

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH CONGRESSMAN JOHN CONYERS

SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN JOHN CONYERS, JR., CHAIRMAN OF THE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE AND DEAN OF THE CONGRESSIONAL BLACK CAUCUS, WILL ADDRESS THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB AT A LUNCHEON ON FRIDAY, JULY 24.

MODERATOR: DONNA LEINWAND, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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DONNA LEINWAND: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon. Welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Donna Leinwand. I'm a reporter with *USA Today*, and I'm president of the National Press Club.

We're the world's leading professional organization for journalists and we're committed to a future of journalism by providing informative programming and journalism education and fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, please visit our website at www.press.org.

And on behalf of our 3,500 members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and our guests in the audience today. I'd also like to welcome those of you who are watching on C-Span.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards, I will ask as many questions from the audience as time permits. Please hold your applause during the speech so 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 when their names are called. From your right, John Peterson, senior vice president of APCO Worldwide, and a former Washington correspondent for *The Detroit News*, and a former member of the National Press Club's board of governors; Larry Bivins of Gannett News Service, also a former member of the NPC board of governors.

Dr. Patricia Berg, Weiner Public News, and a member of the National Press Club and a professor at George Washington University Medical School; Dick Ryan, a retired reporter for *The Detroit News* and a past president of the National Press Club; Gail Dixon, member station board WPFW Pacifica, and a guest of Congressman Conyers; Perry Apelbaum, chief counsel of the House Judiciary Committee.

Skipping over myself for a second, Angela Greiling Keane of Bloomberg News, and chair of the NPC Speakers Committee. Skipping over our guest, Bob Weiner, NPC Speaker Committee member who organized today's luncheon, and a national columnist. Thank you very much, Bob. Marcia Dyson, Georgetown University's Center for Social Justice, a guest of Congressman Conyers; Reverend Barbara Reynolds, a radio host and columnist; Deb Price of *The Detroit News*; and finally, Irv Chapman of Bloomberg Radio. (Applause.)

Washington Post journalist, Jack Anderson, once called our guest today, "...a junkyard dog investigator, watching out for taxpayers' wallets by rooting out fraud, waste, and abuse." And surely, there's been no shortage of that in the 40 plus years that Representative John Conyers, Jr. has served in the House of Representatives as a Democrat from Michigan.

Congressman Conyers is the second longest serving House member. And before winning his own seat, he served as an aide to the longest serving congressman, John Dingell, also of Michigan. That means, by the way, he's been reelected 22 times. (Applause.)

And along the way, there have been great achievements and some great controversies. Among his claims to fame, he is a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus. He is an original enemy on President Nixon's enemies list-- (Applause.) --and he introduced the first bill in Congress to make Martin Luther King, Jr. Day a national holiday.

Congressman Conyers now chairs the powerful House Judiciary Committee where he has been an outspoken critic of President Bush's policies regarding interrogation of terrorism suspects and warrantless wiretapping. And he hasn't hesitated to use his committee's power to pursue investigations into those policies. He's also front and center in the national health insurance debate as a long-time advocate of the single payer system in which the government would provide healthcare to every American.

We look forward to hearing his take on what now appears to be the stalled healthcare bill. Please join me in welcoming to the National Press Club, Congressman John Conyers. (Applause.)

CONGRESSMAN JOHN CONYERS: Thank you, Donna, for a well prepared introduction. I drew that one up myself and you delivered it remarkably well.

To everyone here, the head table and all of you, many of my friends, I'm happy to see you out here today — Weiner and Pat, Dick Ryan from way, way back, Larry Bivins, John Peterson, April Ryan, Barbara Reynolds, Dave McConnell, Deb Price, and the few friends that I've invited, my staff and all of you here. This is a great time to have a discussion for a few minutes as to where I think we are.

And so I wanted to-- I've always asked my staff to over-prepare me. And they didn't let me down today. We've got 29 pages plus some books and things that I ask about. And then I always go off on my own anyway. But this is a great help, though. Nothing like it.

There were five things that I wanted to squeeze into fifteen to twenty minutes. And we can talk about them. Eric Holder must appoint a special counsel to review the Bush Administration abuses of power and misconduct, a criminal probe. He's got to do that. And that's why I love being at the Press Club. You'll hear about this. I do not have to call him or send-- 'Course he knows how I feel anyway, so. Eric and I go back a long ways.

Number two, I've got a bill that calls for a blue ribbon panel about the same thing. And so why, chairman, do you need both? Well because a special counsel is not going to work in the public. They have to work confidentially of course. And so we need a 9/11 type panel, no congressmen on it (I wouldn't even put ex-members on it) so that we can publicly go into what we've talked about and been doing.

And by the way, I have to say I was surprised as I was looking over my notes. They said we've had 55 hearings on this subject matter, this

Administration, its abuse of power, its misconduct. I said, "Fifty-five? May I see them? May I see the titles?" And so they went back to 2007 and started off with all of these. I've got them available for anybody that would like to get a copy of them. See Renate Strauss on my staff back there, and be happy to make it available to you.

We need also to enforce the subpoenas that I've issued to my friends in the other Administration for declining to join us in the Rayburn hearing room for a few dozen friendly questions under oath at risk of perjury. We have to keep the process working. I mean, Congress's role has been to diminish as the President's Executive role has increased. But when you get around to saying, "Everybody says, well, I can't come because it's Executive privilege. I can't tell you-- I work in The White House. I can't tell you what-- I can't answer these questions," we try to counter with, "Well, wait a minute — you don't know what questions we're going to ask. And besides, if we ask one that you think deserves to be challenged, we'll set it aside and see if we can work something out."

But the blanket, anybody near The White House doesn't have to come to a hearing, that wouldn't wash, you know, in my son's freshman class at Morehouse College in Atlanta, much less with me. And so we're in the process of enforcing the subpoenas against Harriet Miers, former Chief of Staff, Josh Bolten-- Well, Miers was the lawyer. Bolten was the Chief of Staff. He's got lots of documents. And all the breadcrumbs, as we call them, go right to The White House. And it's not hard to figure out — the firings of the U.S. Attorneys politicizing the one branch of the Administration that should be as free of politics as possible, the Department of Justice.

And we're trying to get hate crimes through. Oh boy. Somebody wanted to add the death penalty to the Hate Crimes Act over in the Senate. Thanks, guys. Nothing like cooperation with the other body. And then, in a way, the subject that has commanded so much of my time is the Universal Healthcare Bill. I started with this so long ago, not as the leader of it, but when Hillary Clinton called us universal single payers into The White House-- We had a hundred then, hundred and one I think. And we have 85 co-sponsors now, which is the most popular healthcare bill in the Congress. And yet there's this effort to lock it in the drawer and let's talk about it as little as possible, the one that most Americans have been...(inaudible).

And this reaches everybody. A Universal Healthcare Bill, from the moment you're born till the time you go to heaven, is what we need in this country. Most industrial countries already have some form of it already. So I spend enormous amount of time with other organizations, over five hundred labor organizations alone, Democrats For Progressive-- Progressive Democrats of America, churches, community groups. I'll be speaking Sunday night with the

National Medical Association, the African-American docs. And their organization was supporting this when I first started out. And so that's the general gist of where I'm coming from.

Now we want to lay down some guideposts, because one of the problems in this democratic process of ours is that if you don't, it's assumed that it's okay. You did it under the past Administration, and there were the usual liberal critics. But forget them. It's been done. There's precedent.

We're saying no, not even to our dear friend, the 44th, no, we're laying down guidelines. And yes, when we have honest disagreements, we want to talk about them. That's what it's all about. I told President Obama when we were in The White House, "Of all the important things that you've said, the one that I think is the one that I want to thank you for right now is that you said you wanted all the people that supported you to keep advising you." You know, he's asked for these groups to meeting around him, so forth.

"Well," I said, "my friend, you didn't have to tell me that. 'Cause we're going to keep-- I was going to keep advising you even if you hadn't said it. But what made me proud was that the fact that you did say it. And you encouraged people." No President has ever done that before, none. You get elected, "Well, thanks so much. Now I've got my Administration. I've got my staff. I've got my counsel. I've got every"-- Look, stay in touch. But he said, "Keep me advised." And I think that's what we have to do.

So in the spirit of keeping him advised, and not just congratulating him on all the things that-- overwhelmingly like, I'm going to just take a moment and describe to you the circumstances that I think we find ourselves in on this 24th day of July in terms of healthcare and the political system itself. Where are we?

Well, first, the healthcare bill is unfortunately in trouble. And I heard the President, driving this morning out, being quoted on NPR from Chicago. He said, "First of all, we've got to do it right. And then we've got to get it done." Well, yes. But I don't think it's being done right. And not that it's not single payer, although the President may have-- Well, he couldn't have been a single payer before me, but he was a single payer, and a good one. He made some great speeches about it.

Now he's got a evaluation that if we were starting all over again, we would start with single payer. But we're not starting all over again. Please, as they say, "Give me a break." Of course we're not starting out all over. But we should be. We ought to scrap the system. And somewhere along the line, people in Congress, inside the Beltway, are going to do what most people already want. They want a system where it doesn't turn on which of 1,200 insurance policies

you've got (not that anybody's ever read the fine print on them). And then number two, did you understand it after you read it?

I love these members that get up say, "Read the bill." What good is reading the bill if it's a thousand pages and you don't have two days and two lawyers to find out what it means after you've read the bill? But what I'm saying is that too much is the same. We're not making enough changes. We're not covering everybody. It's not really universal. Creating two classes, buying insurance for(?) the poor, that failed in Massachusetts. Ask Barney Frank when he comes on Monday here. We need a real serious bill.

And, by the way, the fundamental question, is healthcare a constitutional right? I mean, do you have a right to healthcare, an American system of government or not? Well, we believe that people do. And we're introducing a constitutional amendment just to make it real clear, so that you don't have to infer it or assume that that's a given, and all that.

So what we think we have is something. Now, look at the other body. Well, don't look at the other body. How can you have-- You know, I keep thinking that if this business that I'm in wasn't so serious, it's really-- it'd make a great comedy, you know, if you took out the names not to embarrass the people that speak. But, I mean, here we are, we just got around to agreeing that climate change is something we caused and that it ought to be-- I mean, we finally admitted that. The science is mile-long on the subject, and we're finally agreeing to it. We're saying (and this is a phrase that either draws tears or a smile to my face) we want to provide everybody in America with affordable insurance. What an oxymoron. How can a bloke that can't pay his rent, lost his job, in bankruptcy, how can he get affordable insurance?

"Well, we'll buy it for him, Chairman." You will, huh? Well, that'll be the most second class health insurance policy anybody ever saw. And then of course to make it really difficult, we've got the question of a public option. And I'm so proud, first of all, of Dennis Kucinich, who, in one committee, introduced the amendment that would allow ARISSA(?) to be waived and for any state that wanted to try universal single payer healthcare, they'd be able to do it. And he got that through. And we're trying to keep it in. Do not hold your breath on how long this can stay in. But at least he got it in and we're now going to find out who doesn't want it in, and so forth.

So at least give us a public option that's worth uttering the term. And already we've had a number of senators that have already said, "Public option is out. We're not giving the American people a choice between private insurance and a public plan," which wouldn't have to advertise. The costs would be down. Administration would be down. Profit taking would be down three or four percent

for overhead for Medicare, fifteen percent and up for private insurances, depending on which one. They said, “No, take it out. We don’t even want it. We don’t even want a weak one. We don’t want any at all.”

So we got a problem. And the President, god, what a guy, what presence, what intellectual force, what courage, what ability, Mr. Nice Guy — there are so many people, even in my group that say, “Look, let’s stop being so nice. These guys are ‘no’ on everything. And we got the votes. Let’s take ‘em out.” But he doesn’t do that. He keeps saying, “Please come to the table. Have a drink with me on Friday evenings in The White House. Let’s talk, negotiate...(inaudible).”

But that’s smart, because once he starts swinging back, the media, like you guys, will be saying, “Oh, there they go again, the Ds and the Rs are fighting and fighting, and it’s all the same.” And Obama is all about making it not all the same. And that’s why he’s doing that. That’s why I take exception to some of my friends that want him to sock, punch back, and all that sort of thing.

Now, I close with my observations about the political sit we find ourselves in. It’s funny. Here’s an old American respected political party, self-destructing right in front of our eyes, in every way. Every day, they call eighteen, two dozen votes, roll-call votes on everything they can think of, motions to adjourn all over the place. The minority leader had a fundraiser, so he made them read the whole bill, 55 pages for two or three hours till he got-- That was yesterday. What’ll they do today that’ll make you either laugh or cry? It goes on and on.

And as a supporter of Sarah Palin for taking over the Republican Party-- I’m one of her great advocates. I mean, what an attractive, young, neoconservative reactionary. Wow. There’s never been one like her. She attracts crowds. She’s going to write a book. She’s so busy, she can’t-- she doesn’t have time to govern Alaska: “Hey, let’s get ready for the big one, when we go back in to take on Obama.” I want to encourage her.

And then there’s my former colleague, Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich. Newt has remade himself at least three times, three editions of Gingrich. And he always gets particularly vocal, just like the Vice President, when he’s got a book coming out. “You got a book coming out?” “Put me on everything.” And of course with the Vice President, we-- those-- There are groups in the Democratic Party that have been accused of helping him get time to get on, because as a guy who couldn’t get above about 15% popularity when he wasn’t hiding somewhere and claiming he’s not in the Administration, this is our kind of guy.

Oh, don’t forget Steele, the chairman of the Republican Party, who has not gotten off one consistent speech ever since he became the chairman. I mean, the

whole thing-- I don't know who's left around there. I mean, but with an organization going down the drain and with these kind of leaders coming forward to regain control-- We've got a couple of family values men that got caught. I won't mention their names or what they did, because you know already.

But they were going to become presidential candidates. Now they want them to get out-- take a hike out of the Senate. So we live in exciting, important times. What you do in the media is so important. And it's not always easy. But many of you do it. Many of the big leads we've got have been--

[side remarks]

So many of you have been the ones that caused many of the things that we're investigating to happen. And I commend you for it. And I thank you for your patient attention to my remarks this afternoon. (Applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: Not that we don't like hearing all this nice stuff about the media, but can you explain to us a little more about the politics of the healthcare bill? What are the Democrats disagreeing about? What will it take to bring the Democrats together? And then what will it take to get Republican buy-in?

CONGRESSMAN CONYERS: Well if I really knew the answer to that, I would go leave this luncheon and get straight to the Speaker's office and make her the beneficiary of this wisdom that I do not possess. Here's some of the problems. We can expound on them.

But one is that there are a lot of-- We've got majorities. But in some sense, they're paper majorities. We've got sixty in the Senate. I wouldn't want to bet your house on that. We've got sixty in name. We've got fifty-something blue dogs on the House, half of whom vote Republican most of the time, or half the time. Then we have a number of men and women who are freshman from districts that are normally Republican. And they don't want any kind of votes at all. And a strong breeze they think will blow them away. So these are the problems that you're confronted with.

We want a strong public option in the House. The Senate, some do and some don't. And when you have a senator like Max Baucus helping us make the decisions on a reform healthcare bill, you're in trouble. And if you don't know it, you're going to find out over the next few weeks.

So it's not an easy lift at all. The President says now is the time. He called us into the summit in The White House, the first healthcare summit, and said, "Everybody get busy." And now he knows he's got to start. He can't wait for-- If

he's waiting for us to serve him up with a healthcare reform bill, he knows now he's got to get into it. He's got to expend some capital. And he's doing that.

So those are some of the problems. The overarching problem is, how are you going to pay for it? And will this put us into more debt? And of course the answers with universal single payer, you end up with less debt. But we don't have universal single payer. So as long as the insurance companies are there, as long as preexisting illnesses as a way to disqualify anybody that's got something that's going to cost them money-- After all, this is a business, Conyers. The way you make profit in a healthcare business is, don't insure the people that are likely to be sick, and the ones that are, get rid of them if you can by any means necessary. That's how you make profit. Ask the insurance people. They'll tell you.

MS. LEINWAND: Why do you want to scrap the healthcare system when it is reported that seventy percent of Americans are generally satisfied with their healthcare plan?

CONGRESSMAN CONYERS: Because it's not an accurate statement, that's why. The majority of Americans want single payer. And I've got two polls to back me up. They want a universal-- And they're willing, many of them, to pay more for it. And now the medical community has come around.

When I first started out-- I mean, I was invited to an AMA conference once. But now, more doctors support our plan than any other plan. And of course you know the nurses are all over this plan. They support it. The people support it. The unions support it. Community groups support it. So telling me that seventy-- Look — fifty million people don't even have a plan to prefer. They don't have any insurance at all.

MS. LEINWAND: How influential are the big pharma and big insurance lobbyists? And should your congressional colleagues send back their campaign contributions from those groups?

CONGRESSMAN CONYERS: How could anybody have gotten the notion that pharma and the health insurance companies were giving campaign contributions to influence the independent-minded members of the House and the Senate? Oh. Where did anyone ever get that notion?

Well, if you were in a group, the chief exec was making millions of dollars a year, wasn't even a doctor, and you have quarters(?), the ques-- is on the bottom line, how much money did you make? How is the stocks doing? Of course they're the ones blocking this. Why would they want a single payer when they got 1,200 other insurance companies to fool around with right now and compete with each other? Go down my street in my town, and what do I see? Billboard —

“Come to this hospital. We’re the best in the country on baby care.” “Come to this hospital,” (another billboard five blocks away) “...come to this. We’re heart specialists,” another one for something else, something else, something else. They’re competing. And until-- We take that incredible cost of advertising, administration, overhead, it’s driving some doctors out of the business, because they can’t afford all the administrative help they need to fill out this growing number of insurance policies.

MS. LEINWAND: Will you oppose a health plan without a public option?

CONGRESSMAN CONYERS: No. I should say, heck no. I could say something else. Of course not. It’s all I can do to support a health plan without universal single payer healthcare. I mean, that’s what I’ve been working on. And by the way, that movement will hopefully help a lot of people in the legislature realize that a public option, a real public option--

Now look — the men and women on K Street can write public options that aren’t worth the napkin they’re written on. I’m talking about a real public option, not something a guy dreams up between martinis and brings-- sends it down to us to enact.

MS. LEINWAND: You want single payer. President Obama does not. Why do you want it? And why doesn’t Obama?

CONGRESSMAN CONYERS: Well, I want it because it’s the best plan. I can remember when Obama agreed with me. I’m just guessing now, because we haven’t talked about it. But he wants it because of the Rahm Emanuel factor. Okay? I’m glad you asked me. The Rahm Emanuel factor, to quote him, is that, “Look — we want success and we’re willing to make a deal about anything.” Does that make you feel pretty comfortable about healthcare?

And that’s the whole idea, is that he wants a bill. He wants to win in the off-year elections. He wants our President reelected the next time he comes up. And so do I. But I don’t want anything that’s stamped ‘reform’ and let it go at that. This will not hold down costs. It will not cover everybody. It will not take away the misery of hundreds of thousands of people who’ve been caught-- We have so many horror stories about people having to go in bankruptcy. Well, we’re having a hearing on it next week in Judiciary about the major cause of personal bankruptcies is healthcare bills, hospital bills, doctor bills, and the tragedy of people not being able to eat or pay rent or even get their pharmaceutical prescriptions.

[side remarks]

MS. LEINWAND: Votes on the floor. Can you hold on a couple minutes?

CONGRESSMAN CONYERS: No. Twelve minutes left on the first vote. Four more votes follow. Many apologies for Congressman Conyers. I thank you very much.

MS. LEINWAND: Can we just take a couple more questions?

CONGRESSMAN CONYERS: No.

MS. LEINWAND: Really, really?

CONGRESSMAN CONYERS: Yeah, really. (Applause.) Thank you all very much. Forgive me for doing this. Maybe I'll come on again and have more time. (Applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: Okay, my apologies that we are ending early. But I will make a few announcements about our future speakers. On July 27th, which is Monday, Congressman Barney Frank, a Democrat from Massachusetts and chairman of the House Financial Services Committee will join us. On July 29th, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts and chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations will join us. And coming up in the Fall, on September 29th, Ken Burns, the documentary filmmaker will be here to talk about his newest documentary.

Also on September 12th, the National Press Club will host the 12th annual 5K run and auction, benefiting the National Press Club scholarship fund for diversity in journalism. For more information about that, please go to our website at www.press.org. Now would be the time to sign up for that.

Also, I'd like to thank you all for coming today. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members, Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, JoAnn Booz and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also thanks to the National Press Club's Library for its research.

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Thank you very much and we are adjourned, a little early (Gavel sounds.)

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