

Remarks By John McCain to CPAC

February 7, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain's presidential campaign today released the following remarks by John McCain as prepared for delivery:

Thank you. Thank you for inviting me. It's been a little while since I've had the honor of addressing you, and I appreciate very much your courtesy to me today. We should do this more often. I hope you will pardon my absence last year, and understand that I intended no personal insult to any of you. I was merely pre-occupied with the business of trying to escape the distinction of pre-season frontrunner for the Republican nomination, which, I'm sure some of you observed, I managed to do in fairly short order. But, now, I again have the privilege of that distinction, and this time I would prefer to hold on to it for a while.

I know I have a responsibility, if I am, as I hope to be, the Republican nominee for President, to unite the party and prepare for the great contest in November. And I am acutely aware that I cannot succeed in that endeavor, nor can our party prevail over the challenge we will face from either Senator Clinton or Senator Obama, without the support of dedicated conservatives, whose convictions, creativity and energy have been indispensable to the success our party has had over the last quarter century. Many of you have disagreed strongly with some positions I have taken in recent years. I understand that. I might not agree with it, but I respect it for the principled position it is. And it is my sincere hope that even if you believe I have occasionally erred in my reasoning as a fellow conservative, you will still allow that I have, in many ways important to all of us, maintained the record of a conservative. Further, I hope you will grant that I have defended many positions we share just as ardently as I have made my case for positions that have provoked your opposition. If not, thank you for this opportunity to make my case today.

I am proud to be a conservative, and I make that claim because I share with you that most basic of conservative principles: that liberty is a right conferred by our Creator, not by governments, and that the proper object of justice and the rule of law in our country is not to aggregate power to the state but to protect the liberty and property of its citizens. And like you, I understand, as Edmund Burke observed, that "whenever a separation is made between liberty and justice, neither . . . is safe."

While I have long worked to help grow a public majority of support for Republican candidates and principles, I have also always believed, like you, in the wisdom of Ronald Reagan, who warned in an address to this conference in 1975, that "a political party cannot be all things to all people. It must represent certain fundamental beliefs which must not be compromised to political expediency or simply to swell its numbers."

I attended my first CPAC conference as the invited guest of Ronald Reagan, not long after I had returned from overseas, when I heard him deliver his "shining city upon a hill" speech. I was still a naval officer then, but his words inspired and helped form my own political views, just as Ronald Reagan's defense of America's cause in Vietnam and his evident concern for American prisoners of war in that conflict inspired and were a great comfort to those of us who, in my friend Jerry Denton's words, had the honor of serving "our country under difficult circumstances." I am proud, very proud, to have come to public office as a foot soldier in the Reagan Revolution. And if a few of my positions have raised your concern that I have forgotten my political heritage, I want to assure you that I have not, and I am as proud of that association today as I was then. My record in public office taken as a whole is the record of a mainstream conservative. I believe today, as I

believed twenty-five years ago, in small government; fiscal discipline; low taxes; a strong defense, judges who enforce, and not make, our laws; the social values that are the true source of our strength; and, generally, the steadfast defense of our rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, which I have defended my entire career as God-given to the born and unborn.

Those are my beliefs, and you need not examine only my past votes and speeches to assure yourselves that they are my genuine convictions. You can take added confidence from the positions I have defended during this campaign. I campaigned in Iowa in opposition to agriculture subsidies. I campaigned in New Hampshire against big government mandated health care and for a free market solution to the problem of unavailable and unaffordable health care. I campaigned in Michigan for the tax incentives and trade policies that will create new and better jobs in that economically troubled state. I campaigned in Florida against the national catastrophic insurance fund bill that passed the House of Representatives and defended my opposition to the prescription drug benefit bill that saddled Americans with yet another hugely expensive entitlement program. I have argued to make the Bush tax cuts permanent, to reduce the corporate tax rate and abolish the AMT. I have defended my position on protecting our Second Amendment rights, including my votes against waiting periods, bans on the so-called "assault weapons," and illegitimate lawsuits targeting gun manufacturers. I have proudly defended my twenty-four year pro-life record. Throughout this campaign, I have defended the President's brave decision to increase troop levels in Iraq to execute a long overdue counterinsurgency that has spared us the terrible calamity of losing that war. I held these positions because I believed they were in the best interests of my party and country."

Surely, I have held other positions that have not met with widespread agreement from conservatives. I won't pretend otherwise nor would you permit me to forget it. On the issue of illegal immigration, a position which provoked the outspoken opposition of many conservatives, I stood my ground aware that my position would imperil my campaign. I respect your opposition for I know that the vast majority of critics to the bill based their opposition in a principled defense of the rule of law. And while I and other Republican supporters of the bill were genuine in our intention to restore control of our borders, we failed, for various and understandable reasons, to convince Americans that we were. I accept that, and have pledged that it would be among my highest priorities to secure our borders first, and only after we achieved widespread consensus that our borders are secure, would we address other aspects of the problem in a way that defends the rule of law and does not encourage another wave of illegal immigration.

All I ask of any American, conservative, moderate, independent, or enlightened Democrat, is to judge my record as a whole, and accept that I am not in the habit of making promises to my country that I do not intend to keep. I hope I have proven that in my life even to my critics. Then vote for or against me based on that record, my qualifications for the office, and the direction where I plainly state I intend to lead our country. If I am so fortunate as to be the Republican nominee for President, I will offer Americans, in what will be a very challenging and spirited contest, a clearly conservative approach to governing. I will make my case to voters, no matter what state they reside in, in the same way. I will not obscure my positions from voters who I fear might not share them. I will stand on my convictions, my conservative convictions, and trust in the good sense of the voters, and in my confidence that conservative principles still appeal to a majority of Americans, Republicans, Independents and Reagan Democrats.

Often elections in this country are fought within the margins of small differences. This one will not be. We are arguing about hugely consequential things. Whomever the Democrats nominate, they would govern this country in a way that will, in my opinion, take this country backward to the days when government felt empowered to take from us our freedom to decide for ourselves the course and quality of our lives; to substitute the muddled judgment of large and expanding federal bureaucracies for the common sense and values of the American people; to the timidity and wishful thinking of a time when we averted our eyes from terrible threats to our security that were so plainly gathering strength abroad. It is shameful and dangerous that Senate Democrats are

blocking an extension of surveillance powers that enable our intelligence and law enforcement to defend our country against radical Islamic extremists. This election is going to be about big things, not small things. And I intend to fight as hard as I can to ensure that our principles prevail over theirs.

Senator Clinton and Senator Obama want to increase the size of the federal government.

I intend to reduce it. I will not sign a bill with earmarks in it, any earmarks in it. I will fight for the line item veto, and I will not permit any expansion whatsoever of the entitlement programs that are bankrupting us. On the contrary, I intend to reform those programs so that government is no longer in that habit of making promises to Americans it does not have the means to keep.

Senator Clinton and Senator Obama will raise your taxes.

I intend to cut them. I will start by making the Bush tax cuts permanent. I will cut corporate tax rates from 35 to 25% to keep industries and jobs in this country. I will end the Alternate Minimum Tax. And I won't let a Democratic Congress raise your taxes and choke the growth of our economy.

They will offer a big government solution to health care insurance coverage.

I intend to address the problem with free market solutions and with respect for the freedom of individuals to make important choices for themselves.

They will appoint to the federal bench judges who are intent on achieving political changes that the American people cannot be convinced to accept through the election of their representatives.

I intend to nominate judges who have proven themselves worthy of our trust that they take as their sole responsibility the enforcement of laws made by the people's elected representatives, judges of the character and quality of Justices Roberts and Alito, judges who can be relied upon to respect the values of the people whose rights, laws and property they are sworn to defend.

Senator Clinton and Senator Obama will withdraw our forces from Iraq based on an arbitrary timetable designed for the sake of political expediency, and which recklessly ignores the profound human calamity and dire threats to our security that would ensue.

I intend to win the war, and trust in the proven judgment of our commanders there and the courage and selflessness of the Americans they have the honor to command. I share the grief over the terrible losses we have suffered in its prosecution. There is no other candidate for this office who appreciates more than I do just how awful war is. But I know that the costs in lives and treasure we would incur should we fail in Iraq will be far greater than the heartbreaking losses we have suffered to date. And I will not allow that to happen.

They won't recognize and seriously address the threat posed by an Iran with nuclear ambitions to our ally, Israel, and the region.

I intend to make unmistakably clear to Iran we will not permit a government that espouses the destruction of the State of Israel as its fondest wish and pledges undying enmity to the United States to possess the weapons to advance their malevolent ambitions.

Senator Clinton and Senator Obama will concede to our critics that our own actions to defend against its threats are responsible for fomenting the terrible evil of radical Islamic extremism, and their resolve to combat it will be as flawed as their judgment.

I intend to defeat that threat by staying on offense and by marshaling every relevant agency of our government, and our allies, in the urgent necessity of defending the values, virtues and security of free people against those who despise all that is good about us.

These are but a few of the differences that will define this election. They are very significant differences, and I promise you, I intend to contest these issues on conservative grounds and fight as hard as I can to defend the principles and positions we share, and to keep this country safe, proud, prosperous and free.

We have had a few disagreements, and none of us will pretend that we won't continue to have a few. But even in disagreement, especially in disagreement, I will seek the counsel of my fellow conservatives. If I am convinced my judgment is in error, I will correct it. And if I stand by my position, even after benefit of your counsel, I hope you will not lose sight of the far more numerous occasions when we are in complete accord.

I began by assuring you that we share a conception of liberty that is the bedrock of our beliefs as conservatives. As you know, I was deprived of liberty for a time in my life, and while my love of liberty is no greater than yours, you can be confident that mine is the equal of any American's. It is a deep and unwavering love. My life experiences in service to our country inform my political judgments. They are at the core of my convictions. I am pro-life and an advocate for the Rights of Man everywhere in the world because of them, because I know that to be denied liberty is an offense to nature and nature's Creator. I will never waver in that conviction, I promise you. I know in this country our liberty will not be seized in a political revolution or by a totalitarian government. But, rather, as Burke warned, it can be "nibbled away, for expedience, and by parts." I am alert to that risk and will defend against it, and take comfort from the knowledge that I will be encouraged in that defense by my fellow conservatives.

You have heard me say before that for all my reputation as a maverick, I have only found true happiness in serving a cause greater than my self-interest. For me, that cause has always been our country, and the ideals that have made us great. I have been her imperfect servant for many years, and I have made many mistakes. You can attest to that, but need not. For I know them well myself. But I love her deeply and I will never, never tire of the honor of serving her. I cannot do that without your counsel and support. And I am grateful, very grateful, that you have given me this opportunity to ask for it.

Thank you and God bless you.