Keynote Address
President and CEO Benjamin Todd Jealous

First Plenary Session
NAACP 103rd Annual Convention
July 9, 2012
Thank you Dr. Williams for that wonderful introduction. Thank you for all you have done and are doing to ensure your patients get the IDs they will need to vote—if Governor Haley has her way.

Good morning NAACP!

My name is Benjamin Todd Jealous and my wife Lia and I are proud to be the parents of the newest and youngest life member of the NAACP—little Jack Jealous—born last week on the fourth of July. Like his sister Morgan, he is now a sixth-generation of the NAACP.

Like all of us, I am here today because I am proud to be part of the greatest nonviolent army for freedom and justice the world has ever known.

Thank you Chairman Brock, Vice Chair Russell, and the entire NAACP Board of Directors for all you do to steward this great organization.

Thank you Chairman Duffy, Vice Chair Maxwell and the entire SCF Board of Trustees for all you do to resource the fight.

Now, will Gary Bledsoe of the Texas State Conference, Reverend Reginald Lillie of the Houston branch, and ALL state, local, and youth and college presidents from across the country, please stand up – THANK YOU!

Because of you, because of your dedication and sacrifice and because of the more than 25,000 NAACP active volunteer leaders in our more than 1,200 active units across the country... it is truly never a question of IF we will when, but WHEN we will win.

To the State Conference Presidents, Unit Presidents and Officers, Volunteer leaders, members and supporters in this room and across the country today, I say THANK YOU!

You are the lifeblood of this Great Association. You are the frontline in the fight for justice and equality in this country.

You are the ones whose work and input inspired us to find our game changers, and you are the ones who will lead us on the battlefield to get them
accomplished. As W.E.B. Du Bois reminded us, our greatest fights may be national in scope but are local in nature.

And let us each remember as we are on the battlefield, prosecuting our game changers, that they are like the five fingers that cast our ballots. Remove any one of us and it just doesn't work as it should.

So let everyone join me in pledging that we will achieve our game changers in the next half-century.

- We will see the end of mass over-incarceration
- We will see the end of mass under-education
- We will see the end of the great health disparities that divide this nation
- We will see that this nation is land of opportunity for all its children, regardless of color or creed, gender or sexual orientation
- And we will see that every American has free and open access to the vote.

Brothers and sisters, I am proud to support today that the state of the NAACP is strong and getting stronger every day.

In the past three years we have increased membership three years in a row for the first time in more than 20 years.

In the past four years our online activists from 175,000 to over 650,000 people. Our Facebook followers have grown from just 5,000 to 135,000.

And already this year, we have registered 75,000 voters, on track to hitting the 100,000 we projected for July and the hundreds of thousands we will register for November. Each of these adds to the more than 530,000 voters we already had in our network at the beginning of the year. And we will make sure they are turn out to vote this November.

And while the number of supporters have grown in every category, I am proudest to say that our individual donors have grown from 16,000 to 125,000 people writing checks of all size to the Association every year. And because of the hard work and good fortune, I am proud to report that we have been in the black EVERY year for the past four years, and growing every year straight through this recession.
And we have been rewarded for our hard work with solid victories.

- We challenged school boards that would seek to resegregate our society
- We closed down the two coal plants in Chicago that topped our list of top environmental justice offenders
- We shut down prisons and worked with allies on both sides of the aisle to introduce policies that are “smart on crime” instead of “tough on crime”
- We fought discrimination in employment and lending
- We ensured that our schoolchildren and communities have access to the healthy food they need not just to survive but to thrive.

These are tough times. Our democracy is literally under attack from within. We have wealthy interests like the Koch brothers seeking to buy elections and suppress the vote. And to be honest, each of us is on the front line in every state of our union every day. From redistricting battles in states like Georgia, to fighting wholesale takeovers of local government in states like Michigan, to fighting attacks on voter suppression across this country, there is no battle more important to the NAACP right now than the battle to defend democracy in our great nation.

I would like to give special acknowledgment to our activists in Florida, who despite threats of exorbitant fines and even jail time have kept Florida one of our most productive states for voter registration, and indeed until the recent court ruling were among the only voter registration activists in the state who did not retreat in the face of their governor’s outrageousness and aggressive intimidation.

People ask me why we don't back down when the stakes get as high as they have in Florida, Georgia, and so many other states. And I tell them, we act differently because we are different. We have endured more martyrs than any other civic organization. We know their names – indeed many of us knew them personally – and we honor their memory by seeking to emulate their courage in defending and extending our democracy.

For example, in the midst of the latest round of democracy battles in Florida, this past Christmas Eve we marked the 60\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the assassinations of Florida NAACP leaders Harry and Harriet Moore who were blown up in
their bed because of their efforts to register voters, and fight lynchings, in the Sunshine state.

This fall, as we push to do everything we can to encourage people to vote, we are also preparing to mark the 50th anniversaries of the assassination of Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi, as well as the murders of four little girls when white supremacists blew up 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama - Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair.

This year we carried pictures of these martyrs and others in marches to the North Carolina state capitol, the South Carolina state capitol and the Alabama capital in Montgomery, as well as the UN itself. Because we are committed to defending the freedoms they died seeking to secure for future generations, and we are committed to ensuring future generations remember the ultimate sacrifice each of these people made for them.

I mention the special role that we have in defending democracy, and the martyrs who we remember, for three reasons:

1. First, because we are living through the greatest wave of legislative assaults on voting rights in more than a century. In the past year, more states have passed more laws pushing more voters out of the ballot box than at any time since the rise of Jim Crow. And when the tide rises high, we at the NAACP must ensure that the forces of freedom and justice rise even higher.

2. Second, I mention it because we must understand what those who are attacking our rights understand: our voting rights are the rights upon which our ability to defend all of our other rights is leveraged. And if you let someone diminish the power of your community’s vote, you may have already lost the battle.

Should anyone need any assurance that one is connected to the other, I would refer them to the recent activities of the American Legislative Exchange Council, which I’ll talk more about later, or the legislative history of our nation’s oldest voter suppression laws, ex-felon disenfranchisement bans. Or in states like my family’s home state of Virginia, where the legislative history states plainly that the purpose of the law is to “eliminate
the darkie as a political power” and maintain white supremacy as the order of the day.

3. Finally, we must focus on defending our democracy because for 103 years we at the NAACP have focused on pushing America toward that great providence described by Frederick Douglass in his speech against the Chinese Exclusion Act in a speech called “Our Composite Nationality”, in which he said the destiny of America is to be the greatest example of human unity the world has ever seen.

Let me make this clear. Like our ancestors understood a century and a half ago when Frederick Douglass was leading the battle, we assailing our communities’ voting rights and pushing immigrants of color out of this nation are the flipside of the coin that is cast by those seeking to buy our elections. And thus we at the NAACP will resist each effort with the same force.

Let me be clear:

1. We WILL ensure that our nation continues to practice free and fair elections even as it approaches the day when people of color will be the majority in this country.

2. And we will ensure that our nation continues to follow the creed etched into the statue of liberty – to take in the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to be free – and not just for those from Canada but for those from Mexico and other places south of our border too.

3. And finally, we will ensure that the opportunity to run for office and represent your community remains open to all our nation’s children, rich or poor, black or white. And that all our elected representatives are beholden to the people who voted for them, not the oligarchs who invested in them.

Because we need to define “people” as defined by the abolitionists when they pushed for the 14th amendment, not as defined by Chief Justice Roberts when he grossly misinterpreted it in Citizens United. Memo to Justice Roberts,: we will concede that corporations are
people too when you permit a state like Texas or Georgia to wrongfully execute one.

Now, in 2008 the entire nation saw the same thing – the color barrier was broken at the White House, and we had largest and most diverse electorate in history.

But the country was split in how they responded to this news. Some looked at the record turnout and said “Oh yes” – America is finally achieving its destiny as the greatest example of human unity the world has ever seen. But others took one look at the turnout where African American women turned out at higher rates than white men, and said “Oh no”. And then they pulled the oldest most powerful playbook of voter suppression of the shelf – using the law itself to suppress voters. And invested in an intentionally divisive strategy of systematic exclusion, to hold off our nation’s destiny for as long as possible.

Fortunately, holding off the future another moment or two is the most they will ever be able to achieve. And if we have our way, they won’t even be able to achieve that. Because for 103 years the NAACP has made it our business to hasten the arrival of America’s future.

Right now, in this moment, with 120 days left until the election, we have a choice to make. We can allow this election to be stolen in advance, as the leader of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives openly admitted he was trying to do with his support of that state’s voter ID law.

Or we can double down on democracy and overcome the rising tide of voter suppression.

While the challenge is significant, we have overcome more significant hurdles in the past. While it will require sacrifice, we have witnessed even greater sacrifices to get us to this point, where we even have a voting base to defend.

So in this year, we must each be prepared to make great sacrifices – sacrifices of time, treasure and talent – to defend voting rights and defend democracy from those seeking to buy wholesale.
I wish everyone in the audience could have the view that I have, looking out into the faces of so many champions of voting rights, so many people winning victories right now.

Our leaders from states like North Carolina and Michigan who have convinced their governors to veto voter ID laws and even organized an override in North Carolina.

Our leaders from states like Texas, Mississippi, South Carolina and Florida, who have helped convince the Department of Justice to attack some of the nation’s most outrageous new voter suppression efforts. Such as the law in this state that allows you to vote with a gun license but not a student ID.

And great freedom fighters like Kemba Smith, who traveled with us to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva this spring to speak on behalf of the millions of formerly incarcerated people in this country for whom voting rights continue to be denied based on Jim Crow-era statutes. She joined us even as she prepared to travel back to Virginia and petition her governor to finally restore her right to vote.

And let us be very clear. This battle against voter suppression is not about stopping a new chapter in American history as much as it is about keeping a very bad chapter in our democracy from repeating itself again.

Last Wednesday, Independence Day, as I held my newborn son in my arms, occurred to me I was not the first father in my family to hold a new son in my arms on July 4th.

The first would by Burl Todd, my great great grandfather, who was born a slave in 1849 and whose son Edward Jerome Todd Sr. was born on July 4th, 1889. Now I didn’t know either of them, but I did know the son’s son, my grandfather, Edward Jerome Todd Jr., was a patriot, a great student, a hard worker, and a member of law enforcement in Baltimore for more than three decades.

He was also a man of few words.
I can still remember the last real conversation I had with him. I was finishing up the July 4th holiday at his house, and getting in my car to drive back to DC before flying to the UK to attend Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar.

Standing there saying goodbye with my duffel bag over my shoulder, my grandfather spoke up. And he told me that if he had the chance to do this all over again, he would have left the country years ago and never come back.

Almost 90 years old at the time. Despite his patriotism, despite his long and distinguished career in public service, his experience as a black man in America resigned himself to the notion that no matter his dedication to his country, his country was never going to love him as much as he loved it.

And at that moment as I sat there cradling my newborn son in my arms, remembering the saddest conversation I ever had with my grandfather, the son of a black man born on the fourth of July, I recommitted myself to winning the fight against racism, the fight to tear down all the walls that cut through our society and lock children out of the American dream, and the fight against poverty itself, before the original sins of our nation can break the heart of my son, let alone his sons or daughters.

And in this nation of laws not of men, where our birthright is defined by our constitution not our community of origin, let us each honor the memory of our grandparents and great grandparents who sacrificed so much to get us where are right now. Let us honor them by recommitting to the fight for freedom and adopting the rallying cry of our troops in North Carolina – forward ever, not one step back.

Let us recognize that while our children may be born any day of the year, their rights were born on the Fourth of July. Our forefathers recognized the truths that stand for all of humanity – we are all governed by inalienable rights – life liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These are words that put into motion the greatest ongoing multifaceted movement for human rights and human dignity the world has ever seen.

So at this great historic juncture, at this crossroads of history when we are blessed to know that the direction of our nation is literally our choice – our power, our decision, our vote – let us each internalize that which Dr. W.E.B. Du
Bois admonished us to recognize more than a half century ago – that we must be “nonpartisan in our allegiance and bipartisan in our aggression."

That we do not owe allegiance to any candidate because they share our party or our color, but because they share our principles and our conscience.

Which is why we worked our state leaders and national staff make sure to coordinate with allies on the left and on the right.

We worked with Democratic Governor Dannell Malloy, a former prosecutor who upheld his key campaign promise to make Connecticut the 17th state to abolish the death penalty! Governor Malloy is in the audience with us tonight. Thank you, Governor, for leading the vanguard of governors who are reforming failed tough on crime policies and working towards a nation that is smart on crime.

We worked with Republican Governor Nathan Deal in GA, who just signed into law the most sweeping criminal justice legislation in the country. We found common ground with Virginia’s Republican governor Bob McDonnell, who shut down prisons and called for more money to be sent to universities. And here in Texas, the state conference, working under the umbrella of the Texas Criminal Justice coalition, we helped push Republican Governor Rick Perry to sign 12 progressive reforms that led to Texas scheduling the first closure of a prison in its history.

And this past week in Michigan we worked with Republican Governor Rick Snyder, who became the first Republican governor to veto a photo identification law for voting.

These developments have hastened the day when our game changers will be achieved. They also speak to the real possibility of true cooperation in these partisan times.

Of course we also have certain principles that we will never compromise – and we are bipartisan in our aggression as we protect them.

The mission of the NAACP is to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination.
This is the standard by which we hold every issue that we take on. These are the values that guide our game changers and this is the standard for every mission we take on.

That’s why this May our Board of Directors under the leadership of our fierce and courageous Chairman Roslyn Brock, made a stand for marriage equality.

Because the NAACP will never support any attempt to codify discrimination into law. We believe that marriage is a civil rights and a marriage of civil law under the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Right now is the right time to do the right thing”.

To those who have questions about the NAACP’s resolution to support marriage equality, the NAACP has never wavered against attempts to codify discrimination or hatred into the law.

That is why we are telling Nikki Haley of South Carolina, Rick Scott of Florida, Rick Perry of Texas, and any other governor who has set their sights on the Voting Rights Act, we would remind you that there was a reason congress reauthorized it. We had a lot to do with that victory, and the case for maintaining it is as sound now as it was then. We look forward to you being as shocked when the court upholds the Voting Rights Act as you were when they upheld the Affordable Health Care Act.

That is why I would like to thank the 70,000 or more people who joined us at Mayor Bloomberg’s house to celebrate father’s day by calling for an end to stop and frisk.

To Ray Kelly, the commissioner of the NYPD who criticized stop and frisk when it was born under Giuliani, but has increased it tenfold as a servant to Mayor Bloomberg, let me be very clear: the march was just the beginning.

When 90% of the people you stop are innocent, 90% are people of color, 99% don’t have a gun, there’s nothing to mend it, it must be ended. And if you choose to stand your ground on stop and frisk and make yourself the Bull Connor of the 21st century, we will come for you just as we came for Bill Lee in Sanford, FL.
That is why I say to the American Legislative Exchange Council, ALEC, who has so efficiently replicated stand your ground laws around this country, and voter suppression methods from coast to coast: the blood of every adult who was wrongfully killed because of these laws is on your hands, and if it comes to pass that this election was stolen in advance because of your efforts to legalize voter suppression across this country, the shame will be yours as well.

To our friends at Walmart and Johnson and Johnson who have stopped supporting ALEC since our board issued a call for corporations to do so, we say thank you. And to those who are still deliberating, we encourage you to come to a similar conclusion.

Because while we welcome robust and informed debate, there are some lines that should never be crossed by any member of civil society. And when an organization supports measures that push voters out of the ballot box, as ALEC did with voter suppression laws; when an organization pushes laws that license ordinary citizens to racially profile with lethal force as ALEC did with stand your ground laws; and when an organization helps promote laws that legalize the greatest legislative assault on immigrants of color since the Chinese Exclusion Act, that organization has crossed at least three lines too many.

We will keep our principles in mind as we look to the future and prepare to win three battles in the next year:

- In January when state sessions open across the country, our members must be prepared to play defense effectively and offense aggressively, stop next wave against voting rights, push forward against game changers for 21st century
- By December we must be prepared to play our part in an epic battle to ensure the federal government leads the way in rebuilding the American dream by ending the Bush tax cuts and ensuring that our national economy is back to one in which everyone works for a fair wage and everyone pays their fair share
- By November, we must be prepared to push back against those who would intimidate, mislead or misdirect voters in advance of Election Day, like the King Street Patriots here in Texas. We need to overwhelm
the massive tide of voter suppression with an even bigger tide of voter registration, voter activation and voter protection.

As I think about these challenges in the next year, my thoughts inevitably turn back to my baby boy Jackson.

For any parent, the birth of a new child often causes you to pause and reflect on the world in which he or she is born.

Will the world they become to know be one in which they can prosper and grow?

Will the America they grow up in allow them realize to realize all the dreams and aspirations that they dare to dream?

Will they love their country more than their Country loves them?

I have spent many hours reflecting on these questions. Questions that all parents ask of themselves, questions that I am certain Tracy and Sabrina pondered as they looked at their beautiful baby boy, Trayvon.

And sadly, I, like many of you, and certainly Tracy and Sabrina, have come to face the harsh reality that in this great nation there exists a deep and troubling paradox: a conundrum of epic portions if I may add.

You see, the sad reality is that if we simply accept things as they are and allow those who wish to turn back the tides of all that we have gained – and block the forward movement before us.

That if we simple stay idle and watch the Game rather change it, that the American Dream and America’s promise will be denied to many of America’s children.

I don’t know about the rest of America – but I am deeply disturbed by the fact that in this Great Nation, a nation founded on the principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that in a nation whose founding text echoed the ideals of democracy and justice, there lies the troubling reality that our children’s lives will be worse off than the Generation before them.
Well NAACP, I come to tell you today, that it is time to shift this Nation’s priorities.

Time to shift away from priorities rooted in fear and toward those motivated by the ideals of the country we aspire to be, priorities motivated by the aspiration of the America that we must build for ALL of her children.

You see, there is much at stake – and far too much for us to give up now.

And even now when the forces that seek to divide us appear to outnumber us, let us be reminded of the tenacity of the great prophet Elisha—

Elisha was sent to preach the truth –
But the powerful kings of the land did not like what he had to say –
So they, like the powerful interests of today, unleashed a mighty army to defeat him.

Surrounded by the Enemy, Elisha’s servant looked out the window –
Overwhelmed by the many men he saw, he resigned that they had surely lost the battle.

But Unmoved by the numbers set out to destroy him, Elisha raised his voice and proclaimed:

“Open his eyes God—Open his eyes------ Let him see that there they are more with us---than against us.”

You see, Mr. Russell – Elisha knew something about the 99 percent!

As I reminded us last year—we must always see ourselves as Giants and not grasshoppers in this fight to build the America for ALL OF HER CHILDREN.

An America where not one child nor their parents live on the margins of society.

An America where our sons can walk freely in their neighborhoods without fear of being harassed, embarrassed, or brought down by the bullet of a suspicious neighbor.
We must do this doggedly and strategically, and even when America seems to lose her way, we must resolve to be Her Conscience—

And that Conscience must have Courage—

And yes, Chairman Brock, we must ensure that it does not Skip this Generation.

That Courage must not waver.

And even when the forces against us unleash all that they can – whether it be millions of dollars to suppress our votes or mass confusion meant to divide us, we can never retreat

And when the going gets tough and rough, let us lift up our eyes to the hills for which cometh all of our help.

And when the way gets weary and the fire hot--- Let us walk the path like Meshak, Shadrack and Abindigo.

When our backs are against the wall and the end seems near--- let us keep our eyes on the prize like Daniel in the Lion’s Den.

For when we push America to back to her ideals of life liberty and justice for all, we make America Stronger.

And in doing so we will build an America for ALL of our children

An America in which my baby boy Jackson, born on the 4th of July, unlike his Great Grandfather years before him, will be able to stand tall and sing proudly without a lingering doubt:

**My country ‘tis of thee...**

When we build an America where all of our children have access to a high quality public EDUCATION – my baby boy can proclaim

**Sweet Land of Liberty...**
When we build an America where economic justice and the great American dream can be realized by all, he too can sing

**OF thee I sing...**

When we build an America that move beyond mere tolerance and to a place where all of her children no matter where they come- are embraced. He too can sing

**Land where my father's died...**

When we build an America free of racial discrimination and hatred and one rooted in justice and liberty, he too can sing---

**Land of the Pilgrims Pride...**

When we build an America when Every American can enjoy a high quality affordable health care, and enjoy an environment free of pollution, he too can sing –

**From Every mountain side...**

When we build an America where we truly embody ONE PERSON, ONE VOTE, he too can sing –

**Let Freedom Ring...**

For when we push America back to her ideals of life liberty and justice for all – when we take America back to a true democracy of the people, for the people, by the people,

We will make America stronger. WE WILL MAKE AMERICA STRONGER. LET US MAKE AMERICA STRONGER!!

LET US MOVE AMERICA FORWARD, FORWARD EVER, BACKWARDS NEVER—

Until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Thank you and God Bless the NAACP.