

CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

TAKE BACK AMERICA 2006

MONDAY, JUNE 12, 2006

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

**2:15 P.M. -3:45 P.M. PROGRESSIVE AGENDA
FOR THE COMMON GOOD**

SPEAKER:

REPRESENTATIVE BENNIE G. THOMPSON (D-MS)

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

ROGER HICKEY: Now I need to apologize to all of our panelists here. Because of the Apollo Alliance -- a very exciting program -- we're all running a little late, but don't worry. The breakout sessions are going to be starting a little late as well. And keep in mind that there will panels, breakout sessions on each one of these topics throughout the next two days.

Progressives could not gather to talk about an agenda for the common good without talking about the impact of Katrina and the hurricanes on the Gulf and the disastrous response of our government to those hurricanes. And we have brought together three people to talk to you about what it will take -- because it still hasn't been done -- what it will take to rebuild the Gulf and to rebuild America, and to address the poverty and racism that were exposed by that storm.

Our first speaker, another member of Congress who I just have to thank for sticking around with us -- they have very busy schedules -- is Representative Bennie Thompson. He has a right to speak about this. He is -- represents Mississippi's 2nd District, which flanks the Mississippi all the way up. He's the longest-serving African American elected official in the state of Mississippi, and he knows the damage firsthand.

So please -- please welcome Representative Bennie Thompson. (Applause.)

REP. BENNIE THOMPSON (D-MS): Thank you very much. I'm happy to be here. I'm a very rare breed. I'm a progressive in a right-to-work state, and happen to be African American too. (Laughter.) So I'm happy to be among friends.

In the interest of time, I will speed up a little bit because somebody's holding cards out in front of us, for those of you who can't see.

Hurricane Katrina was quite a devastating blow to a lot of us. Hurricane Katrina caused 1,326 deaths along the Gulf coast, over a thousand in Louisiana, over 200 in Mississippi, and only two in Alabama. There were 780 homes destroyed, 413 mobile homes. But in terms of damage, there were over 7,000 homes destroyed in the Gulf coast region alone. The six counties along the Gulf coast suffered the majority of the damage. Twenty-six miles of pristine beaches along the Mississippi Gulf Coast was absolutely devastated. If you remember the Biloxi, Gulf Port, Waveland area of the past -- absolutely now it is a figment of your imagination. It is absolutely not the same. Neighborhoods, schools and businesses were absolutely destroyed. The numbers, they say it will take about 10 years to bring it back, if we're lucky.

A lot of those people who left the Gulf coast came to my congressional district. We opened our arms to some 50,000 people who came. Myself, I was without power for two weeks. But you know, in America, like other places, you do what you have to do

survive. So we did pull together, made a difference. But I can tell you that from a homeland security standpoint, this -- Katrina laid us bare.

I'll tell you a little bit about it. There's a story about the emperor who wanted to get a new suit, and basically, the tailor pretty much fooled the emperor convincing him that he had prepared a new suit. And ultimately, there was no suit. The emperor went outside, people saw him, everybody was afraid to tell him that there was no suit, except a little kid who came long and said, "Emperor, you're naked." (Laughter.)

Homeland Security made us naked in this country, and we have to do better. And let me tell you how we can do better. We can't let President Bush, Secretary Chertoff of the hook. They -- (cheers, applause) -- they basically messed up, blamed everybody, including Brownie, for a job that they should have done themselves. So we can't let our president go to New Orleans and make a speech immediately after Hurricane Katrina and say that he's here to help, he wants to rebuild the Gulf Coast better, but when we see it's not any better, even nine months after.

Katrina made it clear to us, much like the child in the story, we have to do better. Even with the several days' notice that Katrina, Rita and Wilma gave us, our federal government still couldn't pre-place assets or coordinate response and recovery among federal, state and local agencies. All the back-patting and high fives between this administration wasn't going to change it.

Can you imagine what would happen if San Francisco or LA was hit by an earthquake with only seconds' notice, or if terrorists attack anywhere within our borders what would happen. My observation on post-9/11 intelligence gathering and sharing efforts does not give me much comfort that we will have enough notice of such an attack. But that's for another day.

Let's talk a little bit about what we need to do. Local law enforcement and first responders need real leadership, not some contractor-driven document that isn't going to stop disaster from happening. Everything that was predicted to happen with Katrina we had already predicted it, but it was on a plan -- it was on the shelf. We have plans all over the place. But somehow, this administration can't execute the plans.

Let me give you one example.

Sheriff McGee from Forest County, Mississippi, where Hattiesburg is, arrested a National guardsman who was guarding water the fourth day that his community was without water. Camp Shelby is in Forest County. The guardsman told him, "I can't let you have the water until somebody tells me to let it go." So above all, Sheriff commandeered the water, gave it out to the people. Now our federal government want to prosecute him for taking the water without permission. So that's kind of ass-backward of doing things that you see a lot of government doing. I'm with progressives, so you can understand my English very well. (Laughter.) But it's also a notion that we have to do better. But the only way we can do better is with your help. We have to put people in

charge who know what they're doing. You can't put political cronies in charge of positions of absolute responsibility. And what we have here at the Department of Homeland Security is an agency, either void of expertise or only providing the political cronyism that goes on.

So let me say to you that we must have the equipment for our firefighters and first responders to do the job. Third, those plans have to be in place. We have to take care of the children, elderly and those language difficulties and the disabled. So many of the people with Katrina had nowhere to go. They were vulnerable citizens, and sure to go to the Super Dome is one thing, but if we leave them there because the public transportation system or the transportation system didn't work, it's not their fault. Everyone didn't have a vehicle to leave town when people said, "You have to leave." So we have to take care of them.

The federal government needs a better housing program. Evacuees will be losing their temporary housing one day. Another day they say they can stay, and the next day say, "Well, we going to kick you out after all." They shouldn't be on that yo-yo, as most of you were involved with. Meanwhile, many people are living in trailers, absolutely the worst thing in the world. They're going to have to stay just to have them for 18 months, and then, they'll have to do something else. Well, a lot of those trailers are still in Hope, Arkansas. They haven't made it to the Gulf Coast yet, but at least they're paid for, if you can believe that that's going to help the people on the Gulf Coast. So we have to fix that.

In addition to that, insurance companies have gotten away with absolute thievery in terms of servicing the people -- (applause) -- in the Gulf Coast region. Insurance companies last year made \$43 billion profit; 11 percent more than they've ever made in the history of the industry. So they can't say they don't have the resources to service the event. They just don't want to do it.

Our attorney general, along with some others, are suing the companies, and we believe that once the people have their day in court, the insurance companies are going to have to pay. And you know, we have triple damages in Mississippi. So it's not just the penalty that's on the policy you pay, but you pay three times the amount. So I'm looking forward to sitting in court that day making sure that they get theirs. (Applause, cheers.)

To move forward, the Red Cross, we have to do better. The Red Cross at the time of Katrina only had one operating agreement with a nonprofit organization, and that was the Southern Baptist Convention. Now the Southern Baptist Convention, if I showed up, I would probably not be the most welcomed Christian at the convention. (Laughter.) So you can imagine what low-income vulnerable citizens had to do when the Red Cross showed up. Many of the shelters were located in suburban areas that did not have transportation available. So there were a lot of problems. We're trying to fix that. GAO report has also agreed with our concern about that.

Let me just say a couple of things that I want you to keep in mind.

We're trying to fix the problem, but when you're not in charge, you can only become an advocate or an agitator to fix it. Give us a chance to be in charge. If I'm chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, I'll do my damned best to fix it, I promise you. (Applause.) I've been there, I've had the opportunity to see it firsthand, all we need is an opportunity to do it.

On September 15th, just to show you what our president's talking about, he acknowledged the deep, persistent poverty in the Gulf Coast region. We all knew that all along. (Laughter.) He even conceded that the poverty of the Gulf Coast has roots in a history of racial discrimination. (Laughter.) No kidding? (Laughter.) In a bold move, the president even asserted that we have a duty to confront this poverty with bold actions. Have mercy! (Laughter.)

So we ain't there yet. But now, Barbara Jordan said, what the people want is very simple; they want an America as good as its promises. And so Mr. President and all the other people who gathered after Katrina saying they want to do something, it's clear that we are not there yet. It's clear to me that this administration and the Republican-led Congress haven't kept their promise to secure America.

We need to change that. And hopefully, this fall we will. Thank you.

(Applause.)

(End of remarks.)