

SPEECH ON POVERTY, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

CBR: When Tony Shorris first asked me to appear here, I thought that I needed all of the academic credit possible to be able to say, "I spoke at Princeton."

It is true that the Ways and Means Committee is the most powerful Committee in the House of Representatives, and even as it relates to the Senate. All tax issues, by the Constitution, have to be initiated in the House, and therefore, the Ways and Means Committee. The entire tax structure comes out of the Ways and Means Committee, corporate and private – which also means who doesn't get to pay taxes, who gets the tax incentives that are caught up in the tax structure, [etc.].

The Ways and Means Committee has jurisdiction over international trade which, again, by Constitution comes from the Congress. The Social Security system which is under severe attack from the Administration comes out of our Committee. We have jurisdiction over Medicare which is the healthcare system for our seniors. And so I am reminded that what we have to deal with in the United States is the fundamental difference between the parties.

This is not political, this is academic: the Republican Party basically believes that a small government is best for the American people. They believe that it is not the government's money, it's the taxpayers' and the taxpayer knows how to use that money better than the Federal government. Republicans believe the only reason that we have a Congress is to raise the funds for national defense and to deal with those issues relegated to the Federal government under the Constitution. Anything else, they believe, should remain in the hands of local and State governments.

So, as it relates to Social Security, Medicare, and Federal programs, they do not believe that one size fits all and that the local government should have the responsibility. So, one might say, "How do you expect them to pay for it?" They [Republicans] say we pay for it because your constituents are not paying the high taxes, and so therefore, it's up to the local government to determine its own priorities. And if you want them to pay for health care, Social Security, or any other social programs, you should demand that from your mayor and your local government. If they refuse to do it, you vote them out, but these services should not come from the Federal government.

Democrats believe that our government should not force people to go it alone – that the government, as [President] Roosevelt thought, should be there as a cushion between your pension and your retirement, not only to make you more comfortable, but also to provide the opportunity for you to be a productive American. When you suffer a disability that keeps you from working, the government should be there. We believe the government should be there when a wage-earner dies and their kids need support and need to go to school. We believe that health care should be a universal right, not a privilege, as is too often the case.

And so, this very fear is that when it comes to the budget, we find the Republicans anxious to slash revenues, not because wealthy people are asking for it, but to "starve the beast." If they succeed, they'll get rid of the money to fund Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. Well, how do you make the transfer? You make the transfer, as Republicans would say, by taking the taxpayers' money and transferring the incentives to the health maintenance organizations or transferring the money to what the President likes to call "private accounts." And at the end of the day, the Federal government cannot compete with the already-subsidized private sector. Once you destroy the Social Security system by private accounts; or Medicare by health savings accounts; or the prescription drug program of Medicare by prescription drug companies running the programs; then the programs swell over. It will take many efforts to restore this again because it will then mean a dramatically unpopular responsibility of increasing it.

Well, I'm seventy-six years old. I can't change the thinking in Washington, but I understand that most everyone believes that what's important today is preserving our national security. And so, rather than talk today about social workers, bleeding hearts, and helping the poor, I stand before you as an advocate for strong national security, and make the argument that poor people are a threat to our national security.

[The reality is that] poor people are uneducated. Poor people don't have the means to take care of themselves. Poor people get sick earlier. Poor people get in trouble earlier. Poor people are not competitive. Poor people are costing us billions of dollars: being in our jails, eating, getting healthcare, producing absolutely nothing. Consider for a moment that putting someone in jail costs on average over \$22,000 a year, or that health care for the uninsured costs our nation about \$35 billion a year, or that drug abuse costs society \$143 billion a year in lost productivity. Wouldn't investing in positive outcomes be cheaper than covering the cost of negative outcomes.

Poor, young people are not even eligible to volunteer to fight in wars because of their healthcare problems, or their criminal problems.

And if you are indeed the CEO of a multi-national, we have to determine while that flag is waving whether or not you're producing your responsibilities to your shareholders. Where does the favoritism begin? And if you believe it is your obligation to get the best bite for the least price of oil at the expense of the American workers, then the question has to be, "Is America doing all that it can to make certain that your firm is being subsidized by the Federal government, to make sure that every one of your workers has health insurance, and every one of your workers has received the best possible education to make certain that we can compete with people overseas?"

To me, it seems that if you saw what happened in Katrina, it really wasn't a question of whether God was racist. It was poverty that put so many black folks on the death line with so many poor, uneducated white folks. Many politicians know what I'm talking about: it's the question of life and death. And with Katrina, poverty was the question of life and death. And so, I ask my Republican friends, "Can we afford that?"

Not from a compassionate viewpoint, but if we had invested in the Ninth Ward, wouldn't those people have had the education and the resources to have blessed them – before the floods, and the drowning, and the deaths? Does anyone really think it is an accident that one out of every four of American adults without a high school degree lives in poverty, while only one out of every 25 with a college degree are in poverty.

There's a fellow from Mississippi, [Rep.] Gene Taylor, a Congressman who represents the affected area. He cried on the [House] floor, and he said, "If only that flood, that hurricane had come only three days later, my people would have been saved." And I asked him, "What is the connection between three days and what would have happened?" He said, "What happened was three days later, most or all of my people would have received either their welfare checks or their Social Security checks, and they would have had the money to get some gasoline, to get some trucks, to get out of town."

Now, I know a lot of people believe it's our responsibility to bring peace and democracy to all parts of the world: Baghdad, Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. But if we really want to show the strength of democracy, we have to explain what happened in Katrina. We have to let the world know that no matter how great we think we are, that poverty and a lack of education in our communities is not even on our agenda. In fact, a recent UNICEF report ranks the United States second from the bottom in terms child poverty rates in the industrialized world.

And so in going back to the Congress, we will have an opportunity not just to deal with the questions of what Republicans or Democrats would do for the poor. When you're uneducated, lacking self-esteem, without skills, unable to take care of your family, you don't care if it's a Republican or Democrat that's there. But one thing is abundantly clear, that there is going to be a breath of fresh air in that Congress as we can now look at the Executive Branch, the House, and the Senate, and say there must be a better way for Americans to show our light to the people of the world who are dreaming and aspiring for a higher quality of life - to show them how we run it here.

Poverty is a luxury that this great country, politically, cannot afford. We need the trust of friends all over the world to say that here, that no matter how poor you are, for your kids, at least, there is an opportunity. This is what America is all about.

If you take World War II, and take the GI bill, and see how people who were discharged from the service were able to realize their dreams, not because of who they were or who their family was, but because of what they knew they could be. What did we give them? Education, because most of those who went into the Army did not have the means to do it for themselves. Instead, most of them went into the Army, had children and got married. To be able to get by with no money for a mortgage, to get a house – what happened out of this? It developed the middle class of America. It took people out of poverty and it enabled their children to be all that they could be; it was that bridge that allowed us to create the greatness of America which should be the objective of all the developing countries: to have that middle class. The GI bill provided

educational opportunities to over 21 million Americans, and between 1945 and 1966, one-fifth of all homes built in the US were financed by GI loans.

And what do we have today? A squeezing even greater with the tax structure for the middle class. The inability for so many people who work every day to have health care, the inability for them to deal with the gas prices, or mortgage prices, to know that children who should have been out on their own cannot afford their own home. Since 2001, income for America's families has not kept pace with inflation, declining in real terms by nearly \$1300. Is it any wonder that poverty is simultaneously rising – with over five million more Americans falling into poverty over the last five years.

Instead of things historically getting better for the middle class, the heart of America, we're watching an economic boom for those on the highest, and every year, more people getting into poverty – people who, economically, cannot take advantage of globalization which is based on finding subsidized workers – with Republicans and the CEO class struggling against it.

I know as a fact that education really works in eliminating or alleviating poverty. I was born and raised on the streets of Lenox Avenue; I did not know anybody that attended college, much less graduated. It didn't bother me at all because I hung out on the street with young people who thought we were better than young people who were even talking about going to college. But at the end of the day, I went off into the Army. I got that uniform. I had that brass. I was feeling good, and I had self-esteem. I had no idea Tony, that when I would go to Korea that the Chinese hated me so much that they would shoot me, try to kill me, and I asked Jesus that if I get out of that, he'd have no problem with me.

And between you and me, I haven't had a bad day since I got out of there.

[Applause]

CBR: I got out with a pocketful of money and looking good with self-esteem, but the one thing that was missing was that I didn't have a high school diploma. I thought that I didn't need it. I was a cracker-jack rifle shotsman. I was a sergeant. I could take a 75-pound artillery shell and have it directed on the enemy seven miles away through the fire direction center. I was somebody important. When I went down to get a job, they asked what I could do. And you know how that ended, I ended up right back in the garment center where I started. So, one day, they loaded me up with a hand truck with all of these boxes. It was raining. The boxes were old, and they spilled out into the middle of the street – onto 36th Street, 6th Avenue. Cops were cursing me out, telling me to get off the street or they were going to arrest me. I said, "I'm Sergeant Charles Rangel!" He said, "Get off the street."

I went straight to the Veterans Administration and said, "Sir, there's something wrong, they must not know who I am." I looked at all these faces, and as it turned out, everybody at the VA were World War II veterans and had no idea what the hell I was

talking about. It took a long time and then finally, I won. They gave me an aptitude test and they said I should be an undertaker or an electrician. I said, "You've got the wrong test here!" I mean, I took my rosaries – Catholic Charities gave the test – so I said, "Something's wrong." And they said, "No, you're a high school dropout, you cannot go to college, and you don't have enough time." I said, "I'm staying here until we find some time."

So finally, after six months, they asked me, "What is it you want, Rangel? What is it you want to be?" I was crushed. For a young man, not even to know enough to be able to say what he or she wants to be happens to be the greatest sin of all. I had nothing even to dream about. And I stood absolutely bewildered in trying to get some answer to catch up to my aggressive desire to work.

My grandfather was an elevator operator in the criminal court building. He worked there for 33 years, and he survived automation. He was important. He wore that uniform going to work, off to the job. He had seniority, and he had the elevators that took up the district attorneys and the judges. And he wasn't the kind of guy who said, "I love you," but you know. I understood. I didn't ask for a whole lot of love, I just wanted to get out of Lenox Avenue. Now, he wasn't the kind of guy who appeared to like people, but those judges, and lawyers, and DAs would come in, and you would think Jesus Christ appeared – all the excitement in the world! So I told one of them that I wanted to be a lawyer. And he told me how much time we had, what I had to do, and I digested it. So I went home, and told my grandfather that I wanted to be a lawyer and I don't know when he stopped laughing. But I know one thing, before he died, I was Assistant District Attorney in that damn building.

[Applause]

CBR: Why do I tell these stories? I knew what I wasn't when I went to the Army. I knew what I didn't know when I went out of school. But the difference – not only with me but every guy on the block I was raised with – is having access to an education, and I am saying that if the Army can take you and teach anything, there is no reason why – with a national commitment – that we can't take every child we have and make them better than they are, to make them productive, make them believe in themselves and therefore, make them believe in this country.

When I accepted this invitation, I knew that it's going to take more than political will; it's going to take people to understand that this Federal government will only do what they are mandated to do. If you bring the politicians, the goodwill, and those in the academic fields, and those who have the responsibility [together] – we don't need any welfare system in this country. If we say that every child, and every family, and every community is going to have opportunity, they don't have to fail. If we can tell all the developing countries that you don't have to read our Constitution but rather see what we do with our people, see what they are able to do for themselves, their community, and their country- you don't need a Constitutional government; you need a government that cares.

And so, as Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee some would say, "What exactly can you do?" I'm saying, if you're looking for an economic incentive, if you're looking for a tax credit, you have to tell me what you are doing to help get people out of poverty or to help prevent them from getting into poverty. Do you advocate educational programs? Do you advocate that Americans should be as healthy as they can be? Do you advocate that education should not be something that children pay for? They should get it and pay back for the fact that we gave it to them by being more productive.

This could truly be a revolutionary period because some of you may have heard that I'm an advocate for the draft. But being an advocate for the draft means that I'm advocat[ing] that just being poor, and unemployable, and hopeless should not make you the only people that are being placed in harm's way. It is immoral for a President to have an elective war knowing that nobody in this Administration – or this Cabinet and the Pentagon – not only will they never have to serve [but they] will never have to go to a funeral of anybody [who served] because they don't know anybody.

But when those youngsters are trained, they don't have the political choice. They have to do what they are told, and they are the courageous among us. But why don't we apply this belief to patriots throughout America? If being at war means that our nation is in danger, then everybody – I should be, my grandson should be, my son – should be saying, "I want to make some type of sacrifice to protect the country that's been good to me." But if the war means that they are excluded and some of the times, when they are offered money – up to \$40,000 – some of these youngsters have to take the bonus because they need it. Rich kids don't need \$40,000.

And the whole idea is that if we really believe that we were going to war and would lose those in our community, we would think twice about whether or not Saddam Hussein is really a threat to the United States of America. We would not make the mistake that there were no weapons of mass destruction, no connection to Al Qaeda, no connection to 9/11. We would not be rattling swords with North Korea. We will not be prepared to put the military option on the table in Iran. And when it reaches the point that our country is in danger, everybody should do something instead of just giving tax cuts to the rich. But, if you're poor, what other options do you have? What political strength do you have? And just as in 1948, September 15, the Army was the best employment hopes that I had, believe me, in the rural United States and the inner cities, poverty drives the number of people who are drawn to the military, and that is immoral and unpatriotic.

And so, what I'm asking is this: let us try to get that developed because it has to start somewhere. The Civil Rights movement and the racism and the lynchings that took place in this country in the 20s and the 30s – the priests, and ministers, and rabbis spoke up against it. One day a woman in the back of the bus spoke up and said, "I will not move." As a result they formed a boycott, and along came Martin Luther King Jr. And then, all of America said that this can't keep going on. And maybe this is the time for us to move on, and all of these people in this great country – blacks and whites, Jews and Gentiles – stepped together. And collectively, they were not only able to stop the

murders, but they changed the voting laws. Even though I marched with them, I never even thought that I could ever become a public servant. In the Congress I joined, there were nine blacks. We became thirteen blacks, and now we have forty-two blacks. We've got a black in the Senate and twenty Hispanics. In other words, this revolution took place, and people had to ask themselves, "What were they doing before the revolution?"

I'm suggesting to you that the period of time that we are living here today is one of the most dangerous times that our country has ever faced. We are involved in a war that has no end and the people that are suffering are those that are poor. Not one person here can even make up what victory looks like. If I told the President tomorrow that the enemy wanted to surrender, he wouldn't have a clue as to who to go to sign the papers.

CBR: We don't know. We are involved in a mess and the only question is: can we admit it and get the hell out? The opportunity to change is here, not only for peace, but for poverty, lack of health care, lack of jobs, lack of self-esteem, and lack of the stuff that makes Americans so proud of themselves. We should never be ashamed with any foreigner for who we are or what we're not doing. We should be so proud, that the rest of the world would say, "I only wish that my country could be like yours."

We have that opportunity. And you are the ones that are on the ground. And we need you, not only in dealing with academic classes or dealing with your clients, but we need you at the polls because voting is just as much a part of being an American as anything else you can think of. And if at the end of the day, things remain the same and you did your part, at least you can explain that you loved this country – and all of its people – and you lost. Because, losing isn't the worst thing; lack of participation is. If we lose and you didn't participate, it's not just how you feel about yourselves, but it's that you didn't say anything when the war was going on or the corruption was going on. These things were happening – did you participate? Were you part of the problem or part of the solution?

I hope, Tony, that this is the beginning of a partnership – with whatever power I may get in the Ways and Means Committee – that I consider it a partnership with you. That we bring it together to create a national program, to be able to say, there is another way. That people don't deal with this war, that they deal with peace. That they deal with people, that they deal with aspirations, that they deal with dreams, and deal with making Americans one. I just want to be the politician that is on that side.

Now back home on the streets of Lenox Avenue, people are asking me – people who used to call me Charlie – that if I become the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, "Do we really have to call you "Mr. Chairman?" And I haven't given that a lot of thought because I don't care too much. But, no, you don't have to call me Mr. Chairman because I wouldn't really want to be treated any differently than any other world leader.

So with that being said, I've really enjoyed being here. Thank you so much.