



MARTIN AVILLEZ

# NEW STORY FOR AMERICA

BY BILL MOYERS

The following is an adaptation of remarks made to a December 12, 2006 gathering in New York sponsored by *The Nation* magazine, *Demos* (a public policy group based in NYC), the Brennan Center for Justice (named after the late Supreme Court Justice William Brennan), and the New Democracy Project.

You could not have chosen a better time to gather. Voters have provided a respite from a rightwing radicalism predicated on the philosophy that extremism in the pursuit of virtue is no vice. It seems only yesterday that the Trojan horse of conservatism was hauled into Washington, D.C. to disgorge Newt Gingrich, Tom DeLay, Ralph Reed, Grover Norquist and their hearty band of ravenous predators masquerading as a political party of small government, fiscal restraint and moral piety and promising "to restore accountability to Congress... (and) make us all proud again of the way free people govern themselves."

Well, the long night of the junta is over, and Democrats are ebullient as they prepare to take charge of the multitrillion-dollar influence racket that we used to call the United States Congress. Let them rejoice while they can, as long as they remember that while they ran some good campaigns, they have arrived at this moment mainly because George W. Bush lost a war most people have come to believe should never have been fought in the first place. Let them remember, too, in this interim of sweet anticipation, that although they are reveling in the ruins of a Republican reign brought down by stupendous scandals, their own closet is stocked with skeletons from an era when they were routed from office following Abscam bribes and savings & loan swindles that plucked the pockets and purses of hard-working, tax-paying Americans.

As they rejoice, Democrats would be wise to be mindful of Shakespeare's counsel, "Tis more by fortune... than by merit." For they were delivered from the wilderness not by their own goodness and purity but by the grace of K Street corruption, DeLay Inc.'s duplicity, the pitiless exploitation of Terri Schiavo, the disgrace of Mark Foley and a shameful partisan coverup, the shamelessness of Jack Abramoff and a partisan conspiracy, and neocon arrogance and amorality (yes, amoral: Apparently there is no end to the number of bodies Bill Kristol and Richard Perle are prepared to watch pile up on behalf of illusions that can't stand the test of reality even one Beltway block from the think tanks where they are hatched). The Democrats could not have been more favored by the gods if they had actually believed in one!

But whatever one might say about the election, the real story is one that our political and media elites are loath to

acknowledge or address. I am not speaking of the lengthy list of priorities that progressives and liberals of every stripe are eager to put on the table now that Democrats hold the cards in Congress. Just the other day a message popped up on my computer from a progressive advocate whose work I greatly admire. Committed to movement-building from the ground up, he has results to show for his labors. His request was simple: "With changes in Congress and at our state capitol, we want your input on what top issues our lawmakers should tackle. Click here to submit your top priority."

I clicked. Sure enough, up came a list of 34 issues — an impressive list that began with "African-American" and ran alphabetically through "energy" and "higher education" to "guns," "transportation," "women's issues" and "workers' rights." It was not a list to be dismissed, by any means, for it came from an unrequited thirst for action after a long season of malignant opposition to every item on the agenda. I understand the mindset. Here's a fellow who values allies and appreciates what it takes to build coalitions; who knows that although our interests as citizens vary, each one is an artery to the heart that pumps life through the body politic, and each is important to the health of democracy. This is an activist who knows political success is the sum of many parts.

But America needs something more right now than a "must-do" list from liberals and progressives. America needs a different story. The very morning I read the message from the progressive activist, *The New York Times* reported on Carol Ann Reyes. Carol Ann Reyes is 63. She lives in Los Angeles, suffers from dementia and is homeless. Somehow she made her way to a hospital with serious untreated needs. No details were provided as to what happened to her there, except that the hospital — which is part of Kaiser Permanente, the largest HMO in the country — called a cab and sent her back to skid row. True, they phoned ahead to workers at a rescue shelter to let them know she was coming. But some hours later a surveillance camera picked her up "wandering around the streets in a hospital gown and slippers." Dumped in America.

Here is the real political story, the one most politicians will not even acknowledge: the reality of the anonymous, disquieting daily struggle of ordinary people, including the most marginalized and vulnerable Americans but also young workers and elders and parents, families and communities, searching for dignity and fairness against long odds in a cruel market world.

There's no mistaking that America is ready for a change. One of our leading analysts of public opinion, Daniel Yankelovich, reports that a majority want social cohesion and common ground based on pragmatism and compromise, patriotism and diversity. But because of the great disparities in wealth, the "shining city on the hill" has become a gated community whose

privileged occupants, surrounded by a moat of money and protected by a political system seduced with cash into subservience, are removed from the common life of the country. The wreckage of this abdication by elites is all around us.

Corporations are shedding the social compact, pensions are disappearing, median incomes are flattening and healthcare costs are soaring. In many ways, the average household is generally worse off today than it was thirty years ago, and the public sector that was a support system and safety net for millions of Americans across three generations is in tatters. For a time, stagnating wages were somewhat offset by more work and more personal debt. Both political parties craftily refashioned those major renovations of the average household as the new standard, shielding employers from responsibility for anything Wall Street didn't care about. Now, however, the more acute major risks workers have been forced to bear as employers reduce their health and retirement costs — on orders from Wall Street — have made it clear that our fortunes are being reversed. Polls show that a majority of U.S. workers now believe their children will be worse off than they are. In one recent survey, only 14% of workers said that they have obtained the American dream.

It is hard to believe that less than four decades ago a key architect of the antipoverty program, Robert Lampman, could argue that the "recent history of Western nations reveals an increasingly widespread adoption of the idea that substantial equality of social and economic conditions among individuals is a good thing." Economists call that postwar era "The Great Compression." Poverty and inequality had declined dramatically for the first time in our history. Here, as Paul Krugman recently recounted, is how *Time's* report on the national outlook in 1953 summed it up: "Even in the smallest towns and most isolated areas, the U.S. is wearing a very prosperous middle-class suit of clothes, and an attitude of relaxation and confidence. People are not growing wealthy, but more of them than ever before are getting along." African-Americans were still written out of the story, but that was changing, too, as heroic resistance emerged across the South to awaken our national conscience. Within a decade, thanks to the civil rights movement and President Johnson, the racial cast of federal policy — including some New Deal programs — was aggressively repudiated, and shared prosperity began to breach the color line.

To this day I remember John F. Kennedy's landmark speech at the Yale commencement in 1962. Echoing Daniel Bell's cold war classic *The End of Ideology*, JFK proclaimed the triumph of "practical management of a modern economy" over the "grand warfare of rival ideologies." The problem with this — and still a major problem today — is that the purported ideological cease-fire ended only a few years later. But the

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