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**Miles Rapoport  
President Dēmos**

**“Raising Our Sights:  
Fighting For a  
Progressive Vision  
in Sharply Contested  
Terrain”**

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The 2011 Jerry Wurf  
Memorial Lecture



The Labor and Worklife Program  
Harvard Law School

#### JERRY WURF MEMORIAL FUND (1982)

Harvard Trade Union Program, Harvard Law School

The Jerry Wurf Memorial Fund was established in memory of Jerry Wurf, the late President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Its income is used to initiate programs and activities that “reflect Jerry Wurf’s belief in the dignity of work, and his commitment to improving the quality of lives of working people, to free open thought and debate about public policy issues, to informed political action...and to reflect his interests in the quality of management in public service, especially as it assures the ability of workers to do their jobs with maximum effect and efficiency in environments sensitive to their needs and activities.”

# Jerry Wurf Memorial Lecture

February 10, 2011

Miles Rapoport,

“Raising Our Sights: Fighting For a  
Progressive Vision  
in Sharply Contested Terrain”

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## **Paul Booth**

### **Executive Assistant to the President, AFSCME**



Paul Booth

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to perform this function. First, let me thank the Harvard Trade Union Program and Elaine Bernard. I am told this is the 100th session of the Harvard Trade Union Program. I am told not to assume that it has been here for one hundred years, as there have been more than one session in some years. The HTUP made a great contribution to the development of several generations of AFSCME leaders who I know personally. We keep coming back. It testifies to the strong support from those who come here and keep enticing others to do so. This particular event is produced by the Jerry Wurf Memorial Fund. It is a fund AFSCME and our friends have established here in memory of the tremendous trade union builder that was Jerry Wurf, the second president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, who led us in the 1960s and 1970s from a minor corner of organized labor into the prominence and power upon which we have continued to build ever since. Jerry's widow, Mildred, is here, and daughter Abigail and son Nicholas are also here.

Miles Rapoport is the president of Demos. What is Demos? There is an awful lot of Demos material out on the table there, and you really should indulge freely in it. To me, Demos is simply the leading voice in the United States for small d democracy. Its mission, as I see it, is this cause which it so ably advances.

Miles has a career that included personal involvement in Connecticut politics, to which he brought activism, organizational skills, and a set of real deep commitments.

special issue on the middle class (15 February 2011) had a great line based on real polling data saying that people who voted Republican in the 2010 elections did not buy the solutions of the right. But they searched in vain for ours. This says to me that is a task. Our task is to have answers that will give real hope. Tell the story about the America we want to have. Then we need to repeat that story, explain it, write about it, organize around it, and marvel in it through the lives of ordinary people. I actually have great confidence that we can do all this. Our story is right, and we will prevail. And I think Jerry Wurf would have expected no less. Thank you very much.

He served ten years in the legislature there and got elected Secretary of State in 1994. Miles, when he was Secretary of State, explained to those who would pay attention the key significance of that job and its role. This was before Katherine Harris in Florida during November and December of 2000 got that point across to everybody else when she counted the votes in the Presidential election she wanted to count and avoided counting those she didn't want to count. The question is: where did that activism come from that led Miles to Connecticut politics, to being Secretary of State?

I think it is deeply rooted in him. It is about his values. He already had them before he came to Harvard. He was an undergraduate at Harvard. He was a strike leader at this university. They had one hell of a strike at Harvard against the war in Viet Nam, and Miles was in the leadership of that. I think the university may be a little nervous about Miles, and they should be nervous about Miles.... Anyone with special privileges in America should be nervous about Miles, about the people he inspires, about the work he does because it is quite impressive.

And it is important that we in the labor movement know about Miles and the work of Demos. We are on the same track. We are on parallel tracks. We are both about small d democracy, in the workplace and in society at large.

**Keynote Address**  
**Miles Rapoport**

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*“There is nothing more important for preserving our small d democracy than fighting for and defending a real role for government in our society.”*

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This is really very nice for me to be here. In some ways, a lot of my past here is coming together. I was a student at Harvard. So I was involved around these parts. I was a member of the Class of 1971. The president of Harvard at the time was Nathan Pusey. He was famously quoted as saying that The Class of ‘71 was the worst class ever. This was featured at the reunion. I was really proud of it. He did not really mean it.

I want to thank Elaine Bernard, who has been a colleague and friend and progressive leader for many, many years for the Trade Union Program and for working people and unions generally. It is also nice to be with the Wurf family. I have my own personal Jerry Wurf story. I actually interviewed for a job as organizer for AFSCME by a guy named Bill Hamilton in 1973. While I was sitting in the office, Jerry Wurf walked by and was swearing at someone. He was a commanding presence. I was actually offered the position, but I declined the job because I decided to go into community organizing instead. I could have been Paul Booth, but I ended up as Heather Booth. By the way, my colleague at Demos Patrick Bresette has been a Jerry Wurf Fellow for last year and the year before. I am really proud of the work that he has done. There is nothing more important for preserving our small d democracy than fighting for and defending a real role for government in our society. If you lose that, it seems to me we lose everything else. I will come back to that a little later.

ing would be no more than 20 percent of GDP. If you make that assumption, the character of our society is defined as one of austerity and decline. There is a different way. There is a higher road to fiscal sanity and fiscal stability. We can actually give people more and reconstruct the social contract, tax fairly in order to achieve it. That is the core of an alternate vision. It is not a wild vision. It has been adopted by almost every civilized country in the rest of the world, except the United States. I think we really need to fight for it.

So I am actually fairly optimistic about the outcome of this contest for the future direction. Not that I don’t have my bad days. There are a number of reasons for this. One, if demography is destiny, our arc bends toward diversity, equality, and tolerance. There is no question that the young people are for a more diverse country and a more tolerant country, a more progressive building block. That will help us with more progressive values going forward. Real victories have been won. We need to claim credit for them and that they are important. The progressive infrastructure is far more advanced than it was twenty years ago. And the solutions of the right do not work. They will not work; they are not designed to work. We have all been saying this for a very long time. But this is clearly now more demonstrably true and more available to people.

E.J. Dionne in *The American Prospect*



Mildred Wurf and  
Miles Rapoport

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*“There is a higher road to fiscal sanity and fiscal stability. We can actually give people more and reconstruct the social contract, tax fairly in order to achieve it.”*

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of education here, and I said very loudly, “If we were at the Department of Motor Vehicles, we would be done by now.” People nodded at me and laughed. Or they were thinking, “We should commit that guy.” Or else they were agreeing that there was point I was making about the public sector and the private sector.

More seriously, I testified before Barney Frank’s committee, the House Financial Services Committee, with Felix Rohatyn. And both of us were talking about the need for social investments and the need for a stronger role for government. One of the Republican Congressmen said in questioning me: “Right now, the [federal] government spends 19 percent of Gross Domestic Product on taxes. I presume you think that is too low. What percentage would be appropriate?” My first instinct as a politician is, All right, he is not going to catch me on this one. But wait a second, I am a Think Tank guy now, and our role is to push out that debate. First of all, I said you have to compare apples to apples. In some countries where they have much higher levels of taxation, your health care is included, here you have to add the premiums; and there is also free education and on and on. But checking that aside, 30 percent would be an appropriate figure for the United States as a percentage of taxes. He was really happy because he got me on record. But that is what we need to do, those of us outside the political structure. That is, we have to try to push out the space.

I was appalled when the leaders of the Deficit Commission appointed by the President came out and the first thing they said was that government spend-

Let me say a word about Demos. Demos was founded ten years ago. We call ourselves a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated in an informal way to pushing back against the Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, and Manhattan Institute and the rest of that godawful crowd. In a more serious way, we are dedicated to advancing in public debate and public policy fundamental progressive values. One is economic justice and the widest sharing of America’s prosperity. We have done a lot of work on issues of economic security for the middle class and working class families, the economic challenges young people face today getting ahead, the crushing burdens of debt: credit card debt and mortgage debt. When I say we work on it, what it means and what we try to do is write about it and to be of service for advocates in the field. We do books, research, reports, op-ed pieces, blogs, all kinds of things, and try to get up in the public debate. There is such a thing as the ether. I discovered this as a legislator, how the parameters of debate are set and shift over time. Over thirty years, the parameters of public debate have shifted to the right. Let’s move those goal posts back to the left a little bit, or at least back into the center-left. We are dedicated to doing that around economic justice issues, and democracy issues. We are the principal promoters of election-day voter registration and full implementation of the National Voter Registration Act. We have sued a couple of states, including Ohio.



Miles Rapoport



That reminds me. Just establishing my credentials here. I was Secretary of State in Connecticut until 1998. In 1999, the National Association of Secretaries of State asked me to do a training session for the newly elected Secretaries of State, and I did that at the Washington conference. Two of the people in my class who were the most vocal and most eager to serve: Katherine Harris and Ken Blackwell. So take my advice with a grain of salt.

Anyway.... So we have worked on democracy issues and economic issues. We have a whole Public Works program, which is the effort at Demos to speak up for a robust public sector. We have done a lot of work with AFSCME and other unions to promote the notion that government has an essential role to play, a robust role, a strong role to be a countervailing force against the workings and consequences of the market, to plan for the future, to build the public structures that businesses, individuals, and communities rely on every day without even thinking about it. When those public structures are left to deteriorate, we all suffer. That is a message that we want to put out in the public domain. We all need to do this.

The last thing is we want to create a different role for the United States in a clearly interdependent world. This is a remarkable day. We are awaiting a press conference. But they are reporting thirty years of dictatorship in Egypt is over.

We intend to continue to work to try to promote those values in our work on public policy. We were very active on the Dodd-Frank bill, part of

the need to reverse the trends, I think then we can do something. If the public sector is diminished, undermined, and underfunded, cannot do its job, then from health care to financial reform to early childhood education to college education it is going to be really difficult to do something. We need to start with the understanding that almost everything we want to accomplish requires the public structures that are created by government, that pave the way for innovation and economic growth. We need to fight for regulation and not give away the concept that provides a known and stable structure that supports constructive competition. We need a government that can be a counterweight to private interests running over the public good and be a steward of our future.

We have to be conscious about supporting the role of government as forcefully as the right-wing has worked to undermine it.

I want to tell you just two fun stories on how to do this. I was standing in a line at the bank about a year ago. I have gone to the same bank for thirty years. It has been six different banks. It was Connecticut Bank and Trust, then it became First National Bank of Boston and then it became Shawmut and then Fleet and now it is Bank of America. The people have not changed. The only thing that changes are that every time someone new takes over there are fewer tellers. So I was standing in line and waiting for a teller with probably over 30 people in line on a Saturday morning. I thought I could do a little piece

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*“We have to be conscious about supporting the role of government as forcefully as the right-wing has worked to undermine it.”*

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Question from  
Dr. Linda Kaboolian,  
Lecturer in Public  
Policy, Kennedy  
School of Government

ibly different outcomes. So we need candidates and political leaders we can count on, and thankfully we have some of them. But there are not nearly enough. We need organizing and coalition building; we need advocates, victories and political leadership.

But I want to focus on what overrides that and undergirds it. We need an alternative narrative. My new informal slogan for Demos is, ‘We are the narrative we have been waiting for.’ All the work that we do, the campaigns that we fight, the organizing campaigns we do, the candidates we support, needs to be done in the context of constructing an alternative progressive narrative that can explain what the problems are that people are facing, that gives a vision of the kind of country we want to be, that resonates and connects with the lives of ordinary people.

President Obama’s State of the Union had a piece of it. There is a piece on innovation and competition, investment and education, winning the future, outbuilding and competing with the rest of the world. But we need much more than this. The central focus is the protection, preservation, and re-creation perhaps of the middle class. The current issue of *The American Prospect* on “The Endangered Middle Class” has a great piece of artwork on the middle class family in a museum case. The critical fight over the next four to six years is to restore the economic security, future, and livelihood of America’s middle class. That has to be coupled with a commitment to dealing with the issue of poverty. If anything, it is getting worse. If we focus on the middle class and the poor, raise the issue of inequality and

Americans for Financial Reform, headed up by Heather Booth. That was an incredible fight. It gives me the most hope that we can make progress. That bill defied the laws of gravity. That is, every single thing we know about American democracy, politics, and money. That bill should have been watered down all the way through, and Elizabeth Warren should have never been allowed to run that agency. But because of a remarkable grassroots effort and coalition policy and advocacy work, that bill got stronger. It is a really good bill preventing the next financial catastrophe and an act of great hope for our future. Heather deserves a round of applause.

But let me say one more word about Demos that is really exciting for us. In March 2010, Demos and *The American Prospect* joined forces. Robert Kuttner is here, and he is the founder and co-editor of *The American Prospect* for twenty years. We think we can be a stronger institution with more impact, with a larger footprint, more ability to put ideas in the public debate, to create and promote a different narrative and story. I am delighted that one of Demos’s activities is to help put out the best progressive magazine in America, *The American Prospect*.

I want to talk a little bit about the moment we’re in. I think we are starting the third post-war period of American history. The story of the last sixty years has been about two eras, both of which are finished. The first era was the postwar period of growth. It was characterized by the de-

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*“[The Dodd-Frank bill] gives me the most hope that we can make progress. That bill defied the laws of gravity.”*

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liberate creation by government, by unions, by public policy of a middle class. There was a social contract that was created in the postwar period between workers, between unions, between society. A lot of people were left out of that social contract: African Americans and women in large measure. Nevertheless, there was the creation between 1945 and 1973-74 of a middle class that was the envy of the world. In part, it was required by the needs of the cold war. It was an extraordinary societal achievement.

The largest private employer in 1946 was General Motors. If you came out of high school and went to work for General Motors, you made the equivalent of about \$18 an hour. You had fully paid defined benefits, pension, and health care. You could send your kid to college all on one income. Today, of course, the largest private employer is Wal-Mart. Your average wage is \$7.30. You don't have a pension, you don't have health care -- or maybe you have a partial health care plan. You certainly are not going to send your kids to college. That is a measure of where we have come from the 1940s and now. It is important to recognize that this was a consciously constructed effort, to build the middle class. It was not by accident. It was not simply a result of the end of the war. There was an investment, a set of public investments. The National Defense Highway System was the largest infrastructure project in the nation's history. We invested in research, in development, in higher education, and in housing through the GI Bill. The GI Bill created a situation where in 1944 there were 114,000 new homes built and in 1950 some 1.7

the agencies. All of this is really important.

And yet, what is missing has been the construction of an alternative narrative. I will come back to that in a minute. In terms of what needs to be done, there are a lot of different strategies that need to take place. There is no one thing, one person or one movement that is going to do it all. There has to be organizing, whether it be labor organizing, community organizing or immigrant organizing. There has to be pressure from below: people fighting on mortgages, pointing out the role of the bankers in the catastrophe. There have been some real successes; the immigration movements and the energy that came from that has been extraordinary. There need to be campaigns, national as well as state to win concrete changes and to blunt the initiatives of the right. We are in a dangerous moment, with the combination of Darryl Issa in control of the Government Operations Committee with a vicious attempt to demonize progressives of all stripes. Whether it is by Glenn Beck, Andrew Breitbart or the rest of that crew combined with some allies in official positions who can hold hearings and do damage, we need to right that and need to push back against it. We need to do voter registration efforts. There is the possibility of really getting people out to the polls. One of the reasons Demos works so hard on election reform issues: I truly believe in the democracy with a small d; if the electorate really reflected the diversity of our population, we would have incred-

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*“And yet, what is missing has been the construction of an alternative narrative.”*

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*“We are going into a new period of American political and social history.”*

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with the era when we are completely outgunned and defeated. But we are in a period of sharply contested terrain. Hence, the title of my talk.

We are going into a new period of American political and social history. But the character of that period is yet to be defined. It makes the next four to six years incredibly important. What won't happen is muddling through. The first thing I ever read when I got to Harvard was a paper by Charles Lindblom called “The Science of ‘Muddling Through’” [*Public Administration Review* vol. 19, no. 2, Spring 1959]. No, we are going one way or the other, in my view. Remarkably, the right-wing is recommending the exact same solutions that got us into the mess: more deregulation, more lowering of taxes, more cutting of social investment, privatization of public assets (water systems, transportation systems, even government buildings), proposals by the leaders of the deficit commission to cut and privatize Social Security and Medicare.

Tea Party extremism in my view: it is the tail and not the dog. Secondly, it is the flailing of a bygone era. It does not mean you cannot be stung. I don't think it represents the social movement of the future. What are we going to do? It is not that easy. It has been a daunting period since the election. President Obama and the Democrats in Congress have made real gains. I don't think we should pooh-pooh them. There is the victory of the health care bill, passage of a stimulus package, the credit card act of 2009, the financial act of 2010, the appointment of judges, the completely changed character of many of

million new homes were built, a tenfold increase in six years.

One critical anchor of the contract was the support of the labor unions. They were critical, they were respected, they were bargained with, and they were a part of the whole social structure. They were at the heart of that creation of the middle class.

That era began to end in the mid-1970s. Some say it was Ronald Reagan. It started well before Reagan. Around the middle of the 1970s, major changes started to take place, some coming from the cultural schisms based on the Viet Nam War and some of the changes that came from the Arab oil embargo. But fundamentally it was a political change. There was a politically orchestrated campaign saying that we had to change the social contract that we have had up to now.

Now I am not a believer in conspiracies. I brought a document with me, and what a document! It is a commentary from October 12, 1974 by John Carson Parker, who was a senior editor of *Business Week*. It's called “The options ahead for the debt economy.” I can't do it justice, and some of it is a little dated. Here are some of the highlights:

*The U.S., like the world around it, is in sad shape today. Having borrowed too much in the expectation of perpetual plenty, Americans are desperate for answers to questions for which there are no pat answers... [There is] No more to*

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*“[Labor unions were] at the heart of that creation of the middle class.”*

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*“There has been a reallocation of capital from all of the rest of us to the rich and to the business community.”*

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*borrow. The U.S. has tried to do too much with too little, and that cannot go on forever.*

*It is inevitable that the U.S. economy will grow more slowly than it has. Government economic policy will be more restrictive – and, at the same time, more imposing because it is also inevitable that government will attempt to take on more of the job of channeling what capital there is to where it seems needed the most.*

*Some people will obviously have to do with less, or with substitutes, so that the economy as a whole can get the most mileage out of available capital....*

*Indeed cities and states, the home mortgage market, small business, and the consumer, will all get less than they want because the basic health of the U.S. is based on the basic health of its corporations and banks..... Compromises, in terms of who gets and who does without, that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago will be made in coming years because the economic future not only of the U.S. but also of the whole world is on the line today.*

*Yet it will be a hard pill for many Americans to swallow – the idea of doing with less so that big business can have more. It will be particularly hard to swallow because it is quite obvious that if big business and big banks are the most visible victims of what ails the Debt Economy, they are also in*

been a dismal economic time. The area where we have made huge progress are in the issues of tolerance. We have a Black president. We have the issues of gay equity and gay marriage. We have made strides that I would have never thought possible thirty years ago when I was first doing this. The issues of diversity, the opportunities for women.... All of this we have made huge progress. Where we are falling down is on the economic issues. It is encouraging on the other level and sad on this one.

In 2004-2005, there were a number of books published that described the creation of a permanent Republican hegemony or majority through a combination of money in politics, the cultural divide, the wedge issues that were used so effectively over the years by the conservative movement. I do not want to give you a list of the books, but one I remember was by Thomas Edsall, a very smart reporter. In a speech at the Century Foundation in New York, he said, forget it liberals, you are done. Karl Rove and these guys will be in power forever. It turned out to be completely wrong: a combination of the people rejecting the economic ideas of the Bush era and the Iraq war, etc. The elections in 2006 were a serious and partial rejection of it. And then there was 2008. In 2008, many people thought that everything changed, but have been sorely disappointed. On the other hand, those who believe everything has been lost since then are equally wrong. My own judgment is that we are finished



Question from the Audience

some discussion about that and get back to you in a couple of weeks.” Multiply that by thousands and thousands of times by those who have less certainty on where they stand on the issues. That’s the character of political conversation that takes place. It’s an awful, awful character.

The consequences of all of this have been awful for ordinary Americans. We all know this. The standard of living has eroded at every point in the income stream, the housing stream, the equity people have, the security of their retirements, their ability to get health care, and their ability to send their kids to college. You name it, it is worse off now.

One of the books I brought is *Strapped: Why America’s 20- and 30-Somethings Can’t Get Ahead* written by a fabulous young woman at Demos named Tamara Draut. It goes through in great detail why all of the hallmarks of adulthood that we all took for granted from people of our age, getting our college degree and paying off our student loans, buying a house, getting a job with health care, and having children, are three or four times more difficult today, unless you have rich parents, than they were then. The cost of housing, the cost of day care, the burden of student debt, Pell Grants that cover 30 percent of the costs of a college education as opposed to 70 percent when they were first invented, all of this is a really interesting area of thought for us and for our next generation. It is not about the level of debt or deficit, rather it is about what our society thinks is a reasonable level of provision for people’s futures. There has been the vast increase in inequality. It has

*large measure the cause of it....*

*Facing it squarely. Nothing that this nation, or any other nation, has done in modern economic history compares in difficulty with the selling job that must now be done to make people accept the new reality.*

And that is just about the time, if you look at any graph you want to look at -- from the relationship between productivity and wages to the Gini Coefficient to the level of economic inequality to the average income -- it is all up from 1946 to 1975 and then it is all down since then. This was no accident. This was a conscious hard political campaign that has been done in all kinds of ways. Think tanks such as The Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the American Enterprise Institute were all founded around that time. It is quite a remarkable story if you think back on it.

Reading that piece in *BusinessWeek* is an interesting exercise.

I am obviously not doing justice to the period, but I am also among people who know a lot about this. The second period has been the reign of free-market fundamentalism beginning in the 1970s and going through Reagan and everything happening up till now. There has been a reallocation of capital from all of the rest of us to the rich and to the business community. The agenda for doing that has had multiple parts. Deregulation was one of the key elements of the agenda.



Mrs. Jerry Wurf



Jerry Wurf's children:  
Nicholas and Abigail

Again we cannot blame this on Reagan. It started under Carter. It continued under Clinton. Democrats and Republicans alike are responsible for this. It has been nothing short of an actual disaster.

There was the ability of corporations to avoid taxes, and changes in the tax laws took place on the funding of our governmental functions. In 1978, Proposition 13 in California was the start of the assault on the ability of municipalities and states to raise the money they need. Obviously it followed with attacks on organized labor starting with PATCO and a litany of things this audience can list far better than I can. It has also been an assault on government. Savings-and-loan deregulation, which was based on The Garn-St. Germain Depository Institutions Act of 1982 [co-sponsored by Utah Republican Senator Jake Garn and Rhode Island Democratic Representative Fernand Joseph St. Germain], led directly to the savings-and-loan crisis. These institutions diversified their lending, supporting golf courses rather than houses, mergers and acquisitions instead of mortgages. It was a complete disaster.

This is a statistic I find quite amazing on cuts in federal assistance for cities. In 1980, federal funds accounted for 22 percent of city budgets. By 1988, only eight years later, the figure dropped to 6 percent. So first there were the block grants, and then there was the cutting of the block grants.

Then there was the vision of the unipolar world. Call it the neocon vision if you will. There is the inability of the U.S. to fund and support its own social contract, but at the same time we are going

to police the world and remake the world in our own image. At huge expense to all of us.

Unfortunately, this business offensive captured major elements of the Democratic Party. There is a democracy piece here. Campaigning became more and more expensive. I can testify. I had to raise more and more money for their campaigns. All of a sudden we heard that we need a different attitude toward business and Wall Street. We cannot be these old-line Democrats.

Let me tell you a story about how fund-raising operates and the insidious impact it has. Now I was a pretty strong progressive elected official. But I had to raise a lot of money for my campaigns. One day I got the list of Sam Gejdenson's \$500 or more givers. They put me in a room with a bag of potato chips and a Diet Coke, and told me to call through the entire list. I made about fifty phone calls in three or four hours. None of the people I was calling were having trouble paying for daycare for their kids, none of the people I was calling were worried about sending their kids to college. What were they worried about? High taxes for business, intrusive regulation, environmentalists suing them. My purpose was not to do battle with them. My purpose was to get the check. I worked all night trying to figure out what I could say that I could live with myself in the morning and get the check from the person. "That is really a good point, I will have someone on my staff take a look at it, we'll have

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*"In 1980, federal funds accounted for 22 percent of city budgets. By 1988, only eight years later, the figure dropped to 6 percent."*

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