

Fighting Bob Fest

Senator Tom Harkin

Baraboo, Wisconsin
September 18, 2004

Midge, thank you very much for the kind and overly generous introduction. As Mark Twain once said when he was introduced with a lot of effusive praise, he turned to the person who introduced him, and said, "Ma'am, you will go to heaven for your generosity, unless you go elsewhere for your exaggeration." But it sounded pretty good, and I liked it.

I want to thank Midge for being a friend of so many years, and I want to thank you Midge for mentioning that I had ran for president in '92 -- some of you may have missed it. I think my wife may have even missed it now that I think about it. Thank you for all your help and your support. If you're not on Midge Miller's e-mail list yet, you ought to get on it. And I'll tell you at the end of the day if you're feeling a little down about stuff, just get on her e-mail and start reading some of the things she sends along, and it will get your juices flowing again. I'll tell you that. So Midge, thanks for having me on your e-mail list.

And I want to thank Ed Garvey, a friend of some 20 years. Now I always think of Ed as meek, mild-mannered -- it's kind of hard to get Ed to say what he thinks. But when he does, by God it's good. No, Ed is just a -- again I can't think of anyone to carry on a tradition of progressivism and the spirit of Bob LaFollette -- I can't think of anyone better than your own Ed Garvey. What a great guy. Thanks, Ed.

And thank you all for coming out today, and I thank Ed and others for inviting me to be here today. Two years ago I was running for reelection and couldn't be here, last year I had my steak fry on Saturday and couldn't be here, but this year my steak fry is tomorrow, so when Ed offered this, I said you bet I want to be here. I want to be here with people who are willing to fight back. You know six weeks to go until election day, there's still one question that we haven't heard from the Republicans: Are you better off today than you were four years ago?

Now let me get right to the point. Bush has driven this country into a ditch at home and a quagmire abroad. He's driven the country deeper into debt and deficit; he's driven over our Bill of Rights and our U.N. Charter like they were someone's trash on the street. If Bush had been a truck driver not President, he would have had his license pulled for being a habitual reckless driver a long time ago. But, hey, look on the bright side, as of last Monday, once again you can visit your local gun store and buy your very own street sweeper 12-gage rapid fire assault rifle here in America. What a deal.

During the election four years ago a Republican senator gave me a stern warning. He said, Tom, if you vote for Al Gore, and Al Gore wins, we'll lose millions of jobs, the economy will hit the skids, America will be disrespected and hated around the world. Well by golly, I did vote for Al Gore. Ed, I think this crowd's way ahead of me this morning. And Al Gore did win. And sure enough, all those things came true just like he told me.

But don't worry, I have a news flash this morning. You haven't heard about this yet so I'm going to tell you. News flash: George W. Bush has a plan to build a progressive society. Yes, Bush is promising a fair election. No, that's not all. He's going to rebuild schools; he's going to

invest in roads and bridges; he's going to create jobs; he's going to provide health care to the people; and if it works in Iraq, he might just try it here in America.

I'm supposed to behave myself this morning. What can I do? I appreciate that Fighting Bob, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) tax-free organization, and that Fighting Bob Fest is a nonpartisan event. So in the spirit of bipartisanship and nonpartisanship, let me talk about a Republican who had his head screwed on right: Robert Marion LaFollette, also known as Fighting Bob LaFollette. It's no coincidence that LaFollette was a great progressive and a great fighter. He fought the railroads and the banks and the other vested interests of his day. He knew, as Reverend Martin Luther King once said that "justice does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability."

The very nature of progressivism is a fight against entrenched corporate interest, entrenched economic privilege, entrenched political power; it is a fight for economic and social justice; it is a fight for empowering people not business and not the State. And today the powers that be, the Enrons, the Haliburtons, the drug and oil companies, are not going to give up an inch without a fight and a struggle.

Look at the knock-down, drag-out fight just to try to find out what was going on in Dick Cheney's secret energy task force when he first came to office. Cheney fought all the way to the Supreme Court to keep it a secret. Maybe you read about it. Cheney goes duck hunting with Justice Scalia, but Scalia says, however, he won't recuse himself. So they spent all that time in a duck blind, but this Justice is not blind. Scalia and the majority of the Court sided with Cheney, and we still don't know what Cheney gave away to his oil and his gas buddies.

So it's not enough just to be progressives; it's not enough to have our hearts in the right place. We have to be progressives who know how to fight and are willing to fight. It's like the story of the priest and the rabbi who went to an amateur boxing match. The bell rings to start the match, the two fighters come out, and one of the fighters crosses himself. The rabbi turns to the priest and says, now exactly what does that mean? The priest says, it doesn't mean a damn thing if the kid doesn't know how to fight.

Couple weeks ago The New York Times asked me what advice I'd give the Kerry campaign. I've been going after Cheney, and I've been going after Bush on the stump for months, taking some heat for it. My answer to The Times was very simple: Never defend, always attack. Once you start defending yourself, people think there must be something wrong. That's why I got in hot water with The Wall Street Journal here a few weeks ago, and some of the Republicans around the country.

I was in Des Moines, I had a little press conference, and I called Cheney a coward. Well, I tell you, I heard from Democrats and liberals all across the country saying, right on, it's about time someone told the truth about Cheney. Someone was asking me about that, I want to be clear about this. I don't believe in any military litmus test to hold public office; I don't believe that anyone had to serve in the military to be a good public official. I have a very high regard for those who are conscientious objectors. But when the likes of Dick Cheney, who took five deferments during the Vietnam War, who said he had other priorities. When I go down and see that Vietnam Wall with 58,000 names on it, I think those young men might have had other priorities too. When I see something like that, when I hear Cheney call Kerry unfit to be President of the United States, you bet I'm going to call him a coward, because that's exactly what he is.

I remember this war movie I saw one time. There was this general going by in his Jeep, two of the grunts were talking, this one grunt said, "there goes old General Blood and Guts." The other army guy says, "yeah, our blood, his guts." Yeah, Dick Cheney is willing to send your kids to Iraq and your kids to Iraq, the kids of working families and Hispanics and African-Americans and low-income people; he's willing to send them. But when it was his time, no, he had other priorities. Well, I gotta tell you, Mr. Cheney, we got other priorities, too, and they don't include you being Vice President of the United States.

I have been privileged to represent my state now for 30 years, 10 in the House and 20 in the Senate. I didn't mean to applaud that, I was just telling you a fact that's all. But I got to tell you, I didn't stay there by defending myself. You've got to attack those people. And I don't mean in a mean-spirited way, we can laugh about it, have a little fun -- but you've got to let people know what you're willing to fight for! And what you're going to fight against! And what you're willing to give up your office for in fighting for! You've got to do it.

There's a lot of things I've done that I'm not proud of. We all have votes we've cast that we'd go back and do it again. But there is one thing I am proud of, thanks to so many of you who have helped me out -- I see some of my fellow lowans who are here -- I now hold the record of having defeated more sitting Republican members of Congress than anyone in U.S. history. That is a record to be proud of!

But you've got to agitate, you've got to stir the pot up. As Frederick Douglass, a great freedom fighter and progressive put it, "those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without ploughing up the ground; they want rain without the thunder and the lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters."

Today, my friends, we progressives face a new challenge. Three years ago last Saturday we Americans suffered the worst terrorist attack in our history. September 11th traumatized our nation. But one good thing started to come out of that tragedy. In the aftermath of the attacks, Americans stood united and bound together like no other time I've seen in my lifetime. As I said at the time, today there are no Democrats and no Republicans, only Americans.

And the rest of the world rallied to our side too. Remember the headline of the Paris daily Le Monde on September 12th -- big headline: We Are All Americans Now. From Jakarta to Moscow to Rio de Janeiro, all across the Muslim world, people were with us. At that point President Bush had two choices. One choice was this: He could have kept his promise to be a uniter not a divider; he could have summoned us to put aside partisanship and personal agendas; he could have led us as a united America; he could have reached out to his supportive and sympathetic world to capture Osama bin Laden, destroy al Qaeda, stamp out global terrorism, to build not only a better, fairer America, but also a safer and more united and more peaceful world.

But Mr. Bush made a very different choice. He used his post 9/11 popularity and power to help vilify his political opponents, people like Senator Max Cleland of Georgia. He chose to divide America. Here at home he chose to ram through an extreme, ideological, right-wing agenda: Tax cuts for the wealthy, deregulation for polluters, countless favors for big business.

And abroad, instead of keeping his eye on the ball and going after al Qaeda and reaching out to other countries, forming partnerships with other countries. He used the 9/11 attacks as a pretext for doing what he wanted to do from day one of his presidency: Attack Saddam Hussein. And from that came the whole litany of lies: Cheney asserting that Saddam had "reconstituted nuclear weapons;" Bush asserting that Iraq was in bed with al Qaeda; Wolfowitz and company claiming that invading Iraq would be "a cake walk," that the war would be self-financing thanks to Iraq's oil. For the rest of the world Bush said, bug off, we're going to go it alone. We're going to do it my way.

And here at home he has stoked people's fears and anxiety about terrorism. As we saw most recently at the Republican National Convention, he has shamelessly exploited September 11th as a giant smoke screen to hide his real agenda: More tax cuts for the wealthy, more deregulation for Corporate America, the rollback of three decades of environmental protection, privatization of social security and Medicare, and an end to a woman's right to choose.

It's as though Bush has taken us back to the 1950s and the McCarthy era. The message then as now: Be afraid. Live in fear. And if you dare to dissent, if you speak out against a

reckless war, then you're weak -- you're soft on communism then. Now you're soft or sensitive on terrorism and you're un-American if you speak out and dissent. It's like the Red Scare of the 1950s, only instead of a cross-dressing J. Edgar Hoover, this time around we have John Ashcroft covering up the exposed bosoms of stone statues of the Justice Department.

Make no mistake about it. Once again, as then, our civil liberties are under assault. Many speakers today will talk about the excesses and abuses of the Patriot Act and others, but, my friends, it goes beyond that. Ordinary citizens here in middle America are being targeted for intimidation and harassment by the Bush Justice Department and the FBI. Let me give you just one example close to home. Last November in Des Moines, a small group of peace activists held a conference at Drake University, and they held a very peaceful demonstration outside the Iowa National Guard headquarters protesting the war in Iraq. The U.S. Attorney in Des Moines responded by subpoenaing Drake University for information about the conference. He also subpoenaed four of the activists to appear before a grand jury. Subpoenas were delivered by an officer who left business cards identifying himself as a member of the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force. Now just who were these four suspected terrorists? One was executive director of the Catholic Peace Ministry; one was a former coordinator of the Iowa Peace Network; one was a public school teacher; and the fourth was a member of the Catholic Worker Community.

I was not the only one outraged by the obvious harassment of peaceful demonstrators. People across our whole community were angry. And because of the public outcry and the editorials in the paper, within days the U.S. Attorney withdrew all of the subpoenas. But the message was clear: We're watching you. If you dare to dissent, you'll pay a price.

On August 16th of this year, The Washington Post reported that the FBI was questioning and in some cases subpoenaing political activists in the run up to the Republican National Convention. Sarah Bardwell, a 21-year-old intern with a Denver peace group, was visited by six FBI investigators. Now there's only one reason to send six investigators knocking on the door of a 21-year-old peace activist: Intimidation. To send the same message: If you dare to dissent, you, too, are going to get the knock on the door.

At a press conference John Ashcroft was asked about the FBI knocking on doors and interviewing peace activists such as Sarah Bardwell. George Orwell would have loved his answer. Here's what Ashcroft said, "The interviews were designed to support freedom, to enrich it, to make sure it was not interrupted or otherwise disrupted by violent criminal terrorist activities and plans." Now I know you can't believe what I just said, so I'm going to say it again. This is what Ashcroft said. Listen. "The interviews were designed to support freedom, to enrich it, to make sure it was not interrupted or otherwise disrupted by violent criminal terrorist activities and plans." My friends, we have reached a truly frightening juncture when the top law enforcement officer in the land said six FBI agents knocking on the door of a 21-year-old dissenter is designed to support freedom and to enrich it.

Meanwhile we have a new term that's entered our political vocabulary: First Amendment Zones. Maybe you haven't heard about them. Well, when George W. Bush visits a city, protesters are restricted to an area cornered off by police and secret service; it may be a half a mile from where the President is speaking. In one case when Bush visited Birmingham, Alabama, the First Amendment Zone was five miles away. Protesters must remain within the zone or face arrestment or detainment.

My friends, a funny thing, I don't remember being taught about First Amendment Zones in my civics class in high school. What I was taught is the entire United States of America is a First Amendment Zone. I remember being taught that the First Amendment says that Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech or the right of peaceful assembly. Now if you don't believe me, you can look it up. And if you need a copy of the Bill of Rights, you can find one in the garbage can right outside of John Ashcroft's door.

My friends, we must not allow Bush, Cheney, and Ashcroft to create a new McCarthy era. In the '50s we were told to hide under our desks, now they want us to buy duct tape and plastic wrap. In the '50s it was the Red Scare, and now it's Orange Alerts. And as progressives, we'll have none of it. We're Americans. We refuse to live in fear, because if we live in fear, the terrorists have won. And we are not going to let them win.

By all means we must take smart, aggressive steps to protect Americans against terrorists. And we will crush al Qaeda and anyone else who attacks our great country. But let's be clear. A military response alone will not defeat terrorism; in fact, it will backfire on us. It will backfire on us if we do not also address the issues of poverty and hunger and education -- especially in the Muslim world -- and if we continue to thumb our nose at legitimate political and economic grievances. We can defeat terrorism without creating an atmosphere of fear and anxiety and paranoia. We can do it without giving up our rights and principles and values as a free people. We can defeat our enemies without becoming like them.

My friends, the last time I heard the National Anthem, it still said that America is the land of the free and home of the brave. And contrary to the poison on right-wing radio and Fox TV, America is still at root a progressive country. As someone once said, America is a conservative country, but the values we conserve are liberal. The great majority of Americans believe in equality and tolerance and have respect for diversity and dissent; and most Americans also believe in the great progressive value, a value embodied in every major religion, of extending a helping hand to those who have been left on the roadside of life. We all believe in pursuing the American dream of getting a better job, a better house, and a better car and having a better life, moving up the ladder. I always believed in the ladder of opportunity.

But here's the difference between Bush and that crowd and most of them in that party and us, the progressives: Those Republicans believe that when you get to the top, you should pull the ladder up behind you. And the government will help you pull it up. We progressives believe that when you get to the top, it's one of our primary responsibilities of free government to make sure we leave the ladder down for others to climb too. Now you notice I said a ladder, I did not say an escalator. This is not a free ride. That's what all those conservatives say, you liberals just want to give everybody a free ride. I don't want to give anybody a free ride. You see with a ladder, if you follow my analogy a little bit further, with a ladder, you still have to exert energy and effort and responsibility to get up. But the rungs are there. And sometimes you look around, and there are people who couldn't get up that ladder no matter how hard they tried; no matter how many rungs were there, they couldn't get up because they were disabled either physically or mentally.

So I looked around America, and I saw what happened to my own brother over his lifetime because of his disability. The fact that no matter how many ladders, they could never get up. We had to do something else, so we built a ramp. And we called it the Americans with Disabilities Act. And made sure that they, too, had opportunity. You know, I always said the Americans with Disabilities Act, that I authored and sponsored, that not one nickel, not one dime, was given to a person. But we broke down the barriers, built the ramps and the curb cuts, and we provided for accommodations for people's jobs. We still have a long way to go to get people out of the nursing homes and get them into the community, but we're on our way. We're going to do that. We're a long way from achieving Paul Wellstone's dream of equity for mental health parity, but we're going to get that too.

But the rungs and the ramp are there. Things like maternal and child health care and Headstart and child care and affordable health care and student loans and Pell grants and Medicare, Medicaid, social security, minimum wage, overtime pay, civil rights, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. They're all there to make sure that no matter who you are, no matter the circumstances of your birth, the color of your skin, no matter what -- you, too, have opportunity. And we as a government better make sure that those

ramps and those rungs are there, and that they're not taken away. And we progressives must always fight to make sure that they are always there and a part of our society.

A lot of times people ask me why I'm a liberal -- progressive -- I use the words interchangeably. Well, let me tell you a story about why I'm a progressive. Back when George Bush was Governor -- he was just running for President, so this would have been about 1989-'90 -- I'm sorry '99-2000. I had a friend of mine that came to see me in my office. He's a Republican and a good friend of mine -- there I've gone nonpartisan. I'm covering my bases here. He's a good guy, a good Republican. He came in, and he was a big Bush supporter at that time. He said, well Tom, one thing you've got to agree with Governor Bush on. I said, what's that? He said, government can't give hope to people. And I said, really? I said, Bob, come here. I took him out of my chair in my office, I went over to a wall that's by my door.

I want you all to know I don't have one of these "I love me" walls in my office. Here I am with this famous person and all that kind of stuff, I don't do that. But I do have two things on my wall right by my door when I walk out of my office, when I go to vote or whatever. When I walk out, there are two things right by my door. One is a drawing of the birthplace of my mother in a small village, Suha, in Yugoslavia, where she was born and raised in a small house with a dirt floor and an outhouse out back. Family lived in one side, the animals lived on the other side. So I've got that to remind me that I'm just a first, half-way first generation American, and to remind me of where my roots come from there. Next to that I have a little plaque that I have framed. If you ever come to my office, I'll show it to you. It's a little orange certificate, I've got it in a frame. I took it off the wall, and I showed it to Bob -- first explained the picture of my mother's birthplace. I said now I'll show you this. I want you to look at the date on it, the date up on the corner -- 7/19/39. I said, now Bob, I was born 11/19/39, so this is four months to the day before I was born. You see the name on it, it's Patrick F. Harkin, that's my father. And it says to report to work at once as a laborer, \$40.30 a month. Up in the left hand corner it says WPA Form 430. I said, Bob, now you know what the WPA was right? He said no, he didn't. True story. I said let me put it in context for you.

We lived in a little two-bedroom house in a small town of 150. My mother was an immigrant, spoke passable English. We had five kids and one on the way, that would be me, in this little two-bedroom house. My father at that time was 54 years old, my mother was 44; so as you can see, I just slipped in under the wire. My father only had a 6th grade education. Well, Ed, actually he always said he had an 8th grade education, but he was Irish and liked to brag a lot. So here my father's 54, my mother's 44, we have five kids, and I'm on the way. It's 1939, my father has worked most of his life in coal mines -- many of you probably didn't know we had a lot of coal mines in Iowa in those days. He worked in coal mines for a long time. He then married my mother who was a widow -- I'm not going to go into all that. He bought a small farm, lost it in the Depression. And here it is 1939, he's got five kids, one on the way, no job, no hope, no income. He's at the end of his rope -- what's he going to do?

FDR and the Democratic Party came, they gave him a job, and they put him to work. They gave him dignity. Later on my dad used to take me down to Lake Ahquabi, a little lake south of Des Moines down there. There's a high school in Indianola that they worked on and built--still use today. He was proud of the fact that what he had worked on people were still using.

So I told this all to Bob. I said, Bob, you know when you and that Bush character, when you tell me that government can't give hope to people, you are talking to the wrong person. You see government can give hope to people! Government can give hope to people, it just depends on who's running the government. And who's getting the hope. Believe me, in the last three and a half years Haliburton's gotten a lot of hope; the pharmaceutical companies have a lot of hope; the oil and gas industry, the other big polluters, they've gotten a lot of hope; the right wing, they've gotten a lot of hope.

You and I believe in giving hope to people who truly need it and deserve it: Hard working Americans who have lost their jobs, young people who need a quality education without going into debt up to their eyeballs, family farmers and small business owners who are struggling to stay afloat, elderly people who are having trouble paying their utility bills in the winter because their drug costs have gotten so high. These are the people who need the hope in our country.

Well, these are our ideals. They're ideals to be proud of, and they are worth fighting for. And fight we must, because we have an unfinished agenda. When Franklin Roosevelt took to the campaign in 1936, he talked about a country ill-nourished, ill-housed, and ill-fed. He didn't try to talk about his last four years, about everything was great. He said we have an unfinished agenda. And my friends, I tell you that we progressives today have an unfinished agenda. As long as one child is denied a quality, free, public education, we have an unfinished agenda; as long as one American is without health insurance and denied access to medical care, we have an unfinished agenda; as long as one senior citizen is cutting her pills in half because she can't afford both medicine and food, we have an unfinished agenda; as long as one American is denied equal treatment because of color, creed, disability or sexual orientation, we have an unfinished agenda; and as long as one law-abiding protester gets a knock on the door by six FBI agents, we have an unfinished agenda.

My friends, our ability to address this unfinished progressive agenda will largely be determined on November the 2nd. So we've got a big job ahead of us. We've got to register more voters, we've got to go door-to-door, we've got to stand up and speak up and fight. Fight as though our lives and future depend on it, because they do. Right up until election day.

You know, Bob LaFollette must be looking down on this gathering today, and he's saying the same thing: Time to stand up, fight back. Our country is being taken backward, our progressive ideals are under assault, our standard bearers are being smeared.

Well, I think I'm probably talking too long, but someone once described me a Hubert Humphrey Democrat. I said, I am, and I'm proud of it. Hubert one time was asked to speak for five or ten minutes, and he got up and got all wound up, and he went on and on and on. And he finally looked at his watch after he'd gone on for about an hour, and he said, oh, my goodness. He said, you know, I was only supposed to talk for about ten minutes, and I've gone on for over an hour. I really apologize, but, you know, he said, the longer I talked, the more I liked what I heard.

And so I conclude with this appeal: To join together, to join with other progressives here in Wisconsin, the Upper Midwest -- this is a battleground area. To fight for our progressive ideals, to make sure we don't turn the clock back, to make sure we address this unfinished agenda. So in the spirit of this gathering, I've got to leave to go to Iowa, after a bit anyway. But let me leave you with this benediction: Now again, I know this is a 501(C)(3), so I'm going to put this in the spirit of a benediction. As you leave these grounds, and you go back to your farms and your homes and your communities, your businesses, your endeavors, your churches, your social friends, as you go back, remember to talk to them about what's at stake on November the 2nd. And tell them all it's really not very complicated, it's really very simple. All they ever needed to know about what's taking place on November the 2nd, they learned in driver's education. Yes, I say to you, all you ever needed to know on November 2nd, you learned in driver's education. Very simple: If you want to go backward, you put it in 'R.' And if you want to go forward, you put it in 'D!'

Thank you all very much. God bless you. Thank you. Thank you. Never give up! Never give up! Never give up! Hurry to fight on!