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Text of Sen. John Edwards' convention speech

A text of a speech by Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina, running mate of John Kerry, as prepared for delivery Wednesday night at the Democratic National Convention:

Thank you. Now, you know why Elizabeth is so amazing.

I am a lucky man: to have the love of my life at my side. We have been blessed with four beautiful children: Wade, Cate, Emma Claire, and Jack.

My mother and father, Wallace and Bobbie Edwards, are here tonight. You taught me the values that I carry with me in my heart: faith, family, responsibility, and opportunity for everyone. You taught me that there's dignity and honor in a hard day's work. You taught me that you look out for your neighbors, you never look down on anybody, and you treat everyone with respect.

Those are the values John Kerry and I believe in, and nothing makes me prouder than standing with him in this campaign. I am so humbled to be your candidate for Vice President of the United States.

I want to talk about our next president. For those who want to know what kind of leader he'll be, I want to take you back about 30 years. When John Kerry graduated college, he volunteered for military service. He volunteered to go to Vietnam and to captain a swift boat, one of the most dangerous duties you could have. And as a result he was wounded and honored for his valor.

If you have any question about what he's made of, you need to spend three minutes with the men who served with him then and stand by him today.

They saw up close what he's made of. They saw him reach down and pull one of his men from the river and save his life. And in the heat of battle, they saw him decide in an instant to turn his boat around, drive it straight through an enemy position, and chase down the enemy to save his crew.

Decisive. Strong. Aren't these the traits you want in a Commander in Chief?

We hear a lot of talk about values. Where I come from, you don't judge someone's values based on how they use that word in a political ad. You judge their values based upon what they've spent their life doing.

So when a man volunteers to serve his country, and puts his life on the line for others - that's a man who represents real American values.

This is a man who is prepared to keep the American people safe and to make America stronger at home and respected in the world.

John is a man who knows the difference between what is right and what is wrong. He wants to serve you - your cause is his cause. And that is why we must and we will elect John Kerry as our next president.

For the last few months, John has been talking about his positive, optimistic vision for the country - talking about his plan to move this country in the right direction.

But we've seen relentless negative attacks against John. So in the weeks ahead, we know what's coming - don't we - more negative attacks.

Aren't you sick of it?

They are doing all they can to take this campaign for the highest office in the land down the lowest possible road.

This is where you come in. Between now and November - you, the American people - you can reject the tired, old, hateful, negative, politics of the past. And instead you can embrace the politics of hope, the politics of what's possible because this is America, where everything is possible.

I am here tonight because I love my country. And I have every reason to love my country because I have grown up in the bright light of America.

I grew up in a small town in rural North Carolina. My father worked in a mill all his life, and I will never forget the men and women who worked with him. They had lint in their hair and grease on their faces. They worked hard and tried to put a little something away every week so their kids and their grandkids could have a better life. They are just like the auto workers, office workers, teachers, and shop keepers on Main Streets all across America.

My mother had a number of jobs. Her last job was working at the post office so my parents could have health care. And she owned her own small business - refinishing furniture to help pay for me to go to college.

I have had such incredible opportunities in my life, and I was blessed to be the first person in my family to go to college. I worked my way through, and I have had opportunities way beyond what I could have ever imagined.

And the heart of this campaign - your campaign - is to make sure that everyone has those same opportunities that I had growing up - no matter where you live, who your family is, or what the color of your skin is. This is the America we believe in.

I have spent my life fighting for the kind of people I grew up with. For two decades, I stood with families and children against big HMOs and big insurance companies. And as a Senator, I fought those same fights against the Washington lobbyists and for causes like the Patients' Bill of Rights.

I stand here tonight ready to work with you and John to make America strong again.

And we have so much work to do. Because the truth is, we still live in two different Americas: one for people who have lived the American Dream and don't have to worry, and another for most Americans who work hard and still struggle to make ends meet.

It doesn't have to be that way. We can build one America

We can build one America where we no longer have two health care systems. One for people who get the best health care money can buy and then one for everybody else, rationed out by insurance companies, drug companies, and HMOs - millions of Americans who don't have any health insurance at all.

It doesn't have to be that way.

We have a plan that will offer everyone the same health care your Senator has. We can give tax breaks to help pay for your health care. And we will sign into law a real Patients' Bill of Rights so you can make your own health care decisions.

We shouldn't have two public school systems in this country: one for the most affluent communities, and one for everybody else.

None of us believe that the quality of a child's education should be controlled by where they live or the affluence of their community.

It doesn't have to be that way.

We can build one public school system that works for all our children. Our plan will reform our schools and raise our standards. We can give our schools the resources they need. We can provide incentives to put quality teachers in the places and the subjects where we need them the most. And we can ensure that three million kids have a safe place to go after school. This is what we can do together.

We shouldn't have two different economies in America: one for people who are set for life, their kids and grandkids will be just fine, and then one for most Americans who live paycheck to paycheck.

And you know what I'm saying. You don't need me to explain it to you, you know - you can't save any money, can you? Takes every dime you make just to pay your bills, and you know what happens if something goes wrong - a child gets sick, somebody gets laid off, or there's a financial problem, you go right off the cliff.

And what's the first thing to go. Your dreams. It doesn't have to be that way.

We can strengthen and lift up your families. Your agenda is our agenda - so let me give you some specifics.

First, we can create good paying jobs in America again. Our plan will stop giving tax breaks to companies that outsource your jobs. Instead, we will give tax breaks to American companies that keep jobs here in America. And we will invest in the jobs of the future - in the technologies and innovation to ensure that America stays ahead of the competition.

We will do this because for us a job is about more than a paycheck - it's about dignity and self-respect. Hard work should be valued in this country and we're going to reward work, not just wealth.

We don't want people to just get by; we want people to get ahead. So let me give you some specifics about how we're going to do that.

To help you pay for health care, a tax break and health care reform to lower your premiums up to $1,000. To help you cover the rising costs of child care, a tax credit up to $1,000 to cover those costs so your kids have a safe place to go while you work. And to help your child have the same chance I had and be the first person in your family to go to college, a tax break on up to $4,000 in tuition. So now you ask how are we going to pay for this? Well, here's how we're going to pay for it. Let me be very clear, for 98 percent of Americans, you will keep your tax cut-that's 98 percent. But we'll roll back the tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, close corporate loopholes, and cut government contractors and wasteful spending. We can move our country forward without passing the bill and the burden on to our children and grandchildren.

We can also do something about 35 million Americans who live in poverty every day. Here's the reason we should not just talk about it, but do something about millions of Americans who still live in poverty, because it is wrong. We have a moral responsibility to lift those families up.

I mean the very idea that in a country of our wealth and our prosperity, we have children going to bed hungry. We have children who don't have the clothes to keep them warm. We have millions of Americans who work full-time every day for minimum wage to support their family and still live in poverty - it's wrong.

These are men and women who are living up to their part of the bargain: working hard and taking care of their families. Those families are doing their part; it's time we did ours.

We will do that when John is in the White House. We will raise the minimum wage, finish the job on Welfare Reform, and bring good paying jobs to the places that need them. And we will say no forever to any American working full-time and living in poverty - not in our America, not in our America.

Let me talk about why we need to build one America. I saw up close what having two Americas does to our country.

From the time I was very young, I saw the ugly face of segregation and discrimination. I saw young African-American kids sent upstairs in movie theaters. I saw white only signs on restaurant doors and luncheon counters. I feel such an enormous responsibility when it comes to issues of race and equality and civil rights.

I have heard some discussions and debates about where, and in front of what audiences we should talk about race, equality, and civil rights. Well, I have an answer to that question. Everywhere.

This is not an African-American issue, not a Latino issue, not an Asian-American issue, this is an American issue. It's about who we are, what our values are, what kind of country we want to live in.

What John and I want - what we all want - is for our children and our grandchildren to be the first generations to grow up in an America that's no longer divided by race.

We must build one America. We must be one America, strong and united for another very important reason - because we are at war.

None of us will ever forget where we were on September 11th. We share the same terrible images: the Towers falling, the Pentagon in flames, and the smoldering field in Pennsylvania. And we share the profound sadness for the nearly three thousand lives lost.

As a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, I know that we have to do more to fight terrorism and protect our country. And we can do that. We are approaching the third anniversary of September 11th, and I can tell you that when we're in office, it won't take us three years to get the reforms in our intelligence we need to protect our country. We will do whatever it takes, for as long as it takes, to make sure that never happens again, not to our America.

When John is president, we will listen to the wisdom of the Sept. 11 commission. We will build and lead strong alliances and safeguard and secure weapons of mass destruction. We will strengthen our homeland security and protect our ports, safeguard our chemical plants, and support our firefighters, police officers and EMTs. We will always use our military might to keep the American people safe.

And we will have one clear unmistakable message for al Qaida and the rest of these terrorists. You cannot run. You cannot hide. And we will destroy you.

John understands personally about fighting in a war. And he knows what our brave men and women are going through in another war - the war in Iraq.

The human cost and extraordinary heroism of this war, it surrounds us. It surrounds us in our cities and towns. And we will win this war because of the strength and courage of our own people.

Some of our friends and neighbors saw their last images in Baghdad. Some took their last steps outside of Fallujah. And some buttoned their uniform for the final time before they went out to save their unit.

Men and women who used to take care of themselves, they now count on others to see them through the day. They need their mother to tie their shoe. Their husband to brush their hair. And their wife's arm to help them across the room.

The stars and stripes wave for them. The word hero was made for them. They are the best and the bravest. They will never be left behind. You understand that. And they deserve a president who understands that on the most personal level what they have gone through - what they have given and what they have given up for their country.

To us, the real test of patriotism is how we treat the men and women who put their lives on the line every day to defend our values. And let me tell you, the 26 million veterans in this country won't have to wonder if they'll have health care next week or next year - they will have it always because they took care of us and we will take care of them.

But today, our great United States military is stretched thin. More than 140,000 are in Iraq. Nearly 20,000 are serving in Afghanistan. And I visited the men and women there and we're praying for them as they keep working to give that country hope.

Like all of those brave men and women, John put his life on the line for our country. He knows that when authority is given to the president, much is expected in return. That's why we will strengthen and modernize our military.

We will double our Special Forces, and invest in the new equipment and technologies so that our military remains the best equipped and best trained in the world. This will make our military stronger so we're able to defeat every enemy in this new world.

But we can't do this alone. We have to restore our respect in the world to bring our allies to us and with us. It's how we won the World Wars and the Cold War and it is how we will build a stable Iraq.

With a new president who strengthens and leads our alliances, we can get NATO to help secure Iraq. We can ensure that Iraq's neighbors like Syria and Iran, don't stand in the way of a democratic Iraq. We can help Iraq's economy by getting other countries to forgive their enormous debt and participate in the reconstruction. We can do this for the Iraqi people and our soldiers. And we will get this done right.

A new president will bring the world to our side, and with it - a stable Iraq and a real chance for peace and freedom in the Middle East, including a safe and secure Israel. And John and I will bring the world together to face our most dangerous threat: the possibility of terrorists getting their hands on a nuclear, chemical or biological weapon.

With our credibility restored, we can work with other nations to secure stockpiles of the world's most dangerous weapons and safeguard this dangerous material. We can finish the job and secure all loose nukes in Russia. And we can close the loophole in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty that allows rogue nations access to the tools they need to develop these weapons.

That's how we can address the new threats we face. That's how we can keep you safe. That's how we can restore America's respect around the world.

And together, we will ensure that the image of America - the image all of us love - America this great shining light, this beacon of freedom, democracy, and human rights that the world looks up to - that that beacon is always lit.

The truth is every child, every family in America will be safer and more secure if you grow up in a world where America is once again looked up to and respected. That's the world we can create together.

Tonight, as we celebrate in this hall, somewhere in America, a mother sits at the kitchen table. She can't sleep. She's worried because she can't pay her bills. She's working hard to pay the rent and feed her kids. She's doing everything right, but she still can't get ahead.

It didn't use to be that way in her house. Her husband was called up in the Guard and he's been serving in Iraq for more than a year. She thought he'd be home last month, but now he's got to stay longer.

She thinks she's alone. But tonight in this hall and in your homes - you know what? She's got a lot of friends. We want her to know that we hear her. And it's time to bring opportunity and an equal chance to her door.

We're here to make America stronger at home so she can get ahead. And we're here to make America respected in the world so that we can bring him home and American soldiers don't have to fight the war in Iraq and the war on terror alone.

So when you return home, you might pass a mother on her way to work the late-shift - you tell her... hope is on the way.

When your brother calls and says that he's working all the time at the office and still can't get ahead - you tell him... hope is on the way.

When your parents call and tell you their medical bills are through the roof - you tell them ...hope is on the way.

When your neighbor calls you and says that her daughter has worked hard and wants to go to college - you tell her... hope is on the way.

When you talk to your son or daughter who is serving this country and protecting our freedoms in Iraq - you tell them...hope is on the way.

And when you wake up and sit with your kids at the kitchen table, talking to them about the great possibilities in America, you make sure that they know that John and I believe at our core that tomorrow can be better than today.

Like all of us, I have learned a lot of lessons in my life. Two of the most important are that first, there will always be heartache and struggle - you can't make it go away. But the other is that people of good and strong will, can make a difference. One lesson is a sad lesson and the other's inspiring. We are Americans and we choose to be inspired.

We choose hope over despair; possibilities over problems; optimism over cynicism. We choose to do what's right even when those around us say, "You can't do that." We choose to be inspired because we know that we can do better - because this is America where everything is still possible.

What we believe - what John Kerry and I believe - is that you should never look down on anybody, that we should lift people up. We don't believe in tearing people apart. We believe in bringing people together. What we believe - what I believe - is that the family you're born into and the color of your skin in our America should never control your destiny.

Join us in this cause. Let's make America stronger at home and respected in the world. Let's ensure that once again, in our one America - our one America - tomorrow will always be better than today.

Thank you and God bless you.