

back until we get the truth about what started this war in Iraq, why it was instigated in the first place, and why it is continuing to be carried out in such a failing manner.

POVERTY IN AMERICA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Vermont (Mr. SANDERS) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. Speaker, there is not a lot that I can add to what my colleagues have said about the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, about the hundreds of lives that have been lost and the billions of dollars in property damage that has been experienced. But perhaps in the midst of this horror, there might be a silver lining. And if there is a silver lining, it might be that we begin to take a hard look at some of the realities of America, realities that are very rarely talked about here on the floor of the House or in the media.

Clearly, one of the realities that we did observe in New Orleans is that there were thousands and thousands of people there who could not flee the flood because they did not have money, they did not have a car, and they had no place to go. And some of them died because they are poor.

But poverty exists well beyond New Orleans. The fact of the matter is that millions of Americans today live in abject, humiliating poverty. And, tragically, in the last 5 years alone, since President Bush has been in office, the number of poor people in America has grown by 5 million.

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So not only are we not addressing the problem of poverty; it is becoming significantly worse. And at a time when a lot of my colleagues talk repeatedly about family values, some 17 percent of the children in America live in poverty, which is by far the highest rate of childhood poverty in the industrialized world. Some of the other industrialized countries have poverty rates of 3, 4 percent. We are over 17 percent.

So if there is a silver lining in Hurricane Katrina, it may be, it may be, it might be that we refocus on the needs of ordinary Americans, and we make fundamental changes in the priorities that have been established in this country in the last 5 years.

Mr. Speaker, it is not just that poverty in America is increasing; it is that the middle class in this country is shrinking. We all know about the explosion in technology. We all know that worker productivity in America is rapidly rising; but in the midst of that, what we are seeing is that real wages, inflation accounted for wages, for millions and millions of workers is going down. People are working two jobs, they are working three jobs, and yet they are further behind economically than they were 20 or 30 years ago.

Mr. Speaker, in America when we talk about priorities, when we talk

about our kids, we have got to ask ourselves about our educational system and why it is that throughout this country, in Vermont and virtually every other State in America, our child care situation in America is an absolute disaster. Every psychologist will tell you that the most important years of a person's life are the first few years, and yet in America today we have kids being warehoused in America in facilities where there are inexperienced, underpaid teachers and people who are minding the children. We have millions of other Americans today who would like to go to college, but cannot afford the \$35,000 or \$40,000 a year that it costs.

To my mind we are wasting huge amounts of intellectual capital by not making college available for all Americans. It is a national disgrace that for the first time in recent years, fewer low-income kids are going to college than used to be the case.

Mr. Speaker, while the middle class is shrinking, poverty is increasing. While some 46 million Americans have no health insurance, while the average American today is paying the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs, there is another reality taking place in America, and that is that the wealthiest people in our country have never had it so good.

What we are seeing today in America is the widest gap between the rich and the poor of any industrialized nation on Earth, and it is wider in America today than at any time since the 1930s.

Mr. Speaker, to my mind a great nation is measured not by the number of billionaires it has, not by the number of nuclear weapons that it has, but in fact how we treat the least amongst us, the elderly, the sick and the poor. By that definition, we are not doing very well at all.

Mr. Speaker, while average Americans were struggling last year just to keep their heads above water economically, maybe to make a few bucks more than inflation was taking away from them, the CEOs of the Forbes largest 500 corporations in America saw a 54 percent increase in their compensation; 54 percent for the CEOs of the largest corporations, while millions of Americans are seeing a decline in their standard of living.

Mr. Speaker, in the midst of the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, in the midst of a period when we are going to be spending tens of millions of dollars rebuilding the gulf coast, at a time when we are spending \$300 billion in Iraq, our Republican friends and the President of the United States want to repeal the estate tax and provide hundreds of billions of dollars more in tax breaks for the wealthiest 2 percent who are the only people who will benefit from the repeal of the estate tax and half of those benefits are going to the richest one-tenth of 1 percent.

Yes, we can cut Medicaid by \$50 billion. Yes, we can underfund the Veterans Administration so the veterans

go on waiting lists all over America. Yes, we can have children sleeping out on the street. There is no money to take care of those needs, but apparently we have hundreds of millions to give to the wealthiest 2 percent, which will drive up our deficit, drive up our national debt and leave all of that to our children.

I would hope that common sense will prevail and that the President and Republican leadership, at a time of a record-breaking national debt, record-breaking deficits, will not give huge tax breaks for people who do not need them. Instead, let us move forward to lowering our deficit. Instead, let us pay attention to the middle class and low-income Americans who need help.

So once again, Mr. Speaker, if there is any silver lining in the disaster and the horror of Hurricane Katrina, it might be that today we begin reevaluating our priorities.

TWO AMERICAS LIVE IN THE UNITED STATES

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. KUHLMANN of New York). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 4, 2005, the gentlewoman from California (Ms. LEE) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Ms. LEE. Mr. Speaker, first, let me just remind those who are listening tonight that there have always been two Americas here in the United States. I was quite taken aback right after the very recent catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina that reporters and many individuals kept commenting that this is not America, we do not know this place, this cannot be America. But my response consistently has been, this is the America that I know and this is the America that brought many of us here to Congress.

By race or class, there are two distinct and separate societies surviving on sheer will and determination here in our own country. It just does not make sense that the richest, most powerful Nation in the world has some of the poorest, unhealthiest, and most vulnerable people in the world. In many ways, Hurricane Katrina has brought to light the shame that the United States really, quite frankly, has tried to sweep under the rug for decades.

Now, the Congressional Black Caucus has represented this hidden America for nearly 40 years in this Congress. The Congressional Black Caucus has consistently worked to eradicate poverty throughout our country. Just look at the disparities agenda put forth by the Congressional Black Caucus under the leadership of our great chairman, the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. WATT). Whether it is unemployment rates, whether it is health statistics, whether it is statistics as it relates to decent and affordable housing, the gaps are glaring. The disparities are glaring.

The disparities of poverty severely and disproportionately affect African