

Remarks for Charles Lyons
Opening General Session
Thursday, December 2, 2004

Thank you very much for that generous introduction.

As we begin this conference, and stand here together at the end of my year as NLC president, let me share with you my optimism and hope, my sense of certainty that America's cities will continue to move this country forward--as laboratories of democracy, as incubators for innovation, and as the very heart of the wide and beautiful community that is America.

As many of you know, in addition to serving as a Selectman from Arlington, Massachusetts, by profession I am the superintendent of a regional high school. Every day, all of us stand up; students, faculty and staff together, and we begin our morning with a Pledge of Allegiance to our flag and to this great republic, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Every day we are reminded that we live in the greatest democracy in the history of the world. Every day, we are reminded of how fortunate we are to be here, in this country, at this time.

And in spite of what the pollsters and spin masters say about the *political* divisions that exist here at home, in the larger and grander sense we are wonderfully united as a nation, and we are together as a people.

United and together in our passion for democracy. United and together in our love for fairness and decency. United and together in our commitment for a just future for all of our citizens. United and together for the Promise of America.

228 years ago, our Declaration of Independence brought our emerging nation to new heights as a country that would hold this truth to be self evident: that all men are created equal.

Seven score and one year ago, Abraham Lincoln reminded us that our nation was conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that ALL men are created equal.

84 years ago, the women of America were finally granted the right to vote, and we began our march on a path that recognizes the basic proposition that all men AND women are created equal.

Forty years ago Martin Luther King prayed that, someday, his four little children would indeed be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. All men and women are created equal, and in America and in this world, must be judged, treated and respected as equals.

Each generation of Americans has inherited the great responsibility to leave to the next generation a more perfect nation, one in which our fundamental constitution demands the equality of justice, the maintenance of domestic tranquility, and the collective duty to commonly defend ourselves to ensure that we are able to transfer the blessings of liberty to those who follow.

This is the dream of America.

It is chronicled in our history, it is documented in our writings, and it is defined in our principles. We aspire to be the beacon of democracy worldwide, providing justice and opportunity for all. Of course, in order to do this, we must constantly strive to meet this standard at home, too.

One year ago I called upon our federal government partners to stand with us, with the cities of America, and do what needs to be done to invest in our people and to address the many problems and challenges that can divide Americans from each other.

I stated: "To succeed, we will have to slice through partisan politics, and unite so many who have been polarized from each other."

Unfortunately, we didn't make as much progress as I had hoped. This past election year, Congress enacted only thirty pieces of legislation during the first six months. No legislation important to cities and towns was enacted.

Comment [R1]: Can Be Cut

When Congress came back to work in September, one of four bills adopted was Homeland Security. We applaud the bi-partisanship that led to enactment of this legislation, and the collective commitment to get needed dollars to first responders.

The lameduck Congress again failed to support key local programs and even reduced funding for programs that have benefited cities and towns across the country --COPS and CDBG, and failed to increase funding for No Child Left Behind, even to the level requested by the President.

In a nation founded upon the premise of ensuring liberty and justice for all, thirty million of our workers can't afford a single-bedroom apartment anywhere in the United States, forty-five million people go to bed every night without any health insurance - and ten million of them are children.

Comment [R2]: Can Be Cut

Despite all of these challenges, you might ask why am I so optimistic about the future?

Well, in a small way, I am abidingly optimistic against seemingly insurmountable odds because as Mayor Williams said: I am now and always have been a Red Sox fan.

And think about this: there is no curse, no problem that cannot be overcome if you have faith, if you are doing the right thing, if you work as a team, and if you believe that you can win.

I am optimistic because I have seen with my own eyes this year the power of local government. I have seen your dedication, your endless energy, and your dazzling accomplishments.

I am optimistic because I know that we are united under the NLC umbrella to support an agenda that will make our cities and towns stronger, build on past successes, and place us on a path of progress.

I am optimistic because, during the past year, with two-thirds of Americans believing that the American Dream is becoming harder to achieve, especially for young families, and that poor quality public education and financial insecurity are the most significant barriers, we initiated NLC's "American Dream Campaign" to raise passion about making the dream a reality for all Americans.

We celebrated a national day of deliberation and commitment on September 28th calling for a national partnership to ensure economic fairness. We urged the candidates for President to focus directly on issues related to achieving the American Dream - a good education, a safe and affordable place to live, a good job, and a bright future. Over 100 communities held special meetings and forums highlighting the existence of extreme inequalities and examined what can be done to eliminate disparities.

We declared education and housing are critically important for families to realize the American Dream.

We stated children couldn't simply be mandated to greatness without significant investments to ensure that all public schools provide high-quality education to all children.

In my journey as President of the NLC, and through the experiences gained as a Selectman and Superintendent, I believe we need to develop a comprehensive regional approach to schooling, housing, and job-creation. We need coordination of public and private investment and comprehensive thinking to lessen the widening divide in America. We need to focus on the differences that exist in America's schools and change neighborhood environments that interfere with good education. We need all of our cities to be livable and sustainable with safe neighborhoods.

I learned this year that in some neighborhoods, like mine, three pressing issues are schools, traffic, and affordable housing. In other neighborhoods, the most pressing challenges are graffiti, gangs, and gun violence.

In order to be able to reach out and bring hope to these diverse neighborhoods and to the thousands of others across America, we must unite and build a plan for the future.

To achieve these goals and ensure access to the American dream, we need a strong federal-state-local partnership - a partnership that encourages and supports joint problem-solving, bipartisan policy making, and thoughtful, effective investments.

I remain optimistic because during a rigorous federal election cycle, local elected officials led mature public discussions about important issues and promoted realistic solutions. We listened to each other, we learned from each other, and we proposed new ideas. Eleanor Roosevelt was right when she said great minds talk about ideas, average minds talk about events, and small minds talk about people.

New ideas come about through respectful debate and intelligent compromises. The National League of Cities is an organization committed to the fertilization of new ideas and respectful debate.

During the past year, we redoubled our efforts to build a powerful grassroots advocacy and lobbying network.

Working closely with our state municipal leagues, we can now organize advocacy campaigns that focus on key members of Congress whose votes are essential to achieving our desired outcome.

Ours is a smart plan that incorporates modern "war rooms," up-to-date databases, the one thousand members of our policy committees, and, over time, *all* of you. We have already used this network successfully to achieve important victories for America's cities and towns, particularly on protecting local revenue streams.

We are over 1600 direct member cities, towns and villages who comprise, along with 49 state municipal leagues, the National League of Cities, the oldest and largest organization in our nation representing the interest of America's residents. We are not defined as Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, or for that matter - red or blue.

Comment [R3]: Can Be Cut

That's right: cities are not red or blue.
Cities are Red, White *and* Blue.
We are American institutions.
We are centers of democracy.

We are communities, united by local leaders who are ready, willing, and able to fight to ensure that all our people will experience the American Dream.

I have traveled this year from Lafayette, Louisiana to Long Beach, California; from Burlington, Vermont, to Bismarck, North Dakota; and from Biloxi, Mississippi to Beaverton, Oregon and so many places in between. Every local official I met believes in the dream of America and works tirelessly to ensure the dream will never die.

We are the soul and fabric of participatory democracy, from Town Meetings in Arlington, Massachusetts to City Hall chambers in Los Angeles, California.

In our nation's capital, Washington D.C., local government is the only democracy residents are allowed to participate in because they do not have voting representation in Congress - a privilege that the rest of us in America take for granted.

We are the incubators of democracy, and I have seen first-hand there is no challenge too great for local government to undertake. Eighteen thousand communities actually balance budgets every year while meeting pressing local needs. If there is partisan politics in local elections, it is limited to that election. The partisan differences end when the election is over and the peoples' agenda comes center stage.

You have been exemplary role models this year, and we have a lot to teach our federal partners.

Woodrow Wilson once said that when the history of the United States of America is finally written, when the achievements of this great democracy are chronicled for the universe to see, it would in its truest and purest form, be simply a collection of the individual histories of America's cities, towns and villages.

My fellow delegates, my colleagues, what you are doing back home is nothing short of writing history for the world to see. A history filled with promise, with hope, with optimism and achievement.

Personally, I know that the National League of Cities is a positive and wonderful part of our history. With terrific leaders, an amazing staff, and a vision that is pure Red, White and Blue.

Let me thank you all for the opportunity to serve as your president for the past year. Your officers and members of the Board of Directors are remarkable and, together with our first-rate staff, led by Don Borut and Chris Becker and their colleagues, they have done more for our cities, and for me, than I can ever say.

So let us gather here in the great city of Indianapolis, and let us continue this work, with the National League of Cities as a uniting force to support an agenda that reflects the promise of America, to help us learn from and gather strength from each other, and to help us bridge any political divide.

Centuries ago, when the first threads of democracy and public service were emerging, they could be found in the city of Athens, Greece. Now, hundreds of years later, we have woven these threads into the great tapestry and fabric of America.

So as we begin our meeting, as we strive throughout the year to improve our communities, and as we face the challenges that lie ahead, let us recall, and be inspired by the words and the truth of The Athenian Oath:

"We will never bring disgrace to this our city by any act of dishonesty or cowardice, nor ever desert our suffering comrades in the ranks

"We will fight for the ideal and sacred things of the city, both alone and with many;

"We will revere and obey the city's laws and do our best to incite a like respect in those above us who are prone to annul or set them at naught;

"We will strive unceasingly to quicken the public's sense of civic duty.

"Thus, in all these ways, we will transmit this city greater and more beautifully than it was transmitted to us."

So may it be for all of us.

Thank you very much.