

Congressman Bernie Sanders (I-VT) delivered the following remarks on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives on October 21, 2003.



Mr. Speaker, the corporate media does not talk about it too much, and we do not discuss it terribly much here in the Congress, but the United States of America is rapidly on its way to becoming three separate nations: An increasingly wealthy elite, a small number of people who have incredible wealth and incredible power; a middle class, the vast majority of our people, which is shrinking, where the average person is working longer hours for lower wages; and, at the bottom we have a growing number of Americans who are living in abject poverty, barely keeping their heads above water.

Mr. Speaker, there has always been a wealthy elite in this country, that is not new, and there has always been a gap between the rich and the poor. But the disparities in wealth and income that currently exist in this country have not been seen since the 1920s.

In other words, instead of becoming a more egalitarian country, with a stronger middle-class, we are becoming a Nation in which the rich have more wealth and power, the middle-class is shrinking, and poverty is growing.

Mr. Speaker, today the wealthiest 1 percent own more wealth than the bottom 95 percent. One percent own more wealth than the bottom 95 percent. The CEOs of large corporations today earn more than 500 times what their employees are making. While workers are being squeezed, being forced to pay more for health insurance, while their pensions are being cut back, the CEOs of large corporations make out like bandits.

Mr. Speaker, the Nation's 13,000 wealthiest families, which constitute one one-hundredth of one percent of the population, receive almost as much income as the bottom 20 million families in the United States. One one-hundredth of one percent, more income than the bottom 20 million families. That, to my mind, is not what America is supposed to be.

New data from the Congressional Budget Office shows that the gap between the rich and the poor in terms of income more than doubled from 1979 to 2000. In other words, we are moving in exactly the wrong direction. The gap is such that the wealthiest 1 percent had more money to spend after taxes than the bottom 40 percent. The richest 2.8 million Americans had \$950 billion after taxes, or 15.5 percent of the economic pie, while the poorest 110 million had less, 14.4 percent of all after-tax income. Once again,

that is not what America is supposed to be. While the rich get richer and receive huge tax breaks from the White House, the middle-class is struggling desperately, in my State of Vermont and all over this country.

It is increasingly common to see people work at not one job, but two jobs, and occasionally three jobs. When I was growing up, the expectation for the middle-class was that one worker in a family could work 40 hours a week and earn enough income to pay the bills. Well, in the State of Vermont, and all over this country, it is becoming increasingly uncommon when that happens. Much more often than not, wives are forced to work alongside husbands in order to bring in the necessary income, and kids, in many instances, do not get the care that they need.

Unemployment in our country is now at a 9-year high. We are over 6 percent, and there are now over 9 million people who are unemployed. But in truth the real number is higher than that, because there are a lot of people who are working part-time because they cannot find full-time jobs, and there are a lot of people who are not part of the statistics because they have given up and are not actively seeking employment.

Mr. Speaker, of the 3.3 million private sector jobs that have been lost over the last 3 years, 2.7 million were in the manufacturing sector. This is an issue I want to spend a moment on, because what is happening in manufacturing today is a disaster for this country and bodes very poorly for the future of our Nation.

Mr. Speaker, the bottom line is, and this Congress must finally recognize it, our trade policies are failing. Permanent, normal trade relations with China has been a disaster. NAFTA has been a disaster. Our membership in the World Trade Organization has not worked for the middle-class and working families, for this country, and the time is long overdue for the United States Congress to stand up to corporate America, to stand up to the President of the United States, to stand up to all of the editorial pages all over America who have told us year after year after year how great unfettered free trade would be.

They were wrong. Their policies have led to enormous economic problems for the middle-class in this

country. The decline of manufacturing is one of the reasons why our middle-class is shrinking and why wages for middle-class workers are in decline.

Many people understand the pain involved when we have lost 3 million jobs in the last few years. But we also have got to point out that our trade policies and our overall economic policies have been a disaster for the wages that American workers receive.

Today, American workers in the private sector are earning 8 percent less than they were in 1973. Now, just think for a moment. Think for a moment. In the last 30 years, there has been a revolution in technology. We all know that. We all know what computers have done, what e-mail has done, what faxes have done. We know what robotics in factories

have done. In other words, we are a much more productive Nation than we used to be. Every worker is producing more.

Given that reality, why is it that the average worker in the private sector today is earning 8 percent less? That is an issue we have to put right up there on the radar screen, and we need to debate.

Mr. Speaker, manufacturing in this country is currently in a state of collapse. Let us be honest about it. In the last 3 years, we have lost 2.7 million manufacturing jobs, which comprise 16 percent of the total. That is right. You heard that right. In the last 3 years, we have lost 16 percent of our manufacturing jobs. At 14.7 million, we are at the lowest number of factory jobs since 1958.

In my own State of Vermont, my small State of Vermont, we have lost some 8,700 manufacturing jobs between January 2001 and August 2003, and the pity of that is that in Vermont, manufacturing jobs pay workers middle-class wages. In Vermont, on average, a worker working in manufacturing makes over \$42,000 a year. That is a decent wage. We are losing those jobs, and the new jobs that we are creating are paying only a fraction of what manufacturing jobs are paying, and almost always provide much, much weaker benefits.

Mr. Speaker, in 2002 the United States had a \$435 billion trade deficit, a \$435 billion trade deficit. This year, the trade deficit with China alone, one country, China, is expected to be \$120 billion, and that number is projected to increase in future years. It has gone up and up and up. The National Association of Manufacturers estimates that if present trends continue, our trade deficit with China will grow to \$330 billion in 5 years.

But our disastrous trade policy is not only costing us millions of decent paying jobs; it is squeezing wages. It is squeezing wages. Because many employers are saying if you do not take the cuts in health care, if you do not take the cuts in wages, we are going to move to China, we are going to move to Mexico.

One of the areas where people are being most severely hurt is among young workers without a college education. For entry-level workers without a college level education, the real wages that they have received, that they are now receiving, have dropped by over 20 percent in the last 25 years. And the answer and the reason for that is quite obvious. 25 years ago, 30 years ago if somebody did not go to college, as most people did not, what they would be able to do is go out and get a job in manufacturing. And millions and millions of workers did that. And with those wages and those benefits they were able to lead a middle-class existence and raise their kids with a decent standard of living. But the reality now is that the new jobs that are being created, the jobs at McDonald's and the jobs in Wal-Mart are not paying people a living wage.

What is happening to our economy today is best illustrated by the fact that some 20 years ago our largest employer was General Motors. And workers in General Motors earned, and still earn today, a living wage. Today, Mr. Speaker, our largest private

employer is Wal-Mart. And that is what has happened to the American economy. We have gone from a General Motors economy where workers earned decent wages and decent benefits to a Wal-Mart economy where people earn low wages and poor benefits. Today Wal-Mart employees earn \$8.23 per hour or \$13,861 annually. And that, Mr. Speaker, is an income which is below the poverty level.

And that is what the transformation of the American economy is about, an economy where workers used to work, produced real products, made middle-class wages, had good benefits, to a Wal-Mart economy where our largest employer now pays workers poverty wages, minimal benefits, huge turn-over.

Frankly, Mr. Speaker, in hindsight it did not take a genius to predict that unfettered free trade with China would be a disaster, which is why I and many other Members in the House have opposed it from the beginning. With educated, hardworking Chinese workers available at 40 or 50 cents an hour, and with corporations having the capability of bringing their Chinese-made products back into this country tariff-free, why would American multinational corporations not shut down their plants in this country and move to China? It did not take a genius, frankly, to think that that would happen.

Should anyone be surprised that Motorola eliminated 42,900 American jobs in 2001 and invested \$3.4 billion in China or that IBM has signed deals to train 100,000 software specialists in China over 3 years? Who is shocked that General Electric has thrown tens of thousands of American workers out on the streets while investing \$1.5 billion in China. Honeywell is a sophisticated corporation. Should anybody be really surprised that they have built 13 factories in China or that Ethan Allen furniture has cut jobs at three sawmills and 17 U.S. manufacturing plants, including some in my State of Vermont, as they import more medium-priced furniture from China into the United States? Nobody should be surprised at these developments.

China, for American multinational corporations, is a great place to do business, if by "doing business" we mean making products for export to the United States that companies previously made here. Not only are wages extremely low in China, but if workers attempt to stand up for their rights in China and form unions, those workers go to jail. Now, what a great place to do business where when workers try to organize, they go to jail. What more could a company ask for?

In China today environmental regulations are almost nonexistent. And while China becomes one of the most polluted countries on Earth, companies that invest in China, they do not have to "waste money on environmental safeguards." In our country we said many years ago to companies you just cannot willy-nilly throw your garbage into our lakes and into our streams. You cannot pollute the air any way you want. You have got to have some environmental safeguards. Those safeguards are expensive. But in China, no problem, you can do whatever you want. Great place to do business.

Mr. Speaker, over the years advocates of unfettered free trade have tried to gloss over the bad news about the decline in factory employment by promising that a new economy

was in the making. A new economy was in the making, one in which Americans would be working at good wages in the high-tech field. We have all heard it. Hey, you do not have to worry about them factory jobs anymore. We are the United States of America. We all have new clean, high-tech computer jobs. All of our young people will go out there, make \$50,000, \$60,000, \$70,000 a year. That is the future for the United States. That is what they told us.

Unfortunately, the advocates of unfettered free trade are wrong again. We now know that blue collar manufacturing jobs are not the only casualty of unfettered free trade. Estimates are that some 50 to 60,000 high-tech white collar jobs have been lost in this country in the last 2 years, and that many of them have ended up in India. If any of the listeners sometimes want to argue with the phone company that your phone bill was wrong, you get on the phone and you are calling up and arguing, well you may end up going not to Chicago or New York or Los Angeles, you may be talking to somebody in India. And that is happening more and more.

According to Forest Research, a major consultant on this issue, they say, and I quote, "Over the next 15 years 3.3 million U.S. service industry jobs and \$136 billion in wages will move offshore. The information technology industry will lead the initial overseas exodus." That is from Forest Research. According to Booz Allen Hamilton, companies can lower their costs by as much as 80 percent by shifting tasks such as computer programming, accounting, and procurement to China.

Among many other companies moving high-tech jobs

abroad is Microsoft, which is spending \$750 million over the next 3 years on research and development and outsourcing in China. Just the other day, just last week, Intel Corporation chairman Andy Grove warned that the U.S. could lose the bulk of its information technology jobs to overseas competitors in the next decade, largely to India and China.

In other words, Mr. Speaker, not only has unfettered free trade cost us our textile industry, cost us our shoe industry, our steel industry, our tool and die industry, our electronic industry, much of our furniture industry, as well as many, many other industries, it is now going to cost us, unless we change it, millions of high-tech jobs as well.

Now, let me be very clear. The United States needs to have a strong and positive relationship with China. I am not anti-Chinese. I am an internationalist. China is the largest country on Earth, and this country must have a good and positive relationship with China; and there are a number of ways that we can do that. But doing that, having a positive relationship with China, does not mean allowing corporate America and their supporters in the White House, in Congress, to destroy the American middle class by making jobs America's number 1 export.

We want our exports to be products manufactured by American workers, not the jobs that American workers have. If we continue to force American workers to, quote unquote, compete against desperate people from China and other developing countries, both in manufacturing and high tech, the United States will be the loser.

By definition a sensible and fair trade agreement works well for both parties, not just for one. Trade is a good thing. Trade is a good thing when both sides benefit. The New York Yankees do not engage in free trade by exchanging their top ball player for a third string minor leaguer.

The United States is the most lucrative market in the world. We need to leverage the value of that market to achieve trade agreements that result in fairness for the American worker. And we can do that. Trade is a good thing. But our current trade policies are not working for American workers.

When we talk about trade with China, Mr. Speaker, we should also understand that today 60 percent, 60 percent of Dell Computer parts are made in China. Boeing recently said that it expected to purchase \$1 billion worth of aviation equipment annually in China by 2009 and \$1.3 billion by 2010, up from \$500 million this year.

North Carolina's Pillowcase Corporation filed for bankruptcy on July 20, 2003, laying off 6,450 of its 7,650 workers and made plans to sell its textile-producing machinery to several nations, including China. Over the past year, Intel has added 1,000 software engineers in China and India. And on and on it goes. The bottom line is that American workers cannot and must not be forced to compete against workers in China who are paid extremely low wages.

Two-thirds of China's 1.3 billion citizens live on less than a dollar a day. The average factory wage in China is 40 cents an hour, 1/40th of what U.S. factory workers are paid. The average annual salary for an information technology programmer in the U.S. is \$75,000; in China it is \$8,952.

Mr. Speaker, for all of these reasons and more, I have introduced H.R. 3228, which would repeal permanent normal trade relations with China. My legislation, once again, would repeal permanent normal trade relations with China. It will acknowledge that our current trade policies with that country are a failure. And we have got to begin negotiating trade policies not only with China but with other countries that work well for the American worker and the American middle class.

I am happy to say that in just over 3 weeks, this tripartisan legislation has garnered 52 cosponsors, including 14 Republicans. So we are moving forward in that area, Mr. Speaker, in a tripartisan way.

Mr. Speaker, when we talk about the decline of the middle class, we are talking about high unemployment; we are talking about the conversion of the United States from a

manufacturing economy to a service economy whereby wages and benefits are much lower.

We are also talking about the fact that in the United States, workers today are now working the longest hours of the workers in any major country on earth. There should be little wonder why the average American family is so stressed out. And one of the reasons that they are so stressed out is that people are working incredibly long hours in order to make enough money to pay the bills. Today, the average American employee works by far the longest hours of any worker in the industrialized world, and the situation is getting worse.

According to statistics from the International Labor Organization, the average American last year worked 1,978 hours, up from 1,942 hours in 1990. That is an increase of almost one week of work. Since 1990, the average American is now working an additional week a year of work. We are now, as Americans, putting more hours into our work than at any time since the 1920s. Just think about that. Huge increases in productivity and an explosion of technology, logically, would lead one to believe that people would be working fewer hours for higher wages, but the converse is true. People are working longer hours for lower wages.

Americans are now putting in more hours at our work than at any time since the 1920s, 65 years after the formal establishment of the 40-hour workweek under the Fair Labor Standards Act, almost 40 percent of Americans now work more than 50 hours a week; and we should do a lot of thinking about that. An explosion of productivity and technology, people working longer and longer hours; and in almost every instance in the middle class, two bread winners are needed to pay the bills. Real wages for workers in the private sector have declined since 1973. The rich get richer. The middle class shrinks and poverty increases.

Mr. Speaker, I have talked a moment about what is going on with the middle class. I have talked a little bit about the conversion from a manufacturing society, a General Motors society, to a service industry economy, a Wal-Mart economy, but let us look for a moment at the people who are not even in the middle class. People who have not made it into the middle class. People who are at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder in our country, the 34.8 million people in America who live in poverty. Sadly, Mr. Speaker, while the rich get richer, 1.3 million more Americans became poor and entered poverty, the group of poor people in America.

In the midst of those people, Mr. Speaker, we have got to ask about the 11 million Americans who are trying to survive on the pathetic minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour which exists here, and I think it is morally repugnant that this Congress voted to provide huge tax breaks for millionaires and billionaires, but somehow the President of the United States and the Republican leadership, not for one moment have thought about raising the minimum wage, which today is at a pathetic \$5.15 cents an hour.

How do people earning those wages survive? And I will tell you how some of them do it. After working 40 hours a week, they live in their automobiles because they cannot afford housing units in order to survive. They just cannot afford the housing because their wages cannot pay the rent. And what, Mr. Speaker, about the 43.6 million Americans who lack any health insurance? That is 15.2 percent of our population. What about the 3.5 million people who will experience homelessness in this year, 1.3 million of them children? What about our elderly citizens who cannot afford the outrageously high cost of prescription drugs? And the many of them who cut their pills in half or do not even bother trying to fill the prescriptions that their doctors write for them? What about those people? What about the veterans who have put their lives on the line defending this country and then try to get into a VA hospital but find out that they are on a waiting list?

Mr. Speaker, one of the clear crises being faced by the American middle class is the crisis in health care and the cost of prescription drugs. In the last several years, we have seen huge increases in health insurance and with the increase of unemployment, we have seen more and more working people lose their health insurance. In terms of losing health insurance, people then are open to bankruptcy, because if they end up with an accident or a serious illness, they go to the hospital, but they are unable to pay those bills. And the highest amount of people who are bankrupt are the people who cannot pay their health expenses that have been generated as a result of an accident or illness.

Mr. Speaker, our health care system today is in a state of collapse. More and more people are uninsured and more and more people are underinsured. That is, people have higher and higher copayments, higher and higher deductibles, higher and higher premiums. To my mind, the only solution, the only serious solution to our health care crisis is for this country to do what every other major industrialized nation on Earth has done and that is to move toward a national health care system

which guarantees health care to every man, woman and child.

A hundred years ago, the United States of America said that every young person, regardless of income, could get a quality public education. Well, the rest of the world has said that every person in their country, regardless of income, is entitled to health care. But we lag behind what countries throughout Europe, Scandinavia and Canada are doing. To my mind, health care is a right, not a privilege. It is wrong that more and more Americans delay and hesitate going to the doctors because they do not have health insurance or because they cannot pay the deductible or the copayments.

When people in America get sick, they have a right to go to the doctor, to go to the hospital and get the health care that they need. The irony with regard to our collapsing health care system is that it is an extremely costly and wasteful system. The fact of the matter is that we spend more than twice as much per capita on health care as any other nation, and yet we end up with 43 million people with no insurance and many more who are underinsured. For the sake of our children, for the sake of our parents, for the sake of the middle class of this country, we have got to adopt a national health care system which

finally says with no ifs, ands, or buts about it that in America, all of our people will receive the care that they need as a right of citizenship.

Now, Mr. Speaker, given the very, very serious problems facing the American people and especially our middle class, it is appropriate, I believe, to ask what President Bush and his administration have done to begin addressing some of these problems. What are their priorities? What are they doing to reach out to the middle class and say we are going to expand the middle class; we are going to lower poverty; we are going to improve health care? What are they doing in that direction?

Well, let me tell you a little bit about what they have done. They have given hundreds of billions of dollars in tax breaks to the very richest people in our country while cutting back on the basic needs of working families. Now, at a time when the middle class is shrinking, when poverty is increasing, when the number of people without health insurance is going up, when unemployment is far too high, who are the people that the Bush administration are reaching out to? Well, needless to say, it is their campaign contributors and the very wealthiest people in this country who have received hundreds and hundreds of billions of dollars in tax breaks.

Through legislative and administration efforts, the Bush administration is making it more and more difficult for workers to form unions and to protect their jobs and incomes. When a worker is a member of a union, by and large that worker will earn 30 percent more than a worker doing a similar job who is nonunion. That is why many workers want to join unions, and yet it is getting harder and harder for workers to do that because the law very clearly sides with the employer and the large corporation and not with the worker.

The Bush administration, if you can believe it, is now attacking overtime for American workers and trying to undo laws that have been on the books for decades which say that if you worked over 40 hours a week, you will get time and a half. And I am proud that a number of Republicans join many of us on this floor of the House to say that when the middle class is shrinking, when real wages are declining, we are not going to cut back on the overtime pay that workers need.

Now, when we talk about the achievements of the Bush administration, and we understand that our deficit is now at an all-time high, that our national debt is going higher, that in the midst of all of this, our conservative friends who year after year told us how terrible deficits were and what kind of terrible obligations we were leaving to our kids and our grandchildren, well, these are the folks that are driving up the deficit, and they are driving up the national debt. Now, why are they doing that? Why are conservatives doing that?

Well, I think there are two reasons. Number one, obviously, the tax breaks for the rich are not hard to understand. Here in Washington, D.C. there are fund-raising dinners in which individuals have contributed \$25,000 a plate, large corporations and their executives make huge contributions and that is payback time. Nothing new. The rich

make contributions. They get paid back in tax breaks. They get paid back in corporate welfare. They get paid back with their trade policy which makes it easier for them to throw American workers out on the street and move out to China. That we can understand. That is obscene, but easily understood.

But, Mr. Speaker, let me suggest to you that there is another even more cynical reason for driving up this deficit and driving up the national debt. And I believe that that reason is that as the debt and the deficit become higher and higher, this President, or any other President, may be forced to come before the American people and say our deficit and our debt is so very high that we have no choice but to privatize Social Security, privatize Medicare, privatize Medicaid, privatize public education.

We have got to do it. We have a huge deficit. Oh, yeah, we did give hundreds of billions of dollars in tax breaks to the rich; but nonetheless, the deficit is so high that we are going to have to do away with all of the benefits, all of the guarantees that the American people have fought for over the last 100 years; and it is my belief that this administration really does want to take us back to the 19th century, where working people and the middle class had no protections whatsoever, where workers and poor people were dependent upon the largess of the wealthy for charity, but there were no guarantees.

Social Security has its problems; and in my view, Social Security must be strengthened. Seniors must be receiving larger COLAs, but the solution to the problems that we may have are not to privatize Social Security and bring us back to the 1920s when elderly people were the poorest segment of our society; but that is the direction that these folks are moving us towards, and they are moving us toward the privatization of Medicare.

Think about how many private insurance companies are really going to provide insurance for elderly, low-income sick people. The function of an insurance company is to make money, not to provide health care; and if a person is old and sick and poor, who is going to insure them? They are on their own.

In terms of prescription drugs, an issue that I have worked very hard on for a number of years, the Bush administration is working hand-in-glove with the pharmaceutical industry, the most powerful lobby here on Capitol Hill. While Americans pay by far the highest prices in the world for their prescription drugs, the pharmaceutical industry year after year after year is the most profitable industry in this country.

In order to maintain their status as the most profitable industry, they have hired over 600, 600 paid lobbyists right here in Washington, D.C., to descend on the Congress, on the House and the Senate, to make sure that we do not pass any legislation which will lower the cost of prescription drugs. Nonetheless, despite all of the hundreds of millions of dollars that they have spent on all of their lobbying efforts, all of their campaign contributions, I am happy to tell my colleagues, Mr. Speaker, that 6 weeks ago, longer than that, the House of Representatives, in a bipartisan way, had the courage to stand up to the pharmaceutical industry and pass legislation that would allow our pharmacists,

prescription drug distributors, and individuals to buy FDA-approved medicine in 26 countries including Canada; and if we can get that bill through the Senate, we will be able to lower prescription drug costs in this country by between 30 to 50 percent. Unfortunately, on this issue, we are fighting not only the pharmaceutical industry but the Bush administration and the Bush campaign, which has received substantial support from the drug companies.

Mr. Speaker, on another area that is of enormous importance to the American people and more and more Americans are getting involved in it, the Bush administration is moving in precisely the wrong direction in terms of media consolidation. In my view, one of the crises that we face in our country today is fewer and fewer large media conglomerates own and control what we see, what we hear, and what we read. I know the average person says, well, man, I have got 100 channels on my cable. Check out who owns those 100 channels. Check out who owns NBC, which is General Electric; who owns CBS, which is Viacom; who owns ABC, which is Disney; who owns Fox Television, which is Rupert Murdoch, an extreme right-wing billionaire. What we are seeing in terms of media is fewer and fewer large corporations controlling the flow of information in America. Clear Channel Radio now owns 1,200 radio stations all over this country.

In America, what our freedom is about is debating different points of view. No one has all the right answers, but we cannot flourish as a democracy unless we hear different points of view; and that is becoming harder and harder to achieve, as fewer and fewer companies own what we see, hear, and read.

Instead of acknowledging that problem and moving us to a more diversified media, where we will have local media reporting on local issues, where it will be different points of view being heard, where there will be more diversity in our media, the Bush administration is moving in exactly the wrong direction.

Michael Powell, who is chairman of the FCC, with the strong backing of the Bush administration, passed with a three to two vote on June 2 more media deregulation, which will allow for even fewer companies to own what we see, hear, and read; and one of the manifestations of that decision, if it is allowed to stand, is there will be cities in America where one company will own the local newspaper, will own the largest television station, will own many of the radio stations, and will own the local cable TV system.

Mr. Speaker, that is not what America is supposed to

be; and I am happy to tell my colleagues that all over this country, in a grassroots fashion, millions of Americans have written and communicated to the FCC, some of them conservatives, the National Rifle Association, some right-wing organizations, some of them progressives, some left-wing organizations, some in the middle, different points of view philosophically on almost every issue, but they have come together to say that in America we need to have a diverse ownership of media and different points of view to be heard.

The Senate, listening to the demands of the American people, had the courage in a bipartisan way, Senator Byron Dorgan, Senator Trent Lott helping to lead the effort, had the courage to pass a resolution of disapproval with regard to what the FCC did. In other words, they said we want to junk it. That bill is now here in the House of Representatives; and working with some of my colleagues again in a tripartisan way, we have now garnered 190 signatures on a letter to the Speaker of the House, because the bill is now on the Speaker's desk, and we have said, Mr. Speaker, let the American people have the debate and a vote about whether or not we want more media consolidation. I sincerely hope that the Speaker will allow that debate because if that debate takes place, I believe that the American people will win and that Republicans, Democrats, and Independent on the floor of this House will vote to junk what the FCC has done.

Mr. Speaker, when we talk about America, we often pride ourselves upon being a free country, a free country; and it is easier to stand in front of the American flag and give great speeches about freedom than it is to really fight for freedom, because one of the elements of freedom is to understand, among other things, that not everything, not everything that somebody says or does is something that we agree with, but what freedom is about is tolerating and respecting other points of view, of understanding that people have the right to read whatever they want to read, have the right to an attorney when they need an attorney.

I was one of the relatively few people in the House who voted 6 weeks after the horror of 9/11 against the USA PATRIOT Act, and I voted against the USA PATRIOT Act not because I am not concerned about terrorism. I happen to believe that terrorism is a very serious issue and that the United States Government must do everything that it can to protect the American people and fight terrorism, but I voted against the USA PATRIOT Act because I believe we can fight terrorism without undermining basic constitutional rights, which is what the USA PATRIOT Act is doing.

Again, on this issue, we have seen some very interesting nonideological coming-together. We have seen some really very conservative people who are honest conservatives who say because they do not believe in Big Government they do not want the United States Government monitoring the reading habits of the American people in their libraries or their bookstores. Unfortunately, again, on this issue, the Bush administration and Attorney General John Ashcroft are on the wrong side. They are, in many respects, working to undermine the basic constitutional rights that are given, that have made this country a free country.

So, Mr. Speaker, let me conclude by stating that it is high time that the Congress of the United States begin to focus on the needs of the middle class, the vast majority of our people, the middle class of which is shrinking, the middle class in which the average person is working longer hours and for lower wages. America will grow when the middle class grows; and to do that, we need some fundamental changes in our policies.

We need a national health care system which guarantees health care to all Americans. We need to raise the minimum wage to a living wage. We need to fundamentally change

our trade policies so that we do not continue to see the collapse of manufacturing. We need to make sure that every American, regardless of income, has a right to go to college. We need to rescind the tax breaks that have been given to the wealthiest people and the largest corporations and create a tax structure which works for the middle class and not just for the wealthy and the powerful.

There is a lot of work that must be done, and I look forward to participating in that effort.