

"A leader we can believe in."

Senator John McCain

Good evening from the great city of New Orleans. Tonight, we can say with confidence the primary season is over, and the general election campaign has begun. I commend both Senators Obama and Clinton for the long, hard race they have run. Senator Obama has impressed many Americans with his eloquence and his spirited campaign. Senator Clinton has earned great respect for her tenacity and courage. The media often overlooked how compassionately she spoke to the concerns and dreams of millions of Americans, and she deserves a lot more appreciation than she sometimes received. As the father of three daughters, I owe her a debt for inspiring millions of women to believe there is no opportunity in this great country beyond their reach. I am proud to call her my friend. Pundits and party elders have declared that Senator Obama will be my opponent. He will be a formidable one. But I'm ready for the challenge, and determined to run this race in a way that does credit to our campaign and to the proud, decent and patriotic people I ask to lead.

The decision facing Americans in this election couldn't be more important to the future security and prosperity of American families. This is, indeed, a change election. No matter who wins this election, the direction of this country is going to change dramatically. But, the choice is between the right change and the wrong change; between going forward and going backward.

America has seen tough times before. We've always known how to get through them. And we've always believed our best days are ahead of us. I believe that still. But we must rise to the occasion, as we always have; change what must be changed; and make the future better than the past.

The right change recognizes that many of the policies and institutions of our government have failed. They have failed to keep up with the challenges of our time because many of these policies were designed for the problems and opportunities of the mid to late 20th Century, before the end of the Cold War; before the revolution in information technology and rise of the global economy. The right kind of change will initiate widespread and innovative reforms in almost every area of government policy -- health care, energy, the environment, the tax code, our public schools, our transportation system, disaster relief, government spending and regulation, diplomacy, the military and intelligence services. Serious and far-reaching reforms are needed in so many areas of government to meet our own challenges in our own time.

The irony is that Americans have been experiencing a lot of change in their lives attributable to these historic events, and some of those changes have distressed many American families -- job loss, failing schools, prohibitively expensive health care, pensions at risk, entitlement programs approaching bankruptcy, rising gas and food prices, to name a few. But your government often acts as if it is completely unaware of the changes and hardships in your lives. And when government does take notice, often it only makes matters worse. For too long, we have let history outrun our government's ability to keep up with it. The right change will stop impeding Americans from doing what they have always done: overcome every obstacle to our progress, turn challenges into opportunities, and by our own industry, imagination and courage make a better country and a safer world than we inherited.

To keep our nation prosperous, strong and growing we have to rethink, reform and reinvent: the way we educate our children; train our workers; deliver health care services; support retirees; fuel our transportation network; stimulate research and development; and harness new technologies.

To keep us safe we must rebuild the structure and mission of our military; the capabilities of our intelligence and law enforcement agencies; the reach and scope of our diplomacy; the capacity of all branches of government to defend us. We need to strengthen our alliances, and preserve our moral credibility.

We must also prepare, far better than we have, to respond quickly and effectively to a natural calamity. When Americans confront a catastrophe they have a right to expect basic

competence from their government. Firemen and policemen should be able to communicate with each other in an emergency. We should be able to deliver bottled water to dehydrated babies and rescue the infirm from a hospital with no electricity. Our disgraceful failure to do so here in New Orleans exposed the incompetence of government at all levels to meet even its most basic responsibilities.

The wrong change looks not to the future but to the past for solutions that have failed us before and will surely fail us again. I have a few years on my opponent, so I am surprised that a young man has bought in to so many failed ideas. Like others before him, he seems to think government is the answer to every problem; that government should take our resources and make our decisions for us. That type of change doesn't trust Americans to know what is right or what is in their own best interests. It's the attitude of politicians who are sure of themselves but have little faith in the wisdom, decency and common sense of free people. That attitude created the unresponsive bureaucracies of big government in the first place. And that's not change we can believe in.

You will hear from my opponent's campaign in every speech, every interview, every press release that I'm running for President Bush's third term. You will hear every policy of the President described as the Bush-McCain policy. Why does Senator Obama believe it's so important to repeat that idea over and over again? Because he knows it's very difficult to get Americans to believe something they know is false. So he tries to drum it into your minds by constantly repeating it rather than debate honestly the very different directions he and I would take the country. But the American people didn't get to know me yesterday, as they are just getting to know Senator Obama. They know I have a long record of bipartisan problem solving. They've seen me put our country before any President -- before any party -- before any special interest -- before my own interest. They might think me an imperfect servant of our country, which I surely am. But I am her servant first, last and always.

I have worked with the President to keep our nation safe. But he and I have not seen eye to eye on many issues. We've disagreed over the conduct of the war in Iraq and the treatment of detainees; over out of control government spending and budget gimmicks; over energy policy and climate change; over defense spending that favored defense contractors over the public good.

I disagreed strongly with the Bush administration's mismanagement of the war in Iraq. I called for the change in strategy that is now, at last, succeeding where the previous strategy had failed miserably. I was criticized for doing so by Republicans. I was criticized by Democrats. I was criticized by the press. But I don't answer to them. I answer to you. And I would be ashamed to admit I knew what had to be done in Iraq to spare us from a defeat that would endanger us for years, but I kept quiet because it was too politically hard for me to do. No ambition is more important to me than the security of the country I have defended all my adult life.

Senator Obama opposed the new strategy, and, after promising not to, voted to deny funds to the soldiers who have done a brilliant and brave job of carrying it out. Yet in the last year we have seen the success of that plan as violence has fallen to a four year low; Sunni insurgents have joined us in the fight against al Qaeda; the Iraqi Army has taken the lead in places once lost to Sunni and Shia extremists; and the Iraqi Government has begun to make progress toward political reconciliation.

None of this progress would have happened had we not changed course over a year ago. And all of this progress would be lost if Senator Obama had his way and began to withdraw our forces from Iraq without concern for conditions on the ground and the advice of commanders in the field. Americans ought to be concerned about the judgment of a presidential candidate who says he's ready to talk, in person and without conditions, with tyrants from Havana to Pyongyang, but hasn't traveled to Iraq to meet with General Petraeus, and see for himself the progress he threatens to reverse.

I know Americans are tired of this war. I don't oppose a reckless withdrawal from Iraq because I'm indifferent to the suffering war inflicts on too many American families. I hate war. And I know very personally how terrible its costs are. But I know, too, that the course Senator

Obama advocates could draw us into a wider war with even greater sacrifices; put peace further out of reach, and Americans back in harm's way.

I take America's economic security as seriously as I do her physical security. For eight years the federal government has been on a spending spree that added trillions to the national debt. It spends more and more of your money on programs that have failed again and again to keep up with the changes confronting American families. Extravagant spending on things that are not the business of government indebts us to other nations; fuels inflation; raises interest rates; and encourages irresponsibility. I have opposed wasteful spending by both parties and the Bush administration. Senator Obama has supported it and proposed more of his own. I want to freeze discretionary spending until we have completed top to bottom reviews of all federal programs to weed out failing ones. Senator Obama opposes that reform. I opposed subsidies that favor big business over small farmers and tariffs on imported products that have greatly increased the cost of food. Senator Obama supports these billions of dollars in corporate subsidies and the tariffs that have led to rising grocery bills for American families. That's not change we can believe in.

No problem is more urgent today than America's dependence on foreign oil. It threatens our security, our economy and our environment. The next President must be willing to break completely with the energy policies not just of the Bush Administration, but the administrations that preceded his, and lead a great national campaign to put us on a course to energy independence. We must unleash the creativity and genius of Americans, and encourage industries to pursue alternative, non-polluting and renewable energy sources, where demand will never exceed supply.

Senator Obama voted for the same policies that created the problem. In fact, he voted for the energy bill promoted by President Bush and Vice President Cheney, which gave even more breaks to the oil industry. I opposed it because I know we won't achieve energy independence by repeating the mistakes of the last half century. That's not change we can believe in.

With forward thinking Democrats and Republicans, I proposed a climate change policy that would greatly reduce our dependence on oil. Our approach was opposed by President Bush, and by leading Democrats, and it was defeated by opposition from special interests that favor Republicans and those that favor Democrats. Senator Obama might criticize special interests that give more money to Republicans. But you won't often see him take on those that favor him. If America is going to achieve energy independence, we need a President with a record of putting the nation's interests before the special interests of either party. I have that record. Senator Obama does not.

Senator Obama proposes to keep spending money on programs that make our problems worse and create new ones that are modeled on big government programs that created much of the fiscal mess we are in. He plans to pay for these increases by raising taxes on seniors, parents, small business owners and every American with even a modest investment in the market. He doesn't trust us to make decisions for ourselves and wants the government to make them for us. And that's not change we can believe in.

Senator Obama thinks we can improve health care by driving Americans into a new system of government orders, regulations and mandates. I believe we can make health care more available, affordable and responsive to patients by breaking from inflationary practices, insurance regulations, and tax policies that were designed generations ago, and by giving families more choices over their care. His plan represents the old ways of government. Mine trusts in the common sense of the American people.

Senator Obama pretends we can address the loss of manufacturing jobs by repealing trade agreements and refusing to sign new ones; that we can build a stronger economy by limiting access to our markets and giving up access to foreign markets. The global economy exists and is not going away. We either compete in it or we lose more jobs, more businesses, more dreams. We lose the future. He's an intelligent man, and he must know how foolish it is to think Americans can remain prosperous without opening new markets to our goods and services. But he feels he must defer to the special interests that support him. That's not change we can believe in.

Lowering trade barriers to American goods and services creates more and better jobs; keeps inflation under control; keeps interest rates low; and makes more goods affordable to more Americans. We won't compete successfully by using old technology to produce old goods. We'll succeed by knowing what to produce and inventing new technologies to produce it.

We are not people who believe only in the survival of the fittest. Work in America is more than a paycheck; it a source of pride, self-reliance and identity. But making empty promises to bring back lost jobs gives nothing to the unemployed worker except false hope. That's not change we can believe in. Reforming from top to bottom unemployment insurance and retraining programs that were designed for the 1950s, making use of our community colleges to train people for new opportunities will help workers who've lost a job that won't come back, find a job that won't go away.

My friends, we're not a country that would rather go back than forward. We're the world's leader, and leaders don't hide from history. They make history. But if we're going to lead, we have to reform a government that has lost its ability to help us do so. The solution to our problems isn't to reach back to the 1960s and 70s for answers. In just a few years in office, Senator Obama has accumulated the most liberal voting record in the Senate. But the old, tired, big government policies he seeks to dust off and call new won't work in a world that has changed dramatically since they were last tried and failed. That's not change we can believe in.

The sweeping reforms of government we need won't occur unless we change the political habits of Washington that have locked us in an endless cycle of bickering and stalemate. Washington is consumed by a hyper-partisanship that treats every serious issue as an opportunity to trade insults; impugn each other's motives; and fight about the next election. This is the game Washington plays. Both parties play it, as do the special interests that support each side. The American people know it's not on the level. For all the problems we face, what frustrates them most about Washington is they don't think we're capable of serving the public interest before our personal ambitions; that we fight for ourselves and not for them. They are sick of the politics of selfishness, stalemate and delay, and they have every right to be. We have to change not only government policies that have failed them, but the political culture that produced them.

Both Senator Obama and I promise we will end Washington's stagnant, unproductive partisanship. But one of us has a record of working to do that and one of us doesn't. Americans have seen me put aside partisan and personal interests to move this country forward. They haven't seen Senator Obama do the same. For all his fine words and all his promise, he has never taken the hard but right course of risking his own interests for yours; of standing against the partisan rancor on his side to stand up for our country. He is an impressive man, who makes a great first impression. But he hasn't been willing to make the tough calls; to challenge his party; to risk criticism from his supporters to bring real change to Washington. I have.

When members of my party refused to compromise not on principle but for partisanship, I have sought to do so. When I fought corruption it didn't matter to me if the culprits were Democrats or Republicans. I exposed it and let the chips fall where they may. When I worked on campaign finance and ethics reform, I did so with Democrats and Republicans, even though we were criticized by other members of our parties, who preferred to keep things as they were. I have never refused to work with Democrats simply for the sake of partisanship. I've always known we belong to different parties, not different countries. We are Americans before we are anything else.

I don't seek the presidency on the presumption I'm blessed with such personal greatness that history has anointed me to save my country in its hour of need. I seek the office with the humility of a man who cannot forget my country saved me. I'll reach out my hand to anyone, Republican or Democrat, who will help me change what needs to be changed; fix what needs to be fixed; and give this country a government as capable and good as the people it is supposed to serve. There is a time to campaign, and a time to govern. If I'm elected President, the era of the permanent campaign of the last sixteen years will end. The era of reform and problem solving will begin. From my first day in office, I'll work with anyone to

make America safe, prosperous and proud. And I won't care who gets the credit as long as America gets the benefit.

I have seen Republicans and Democrats achieve great things together. When the stakes were high and it mattered most, I've seen them work together in common purpose, as we did in the weeks after September 11th. This kind of cooperation has made all the difference at crucial turns in our history. It has given us hope in difficult times. It has moved America forward. And that, my friends, is the kind of change we need right now.

Thank you