

CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

TAKE BACK AMERICA 2006

TUESDAY, JUNE 13, 2006

**WASHINGTON HILTON HOTEL
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

12:45 – 2:00 P.M. LUNCH SESSION

SPEAKER:

**BARBARA EHRENREICH,
AUTHOR,
*NICKEL AND DIMED: ON (NOT) GETTING BY IN AMERICA***

*Transcript by:
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.*

BARBARA EHRENREICH: Hi, I'm glad to be here, thrilled to be here. Bob, you were wrong in your introduction to me; it wasn't hydrolysis of carbohydrates but of peptides. (Laughter.) Now – I had to say that.

It seems – I feel really mean to be standing here to, well, question the idea of the common good. But that's what I'm going to do. (Chuckles.) We're going to have a little argument here, I hope. The problem that I have, Michael, is that there is a war going on, and I don't just mean the shameful and increasingly sickening abuse of our American military force in Iraq, I mean – (applause) – I mean the class war in the United States. (Applause.)

Talk about an asymmetrical conflict. It is a class war here. We see wages being held down, and salaries for many salaried people. We see rising prices, and I suspect that Senator Harkin went through his little lists of how much, you know, tuition, gas, housing, and health care have gone up in just the last six years, it's about fifty or sixty percent for most of them. We see a perpetual low level -- kind of, well, not low level all the time -- but we see chronic layoffs affecting white-collar and blue-collar people all the time. And we see -- we have for the last six years -- a government policy of tax cuts for the rich, financed to a tiny degree by cuts in Medicaid, student loans, and every other program for the poor, the middle class, the elderly, and children.

So that's why I say there's a class war and before -- you know, it's hard for me to talk about the common good when I don't see that Americans even have common ground anymore. We are that divided. We are increasingly divided between the gated communities on the one hand and the tenements and the trailer parks on the other hand. (Applause.)

There's even a kind of sick version of the common good – you take no responsibility for this, Michael, but – that goes on all the time. And that's the sort of Thomas Friedman kind of line that when somebody gets laid off or when people complain that they're only making eight dollars an hour, there's always somebody to say, well, that's globalization. We want to be competitive; you've got to take the fall. You've got to see your pay go down, your benefits go down, or lose your job. I mean, that kind of sacrifice for globalization as a -- you know, a perverted version of what you're talking about, is happening all the time.

Now, I think what I would push for as a liberal and progressive sort of message is that poverty -- and by poverty I don't just mean, you know, some people; I mean the threat that hangs over each and every one of us -- that poverty is a moral issue, that this is our moral issue. (Applause.) Now for a long time the right has been defining the moral issues, right? Like last week we even had another vote on gay marriage. That's an easy

one. If you don't like the idea of gay marriage, please don't marry a gay person -- (laughter and applause) -- you know, it's taken care of.

And for a long time, the right even had poverty defined in a kind of a moral way, in terms of the amorality of the poor. Why was there poverty in America? -- and we still hear this -- because some people have bad characters, bad lifestyles, they're lazy, they drink too much, you know, they're promiscuous, whatever. That was the theory of poverty; that it was caused basically by those things. I have another theory by poverty; I think it's caused by a shortage of money. (Laughter.)

And this -- (applause) -- this view has actually been gaining ground. (Laughter.) It has, unlikely as that may seem. We have a living wage movement in America which has been successful -- (applause) -- in over -- over 120 cities. We have had campaigns that successfully raised the minimum wage in 19 states. That's not waiting around for Washington to do anything; that's people, unions, church groups, women's groups, everybody getting together and making the change themselves.

But I think of all those things -- the biggest achievement, you know, through all these scattered fights for the living wage -- I live in Charlottesville, we've had a ten-year fight for it there. You may have read about the students who got arrested at UVA, incredibly enough, in April. Georgetown, University of Miami, it's all over the place -- very moving struggles. But our big achievement so far is not just in the number of victories we can count but in the fact that we have made this a moral issue. And I'm not just saying that, I've got the Wall Street Journal to back me up: May 1st, '06 -- can't be a coincidence that it's May 1st -- they say that the living wage may become the wedge issue for the Democrats, and they say that one of the big things about it is that people, progressives, are making this a moral issue. And boy, if you want a moral issue that you can get Biblical back-up on -- (laughter) -- if that's what you're looking for, this is it. (Applause.)

I have, you know, I have searched the Bible, and there is no mention of stem cells -- (laughter) -- in the Bible. There are hundreds and hundreds of mentions of the obligation of every community towards its poor and its oppressed people. I say -- (applause) -- this economic injustice is what we have to push forward on. It is, along with the war in Iraq, the moral issue of our time. Thank you. (Applause.)

(End of remarks.)