

CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

TAKE BACK AMERICA 2006

TUESDAY, JUNE 13, 2006

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

12:30 – 12:45 P.M.

**SPEAKER:
GOVERNOR TOM VILSACK**

*Transcript by:
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SENATOR TOM HARKIN (D-IA): Before I introduce our next speaker, let me again just thank Bob Borosage and Roger Hickey for all their good work – for a lifetime of good work, I might add.

(Applause.)

The Take Back America conference is becoming kind of an annual rite of spring in D.C., sort of a gathering of the liberal clans from around the country. I guess I'm going to be here with you twice today. I'm here now to introduce our governor, Vilsack; tonight I'll be here to introduce B. Rappaport (sp). So after 31 years in the Congress, it comes down to this: I'm just the warm-up act for Vilsack and Rappaport today. That's all.

(Laughter, applause.)

But I've come here this afternoon -- and I apologize for being a little late, we had a vote on the Senate floor and I've got to return there right after this, but I've come here today to introduce to you a good friend of mine, someone that I have known for, well, well over 20 years I guess now; a fellow Iowan, a very good friend.

Tom Vilsack is our nation's longest serving Democratic governor. He's been a leading player in the debate about how to lead the Democratic Party forward and how to lead our country forward. As past chair of the Democratic Governors Association and to his Heartland PAC, he's worked tirelessly to elect progressive Democrats. In particular – now get this – in particular he's committed to insuring that everyone can vote and that everyone's vote is counted. That's why –

(Applause.)

That's why as head of the DGA, and through his Heartland PAC, he is focused on electing honest secretaries of state in each state including Ohio and Florida.

(Applause.)

It's no surprise why the national media has been giving so much attention to Tom. He is the classic American success story. Orphaned at birth, raised in very humble circumstances, he literally did pull himself up by his bootstraps; went to law school, became mayor of a small town in Iowa; then state senator and a very successful two-term governor. He's someone who knows the Midwest; from top to bottom he knows the Midwest, from agriculture to small towns, large cities.

He's also someone who knows how to deal with an unruly legislature. I'm sad to - - sorry to say that he's had to deal with a very conservative Republican legislature all the

time he's been there. But even with that, he's been able to get through good progressive legislation in Iowa.

He's tough. He's relentless. I can tell you when he was running for governor in 1998 he was always down in the polls but he never gave up. He fought back and he won.

And for nearly eight years as governor, Tom Vilsack has led the way with a positive vision for our state. He's fought to make Iowa public schools among the best in the nation, to make Iowa a powerhouse of clean, renewable energy, and he has focused on cleaning up our environment in the state of Iowa, and leading Iowa to become one of the leaders in bike trails and walking paths all over our state. He's fought to bring new industries and good-paying jobs to our state.

And during his eight years as governor he is also had his more valuable secret weapon and that is his wife Christy Vilsack, who has done such an outstanding job both in the field of education and especially pre-school and really young education. And she has single handily -- I think within eight years -- rejuvenated and revitalized our public library system throughout the entire state of Iowa.

(Applause.)

And so in my book, I guess the highest accolade I could pay to Tom Vilsack is that he is a good and decent person, with a deep-seated passion for fairness and social justice. And he has the vision and the toughness to achieve that fairness and that justice. So my friends it is a singular honor for me to introduce to you a very good friend, a great progressive, a great Democratic governor of the state of Iowa, Tom Vilsack.

(Cheers, applause.)

TOM VILSACK: Thank you very much, folks. Thank you very much. Thank you very much.

MR. : (Inaudible) – president of the United States!

(Laughter.)

GOV. VILSACK: (Chuckles.) We had to pay him to come from Iowa to do that.

(Laughter.)

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank my good friend, Tom Harkin, for spending a few minutes with us today.

(Applause.)

Anyone who understands progressive politics in America for the last 25 years knows that there is no greater progressive. No one who cares more about those who need help and assistance than my senator, Tom Harkin. He had opened the door for the people with disabilities throughout this country. He is the author and the champion of the Americans for Disabilities Act (sic), and this is an opportunity for me to thank you for that, Tom Harkin.

(Applause.)

He has also given a great deal of hope to those in rural America with his establishment of the Conservation Security Act in the last farm bill. If only we had a president that would adequately fund that Conservation Security Act.

(Applause.)

So I consider it an honor to be introduced by this senator. And I want to take this opportunity, as the senator did, to introduce my wife, Christy. She is seated right over here. Honey, would you stand up?

(Applause.)

Christy is a classroom teacher of 32 years and is dedicated to making sure that our education system does more than give us a nation of standardized test takers.

(Applause.)

Folks, I'm going to do something that I don't think politicians normally do when they begin a speech of this kind. I'm going to admit to you that I'm a little nervous. Now, why am I nervous? I'm nervous because the topic of this speech, the topic of this conference is so extraordinarily important to the future of our country. And the people in this room have made and continue to make and must make the difference for America. And so it is humbling to be here and it is a little difficult to speak to you today.

So, you'll permit me, in order to get over this initial nervousness, to talk a little bit about something that I'm confident talking about, which is my belief in this country. I believe strongly in an America that is a place where hard work and hope leads to a life well led.

(Applause.)

I believe in an America where we have an American bargain with those who work hard, and that is: if you work hard and you get ahead, then you have a responsibility to give something back to your country.

(Applause.)

I believe that we are a nation where our security and our stability comes from our fervent belief in the strength of community; that we each have a collective responsibility to one another to make sure that not just our lives, but all of our lives are well led. And I believe that this is a country where the only thing more powerful than our military is our generosity of spirit.

(Applause.)

Unfortunately, the America that I believe in – and the reason I do believe in this is because I've had the fortune of growing up in this country, as Tom said, starting out as an orphan and then ending up talking to you as a governor of the great state of Iowa. But my America is not the America that many Americans see today. My America is not an America that a lot of folks outside of this country see.

It's not the America that middle-income Iowans and Americans working hard – working really hard, longer hours, working hard, maxing out credit cards, refinancing their homes. It's not an America where those hard working middle-income Americans can keep pace with rising housing costs and gas costs and energy costs and healthcare costs and college education costs. Too few in this country see the benefit of that American bargain.

It's not an America where we can talk about the security and stability of community when we have 46 million Americans without the protection of health insurance, where our national commitment to our children's education amounts to no more than an under-funded slogan, where many of those who are relying on pensions no longer have the stability of those pension systems, and we're told that the promise of social security and Medicare at some point may be uncertain for future generations. All of this is combined with the fresh memories of a failed national effort with Katrina. And our feeling about community is not as strong as it needs to be.

Now, as I talk about community, let me explain to you what I mean by that. The best way I can do that is by relating a story of a recent church service my wife and I attended, where the priest came out and he wanted to explain to the children of the church the Gospel he was about to read. It was a wonderful story of the loaves and fishes; you all may be familiar with it. It's a story in which Jesus is giving a sermon. He sees 5,000 hungry people. He says to his disciples, go feed the people. The disciples basically take a look at what they have. They have a few loaves of bread, a couple of fish, and they express doubt as to whether or not it's possible to feed 5,000 people. But Jesus said, pass the baskets. And the baskets were passed and everyone was fed. And when they got the baskets back there was more food than when they started.

It is a powerful metaphor for the strength of community, that when we look out for each other, not only do we benefit individually, but collectively we are stronger and better off. But the priest explained it this way.

(Applause.)

The priest explained it this way, he said, what Jesus did in that story, he's removed the fear of sharing. He removed the fear of sharing. And my concern today in America is that those in charge of our national government are making us more fearful of sharing. They are not removing the fear of sharing with the hope of community.

The America I believe in is not the America that many in the world see. A go-it-alone-war based on false pretenses and faulty planning and prison scandals overshadows the good work of those who serve us in uniform, and leave other nations more fearful of America than inspired.

Now, who is responsible for this America? Well, it's pretty clear. The Republicans control the presidency. They control the House. They control the Senate and a majority of governorships. And it seems to me the party of accountability has to begin accepting some of that accountability for the America of today.

(Applause.)

We are left with a nation that is unprepared for the twin challenges that face us: the challenges of assuring people that we will keep them safe and at the same time the challenges of a very difficult and competitive economy that is leaving too few with the benefits of that economy.

Now, Democrats also have a responsibility and I'm here to talk just for a minute about that. We have a responsibility to make a compelling case to the American people that we can be trusted to do better; that we can not necessarily point out all of the failures or corruptions of others, but we can put forward a positive agenda for change. We in essence can take back America.

(Applause.)

That effort begins with guarantying the benefits of the American bargain to every hardworking American family. That's going to require us to be the most innovative and creative and competitive and independent economy in the world. We must begin to once again create jobs that support families and communities. To do that we must have a strong labor movement with collective bargaining rights.

(Cheers.)

We must also embrace the challenge that the world has given us to develop more sustainable, more renewable energy sources. We must become the renewable energy leader of the world.

(Applause.)

But we need to do more than that. We need to create an energy policy in the context of a natural resources policy that ensures that we use our land and our water appropriately. We must also continue to encourage conservation in this country. We must also lead the world in conservation.

(Applause.)

In order for us to have a competitive, innovative and independent economy, we must also make investments in our infrastructure. The reality of today is that when you build, economies improve. And it is time for us to renew our commitment to a transportation system that works, a communication system that allows us to communicate all over the world. It's time to put resources into infrastructure and to do it in a meaningful way. That will put people to work and it will create good paying jobs that will support families and communities.

(Applause.)

It's also time to strengthen community in this country by tackling the big domestic issues of our time. It ought to be a disgrace, a national disgrace, that we have 46 million uninsured Americans today. It ought to be a national disgrace that we don't have a program for all people in this country to have access to decent, affordable healthcare. And that should be a challenge that we as a party accept.

(Applause.)

We should also make sure that we produce a relevant education for all of our children. As I said earlier, it's not enough; it's not enough to leave no child behind. We must have an education system that makes sure that every single youngster reaches their potential and is the most creative and innovative person they can possibly be. We have to have a revolution in education; not No Child Left Behind.

(Applause.)

Part of our effort to Take Back America must also be – to ensure that we secure the home front by restoring America's integrity abroad, our reliance on renewed commitment to alliances and working with nations, not against them. We must acknowledge that our first responsibility of any government is to ensure the stability and safety of its people, which is why we must have a much more serious effort in homeland security, starting with the nuclear and biological terrorism threat. It is time for America to get really serious about security.

(Applause.)

It's also time for us to consider the great power of America, the opportunity for America to inspire. The reality today is -- what the rest of the world knows about America is that we have phenomenal military might. But I think there's something even

more mightier than that. I think we ought to consider a second front if you will in the war against terrorism and extremism.

In the secretary of State's office there's a wonderful letter from John Marshall as an introductory to the Marshall Plan in 1950, where he suggested that our enemy is not a country; our enemy is a condition: poverty, ignorance and hunger. The time has come for America to lead an international effort to eliminate hunger and illiteracy and poverty in America and in the world.

(Applause.)

We have the capacity and the will to marshal the forces of the world. Understand that when there is a malnourished child, there is failure that we all have to accept responsibility for. Today there are 375,000 malnourished children in the world today, and each of us should accept responsibility.

This country is a great nation. This country is a great nation that can tackle great problems. And we have great bounty, and the time has come for us to use that bounty in an effective way to ensure that the people of the world understand that America's might is in its heart, in its spirit and its generosity.

(Applause.)

In order for America to meet the competitive challenge that it faces economically, and to establish a second front on the war against extremism and terrorism, it's going to be necessary to have competent leaders with integrity that speak the truth. Competent leaders that can identify with the struggle of American families, and competent leaders that call for sacrifice from all of us. I believe the Democrats can, and must provide that leadership.

Let me talk to you for just a minute about sacrifice. One of the responsibilities I have as a governor is as commander-in-chief of National Guard troops. Ninety-seven hundred people serve in our National Guard in Iowa. We are but one percent of this nation's population but we are three percent of the National Guard's population. We have an ethic of service. Forty-two times I've had to contact families of those who have lost loved ones in either Iraq or Afghanistan. It's by far the toughest thing I do as governor. It's an opportunity to convey to those who have lost a husband a son or a daughter the feelings of three million Iowans. I remember all of those conversations, including the one that I had just a few days ago with the family of the first woman who passed away.

But the one conversation I will never forget, and the one that I've been telling all of the people I talk to about, is with Oliva Smith.

Oliva Smith was the widow of Bruce Smith. Bruce Smith was 42 years of age. He had been in the National Guard for over 20 years. He was the grandfather of the National Guard. He was the man 19, 20, 21 year-olders (sp) looked up to and asked for advice. He

was called to service by his country and he responded time and time again. He believed in America, and so when his nation called him again he responded. He took himself away from his wife and two children and the community that he loved and the safety and security of West Liberty, Iowa, and he went to Iraq.

His job in Iraq was to fly helicopters, to ferry troops to dangerous places in that country. On one occasion Bruce's helicopter was hit by a missile. Now, I was told by those with the National Guard that Bruce had a very split second decision to make: he could put his own life further at risk and that of his co-pilot in the hope of maybe saving those on board, or he could put those on board at risk in the hope of saving his life. Bruce did what he was trained to do. He did what you would expect him to do. He put his own life at risk and on that day he died, as did his co-pilot. Eighteen people lived that day. My job was to call his wife and to express to her the condolences of the people of Iowa.

Now, what is it that you say in that circumstance? You can talk about honor and duty and sacrifice and thoughts and prayers; all of the words you would expect someone in my position to say. But the reality is that none of those words really can convey what it must be like to someone who now finds herself having to raise two children alone. Mrs. Smith recognized that I was having trouble and she interrupted me. And she said, Governor, I've got this figured out. I thought to myself how could you possibly have it figured out? She said, I have it figured out. She said, those 18 men onboard that helicopter who lived, needed Bruce more in that split second than I will need him the rest of my life.

I put the phone down after finishing the conversation and I sat in my office alone. I realized I had been in the presence of greatness -- the greatness that defines this country, the greatness that brings you all here, the greatness that wants you to take this country back. It's the greatness of an ordinary individual who does extraordinary things. It's the greatness of somebody who understands that the strength and power of America is in those who believe it serves a higher purpose and calls all of us to that common purpose.

It's the greatness that suggests that that common purpose, that higher purpose is something we all should be willing to sacrifice for and work for. It's the greatness that suggests that some, unfortunately, may be asked to give more than others. Some may be asked to make ultimate sacrifices, but there is an acceptance of that and an awareness of that. It's the greatness that has built this country to where it is today. It is a greatness that is not being recognized in America today. It's a greatness in which the policies of the current administration do not recognize and do not support. It is a greatness that calls you to action.

So I'm here today on her behalf because I believe that there are millions, millions like her in America. I believe that if we call all of those to a common and higher purpose that we will respond. I believe that we can become a great nation, a greater nation, that we can tackle the issues of the environment and healthcare and education reform. I believe we can make safer and better work places. I believe that we can provide for better

financial stability for those who work hard. I believe that we can make the dream of college education affordable. And I believe that America can inspire once again.

And that's what you believe. And that's why it's important for us, in this election and every election, to remember what it is about. It is about the greatness of this nation and taking it back because they've taken it from us, and in doing so they've lessened our opportunity, and no generation of Americans should let that ever happen -- ever.

(Cheers.)

(END)