



SENATE DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATIONS CENTER

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REID ADDRESSES ECONOMIC FORUM ON POST-KATRINA CHALLENGES

“With Katrina behind us and Rita ahead, one thing is clear: we can no longer afford business as usual in Washington. Our country's needs have changed, and our priorities in Washington must change with them.”

Washington, DC - Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) delivered opening remarks today at the Joint Economic Committee (JEC) and Democratic Policy Committee's (DPC) joint economic forum, “Meeting America’s Economic Challenge in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina.” Remarks as prepared:

“We titled this forum “Meeting America’s Economic Challenges in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina.” But now with Rita bearing down, it’s clear that title is not suffice. Even more challenges lie ahead.

“This morning, our thoughts are with families all along the Gulf Coast from Alabama to Texas. I want them to know we are ready and willing to do whatever it takes to help them in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

“With Katrina behind us and Rita ahead, one thing is clear: we can no longer afford business as usual in Washington. Our country's needs have changed, and our priorities in Washington must change with them.

“Our first priority is making sure victims receive the assistance they need. This includes housing, health care and financial relief. We’ve done some work, but not nearly enough. America can do better. We must come together, and we must act quickly.

“Our second priority is finding answers. With the benefit of hindsight, the White House and local officials appear to be better prepared for Rita. However, even if everything goes according to plan, we must know why – four years after 9/11 – the government was unprepared. And we must know how we can ensure we’re ready for future disasters. We

need an independent commission and the answers outside of politics that only an independent commission can provide.

“Our third priority is our topic today – rebuilding the Gulf...repairing deep economic and social divides ... and making sure the regional and national economy emerges stronger than ever.

“Starting this discussion, it’s important to remember that even before Katrina, families were struggling to get ahead. In the Bush economy, jobs pay less. Benefits are scarce. Costs for gasoline, health care, and education are skyrocketing, and, not surprisingly, poverty is on the rise.

“Now in the aftermath of possibly two devastating hurricanes, our economy will take on more burdens: reconstruction costs, interruptions in commerce, even higher costs for energy and gas.

“I’m eager to hear this panel’s thoughts on how we can overcome these burdens. There’s no doubt reconstructing the Gulf Coast will cost billions, and we will do whatever it takes.

“In the wake of Katrina, it’s been interesting to see some on the other side scream and holler for matching cuts in other domestic programs. These same individuals had no problem spending trillions of dollars in Iraq or on the Bush tax cuts while our deficits were mounting. But now, in the wake of this disaster - - when the federal government begins to help rebuild the lives and communities of Americans who have lost everything - - they’ve found religion in fiscal discipline. I’d welcome this interest in fiscal responsibility, if I thought it was sincere. They’ve already mortgaged our future to countries like China and Japan, and with billions in additional tax breaks on the horizon, they have no plans of letting up.

“We need to change the way we do business in Washington and come together to put the priorities of America’s government in line with the needs of America’s families.

“My own view is this is not the time to cut Medicaid, cut education and cut food stamps so we can spend billions on tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans.

“In Louisiana, some of America’s neediest families suffered the most simply because they were poor. Now, we shouldn’t ask those with the least to pay the most for reconstruction too.

“America can do better. We must unite and move forward in a new direction. We can't change the past, but we can change our future.”

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