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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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April 11, 2014

Remarks by the President at the National Action Network's 16th Annual Convention

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4:02 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Hello, New York! (Applause.) Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. It is good to be at the National Action Network! (Applause.) It is good to be here with some good friends.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We love you!

THE PRESIDENT: I love you back. (Applause.)

It is wonderful to be with all of you. I want to say, first of all, thank you to your leader, Reverend Al Sharpton. Give him a big round of applause. (Applause.) And I appreciate the idea of being an "action" President, although I do also have style -- (laughter) -- I just want to point that out. I know it's not about it, but I just -- but I do have it. (Laughter.) Al is not the only guy with style.

We've got Barbara Arnwine here today, and we want to thank her. Clayola Brown, thank you. Melanie Campbell, thank you. Marc Morial, thank you. We've got members of Congress, state and local officials from New York. And of course, we've got all of you. So thanks to all of you for such a wonderful welcome. (Applause.)

Everybody, sit down. Sit down. Al doesn't know how to get back to his seat. (Laughter.) Somebody help out the leader here. But don't make him jump over it. Okay, they're going to explain it. There we go. All right. You're going to be all right.

Now, the last time I was here was three years ago, and a few things have changed since then. I am here as a second term President. (Applause.) I have more gray hair. (Laughter.) It's all right. Let's see, what else -- I've got twice as many dogs. I'm glad I won't have to serve a third term -- because three dogs is too many. I can't keep on promising Malia and Sasha another dog.

Of course one thing that has not changed is your commitment to the cause of civil rights for everybody and opportunity for all people. And that's been something that's been on my mind this week. Some of you may know that yesterday I was down in Austin, Texas at the LBJ Library to speak on the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act and the man who signed it into law. (Applause.) And standing there, I thought of all the Americans, known and unknown, who made it possible for me to stand in that spot -- who marched and organized, and sat in, and stood up for jobs and for justice. I thought of all who achieved that great victory and others -- not just with respect to the Civil Rights Act, but the Voting Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act, and immigration reform, and Medicare and Medicaid, and the first battles of a long War on Poverty.

And over the past five years, in the wake of the worst economic crisis of our lifetimes, we've won some victories, too. Nearly 9 million new jobs at America's businesses over the past four years. (Applause.) Seven and a half million Americans signing up to buy health care coverage under the Affordable Care Act. (Applause.) And millions more who have gained coverage through Medicaid and CHIP, and young people being able to stay on their parents' plans. The rate of uninsured Americans is down. High school dropout rates are down. Our high school graduation rate is the highest on record. More young people are earning college degrees than ever before. (Applause.) We've made progress and we've taken action.

But we also know our work is unfinished. Too many Americans working harder than ever just to get by. Too many Americans who aren't working at all. We know we have to do more to restore America's promise of opportunity for all people, particularly for communities hardest hit by the recession; particularly for those who struggled since long before the recession -- not only African Americans and Latinos, but Americans trapped across the country in pockets of poverty -- inner city, suburban, rural.

And we know what opportunity means. Opportunity means more good jobs that pay good wages. Opportunity means training folks for those jobs.

Opportunity means changing the odds for all of our children through Pre-K, something Mayor de Blasio is fighting for here in New York City. (Applause.) And opportunity means affordable higher education for all who are willing to work for it.

Opportunity means answering the call to be My Brother's Keeper and helping more boys and young men of color stay on track and reach their full potential. (Applause.)

Before I came out, I was in a photo line, saw my good friend, Freddie Haynes, a great pastor from the great state of Texas. And he told me this summer they're going to hire 100 young men, pay them \$10.10 an hour -- maybe \$10.50 -- (applause) -- as a consequence of this call. And the point is, is that My Brother's Keeper, that's not just something I do, that's not just something the government does. That's something everybody can participate in, because we know these young men need support.

Opportunity means making the minimum wage a wage you can live on. It means equal pay for equal work. (Applause.) It means overtime pay for workers who have earned it. It means continuing to extend the right of quality, affordable health care for every American in every state, because we've got some states that aren't doing the right thing. We have states who just out of political spite are leaving millions of people uninsured that could be getting health insurance right now. No good reason for it. If you ask them what's the explanation they can't really tell you.

And, by the way, making sure our citizens have the opportunity to lead healthy lives also means dealing with things like the dangerous carbon pollution that's disproportionately affecting low-income communities. It means making sure that our young people are eating right, so listen to Michelle. (Laughter.) I'm just saying.

So we know we've got more work to do to bridge the gap between our founding ideals and the realities of our time. And the question then becomes, well, how do we actually make these changes? How does it happen? How do we get a minimum wage bill passed? How do we make sure that those states that aren't yet implementing the Affordable Care Act actually are doing right by their citizens? It means being vigilant. We've got to be vigilant to secure the gains we've made, but also to make more gains in the future.

And that's the meaning of these last 50 years since the Civil Rights Act was passed. Because across the country right now there are well-organized and well-funded efforts to undo these gains. And one of those gains is under particular assault right now, and that's what I want to spend the rest of my time here talking about.

Just as inequality feeds on injustice, opportunity requires justice. And justice requires the right to vote. (Applause.) President Johnson, right after he signed the Civil Rights Act into law, told his advisors -- some of whom were telling him, well, all right, just wait. You've done a big thing now; let's let the dust settle, don't stir folks up. He said, no, no, I can't wait. We've got to press forward and pass the Voting Rights Act. Johnson said, "About this there can and should be no argument. Every American citizen must have an equal right to vote." (Applause.)

Voting is a time when we all have an equal say -- black or white, rich or poor, man or woman. It doesn't matter. In the eyes of the law and in the eyes of our democracy, we're all supposed to have that equal right to cast our ballot to help determine the direction of our society.

The principle of one person, one vote is the single greatest tool we have to redress an unjust status quo. You would think there would not be an argument about this anymore. But the stark, simple truth is this: The right to vote is threatened today in a way that it has not been since the Voting Rights Act became law nearly five decades ago.

Across the country, Republicans have led efforts to pass laws making it harder, not easier, for people to vote. In some places, women could be turned away from the polls just because they're registered under their maiden name but their driver's license has their married name. Senior citizens who have been voting for decades may suddenly be told they can no longer vote until they can come up with the right ID.

In other places, folks may learn that without a document like a passport or a birth certificate, they

can't register. About 60 percent of Americans don't have a passport. Just because you don't have the money to travel abroad doesn't mean you shouldn't be able to vote here at home. (Applause.) And just to be clear, I know where my birth certificate is, but a lot of people don't. (Laughter.) A lot of people don't. (Applause.) I think it's still up on a website somewhere. (Laughter.) You remember that? That was crazy. That was some crazy stuff. (Laughter and applause.) I hadn't thought about that in a while. (Laughter.)

Now, I want to be clear -- I am not against reasonable attempts to secure the ballot. We understand that there has to be rules in place. But I am against requiring an ID that millions of Americans don't have. That shouldn't suddenly prevent you from exercising your right to vote. (Applause.)

The first words put to paper in our American story tell us that all of us are created equal. And we understand that it took a long time to make sure that those words meant something. But 50 years ago, we put laws in place, because of enormous struggles, to vindicate that idea; to make our democracy truly mean something. And that makes it wrong to pass laws that make it harder for any eligible citizen to vote, especially because every citizen doesn't just have the right to vote, they have a responsibility to vote. (Applause.)

So, yes, we're right to be on guard against voter fraud. Voter fraud would impinge on our democracy, as well. We don't want folks voting that shouldn't be voting. We all agree on that. Let's stipulate to that, as the lawyers say.

But there's a reason why those who argue that harsh restrictions on voting are somehow necessary to fight voter fraud are having such a hard time proving any real, widespread fraud. So I just want to give you some statistics. One recent study found only 10 cases of alleged in-person voter impersonation in 12 years -- 10 cases. Another analysis found that out of 197 million votes cast for federal elections between 2002 and 2005, only 40 voters -- out of 197 million -- were indicted for fraud. Now, for those of you who are math majors, as a percentage, that is 0.00002 percent. (Laughter.) That's not a lot. So let's be clear -- the real voter fraud is people who try to deny our rights by making bogus arguments about voter fraud. (Applause.)

And I have to say, there have been -- some of these officials who have been passing these laws have been more blunt. They said, this is going to be good for the Republican Party. Some of them have not been shy about saying that they're doing this for partisan reasons.

"It is wrong," President Johnson said, "deadly wrong, to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country." It is wrong to change our election rules just because of politics. It is wrong to make citizens wait for five, six, seven hours just to vote. It is wrong to make a senior citizen who no longer has a driver's license jump through hoops and have to pay money just to exercise the rights she has cherished for a lifetime. America did not stand up and did not march and did not sacrifice to

gain the right to vote for themselves and for others only to see it denied to their kids and their grandchildren. We've got to pay attention to this. (Applause.)

Some of the folks from Chicago know -- Crider (ph) knows -- one of the first jobs I had out of law school was to lead a voter registration drive in my home state of Illinois. We registered more than 150,000 new voters. And as an organizer, I got to help other citizens exercise their most cherished and fundamental rights. That mattered to me.

And as President, I'm not going to let attacks on these rights go unchallenged. We're not going to let voter suppression go unchallenged. (Applause.) So earlier this week, you heard from the Attorney General -- and there's a reason the agency he runs is called the Department of Justice. (Applause.) They've taken on more than 100 voting rights cases since 2009, and they've defended the rights of everybody from African Americans to Spanish speakers to soldiers serving overseas. (Applause.)

Earlier this year, a bipartisan commission I appointed chaired by my election lawyer and Mitt Romney's election lawyer came up with a series of modern -- or common-sense reforms to modernize voter registration, and to curb the potential for fraud in smart way, and ensure that no one has to wait for more than half an hour to cast a ballot. States and local election boards should take up those recommendations. And with the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer almost upon us, I urge members of Congress to honor those who gave their lives so that others could exercise their rights, and update the Voting Rights Act. Go ahead and get that done. (Applause.)

Do it because the right to vote is something cherished by every American. We should not be having an argument about this. There are a lot of things we can argue about, but the right to vote? I mean, what kind of political platform is that? (Laughter.) Why would you make that a part of your agenda, preventing people from voting? How can you defend that? There are a whole bunch of folks out there who don't vote for me; didn't vote for me, don't like what I do. The idea that I would prevent them from voting and exercising their franchise makes no sense.

Black or white, man or woman, urban, rural, rich, poor, Native American, disabled, gay, straight, Republican or Democrat -- voters who want to vote should be able to vote. Period. Full stop. (Applause.) Voting is not a Democratic issue, it's not a Republican issue. It's an issue of citizenship. (Applause.) It's what makes our democracy strong.

But it's a fact this recent effort to restrict the vote has not been led by both parties -- it's been led by the Republican Party. And in fairness, it's not just Democrats who are concerned. You had one Republican state legislator point out -- and I'm quoting here -- "Making it more difficult for people to vote is not a good sign for a party that wants to attract more people." (Laughter.) That was a pretty -- that's a good insight. (Laughter.) Right? I want a competitive Republican Party, just like a competitive Democratic Party. That's how our democracy is supposed to work -- the competition of

ideas. But I don't want folks changing the rules to try to restrict people's access to the ballot.

And I think responsible people, regardless of your party affiliation, should agree with that. If your strategy depends on having fewer people show up to vote, that's not a sign of strength, that's a sign of weakness. (Applause.)

And not only is it ultimately bad politics. I believe ultimately it harms the entire country. If voting is denied to the many, we risk ending up stuck year after year with special interest policies that benefit a fortunate few. And injustice perpetuates inequality.

But remember, just as injustice perpetuates inequality, justice opens up opportunity. And as infuriating as efforts to roll back hard-earned rights can be, the trajectory of our history has to give us hope. The story of America is a story of progress. No matter how often or how intensely that progress has been challenged, ultimately this nation has moved forward. As Dr. King said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, [but] it bends towards justice." We move forward on civil rights and we move forward on workers' rights, and we move forward on women's rights and disability rights and gay rights. We show that when ordinary citizens come together to participate in this democracy we love, justice will not be denied. (Applause.) So the single most important thing we can do to protect our right to vote is to vote. (Applause.)

So I'm going to make one last point here. We're going to have an attorney general that looks at all the laws that are being passed. We're going to have civic organizations that are making sure that state laws and local laws are doing what they're supposed to do. We will fight back whenever we see unfairly the franchise being challenged. But the truth is that for all these laws that are being put in place, the biggest problem we have is people giving up their own power -- voluntarily not participating.

The number of people who voluntarily don't vote, who are eligible to vote, dwarfs whatever these laws are put in place might do in terms of diminishing the voting roles.

So we can't treat these new barriers as an excuse not to participate. We can't use cynicism as an excuse not to participate. Sometimes I hear people saying, well, we haven't gotten everything we need -- we still have poverty, we still have problems. Of course. These things didn't happen overnight.

When I was down in Texas, everybody was celebrating the day that the Civil Rights Law was finally passed. Remember there were decades in which people sacrificed and worked hard. (Applause.) Change doesn't happen overnight, but it happens as long as we don't purposely give our power away. Every obstacle put in our path should remind us of the power we hold in our hands each time we pull that lever or fill in that oval or touch that screen. We just have to harness that power. We've

got to create a national network committed to taking action. We can call it the National Action Network. (Applause.)

So I want you to go out there and redouble your efforts. Register more voters. Help more folks to get their rights. Get those souls to the polls. If they won't let you do it on Sunday, then do it on a Tuesday instead. (Applause.) I know it's better going to the polls on Sunday because you go to church, you get a little meal. (Laughter.) You got the bus waiting for you. I understand. But you can do it without that if we have to.

We're at a time when we're marking many anniversaries. And it's interesting for me -- I've been on this Earth 52 years, and so to see the progress we've made is to see my own life and the progression that's happened. You think about Brown v. Board of Education, and the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act, and Freedom Summer. And with those anniversaries, we have new reason to remember those who made it possible for us to be here. Like the three civil rights workers in Mississippi -- two white, one black -- who were murdered 50 years ago as they tried to help their fellow citizens register to vote. James Chaney and Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner believed so strongly that change was possible they were willing to lay down their lives for it. The least you can do is take them up on the gift that they have given you. (Applause.) Go out there and vote. You can make a change. You do have the power.

I've run my last election, but I need you to make sure that the changes that we started continue for decades to come.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless America. (Applause.)

END

4:26 P.M. EDT

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