

Political commentator Joe Conason, Democratic pollster Celinda Lake and Campaign for America's Future co-director Roger Hickey held an event at the National Press Club on Friday, December 2 to brief reporters on the fight to protect Social Security and its affects on the 2006 mid-term elections. Hickey discussed how Social Security was a bridge way too far for the anti-government ambitions of the radical right and how the fight against their plan to dismantle Social Security has sparked a new progressive force that will not only defeat privatizers in 2006, but also demand a greater public role in ensuring retirement security, health care, tax justice, and investments in jobs and public services for all Americans.

THE ANATOMY OF A VICTORY AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2006

*Why Americans Rejected Bush's Raw Deal on Social Security in 2005 and
Why Privatization Supporters Will Pay in 2006*

REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY
CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE CO-DIRECTOR ROGER HICKEY
National Press Club
Friday, December 2, 2005

George W. Bush's radical right-wing plan for privatizing social security was stopped dead in its tracks this year. Its failure was not a matter of inside the beltway legislative mistakes. Bush and his party had all the advantages of the White House bully pulpit, strong majorities in both houses, and a national media that was generally convinced that Bush would get his way.

On behalf of a pretty impressive citizen's organizing movement, I want to take credit for stopping Bush's number one priority and explain how we did it.

And I want to talk just a little bit about the implications of this new citizen force for future issue battles – and for future elections in America.

And I want to announce here and now that we are going to make congressional incumbents' support for privatization of social security a defining issue in the upcoming '06 elections.

We at the Campaign for America's Future saw the privatization issue coming at us – way back in the 1990s. So did the Clinton administration, and in a bizarre response, **Bill Clinton** devoted an entire year of public forums to a debate about whether to privatize or not. The net effect was to give respectful equal time – in White House approved public events – to the right-wing think tanks and advocacy groups, all of whom wished nothing but bad things for the Clinton administration.

We mobilized a coalition of major citizen and labor groups to convince Clinton to turn away from his flirtation with privatization. Ultimately we succeeded, and Clinton used the slogan "save Social Security first" to get the upper hand in his showdown with **Newt Gingrich** over the federal budget.

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CAF also worked with experts and activists to mobilize a concerted campaign to discredit the one-sided pro-privatization national commission that President Bush appointed to keep the idea alive during his first term.

Along with labor and grassroots groups like Citizen Action, CAF also mobilized a pledge campaign in 2002 – to demand that candidates for congress in the 2002 campaign tell the voters where they stood on privatization. GOP consultants advised even the most aggressive privatizers – like New Hampshire’s **John Sununu** – to run away from the issue and pretend they would never support anything that would cut Social Security benefits.

What we succeeded in demonstrating is that cutting guaranteed benefits is the heart of the privatization enterprise. They have to cut benefits to deal with the loss of revenues caused by funding private accounts. And they have to cut benefits still more in order to make Social Security solvent. (At some point this year, White House staff straight-forwardly admitted that creating private accounts does nothing to solve whatever solvency problem Social Security will face in the future – in fact, funding private accounts makes the problem worse.)

In 2004, so once we got over the shock of the outcome of the presidential election – and as soon as we heard Bush declare that privatization would be the number one domestic priority of his second term – we were ready to mobilize. We had an informed and motivated coalition of labor, minority organizations, women’s groups, and grassroots citizens’ groups like USAction – and the new cyber-activist groups like Moveon.org.

When Bush conducted his December 16 economic summit to promote privatization, I conducted an anti-privatization press conference in this room with **John Sweeney** of the AFL-CIO, **Julian Bond** of the NAACP, **Kim Gandy** of NOW, disability rights leader **Marty Ford** and **George Kourpius** of the Alliance for Retired Americans.

In February, when President Bush headed out to try to intimidate key democratic senators in places like Montana and Nebraska, the Campaign for America’s Future joined with USAction, AFSCME and the AFL-CIO to make sure that prominent local critics of privatization were heard at noisy rallies and smart press conferences at every city on his trip: Helena, Mont.; Bismarck, N.D.; Little Rock, Ark.; Omaha, Neb.; Great Falls, Mont.; and Tampa, Fla.

The turning point came when President **Gerald McEntee** of AFSCME decided that our coalition had to have the resources and the paid staff and field operation of a serious political campaign. And so Americans United to Protect Social Security was born.

President McEntee helped to guide strategy – and he raised crucial resources from all parts of the labor movement – and from other funders who care about the future of our country. Professional staff was hired to coordinate field, congressional strategy, and an aggressive media effort.

USAction’s 25 state-level affiliate organizations formed the backbone of the AUPSS field organizing operation – and activities in other states were directed by organizers from unions, other coalition members or by paid organizers.

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In just a few months, AUPSS did over 1300 events in our target states, with Citizen Action conducting almost 400 of these. Our press operation, led by the prolific **Brad Woodhouse**, issued over 2,500 total press releases. And reporters here will be surprised to know that all of them didn't go to your mailboxes. The vast majority of them went to local reporters in communities we targeted.

Our Institute for America's Future – produced lots of talking point memos for activists – but we also produced nearly 300 unique policy reports showing the impact of Bush's Social Security plans on individual states – demonstrating how privatization would affect poverty rates, state budgets and rural communities, for example. Local and state-wide media covered these reports widely. We counted more than 400 news stories across the country. And IAF and other experts were featured on hundreds of local talk radio programs.

During one 3 week period around the Memorial Day congressional recess, AUPSS organizers conducted over 220 local events – including 53 town meetings – in over 65 congressional districts. The purpose was educational: to ask Members of Congress to “take a stand” – for or against the president's privatization plan.

Well, the short version of the story is this: The president and his allies did use up a lot of their political capital to try to sell privatization to the American people. And a new progressive force, with enough resources to organize a serious campaign, made democracy work.

We let people in communities around the country know that there were serious problems with privatizing Social Security – and we empowered local leaders to speak out, get media attention, and pressure important congresspeople and senators.

The Democrats stayed united – due to grassroots pressure and the leadership of **Harry Reid** and **Nancy Pelosi**. They ignored the advice from prominent Clinton staffers that the Democrats needed their own private accounts plan – a misguided strategy that would have split Democratic unity. And more and more Republicans, feeling the heat from their constituents, told their leaders not to force them to vote on this right-wing hot potato.

We all know how this ends – at least for this year. On October 4, in a Rose Garden press conference, President Bush acknowledged for the first time that Congress has a “diminished appetite” for passing his plan to privatize Social Security. And when he listed the priorities he would like Congress to address – and for which he is willing to expend his own political capital – privatization was not among them.

Look at what has happened to the president this year since his re-election. His first choice was "What am I going to put at the top of my agenda?" Social Security reform. He was rolled by the Democrats, and the lack of support from within his own party. What has happened to the president in these 10 months is that he has shown that he is vulnerable, vulnerable, vulnerable, and he is in full retreat.

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Now is the time we should be celebrating our success – and laying plans to make social privatization the radioactive issue in the 2006 elections that we know we can make it.

We have done a little celebrating – and we are planning for 06 – but the amazing coalition of organizations and staff operations we built to fight the Social Security fight has stayed very busy. Again, led by Gerry McEntee of AFSCME, we pivoted the whole operation directly into the fight over the unfair GOP budget cuts and against the obscene Bush tax breaks for the wealthy.

It is now called ECAP – the Emergency Campaign for American Priorities. There is now better proof that we now represent a permanent and creative force in American politics than the great difficulty the Republicans in the House and Senate are having with passing their budget and tax bills. Once again, their right wing has pushed them to extremes. Once again, the Democrats are remarkably united. And once again, the progressive forces of citizen democracy have mobilized citizen questioning and pressure on those politicians who either have a conscience – or who are worried about their re-election chances if they embrace either privatization or the extreme GOP Robin Hood budget that takes from the poor and the middle class and gives to the very wealthy.

So I rest my case – the progressive force that made democracy work and stopped the privatizers has become a permanent and dynamic force that will transform American politics in the months and years to come.

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