Part-text of U.S. President Barack Obama’s “Words Matter” Speech (Feb. 16, 2008)

Transcribed by Robert S. DeFrance

But understand this argument about words not mattering. The most important thing we can do right now is to reengage the American people in the process of government. To get them excited and interested again in what works and what can work in our government, to make politics cool again and important again and relevant again. Don’t tell me words don’t matter. “I Have a Dream.” Just words. “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.” Just words. “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” Just words. Just speeches. It’s true that speeches don’t solve all problems, but what is also true is if we cannot inspire the country to believe again then it doesn’t matter how many policies and plans we have and that is why I’m running for President of the United States of America. And that’s why we just won 8 elections straight because the American people want to believe in change again. Don’t tell me words don’t matter.

Don’t tell me ideals and inspiration don’t matter. Don’t tell me hope doesn’t matter. It’s fascinating to me to see, lately, my campaign criticized because I talk about hope too much. Ah, he’s talking about hope again. He’s so naïve. He’s so idealistic. His head’s in the clouds. He’s a hope monger. He needs a reality check. He’s peddling false hopes. False hopes. False hopes. The notion is, apparently, if you talk about hope, you must not have a clear view of reality. That you must just be, you know, going around happy as can be, ignorant of those mean republicans out there. All the barriers that stand in your way. Listen, it’s true I talk about hope a lot. I talk about hope because it’s very unlikely that I’m standing on this stage here tonight. I was born to a teenage mom. My father left when I was 2. I was raised by a single mother and my grandparents. They didn’t have money. They didn’t have wealth. They had no status. They gave my love, they gave me an education, and they gave me hope. And so I do talk about hope. We put hope on our signs. I delivered a speech in Boston about hope. I wrote a book called *The Audacity of Hope*.

But, this notion that somehow hopes are false, that implies that hope is blind optimism, that you’re passive, that you’re waiting and sitting back for good things to happen, that you’re shirking from a fight. That’s not what hope is. Hope is not blind optimism. Hope is not ignoring the challenges that stand your way. I know how hard to will be to bring about change in this country. I know how hard it will be to deliver on universal health care. If it were easy, it would have already been done. I know how difficult it will be to bring about a sensible energy policy in this country. Exxon-Mobil made $11 billion dollars this past quarter. They don’t wanna give up their profits easily. I know how hard it will be to alleviate poverty in places like inner-city Milwaukee or the Southside of Chicago. That poverty is built up over generations, over centuries. Same thing in the reservations. There’s a long history there we’ve never truly accounted for. I know how hard it will be to fix our schools because it’s not just a function of money. It’s a function of changing attitudes. We’re gonna have to change how we teach our children. We’re gonna have to change how we nurture them. We’re gonna have to parent. And changing culture is a hard thing. I know because I’ve fought on the streets as an organizer, I’ve fought in the courts as a civil rights attorney, I’ve fought in the legislator. I’ve won some good fights. But, I’ve also lost some fights because I know good intentions are not enough when not fortified with political will and political power. I’ve seen how politics can be used to make us afraid of each other and how we turn on each other, how fear can cloud our judgment. And suddenly, we start scapegoating gay people, or immigrants, or people who don’t look like us, or Muslims because our own lives aren’t going well. I know how hard change is, but Democrats I also know this…

I also know this. That nothing in this country worthwhile has ever happened except somebody somewhere was willing to hope. **That’s how** this country was founded by that greatest generation by that group of patriots that declared independence against the mighty British Empire. Nobody gave them a chance. **That’s how** slaves and abolitionists resisted that wicked system. **And how** a new president charted a course to ensure this country would not remain half slave and half free. **That is how** the greatest generation, my grandparent’s generation, my grandfather fighting in World War II, my grandmother staying behind with a baby, working on a bomber assembly-line, how that greatest generation defeated Hitler and rose out of a Great Depression. **That’s how** we populated the west. Great pioneers, but also great hope. **That’s how** immigrants came from distant shores, uncertain about what they would find when they arrived, but knowing they wanted a better life for their children. **That is** how workers won the right to organize against violence and intimidation. **That’s how** women won the right to vote. **That’s how** young people traveled south, to march, and to sit-in, and to be beaten, and some went to jail, and some died for freedom’s cause. That’s what hope is. That’s what hope is. Imagining for, fighting for, and then working for what did not seem possible before. That’s leadership. John F. Kennedy didn’t look up at the moon and say ‘that’s too far. We can’t go.’ False hopes. Martin Luther King didn’t stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and say ‘go home everybody. The dream’s deferred. False hopes. You all need a reality check.’ There is a moment in the life of every generation when that spirit of hopefulness has to come through if we are to make our mark on history. When we cast aside the fear, and the doubt, and the cynicism, and stop settling for what the critics tell we have to settle for, when we join together, and we decide that we are going to roll up our sleeves and remake this country block-by-block, neighborhood-by-neighborhood, county-by-county, state-by-state, when we decide in our guts, when we are determined that our children and grandchildren deserve the same chances somebody gave us, when we make a determination, and we are willing to fight, and we are willing to fight on the basis of the conviction, that we are gonna keep the dream alive for those who still yearn for justice, still thirst for opportunity.

And Democrats, this is our moment. This is our time. And if you will stand with me on Tuesday, if you vote for me on Tuesday, if you are willing to keep on marching, organizing, and knocking on doors, and making phone calls, attracting young people, and getting old folks reinvigorated, and getting the middle folks involved, I promise you we will not just win Wisconsin, we will win this nomination, we will win the general election, and together, you and I, we will change this country and we will transform the world. Thank you Wisconsin. I love you!