

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:

**MICHAEL TOMASKY, EDITOR, *THE AMERICAN PROSPECT*,
AND AUTHOR, *PARTY IN SEARCH OF A NOTION***

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

MICHAEL TOMASKY: (Applause.) Now that you mention it, I think I'd rather discuss cellular biology. (Laughter.)

Thank you, Bob. I want to say first – geez, look at this – covered the first Take Back America Conference as a journalist in 2000 -- 1999? 2000? It was held -- some of you were in Washington, maybe you know this room -- it was held in the ballroom on the top floor of the National Press Club. And it's a reasonably large ballroom but its large in the sense of like 200, 250 people. It's not large in this sense, so what this has grown into is really an amazing thing. So hats off to you – (applause) – yeah, go ahead -- Roger Hickey and everyone else involved with putting this together. I'll be really quick; we don't have a lot of time.

Bob, though, summed up pretty well the genesis of my article and my argument. I started thinking after the election in 2004 about what the Democrats and liberals and progressives – what were the fundamental issues that face us? And I was going to a lot meetings -- some of which Bob was at, some of which he chaired -- where people were talking about what went wrong with the election, and some people would say Iraq, and some people would say national security, and some people would say no credential on fighting terrorism, and someone would say the gay marriage initiatives in the eleven states. And we'd go back and forth like this for a while then always someone would just go -- (releases his breath). It was always like that; you know, looking down at the table, the deep breath, the nodding of the head. The problem is that people just don't understand what we're for. And that always kind of – that's not really an applause line -- (laughter) -- thanks for the effort, though. (Laughter.)

And this -- it stung me; and it stung everyone in the room at all of these meetings, and I was at a dozen of them or more. Why don't people know? And as Bob just said, and as Stan Greenberg has said, and I suppose some of you were at his seminar his morning, there is a philosophy gap in this country between liberalism and conservatism. Americans -- and when I say that I mean the mass of Americans who are in the middle, who aren't necessarily very ideological, who aren't necessarily very politically committed -- they understand what conservatism is about. They don't really understand that much more what liberalism is about.

So I started thinking about this, and I wrote this article. And that's why I'm up here, I guess. The article is in the May issue of The American Prospect. It's called "Party in Search of a Notion," and I think, you know, if our well-oiled PR machine is, indeed, well-oiled we'll have some copies out there that you can pick up if you haven't read it.

I'll sum it up like this: I think that we're now at an incredibly exciting, potential point in American history because I think something has happened now that doesn't have any precedent in recent American history. For the first time since the modern conservative movement began, say 1955, if you want to mark it to the founding of the National Review magazine 1958, thereabouts. For the first time since then, the majority of Americans have the experience of something they've never had the experience of

before; they have the experience of conservative failure. They have the experience of conservative government failing them in their everyday lives. Now – (applause) – yes, that’s an applause line.

Now of course, you and I have known for a long time the ways in which the conservative government was failing people but, I mean, a majority of Americans now sees Iraq, Katrina, the transparent attempt to privatize social security, the incompetence, the corruption. People see that conservative government, conservative philosophy, conservative ideology is failing them. I think that creates an opening for a new liberal, progressive philosophy. And I think it’s the philosophy of the common good.

It’s a philosophy in which political leaders ask of people -- all people, not as liberals, not as conservatives, not as blue-staters, not as red-staters, not as white or black, or straight or gay or feminist or environmentalist or corporatist or whatever kind of “-ist” you are -- but ask Americans to come together and contribute to something larger than themselves, something to which they can contribute but something from which they can benefit. And that, I think, is a philosophical framework that has worked for liberalism in the past; it worked for Franklin Roosevelt, it worked for Harry Truman – (scattered applause) – yes, it worked for Lyndon Johnson -- (scattered applause) -- until, you know - - until Johnson had certain difficulties that we all know about.

I quote in my article -- and I’ve quoted in other speeches I’ve given and radio and television appearances that I’ve given to talk about this piece -- Lyndon Johnson’s line when he signed the Civil Rights Bill in 1964. He went on television that night and he said, “My fellow Americans, today I’ve signed the Civil Rights Bill of 1964. I want to tell you what that means for every American.” He didn’t say for African Americans, he didn’t say for southerners, he didn’t say for residents of, you know, ten or eleven states, he said “for every American.” He gave every American a stake in the success of that legislation.

Now things fell apart for our side a little bit in the intervening years and, you know, we can all have different interpretations as to why that happened. I have mine; it’s in the article. I don’t want to talk for too long, so I won’t go into the details of it. But I do think that the collapse of conservative philosophy creates a great opening now for our side, for the political leaders on our side, for all of us, actually -- for each one of us.

And I think that the Democratic leaders have to seize this ground, and they have to start arguing with Republicans and with conservatives on the level of political philosophy and show them – (scattered applause) – that liberal philosophy actually is appealing to people and actually can answer the questions that people face much more effectively than conservative philosophy has in the last six years.

And they’re afraid of doing this; I know they’re going to be, you know, a little skittish about doing it. Their pollsters have been telling them, no, no, no, no, god, don’t talk about philosophy; don’t, don’t, don’t talk about ideology, and, for god’s sake, don’t use that word, that “L” word, for god’s sake. Well, I don’t think they’re going to be using

the “L” word any time soon, but I do think that they can talk about the philosophy of the common good.

They have been talking about it; I gather that John Kerry was using that phrase, tossing it around this morning. This actually scares me a little because, like, those of us who write these kinds of articles, we always secretly hope that the Democrats aren't going to take our advice because then we can spend the next couple of years complaining that, you know, if only he'd taken my advice – (laughter). You know, everything would be fine. But now they kind of are taking my advice, and it's really terrifying because what if it flops? Is my career over? (Laughter.)

But I think it's a good framework; I think it's a good philosophical framework for a progressive revival. On an issue like energy independence -- on which Bob has done a tremendous amount of great work with the Apollo Project -- I think political leaders can say to people, this is a problem that our country faces, we know our country faces it, we cannot ignore it, we ignore it at our peril. Conservatives are ignoring it; they don't want to do anything about it because of their oil buddies and because of a whole lot of other reasons. We can do something about it.

But we can't fix it with tax cuts. You and your neighbors can't take your tax cuts, band together, and come up with a program to get American into a state of energy independence. We can't do it in a society of radical individualism. We can do it only in a society in which we all pull together and we all work toward a common end. That's the kind of thing I'm talking about; that's where I'll top. Thanks very much. (Applause.)

(End of remarks.)