

REMARKS BY FORMER SENATOR JOHN EDWARDS (D-NC) TO THE CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE TOPICS INCLUDE: HEALTH CARE LOCATION: THE WASHINGTON HILTON, WASHINGTON, D.C. TIME: 1:51 P.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, JUNE 2, 2005

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(Applause.)

MR. EDWARDS: Thank you all very much, and thank you to John for this wonderful award. What an honor and privilege it is for me to be with all of you here today.

Let me say, first, a personal thank-you to all of you for your support, your well wishes and your prayers for Elizabeth. I've got good news: Elizabeth's doing great. (Cheers, applause.)

You know, we've been lucky because we've had you and family, friends from all over the country supporting us in this. And we've also had the best health care that's available in this country. And as Elizabeth likes to say, that's why that health care should be available to every single American, not just the people like us. (Applause.) You know, I'm so blessed to be married to this extraordinary woman. Most of you have probably heard this story. But she was diagnosed the day after the election, with breast cancer. We came home that night and got up the next morning, and she said to me -- she said, "You know what? I've thought about this, and I want to go public with it." And I said, "You know, this is really not necessary. This is personal and private for us and for our family. We've lived this very public life for the last few years. It's fine to keep this just within our family."

Elizabeth said, "All that's true, but if I can cause one woman to go to the doctor who otherwise wouldn't go, it'll be worthwhile." And God bless her; I think she's caused thousands of women to go to the doctor who otherwise wouldn't have gone. (Applause.)

Now I want to talk a little bit about what I've been hearing on television -- the yappers, I call them -- (laughter) -- you know, since the election, the ones who keep saying, "Well, now the Democratic Party has lost its way. The Democratic Party doesn't know what it stands for. It

doesn't know what it believes in anymore. In fact, it's not clear that the Democratic Party stands for anything."

And then they go on to give us advice -- right? -- (laughter) -- about what we should do. And they say, "Here's what the Democrats need to do. They need to figure out how to change some of their positions, how to nuance some of their positions, how to better navigate their way through the political landscape, so that somehow they're more appealing to more people."

Well, speaking for this Democrat, those yappers on TV have got it dead wrong, dead wrong. (Cheers, applause.)

How about if we actually stand up and fight with passion for what we believe in? (Cheers, applause.)

And I want to talk a little bit today about what we believe, because what we believe is, we do believe in fighting for people who don't have a voice, don't we? It's what we have always believed in. (Scattered applause.) It's what the Democratic Party stands for. It's why I became a Democrat.

And I'll tell you something else. We know the difference between right and wrong, don't we? (Applause.) It was right and it is still right to talk about the two different Americas that we live in - (applause) -- one for families that have everything they need and then one for everybody else.

You know, we don't believe it's right for a single mother to wake up in the middle of the night with a sick child and worry about whether she should go to the doctor, because she's not sure she can pay the doctor's bill. That's why we want to expand and strengthen health care in this country.

We don't think it's right for one of our children to go to a school that has the best computers money can buy, while another goes to a school that doesn't even have the textbooks that they need. That's why we want to build one school system that actually works for all our children.

And speaking for me -- (applause) -- how about if we start by expanding and strengthening early childhood education, and -- (applause) -- and how about if we treat the teachers and those who work in our schools with the dignity and respect that they have earned in working for us and for our children? (Cheers, applause.)

We don't think it's right for our soldiers to come back from Iraq or Afghanistan and have to beg for their back pay. We don't think it's right -- (applause) -- we don't think it's right for our veterans to have to pay \$250 registration fee to get to the health care that they're entitled to.

Here's what we believe: we believe those men and women paid their registration fee when they put on the uniform of the United States of America. That's what we believe. (Applause.)

We also don't think it's right that we still have two different economies in this country: one for wealthy insiders and then one for everybody else. We don't believe it's right that a man or woman could be fired from the job for trying to organize a union in the workplace, so that working people actually have a voice. (Applause.)

And this is something I take very personally. My mother and father have health care today because of the unions. My younger brother is a card-carrying member of IBEW; he and his family have health care today because of the union. We need real labor law reform in this country. (Applause.) We need to make certain that those who violate the law in organizing campaigns are held accountable; that their punishment is swift and severe. We need to be certain that we make card check neutrality the law of the land in this country to help in organizing campaigns -- (applause) -- so that working people actually have a voice.

I'll tell you something else. We believe that it is wrong in a country of our wealth and our prosperity to have 36 million people who wake up in poverty every day. (Applause) There's something we have always believed, and we still believe it today.

Now, the truth of the matter is -- the truth of the matter is, that the Republicans value one thing, and one thing alone: wealth. And they want to make sure that those who have it, keep it. You got it. And it shows in absolutely everything they do. Trying to shift the tax burden away from wealth and on to work, on to the backs of working people; these Health Savings Accounts, they're nothing but write-offs for millionaires. We all know that.

And now -- now here we go, here we go -- Social Security, right? (Boos.) They want to take - - they want to send this country deeper and deeper into debt; borrow money, sending us deeper and deeper into debt. They want to cut benefits for seniors. And now they finally admit that what they're doing does absolutely nothing to strengthen Social Security over the long term.

Here's what we believe. We believe that men and women who have worked hard all their lives deserve to grow old with dignity and respect, without having to depend on their children and their grandchildren to get them through. (Applause.) That's what we believe. That's why we created Social Security to begin with.

Now, when I say we believe it's wrong to have 36 million people who wake up in poverty every day, there is actually a document, a document, that says something about how we treat and how we care about those who are struggling. There is a document that says what our commitment is to ending poverty in this country. And there is a document that says whether we are honoring our moral test to do unto others. And it's called the budget. You know, others have said this -- (applause) -- others have said this, but the truth is, the budget is a moral document. (Cheers, applause.) And this president's budget is not meeting the test.

Every day, every day millions of families across this country, they sit down at their kitchen table, they figure out what they need, they figure out what they've got, they figure out what they can pay for, they figure out what they'll have to put off till later, how they're going to save money, how they're going to pay for their kids' education. It's what people do. It's what my own family did. It's what my parents did. It's probably what many of your families and parents did and still do today.

Here's what I want to know. If the American people get it, why in the world does Washington not get it? What -- (applause). Every time a president of the United States chooses whether he's

going to provide support for a housing program or for college loans problems, every time a president decides who the beneficiaries are going to be of their big tax cuts, every time a president takes a red pen to food stamps or VA healthcare programs or college loan programs, that president is saying what their values are, what their moral values are. (Applause.)

So you tell me what kind of values are in this budget. Are they the values of hard work?
AUDIENCE MEMBERS: No!

MR. EDWARDS: Are they the values of opportunity?

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: No!

MR. EDWARDS: Are they the values that made this country great?

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: No!

MR. EDWARDS: No, here's what they are. They're the values of injustice and indifference. That's what they are. You tell me -- (applause). You tell me, with 12 million children living in poverty every day, what kind of message does it send to have a budget that could cut 300,000 of those kids off of the child care that they need?

When we have tens of thousands of young people who desperately want to go to college, what kind of message does it send to cut funding for Pell Grants?

When we have young people dropping out of high school, and we're worried sick about all the young people who are dropping out of high school, what kind of message does it send to cut funding for drop-out prevention programs?

And when we live in this world where's it going to be harder and harder for our young people to compete, what kind of message does it send to our kids when we cut funding for science, math, technology -- all those things that are going to be able to allow our children to compete?

The truth is, what our young people want from us, is they want hope. They want to believe that they actually have a chance.

And you tell me what it means when you ignore 45 million Americans today, who have no health care coverage. What kind of message does it send to 50 million Americans -- including 25 million children, 8 million disabled, 6 million seniors who depend on Medicaid for their health care -- that we're going to cut Medicaid by \$10 billion? What does it say about our country's values when we cut the help and support for those who are most needy and most vulnerable?

If every child in this country wants to start life with a decent chance, what does it say when we cut funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program; when we make barely able to function, when we don't expand it to make it available to more kids who desperately need health care coverage?

What does it say when we cut programs to help prevent some of the health care problems that we have in this country -- preventable diseases like heart disease, like diabetes, like some form of cancer?

And what about when we have more than 25 percent of our families -- one in four -- who live on the margins every single day? We have a responsibility to make health care available to every one of those Americans.

And the truth is -- (applause) -- we have families who are filing for bankruptcy because they can't pay their health care bills and, by virtue of this bankruptcy bill, which was an abomination that just passed, they're going to get no help. They're going to carry that burden around with them for the rest of their lives. Some of our families are doing absolutely everything right, and they're still going into poverty just because of their health care costs.

Tell me, how can a country that's based on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness honor a moral document that does so much for those who don't need it, and so little for all those who do?

(Applause.)

How about more loans for people who are actually trying to start a small business? How about if we actually provide funding for technology, for math and science? How about providing shelter for the homeless? How about feeding the hungry? How about if we actually address one of the great moral issues of our time, which are 36 million Americans who wake up in poverty every day?

Now, I want to tell you something that's happened to me since the election. Over the last few months, I've been traveling around this country, and I've been meeting with folks who were struggling behind closed doors all over America. People who are struggling and living in poverty. And their stories are powerful.

I'll never forget the first meeting. I'm sitting at a table. Doors are closed; there are about 12 or 15 people around the table. There was a woman down at the end. And she would've fit in just fine if she were here with us today; very smart, articulate woman. And she told me that she had worked for years, and then she'd lost her job, and now she was having trouble finding a job. Because she lost her job, she lost her place to live, and now she's living in a shelter -- and this was back in January.

She said, "Senator, yesterday I went in to the local laundromat just to get in out of the cold."

Then she said, "there was a woman there -- sort of looking down on me, and she said, 'You know, I recognize you.'"

And she said, "Yes, ma'am?"

She said, "'You're one of the people who live in the shelter.'"

And she said, "Yes ma'am, I am."

And this woman said to her -- she said, "As far as I'm concerned, all those people who live in the shelter are just trash."

There but for the grace of God go every single one of us. And I take this -- I take this very personally. You know, all of you've heard my story, more than you need to hear it any more. (Laughter.)

I am the son of a mill worker, if you didn't remember that. (Laughter, applause.) But it is true. It is true that -- that I am the son of a mill worker -- (laughter) -- and it is also true that my dad borrowed \$50 to get me out of the hospital when I was born. Took me home to a little two-room house in the mill village.

My parents worked in the mill; my grandfolks -- who lived right up the street -- they worked in the mill. And the truth of the matter is, we worked hard. Things went well for us, and Lord knows I've been blessed with everything anybody could have ever had.

But there are a lot of people that I grew up with, who worked just as hard, who were just as responsible, and things broke the wrong way for them. And if things had gone the wrong way for me, I could've easily been one of those people sitting at the table.

There was another woman, by the way, at that same meeting, sitting right next to me. And I'll always remember -- her name was Loretta. Tall, thin. We shook hands, and I swear it was like shaking hands with a 250-pound truck driver. (Laughter.)

And she told me the story of having worked -- she'd worked at the watch house for 14 years. She worked for minimum wage. She wanted to do better for herself and for her family, and then finally she was able to get her GED. And then, she finally got a loan, and now she actually had her own business -- a small pizza restaurant. And the truth is, even today, she's still struggling.

But the guy at the table who had helped her get the loan said, "Loretta, tell the senator how many people work for you." And she said, "There are eight of us." Not "seven who work for me" - - "there are eight of us." It's not the same thing.

And then he said -- he said, "Tell the senator how much it costs you, how much is your overhead to have to pay all these people." And she -- I'll never forget this. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "It is an honor for me to give a paycheck to the men and women who work with me every day." You could literally hear her respect for other people in her voice.

And I got to tell you, it was a ways from where I'd grown up, but it all sounded really familiar to me, this kind of natural respect for other people, and a belief in effort and a belief in doing the right thing; a belief that, you know, if you keep trying, somehow things will get better; they'll be better tomorrow than they are today. And some of you may know this. It's actually why I've continued one of the great causes in my life that began before I ever got involved in politics, which was by starting a poverty center -- Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the University of North

Carolina at Chapel Hill. (Applause.) I would love to have any of you who are interested to join us in this cause. We're going to be engaged, I hope, in asking some of the hard questions and finding some creative answers.

But the truth is, there are some things we know right now that need to be done, and the starting place, the starting place is we ought to end the national disgrace of the minimum wage in this country and raise the minimum wage. (Cheers, applause.) And if they won't do it here in Washington, we ought to do it state by state by state.

And I'll tell you one other thing. You know, it's not just an income disparity that we face in this country, it's also a huge asset disparity. The truth is, if you are an African-American family in America today, your average net worth is about \$6,000. Latino family, about \$8,000. White family, \$80,000. And here's what it means -- you all know what it means. It means these families have nothing to fall back on. They have nothing to give to their children. They have nothing that allows them to get ahead. So in addition to dealing with this income disparity, we have an enormous responsibility to try to create assets, not for those who already have them, but for those who desperately need them so that they have something to fall back on. (Applause.) Now -- and there are actually lots of -- lots of interesting ways about how to do that. I was just in England last week and met with Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and they're doing some great anti-poverty work in England using things -- what's called "baby bonds" to help create assets for kids who otherwise would have no assets. But we need to face this.

But here's what I want to say to all those yappers on TV. If they want to know -- they want to know who we stand with and who we're going to stand with, here's what we're going to do. We're going to let the Republicans stand with their friends on Wall Street, big insurance companies, big drug companies, big HMOs, Halliburton. And I'll tell you who we're going to stand with. We're going to stand with the teachers, with the nurses, with the factory workers, with the tech workers -- (cheers, applause) -- with the small-business owners. We're going to stand with every American who needs a voice, and without us has no voice. It is what the Democratic Party is about -- (continued cheers, applause) -- it is what the Democratic Party has always been about.

Now, of course, as you can tell, I've completely gotten off my speech! (Laughter.)

I want to -- I want to come back, though, to the whole issue of not just what's happening here, but what's happening all over the world. Because the truth of the matter is that what all of us believe is we -- when we talk about liberty and freedom, for us it includes and means the ability to build -- the freedom to build a better life for yourself and for your kids and your family. The same thing's true everywhere else. It's not just true here, it's true all across the globe. And just as poverty and disillusionment, you know, help drain hope from people here, it does the same thing all across the planet, because the truth of the matter is there are people -- so many people across the globe who don't feel like they have any kind of chance. If they had the opportunity, they could do what young people have done for centuries in the past, you know, pull down the great books, communicate with each other, talk about the great possibilities in this world. They could help move their own nations out of the fog of hate that so many of them live in. The truth is, that's the power of liberty; it is the power of democracy.

But in a world where poverty and despair is accepted, you can't have freedom. I mean, you think about this for just a minute. You know, freedom doesn't mean a thing to you if your child is dying of malaria. Freedom does not mean anything to that child who went to the door of the school but wasn't allowed in because they couldn't pay for the school uniform that the school required them to pay for. And freedom doesn't mean a thing to 3 billion people -- almost half of the world's population that lives on \$2 or less a day.

You know, there's been a lot of talk -- especially in this city -- been a lot of talk about freedom over the last several months. I want to be really clear about something. America standing for freedom is not new, and freedom does not belong to one political party.

And it does not just belong to our country. (Applause.)

And the truth of the matter is -- the truth of the matter is, we're not done. We have so much work left to do.

We have questions. For example: the little six-year-old girl who will go to bed tonight in the Sudan starving -- is she free? And how about the woman who wanted to vote in the election that they just had in Saudi Arabia, but she wasn't allowed to vote. Why? Because she's a woman. Is she free?

And how about the man -- the Christian in China who wants to worship, but he's not allowed to worship. Is he free?

And what about the man who's in Russia who is in jail tonight, and he did one thing and one thing only: he spoke out and he told the truth. Is he free?

We have to stand for freedom and democracy, and against tyranny, with other free nations around the world. But we ought to do it with more than muscle. We have to do it with moral clarity, which means not turning our backs on people here and people across the globe who are in need and who are struggling.

And one other thing, by the way. I got to get this off my chest. (Laughter.) While we're working on democracy over there, we got a little work to do on democracy over here. (Cheers, applause.)

You know, I don't know about you, but I've seen about enough of vote challengers and vote protectors. You know, it is an outrage that in America -- in America -- any voter should have reason to doubt their vote. So here's a new idea. How about if we actually build the best election system money can buy, so as the next time you choose the leader of the free world, you don't have any doubt that when you go to the polls, you're going to be able to vote, you're going to be able to vote quickly, and you have absolutely no doubt that your vote was counted in the election? That's what we believe in. (Applause.)

So, this is what I say to all these yappers on TV: don't tell me the Democrats don't stand for anything. The truth of the matter is, I know what the soul of this party is, and so do every one of

you. It goes to the core of who we are and what we believe; what our convictions are. We do actually believe that everybody should have a chance to do well, right? No matter who you are or where you live, or what the color of your skin -- (applause). We believe that we have a moral responsibility to help those around us who are struggling.

You know, the truth is, the Lord gave us minds to think with, but he also gave us hearts to inspire us. And when we lead with just our minds, we are leaving behind and neglecting the better half of us.

So don't tell me the Democrats don't stand for anything, because here's what we believe. We believe we should never look down on anybody. We ought to lift people up, right? (Applause.)

We don't believe in tearing people apart. We actually believe in bringing them together.

What we believe, what all of us believe is that the family you're born into and the color of your skin in our America will never control your destiny. (Applause.)

Thank you. God bless you. Go out there and keep fighting for the core beliefs that we have always had and we still have today. Thank you. It's an honor and privilege to be with you. Thank you. (Applause continues.)

END.