

Center for American Progress



SPECIAL PRESENTATION:

“RESTORING THE AMERICAN DREAM – COMBATING POVERTY AND BUILDING ONE AMERICA”

INTRODUCTION:

**JOHN PODESTA,
PRESIDENT AND CEO,
CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS**

FEATURED SPEAKER:

**SENATOR JOHN EDWARDS,
FORMER U.S. SENATOR FROM NORTH CAROLINA;
DIRECTOR, CENTER ON POVERTY, WORK, AND
OPPORTUNITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT
CHAPEL HILL**

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MR. JOHN PODESTA: Good afternoon and welcome to the Center for American Progress. I'm John Podesta, the president at the Center. All of us have been riveted by the stories and the images of families struggling to survive in the wake of Katrina. By now, I think every American knows that many of these families are desperately poor, but what many still do not realize is that the vast majority of these men and women also work for a living. They work in hospitals, grocery stores, hotels, laundries, restaurants, and for dozens of other kinds of employers, big and small. Many are mothers and fathers struggling to raise their children; some are caring for their own parents, too. Yet for all their hard work and sacrifice, all these Americans have ever earned – all they have ever earned are poverty wages. They live paycheck-to-paycheck, no healthcare benefits, no savings.

Jonathan Alter wrote about one of these hardworking women recently in *Newsweek*. Dolores Ellis was a resident of New Orleans' Ninth Ward, and at the time Katrina hit she was making the most money she ever made in her life. She was working as a school janitor for \$6.50 an hour – no pension, no health insurance. "I'm not saying I want to keep up with the Jones'," Dolores said, "I just want to live better."

Some people choose to think that working people don't live in that kind of grinding poverty in America, but we know they are wrong. Today, more than 37 million Americans are living in poverty; one in five children in our nation is born poor; their families aren't just being squeezed by the cost of housing, food, and healthcare; they're being crushed by them. And again, the issue isn't that they don't work. Over 63 percent of U.S. families living below the federal poverty line have one or more workers.

As progressives, as Americans, we're convinced that all of us have a profound moral obligation to stand not only with the survivors of Katrina, but with every family struggling to lift themselves out of poverty. We believe that is something we should all do individually or through civic organizations, through our unions; through our churches, synagogues, and mosques; but at the end of the day, we know that there is only one way to challenge not only effects of poverty, but also its cause, and that's with a creative, responsive, principled government.

We know we can have that kind of government because we've had it before. In the late 1990s when Senator Edwards and I were working together, we had a full employment economy in this country, the percentage of Americans living in poverty dropped to the lowest level in 20 years, and the poverty rate among the elderly and African-Americans fell to an all-time low. We did it by increasing the minimum wage, by moving people from welfare to work, concentrating tax cuts on working people, investing in training, and improving our infrastructure, by balancing the budget and enforcing our labor laws. We can have a progressive government that's ready to do its

part to help every family join the American middle class. That's our vision at the Center for American Progress and that's John Edwards' vision.

In the face of an administration that has put the interests of wealth ahead of other Americans, John Edwards has brought not just the plight, but the decency, the hope, the strength of working class America back into the national consciousness. In his True America speech, he gave voice to the millions of middle class families that are struggling to get by and fear that they are one mishap away from financial collapse. As a lawyer, in the Senate, on the campaign trail, he has persistently fought to help poor people and the middle class to move forward not just for their own sakes, but to strengthen our national community because he understands a fundamental belief too often discarded by the conservative theorists today: America is only as strong and robust as her people.

And as the *Washington Post* noted today, he worked to bring attention to the tens of millions of Americans living in poverty as part of his 2004 presidential campaign with his wife Elizabeth, who so inspired us in 2004 and continues to inspire us today. They spoke eloquently about poverty and the two Americas that exist in our country today. After the campaign, Senator Edwards decided to dedicate his time to working to shine a bright light on Americans living in poverty and the conditions that brought them there. He and Elizabeth recently returned to North Carolina where today he's the director of the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He has spent the last nine months visiting communities across the country to meet America's working poor and the people and organizations that are helping these Americans struggle out of poverty and into the middle class. We're so proud of you, Senator, and of Elizabeth, and we couldn't be prouder than to have you here today.

Please join me in welcoming Senator John Edwards.

(Applause.)

SENATOR JOHN EDWARDS: Thank you, John, very much, and a quick report on Elizabeth since you mentioned her several times: Elizabeth is doing very well. That's the good news for our family. The doctors feel good, optimistic about the future. We feel good and optimistic about the future, and obviously that's very important to us.

I also want to thank everyone at the Center for American Progress for all the important work that you're doing every single day so that our ideas are being heard – being heard by the American people.

You know, all of us have seen the images from the wreckage of Katrina, seen people packed into the Superdome and convention center with the only thing left, the very clothes that they're wearing, and we've all asked what brought them there. One of the things that clearly brought them there was poverty. Widespread poverty existed before Katrina, and it will persist in Gulf regions after they're rebuilt unless or if we let the images that we have all watched on the news fade from our memories, if this becomes transient and not a serious, long-term, national effort to end poverty as we know it.

We have an extraordinary, important, and historic opportunity available to us. That window is open now. We don't have to live in an America that accepts poverty as a fact of life or chooses to ignore it. The day after Katrina hit, a new government statistic showed that 37 million Americans live in poverty now, which is up for the fourth in a row; up by a little over a million in the last year. The Superdome made those people impossible to ignore, but we could look down the streets of every city in America and see enough poor and forgotten families to fill all the stadiums – sports stadiums in this country.

Those families in the Superdome were abandoned, but in a less striking way, that's how millions of struggling Americans feel every single day. They know there are jobs somewhere, but not jobs that they can get to and not jobs that they're trained to do. They know that some children go to good schools, but the schools for their children have overcrowded classrooms and overwhelmed teachers. They know some people live in safe neighborhoods, but they walk their kids past gang members every single day. And that sense of isolation exists in our inner cities and not just in the inner cities, but in small towns and rural areas all across this country.

While it touches African-Americans and Latinos most, it touches every single community. You talk to families across America right now who are sorting their bills into "pay now" and "pay later" categories, knowing that if something goes wrong – if their child gets sick or there's layoff in their family, that they're in serious trouble. They feel like they're alone. There is a powerful hunger for a sense of community in this country again, a sense of national community, a sense that we are all in this together, that there is a higher purpose for our national community. People understand. They get it. They understand that they're supposed to work hard and be responsible for themselves and for their families, but they know there's more to America than them taking care of themselves. This administration may think that every single American is an island, but Americans know that Katrina's victims shouldn't have been out there on their own, and that no American should be out there on their own.

That's why even when our government failed to respond to Katrina, American citizens stepped up in an extraordinary way which all of us have seen over the last several weeks. We know that it matters how we as a nation meet our responsibilities. The truth is, it defines us as a nation. Throughout our history, people around the world have been drawn to America for what we stand for: that we are all created equal, that we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights – life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.

The government's response to Katrina undermined those ideals. One foreign magazine called it "The Shaming of America." It has been our shame. I want the world to see a different America, an America that is working every day to live up to what was written. I want them to see the one America that all of us actually believe in. And that means that while we first have to address the urgent tragedy of poverty in the Gulf states

and in New Orleans, we also have to address the poverty – the tragedy of poverty all across 50 states in this country.

A week ago, last Monday, I went to some shelters in Baton Rouge where folks had been located who had left New Orleans – who'd lost their homes in New Orleans. There was lot of people and I was walking down the line speaking to folks and there was one man – big, burly guy – and he said, “You know, I don't know anything but work. I've worked entire my life, and I got here –” now understand, he's sleeping on the floor along with all the other people who were there, and he said, “I got here, and I heard that if you go out front at 5:00 in the morning, sometimes somebody will come by in a pickup truck and pick you up and take you to do some work.” He said, “So I've been out there at 5:00 hoping somebody would pick me up. So far, it hadn't happened, but I want to go to work.” You know, the truth of the matter is, this man represents the best of what this country is supposed to be about. Here he was in this terrible situation: he'd lost his job, he'd lost his home, he was sleeping on the floor of the shelter. But what did he want to do? He wanted to go to work because he felt like if he went out there and kept working – what he'd been doing his entire life – that somehow things would get better. And by the way, he spoke for most Americans of every race and class when he was talking to me last Monday.

The trouble is that for too many Americans, not just in the Gulf coast, but absolutely everywhere, the American dream has become too distant. It's too far away. It's too unattainable. You can see it in the numbers: millions of parents work full-time and still live in poverty. The typical white family has a net worth of about \$80,000; typical African-American family is about \$6,000; typical Latino family is about \$8,000. We have a huge asset gap in this country. And as other people have said, income is what you use to get by, but assets are what you used to get ahead. It's what allows you to have something to fall back on. It's what allows you to have something to pass on to your children. This huge asset gap is one reason so many Americans are just barely getting by. And again, it's not just the poor. Middle-class incomes are stagnant and more people file for bankruptcy than graduate from college every year.

Since January, I've been traveling around the country and meeting with people who are living on the edge, many families who live in poverty. I've done it in probably 25 or 30 states now and I have to tell you, their grit, their strength, their backbone is extraordinary and it's inspiring, and so are their struggles. I met a woman in Kansas City who had two kids and had a job that paid \$9.50 an hour which is, as I'm going to talk about in a few minutes, significantly about the minimum wage. She told me about winters there where she has to make a choice between paying for her lights and paying for her gas. Well, she chose to pay for her lights. And what she does, she tells her kids every night to bundle up in the warmest clothes they have so that they won't freeze, and she also tells her kids not to tell anybody at school that they don't have any gas because if you do, somebody might come and take you away from me. She said to me – she said, “Nobody in America who works should live like that,” and she is absolutely right. “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing,” as a very famous man once said. What that woman endures every day is evil, and as a nation we

cannot do nothing. We can't stand by and let this continue. And Katrina has given us an opportunity to tap into the conscience of the American people.

In the 1960s, we fought a war on poverty. Our intentions were good, but sometimes we expected government to do things that families and communities should be doing. Sometimes we gave too much money to bureaucracies that never got to the people who needed to be helped. Yet as a result of the efforts that were made, in the course of a decade we reduced the poverty rolls by almost half: 43 percent from 1963 to 1973. Again in the 1990s, as John just made reference to, by expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit, putting people back to work, raising the minimum wage, we lifted 7 million people out of poverty. If we're going to fight poverty, we have to make a commitment ourselves once more, deeper than we've ever made before.

But while America does more, the people we're trying to help have to do more too. This is something that I've seen and come to understand better as I've spent more time with poor, teen moms who didn't graduate from high school and aren't married. These are good and decent Americans. They are looking for some kind of happiness in their lives, but too often they find that the only way to have that happiness is to have a child. And while they struggle, many young dads don't stick around. Someone who spends his life working with young men said to me that what he hears is, "I'm going to end up in prison or jail anyway, so I have to leave a seed here." And he also told me how that choice has consequences.

I went to an extraordinary program in Chicago, it's called Bethel New Life, and there were tee-shirts – there was a whole line of tee-shirts as you go down the hall where they'd asked the kids, most of whom lived with single moms, to describe on this tee-shirt how they felt about the fact that their dad wasn't around, their dad wasn't supportive. And one of the tee-shirts said, "You won't be there. Should have, could have, would have." And it had a picture of – it actually had a hole in the tee-shirt in the shape of a heart. In families with teen parents who didn't graduate high school and aren't married, children are nine times more likely to be poor.

Down in New Orleans, hundreds of thousands of people lost their homes and untold numbers lost their lives because the levees we built were too weak and too low. We knew better, but we didn't act because we didn't want to look. That's how it is with the moral foundation of our society. All over this country, too many children are growing up in harm's way and too many lives are being washed away because the levees we built are too weak and too low.

When a 13-year-old girl thinks that there's nothing wrong with having a baby that will drive both her and her child into poverty, we haven't built the levees high enough. When a 15-year-old boy becomes a father, then walks away, gets shot or goes to jail, we haven't built the levees high enough. When young people spend more time going to meth labs than chemistry labs, we haven't built the levees high enough.

We know better, but we don't act because we don't want to look. If we believe in community, we have to have the courage to do what communities do: together, we have to stand side by side and man the levees – all of us: parents, clergy, teachers, public officials. We need to say some simple truths: it is wrong when boys and young men father children, but don't care for them. It's wrong when girls and young women bear children that they aren't ready to care for. And – and it is wrong when all Americans see this happening and do nothing to stop it because this is all about America's responsibility, our responsibility, our collective responsibility to create new opportunities for these young people.

I met a woman from New Britain teen pregnancy program, it's called Pathways/Senderos. She told me how she tries to give kids with struggling parents the love, the discipline, and the chance to succeed that all of us would want from our own kids. Instead of having kids, many of these teenagers are getting diplomas. And here in Washington, I met with a baseball coach and a teacher whose name is Luis Cardona, who told me how he's helped boys in gangs get jobs and become mentors to other kids to get them out of gangs. So many young people are struggling against odds to do right – against the odds to do right and they need us, they need America, they need our national community to give them support to be able to do that for themselves.

You know, words aren't enough. It's time for a new social compact in this country. When President Bush talks about an ownership society, he means the more you own, the more you get. For most Americans, his approach is, the more you work, the more you pay, and the less you get. Where I come from, what matters most is not how much you have; it's how much you give to others. Work gives pride, dignity, and hope to our lives and to our communities and so the president is wrong: America is not, and never wanted to be, a wealth society.

To be true to our values, what our country needs to build is a working society; an America where everyone who works hard finally has the rewards to show for it. In this working society, nobody who works full-time should have to raise their children in poverty or in fear that one more healthcare emergency or one more layoff is going to put them right in the ditch. In the working society, everyone who works full-time will at least something to show for it: a home of their own, an account where their savings and paychecks can grow. In the working society, everyone willing to work will actually have a chance to get ahead. Anybody who wants to go to college and is willing to work for it will be able to go. In the working society, people who work have the right to live in communities where the streets are safe, the schools are good, and jobs can be reached.

In the working society, everyone will also be asked to hold up their end of the bargain, to work, to hold off having kids until they're ready, and to do their part for their kids when the time comes. The first test of the working society will be what we've been seeing on television and it will occur in the Gulf Coast, and the most vivid example being in New Orleans. The central principle of our effort should be the one that I just talked about: we can only renew the Gulf if we renew the lives of the people in the Gulf whose lives have been devastated. The president doesn't seem to get that. At a time when

millions of people have been displaced, many already poor before this storm ever hit, when the only shot many people have is a job rebuilding New Orleans, this president intervened to suspend Davis-Bacon so that people who are working there could at least earn a decent wage – the prevailing wage in the area for a hard day's work.

You know, I might have missed something, but I don't think the president ever talked about putting a cap on the salaries of the CEOs of Halliburton and the other companies who are bidding on these contracts. No, this president, who never met an earmark he wouldn't approve or a millionaire tax cut he wouldn't promote, decided to the slash wages for the least of us, for the most vulnerable.

Seventy five years ago, our government was led by a president who actually succeeded in navigating America through a disaster. Faced with the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt saw that relief requires more than food and shelter. It requires the dignity that comes from a job, the dignity that comes from a decent wage, the dignity and self respect that comes from being able to support yourself and your family. And he saw something else. As Allida Black put it in a forum here last week, we have to build to last. Many of our children still go to schools that the WPA constructed, many of our homes are lighted because of dams that the PWA built, and many of our families still hike on trails that the CCC blazed. That's why trailer parks are not the answer. In fact, if we know anything from half a century of urban development, is that concentrating poor people close to each other and away from jobs is a lousy idea, it does not work. If the Great Depression brought forth Hooverilles, these trailer towns that we're now seeing may someday be known as Bushvilles.

We can do better. I've proposed a new American initiative based on the principles that FDR and the WPA taught us. First, we need to make sure not just that we're doing construction, but we make job creation a top priority. We ought to have a new WPA where we make sure that the people who have lost their homes and lost their jobs and are now displaced, are able to rebuild their own city and rebuild their own communities in New Orleans and across the Gulf Coast. (Applause.) You can clap for that, that's fine.

Good wages are part of this effort too, and so is building skills. Tax breaks for businesses alone will never attract high-wage, high-skill jobs. We need a new approach that unites businesses, community colleges, nonprofits, and unions in this effort. Second, folks need a chance to save for the future. The CCC sent money home to families. FEMA actually had a good idea with these debit cards, but now they're doing direct deposits into bank accounts. Great idea. The problem is, a lot of these folks have no bank accounts to put this money in, you know. So a worker making \$12,000 a year – because they have no bank accounts, these people are always vulnerable and they have to cash checks at these check cashing agencies. A worker making \$12,000 a year could actually spend \$500 just cashing checks in order to get his paycheck.

David Shipler begins his book about poverty by saying, "It's expensive to be poor," and he's absolutely right, so what we should do is offer these people help. We

should open bank accounts for them so that they can save and so that they're not going to be susceptible to these check-cashers; so they can get ahead, not just get by. Finally, we ought to build a Gulf Coast that's actually built to last with the infrastructure to be able to compete. And that's not trails these days; it's modern mass transit. It's not dams; it's energy-efficient businesses and homes. Urban homesteading is a good start, but let's bring together the great private engines of development, challenge them to build integrated communities, and leverage federal dollars to do it.

We'll beat poverty in the 21st century by building a Gulf for the 21st century. While we fight poverty in the Gulf, we also have to fight poverty all across this country. I've talked about this being an extraordinary window of opportunity. The question is, whether we're going to sustain this effort. We ought to begin by returning to a promise once kept and that's now being broken. If you work full-time, you should never have to – in our country, you should never have to raise your children in poverty. Today, a single mom who has two kids, who works full-time for the minimum wage is about \$2000 dollars below the poverty line. The erosion of the minimum wage is a national disgrace. We should raise the minimum wage in this country to at least \$7.50 an hour. Unionized workers in America make 30 percent more, so we need to be behind real efforts to organize and make sure that the law creates a level playing field that allows unions to organize in the workplace. And we also need to make sure that people can enter the workplace – workforce and change jobs without losing their health insurance.

It's not enough to say that people who work full-time shouldn't live in poverty. We need to help every American develop the assets they need to get ahead, to send their kids to college, to be able to buy a home, or to just have a little peace of mind so that there's breathing room if something goes wrong. I mean, the reality is something goes wrong in all of our lives. It's just the way we live. It's the nature of our lives. You know, your wife gets sick, your child gets sick, some unexpected medical problem, some unexpected financial problem, it happens to all of us, but the difference between somebody like me and these faces we've been seeing on television in New Orleans is, I get through that. They have nothing to fall back on – nothing. And it takes much less than a hurricane to cause catastrophe for them.

So let's help people create assets. First, let's help people buy home that they can actually keep. Today, the rich get subsidies while the poor get ravaged by predatory lenders. We should do something different. We should crack down on these lenders and offer a new deal to poor families that are just going into the workforce. For the first five years you're working, we should set up to \$1000 in an account aside in order to help you make home payments. After five years, you'll have \$5000 so that you can make a down payment.

Next, we want to help family save. We ought to offer low-income families work bonds, an extension of the Earned Income Tax Credit, it helps families save for the future. Low-income working families will receive an extra credit of up to \$500 a year that would be directly deposited into a new account held by a bank or a safe stock fund with low fees. If families put away more, the amount in the account would grow, and it

would be available not just for retirement, but for an emergency, for if they want to start a small business, for other reasons. It will be there for a rainy day and give them security and peace of mind in the process.

Third, work should give you a good education. You know, we could give a whole – any of us could give a whole speech on education and what needs to be done with our schools, but we will never end poverty unless we improve our school system. And here's one idea. You know, we've heard this president talk about – a lot about school vouchers. What I'd like to see is a major effort to give working parents, parents who are poor, housing vouchers so they have a chance to move into neighborhoods with better schools. It'll not only expand opportunity, it will build healthier communities through cultural integration, as David Brooks of the *New York Times* has talked about.

There are other things we should do. You know, we have trouble attracting good teachers into poor areas, into inner city, into poor rural areas. We need to have incentive pay so that we get our best teachers to the places where we need them the most. I mean, these areas of high concentration of poverty are the places we need our talented and most motivated teachers. We need to give them a reason to go there. Let's pay them better. Let's give them an incentive to come.

And we also have to make sure that these kids who are growing up in very difficult environments get off to the right start. My view about that is, the way to do it is to strengthen our early childhood programs, head start, which means starting younger than we're starting now, at a point where we can have more impact on the lives of these kids; making sure we're providing the correct kind of training and education for those who teach in early childhood programs; and make sure we're meeting the healthcare and nutritional needs for the kids who are in these programs. You know, a sick or hungry child never got anything out of an early childhood program. I mean, these are the kind of things we can do to have a real impact on schools in areas of high poverty.

Poor people don't need new bureaucracies. What they need is access to the same banks and jobs and markets that most Americans take for granted. The chance to go college meant everything to me and I suspect it did for most of you. For years now, I've talked about an idea that I call "College for Everyone." If you stay out of trouble in high school and you take – and you agree to work your first year in college, and you take college prep courses, then you'd be able to go tuition-free your first year of college. In a couple of weeks, I'm actually going to be announcing a pilot program in North Carolina for one county where we hope to put this idea in place.

We also need policies that help strengthen families. Though the 2001 tax bill eliminated the marriage penalty for the middle class, poor families can still get hit with a \$3,000 marriage penalty. This makes no sense. We need to do something about this. We need to finish the job of welfare reform. It caused millions of mothers to go out and get jobs, but it left poor young men right where they were. In communities where 40 percent of young men are unemployed, we can get more poor men into the workforce by connecting them with more jobs and supporting their wages the same way the Earned

Income Tax Credit already does for families. And we should make sure that young fathers get the same deal as young mothers. You have to work and take responsibility for your children. In return, we'll help you find a job.

Now, how are we going to pay for all this, particularly at a time when we have record deficits? Well, first of all, we'll pay for it if we decide this is a priority; that it matters to us as a national community. Just in the next five years, George Bush has found the money to pay for over \$336 billion in tax breaks for the wealthiest 1 percent Americans. He's found the money to deliver subsidies to every single kind of corporate interest. Now, he says he wants to cut waste, but he won't touch two more tax cuts for millionaires that haven't even taken effect yet.

To do this right, what we're going to need to do is cut wasteful spending, breaks for oil companies, highways to nowhere, subsidies for ceiling fan exporters, but that's not going to be enough. We also need to repeal tax cuts given to the most fortunate among us. Unfortunately, even that is not enough. For a long time, I've talked about how this president's tax policy rewards wealth and not work. Today, a stockbroker sitting by their swimming pool is paying a lower tax rate than their secretary who types their letters. We need tax reform in this country.

I've already talked today about how we can reward work by expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit, but we also ought to stop favoring the wealth or the wealthiest. An easy way to do that is to restore the Alternative Minimum Tax to its original purpose, shielding the middle class, but ensuring that the very richest pay at least the same 28 percent rate on their stocks that they already pay on their work under the AMT. That will mean that the secretary and the shop clerk living off their work don't pay a higher tax rate than millionaires who are living off their wealth.

When I first started talking about poverty in the 2004 campaign, I had a lot of political types tell me that it was futile. They said nobody cared, the only people who pay attention are poor people, and they don't vote. Well, they were wrong. Through their overwhelming generosity that we have seen for the American people since Katrina, Americans have shown that we all care. We care about those around us. We care about our national community. We know that no one succeeds on their own. We know that when one person is down, it drags all of us down.

What we're talking about today is not something we're going to do for them. It's something we're going to do for us – for all of us – because it makes us better. It makes us stronger as a nation. People do not want to feel that they're out there by themselves. They want to be involved in a higher purpose. We need to give them that purpose. We just want to fight poverty in a way that reflects what we believe and what the values of the American people are. As I watched the horrific images of human suffering that were caused by Katrina, like all of you, it was heartbreaking. Unfortunately, those images are not the images of one city. They are the images of our America today. It doesn't have to be that way.

This is an historic moment when our country is ready to act, but the question is, will the attention to poverty – will it be sustained or will it be transient. That depends on us. It depends on our leaders, whether we step up and sustain our moral commitment as the country's conscience would naturally want us to do. This is what the country wants. They are asking for it. We need to ask them to act. We need to show the leadership that they need.

So today I implore all Americans, don't turn off the television, don't put these disturbing images out of your mind, don't let yourself think that because the levees in New Orleans are being repaired, that we've built all of America's levees high enough. Rather, stand with us, stand with me today and pledge to work for an America that doesn't ignore those in need and lifts up those around us who need help and who desperately want to succeed and have dignity and self respect again. Pledge to hold your government accountable for ignoring the suffering of so many for too long. And pledge to do your part to build the America that we've dreamed of where the bright light of opportunity shines on all of us, an America where the family you are born into and the color of your skin will never control your destiny.

Thank you all very much.

(Applause.)

MR. PODESTA: Senator.

SEN. EDWARDS: Thank you, John.

MR. PODESTA: Thank you, Senator. And I think on behalf of everyone who works at the Senate, we pledge to work with you to make sure that these images are not forgotten and that we move forward on this agenda. The senator has graciously agreed to take a couple of questions and if you raise your hands, I'll call on you.

Yes?

Q: Hi, Senator. My name is Derek Douglas. I'm actually with the Center for American Progress, and I want to thank you for your comments today and pick up on what you were getting at at the very end of the speech, which is keeping this issue in the consciousness of the American people.

When Katrina hit, it shocked everybody, and what that made clear was that the issue of property was not something – although several people have tried to make it something that people cared about, it was something that was not on the front and center of most people's minds, and as people have talked about the policy response – what we should be doing – there is this sense that there's this window: it's a confined period of time where we have to jam as much as we can in that window, and once that window closes we're going to back to where we were before with people not really caring.

And my question for you is, one, how do you respond to that notion that we do have this confined window? Do you believe that? And, two, what can we be doing to try and make this issue a permanent issue of concern to the American people as opposed to a temporary one?

SEN. EDWARDS: Well, I think the – I think we need to do several things. One is we need – desperately need for leaders to continue to speak out on this issue; not to let this go by the wayside, not to let the response to be confined to the Gulf Coast, although they urgently and desperately need help.

The second thing is people need to – the American people need to hear ideas that make sense to them; you know, that embrace the kind of values that they believe in: family and work and responsibility, but opportunity – equal opportunity, everybody having a real chance because then they won't feel like that whatever we do is futile. You know, they'll feel like there's something we can do together.

But I think – I actually think the single most important thing is to talk about this as a great moral issue of our time. I mean, if we don't – if this becomes confined to the Gulf Coast and is transient, then it won't be a long-term sustained effort. And we have to tap into the conscience of the American people. It's there and they're certainly paying attention right now, but we have to – we have to tap into that feeling that what was happening – what we saw in New Orleans and what we now know exists all across America is not acceptable to us. It's not okay. These people need to have a real opportunity to do better.

And so I think there are a whole – and I might add, these guys in the back of the room back here need to help us. We can't do this without the media. It is the only way we can talk to the American people. And while government and our leaders bear responsibility for people being in the plight that they're in today, and while you have to give the media enormous credit for their coverage of the hurricane and the aftermath of the hurricane because they are the ones to brought this to the attention of the American people – nobody was asking them to do it; they did it, and they did a very good job of it. But they also bear some responsibility for not having covered poverty in the kind of way that would put it in the consciousness of the American people. So I think all those things together are what's going to be required.

MR. PODESTA: I notice a couple of reporters looking over their shoulders – who you were talking about. (Laughter.)

Q: Hi, senator. My name is Maureen Markham, and I'm a consultant with Affordable Housing and Community Development Work. And I agree with you that this is a great moral issue and I've been concerned from the beginning that as we see pictures of the disaster in New Orleans that what it does is that it diverts attention and it will divert resources from the ongoing, everyday disaster of people living in poverty all across this country.

And so my question is, what can we do to make sure that the rebuilding of New Orleans is not taken from programs that are already serving other poor people throughout the country, and specifically what can we do to make sure that the reconciliation bill on the budget that's before the Congress now that's an immoral document –

SEN. EDWARDS: Yeah. Yes, it is.

Q: – is that we start over with that, and that the estate taxes are not canceled.

SEN. EDWARDS: Yeah. Well, it's impossible to believe that in this environment where the American people are worried about all the victims of the hurricane, the ongoing cost of the war in Iraq, it's just impossible to believe that the leadership and the Congress are going to bring, you know, the permanent repeal of the estate tax to the floor of the Congress. In this environment, that would be an extraordinary thing to do.

And I think the answer to your question is, first, the president has shown – the best I can tell – no inclination to worry in any way about where money is coming from; you know, whether it's spending or tax cuts, whatever – whichever side it is. You know, I heard no meaningful discussion when he proposed these ideas – when was it? Last Thursday? – when he spoke last Thursday, I heard no meaningful discussion from him or anybody about how he intends to pay for these things and so I don't think we're going to get from the White House any kind of leadership on this issue.

Now, I think if we're going to – this is a matter of priorities, what matters most do us? And if, as I believe is true now, if most Americans believe it should be a priority and certainly the amount of their personal giving to the victims of the hurricane would indicate that they believe it is a huge priority. If they think this is a poverty, then I think they will accept the notion that we need – not only to help the people in the Gulf Coast, but to provide opportunity for everybody, including the kind of work that you yourself are doing, so long as we do it in a responsible way and doesn't just throw money away, so long as we have a covenant with the people that we're trying to help that we also expect them to act responsibly, and so long as we find ways to pay for it, which are some of the things that I've talked about today.

I mean, I think all those things in combination just make common sense to people. And as I've said before, now is our opportunity to do it. I might add, and this is not going to be a news bulletin to any of you, I mean, before Katrina ever hit the coast, you know, this is something I was out going around the country talking about and getting a good response to, but in a much smaller, more limited audience that we're getting today. I mean, the country is really paying attention there.

MR. PODESTA: Okay. I think we have time for one last question.

Q: Hi, it was a really good speech, and I'm Dan Driscoll from the National Academy of Public Administration. I was intrigued by your reference to David Shieler's

book, and in *The Working Poor* he made an interesting comment about how you can – it doesn't take much to be above the poverty line and yet, I mean, so many people are poor and statistically are not really included in the data. I was wondering if you had any ideas about some changes that could be made to really more accurately represent the – just America's poverty statistics because I think that too many people are poor and don't get included as – or identified as being such.

SEN. EDWARDS: Well, as I'm sure you know, there's a lot of politics in how those – how those lines are drawn and most people in this room know it, but let me just say it. I mean basically for a family of four, it's about 50 bucks a day is where the poverty line is. And what that – nobody can live on \$50 a day. I mean, if you've got a family of four and you're making \$25,000 a year and you don't technically qualify as being below the poverty line, you are living in poverty every minute of your life because the very problems that hit the poor every day, which is you can't afford a decent place to live, you can't afford to have a bank account, you can't save anything, you know, you have to work two or three jobs just to get by, those problems exist for people who make \$25,000 or \$30,000 a year, just as much as they do for people who fall just below the poverty line.

So I think the – and by the way, I think the reality is a lot of the people who we saw on television, a number of those of people would not qualify in the poverty statistics, but the reality is they live in poverty. All the things that meant they couldn't leave New Orleans – that they didn't have a car, that they didn't have a bank account, that they didn't have a credit card, that they had no way to get out and no way to pay for themselves once they got out, that they effectively live in poverty. And I do – I will say, I think that it's important, though, to talk about all these issues, which is what you're really asking, in a bigger way, in a way that makes it clear that we're not just talking about people who make \$15,000 a year; that there are many Americans who make \$25,000, 30, \$35,000 a year who also live on the edge every single day. I mentioned that briefly in this speech, but it is reality and we all know it's reality. And that's many, many millions more than the 37 million that are, according to the Census Bureau, included in the poverty statistics.

So that's our job. It's my job and others like me, it's our job to make sure the country knows what we're talking about a much broader swath of America than just those people who technically meet the definition of poverty.

MR. PODESTA: Senator, thank you for speaking –

SEN. EDWARDS: Thanks, John. Thank you.

(END)