

Center for American Progress



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REMARKS AS DELIVERED

Thank you, Sapana, and thank you to the Union for hosting me here this evening. I understand that you just held your elections, so let me be one of the first to congratulate the new officers — in recent years it’s been more common for me to express condolences after elections, so this is a nice change of pace.

As much as I am looking forward to speaking to you tonight, I was disappointed that my schedule didn’t permit me to participate in one of your world-famous debates.

Having spent over 30 years in American government, I have debated a few tough opponents — opponents that include an impeachment-hungry Republican Congress.

Unlike Congress, though, your debates are known for being engaging, informative and thought-provoking — so I was looking forward to that change as well.

But I want to point out that our debating styles are not the only thing that separates our two political systems. Take the case of London Mayor Ken Livingston.

I recently read that the Adjudication Panel of England suspended Livingston for some highly insensitive remarks he made to a reporter.

Imagine that: a government official being held accountable for his words and actions.

We don’t really like to do that in America. Consider our Vice President: Three weeks ago he shot a 78-year-old man in the face. His punishment? Having to sit for a 20-minute interview on Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News Channel.

We did get an apology, though — his elderly victim appeared before the press on his way out of the hospital to apologize for getting in the way of the shot.

But despite our differences, we do have a lot in common.

For example, both countries evidently made a decision to invade Iraq based on faith, rather than a plan.

And in the 1990s, we shared a common governing principle, which I would like to turn to now.

Beginning in the early 1990s, I had the opportunity to watch two gifted political leaders on opposite sides of the Atlantic complete the modernization of their political parties through a program they called the Third Way.

In my own country, Bill Clinton assumed the leadership of a progressive movement that many thought had run its course — a movement that for the better part of 50 years had a clear mission: increase national power to assist the vulnerable ... mitigate the excesses of the capitalist economy ... expand individual rights and opportunities ... and protect freedom and democracy at home and abroad.

By the time he became his party's nominee, the Democrats had lost five of six presidential elections because they had lost the initiative when it came to modernization. It was the conservatives, not the progressives, who were able to speak, clearly and vividly, to our nation's place in the world ... to our citizens' grasp of cultural values ... to our state of economic decline in a rapidly globalizing world. And they spoke not just to themselves, but to the broader public, because they organized ... they systematized ... and they built the institutional and political framework necessary to carry their messages to citizens across the country.

Conservatives had modernized — beginning in the 1960s — as progressives carried forward on the sterling principles but declining energy of the New Deal and the Great Society. Conservatives had a governing philosophy, and if progressives still had one, the public no longer could grasp it.

Tony Blair's party faced a similar political predicament.

By 1997, it had lost four consecutive general elections over 17 years. While the Tory's failures had been manifest for some time, modernization was crucial not simply to reinvent Labour's program but to restore Britain's trust in Labour's capacity to govern.

My organization, the Center for American Progress, is leading the effort in the United States of America to again modernize the machinery of progressivism.

Half the battle is won.

We are now at a teachable moment in my country when it is conservatism that seems to have run its course — when the failures of its pillars and principles have become glaringly apparent.

As Clinton and Blair learned in their time, it is not sufficient to capture the trust of the voting public by simply criticizing those who hold power. What remains is the prerequisite of modernization — persuading the public that our program is right for our time, our challenges, our needs and our aspirations.

Just as I am urging my colleagues at home to reform and renew the progressive agenda, it is my hope after having witnessed so closely the collaboration of the New Democrats and New Labour and the failures of contemporary conservatism, that progressives here in this country will not get on the back foot when it comes to modernization and reform in your country.

We are at pivot points in history, in America and here in Britain, and I believe that progressive parties are the first and best hope for the people in both lands.

I know that the Union recently held a debate on Hurricane Katrina.

I am here tonight to try and inform that debate. I am here tonight to tell you that Hurricane Katrina did not expose the American dream to be a myth. Rather, the storm's aftermath exposed the myths that make up conservative government.

For 40 years, conservatives in America — those we now call “the radical right” — have worked ceaselessly to recreate our nation in their ideological image and they have developed a clear, overarching purpose for its politics.

It is an effort built upon the following four pillars.

First, tax cuts to the wealthiest as the only way to stimulate economic growth and prosperity ... second, military might as the only way to legitimately exercise power and keep the country safe ... third, defining diversity as a threat to the family, and fourth, denigrating government as incapable of solving problems and the source of the despair that plagues our people's lives.

But the lesson of Katrina is that a government built on these four radical pillars cannot protect its people. Exposed by Katrina, it became clear that these pillars of conservatism are hollow at their core.

Let's examine all four through the eyes of the storm.

First, conservatives have relentlessly argued for cutting taxes on the very wealthy as a means of producing economic growth.

Well, we've seen some GDP growth in the U.S. in the past few years, but in the last three years, median family income has gone down, the number of people in poverty has gone up and job growth has been the worst in any recovery since World War II.

What *has* grown under Bush's tax policy is now a ballooning federal budget deficit that threatens America's future prosperity.

Between early 2001 and September 2005, tax changes reduced revenue by \$870 billion. Notwithstanding those changes and the ballooning national debt, conservative economic policies have failed to spur new business investment, jobs or wages.

The President has taken us into a 400-billion dollar and counting war while failing to veto one spending bill. He has blown through the record budget surplus that was handed to him and replaced it with the highest deficits in our nation's history.

The net result of his tax policy has been to saddle future generations with massive debts and further squeeze an already strapped middle class.

In fact, just a few days ago, Treasury officials told Senate aides that without an increase in the nation's \$8.18 trillion debt limit, the government would soon default on obligations for the first time in history.

Katrina is also the latest and most powerful reminder that the tax cuts that favor the most prosperous are indefensible on grounds of fairness.

The people you saw crowded in the New Orleans Superdome or stranded on rooftops as the flood waters raged onto shore, believe me, were not the beneficiaries of the President's tax-cutting largesse.

Despite the economic inequality the world witnessed in the aftermath of Katrina, President Bush's message to the American people has remained the same — we can find the money for Gulf Coast reconstruction but only by slashing funding for student loans, health care service for the poor and elderly and other federal programs for the neediest Americans. That way, we can save room for another tax cut to the wealthiest.

The fact is that our deficits in budget and international trade are unsustainable — they weaken America, and the conservatives have neither the will nor the program to constrain them.

Second, on no issue have conservatives been more politically dominant in the past 40 years than as the party that champions military strength to protect the American people.

But today we know that the U.S. Army is overstretched, over-deployed and soon to be understaffed.

Katrina laid bare the consequences of the war in Iraq when the states of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama scrambled to send in their National Guard units to help Gulf residents but found themselves short on manpower, experience and equipment. Little wonder when 40 percent of Army forces in Iraq are made up of the National Guard and Reserve — an unprecedented proportion. The Bush administration's adventure in democratizing Iraq left its primary constituents undefended and alone at home.

The scope of Katrina has left us wondering what would happen if a terrorist succeeded in a nuclear or biological attack on a major American city or managed to blow up a chemical plant.

This is no idle threat. As Graham Allison wrote in his report, “Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe,” if things continue on the current path, the odds are good that a group or an individual will succeed in unleashing a nuclear attack in the next 10 years.

And we know the consequences will be deadly.

The EPA has estimated that approximately 100 plants store toxic chemicals that, if released through explosion, mishap or terrorist attack, could result in deadly toxic vapor plumes that would put more than one million people at risk. In the U.S. Army Medical Department’s worst-case scenario estimate, a terrorist attack on such a chemical plant could lead to more than 2.5 million deaths.

And yet, this White House has seen fit to cut funding for port security, to under-fund the effort to secure nuclear materials from the former Soviet Union and has resigned the security of our nation’s chemical facilities to voluntary action by the industry itself.

Third, conservatives have sought political shelter in their trumpeting of “family values.”

But Katrina revealed that their family left out an awful lot of people — it revealed the narrow bigotry of these values.

As *The Economist* noted last September, “The administration’s initial response recalled Donald Rumsfeld’s reaction to the anarchy in Iraq: stuff happens. George Bush was listless and confused. Dick Cheney, the vice president, remained on holiday in Wyoming.... Mr. Bush then added disingenuity to leaden-footedness, declaring that ‘nobody had anticipated the breaching of the levees.’ That claim seems tragically and transparently misleading this week after the release of a videotape taken two days before the hurricane made landfall — a tape that showed the President being briefed on the severity of the storm and the probability that the levees would be breached.”

Every report issued since has confirmed this description of disturbing detachment.

In fact, Katrina revealed the true colors of the far right when it comes to dealing with the deeply divisive issues of race and poverty. The abandonment of the poor and the elderly spoke volumes about the meaning and limitations of family values.

For the radical right, these are little more than political tools meant to be used at election time in order to drive the faithful to the polls.

What Americans and the world saw was the reality that confronts hundreds of thousands of families every day: decaying neighborhoods, unsafe and ineffective schools, parents unable to afford decent housing and medical care for their children.

This leads me to the last crumbling pillar of conservatism — the argument that government itself is the problem.

Katrina has revealed that when things go terribly wrong, there's no real substitute for good government.

Legions of volunteers rushed to aid the hurricane's victims, and great credit is due to the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army and thousands of churches and hundreds of thousands of volunteers across the country.

But it is not the job of students or ministers or the Red Cross to build new levees, or operate wastewater treatment plants, or fly helicopters to rescue stranded families.

It is not the job of Wal-Mart or even Carnival Cruise Lines to house the homeless and feed the hungry.

That is the job of government.

But when your goal is to shrink government to a size small enough to drown in a bathtub — as Grover Norquist, the clown prince of conservative America, famously said — its first victims will be those with no means to escape the rising water.

For 40 years, conservatives have told us that government is the problem, and for the past five years, George Bush has worked hard to make that claim a reality — giving us corrupt, exclusive, imploding, ignorant and just plain bad government.

So I give them grudging credit. They have told us government doesn't work, and they have built a government that doesn't work for the majority of the American people.

This is the reality behind the rhetoric of conservative government.

And what we in America have learned in the wake of Hurricane Katrina should serve as a warning to you today. Because it seems that compassionate conservatism has invaded the British Isles.

Even though we live in different countries and operate within different political systems, the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism remains eerily similar.

While campaigning against Al Gore, George Bush promised to bring civility and bipartisanship back to Washington — pointing to his record of coalition building back in Texas as evidence of his ability to work across the political divide.

Your new young conservative leader, David Cameron, seems to have taken a page straight from Bush's playbook. He frequently talks about the need to avoid the Punch and Judy-style politics of the past in an attempt to rid his party's reputation for pessimism and harsh partisanship.

Bush also consistently spoke to the plight of the poor during his campaign, and he stated that those who needed economic help the most should — on principle and fairness — get it when cutting taxes and determining economic policy.

Like Bush, Cameron has called for a “modern compassionate conservative agenda,” and has urged the party to focus on tackling the growing problems of urban Britain.

But what we have learned from five years of a Bush Administration is that the accent is on conservative, rather than on compassionate, when the governing agenda gets built.

So, as you listen to your new conservative leader, I have a word of warning, to quote from a famous American TV show, “Be careful out there.”

Because in America, compassionate conservatism has led us away from the Third Way policies that registered real gains for the middle class.

Policies in America that produced opportunity by raising the federal minimum wage and creating almost 23 million new jobs ... policies that promoted strong communities by reducing poverty to record lows and increasing health care coverage for needy children ... policies that sought to use America’s standing in the world to promote peace in the Middle East and end ethnic cleansing in the Balkans.

New Labour, with a third term that we in America never got, has reinforced the progressive foundation the Third Way forged almost a decade ago.

Today in the UK, the number of people working is up by over two million since 1997, and the country is still enjoying the longest period of sustained growth in the past 200 years. And I could list other examples.

Rather than taking a similar path towards progress and building upon that Third Way foundation, the Bush Administration has actively sought to destroy it.

Today in America, health care costs are skyrocketing ... the Pentagon’s own report details an Army on the verge of breaking ... wages are stagnant ... New Orleans looks nearly the same as it did six months ago ... and our schools are consistently failing to educate our children, particularly our poorest children.

Without question, the case against conservative government is made.

Where we progressives have more work to do is in articulating our own principles and clarifying our own program.

We have more work to do, but we have begun.

My organization champions the progressive ideals on which our program must be constructed: social and economic justice for the middle class and all Americans; a government that operates openly and honestly; and global alliances, based on trust and respect, against our common challenges.

These form our vision of a government committed to the common good ... that creates opportunity through education, decent work and fair pay ... that builds strong, healthy communities ... an America that respects the rule of law and uses its awesome powers to bring the world together, not tear it apart.

It is vision of a government that understands that to protect its people, it must do more than establish a department of Homeland Security — it must also actively and aggressively protect the general welfare.

Today, we do face threats from terrorists abroad, but that cannot be the excuse to ignore the very real threats people face from sickness, poverty, inequality and lack of opportunity.

And yet conservatism continues to let these threats go unanswered by our government today.

Progressives in America are committed to seeing that they will be answered.

We are committed to championing our values — opportunity, community, security — through practical policy proposals.

Let me now give you just three examples of such proposals that should be a top priority for the United States.

The first is providing universal access to quality, affordable health care.

The improved National Health System in Britain certainly isn't perfect. But at its core, it has the right goal in mind — to provide quality care to every citizen.

In the U.S., our employer-based system of providing care is breaking down.

Forty-six million Americans do not have health insurance. Those who can afford access are getting less in return. Our country has a lower life expectancy than 34 other nations, near epidemics of preventable conditions and an infant mortality rate that actually rose in 2002 for the first time in 40 years.

The cost of employer-based health benefits continues to grow, with more than 60 percent of that increase being born by the workers — these costs are bankrupting businesses and bankrupting families across the United States every day.

Attempts to fix our system have been underway since Lyndon Johnson created federal programs to provide care for the poor and the elderly ... since Richard Nixon sat in the Oval Office ... and then of course, there was the Clinton attempt at reform in 1994.

While these efforts have had some success, particularly Medicare, the overall system continues to unravel.

Why? Because today it is clear that our system needs comprehensive reform if it is to succeed in providing affordable, quality health care for working people.

To that end, my organization has proposed comprehensive health care reform with that goal in mind: providing affordable, valuable care to every citizen.

To make health care affordable to all Americans, the Center for American Progress' plan makes insurance available to all citizens through various mechanisms like a larger private pool system similar to the one used by federal workers and members of Congress ... it expands the federal program designed to provide health care to the poor ... and for those who choose private insurance, it keeps costs in check through refundable tax credits, ensuring that premiums would never exceed five percent of a family's income.

But we also realize that if we're going to make care affordable and accessible to all Americans, it must be high-quality care.

Under our plan, we provide community-based preventive services ... establish a new public-private partnership to research the cost-effectiveness of various treatment options and invest in modern information technology systems that will help save lives by preventing medical errors while reducing administrative costs.

And perhaps, just as important, we have a way to pay for it.

We dedicate a small value-added tax of three to four percent to cover the anticipated costs of providing affordable coverage for all Americans and improving the health care system. Now, a lot of the progressive community shudders at the idea of such a tax, but we have a responsibility to be honest with the American people about what they're getting and how much it will cost — not just bill them later.

The second proposal is enhancing opportunity through education reform.

Since 1997, education in the United Kingdom has undergone major reform, and just this week, a new round of reform debate has begun with the publishing of the Prime Minister's Education and Inspection bill. We will see if this new effort can build upon past successes.

In the United States, key education reform is still needed but has yet to be implemented.

Our current antiquated system has resulted in dangerous achievement gaps in the states and on the international stage ... low-income and minority students unable to compete academically with their more advantaged peers ... and stagnant graduation rates. Our schools themselves remain under-funded and understaffed by high-quality teachers.

Since the 1960s, policymakers and government officials have been establishing commissions, issuing reports and delivering warnings about the failing state of America's education system.

Some progress has been made, but more reform and investment is needed if we truly want to ensure that no child is left behind.

To that end, the Center for American Progress convened a task force of elected officials, policymakers, education experts and community and business leaders to recommend ways to fix the problems that persist in the current system.

The report they issued supports national standards, accountability and fiscal equity.

At its core, the report highlights the simple but serious fact that our children need to spend more time in school — our kids don't start school early enough and they don't stay in school long enough.

The American school year is 13 days shorter than the international average for industrialized nations. Across 12 years of study, this 13-day deficit means that our children lose 156 days — almost one entire academic year. The current school calendar with longer summer breaks and 9 a.m.-to-3 p.m. days is one based on an 19th century agricultural economic model — not one suited to the high-paced globalized world we now live in.

The Center's plan, then, supports a longer school year with intersession — not summer — breaks so kids can retain more of what they learn and teachers can spend more time teaching new material rather than reviewing the old. The current school calendar is especially hard on economically disadvantaged kids, who lack access to after-school and high-quality in-classroom resources, so our plan provides even extra time for low-performing districts. It also emphasizes making available more affordable opportunities for children to continue their studies at the university level.

But why ask our children to stay in school longer if there are not enough skilled instructors to teach them? Teachers are the single most important element in fostering student achievement.

Recent research shows that teacher quality is critical to how much students learn. An American study found that students placed with effective teachers three years in a row performed 50 points better on a 100-point scale than their counterparts placed with three ineffective teachers.

Thus, the Center's plan emphasizes the need for the federal government to promote state and local steps to recruit, retain and reward a high-quality teacher workforce.

American students today face a newly globalized economy, rapidly changing demographics and a lingering and dangerous achievement gap for minority and poor students — a gap that continues to sap our national economic strength by failing to give all our children the tools they need to become the highly skilled workforce and engaged citizenry our country needs.

The third and final proposal I want to talk to you about tonight is making America safer through the strategic redeployment of our troops.

Today, there are currently 136,000 U.S. troops in Iraq. About half of all U.S. National Guard and Reserve forces have been called to service. American troops — both active duty and reserves — are overused, overstretched and over-extended around the world. And as a result, our Army — according to the Pentagon’s own analysis — is at the breaking point, and our troop presence today is helping to fuel the insurgency.

The status quo in Iraq is *not* sustainable.

It is slowly but surely eroding our power and weakening our ability to keep Americans secure.

But instead of fresh ideas, the American public has been given a false choice — should U.S. forces “stay the course” in Iraq or “cut and run”? That’s a false choice.

Instead, the Center has proposed a course of strategic redeployment — a strategy to target our efforts against global terrorist networks and bring greater stability to Iraq and surrounding areas.

We begin with a phased plan for troop reduction. Despite the many missteps of the Bush administration — most profoundly sending in too few troops without providing proper guidance and equipment — a hasty withdrawal, at this point, is not the answer.

Our plan for strategic redeployment recognizes that Iraq is now connected to a broader battle against global terrorist networks — even though it wasn’t before the Bush administration’s invasion.

We believe that we should begin reducing our troop presence in Iraq from the country’s major urban areas — finishing the handover of responsibility that has already begun in many cities.

By the end of this year, 80,000 of the 136,000 U.S. troops currently serving in Iraq would be redeployed from the country. All National Guard and Reserve units would be returned to the United States. Active-duty troops scheduled to be deployed to Iraq in 2006 would be sent to other hot spots around the globe in the fight against terrorists — including Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa and other places on the horizon.

By the end of 2007, our military presence in Iraq would be reduced to a small number of troops needed to protect the U.S. Embassy and advise the government and counterterrorist units.

Our plan for strategic redeployment recognizes that our military presence in Iraq continues to help feed the insurgency and continues to serve as a crutch for Iraqi forces, which need to become self-sufficient. Not setting a timetable for drawing down our troops holds U.S. national security interests hostage to terrorists, insurgents and a cynical Iraqi political process. Setting a timetable puts us back in the driver’s seat.

Finally, our plan for strategic redeployment recognizes that, to make Americans safer, we cannot rely solely on our troops. We must utilize all aspects of American power — diplomatic, political and economic — to protect U.S. national security interests and keep Americans safe.

To see progress in Iraq, we need to listen to our generals in the field, who have argued that we need to stop looking for military solutions to problems that can be solved through effective diplomacy and policy.

Strategic redeployment, education and health care reform are just three of the many proposals that should top the American governing agenda.

They are just three of the many reforms that must be made to really move forward ... to succeed in the areas where conservatism has ultimately failed.

And, as I have argued here tonight, conservatism has failed in both principle and practice to produce an effective American government.

Tax cuts to the wealthiest have not resulted in rising incomes for the middle class ... a so-called strong defense has left us overextended abroad and alone in the world ... their family values have left too many American families out in the cold ... and government is the problem only because they have sought to make it so.

Americans have weathered these failures for too long.

And as we continue to rebuild the Gulf Coast, progressives must continue to rebuild the foundation for an effective, honest and open government — a government that, as President Franklin Roosevelt put it, “refuses to leave the problems of our common welfare to be solved by the winds of chance and the hurricanes of disaster.”

It is the progressive community who *can* and *must* confront the problems that face our common welfare today.

Because for as much as Hurricane Katrina swept away the myth of conservative government, it left behind this challenge to the progressive community.

And, standing before you tonight, I am confident it is a challenge we can meet.

Thank you.