

REFLECTIONS PROJECT
REP. MAJOR OWENS INTERVIEW
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LINDA DOUGLASS: So Congressman Owens let me ask you first of all why it was that you decided to go into the House of Representatives as a Democrat in the '80s when Ronald Reagan was the President?

REP. MAJOR OWENS: Well I was a member of the state senate. I'd been there for 8 years, and, I'm going to tell you the truth. I was elected to the state senate without the support of the local Brooklyn Democratic machine. And they were determined to get me too, the whole 8 years I was there. Every election time I had competition and I was able to defeat the competition and they were able to finance against me, so they decided the reapportionment took place, and they redrew the lines, they put a pen in the middle of my district and my district became one quarter of 4 other districts [laughs]. It was distributed that way, and I looked at it and I said "I can never win re-election in this senate district." And I'd been toying with the idea of running for Congress, but that was, that made it decisive. I said "I may lose, but the noble thing to do now is to run for Congress, to attack instead of retreating." So against everybody's , surprising everybody, I was able to beat an opponent who had \$400,000 in the bank when I had \$10,000 in the bank, and who had the support of the whole, kind of machine, etc., etc. So, I ran for Congress and I won.

DOUGLASS: When you came to Washington, a very different place than Albany, New York, what was it like for you when you first came to the House-- and if you can remember, who was especially nice to you? And if you'd like to tell us, who was not?

OWENS: Oh, most of the Democrats were very...the grand old Democrats were still here. Tip O'Neill, Tom Foley, Mr. Wright, Mr. Natcher, who never missed a vote. So we had that old tradition coming at us at the orientation sessions, and the advice, you know, to be heard—you've got to be seen to be heard. Your first 2 years, you stay around, you learn the ropes, take care of your district, don't get out of hand, be a good guy. Of course, not only myself, but most of my class didn't buy that and [laughs] we immediately started doing things that upset a few people. But, they were nice people. Tip O'Neill, you know, grand old tradition, traditions of the House, protocol was very important, and the Republican's side-- there were gentleman's agreements—you act a certain way, there was a nice, civil atmosphere at that time.

DOUGLASS: Now Ronald Reagan was the President and obviously you were a liberal activist from day one and remain so all of your career. What was the dynamic at that time between the liberal democrats and President Reagan? Because certainly partisan competition battles, disagreements today, are very tense and angry. How would you describe the battles, which were for very big issues in those days, between the liberal democrats and Ronald Reagan who was the leader of a growing conservative movement in the country?

OWENS: Well fortunately, there were a lot of Democrats, you know. We had a 40 member majority, I think, over the Republicans. So there was a lot of contention between liberal Democrats and conservative Democrats, as well as Republicans and Democrats. And Ronald Reagan was a major point of contention. Liberal Democrats—I came here out of, as I said before, I was in a community action program in NYC, a part of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs, Medicare, Medicaid, started etc. – to Ronald Reagan, who made speeches about people are homeless because they want to live that way, you know, being very nonchalant and careless about people at the very bottom. He didn’t care for them, and he also got elected, he launched his campaign Philadelphia Mississippi, appealing to the Southern vote, in a rather racist way. So I thought, he was not a favorite president, who minded his manners and so forth. He was always gracious, etc, charming, etc, but I thought he was real cold-blooded and unconcerned about the people on the bottom, that I represented most. So I had a problem, I had a problem with Ronald Reagan. A number of Democrats had a problem with Ronald Reagan, not only in domestic matters, but later in the biggest conflict with foreign policy—the El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Contra mess that they insisted on, continuing the war. And finally the Congress voted to cut off funds for the war in Nicaragua, so they went to the Irangate and they got away with it, you know. . They really didn’t—it was exposed, but they got away with it. So Ronald Reagan, you know, he was, everybody sort of liked him. But I thought he was poison for the country.

DOUGLASS: Do you remember any personal encounters that you had yourself with various presidents over the time that you served? Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, President Clinton, George W. Bush? Any particular encounters with any of those presidents that stick in your memory?

OWENS: I remember getting close to Ronald Reagan, except in a couple of receptions where I happened to be—I was on one side of the room, he was on the other side of the room. We never really interacted, Ronald Reagan, Daddy Bush, George H. Bush was very different. He actually reached out to the Congressional Black Caucus and was willing to meet with us on a couple occasions and invited us informally to the White House for a reception. And he was interested in that kind of contact with a different kind of individual. But still, it was kind of, sort of distant. And the real interaction came when Bill Clinton became president. We had tremendous interaction, because we were Democrats. There were a couple of crises

that occurred which the Congressional Black Caucus and myself were in the middle of—Haiti was, I became the chairman of the task force of Haiti for the Congressional Black Caucus because I had the most Haitians in my congressional district. And back and forth with Bill Clinton was very dramatic, very up-close, he was calling me on my car phone, and you know, it was unforgettable, you know, the experience of him. We finally came out the right way. He did what I asked him to do, did what we asked him to do. He escorted President Aristide, who had been overthrown in a coup— we had a military group that escorted him back to his country without a single American soldier being killed, which is what I told the president in the first place. I said we would not have— if you take him back, you will not have any opposition. The people who overthrew him are cowards. They will disappear in the bush. They will not fight, and they didn't. But that was a great experience, and later on, we had a number of different meetings with Clinton and the Congressional Black Caucus about other things: The community technology centers that I proposed as part of the education committee dedicated to get over the lack of computers in poor communities—he supported. Later on, he, even in his last year, he did the unthinkable. He went against his Secretary of Labor—Secretary of Education Riley— and supported one of my efforts to get school repair and school construction money. Riley had taken the position that the federal government should not get involved. And I fought him for a whole 8 years and finally at the last meeting of the Congressional Black Caucus with Clinton, he promised he would put money in the budget. And he did put money in the budget—he put \$1.2 billion in the budget for school repair and school construction. So my experiences with Clinton were really fantastic.

DOUGLASS: And this President Bush?

OWENS: This President Bush is very interesting. He's a—you know, I met him several times. He made an effort to make sure that he made contact with the members of the Congressional Black Caucus, and members in general, and the delegations and right away, you know. There's a buddy-buddy sorta thing that he'll pull on you that disarms you [laughs] you know. I'll never forget—I've been around here for a long, long time and a lot of Democrats and other people confuse me with John Lewis [laughs]. John Lewis is almost as handsome as I am [laughs], but not quite. And he had no confusion. I saw him the second, unfortunately, when he visited New York after 9/11, and there's a whole row of Congressmen, and he comes right down the line and says, 'Hi Maj, how are you?' He's a very disarming guy. It's hard not to like him upfront, personally. And on a couple other occasions, he would make a beeline for you and make that dead on, direct approach that "Hi buddy," so you know... in the final analysis, his policies and his, the people who surround him have been terrible for the country. And, I don't really want to go to his Christmas parties and anything else and have to confront that friendly attitude in view of the fact that there are so many things going wrong and so many ways in which we're wasting our resources in Iraq while we are refusing to deal with basic

problems here in terms of—he never did fund No Child Left Behind the way he promised to. I am on the education committee. We had some close negotiations with the Republicans including one meeting with him, and he promised that he was going to put you know, billions of dollars in there to make the thing work and he backed away from that promise this year. So that, I have many grievances again George W. Bush.

DOUGLASS: But he's hard not to like?

OWENS: But you won't get close to him because you'll get sucked in [laughs] into that personal thing that he pulls.

DOUGLASS: The, I want to ask you several questions about the Congressional Black Caucus, one of the more interesting institutions inside the House of Representatives, but I'd like to start actually with the reaction of the Congressional Black Caucus in 2000 after the supreme court in Bush versus Gore concluded that President Bush had won the election. Many members of the Congressional Black Caucus felt that as a personal blow at the time. Can you explain at all what the emotions were, what was behind that and whether it was as personally felt as many of us were led to believe at the time?

OWENS: Well I felt what happened in Florida was a carefully worked out conspiracy and I notice, almost nobody wanted to use that word. The civil rights commission in its investigation and hearings, even my colleagues in the caucus—nobody liked the word 'conspiracy.' But I think it was conspiracy orchestrated at a high level in the state of Florida. That many things could not go wrong in one place—in one state without there having been a conspiracy. Many, many different things did go wrong. Many tricks were pulled of various kinds, but I think the most dastardly deeds were done to the black community, the minority community, the Hispanics. The black community had to suffer from a number of, of tricks that were pulled aimed at the black community. The taking of people—the removal of people's names from the rolls, because they had some kind of criminal record, which later on turned out to be false— they moved a lot of people who had no criminal record, and they blamed it all on the firm that they hired to do that and they got away with it, you know. The—on the day, they had police out near, in black communities, lined up as if they were threatening to search people or do something to them. And they frightened a lot of people who didn't want to go to the polls at all. And then, the polling places themselves, there was this loose kind of thing that our folks objected to that they kept happening and nothing was done about it. So we were angry at Al Gore and the Democrats for not fighting harder, and the Supreme Court you know, reversing itself completely. It was the Supreme Court that insisted that certain things belong to states, the states should decide, and yet they usurped the Florida—we got the Florida Supreme Court going in the right direction finally. They usurped the powers of the Florida Supreme Court and

intervened—it was a fix, as far as we’re concerned, you know. There’s no polite way to talk about it except the fix was in. And we were very angry about it, and fortunately some of my colleagues challenged the whole notion and wanted and Electoral College process to make a protest, which we didn’t get any support for on that ground. Later on, four years later we did get Barbara Boxer in the Senate to help us.

DOUGLASS: So I wanted to ask you that question then. On the day that the election had to be certified in the House of Representatives, the, a few Democratic senators came for that day, not all of them certainly, and Republicans as well. Al Gore was presiding. He had asked the Democratic senators not to object, and members of the Black Caucus were pleading with the senators in their own party, all of whom were white, to have just one of them simply object to throw it all into question again. What was the feeling, your own feeling and the feelings of your colleagues on that day?

OWENS: Well leading up to that, there was a lot of anger and despair, and it gave way to confusion because the caucus actually took a vote and said, ‘since we can’t get a senator, we won’t even challenge it—won’t do anything.’ And later a group that was so angry stayed in Washington, and they did have some kind of challenge, as history will show. But we—it was a refusal of any member of the senate to support us that led us to officially call it off—we were not, as a caucus, going to challenge it. But, thank God some very angry and emotional people did stay and at least we got a, whatchamacallit, a de facto challenge.

DOUGLASS: But did, did it feel like a, just an ordinary political defeat which people suffer in politics all the time, or did it feel like something more personal—or was it even going so far as to say that it felt humiliating? I’m trying to understand at what level the inability to change that result or challenge that result was felt.

OWENS: Well we felt that we were on the cutting edge, speaking for a lot of other Americans. It was not just a matter of Congressional Black Caucus or minority rights that had been abused. There were a lot of other angry Americans, a lot of other angry Democrats and our own party members, and we felt we were, we were the front lines for them as well. And that anger, you know, the feeling that the Democratic Party somehow failed us, in terms of its defense of the right to vote, you know, it did carry over. Of course, some things have happened as a result: we have a whole Voter Protection Act. We have a number of other things that continue to go, and of course, Ohio— that was a different kind of conspiracy; but it also, in my opinion, was a conspiracy. So I think, you know, we were frustrated, but we felt it was the right thing to do. And we were making a great contribution to America.

DOUGLASS: The power of the Congressional Black Caucus evolved considerably during your tenure. It began as a very tiny little group here in the house and rose to a much larger group, over 43 members I believe it is now. And the power of the Black Caucus has risen and is perceived to have fallen in recent years. Can you describe that trajectory and how that cycle has borne itself out and what the causes of rising and falling might have been?

OWENS: Oh I don't know about falling. The New York Times referred to the powerful Congressional Black Caucus last weekend in an article, in the editorial I think. So it's a perception. I think the founders, the 8 or 9 people who originally founded the Caucus, ought to be congratulated for what they did. They started something which has held on, it's stuck together through a lot of crises. And the reason they started it was in recognition of the fact that one by one, they were insignificant. But collectively, they could get a lot done. And one by one, they could not help to repeat the performance of Adam Clayton Powell. I think they all felt that when Adam Clayton Powell sort of faded from the scene that each one was going to try to be a replica of him. And it would look ridiculous with everybody trying to replace Adam Clayton Powell, his high visibility. So they, sort of took an oath amongst themselves, "Let's work collectively together." Well, that was a pretty rocky situation because right away Shirley Chisholm announced she's running for president [laughs] and began to, to sort of project herself up from the rest of the group. But they, they held together. And over the years they've held together and I think at the very first dinner they had Ossie Davis, was a speaker at the dinner. And he talked about, "It's not the man, it's the plan"—you've got to have an agenda. And you cannot represent just your own constituents in your own districts, you have to represent all of black America. And you have to have a master plan for doing that. That notion has hung on in spite of the fact that we don't really have a well conceived master plan, the master plan has not been revised enough—there are a number of problems. That's one of the things that I write about. We had some initial triumphs and a lot of blunders, and among those triumphs of course, was the passage of the Martin Luther King holiday bill, which was not very easy. You know, Reagan, if you recall, vetoed it, but we got the Republicans to write it. The passage of the Sanctions Against South Africa bill, which Reagan again was against and he vetoed. And we got the Republicans to overwrite it—join us in overwriting it. So you know, there have been some triumphs there. The return of the democratic government to Haiti was one, the—we actually got George Herbert Walker Bush to go into Somalia. That later on became a nightmare for Clinton, but it was a great humanitarian move that an outgoing president made—it was at the request of the Caucus, the Congressional Black Caucus. The inauguration of Nelson Mandela, the period leading up to that where they had to have a lot of advice, a lot of technical assistance to help negotiate with De Klerk and the whites and put together a constitution and so forth. The Congressional Black Caucus was very much, members and our staff were very much involved in that. It was a great triumph. And you know, right down the line, there are certain kinds of things that got done with

respect to schools and school construction that could not—nobody else was pushing for—that’s the highest priority of the Caucus. We really took—played a role in the Americans with Disabilities Act, because it was considered sort of an impossible act to pass. Because 14 different committees had jurisdiction over pieces of it. But fortunately 50% of the items were under the jurisdiction of my subcommittee, and I got the help of the whole Black Caucus. I think our first hearing, Jesse Jackson was a witness, and Justin Dart who was a leader of the disability community wanted it to be parallel to the Civil Rights Movement, like the third piece of a troika: Civil rights for minorities, civil rights for women and now, civil rights for people with disabilities. It all sold very well and we overwhelmed the opposition and after my committee passed the 50% of it, the other committees fell in line and we passed that. People look at this as an achievement by a minority caucus, but—

DOUGLASS: And I do want to ask you about the ADA as we talk about issues down the road, but I want to stick with the Congressional Black Caucus for the moment. First I want to pick up on something you said here, which was "blunders" as well. What would you say was one of the blunders that continues to stand out?

OWENS: Well one continuing blunder is ‘the plan.’ We don’t spend enough time developing legislation which addresses the needs of that large number of people out there in the black community who are still poor. Working families—at least half the black communities are poor, across the country, that’s not an exaggeration. And the working families are just a few paychecks away from poverty. We have not collectively developed a plan and a set of, a piece of legislation that has been able to deal with that in an ongoing way. We lost—the biggest blunder was that we lost the Community Action Program and the Office of Economic Opportunity. We allowed Nixon to make inroads into it, but we did, he didn’t finish it off. We let Reagan finish it off, and the history of the Caucus and— because I came out of a community action program, I was the commissioner under Lindsay; I was very concerned when I got here about what had happened. And the history of the caucus was that they just ignored... they ignored the importance of it, they never understood that. That’s the biggest blunder. They had a foot hold in government addressing the needs of the people who we represent in all of our districts, the majority of people are poor. And we let that get away. The second blunder relates to that, and that is under a Democratic president, Clinton, we allowed the Welfare Reform Act to pass. And I’m in the minority on this. Most people think that’s a great act. But I think it was a horror. The Welfare Reform Act was supposed to have an aggressive initiative for job training and job creation. At the same time that we passed that, they were cutting programs for jobs. And the Secretary of Labor under Clinton resigned actually because his department was being sort of reduced so drastically. We let that happen. We probably couldn’t have prevented it because it was a combination of Gingrich and a president who was much worse than he should have been. They could have had welfare reform along with the lines of the

President, but let the Gingrich people push him. Even Gingrich publicly said, “I’m surprised with how much we got away with.” At the same time we were allowing that to happen, the real welfare scandal we were not touching, and that is the agribusiness. Welfare that goes to farmers is outrageous. And if you wanted to be a champion of personal responsibility, then it’s the agri-corporations that we ought to be talking to, because farmers are less than 1% of the population and yet they take, they took \$40 billion out of the budget on a regular basis. And then later on they get drought relief money to add to that, and hurricane relief after that. The real rip-off in government, if you’re concerned about waste, look at the pattern of subsidies for the agri-corporations. They’re not individuals anymore. Roosevelt developed a subsidy program, a little check was going to a dirt farmer out there to help him improve and cooperate with the local agricultural county agent and so forth, encourage that. That later on became a quota. Each farmer had, he had his quota. They sold them to the corporations. And now we have big agriculture corporations that have those subsidies, and they’re getting paid. I think we tried to pass a bill to maximize the amount of payment they can use at \$265,000. That was defeated. It was too little. The agribusiness lobby caucus, which is the Blue Dogs mainly—the Blue Dogs are primarily a great promoter of the agribusiness subsidy, and they are the ones that hate the welfare—they attack welfare recipients the most. It is one of those things that I intend to deal with at great length in my book. And we allow them to get away with it, and we allow ourselves to lose any kind of foothold in the government to really help poor people on a long-term basis.

DOUGLASS: You were talking about agriculture, and that brings me to another question, which is: **The composition of the Congressional Black Caucus has changed during the time that you were in Congress. It was dominated by African Americans from big cities in America. And increasingly they have come from the South, where they often have to deal with rural issues as well. As your members other members dealing with the big city issues, how has that changed the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the working relationship Black Caucus?**

OWENS: Well, it’s had quite an impact on the Caucus. We are more diverse in terms of interests at this point. It is a real danger, there is a real danger of balkanization if we’re not careful. And to the credit of most of the members, they have not had any public splitting on certain issues. We all agree that education is a priority—education for the big cities, for the inner cities and education for the neglected rural schools that we will solidly, are together on that. When you look at the Congressional Black Caucus’ alternative budget, which for several years, I was in charge of preparing, I ran into great opposition when 13 members came in from the South— of my tax on the agribusiness and the agri-budget and the subsidies. They, they saw that as being against their constituents’ interest. Although when challenged, they agreed that the money’s not flowing to their constituency. It’s going to big agri-corporations. But that’s still a point of contention. I didn’t do the budget for the last couple of years, and I noticed that they didn’t touch the subsidies

for agriculture [laughs] in proposing cuts. The defense industry is big in a couple of districts, and they are not as comfortable with their margin of victory as some of the big city members like myself and some others. So they have to worry about a big military base that happens to be their— big military factory and place, so that does make for some tensions. And then there is a, there is a class problem. I think in terms of the orientation of some toward the answer for the black community is a larger entrepreneur class, more businesses, and a greater emphasis on private sector assisting—all of which is true. But those who put that forth, propose it most forcefully, neglect and omit the kind of disaster we faced as was exposed in Katrina. There are pockets of poor blacks, as poor as the people in the 9th ward, who are in danger of just not being able to survive. Given that crisis, they were not able to take care of themselves, and you can pinpoint all the reasons. It's related to poverty. And there are a lot of those across the country in every big city. My—New York by the way, New York City had the greatest increase in poverty out of any big city in the last 10 years. And my district includes, the epicenter of the AIDs epidemic in North America is in part of my district, which a whole, related diseases that are rampant there. So you—we have crises that, there is a group to come in, mostly from Yale and Harvard [laughs] who don't consider that as important as it should be. So there is a tension which we, I hope will be resolved in the direction of the understanding that, you, no matter how you cut it, at least half of the people each one represents are poor people.

DOUGLASS: Well now you've raised the other generational question which is also a change in the caucus so you have younger members now and they are those who didn't live through and serve on the front lines of the civil rights movement, which was so much a part of the formation of the political core of most of you. How has that infusion of that new younger generation, the one that was came of age after the '60s, how is that effecting the Black Caucus?

OWENS: Well I think the younger generation, and I'm not going to call you names or make some sweeping statements here, don't appreciate the need for group cohesion as much as the older ones do. They didn't go through the same kind of struggle. In my opinion, they are more naïve about American power, American politics. They don't understand the competing forces, how greedy they can be, how rampant they can be [laughs]. They don't quite appreciate the kinds of enemies that minorities and black people still have out there—systematic, institutional enemies who are constantly doing things that are against our interest, constantly bearing away at affirmative action, which has been a great success for everybody, including the American corporations. But yet there are groups still banging away at affirmative action, constantly banging away at the notion of personal responsibility. Some of the people that cry loudest about personal responsibility are the biggest hypocrites in America, out in the Midwestern farmers and the Southern farmers who are under dole, under payroll, well not payroll, but they're getting more money from the federal government than anybody else. And they want to get government

off their back. When you start looking closely—they got farm loans, they got grants for the drought and grants for too much water, too much rain, and the market economy is sealed off. If the market is not suitable, then the subsidies go into effect and protect them, but they're the ones who cry loudest about the need to cut Medicaid and cut services for poor people, refusing to fund education at a certain level because we're putting too much money in education. They want to follow the same standards they followed 50 years ago in terms of teachers' salaries and anti-unions and all of this seems to escape some of our newer members in terms of what the impact of it is. And they're naïve in my opinion.

DOUGLASS: What you're also talking about in a sense is the ideological transformation of the Democratic Party, which may be transforming itself again. But certainly you are a self-described liberal, and I want to ask you at some point what that means to you. But in the meantime, I want to ask you whether you think that the party was taken to the center by the very President who was considered to be the best friend of the Black Caucus and that is Bill Clinton. Because he did embrace free trade and he did talk about personal responsibility and he did embrace the notion of putting more police on the streets to fight crime as a higher priority for Democrats than it had been before, something that appealed to Republican voters. And he did talk more about balanced budgets than other kinds of issues and brought in the welfare reform program and so forth. So what, what effect did he actually have on the Democratic party in, in your view?

OWENS: He helped us to win [laughs]. We won the presidency in his first term and he managed to win the second time. But given all that he had, Al Gore should not have had a problem if we had not fallen into the trap of not understanding Aristotle's Golden Mean: Everything has extremes. You know, I think the Clinton administration, under the push of the Democratic leadership council went too far to the center, too far to the right, and neglected the basic constituency out there. The major blunder of the Congressional Black Caucus is also the major blunder of the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party has looked at the situation and the voting patterns over the years, and turned away from the obvious. Even in a presidential election, only about 49%—only about 51% of the people vote, and that other 49% is out there, you know. And the Democratic Party did not accept the challenge of going out for that 49%. Organized labor has not accepted the challenge of going after that 49%. The Congressional Black Caucus has not accepted the challenge of going after that 49%. In Congressional Black Caucus districts, we still have a very low voter turnout following the Jesse Jackson phenomena, where we had tremendous increases. We are now drifting back, and why? Because those are the people that need something concrete to hold onto and say "This matters. The government is trying to help me." You know? So when Bush tried to go private with Social Security, you heard from, you clearly understand that they were threatened and along with a whole lot of other people, the poorest people, you know, united to

push that off the agenda. But they're still out there in terms of healthcare, in terms of, mainly, jobs and means to make a decent living. We have not passed a minimum wage bill in 9 years, while Congress, you know, by cost of living increases, passed by Ronald Reagan— I'm grateful for that, it's a fair thing— but what Congress members, again, how we're treated fairly is no reason to unfairly... I mean it's shocking how we have been unable, and I sit on the committee and I've been the sponsor of the bill to increase minimum wage, we haven't been able to get it up from \$5.15 an hour. It's just ridiculous. So, the Democrats have not fallen on their sword about that. They say, "Well we always put an amendment out there, we always try to pass the bill and we... they don't fall on their sword, and there's always some negotiation things that take place. There are some tradeoffs that even the Republicans that dominate Washington—House, Senate, Supreme Court—they still need some help occasionally; and we can fall on our sword on the matter of minimum wage, so it's ok. But there's not an understanding—there's a competition for the suburban independents, who, you know, are always the focus groups, focused on their [*unintell*] and so forth and they forget about the whole 49% of the people who are out of this process. And somebody needs to pick up the challenge of organizing them, you know. As I go out of Congress, my focus, you know I don't intend to retire and fade away. I'm going to fight from another... attack in another direction. I'm not retreating. But one of my focuses will be on forcing the Democratic Party, the congressional caucus to pay more attention to that tremendous resource we have out there, which is untapped. Howard Dean understands it to some degree, he talks about the state parties and so forth, but underneath that is a grassroots organization process that will take place if you support the state parties.

DOUGLASS: You talk about compromise as sort of an unpleasant necessity from time to time. Because as I said before, and I know you would embrace this label, you are a liberal. Tom DeLay embraces with equal fervor the label "conservative", and many analysts say that one of the reasons that Congress is unable to pass much legislation these days or get much done, this is the view of experts of course, is that the partisanship and polarization now between the wings of the party is so great...there is no ability to compromise, that partisanship has become detrimental to the process of passing legislation. What is your view on that?

OWENS: I think the grand old Democrats, Tip O'Neill and Foley and so forth represent one extreme. Delay is at the very other extreme. I'm going to say something very unusual: I think Newt Gingrich is closer to the middle in terms of these extremes because Newt Gingrich, who I think is a political genius, you know, happens to be on the other side. But I recognize him as a political genius, heads and shoulders above Karl Rove. But in addition to that, I think Newt Gingrich cared about the country. There was an element there where he seriously cares about the country, wants to solve problems, wants to get things done. DeLay represents a

group that has [*unintell*] to loot the government, to loot the taxpayers, to get as much as they can as fast as they can, and every way they can. So you have these kinds of outrageous things happening, passage of a prescription drug bill which says "You'll go to jail if you go to Canada to buy drugs." In the same bill, the federal government is forbidden to negotiate with the drug companies or to lower the price, although every government in the world does that and keeps the prices low. You know, and, of course, after that, the guy who's doing the negotiations gets a \$2 million personal, you know, he goes out on a job and gets a salary of \$2 million. But of course, the drug companies tremendously support all the Republicans in every way. The Cunningham situation is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of, he was a fool and was exposed. Duke Cunningham he was very ragged and foolish and his thing got exposed. But there's a lot of very clever operations going on, which are a tremendous waste. Mr. Weldon, nice guy, enthusiastic, I always admire the way he speaks Russian. But it turns out that he has a whole system, you know, with Italian companies and now and then the Russian companies and his great facility in foreign language and so forth, he's been churning away to turn that into a network of operations that will feed money back into his campaign contributions and also his personal family. So, on and on it goes that when you discover some of these things, you should understand it's the tip of the iceberg. And it has greatly increased on the Republican side. Do Democrats not do the same thing? Yes there were abuses, but if you just look at the amount of earmarking—those people don't understand. Democrats did a lot of earmarks, and earmarks are one of the ways you stay in power. You shove money directly at the people and earmark an operation, but it increased so much more on the Republican side—40 something billion dollars in earmarks was the last. I have to check with David Obey, who has good knowledge. You can't always identify earmarks, the way they do it, but 40 some billion dollars in earmarked projects, you know, and most of them clearly going to Republicans, you know, they don't try to pretend that there's an objectivity and some kind of balance. Most of it goes to Republicans and those who have the most power and those who cause politically in trouble.

DOUGLASS: So you think there is more corruption in Congress now that before you came?

OWENS: Far more corruption. There's a systematic attempt to loot the American tax payers. It starts at the White House, it starts with Dick Cheney. The oil lobby is the most powerful of all. We've just seen them rip us off tremendously with gas prices. And as the election approaches, they have the power to lower the prices in their various ways. You've just seen the war in Iraq is about oil, primarily. And they will stop at nothing in terms of using the power of the government to enrich their system of corporations and various offshoots. And this Halliburton is, Brown Root, there are all kinds of things which, when you look at closely, you'll find a pattern of tremendous amounts of money wasted. What our army and military people used to do—they built their own barracks, they built their own infrastructure, you know, at

salaries that are far too low. We pay our soldiers too little, but Halliburton goes in and they get multibillion dollar contracts to do what soldiers used to do, and all that money goes. So it's systematic, and it's the Republican Party, Karl Rove, Cheney, Bush, they're all—that's their mindset: That the government is here, taxpayers here for the taking. And the taxpayers' funds are here for the taking.

DOUGLASS: Let's talk about some issues now, and since you've raised the rebuilding airport in Iraq as one of them, lets talk about how Congress has, in your view, handled some of the major issues that unfolded on your watch: The Iraq War, the vote to authorize the President to use force if he chose. How thoughtful do you think that debate was, number one, and number two, did Nancy Pelosi persuade House Democrats to, as a majority of House Democrats did, vote against that resolution?

OWENS: I think Nancy Pelosi's position— there was a great element of moral, of moral persuasion there. But there are many of us, of course, who were definitely against the war. Most of us who did vote to go to Afghanistan, and thought that that was quite proper: we had a clear target, we clearly, we asked the Taliban to give up bin Laden and they said no. And I mean, clearly, it was the thing we needed to do. So I think only one person who voted against Afghanistan was Barbara Lee. But when it came to the war in Iraq, it, you know, I think 120 Democrats voted against it. And I'm proud to count Nancy among them, because given her position, she could have waffled out, but she didn't. And she voted against it, too.

DOUGLASS: But did she work to persuade Democrats to vote that way?

OWENS: There was no arm twisting, no great... no, no they didn't. It was one of those votes that you call a conscience vote. There was no party position really taken on it, no party position, but there was an understanding. And Nancy, you know used to use the word "liberal". Now folks get upset about that sometimes. I don't. But progressive. Nancy's a progressive. She came from the progressive wing. She was supported by people like me and Woolsey and a whole lot of progressives in her run for the leadership. So she doesn't, I don't think, shy away from being called a progressive. It's to her credit that she brought all the other elements together and got a lot of discipline and got both the progressives and the conservatives to vote on certain ways to make points that Democrats needed to make an opposition to the public. But that war, she did not twist arms, there was no party position. But her, her moral stance did influence people, sure.

DOUGLASS: Education is one of your absolute priority issues in your time as a member of Congress here. How do you think Congress has dealt with the federal role in education? There was a move at one point to abolish the department of education. That is gone. That doesn't come up anymore. President Bush has come up with this program, No Child Left Behind, which is meant to set some

standards. Has Congress' embrace of education as a federal responsibility actually grown since you have been in Congress?

OWENS: Yes it has. When I came to Congress there was no department of education. After I came here, I was certainly one of the major supporters of that effort, and that's very much needed, law was long overdue. It should be pointed out that even now, the federal government's contribution to overall education fund in the United States of America is less than 8% of the total amount—states and local government fund most of education, that, even when you throw in higher education, which gets more federal money proportionally. So we're not doing very much when you compare us to the other industrialized nations. My argument is, we should move that as fast as we can as possible to at least 25%, because if federal government is paying 25%, you still have 75% controlled by local states. For those people who fear that more federal money means control, it does not. But with a small amount, we have a lot of influence. And President Bush has cleverly, I give it to him, has cleverly made that a centerpiece of his administration and gotten away with a lot of, by rhetoric and promotion, gotten a lot of credit. And that's the only thing out there right now, Democrats don't have anything really to compete with No Child Left Behind at this point, unfortunately. When President Clinton took office, the polls showed that the perception the American voter respects which party was most in favor of education gave the Democrats a 32% lead. They felt Democrats were definitely were most—in the course of his 8 years, and I blame this mostly on his Secretary of Education, who is a very nice person, but a small state governor, small thinking guy, and his little incremental approach, he didn't seize the initiative and deal with the education crisis. He was very much against school construction. While school construction and repair and modernization with computers, I felt, was very much needed as a boost. It was not the answer to education, but it would be a physical manifestation of the support of the federal government, which would lead other people to come in with greater enthusiasm. And he didn't do it. He resisted all the way, the Secretary of Education Riley. It was a disaster. When Clinton left office, the perception was Republicans and Democrats equally support education. In one year, Bush had moved that to a big percentage of people perceiving that Republicans support education aid more than Democrats. So, you know, it's been a disaster for the Democratic Party, not to have been more creative, more imaginative, not to have been willing to go with big projects, and school construction would have been one less complicated. You know, we'd free up money at the local level if they didn't have to spend the money for construction and repair and computers. It would be freed up to do into other things. And they'd choose whether they want to put it in teachers' salaries or other kinds of innovative programs. I made that argument for the whole Clinton administration. And at the last meeting the Congressional Black Caucus had with him, he did say, he personally authorized \$1.2 billion to go into the budget to construction and repair. And it went in, and Bush, when he came in, tried to take it out. And there was so much of a hubbub, outcry out there until he had to leave it in there, because it was

not just the Black Caucus or a minority thing. There's a need, a need for that kind of support all over. So education, given the fact that it has such a central role in our modern economy, our military, everything you know— we are being challenged by people who know the value of education: India, China, they are challenging us economically in terms of world leadership, to say nothing of Russia. We ignore the fact that the Soviet Union, for the last 40 years, they've built a first rate education system. But these countries have millions of people. China with its billions, if they create a middle class, which is one quarter of the population, it's greater than American, all of our population. We boast about having 300,000,000—that's nothing. China has a middle class that's going to be 300,000,000. You know, Japan, all of Japan is considered middle class— they don't have any lower class, when you look at it closely. And that's the role we should—that's where we should be going. How do we do that? Only education. Only education puts people in a position to become productive, to take care of their own interests, and also make some kind of contribution to society. We keep backing away from that kind of commitment.

DOUGLASS: You mention President Clinton because he was so instrumental in so many legislative battles. What impact on the Congress and on the ability for Congress to function as well as it should, what impact, if any, do you think the impeachment of President Clinton had?

OWENS: It ruined the end of his, of his administration in terms of too much—so much time and energy had to be focused on his, on that—I think that a lot of initiatives that might have taken place didn't take place. I think some mistakes that were made would not have been made. I think Clinton was a great president. I think Hillary's a great first lady. I think Hillary's a great senator, you know. I'm a supporter of the Clintons. But nevertheless, I think that there were some situations that, which, I think the Monica Lewinsky case and the way Gingrich handled it just knocked them off balance. They couldn't get certain things done. One of the things I think they fouled up on was, as they say on the corner, they were 'okie doked' and suckered in by Newt Gingrich's call for balanced budget. And they became champions of a balanced budget. And they were beating their chests saying, proudly saying, "Not only will you have a balanced budget, we're going to have a surplus." We had a \$200 billion surplus. That's the money that should have been going into education—not all of it, but just a small portion. And the education, it should have been going into programs to help the poor. And the healthcare—disparages—there are a number of ways in which the Democratic Party could have shored up its base. We talk about the Republican Party base, the church base, the right wing; Democrats didn't do anything for their base. While we were boasting about "Look, we're going to have a balanced budget, we're going to have a surplus." So what? And Bush came in right away and shelled it. We're going to spend money to take care of our base, and make sure our base is happy so we can win re-election. I mean, that's oversimplifying, but, I think it was a great mistake to let Gingrich suck us into being preoccupied with balancing the budget and proving

that we are fiscal conservatives. You know, it went overboard. Like the Golden Mean of Aristotle, it went to extremes. We could have done less than \$200 billion surplus and taken care of some interest of those Democrats that I represent who got left out.

DOUGLASS: You were talking about the Republican base. And there is also a Democratic base as well. I want to ask about 2 components of that base. First, African American voters. A percentage, a larger percentage than in the past, of which voted for a Republican president, George Bush, on the issue of gay marriage in the last election— that’s 2004. Do you see divisions coming within the— what used to be a pretty solid block of African American voters, which used to constitute and still does of course, such an important part of the Democratic base over issues such as gay marriage and other moral, so-called moral issues?

OWENS: I think he penetrated, and it’s a small little beachhead into that solid African American vote for Democrats. And I think that Karl Rove and George Bush are smart enough to widen that. And the way they’re widening, and I’ve tried to wake up my Democratic colleagues, is through the faith-based initiative. Not only are they talking about values and blowing a horn against gay marriage, but they are up giving money to churches. It is one of the biggest giveaways, partisan giveaways going. Right out of the treasury, they are awarding grants without any real competitive procedures. It’s amazing. 4 billion dollars went out last year and these faith-based initiative grants from the departments, they have special arrangements where they can channel a grant to particular denomination, church. And it’s not been a great secret, but the Democrats don’t understand the implication of that. When you give money to people, when you give money that they can use for little programs, recreational programs for the kids, a program to help with people coming in from prison, there’s certain kinds of things that Bush specializes in. They make an impression out there which erodes the base that you once had, because they’re going to see, you know, Democrats give us rhetoric, talk, but they stopped giving us any concrete programs. And when I was in New York City as commissioner of the community development agency over the community action program under John Lindsay, I had a budget of 75 million dollars. We employed, we had 500 agents, little agents underneath us, we employed 5000 people. They expected to see that going on. I’m greeted still as being a commissioner, at one point more than being a congressman. The commissioner was in charge of giving the money, and all that collapsed where, as New York City was getting 10 billion dollars from the federal government. Now New York City is getting 10 billion less from the federal government. Then it got, when I was a state senator, there is a steady withdrawal of money from the federal government. And the state has not picked it up. And the city has not really picked it up in terms of programs for the poor. The city and the state have programs for low income and moderate income housing. They completely ignore public housing. They took away the funding for public housing in the city and in the state. They expect the poor people out there, we’ve got a large

public housing population, almost a million people in public— they expect them to still keep supporting the Democratic Party, at a point what they're doing is apathetic now. The voter registration in turn has gone down greatly, because they feel they've just been demeaned. But they'll return to the Republican Party, if those faith-based grants come out in a greater number. Bush understands what he's doing. He's going to win the Hispanic population with an immigration bill as soon as this election's over. Bush and Rove will take the initiation again. We're going to have an immigration bill. He's not going to give up the 40% he got last time. They're going to broaden that and they're going to win some more of the black vote if we don't wake up to the fact that we have to have more concrete programs for poor people.

DOUGLASS: And another part of the base which has been essential but whose power also has changed and which has also been fractured amongst different concerns in both political parties is unions. How have you seen, you're a champion of workers' rights, how have you seen the influence and cohesiveness of unions change with respect to dealing with Congress?

OWENS: Well I've been here for 24 years and that whole 24 years I've been on the education - it was the education labor committee, on the Democrats when I came in. Now it's the education of the workforce committee, chairman, the ranking Democrat on the subcommittee network protections since the Republicans took over. And working directly with unions has been my career here, and it's been a defensive operation. The Republicans know, they're very smart, starting with Gingrich, the structure of labor power is absolutely necessary if you want to establish a permanent Republican government in this country. One of the big pillars of a Democratic party, they understand and they've gone after labor unions and done it successfully.

DOUGLASS: But also union members have become Republicans as well, right?

OWENS: Well, part of the way they go after them is through the back door. The value issues, the biggest way is they have prevented the union movement from increasing. No help has been given. The lack of any kind of legislation which helps working people including minimum wage only discourages people who pull that much vote, what are the unions doing for us and what are they going to do for us. And the unions themselves have been confused on how they should proceed in terms of, they're into the same trap Democrats are into in terms of holding to the suburban middle class, holding onto their union constituency, who, in many cases, are doing very well. They have jobs, they have wages far above the minimum wage, they have health care. But because they haven't broadened their base, they're losing. You know, General Motors comes out and says they are taking health care benefits away from retirees. They're losing out because in the American power configuration, you have to continually expand power base. If you don't have

power, you don't get results. These are the basics. No one seems to understand. Unions cannot be declining in numbers and have the same influence on the government that they had before, and they are declining rapidly. And one of the problems in the decline is they're looking at the minority populations and not accepting the challenge that that's where the poor people are, in inner cities in the rural areas. The white ethnics have made it, many of them, most of them. You can't hesitate if you're going to be a representative for working families. You can't hesitate because of race or ethnicity.

DOUGLASS: And finally I just want to ask you just about your own personal style. You're a well known for liking to speak on the floor of the house even if there's no one there, just because you have things you want to say-- and sometimes even doing it in rap verse. Tell me why you have enjoyed that. What has been fun about that or interesting about that or satisfying about that, in terms of all the things you care about, for you?

OWENS: Well it's been an opportunity. When you go in the house on the floor and CSPAN is broadcasting it, it doesn't matter that the floor's empty. There's quite a number of people watching in my district as well as everywhere else. So the fact that they're not on the floor doesn't matter. And if they were on the floor, we don't convince anyone on the floor really with our speeches. The decisions are made and die is cast in terms of their vote before they get to the floor. But it's an opportunity to deal with a lot of issues that don't come directly under my committee, One. Two, it's an opportunity to deal with the current issues of the day. And I have opinions on that. And most of all, it's an opportunity to link up the current issues of the day and the broader issues to the specific concerns. So you'll find that even though I've made a lot of one-hour speeches on the floor, they're usually about education and working families the conditions for working families, no matter how I approach it. The savings and loan scandal which broke in the first 5 years I was here, outrageous amounts of money down the drain and so forth, well I saw this money from the tax payers going down the drain that was not being put into education. It was not being put into health care. That kind of rip-off from the government. So there's a pattern, and I don't think I've been frivolous. The rap poems come from the frustration and the anger, was greatest at a point when I started listening to these kids who were doing rap, I just forgot about the foul language they were using. I liked the rhythm. I've always wanted to be a writer. I've studied poetry my entire life. I recognize the elements of rhyme and rhythm and metaphors. It's poetry. No matter how bad the contents may be, it's still poetry. Chaucer said some bad things, some pornographic things. There's a certain...it's about the style, the delivery, and the emotion, and it caught my attention. So I said there are politic issues you could handle that way too. I feel strongly about it, and I know how to handle rhyme and rhythm. I'm not as good as the guys that rap, but I don't try to be a rapper. I don't recite rap. I read my poems on the floor. I might read them somewhere, but I don't pretend to be a rapper. And I have an ear, and I hear other young people who are rappers recite.

And I'm close to what they're doing. More importantly I think it's an exciting form of poetry that has a great future and a lot of applications that have yet to come.

DOUGLASS: What will you miss most about being in the House?

OWENS: I don't know where-- of the fact that the 535 member, 435 in the House and 100 in the Senate, are among the most powerful people in the world, no matter what people say about politicians and try to put them down, most of us are aware of how the tremendous amount of power we have, even those that bottom seldom get a chance to say what they want to say or to get their hands in the corporations' pocket. Everybody here is called upon several times a year to make votes that are very important. Everybody here has a platform that most people in the world don't have. Anything I put in the Congressional Record, millions of copies are going to be made of it. It's going to produce-- a lot of bills I introduce are ideas. I want to express them. I put them in the Congressional Record. I know so many people are going to read them not just now but forever. So it is a very powerful position, and I'm aware of it. It's a very pivotal position here, in terms of macro issues and organization and back in my own community, in terms of micro and organization. They respect me. Certain things get done, and I'm going to miss that. I hope that'll carry over. Once you're a congressman, like being a colonel or a general, you always let people call you by your last title. Let them keep calling me "congressman". But I hope to use what I learn here and galvanize some of my frustrations in a way that still has an impact on what happens in the public arena.

DOUGLASS: Excellent, thank you very much.

OWENS: Thank You.