

REMARKS BY SEN. TOM HARKIN

CEDAR RAPIDS ROTARY CLUB

CROWNE PLAZA HOTEL

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Thank you, Bob, for that generous introduction. And let me also thank Larry Helling for the kind invitation to be with you, today.

As you may know, Congress is in its traditional August recess. Just before adjourning, we finally passed the big energy bill. Somebody asked me why it took Congress nearly *five years* to pass this bill. And I said, “Well, it’s complex. It’s not easy.” And then I told her a story: A farmer is crossing the road to get to his mailbox. He’s in the middle of the road, and he turns to see a speeding car heading right toward him. The farmer dodges to the left; the car swerves to the left. He dodges to the right, the car swerves to the right. Finally, the farmer stands frozen with fear, smack in the middle of the road. The car comes to a screeching halt just inches from his face. The window rolls down to reveal a squirrel in the driver’s seat. The squirrel sticks his head out the window and says, “Not as easy as it looks, is it?”

Likewise, I appreciate that being a member of Rotary is not as easy as it looks. It involves a lot more than showing up for lunch, here, once a week. I have long admired Rotary International’s campaign to eradicate polio worldwide.

And, here in Cedar Rapids, I know that you have had a very active role with Metro High School – helping with fundraising and scholarships . . . and mentoring students who need help with reading. My staff and I participate in a similar program in Washington and Des Moines, so I know the kind of impact you are having on the kids in that school. And I know how much *you* get out of it, too. As someone once said, no exercise is better for the human heart than reaching down to lift up a child.

My hat is also off to you for the work you are doing with Mayans in the Yucatan with your Promise of Health project. What a great example of “service beyond self.”

You know, I can’t help but contrast the values and priorities people have here in Iowa with the very different values and priorities I see in the Nation’s Capital, these days—especially when it comes to taxing and spending.

Just four and a half years ago, we had the largest annual budget *surplus* in U.S. history. And we were looking at a \$5 *trillion* surplus over the coming decade—enough to retire the national debt, and then some.

All of that hard-won fiscal sanity is now long gone. Since January of 2001, total federal spending has grown by an astonishing 33 percent. At the same time, after four years of tax cuts, federal revenue as a share of GDP has fallen to the lowest level since *1959!*

In other words, taxes as a share of GDP are now at the same level they were *before* we had Medicare and Medicaid . . . *before* we had a major federal role in funding

public education, special education, Title 1, and Pell Grants . . . *before* the interstate highway system was a major expense . . . *before* the war on terrorism. Think about this: The Iraq war is the first war in American history to be financed by tax cuts.

So this is the story in Washington today: Massive tax cuts. Rapid increases in federal spending. Record budget deficits. Skyrocketing debt.

It's interesting to remember that President Ronald Reagan confronted a similar situation in the early 1980s. In his first year in office, 1981, he passed a huge tax cut. But Reagan turned out to be a pragmatist – and probably, deep down, a Midwestern fiscal conservative. When he saw that his tax cuts went too far and were creating giant deficits, he allowed sensible adjustments. Many forget that Reagan signed tax *increases* in 1982, 1983, and 1984. And he was reelected in a landslide!

Unfortunately, there is no such pragmatism or moderation in Washington, today. We have a totally out-of-control situation. And what makes it worse is that the choices being made by the powers that be, today, are the wrong choices. They do not reflect Iowa priorities—and they don't reflect Iowa values.

We should be approaching our national budget the way a responsible husband and wife approach their family budget around the kitchen table. They don't spend beyond their means. They make hard choices. And they get their priorities right.

OK, so if I were king for a day, what choices would I make? For starters, I would build a path to balance the budget. I would do it by revisiting some of the non-middle-class tax cuts passed during the last four years. It is just plain reckless to borrow hundreds of billions of dollars from China, Japan, and South Korea—as the Treasury is now doing—in order to finance tax cuts. And it's especially dangerous to allow China—which is a strategic rival—to become our largest banker. This needs to stop.

Second, I would do what a husband and wife do with their limited family budget. I would set priorities, including education, health care, and economic infrastructure, including transportation. And I would focus federal spending on areas where there is maximum return on investment, maximum bang for the buck.

On that score, the good news is that some of the most important things we can do for the well-being of our American family do *not* cost big bucks.

A good case in point is stem-cell research. Senator Arlen Specter and I are the lead sponsors of the Senate bill to permit more aggressive embryonic stem cell research. As you know, we recently got a huge shot in the arm when Majority Leader Bill Frist endorsed our bill.

This research could unlock new treatments—and maybe even a cure—for juvenile diabetes, spinal cord injuries, Parkinson's, Lou Gehrig's and other terrible diseases. Millions of Americans are literally fighting for their lives—including my legislative partner, Senator Specter, who has Hodgkin's lymphoma. And embryonic stem cell research offers them new hope.

The Specter-Harkin bill doesn't require any new funding. What it does is take the shackles off of top researchers at the National Institutes of Health and elsewhere. It will

allow them to do research on stem cell lines from the more than 400,000 embryos that are left over from fertility treatments—embryos that would otherwise be discarded.

The choice before us is to continue to discard those unwanted embryos as just so much medical waste, or to use them in research to cure disease and save lives. It is the *second* choice, I believe, that is truly respectful of human life.

At the same time, we need to be addressing a much broader health care challenge in the United States. The reality, of course, is that we don't have a *health* care system, we have a *sick* care system. If you get sick, you get care. We wait until people become obese, develop chronic diseases, or become disabled – and then we spend untold hundreds of billions to try to make them better.

Someone once defined insanity as doing the same old thing, over and over again, and expecting a different result. Well, our current health care approach is, by definition, insane. We continue to spend a fortune on pills, surgery, treatments, and disability.

Look at the numbers. Some 75 percent of health care costs in the United States are accounted for by chronic conditions and diseases – things like heart disease, cancer, obesity, and diabetes – many of which are *preventable* by changes in nutrition and lifestyle.

It's not only the federal budget—Medicare and Medicaid—that is being eaten alive by health care costs. It is also state budgets. It is family budgets. And it is small-business and corporate budgets.

We need a radical change of course. We need a fundamental paradigm shift in the direction of preventing disease, promoting good nutrition, and encouraging fitness and wellness – in other words, keeping people out of the hospital in the first place. This will be good for the *physical* health of the American people. And it will be good for the *fiscal* health of government, business, and family budgets.

To this end, I have introduced a bill I call the Healthy Lifestyle and Prevention Act, or, simply, the HeLP America Act. This bill takes a *comprehensive* approach to wellness and prevention. It would give the Federal Trade Commission authority to regulate unfair junk food advertising aimed at children. It would give businesses a tax break for providing wellness plans to their employees. It would provide incentives to build bike paths and walking trails. It would require nutrition labeling on menus in chain restaurants. And much, much more.

As I said, the HeLP America Act is *comprehensive*. It is ambitious. And we are at the beginning of a long legislative process. But it is clear to me this new emphasis on wellness and prevention is an idea whose time has come.

Now, let me very briefly mention two major bills that passed the Senate last week, with major implications for Iowa.

The energy bill will be a huge boost to our farmers, to biofuels producers, and to the rural economy overall. I was very pleased that the final bill included the lion's share of the Renewable Fuels Standard that I authored along with Senator Dick Lugar of Indiana. Refiners will be required to blend 7.5 *billion* gallons of ethanol and biodiesel annually by the year 2012 – more than twice the current rate. And that means we are

going to see a lot more ethanol and biodiesel production facilities sprouting up across Iowa.

Also last week, the Senate passed the long-awaited highway bill. The Iowa delegation teamed up to secure nearly \$2.4 *billion* for transportation projects. And let me emphasize that these projects have nothing to do with the deficit. They are fully paid for by Federal gas and car taxes credited to the Highway Trust Fund, which is in surplus. It's my job as your Senator to see that Iowa—and Cedar Rapids—get their fair share of that trust-fund money.

For the Cedar Rapids area, we secured \$8 million to ease congestion on Collins Road by creating a separate turning lane . . . and nearly \$8 million to construct a viaduct on Edgewood Road over the CRANDIC rail yard. In addition, I secured \$600,000 for the Ely Connector hiking-and-biking trail in Linn County.

These are smart investments. The road projects will keep the arteries of commerce unclogged. And bike and walking trails do the same for our *own* arteries.

All of these bills I have mentioned this afternoon—the stem cell bill, my wellness and prevention legislation, the energy and highway bills—have important things in common. They are bipartisan. They speak to Iowa values and priorities. And—with the obvious exception of the highway bill—they carry a modest price tag.

Now, I realize that time is very short, but I'd like close by commenting on something that Bob mentioned in his introduction: the Americans with Disabilities Act. The day that bill passed 15 years ago truly was the proudest day of my legislative career. But not even I expected the progress—the quiet revolution—that we have seen in such a short period of time.

We have removed physical barriers to people with disabilities. Just as important, we have broken down the false dichotomy between “disabled” and “able.” We recognize that people with disabilities – like all people – have unique abilities, talents, and aptitudes. And that Iowa and America are better, fairer, and richer when we make full use of those gifts.

This success is something to keep in mind when you see all those polls showing that Americans believe our country is heading on the wrong track. Yes, there is a drumbeat of bad news from Iraq. And yes we have a budget mess in Washington. But America continues to lead the world in positive things like medical research, technological advance, and civil rights, including the civil rights of people with disabilities.

These are things that *all* Americans can take pride in. They are beyond partisanship—beyond party. And, I promise you, they will continue to be my primary focus as your Senator in Washington.

Thank you, my friends.