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Mayor Manny Diaz's Address as President of the US Conference of Mayors

Thank you - It has truly been an honor to host all of you in my home town - I hope we made you feel at home.

Let me begin by recognizing the debt of gratitude we owe to a mayor among mayors, Doug Palmer. Doug took over this organization at a difficult moment, after the untimely death of another great friend, Mayor Mike Guido.

Doug, your presidency not only showed what an amazing leader you are, but it honors the legacy of Mayor Guido, the dearborn accord, and sets up a tough act for me to follow - you are my friend and my brother, Mayor Doug Palmer.

I also want to thank several past presidents: Mayors Daley, Webb, Riley, Abramson, O'Neill, garner -- you are my mentors, my inspiration, and without you, I would not be standing here today.

I look forward to working with our future presidents, Mayor Nickels and Mayor Kautz, - our Executive Director, Tom Cochran, and the USCM staff.

I am especially humbled to share our city with all of you, a city built on the aspirations and dreams of so many who have come to America searching for freedom.....searching for a better life.

It is what this country gave my family, and what it gave me.

I came to the United States when I was 6 years old, on a freedom flight, sitting on my mother's lap, fleeing a place where the government denies its people the freedoms and opportunities we cherish.

We saw this country as so many others still do, as a beacon of hope, a land of boundless opportunity.

My mom and dad worked two and three jobs at any one time-

They cleaned toilets, parked cars, washed dishes and worked in factories - and yet, there was never any despair - they knew that if you work hard, you can give your children a better life.

We lived in a clean, safe neighborhood. I went to a public school and enjoyed after school activities.

Thanks to the federal CETA program, I worked as a school janitor making \$1.10 an hour to help my parents make ends meet-

Student loans made it possible for me to attend College and Law School.

At every turn of my life, especially in my youth, I benefitted from a partnership - because government invested in me, I can now give back, as mayor of this city, as president of this organization.

Not long ago, I spoke at a naturalization ceremony. I could not help but remember the day that I raised my right hand to swear allegiance to this great nation.

As I looked out at the crowd of over 3,000, from all corners of the world, from every walk of life, all eager to join the great American democracy,

I asked myself, do they see the same things in America that I saw all those years ago?

Is this country still willing to provide the tools needed for advancement?

Is America still willing to invest in its people?

Does a six year old child today have the same access to opportunity that I did, or that any of us did?

This is a time when Washington has lost its values, lost its principles – lost its sense of purpose –

They no longer invest in our cities, they no longer invest in our people.

Plain and simple, they have abandoned us – they engage in endless debate and partisan bickering...,while people throughout this country suffer.

We saw what happened in New Orleans, in Minneapolis, in Des Moines – but let's look deeper:
Over 60% of America's children do not read or perform math at grade level, the number is higher for minorities.

In our largest cities, over 50% of children don't make it past high school.

Is education a local problem? Or an American problem?

1 in every 6 children lives in poverty, with nearly half living in extreme poverty – the numbers are higher for minorities.

If you are a young black boy, you have a 1 in 3 chance of going to jail, 1 in 4 if you are Latino -

Close to 10 million children in this country have no health insurance, part of 47 million in this country who are uninsured.

Are poverty and health a local problem? Or an American problem?

Many middle class Americans are one paycheck..., one sickness away from economic catastrophe.

35 million Americans go hungry, including nearly 13 million children.

Is hunger a local problem? Or is it an American problem?

Americans are being priced out of home-ownership or losing their homes at alarming rates – and the number of homeless is still at unacceptable levels.

Are housing and homelessness a local problem? Or an American problem?

We see violence increase in our cities, and there are more gang members today than there are police officers.

Youth violence accounts for 20% of all violence and is the second leading cause of death among our youth.....and we have the highest incarceration rate in the world.

Is crime a local problem? Or is it an American problem?

Gasoline is now over \$4 a gallon - rising food prices, rising medical costs – hitting each and every one of us in the wallet.

Is our economy a local problem? Or is it an American problem?

Mayors - these are not just local problems, these are not just republican or democrat problems, these are America's problems.

And yet, where is the federal government? Cuts to CDBG, cuts to housing, cuts to cops, cuts in education, job training, arts, infrastructure – government investment in our cities and our people..... All cut.

For the first time in our history, we are in real danger of failing to give our children a better world than the one our parents left us.

For the first time in our history, we are in danger of raising a forgotten generation.

Solutions are not coming from Washington. Solutions are coming from our cities.....

Because cities are not the problem, cities are the solution.

We are the ones that drive the national economy.

We are the ones that address the issues that matter to people the most.

We are the ones that provide the front line, the last hope.....

That in cities..... Not all is lost.

This is what this organization stands for. This is what all of us stand for.

When faced with inaction on climate change, it was Mayor Nickels who inspired over 850 of us to implement the Kyoto Protocol.

Mayors like rich Daley and will Wynn are showing the nation that you can have economic development and an environmental conscience.

When illegal guns and assault weapons flooded city streets, Mayors Bloomberg and Menino raised their voices against violence in our cities.

Faced with cuts to federal programs that help our most vulnerable, Mayors like Antonio Villaraigosa took poverty reduction head on.

While the Federal Government claims to leave no child behind.....we know better, which is why Mayors like Mike Coleman and Shirley Franklin's education policies truly put children first.

While congress gives us multi million dollar bridges to nowhere.... Mayors like John Hickenlooper are bringing common sense to infrastructure.

And, when our cities break because of federal neglect, it is Mayors like R.T. Ryback and Frank Cownie who heal their city's grieving soul.

Each and every single one of us - we are the government of first resort-

But we should not have to be the government of last resort.

So it is that America faces a moment of choice.

In November, we will go to the polls to elect our next president – we demand, the American people must demand an accountable federal partner.

We are prepared to sit down and work with Senator Obama. We are prepared to sit down and work with Senator McCain -

We are prepared to continue to advocate for our ten point plan – for the issues that affect our people, for the issues that affect America.

And we do this because we know the opportunities this country still holds, the promise it stands for.

We are the only country in the world that inspires a dream.

It was a phrase coined in the early part of the last century during the great depression—
“A dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for all.”

Mayors have never lost sight of that.

And it does not matter if we are democrats, republicans, or independents.....we are all mayors first.

This is a defining moment for our country –

We all have a great duty - to make our next president understand that an investment in America's cities is an investment in America's future-

That he should be mayor of the United States.

World powers compete for economic strength. China, Russia, India, Brazil, and many others who are gaining by investing in their people, investing in their cities, investing in their nations.

If we fail to do the same, we know from history, that America will no longer be competitive, that the world will pass us by.

It is not a question of whether we should invest - it is our mandate- it is why we exist - it is our most solemn duty as a nation -

To leave cities where poverty is not a lifelong sentence, but a temporary condition to be overcome –

To leave cities that combine economic prosperity with environmental sustainability –

To leave cities where our children can receive the best education, afford a home, hold a good paying job, have access to the arts and live in cities that work–

To leave cities where everyone has access to the promises of the dream -

I am humbled to be your president, to lead the way..... And I ask you..... I need you....to join me in this challenge –

To fulfill this duty –

To make an investment in our cities,

To make an investment in the American people

So that a 6 year old in America today....may inherit a city..... And grow up in a country..... Better than the one left to us.

Thank you, god bless...

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