that for those who graduate from high school, get a full-time job, and wait until 21 before they marry and then have their first child, the probability of being poor is two percent. And if those factors are absent, the probability of being poor is 76 percent.

Here at the NAACP, you understand the deep and lasting difference the family makes. Your former executive director, Dr. Benjamin Hooks, had it exactly right. The family, he said, “remains the bulwark and the mainstay of the black community. That great truth must not be overlooked.”

Any policy that lifts up and honors the family is going to be good for the country, and that must be our goal. As President, I will promote strong families – and I will defend traditional marriage.

As you may have heard from my opponent, I am also a believer in the free-enterprise system. I believe it can bring change where so many well-meaning government programs have failed. I’ve never heard anyone look around an impoverished neighborhood and say, “You know, there’s too much free enterprise around here. Too many shops, too many jobs, too many people putting money in the bank.”

What you hear, of course, is how do we bring in jobs? How do we make good, honest employers want to move in and stay? And with the shape this economy is in, we’re asking that more than ever.

Free enterprise is still the greatest force for upward mobility, economic security, and the expansion of the middle class. We have seen in recent years what it’s like to have less free enterprise. As President, I will show the good things that can happen when we have more – more business activity, more jobs, more opportunity, more paychecks, more savings accounts.

On Day One, I will begin turning this economy around with a plan for the middle class. And I don’t mean just those who are middle class now – I also mean those who have waited so long for their chance to join the middle class.

I know what it will take to put people back to work, to bring more jobs and better wages. My jobs plan is based on 25 years of success in business. It has five key steps.

First, I will take full advantage of our energy resources, and I will approve the Keystone pipeline from Canada. Low cost, plentiful coal, natural gas, oil, and renewables will bring over a million manufacturing jobs back to the United States.

Second, I will open up new markets for American products. We are the most productive major economy in the world, so trade means good jobs for Americans. But trade must be free and fair, so I’ll clamp down on cheaters like China and make sure that they finally play by the rules.

Third, I will reduce government spending. Our high level of debt slows GDP growth and that means fewer jobs. If our goal is jobs, we must, must stop spending over a trillion dollars more than we earn. To do this, I will eliminate expensive non-essential programs like Obamacare, and I will work to reform and save Medicare and Social Security, in part by means-testing their benefits.

Fourth, I will focus on nurturing and developing the skilled workers our economy so desperately needs and the future demands. This is the human capital with which tomorrow’s bright future will be built. Too many homes and too many schools are failing to provide our children with the skills and education that are essential for anything other than a minimum-wage job.

And finally and perhaps most importantly, I will restore economic freedom. This nation’s economy runs on freedom, on opportunity, on entrepreneurs, on dreamers who innovate and build businesses. These entrepreneurs are being crushed by high taxation, burdensome regulation, hostile regulators, excessive healthcare costs, and destructive labor policies. I will work to make America the best place in the world for innovators and entrepreneurs and businesses small and large.

Do these five things – open up energy, expand trade, cut the growth of government, focus on better educating tomorrow's workers today, and restore economic freedom – and jobs will come back to America, and wages will rise again. The President will say he will do those things, but he will not, he cannot, and his record of the last four years proves it.

If I am president, job one for me will be creating jobs. I have no hidden agenda. If you want a president who will make things better in the African American community, you are looking at him.

Finally, I will address the institutionalized inequality in our education system. And I know something about this from my time as governor.

In the years before I took office our state's leaders had come together to pass bipartisan measures that were making a difference. In reading and in math, our students were already among the best in the nation – and during my term, they took over the top spot.

Those results revealed what good teachers can do if the system will only let them. The problem was, this success wasn't shared. A significant achievement gap between students of different races remained. So we set out to close it.

I urged faster interventions in failing schools, and the funding to go along with it. I promoted math and science excellence in schools, and proposed paying bonuses to our best teachers.

I refused to weaken testing standards, and instead raised them. To graduate from high school, students had to pass an exam in math and English – I added a science requirement as well. And I put in place a merit scholarship for those students who excelled: the top 25 percent of students in each high school were awarded a John and Abigail Adams Scholarship – which meant four years tuition-free at any Massachusetts public institution of higher learning.

When I was governor, not only did test scores improve – we also narrowed the achievement gap.

The teachers unions were not happy with a number of these reforms. They especially did not like our emphasis on choice through charter schools, particularly for our inner city kids. Accordingly, the legislature passed a moratorium on any new charter schools.

As you know, in Boston, in Harlem, in Los Angeles, and all across the country, charter schools are giving children a chance, children that otherwise could be locked in failing schools. I was inspired just a few weeks ago by the students in one of Kenny Gamble's charter schools in Philadelphia. Right here in Houston is another success story: the Knowledge Is Power Program, which has set the standard, thanks to the groundbreaking work of the late Harriet Ball.

These charter schools are doing a lot more than closing the achievement gap. They are bringing hope and opportunity to places where for years there has been none.

Charter schools are so successful that almost every politician can find something good to say about them. But, as we saw in Massachusetts, true reform requires more than talk. As Governor, I vetoed the bill blocking charter schools. But our legislature was 87 percent Democrat, and my veto could have been easily over-ridden. So I joined with the Black Legislative Caucus, and their votes helped preserve my veto, which meant that new charter schools, including some in urban neighborhoods, would be opened.

When it comes to education reform, candidates cannot have it both ways – talking up education reform, while indulging the same groups that are blocking reform. You can be the voice of disadvantaged public-school students, or you can be the protector of special interests like the teachers unions, but you can't be both. I have made my choice: As president, I will be a champion of real education reform in America, and I won't let any special interest get in the way.

I will give the parents of every low-income and special needs student the chance to choose where their child goes to school. For the first time in history, federal education funds will be linked to a student, so that parents can send their child to any public or charter school, or to a private school, where permitted. And I will make that a true choice by ensuring there are good options available to all.

Should I be elected President, I'll lead as I did when I was governor. I am pleased today to be joined today by Reverend Jeffrey Brown, who was a member of my kitchen cabinet in Massachusetts that helped guide my policy and actions that affected the African American community. I will look for support wherever there is good will and shared conviction. I will work with you to help our children attend better schools and help our economy create good jobs with better wages.

I can't promise that you and I will agree on every issue. But I do promise that your hospitality to me today will be returned. We will know one another, and work to common purposes. I will seek your counsel. And if I am elected president, and you invite me to next year's convention, I would count it as a privilege, and my answer will be yes.

The Republican Party's record, by the measures you rightly apply, is not perfect. Any party that claims a perfect record doesn't know history the way you know it.

Yet always, in both parties, there have been men and women of integrity, decency, and humility who called injustice by its name. For every one of us a particular person comes to mind, someone who set a standard of conduct and made us better by their example. For me, that man is my father, George Romney.

It wasn't just that my Dad helped write the civil rights provision for the Michigan Constitution, though he did. It wasn't just that he helped create Michigan's first civil rights commission, or that as governor he marched for civil rights in Detroit – though he did those things, too.

More than these public acts, it was the kind of man he was, and the way he dealt with every person, black or white. He was a man of the fairest instincts, and a man of faith who knew that every person was a child of God.

I'm grateful to him for so many things, and above all for the knowledge of God, whose ways are not always our ways, but whose justice is certain and whose mercy endures forever.

Every good cause on this earth relies in the end on a plan bigger than ours. "Without dependence on God," as Dr. King said, "our efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into darkest night. Unless his spirit pervades our lives, we find only what G. K. Chesterton called 'cures that don't cure, blessings that don't bless, and solutions that don't solve.'"

Of all that you bring to the work of today's civil rights cause, no advantage counts for more than this abiding confidence in the name above every name.

Against cruelty, arrogance, and all the foolishness of man, this spirit has carried the NAACP to many victories. More still are up ahead, and with each one we will be a better nation.

Thank you, and God bless you all.

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