

Democrats embrace League's 10-point plan, promise change

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On issues, there was little daylight between the four Democratic presidential hopefuls who laid out their case Friday before roughly 1,400 filling the Ferrara Theater at America's Center.

To set themselves apart, each emphasized a less-tangible attribute: experience, courage, conviction or charisma.

One by one, the four — Sens. Barack Obama of Illinois and Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina and Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio — embraced and echoed the key points in the National Urban League's 10-point Opportunity Compact, a cornerstone of the four-day conference that ends today.

All four Democrats promised to end the war in Iraq, fight hard for civil rights, expand health care coverage, and broaden opportunities for minorities in education, housing and the economy.

Each also pledged to do a better job running the country than the Republican currently in charge, President George W. Bush.

The only jab among the four was when Edwards called for Clinton and Obama to quit fighting among themselves, as they had been all week over who was stronger on foreign affairs.

"We've had two good people — Democratic candidates for president — who spent their time attacking each other instead of attacking the problems that this country is facing," Edwards said, prompting some groans from the audience.

But otherwise, the chief differences at Friday's forum were in the details: What each candidate chose to emphasize, and how the audience responded.

Clinton, who touted her experience, focused her 20-minute address almost solely on the problems facing young black men. About 1.4 million of them, between ages 16 and 24, are "out of school and out of work" and face uncertain futures, she said.

"When we squander their potential, we squander America's potential," said Clinton, saying programs targeting out-of-work males would cost less than the \$32 billion a year she said is now spent on prisons.

Clinton pledged to confront the problem immediately if elected president. She touched off chuckles when she recalled her much-maligned book title "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child," and added, "I still believe it takes a village to raise a child."

Obama cited his gift to inspire, and said he best could get the nation behind a litany of specific proposals. Among other things, Obama called for setting up an "inner-city bank," similar to the World Bank, that would lend money to businesses in low-income areas.

Obama also promised to re-create in cities around the country a successful federal project in New York City called the Harlem Children's Zone, which provides targeted social services to young children and their families.

The Harlem project "is saving a generation of children for \$46 million a year," Obama said. "That's about what we're paying for four hours of Iraq. Our priorities are skewed, and we're going to have to change them."

Edwards contended that he had the courage to take on the corporate interests — notably the insurance, pharmaceutical and oil companies — that he said wield too much control.

"The system is rigged, it's broken," Edwards said. "We will never create one America until we fix the system."

If elected, Edwards pledged to press for universal health care, and to increase the nation's minimum wage to \$9.50 an hour, with automatic increases to reflect inflation.

Kucinich, who addressed the crowd first, declared that he best had the conviction to get American troops swiftly out of Iraq.

The \$1 trillion or more that the nation has spent on the Iraq war, he said, could have been put to better use providing

free health, vision and dental care to all Americans.

Kucinich recounted the plight of a 12-year-old who died recently because his family, on Medicaid, couldn't find a dentist to treat the child's infected teeth.

"The money is there," Kucinich said, referring to the nation's domestic needs. "The question is whether the will is there."

All four White House hopefuls garnered standing ovations. But Clinton and Obama appeared to be clear crowd favorites.

"I thought Hillary was moving, inspirational and connected tremendously," said St. Louis businessman Michael Roberts.

The added benefit for Obama, Roberts continued, was that "the people knew that he physically lived the experiences he's talking about."

Andre Edwards, a local executive with United Parcel Service, praised John Edwards' health care proposal as "phenomenal."

But amid all the accolades, several in the audience privately expressed concerns about whether the nation was ready to elect Clinton as the first female president, or Obama as the nation's first black commander in chief.

Although no Republican presidential candidates participated in the forum, National Urban League President Marc Morial told the crowd that he did meet briefly Thursday night with one of them, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee. The governor had flown into St. Louis to underscore that he was missing Friday's event because of a scheduling conflict, and that he did care about minority voters, Morial said.

Before any of the candidates took the stage, several corporate executives — whose firms were sponsoring the conference — addressed the audience to emphasize the public's responsibilities as it listens to political pitches.

Said Michael Critelli, chief executive of computer service firm Pitney Bowes Inc.: "With the right to vote comes an obligation for citizens to get involved and get informed."

