

Written by

Wednesday, 22 September 2010 15:03

Hello CBC! It is wonderful to be back with all of you. I know you've spent a good deal of time talking about what the future holds for the African American community, and the United States of America as a whole. I've been spending time thinking about that, too. And at this time of great challenge, one source of inspiration is the founding of the Congressional Black Caucus.

I want us all to take a moment and remember what was happening forty years ago when thirteen black Members of Congress decided to come together and form this caucus. It was 1969. More than a decade had passed since the Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board of Education*. It had been several years since Selma and Montgomery, since Dr. Martin Luther King told America of his dream, all culminating in the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

The founders of this caucus could look back and feel proud of the progress that had been made. They could feel confident that America was moving in the right direction. But they knew they couldn't afford to rest on their laurels. They couldn't afford to get complacent. There were still too many inequalities to be eliminated. Too many injustices to be overturned. Too many wrongs to be righted.

That's why the CBC was formed – to right those wrongs; to be the conscience of the Congress. And at your first dinner, the great actor and activist, Ossie Davis, said that America was at a crossroads. And he boiled down his message about what was needed going forward to a nice little phrase. He said, "It's not the man, it's the plan."

It's not the man, it's the plan. That was true forty years ago, and it's true today. We understood that during my campaign. It wasn't just about electing a black President. It was about a plan to rescue our economy, and rebuild it on a new foundation. It was about giving every hardworking American a chance to join a growing middle class. It was about putting the American dream within reach for all Americans, no matter who you are, what you look like, or where you come from.

Now, I don't have to tell you we're not there yet. This recession has taken a devastating toll on all sectors of our economy. It's hit Americans of all races, all regions, and all walks of life. But as has been true with other recessions, this one came down with a particular vengeance on African-American communities.

And it added to the problems that a lot of neighborhoods were facing long before this recession. Long before this recession, there were black men and women throughout our cities and towns who'd given up looking for a job, and kids standing on stoops without any prospects for the future. Long before this recession, there were blocks full of shuttered stores that hadn't been open in a generation.

So yes, this recession made matters much worse, but the African-American community has been struggling for a long time. And we know that repairing the damage, climbing our way out of this recession, will take time. It won't happen overnight.

But what I want to say to all of you tonight is that we've begun the hard work of moving this

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country forward. When I took office, our economy was on the brink of collapse. So, we acted immediately and took some steps to stop our economic freefall. And now, our economy is growing. We're adding private sector jobs, instead of losing them. We're in a different place than we were one year ago.

Taking these steps wasn't easy. There was a lot of skepticism about whether we could get GM and Chrysler back on their feet; about whether we could hold the banks accountable for their cost to taxpayers; about whether we could make infrastructure investments and investments in clean energy, and hold ourselves accountable for how that money was spent. There was a lot of skepticism about what we were trying to do. A lot of it was unpopular.

But you didn't elect me to do what was popular. You elected me to do what was right. And that's what we've been fighting to do together. That's why we passed health insurance reforms that will make it illegal for insurance companies to deny you coverage on the basis of a preexisting condition; historic reform that gives over 30 million Americans the chance to finally obtain quality care; tackles the disparities in the health care system; and puts a cap on the amount you can be charged in out-of-pocket expenses. Because no one should go broke because they got sick. Not here. Not in the United States of America.

That's why we passed Wall Street reforms that will finally crack down on the predatory practices of big banks and mortgage companies. That will protect hardworking families from abusive fees or unjustified rates every time they use a credit card, or make a mortgage payment, take out a student loan, or overdraw on their account at an ATM. That will help put an end to the days of government bailouts so Main Street never again has to pay for Wall Street's mistakes.

That's why we made historic investments in education, including our HBCU's, and shifted tens of billions of dollars that were going to subsidize banks, and made sure that money was giving millions of kids the chance to go to college.

That's why we're keeping the promises I made on the campaign trail. We passed tax cuts for 95% of working families.

We expanded national service from AmeriCorps to the Peace Corps. We recommitted our Justice Department to the enforcement of civil rights laws. We started closing tax breaks for companies that ship jobs overseas so we can give tax breaks to companies that invest here in America.

We've ended our combat mission in Iraq, and welcomed home nearly 100,000 troops. In Afghanistan, we're breaking the momentum of the Taliban and training Afghan forces so that, next summer, we can begin the transition to Afghan responsibility. And we're making sure we take care of our veterans as well as they've taken care of us.

And even as we manage these national security priorities, we're helping developing countries feed their people. We're helping Haiti rebuild. And in Sudan, we're committed to doing our part – and we call on the parties to do their part – to fully implement the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and ensure lasting peace and accountability in Darfur. As I said in Ghana, it's in

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America's strategic interests to become a stronger partner with nations throughout Africa.

That's what we've been doing, CBC, at home and abroad. It's been an important time. We've had a historic legislative session. Members of the CBC have helped deliver some of the most significant progress in a generation; laws that will help strengthen America's middle class while providing more pathways for men and women to climb out of poverty.

But we still have a long way to go. Too many people are still out of work. Too many families are still facing foreclosure. Too many businesses and neighborhoods are still struggling to rebound. In fact, during the course of this recession, poverty has gone up to a 15-year high.

So, it's not surprising that a lot of people may not be feeling that energized or that engaged right now. A lot of folks may be feeling like politics is something they get involved in every four years when there's a presidential election, but they don't see why they should bother the rest of the time.

Ossie Davis knew why. Because it's not the man, it's the plan – and the plan is still unfinished. For all the strides we've made in our economy, our middle class is still shaken – we need to finish our plan for a stronger economy. For all our progress on education, too many students aren't graduating ready for college and a career – we need to finish our plan to give our kids, all of them, the best education the world has to offer. We still need to implement health care reform so that it brings down costs and improves access for all people; and we've got to make sure that we are putting people to work rebuilding America's roads, and railways, and runways.

So, we've got more work to do; we've got a plan to finish. Of course, the other side has a plan too. It's a plan to turn back the clock on all the progress we've made. To paraphrase my friend Deval Patrick, the last election was a changing of the guard – now we need to guard the change. Because everything we're for, our opponents have spent two years fighting against. They've said no to unemployment insurance. No to middle class tax cuts. No to small business loans. No we can't. That's their motto.

In fact, the only agenda they have is to go back to the same old policies that got us into this mess in the first place. They want to borrow \$700 billion, and use it on tax cuts for millionaires and billionaires. Now, the next few years are going to be tough budget years, which is why I've called for a freeze on some discretionary spending. And if we're spending \$700 billion, it has to come from somewhere. Well, who exactly do they want to pay for these tax cuts for the wealthiest few? Our seniors? Our children's schools? Our hardworking families?

What we should be doing right now isn't passing tax cuts for millionaires and billionaires. We should be helping the middle class grow. And yet, the man with the plan to be Speaker of the House, John Boehner, actually attacked us for closing corporate tax loopholes and using the money to keep hundreds of thousands of essential personnel on the job in our states. He called these jobs – quote – “government jobs,” and suggested they weren't worth saving.

Well, ask your sister who's a teacher if her job was worth saving. Ask your uncle who's a firefighter if his job was worth saving. Ask your cousin who's a police officer if her job was worth saving. Ask your neighbors if their jobs were worth saving. Because I think a job is worth saving

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if it's keeping Americans working and keeping America strong and secure.

That's what's at stake. They want to hand Washington back over to the special interests. We're fighting on behalf of the American people. They want to take us backwards. We want to move America forward.

In fact, they're betting that you'll come down with a case of amnesia. That you'll forget about what their agenda did to this country when they were in charge. Remember – these are the folks who spent almost a decade driving the economy into a ditch. And now they're asking for the keys back.

Do you want to give them the keys back? Me neither. And do you know why? Because they don't know how to drive! At a time when we're just getting out of the ditch, they'd put the car in reverse and drive us right back in.

This is a crowd that wants to turn back the clock; that wants to do what's right politically, instead of what's right – period. That's not what we need right now. Not when so many people are still out of work. Not when so many families are still hurting. We need to finish the plan you elected me to put in place.

It's not going to be easy. I said back on the campaign that change would be hard. It wasn't just a matter of me getting elected, and suddenly, our problems all go away. It was a matter of all of us getting involved, all of us staying committed, all of us sticking with our plan for a better future until it was complete. That's how we've always moved forward in this country.

Each and every time we've made epic change – from this country's founding, to emancipation, to women's suffrage, to workers' rights – it hasn't come from a man. It's come from a plan. It's come from a grassroots movement rallying around a cause. What made the Civil Rights Movement possible were foot soldiers like so many of you, sitting down at lunch counters and standing up for freedom. What made it possible for me to be here today are Americans throughout our history making our union more equal, making our union more just, making our union more perfect.

That's what we need again. I need everybody here to go back to your neighborhoods, and your workplaces, to your churches, and barbershops, and beauty shops. Tell them we have more work to do. Tell them we can't wait to organize. Tell them that the time for action is now, and that if each and every person in this country who knows what's at stake steps up to the plate; if we're willing to rise to this moment, like we've always done before, then together we'll write our own destiny once more. Thank you, God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America.