

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB NEWSMAKER LUNCHEON WITH
REPRESENTATIVE CHARLES RANGEL
(D-NY), CHAIRMAN, HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

TOPIC: BRIDGING THE GAP: RESTORING BIPARTISANSHIP TO A DIVIDED CONGRESS

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MR. ZREMSKI: Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press
Club. My name is Jerry Zremski, and I'm Washington bureau chief for
the Buffalo News and president of the National Press Club.

I'd like to welcome club members and their guests in the audience
today, as well as those of you viewing this on C-SPAN.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards I'll ask
as many questions from the audience as time permits. Please hold your
applause during the speech so that we have time for as many questions
as possible. For our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that if
you hear applause, it may be from the guests and members of the
general public who attend our luncheons, and not necessarily from the
working press.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to
stand briefly while their names are called.

From your right, Mark Schoeff, Jr., staff writer for Workforce
Management; Heidi Glenn, senior reporter for Tax Notes; Joan Pryde,
senior editor of the Kiplinger Tax Letter; Keith Hill, editor and
writer for BNA and vice chair of the Board of Governors of the

National Press Club; Rick Dunham, national political correspondent for Business Week and past president of the National Press Club; over on this side of the podium, Angela Greiling Keane of Bloomberg, chair of the National Press Club Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our speaker, Andrew Schneider, Kiplinger Washington editor and the Speakers Committee member who organized today's event; Ian Bishop of the New York Post; Helena Andrews, staff writer for The Politico; Victoria McGrane, economics and finance reporter for Congressional Quarterly; Sheila Cherry, a reporter and editor for BNA and past president of the National Press Club; and Ryan J. Donmoyer, tax reporter for Bloomberg News. (Applause.)

The man I have the honor of introducing today has lived the American dream to the fullest. Born in Harlem and raised in the depths of the Great Depression, Congressman Charles Rangel has risen to a position of power that, especially today, most Americans would envy; he's the federal lawmaker with the most influence on the U.S. Tax Code.

But Charlie Rangel is much more than the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. He's a war hero who won a Bronze Star and the Purple Heart while serving in Korea.

He is a tireless advocate for civil rights and the interests of the poor and a staunch foe of drugs and violent crime, and he has been one of the strongest and most consistent congressional opponents of the Bush White House over the war in Iraq.

Congressman Rangel recently wrote a memoir called, "And I Haven't Had a Bad Day Since: From the Streets of Harlem to the Halls of Congress," and it's quite a story. After his discharge from the Army in 1952, he packed the remaining two years of his high school education into a single year, then went on to earn his college degree from New York University and his law degree from St. John's in 1960. After representing central Harlem in the New York State Assembly for four years, he challenged and defeated long-time incumbent Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. in a primary. Congressman Rangel is now in his 19th term representing the 15th New York Congressional District.

Early in his career as a member of the House Judiciary Committee, he participated in the impeachment hearings against then-President Richard Nixon. In 1975, upon making the switch from the Judiciary Committee to the Ways and Means Committee, one of his senior colleagues told him he was crazy to make the move, that no one ever left Judiciary, and that he'd be a freshman for 30 years.

Well, 32 years later he still works with the enthusiasm of a freshman, but you might say he has a bit more clout now. And he's using that clout to work in a bipartisan fashion with the top Republican on the committee, Jim McCrery of Louisiana. In fact, the topic of Congressman Rangel's talk today is bridging the gap, restoring bipartisanship to a divided Congress.

Ladies and gentlemen, here on tax-deadline day it is my distinct privilege to introduce you to the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Congressman Charles Rangel of New York. (Applause.)

REP. RANGEL: Thank you very much. (Continued applause.) Thank you, Mr. President, and thank Angela and Andrew and Melinda and the staff that made this all possible.

For a lot of you who don't know me or of me, I want you to know that I've told most of the people in my family and friends that if and when I become chairman of the awesome and powerful Ways and Means Committee, that I didn't want to be treated any differently than any other world leader, and that's just -- (laughter, laughs).

But we were talking up here about my longevity, and I tell people that when George Washington first asked me to run -- (laughter) -- that I had declined. But one of the most beautiful experiences I've had in working here were the friends that I've been able to make on both sides of the aisle. If I could think of any one legislator that allowed me to appreciate the system, the institution, the value of law-making, it was Tip O'Neill.

And since that time, the House has become such a hostile environment to work under. I remember once when Clay Shaw from Florida was in the hospital, and he came back and I had sent him some flowers or something, and he came over to sit on my side of the aisle, on the Democratic side of the aisle, and we talked mainly about our family and some other things, trips we had made together. And as soon as he got up to go to the other side, a young Democrat, who I did not even know his name at that time, said, "Now, what was that all about?"

And so those kind of tensions even built as we found the Republicans trying to make certain that it was not the party and its philosophy that was demonized, but it was the members who happened to be Democrats. And needless to say, in politics, as in human life, those people, young Democrats who were challenged, retaliated, and you had a situation where there was a degree of hostility not only on the floor but in the committees.

And this was really exaggerated when you saw the few days that were spent in Washington, D.C., as young lawmakers had to decide whether they were going to spend time in Washington or more time back home, and the inflation of the price of homes went up, we never really got a chance to know each other. There was no real need to talk with each other. The whole idea of having hearings and discussions and amendments and debates was unnecessary because the law was made before it came to the floor. And we lost a lot of good moderate Republicans, especially in my state, as they were forced to bend to the will of the leadership in the Republican party in order to make what they called a "permanent" Republican majority.

And so there was a time that I was thinking about not serving out this term if we didn't get the majority, not because I wanted to have the power of the chairman, but because I couldn't tolerate the whole idea that going to work meant which fight were you going to participate in, and not which bill were you going to try to get passed.

But when we did win, then I realized that I could not afford to be a part of what I'd been complaining about, and that is the

partisanship. And so I had a friend in the White House, Hank Paulson, and I knew that he was leaving in two years. And I also knew that he had the jurisdiction in the executive branch that I would enjoy in the Ways and Means Committee.

And I told him that there was a time that the Ways and Means Committee not only had a camaraderie but because of the complexity of the legislation that came to our committee, that partisanship had nothing and no solution to any problem that we faced; and then, as now, I cannot conceive of having a trade bill that would be partisan, or thinking that there was a Democratic or Republican way to solve the tax complexities that we have, or the Social Security problems; and that I had hoped that if I could establish a relationship with the Republican majority, that we could at least see from the White House point of view, as long as I didn't have to deal with Cheney and the president -- (laughter) -- whether he would provide the liaison to show what we could do and not what we would be fighting about; and without suggesting to the president as to what language should be used in his proposal, that perhaps if it was screened through a guy like the secretary of Treasury, it could not have the bite of partisanship that would have the Republican -- have the Democratic majority to just dismiss it as another political tool that they would be using.

I then walked over to McCrery's office. And like I said, people were asking, "Do you think you can really work with McCrery?" I didn't even know who the hell McCrery was. I mean, I knew the name, and the only time I ever heard from him is when I took a shot or two at Thomas, and he would, you know, defend him. But I hardly listened to his response.

But I walked over to tell him that I had this discussion with the White House and wondered whether he could see his way clear to talk about, because the Republicans had nowhere to go, they had no coattails for the next election, and we Democrats had not proven or had the opportunity to prove that we earned the right to be in the majority.

And further, as I said earlier, some of the problems that we face as a nation in the Congress would not be able to be accomplished in a partisan way -- Social Security, tax reform, the AMT.

And so I really think that that was the beginning of one of the nicest friendships that I've enjoyed in the Congress. And we go to meetings together. As a matter of fact, he -- I invited him to come here. Since this is the prestigious newsmakers, I thought since my dull speech wouldn't make news, if I showed up with the Republican minority member, that would make news. So I told him that. And he said that I should feel free to tell you that he would have enjoyed being with me this afternoon, but since he heard on some TV show called "Power Lunch" that I had been kind to him, that he was going to be on that saying nice things about me, and I should share that with you. (Laughter.)

We've had -- matter of fact, we've only had three bills that have left the Congress, small bills. But we got applause from the House and visitors from the Senate because for the first time in a decade, we've had the chairman and the ranking member on the same pieces of

legislation. What did we talk about? We wanted to find out whether there was anything that was so complex that if people did not have a political problem with it that we couldn't resolve. And out of all of the things within the jurisdiction of our committee, the Medicare fiscal condition was the only thing that we said to leave that alone if we want to get anything done, until we can do something with the deficit.

In the areas of the -- say the alternative minimum tax, that is the easiest thing to fix. The only thing is where do you get the money to fix it? This is a tax that there's no legislative political or national justification why some people were pushed into a bracket that they were unintended to be in because of our failure to index the AMT for inflation. And each year that we don't do anything about it, kicking the can down the road, makes the problem even more difficult. Twenty-three million people suffer the burden of the AMT. About 7 million people in the middle class under that do not enjoy the benefits of the Bush tax cuts.

If we were to try to do simplification and squeeze out all of the deductions and all of the credits that are no longer necessary or not too popular, we would be able not only to deal with simplification, but to go after the \$340 billion, \$345 billion that the IRS says is in the income tax gap. After we do that, it is my opinion that we can then take the rates within the system that's left and readjust them, and perhaps give an assistance to the poor through an expanded EITC or an income tax credit; certainly adjust to make certain the burden of the middle class and the AMT people is removed, and we would then have a \$1 trillion tax cut, which is what the AMT would be picking up in the extended taxes over the next 10 years.

People would say, well, where would you get the trillion dollars? You get the trillion dollars from the tax code, by making adjustment in the brackets. So far, McCreery has gone just far enough to say, where do you get the money? And he is working on a flat tax type of thing, which of course would generate a lot of money but would have to eliminate either the income tax system or the social security system. It would be very costly in terms of what a flat tax might do.

In any event, in order to make certain that Jim and I don't have a problem, our staff works together, not just on things that we want to do in common but they fiercely compete with each other, knowing that if it's not a healthy competition, some staff member is in trouble. That means on almost every issue that we've had, we know what the problems are. And rather than talk, discuss and argue about it, we start immediately seeing how we can resolve it.

With the trade, it's one of the most difficult things. I was discussing it with Andrew. You write for a trade magazine?

MR. : I write for Kiplinger.

REP. RANGEL: I'm going to say something nice then -- (laughter) -- because I've shared with you things that we're going through.

And the Republicans actually wanted to establish a trade policy that maybe Democrats and Republicans can argue about some small items

in the trade bill, but things that we were interested in, the United States trade representatives would not even discuss with us. Oh, yes, they would listen. But at the end of the day when the trade bill was presented for an up-and-down vote, none of the recommendations that we made was there, because Thomas did not want Democratic input.

And as a result, many Republicans, not only in this but in other issues, moderate Republicans who were willing to see things in our way, not a Democratic way but they thinking it was the right way, were forced to abandon that type of independence and to vote the Democratic line. It happened in health care; it happened in trade. And it happened in a lot of other areas, so that you can see that many moderate Republicans, because they bent to the DeLay rule that it had to be a Republican majority, were defeated -- three of my very good friends in New York State -- not good enough, didn't support the Democrat -- but some pretty nice guys that I've known over the years.

And so, as most of you know, the Constitution provides that the issue of trade, interstate trade and commerce is reserved to the Congress. But because you can't have 535 negotiators dealing with trade, we give the lawyers power of attorney to the president, but we reserve the power of the Congress when we do that. So naturally, what we did is take all of the things that were rejected by the USTR when there was a Republican majority and to include those things that had been rejected. And those things, like I said, are child labor; slave labor; the ability of people that have life-threatening diseases, to allow our pharmaceuticals to break the intellectual property laws for the purpose of helping them; other health provisions; and the major ones which cause the most controversy is establishing some basic labor rights for the workers, hoping that we can provide a way for them to become middle class and to be able to buy our exports and to be able to say that we did not allow people of wealth just to misuse the peasants' rights.

In all of the CAFTA provisions that we asked to come in, the foreign ministers and the leaders of these countries and the peasants of these countries and the religious leaders of these countries wanted them included; of course, they were excluded. And after negotiation with the administration, we will get them to include, in all of the objectives the Democrats wanted to get in -- they agreed to allow this to be folded not only into this but to be in the basis of the president's fast track authority.

Recently -- or just after the Democrats had agreed to it, the Republicans had agreed to it and certain people in the White House agreed to it, the theory came up that there are provisions in the International Labor Organization rules that are not in our labor standards, and that Grassley had some theory that U.S. unions would go to the developing countries and agitate them to sue us, and then the World Trade Organization would establish our labor law -- not policy, law, which is pretty creative -- except that some Republicans said that instead of U.S. labor doing it, that it would be Chavez, Hugo Chavez would fund them to do these things, and at the end of the day they would be able to say that they were creating our labor laws.

Well, it doesn't make any sense. But that's what is holding up -- oh, no, they would then want a provision in the tax bill that would

isolate the United States government from any liability for violations on our part. So you can see why that's a stickler. But we're still working on it and hope we can find the language that Democrats and Republicans can agree on.

And so we don't know where we're going with these major things, but we do hope -- that's McCreary and I -- who, incidentally, have been given a fair degree of independence. I say that because we haven't had any problem with our leadership. But we don't have any reason to believe that if we are able through our leadership on the committee to bring our committee members, which has been absolutely remarkable, that it would put our leaders in the position that they would realize that what we are doing would be good for the Congress and would be good for the country.

And so we are having an exciting time in doing this. We don't know how much we have in our savings accounts of comity, but we're prepared to use it if we think that we can win. And he asked me to share with you, watching what we're trying to do and hopefully, where it's possible, to be able to give us some support, because we truly believe that that's what our country really wants, to see us working together for the best interests of the people of our great country.

Thank you so much. (Applause.)

I get a cup out of this, don't I?

MR. ZREMSKI: You certainly do get a cup out of this. (Laughter.) But not yet.

REP. RANGEL: Okay.

MR. ZREMSKI: (Chuckles.) We have about 25 minutes of questions before the cup is officially awarded --

REP. RANGEL: Okay.

MR. ZREMSKI: -- thirty-five minutes of questions, actually.

First of all, a bunch of questions about bipartisanship. First of all, how did the spirit of bipartisanship break down in the House over the last two decades? And what lessons can you learn to that -- from that as you're trying to change the tenor?

REP. RANGEL: (Sighs.) I don't know what lessons you can learn, but there's no question that Newt Gingrich felt that not only should the 40 years of Democratic leadership be shattered, but that it be converted into a permanent Republican-type majority. And that's when I referred to the fact that the negative -- the monies that was put into negative campaigning when they took office caused Democrats to use the same sword. And it's like in anything in your life: that if you really believe that someone doesn't like you, if you just believe it, and you demonstrate it, you can bet your life they won't like you.

And this just builds up. And someone says something unpleasant, and then it hits the floor, and it's generated to elections.

And I think that the large amount of money that have been raised by all the presidential candidates and the length of time that they have to campaign is going to be such a temptation for negative TV campaigning to take place. And it's a strong candidate that takes negative campaigning, knowing how effective it is, that doesn't retaliate. And that has been our problem.

MR. ZREMSKI: Hm.

You talk about bipartisanship in terms of the leadership of the established parties. What do you think of the attempt to start a major effort to launch a third-party presidential candidate?

REP. RANGEL: Forget about it. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Forget about it? (Chuckles.)

REP. RANGEL: When did I say anything about bipartisanship between the leaders of the party --

MR. ZREMSKI: No, you said between the establishment parties. I didn't say the leadership. Between the two parties.

REP. RANGEL: I thought you did.

MR. ZREMSKI: Did I?

REP. RANGEL: The only thing that I was talking about was the Ways and Means Committee. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: (Chuckles.)

Do you see any signs, beyond the Ways and Means Committee, of this bipartisan spirit continuing elsewhere in the House?

REP. RANGEL: That's very difficult, because I think the Republicans and Democrats believe that the war is actually consuming the oxygen between the people and the president, and therefore the Congress and the president. And there doesn't seem to be any room for compromise as it relates to the bill that we -- the war supplemental bill. I wish that there was. But I think there's a degree of polarization there that would restrict it.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay. A lot of questions about Ways and Means Committee business. First of all, what are the top three things you would want to change about the tax code?

REP. RANGEL: I have said, even though we haven't created a track that I can ride on, that I really think that poverty and lack of education is the biggest threat that we have to our national security. That's maybe long range.

But right now I think the AMT is the thing that we will be focusing on as our main objective to remove that permanently.

MR. ZREMSKI: Republicans have taken a firm position that they won't accept any tax increase to fund AMT repeal. Given that stance,

is there any real hope you can find Republicans that will be able to embrace your AMT approach?

REP. RANGEL: Well, I said that it would be paid for within the code and it would be revenue-neutral.

MR. ZREMSKI: Might that be portrayed as a tax increase, though, if you had to raise the rates?

REP. RANGEL: Well, the way I look at it, Jerry, is that 23 million people have the AMT; 7 million would not have received the benefit of the Bush tax cut. That's 30 million taxpayers that would receive a trillion dollar tax cut. I guess you're right, when you get to the upper bracket. (Laughter, scattered applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Would you support the push by the nation's freight railroads to get a tax credit for money they spend expanding their infrastructure?

REP. RANGEL: Everything on every issue has to be on the table, not only the benefits, the tax benefits that people receive now, as I said earlier, but certainly it would be in competition with people who are expecting tax breaks or tax incentives. We certainly know -- one of the things I didn't mention as it relates to alternative energy sources that we will be raising money for the purposes of giving incentives to alternatives.

MR. ZREMSKI: There's been a great deal of attention lately on the tax treatment of hedge funds and private equity companies, especially with regards to how fund managers are compensated. Are you planning to address this in any legislation?

REP. RANGEL: We plan to address all of those things, which will include local and state taxes, mortgage interest deduction and charitable contributions. What we intend to do about it is something else! (Chuckles; laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: How long will it take to get fundamental tax reform? And will the tax system end up being flatter as a result?

REP. RANGEL: (Chuckles.) Well, as I pointed out, there's no question that my Republican counterpart would like to see something done. What I didn't mention is that we're taking on the major tax issue, whether it's trade or taxes or health care, the ones that we think that we can best resolve in a bipartisan way. So as of now, all of our subcommittees are working in a bipartisan way to report to us as to where they think there's some degree of unanimity.

MR. ZREMSKI: What does your committee plan to do about the continuing reduction of tax revenues from corporations while the American wage-earner's share of tax revenues continues to go up?

REP. RANGEL: Review it.

MR. ZREMSKI: Review it. (Laughs; laughter.) And then?

REP. RANGEL: We don't know. Let me make it clear that Jim and I

are going to do not what is the most important thing, but what we can do together. And what we cannot do, we're prepared to bite the bullet to make it more easy for the next Congress to deal with the very, very difficult things. And we have the cooperation of Hank Paulson to do it. And so even if the committee can't get around to it, we don't have to be stuck with what we have dealt with before, we can come up with plans that we may not have the money to resolve, but certainly that could be accepted as a road map for the next Congress. What we're going to do first will all depend on what degree of unanimity we can get on the issues.

MR. ZREMSKI: Is there any hope for the renewal of fast-track negotiating authority this year?

REP. RANGEL: Yes. First of all, as relates to Doha, that claims that they got new life and that they need fast track in order to continue, we are prepared to give a restricted fast track limited to the Doha convention.

But everything that I said about having a foreign policy -- a trade policy, rather, that's bipartisan, that would necessarily be a part of any fast track agreement that we would have with the executive.

MR. ZREMSKI: How important is policy toward workers who have lost their jobs due to trade in the debate over renewing trade promotion authority? And what are the specific changes you would want to see in trade adjustment assistance?

REP. RANGEL: I meant to say that that is also a part of what we hope to be a bipartisan trade policy; that is -- excuse me --

MR. ZREMSKI: Sure.

(Pause.)

REP. RANGEL: Trade and Lou Dobbs and anyone who's lost a job -- trade is going to take a hit for it. We recognize that if we don't move forward in trade and be competitive, that we'll be moving far behind.

So it's not only necessary that -- in my opinion that we give our U.S. firms a fair advantage in competition, but they have to help us remove the stigma that our businesses just don't care who is hurt. And so included in our document is that the U.S. Trade Representative should take in consideration what U.S. industries are going to be impacted; what globalization would do in terms of affecting communities, even if it's not related to trade; and how, as our multinationals can go in developing countries and train the people to be productive -- how they can take a look at (our ?) cities and counties that are economically depressed and be of assistance to them; and lastly, to get back to the question of education and poverty and national security, to play some role as a partner with the United States so that we don't have to depend on importing people that have knowledge of technology but to make certain that we improve our school systems so that we Americans can once again have esteem in believing that if it can be done well, we can do it better through training.

MR. ZREMSKI: Colombia's vice president said yesterday that he planned to give you a detailed response to questions you raised about Colombia's labor laws. Were you satisfied with his responses? And do you see Congress approving the Colombia Free Trade Deal?

REP. RANGEL: I met with him late last night, and his response to our request of May of last year has not yet been studied by staff.

MR. ZREMSKI: Will Congress pass the minimum wage bill this year, and what is the likelihood that the president would sign it?

REP. RANGEL: Well, the House passed a minimum wage bill without any tax cuts, and the Senate then sent the bill -- could not send the bill to us because constitutionally it would have to emanate from the House.

In order to assist in establishing some type of preparation for a conference, the leadership of the House agreed to put a \$1.3 billion bill together designed really to protect small employers and job opportunity and tax (prevention?). And we paid for it. When we sent that over to the Senate, they attached an \$8.3 billion tax cut, much of it not going to small businesses.

Recently we put a whole package in the supplemental package, and I'm working with the committee to see what we're willing to accept since they have a \$12 million tax cut, which we think that they put it in there just to get our attention, and we have a 1.3. We're anxious to go to conference because we want very badly the minimum wage bill.

MR. ZREMSKI: What sort of tax provisions would you be looking for in those negotiations, and would they primarily be addressing small business?

REP. RANGEL: Yes, that would be the mandate the leadership would give me going into conference. And I might add that Jim McCrery completely agrees with our approach to dealing with tax cuts.

MR. ZREMSKI: Will there be any additional action in Congress to protect workers' pensions from underfunding, plan freezes, and terminations now that the Pension Protection Act has been enacted?

REP. RANGEL: I can't answer that. But we have yet to establish our full agenda. This afternoon I'll be meeting with Chairman Baucus, and before the week is out, I'll be talking with Jim, McCrery to see whether we can get a compatible agenda not only on our committee, but working with Grassley and Baucus.

MR. ZREMSKI: More than 40 million Americans are without health care insurance. Will you use your position as chair of the Ways and Means Committee to try to press for universal coverage? And do you favor a single-payer plan?

REP. RANGEL: Yes, to the last two questions. But we think that's too big a task for us to handle.

But 48 million people without coverage -- we have now found new friends coming to the table and wanting to see whether we can work out

something. Manufacturers have claimed that they are paying more for health care than they are for steel and other necessary expenses. And we're trying to convince them that they're competing with companies that come from countries where education and health care is not considered a subsidy, and that unless they can come and try to find some way that they can share on this side of the ocean, then they'll be at a disadvantage. So we're not confident, but we are optimistic that we can do something in this Congress to deal with the 48 million.

MR. ZREMSKI: Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt said this morning on C-SPAN's Washington Journal that House and Senate bills to authorize the government to negotiate lower Medicare drug prices with the pharmaceutical companies would be unnecessary. Because both the Congressional Budget Office under the Republican Congress and the present Democratic Congress have said that there would be no real cost savings from those sorts of negotiations. Is Mr. Leavitt right, or is such legislation necessary?

REP. RANGEL: The legislation that we have supported authorizes the secretary to negotiate. I don't see why people would be so upset just in going near this relationship between Medicare and the pharmaceuticals. If indeed he has the authority and sorts not to use it, the only thing that he has to worry about is oversight. And they haven't been used to this in a long time. But we don't say there's a mandate. We say the secretary is authorized, and they've had more press conferences than we have on this, with the exception of Gonzales and those other things. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Should Paul Wolfowitz resign from the World Bank?

REP. RANGEL: I'm staying away from that. (Laughter.) The next question may be, why? (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Well, the next question is, how do you rate his judgment from Iraq to getting his girlfriend a promotion and a raise?

REP. RANGEL: You may get me, but not on that. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay, actually, we have a lot of very serious questions here about Iraq and about what happened yesterday at Virginia Tech, and let me just ask a question about that.

In light of the tragedy at Virginia Tech, how do you feel about the nation's current gun control laws? Should they be more strict? And should the Second Amendment be repealed?

REP. RANGEL: No on the last. I don't think so. If you're hunting and are accurate enough not to shoot people in the face, I don't really think that -- (laughter) -- your gun right should be taken away from you. But it seems to me that someone with an automatic weapon committing the type of atrocities, and the painfulness, that should be enough to try to put some control over automatic pistols.

I'm working with Mayor Bloomberg, and he's established about 30 or 40 mayors, and I'm organizing -- me and Peter King -- the congressional delegation to say the Congress has to do something. I

know that the national rifle club is very powerful, but I really believe that -- when someone asked a member how many people in his district supported gun control, he said 85 percent. They said, "Why do you always vote against it?" He said, "The 15 percent are organized." I think we have to be organized. It just doesn't make any sense to have these type of weapons out there that have nothing to do with hunting.

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you think the tragedy that happened yesterday could change the political debate on this issue at all?

REP. RANGEL: I asked that question in a group of Democrats today, and the people that I expected to say no said no. It's a regional thing, it's a cultural thing and it's a sad thing, but it's some type of cult: "Don't touch; don't take the gun from my dead, cold hands."

And I don't understand it, but obviously there is a political difference of opinion on that.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay, now on Iraq. Now that the Shi'a ministers of the Iraqi government have resigned because Iraqi President Allawi has refused to set a date for the withdrawal of foreign troops, do you think that the Bush administration would look more favorably at the benchmarks in the military funding bills in the Senate and the House?

REP. RANGEL: Okay, here goes the speech. You asked for it.

I have no idea what's on my president's mind as it relates to our involvement in the Middle East, even if you remember long enough that not one reason that he gave for us sending our troops into harm's way exists today. And this whole idea that American soldiers, through a surge, is going to be able to resolve the problems that these people have had in this area for centuries is totally unbelievable.

Here we come from a great republic that's trying to work out its race problems, acting as though we have the capacity to work out these cultural problems. And really what gets me -- it is two basic things. One, if the enemy was to say that she wanted to surrender tomorrow, just whom would we take the surrender papers to? Where will the victory be?

And I wish somebody would tell me, what is the role of our so-called friends in that area that understand these people and supposed to be our friends? The Egyptians, which we give billions of dollars every year to be nice to Israel, have not come to do anything to assist us in resolving this (area ?) to their satisfaction; certainly not ours. I don't know how many Americans go to sleep at night wondering whether the Shi'ites or the Sunnis are going to win.

When it comes to the Saudis, 15 or 16 of those who knocked down our World Trade building came from Saudi Arabia. And yet they spend more time at Crawford ranch than any Democrats I know. But I can't think of one thing that they've offered to contribute. And the king of Jordan, he's on TV more than me, and you would think that he would say, "Look, we made a mistake. Let us all come together and see whether we can help resolve it."

And so I end up saying if the president is only getting his information from the vice president, we've got a problem here, a very serious problem. And I don't see how our troops can resolve this issue.

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you think the invasion of Iraq has made another 9/11 more or less likely?

REP. RANGEL: Oh, come on. Next question. The connection between -- I mean, if (Saddam Hussein is ?) in Afghanistan, and we wanted to knock off Saddam Hussein years before 9/11, there's no connection, absolutely none.

And how in the heck -- and the president just said it recently. If we don't kill them over there, they're going to come kill us over here. Why should we not have a mandatory program of national service to have enough people here looking out for the terrorists than sending people in harm's way in Iraq? I don't think anyone takes that type of talk seriously. I hope not.

MR. ZREMSKI: How different would the war have turned out if we did have a draft rather than an all-volunteer military?

REP. RANGEL: There would not have been a war. If people thought for one minute that knocking off Saddam Hussein meant putting their children in harm's way, or if there were enough people in the Congress who understood it, or even now, if they've attended as many funerals as some of us have, and knowing that a draft would be imminent, it wouldn't happen.

MR. ZREMSKI: With the Army and the Marine Corps admittedly stretched thin, do you think your bill to reinstitute the draft will have new life?

REP. RANGEL: No. The troops would be brought back home.

MR. ZREMSKI: Pardon me?

REP. RANGEL: The troops would be brought back home. Where can you get the troops? These guys are exhausted. They're our National Guard. They're our Reservists. They're volunteers. They're gone over three, four, five times. Every one of them is thinking on a new tour, "Is it my turn now? Have I been lucky? Am I going to get shot?"

And so it's going to reach a point that you will not be able to continue to send them there. And then they'll talk, as they do now, about the draft. And then the president will know that he has to bring the troops home.

MR. ZREMSKI: Might it become necessary, given how overly taxed our military has become, for us to do a draft?

REP. RANGEL: Doing a draft means getting members to vote for it, and that's not going to happen. We're not going to get any members to vote for sending their sons and daughters on a mission of surge in the

Middle East. Do you think so? (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: I'm not supposed to have opinions. I'm supposed to read questions from a card.

REP. RANGEL: Sounds like a Republican here. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: That's not what my readers say --

REP. RANGEL: (Laughs.)

MR. ZREMSKI: -- (judging from ?) some of the e-mails. (Laughter.)

Okay, here's a good one. (Laughter.) You've said that the Bush administration's rationale for invading Iraq was "the biggest fraud ever committed on the people of this country." How do you defend this strong statement?

REP. RANGEL: Well, we've lost 3,500 Americans; 30,000 seriously wounded. Hundreds of thousands of people have died. And the reason we lost them is because the president made the decision to make an appeal to the Congress for the authority to go to war. And the reasons that he set was that there was weapons of mass destruction, that Saddam Hussein was directly connected with 9/11, that he also was connected with al Qaeda. And so none of those things was proven to be true.

Now, we could say that the president was not enough -- wasn't intelligent enough to understand the intelligence reports. Or we could say, "Give the guy a break. He's never left Texas except to visit Mexico, so how should he know?" (Laughter.) Or we should say that everybody who was around him at the time indicating that he should follow Osama bin Laden, that he insisted that he wanted to get Saddam Hussein.

Now, maybe in these nice, prestigious halls I should find a word that's more sophisticated. But in Harlem, it's fraud.

MR. ZREMSKI: If it is the biggest fraud ever committed on the people of this country, why have you not joined Elizabeth Holtzman and others in calling for President Bush and Vice President Cheney's impeachment?

REP. RANGEL: Dick Cheney?

MR. ZREMSKI: Vice President Cheney and the president of the United States.

REP. RANGEL: Not enough votes.

MR. ZREMSKI: Is that the only reason? Do you think, in principle, it's called for?

REP. RANGEL: Well, since, as a former prosecutor, I would know that an impeachment is something like a grand jury -- you're not saying anyone's guilty of anything, that you're searching for the

truth -- but it is a war, whether we like it or not. And as an American and as a patriot, I really don't believe, in times of war, that you should impeach both the president and vice president. Then we had Rumsfeld who was (here ?). It just didn't look like a good idea at the time. But keep pushing, though.

MR. ZREMSKI: How about one or the other?

REP. RANGEL: I said this, I think, is not the time. That was said when we were in the minority. I think we've got a better strategy.

MR. ZREMSKI: The Congressional Black Caucus has listed you as a hypocrite -- so says this questioner -- because, while Representatives Waters, Lee and John Lewis are both opposed to the war and to the funding, you would vote to fund it. How would you respond?

REP. RANGEL: Well, we did not have enough votes to get everything cut off, because we thought that most Americans believed -- which is not so -- that by cutting off the funds for the war completely that we could not provide for the funds to bring the troops back home.

So for whatever reason, we didn't have the votes there. And I wanted to make certain that I fulfilled the mandate of the American people, who were concerned about the war. The only way we could effectively do that is to get 218 votes and to put a timetable. I don't think the timetable is nearly as important as telling the president that our constituents want us out of there.

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you think the Bush administration is trying to build democracy in the Middle East, or is there another agenda at play? And what might that be?

REP. RANGEL: I have no -- I wish I could find out why the president is so adamant and aggressively pursuing this war in the Middle East.

And if he's talking about democracies, you know, we've spent a lot of time -- Red China, Vietnam. There are disputes all over the world that we can invest our time in and have a better idea and assurances that it would be successful than in the Middle East. As I pointed out, the problems of the Middle East are centuries old. And I cannot see why he would just pick this one place to decide to cast his bucket for democracy than the Middle East. It's a very difficult task.

MR. ZREMSKI: Jimmy Carter was at the Press Club recently, and he argues that Israel is imposing a system of apartheid on the Palestinians, and that both parties in Congress are complicit. What's your reaction?

REP. RANGEL: All I've heard was President Clinton saying that he was misunderstood, and that's not what he meant, and his supporters say the same thing, and I haven't read the book.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay. A couple of political questions here.

REP. RANGEL: You're kidding. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: We got to it eventually. Your PAC reported some impressive fundraising numbers for the first quarter. Does that tell you that the campaign finance system is working or is broken?

REP. RANGEL: It means that, and I don't know why, but I've acquired a whole lot of new friends since January. (Laughter.) I don't know why that would be. But a reporter asked me that, and the bottom question was, what do you use it for? And I told him 75,000 (dollars) went to the freshman new members and 400,000 (dollars) went to the DCCC. And that in my 38 years, I've not asked anybody ever for a contribution, so it has to be love. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay. We've almost run out of time. We have one more political question yet to come. But before that, I just have a couple of announcements to make. First of all, if I could remind our audience of our upcoming speakers. On April 24th, Jim Nicholson, the secretary of Veterans Affairs will be here. On April 25th, Sam Waterston, the actor and the star of NBC's "Law & Order" will discuss "Unity '08: People doing what politicians won't." And on May 4th, Bobby Rahal, the racing legend and the owner Rahal Letterman Racing will be here to discuss "The Greening of Racing: Ethanol powers the Indianapolis 500."

Second of all, the moment you've been waiting for, the National Press Club mug and a certificate for your wall.

(Applause.)

REP. RANGEL: Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay, our last question -- a political question. If Rudy Giuliani gets the Republican presidential nomination and Hillary Clinton gets the Democratic presidential nomination, won't New York's electoral votes, unlike the last five times, be up for grabs?

REP. RANGEL: Well, if Giuliani gets the Republican nomination with Kerik as his partner, I don't think we'll have any problems.

MR. ZREMSKI: I don't think he's going to be the running mate.

REP. RANGEL: Well, I didn't think Giuliani would be the candidate. (Laughter.) But you can't have Giuliani without Kerik -- (laughter) -- take my word for it.

MR. ZREMSKI: You would know.

(Applause.)

Thank you very much, Congressman Rangel.

And I'd like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booze and Howard Rothman for organizing

today's lunch. Also thanks to the NPC library for its research.

The video archive of today's luncheon is provided by the National Press Club's broadcast information operation center. Press Club members can also access free transcripts of our luncheons at our website www.press.org.

Thank you. We're adjourned.

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