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AN ECONOMIC AGENDA FOR AMERICA:
A CONVERSATION WITH SENATOR BERNIE SANDERS

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PARTICIPANTS:

Featured Speaker:

THE HONORABLE BERNIE SANDERS (I-VT)
United States Senate

Introduction and Moderator:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. DIONNE: I want to welcome everyone here today. I'm E. J. Dionne. For today's purposes I'm a Senior Fellow here at Brookings, and it's a great honor to welcome Senator Bernie Sanders as part of our ongoing conversation on the future of our economy and of shared economic growth.

For those of you out there who want to comment on Twitter, the hashtag is SandersAtBrookings. That's "at," not the "@" sign. That will just mess up everything; SandersAtBrookings.

I want to say at the outset before I do the formal part of the introduction that it is a pleasure to welcome a self-described proud democratic socialist here to Brookings. These days the word "socialist" is thrown around as an epithet, and the socialists I know are insulted when President Obama's called a socialist because they argue he is too moderate to be a democratic socialist, but the thing we forget is the vibrancy of the democratic socialist tradition in the United States, and bear in mind we're talking democratic, small "d" socialist, i.e., Scandinavia, not the old Soviet Union, and that in the American tradition we are talking about people from Eugene Debs to Norman Thomas to Michael Harrington to people today like Barbara Ehrenreich. This is a lively American tradition that has influenced policy in our country in a great many ways, and so it is refreshing to have a senator who doesn't run away from a particular part of our American tradition.

Senator Sanders is a junior United States Senator from Vermont. He spent 16 years in the House of Representatives making him the longest-serving independent member of Congress in American history. He's devoted his career to public service addressing the growing income gap and the shrinking America middle class. He's also been a strong advocate for rebuilding our nation's infrastructure and protecting

our environment.

He was also the Mayor of Burlington, and he is the ranking member of the Senate Budget Committee and former Chair of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, and I just want to note that we sort of worry a lot these days about Congress being able to do nothing, and I think it's worth noting that when two sides are willing to seek agreement and are willing to recognize the urgency of government action, you can actually have things happen, and very recently Senator Sanders with Senator McCain and others negotiated a very comprehensive bill to deal with the problems in the V.A. medical system, so when we have Senator Sanders and Senator McCain working together, we can produce miracles in public policy.

And while Senator Sanders will not be talking about miracles today, I will close by saying that he is a fan of Pope Francis. Welcome, Bernie Sanders. (Applause)

SENATOR SANDERS: Let me begin by thanking Brookings for hosting this event and thank E. J. for moderating it and thank all of you for being here this morning.

Before I begin my remarks in trying to explain what's going on in our country and where I think we should be going, let me say a few words about myself because my journey, how I got here, is, to say the least, a little bit different than many others who have been on this platform.

I was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1941. My father came to this country at the age of 17 without a penny in his pocket and without much of an education. My mother graduated high school in New York. My family was never really poor. My dad was a paint salesman. He never made much money. My mother's dream was to get out of the three-and-a-half room, rent-controlled apartment that we lived in throughout my entire life, but we never made it out. She never lived to see that dream, and what I

learned as a kid is what lack of money does to a family and the kind of stress and pressures that families that don't have the money they need -- what happens to them, and that's a lesson that I have never forgotten.

My wife, Jane, and I have been married for 27 years. We have four kids and seven grandchildren, and without being overly dramatic, the truth is that my involvement in politics has everything to do with what kind of country I hope that they will be living in.

As the longest serving independent in American Congressional history, let me very briefly describe my political journey which is an unusual one. I first came to Vermont in 1964. In 1971 there was a special election to replace the Senator from Vermont, Winston Prouty, who had passed away, and I ran for the United States Senate on a third party called the Liberty Union Party, and I received 2 percent of the vote.

The next year I ran for the Governor of the State of Vermont, and I received 1 percent of the vote. I was on the move heading down. Two years later I ran for the Senate. Pat Leahy, he remembers that race because I ran against him. I received 4 percent of the vote, and then I ran for Governor in 1976 and received 6 percent of the vote.

Then I decided to give the good people of the State of Vermont a break and I stopped running for office, but five years later some friends of mine suggested that I could do well in a race for Mayor of the City of Burlington which is, as you know, the largest city in the State of Vermont, and in that race I ran against a five-term incumbent Democratic mayor. I ran as an independent, and nobody but nobody thought that we had a chance to win. Nobody.

In that very remarkable election -- the point that I want to make here was a profound political lesson that I learned. We did what is not done terribly much today.

We did coalition politics, and that is we put together an extraordinary coalition of workers and unions, of environmentalists, of neighborhood activists, of low-income organizations - - very first press conference I had was at a low-income housing project -- of women's groups, of college students. That's the coalition we put together, and that type of politics, of bringing people together around a progressive agenda is something that I believe was right then, and I believe is right today.

I should also state that that campaign for mayor cost something like \$4,000 and in the process I personally knocked on thousands of doors in the city. On election night when the votes were counted, we won the working-class wards of the city by two to one, something like two to one, and we won the election by all of 14 votes. It was, in fact, the biggest political upset in Vermont history, and after the recounts the margin of victory was reduced to 10 votes.

Now, without going into any great lengths here, and actually there have been books written about this, I took office with 11 out of the 13 members of the city council -- those were the Democrats and the Republicans -- in very, very strong opposition to my agenda. And trust me, if you think that the Republicans have been obstructionist to President Obama, you ain't seen nothing with what happened in my first year as Mayor of the City of Burlington.

But what happened -- and this is also a lesson that I've never forgotten -- by doing what we could do, despite the opposition, and reaching out to people, what happened is a year later the slate of candidates that I supported won a huge victory against the people who were obstructionist.

And the other lesson that I will never forget is that the year following, when I ran for election we almost doubled the voter turnout; almost doubled the voter turnout from what it had been when I first won. And the lesson I will never forget and

what I believe is that when you stand up for people and you keep your promise, people will in fact get involved in politics. I think it was true then and I think it's true today.

In 1986 I ran for Governor of the State of Vermont as an Independent and received 14 percent of the vote. In 1988 I ran for the U.S. Congress, and in that election I was told by my Democratic friends that I would be a spoiler taking away votes and enabling the Republican candidate to win. In fact, the Republican candidate did win with 41 percent of the vote and I got 38 percent. Democrat got 19 percent. Two years later I ran again for Congress defeating the incumbent by 16 points.

In 2006 with the retirement of Senator Jim Jeffords and with the support of Democrats, I won Vermont's United States Senate seat against a fellow who I think was the wealthiest person in the State of Vermont who spent three times more money than had ever been spent in our state previous to that. I received 67 percent of the vote. In 2012 I won re-election with 71 percent of the vote.

As Mayor of Burlington my administration took on virtually every powerful special interest in the city, in the state. We had a very active city attorney's office. Against the wishes of the developers and the railroad we created an extraordinarily beautiful people-oriented waterfront and a bike path on Lake Champlain. We developed the first municipal housing land trust in the country for affordable housing, an idea that has spread worldwide. We won national recognition for urban beautification by planting thousands of trees throughout the city, often using a lot of volunteers to make that happen. We made major improvements in our streets and sidewalks. We implemented the largest environmental program in the state's history by building a new waste-water facility to prevent untreated waste from going into the lake. We started a youth office which created an extraordinary day care center, a little league program, after-school programs, and a teen center, all of which 25 - 30 years later are still in existence today.

We were the first city in Vermont to break our dependence on the regressive property tax. We made major changes to the Burlington police department to move toward community policing. We started a very active and successful art center and women's council, and I say all of that to invite all of you to Burlington in the State of Vermont. It's a beautiful place to visit.

In 1990 I became the first Independent -- not Democrat, not Republican - - elected to the U.S. House in 40 years. During my first year there along with four other House members we put together the Congressional Progressive Caucus which today is one of the largest and I think more effective caucuses in the House.

One of my first votes in the House was a vote against the first Gulf War. I believe that history will record that that was the right vote as was the vote I cast years later against the War in Iraq, a war which has cost us many thousands of brave young men and women, untold suffering for those who returned, and has driven up our national debt by trillions of dollars. It has also -- that war, in my opinion, has also opened up the can of worms which we now see in that region of the world and which we are trying to deal with today.

While a member of the House Financial Services Committee I was one of those leading the fight against the deregulation of Wall Street, and I will never forget having Alan Greenspan up there visiting the Committee telling us how great deregulation was. I didn't buy it then, and I don't buy it now.

I also opposed the free trade agreements that came down the pike after NAFTA, CAFTA; permanent trade relations with China. I never believed then, and I don't believe now that forcing American workers to compete against people who make pennies an hour is a good thing for the United States of America.

While in the House I took on the pharmaceutical industry and the

outrageous prices they charge our people, and how it is that they end up charging us far higher prices for the same products than do they charge the people of any other country. Was the first congressman to take Americans over the Canadian border and will never forget women buying the same exact breast cancer drug for one-tenth of the price that they were paying in the United States.

As a United States Senator and former Chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, as E. J. just mentioned, I worked hard in a bipartisan way with Republicans in the Senate -- a number of Senators including Senator McCain, Jeff Miller in the House -- on what turns out to be one of the more significant pieces of veterans' legislation passed in recent years. I also led the effort with Representative Jim Clyburn to put some \$12 billion into federally-qualified health centers which has resulted into some 4 million lower-income Americans now getting health care, dental care, which is a huge issue in our country, low-cost prescription drugs, and I'm proud of that. With Senator Bob Menendez I helped pass the Energy Efficiency Block Grants Program which put billions of dollars into weatherization and sustainable energy as we do our best to try to reverse climate change.

Now, that is my life and political history in five minutes. Let me get to something more important now, and that is the future of our country. On Saturday, just this last Saturday, I had been invited to speak in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and my friend and I, we're driving back to D.C., and we drove through Gettysburg, and we stopped there for a while at the Battlefield of Monuments and the Museum, and while we were there we of course saw the Lincoln statues and we read from his Gettysburg Address. And you all know about Lincoln's extraordinary Gettysburg Address where he said a hell of a lot more than I said in ten times as much time as he said it, but he said of a hope that this nation would have "a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the

people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.” What an extraordinary statement.

And as we drove back from Gettysburg to Washington it struck me hard that Lincoln’s extraordinary vision, a government of the people, by the people, for the people was, in fact, perishing, was coming to an end, and that we are moving rapidly away from our democratic heritage into an oligarchic form of society where today we are experiencing a government of the billionaires, by the billionaires, and for the billionaires.

Today, in my view, the most serious problem we face as a nation is the grotesque and growing level of wealth and income inequality. This is a profound moral issue. It is an economic issue, and it is a political issue. Economically for the last 40 years the great middle class of our country, once the envy of the world, has been in decline despite -- and here’s the important point to make that we have got to answer -- despite an explosion of technology, despite a huge increase in productivity, despite all the so-called benefits of the global economy, millions of American workers today are working longer hours for low wages, and we have more people living in poverty than almost any time in the history of our country.

Today real unemployment is not the 5.7 percent you read in the newspapers. It is 11.3 percent if you include those people who are working part-time when they want to work full-time or those people who have given up looking for work entirely. We don’t talk about it. Pope Francis does by the way, but we don’t talk about the fact that youth unemployment in this country is 18 percent, and African-American youth unemployment is nearly 30 percent.

Shamefully we have by far the highest rate of childhood poverty of any major country on earth. You hear a whole lot of discussion about family values from our Republican friends but nothing about the fact that almost 20 percent of our kids are living

in poverty.

Despite the modest success of the Affordable Care Act some 40 million Americans continue to have no health insurance while even more are underinsured with high deductibles, high co-payments, high premiums. We remain today the only major country on earth that does not guarantee health care to all people as a right, and yet we end up spending almost twice as much per person on health care as do the people of any other nation.

Now, as all of you know there are a lot of angry people out there all across the country. Some of them are in the Occupy Wall Street Movement and consider themselves Progressives. Some are in the Tea Party Movement and consider themselves Conservatives, but let me give you an explanation as to why they have every right in the world to be angry.

Since 1999 the typical middle-class family, that family right in the middle of the economy, has seen its income go down by almost \$5,000 after adjusting for inflation. Incredibly that family earned less income last year than it did 26 years ago back in 1989. The median male worker, that guy right in the middle of the economy, made \$783 less last year than he did 42 years ago, while the median female worker earned \$1,300 less last year than she did in 2007.

That is why people are angry. They're working longer hours for lower wages. They're seeing an explosion of technology. They're watching TV and seeing all the great benefits supposedly of the global economy, and they're working long hours for low wages, and they're scared to death as to what is going to happen to their kids. What kinds of jobs are their kids going to have?

Are we better off today economically than we were six years ago when President Bush left office? Of course we are, but anyone who doesn't understand the

suffering, anxiety, and fear that the middle-class and working families of our country are experiencing today has no idea about what's going on in the economy, and I fear very much a lot of the pundits here on Capitol Hill don't understand that. It might be a good idea to get off of Capitol -- go into the real world and find out what's going on with working people.

Meanwhile, while the middle class continues to disappear, the wealthiest people in this country and the largest corporations are doing phenomenally well, and the gap between the very, very rich and everybody else is growing wider and wider. The top 1 percent now own about 41 percent of the entire wealth of the United States, while the bottom 60 percent own less than 2 percent of our wealth.

And this one is incredible: today the top 1/10th of 1 percent -- that is the wealthiest 16,000 families -- now own almost as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent. One-tenth of 1 percent owns almost as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent. Is that really what the United States of America is supposed to be about? I don't think so and I don't think most Americans think so. Today the Walton family, the owners of Walmart, and the wealthiest family in America are now worth about \$153 billion. That one family owns more wealth than the bottom 40 percent of the American people.

In terms of income as opposed to wealth, almost all of the new income generated in recent years has gone to the top 1 percent. In fact, the latest information that we have shows that in recent years over 99 percent of all new income generated in the economy has gone to the top 1 percent. In other words, for the middle class, GDP doesn't matter. Two percent, 4 percent, 6 percent; doesn't matter. Just the middle-class and working families are not getting any of it. It's all going to the top 1 percent.

In other words while millions of Americans saw a decline in their family income, while we have seen an increase in senior poverty throughout this country, over

99 percent of all the new income generated goes to the top 1 percent. An example: the top 25 hedge-fund managers made more than \$24 billion in 2013. That is equivalent to the full salaries of more than 425,000 public school teachers. Anyone really think that is morally acceptable? Economically acceptable? Is that really what our country should be about?

But income inequality is not just the moral issue of whether we are satisfied about living in a country where we have seen a proliferation of billionaires at the same time as millions of families are struggling to make sure they're able to feed their kids. It is also a profound political issue.

As a result of the disastrous Supreme Court decision, the five to four decision on *Citizens United*, billionaire families are now able to spend hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars to purchase the candidates of their choice. The billionaire class now owns the economy, and they are working day and night to make certain that they own the United States government.

According to media reports it appears that one family, the extreme right wing Koch Brothers are prepared to spend more money than either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party in the coming elections. In other words, one family, a family which is worth about \$100 billion may well have a stronger political presence than either of our major parties.

Now, I know that people are not comfortable when I say this, but I want you to take a hard look at what's going on, take a deep breath, and you tell me whether or not we are looking at a democracy or whether or not we are looking at an oligarchy when you have one family that has more political power than the Democratic Party, than the Republican Party which can spend unlimited sums of money not only on campaigns but on think tanks, on media, I worry very, very much about the future of democracy in

our country, and that is why it is absolutely imperative that we pass a Constitutional Amendment to overturn *Citizens United*, and in fact why we must move forward to a public funding of elections. I want young people out there, whatever their point of view may be who like the idea of public service to be able to run for office, to get involved in politics without having to worry about sucking up to billionaires in order to get the support that they may need.

Now, given the economic crisis that we face -- I talked a little bit about the political crisis. Given the economic crisis that I laid out a little bit of what that's about. Where do we go? What should we be doing? How do we rebuild the disappearing middle class and create an economy that works for all of our people?

Last month I introduced a 12-point program which I called An Agenda for America. It's available on my website sanders.senate.gov, but let me very briefly summarize it. First of all, you ask the average American what the most important issue he or she is concerned about and the answer is a four-letter word. It's called jobs. We need a major federal jobs program to put millions of Americans back to work. The fastest way to do that is to rebuild our crumbling infrastructure; our roads, bridges, water systems, waste-water plants, airports, railroads, and schools. It has been estimated that the cost of the Bush-Cheney Iraq War, a war we should never have waged will total \$3 trillion by the time the last veteran receives needed care.

A \$1 trillion investment in infrastructure could support 13 million decent-paying jobs and make our country more efficient, productive, and safer, and along with Senator Barbara Mikulski I introduced that legislation two weeks ago.

Further, we must understand that climate change is real. It is caused by human activity, and it is already causing devastating harm. We must listen to the scientific community and not FOX TV and lead the world in reversing climate change so

that this planet is habitable for our children and grandchildren. And what that means -- we have the technology to do it -- transform our system away from fossil fuel to energy efficiency, weatherization, and sustainable energies like wind, solar, geothermal, and other technologies. And when we do that we not only lead the world in reversing climate change, we can also create many jobs.

We not only need to create jobs in this country, we need to raise wages. The current Federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour is a starvation wage. We need to raise the minimum wage over a period of years to at least \$15 an hour. No one who works 40 hours a week in this country should live in poverty. We must also demand pay equity for women workers who today earn 78 cents of what their male counterparts make for doing the same work.

We must also end the scandal of overtime pay where people at McDonalds who make \$25,000 a year as "managers" who work 50 or 60 hours a week, but because they are "managers" they don't get overtime. Further we must it easier for workers to join unions by passing card-check legislation.

In my view, and this is relevant with the Trans-Pacific Partnership Trade Agreement coming down the pike, we need to take a hard look at our trade policies which have resulted in the outsourcing of millions of good paying jobs. I think the evidence is overwhelming. NAFTA, CAFTA, PNTR with China have failed. It makes no sense to me to continue a failed policy which leads just to race to the bottom. We need new trade policies. We need to demand that corporate America start investing in this country and not in China.

In today's highly competitive global economy millions of Americans are unable to afford the higher education they need in order to get good paying jobs. All of you know that hundreds of thousands of young people have literally given up on the

dream of going to college while others are graduating school deeply, deeply in debt. A few months ago I met with a woman in Burlington, Vermont. Her crime was that she went to medical school to become a primary-care physician for low-income people. That was her crime, and the result of that crime was that she has \$300,000 in debt. That is nuts, and what we have got to learn is that in countries like Germany, Scandinavia, many part of the world, people are competing against us, they are smart enough to understand that the future of their countries depends on the education their young people get. Their college education and graduate school is free. We've got to learn that lesson. Free public education does not have to end at high school. President Obama's initiative for two years of community college is good start. We have got to go further as a nation.

We cannot run away from the fact that the greed and recklessness and illegal behavior on Wall Street caused the worst economic downturn in this country, and in fact the world, since the Great Depression. That's a fact. I know it's easy not to talk about it, but that is the fact.

Today six huge Wall Street financial institutions have assets equivalent to 60 percent of our GDP; close to \$10 trillion. If Teddy Roosevelt, a good Republican, were alive today I know what he would say, and what he would say is that when you have six financial institutions issuing half the mortgages and two-thirds of the credit cards in this country, it is time to break them up, and I've introduced legislation to do just that.

In terms of health care, we have got to grapple, as I mentioned a moment ago, with the fact that we remain the only major country without a national health care program. I believe very strongly in a Medicare for all single-payer system. Right now, in fact on Wednesday, and I say this as the ranking member of the Budget Committee, my Republican colleagues are going to begin their effort to try to cut Social Security benefits. They're going to start off with disability benefits and go beyond that.

In my view at a time when senior poverty is increasing, when we have millions of seniors and I meet them in Vermont all the time; people are trying to get by on \$12 - \$14,000 a year. We should not be about cutting Social Security benefits. We should be about expanding those benefits.

As I mentioned a moment ago, we live in a time of massive wealth and income inequality, and we need a progressive tax system in this country which is based on ability to pay. It is not acceptable to me that a number of major profitable corporations have paid zero in Federal income taxes in recent years, and that millionaire hedge-fund managers often enjoy an effective tax rate which is lower than truck drivers or nurses. It is absurd that we lose \$100 billion a year of revenue because corporations and the wealthy stash their money in offshore tax havens like the Cayman Islands, Bermuda, and other places around the world. The time is now for real tax reform.

So, let me conclude by saying this. The struggle that we're in now is not just about protecting Social Security or Medicare or Medicaid or making college affordable to our kids or raising the minimum wage. It is something deeper than that. It is about whether we can put together a vibrant grass-roots movement all over this country which says to the billionaire class, "Sorry, government in this country is going to work for all of us and not just the top 1 percent." Thank you very much. (Applause)

MR. DIONNE: Thank you, Senator Sanders, for that carefully hedged, cautious, political (laughter) speech.

SENATOR SANDERS: I was very quiet. This is the Brookings and I didn't want --

MR. DIONNE: Yeah, this is a moderate version of this speech.

SENATOR SANDERS: That's right.

MR. DIONNE: I have a whole lot of questions I would like to ask. I'm

going to try to limit myself to a few, and then I want to bring in the audience. I am going to have a bias which I hope you'll forgive me for. First, I'm going to ask members of the media to ask questions because they're bringing this to other people, but I will open it up to everyone before we're done.

I want to start with one philosophical and one political question. The philosophical question is what do you actually think of the market economy? In this long list of proposals you do not propose public ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and you are very critical of the way capitalism works, but what is your view of the market economy in general and capitalism in particular?

SENATOR SANDERS: Well, in that regard I think I come down somewhere where Pope Francis is, who I think, by the way, has played an extraordinary role in the last several years in raising issues internationally that have not been raised by such a prominent figure.

I think casino capitalism, runaway capitalism, which is what we are experiencing right now is a disaster. There is no way to defend internationally the top 1 percent owning more wealth than the bottom 90 percent of the world's population. I think it's impossible to defend that. It is impossible to defend the incredible inequities that we see in American society today.

What I believe when I talk about these issues, what I look at is countries like Denmark -- and we have the Danish ambassador coming to Vermont a year and a half ago -- and it's not that the government is going to take over every mom and pop store. That is not what we're talking about, but what we are talking about is that in a democratic, civilized society the basic necessities of life should be available to all people. Not a radical idea. It exists in Scandinavia and elsewhere.

Should everybody have a right to health care? The answer is yes.

Should everybody regardless of their income be able to get as much education as they need? The answer is yes. In the United States when you have a baby, we managed some years ago to do the Family and Medical Leave Act, and you get three months off if you work for a large company without pay. How many Americans know that all over the world women get six - eight months off with three-quarters pay in order to bond with their babies?

When you get old you should have strong retirement security, stronger than we have right now, so, E. J., capitalism does a lot of good things. It creates wealth. You've got a lot of vibrant small business, a lot of entrepreneurs who have come up with fantastic ideas. That is great, but we cannot at the end of that process have a situation where a handful of people own so much and so many people have so little, so the government plays a very important role in making sure that all of our people have the opportunity to succeed in life.

MR. DIONNE: Now, you hinted this but I'd like to ask you to be more specific. This is a very ambitious program; a trillion dollar investment in infrastructure, broader rather than narrower Social Security, free higher education and so on. How are we going to pay for this?

SENATOR SANDERS: Well, it addresses the issues of income and wealth inequality, and you're doing two things at the same time. For example, in terms of Social Security everybody in this room understands that if somebody is making \$10 million a year, somebody is making \$118,000 a year. Both people are paying the same amount into the Social Security Trust Fund. Just simply lift the cap, and you begin taxing people not at \$118,000 but at \$250,000. You will extend Social Security for decades and be able to expand benefits.

In terms of other -- infrastructure, for example. We're losing about \$100

billion every single year because corporations and wealthy people are stashing their money in the Cayman Islands and elsewhere. Real tax reform can generate a significant sum of money which should be used for infrastructure and education.

MR. DIONNE: Many years ago, two folks you probably disagree with but they made a very interesting point. Richard Staman and Ben Wattenburg wrote that the problem with liberals is they often come along and say, "Our programs have failed. Let us continue." And I raised that quote because while you do say that we are better off economically than we were six years ago, you have a pretty tough litany of what's wrong with the economy as it exists. The real unemployment rate is 11.3 percent, youth unemployment 18 percent, and African-American unemployment 30 percent and so on. Yet you voted for a number of programs to try to get the economy moving including the Recovery Act, otherwise known as the Stimulus. If somebody listens to you and says "Bernie Sanders is saying that the programs in the last six years haven't worked," what do you say back to them?

SENATOR SANDERS: Compared to what? I think history -- and I was on the floor eight and half hours a couple years ago in opposition to President Obama's tax proposal. I have been very critical of it, but I think what you will find is that history will judge President Obama a lot better than his contemporaries have.

I'll tell you programs, E. J., that have not worked, and that is trickle-down economics. Trickle-down economics which means tax breaks for the rich and large corporations, deregulation of Wall Street, et cetera, et cetera, has been a grotesque failure, and any economic analysis will suggest that that is true.

Have the Obama programs -- has the Stimulus package worked? Of course it worked. It created millions of jobs at a time when we desperately needed those jobs, so I would argue in terms of infrastructure, putting money into infrastructure and

creating jobs, it's not a question of whether it works. How do you ignore the fact that our infrastructure is crumbling? So I am proud to defend it.

In terms of single-payer health care, all over the world -- I live 100 miles away from the Canadian border. They have a conservative Premiere. They have a single-payer health care system under a conservative Premiere because it is more cost effective and provides health care to all of their people.

MR. DIONNE: But more generally, what has -- I guess when you look back on the last six years what would you have done that we didn't do to get the economy moving to deal with some of the problems you're talking about here?

SENATOR SANDERS: I would have been stronger than President Obama in a number of areas. I think he missed the opportunity politically of doing what Roosevelt did when he was elected, and making it clear to the American people what is happening and why is it happening.

When he was elected this economy was on the verge of collapse. Financial system maybe wouldn't make it, and at that point what he should have done is what Roosevelt did. Should have looked in that camera and said you know what? What Roosevelt said was the economic royalists hate me and I welcome their hatred because I'm going to take them on. I think that's what President Obama should have said. "These people have destroyed millions of lives because of their greed and recklessness. I will take them on and we're going to rebuild an economy so that it works for all people and not just the very wealthy."

I voted for the Affordable Care Act. I think it has done some good things. As I mentioned in my remarks, we managed to get \$12 million into community health centers; very important. I would have gone forward trying to fight for single-payer or at least greatly expanding Medicare making it simpler, more inclusive.

MR. DIONNE: And what do you say to folks who put a heavy emphasis now on the cost of retiring baby boomers? In other words basically you're saying that if we simply lift the cap, we can cover that problem. Is that your answer to that critique?

SENATOR SANDERS: We are exactly where people anticipated we would be when the last Social Security adjustments were made. No great surprise. People can add. They do know demographics, and right now just a couple points on Social Security. There's a lot of misinformation that goes out there. Social Security is not going broke. There's \$2.8 trillion in the Trust Fund, can pay out every benefit owed to every eligible American for the next 18 years. Social Security obviously doesn't add to the deficit because it's paid for by the payroll tax; independent source of revenue. So, the answer is yes. Should we strengthen Social Security? Absolutely, and the way to do that is to lift the cap. I would start at \$250,000.

MR. DIONNE: Is there a place for something like Wall Street in a Bernie Sanders economy?

SENATOR SANDERS: Well, look, banking plays an important role, obviously, in our society, and in that I'm pretty conservative. What banking is about -- traditional banking is I work. I make money. I put it in the bank. I get a guaranteed interest rate. The bank then invests money into the economy.

What has happened in recent years is something radically different. Wall Street, instead of being the grease for the economy taking money in and getting it out to small businesses, medium-sized businesses, what Wall Street has become is an island unto itself where its goal is to make as much money as it can in however way that it can do it. And I don't want to again try to be too dramatic here. I happen to believe that the business model of Wall Street is fraud and deception, and as you know recently you pick up the papers. Every single day there's another large bank that is fined, reaches a

settlement with the government.

So, their job is banking plays an important role. It helps get money out to the economy. The businesses that are producing products, producing services. That is what we want from the banking community. We don't want a small number of people coming up with incredibly complicated speculative dangerous financial tools, and then when it all goes down, the taxpayers of this country bail them out. That is what we don't want.

MR. DIONNE: By the way, the headline on the event so far is Bernie Sanders calls himself pretty conservative. (Laughter) I just want you to note that. I will ask this question just to get it out of the way. Are you running for President and if you are, will the result be closer to the 1971 Special Election or the 2012 re-election?

SENATOR SANDERS: Well, with a little bit of luck we'll be on 1971. But let me just say this. No great secret. I am giving thought to running for President of the United States. At a time when the middle class is disappearing, when we have grotesque levels of income and wealth inequality, when climate change threatens not only this country but the entire planet, when you have a handful of billionaires in the process of buying the United States government and our political system, I think it is imperative that we have candidates who stand up for the working families of this country who are prepared to take on the big-money interests, so I am giving serious thought to do that. Don't tell me wife that, Julie. She doesn't necessarily agree, but --

MR. DIONNE: Tell her to turn off the TV right now.

SENATOR SANDERS: On the other hand I also understand political realities, and that is when you take on the billionaire class it ain't easy, and if I do something -- just who I am -- but I want to do it well, and it's important not just for my ego that I do it well. It's important for millions of people who share the same set of beliefs that

I hold. So, to do it well, we would have to put together the strongest grassroots movement in the modern history of this country with millions of people by saying, "You know what? Enough is enough. We are going to take on the billionaire class. We are going to have a government that starts working for working families rather than just the top 1 percent." And to be honest with you, I mean I am going around the country and talking to a lot of people. I've got a lot of people coming out. There is a lot of sentiment that enough is enough, that we need fundamental changes, that the establishment, whether it is the economic establishment, the political establishment, or the media establishment it's failing the American people.

But the gut feeling that I'm going to have to -- decision that I'm going to have to reach is whether there is that willingness to stand up and fight back, and if there's not I don't want to run a futile campaign. If I run, I want to run to win. To run to win we need millions of people actively involved.

In terms of money that's a whole other story. You know, I'm just thinking the other day -- this is how absurd the situation is. You had a candidate -- me or anybody else -- who really reached out and generated a lot of excitement, and you had two million people say, "You know what? We're going to put \$100 into the campaign -- and by the way, in my Senate race you know what my average contribution was, E. J.? It was \$45, all right? So, if you had 2 million people, phenomenal response, putting in \$100, that's \$200 million. That is 20 percent of what the Koch Brothers themselves are prepared to spend. Can you take that on? I don't know the answer. Maybe the game is over. Maybe they have bought the United States government. Maybe there is no turning back. Maybe we've gone over the edge. I don't know. I surely hope not, but we have to look at that reality.

MR. DIONNE: And last on that issue, when candidates run for President

they often have two objectives. The first objective obviously is to win nomination election, but there have been plenty of candidates in our history who have run to advance an agenda even when they didn't win, and so obviously you've had to have thought about both sides of this equation. If I run and win, I run and win, but if I run and lose how can I have an effect on the agenda of the winning candidate, which at this point on the Democratic side we assume would be Hillary Clinton, without hurting her chances against the Republicans? Can you sort of analyze the politics, and I think the politics really matter because you're really trying to advance an agenda, not simply win an election.

SENATOR SANDERS: Well, if I do this, and people just have to appreciate how difficult a decision that is, but if I make that decision I would be running to win. But having said that let me also tell you something about myself. You are looking at a candidate who ran four times for mayor, eight times for the House and twice for the Senate. E. J., do you know how many negative ads I've run during that whole period? Never ran a negative ad in my life because negative ads disgust me, and in fact in state they don't work.

So, if I run and if Secretary Clinton runs, what I would hope would happen is that we would have a real serious debate. This is a woman I respect, clearly a very intelligent person, who I think I think is interested in issues, by the way. And I think we would have a debate about how you rebuild a crumbling middle class, a debate about how you reverse climate change, a debate about foreign policy and the wisdom of the War in Iraq and how we deal with what we deal with, a debate about trade policy, a debate about Wall Street, and that would be, I think, good for the American people to be honest with you. But it is not my style to trash people. It is not my style to run ugly, negative ads. Never have, never will.

MR. DIONNE: Would you re-register as a Democrat?

SENATOR SANDERS: Well, that's a decision I have yet to make. As I go around the country there are a lot of people who say, "Look, Republican Party, Democratic Party, they are the same. You've got to start outside of the two-party system." A lot of people feel that way, and other people then say, well, you've got to run. You've been in the Democratic caucus since I've been in Congress, and if you want to go where the action is and you want to be in the debates and you want to get media attention and so forth, you've got to run within the Democratic caucus. That's an issue I'm talking to a lot of people about.

MR. DIONNE: Great. We have a lot of voices, I'm sure. By the way, as I begin with journalists first and I want my friend and colleague, Dave Wessel, who is both a Brookings person and a journalist. At any point if you want jump in now or later, let me know. Who among journalists who are here would like to ask a question? Sir, right in the front.

MR. SCHRECKINGER: (off mic).

MR. DIONNE: Say it again just so people know.

MR. SCHRECKINGER: Sure. Ben Schreckinger from *Politico*. Does the pressure to compare yourself to Hillary Clinton make it harder for you to introduce yourself to voters on your own terms?

SENATOR SANDERS: Well, I'll tell you a funny story. I do a number of interviews. Often I do what I'm doing today, talk about the issues that I feel are important, and somewhere around the line at the end somebody has to ask me a question about Hillary, and I try not to attack her. Usually no matter what I say it becomes Hillary Clinton, so to answer your question, to me, if I run, what I am running on are the issues that I talked to you about today; issues, by the way, which I think the vast majority of the American people understand and support.

Clearly in terms of Hillary Clinton, her name recognition is about 10 times greater than mine, so if I run will take a lot of work getting around the country introducing myself to people. But I will tell you this, and this is the interesting point, if I may. When you look at the Republican agenda which comes down boiled down to more tax breaks for billionaires and large corporations, cuts in Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and education, what percentage of the American people do you think support that? I would say 10 - 15 percent max.

When you look at the agenda that I am talking about: a massive jobs program to put people back to work to rebuild our infrastructure, raising the minimum wage, tackling climate change, we have a lot more support, so the question is how we get out to people, how we bring people together to go forward?

SPEAKER: Do you view the Working Families Endorsement of Elizabeth Warren as a setback?

SENATOR SANDERS: Well, I'm not sure that Senator Warren is going to be running for office.

MR. DIONNE: Do you have a thought on Senator Warren while we're here?

SENATOR SANDERS: I'll tell you. I knew Elizabeth Warren before she was Elizabeth Warren. (Laughter) She was a mere brilliant Harvard Law School professor, and we brought Senator -- well, it wasn't Senator -- Elizabeth Warren to Vermont to do town meetings, and she blew me away with her ability to deal with complicated economic issues in a language that people could understand. We did town meetings around the state, so I am big fan of Elizabeth Warren, and Elizabeth and I have worked together on a number of issues.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. Way in the back there?

MR. CIRILLI: Thank you. Kevin Cirilli with *The Hill*. I'm wondering if Senator Warren, though she said she's not running for President, if she were to get in the race, would that change your plans at all for 2016?

SENATOR SANDERS: This is kind of what media does. They like to speculate.

MR. CIRILLI: Sorry.

SENATOR SANDERS: You'll forgive me. I'm not much into speculation.

MR. DIONNE: Mark, you want to come in? Mark Shields, up here in the middle. Welcome, Mark. It's great to have you here.

MR. SHIELDS: Thank you, E. J. Thank you, Senator. No one would accuse you of being Morning in America with your presentation to day.

SENATOR SANDERS: With you maybe. (Laughter)

MR. SHIELDS: But what does give you hope?

SENATOR SANDERS: Thank you, Mark. My wife often tells me that after I speak we have to pass out the tranquilizers and the anti-suicide kits. (Laughter) I've been trying to be more cheerful. You didn't catch that, obviously.

I'll tell you there's another part of my speech that I often give, and I'll tell you where I am optimistic, and this is serious stuff. Regardless of one's political views, if we sat in this room, Mark, 30 years ago and I would have said to you, "You know, I think our country, which has a terrible history of racial prejudice, somebody in the year 2008 would elect an African-American President of the United States, and you know, what the hell, maybe re-elect him four years later." We would overcome our racism and do that you would have said, "What are you smoking? Ain't going to happen." That's what you would have said. We did it. We did it.

Thirty, forty years ago you had one or two members of the United States

Senate who were women. Today you have had -- we have had states where the governor is a woman, senators are women, members of Congress are women, and while we still have a long, long way to go to break down sexist barriers in this country, nobody would deny that we have come a long way.

I remember when I was Mayor. I appointed the first woman police officer back in the 1980's. What a big deal that was. Walk around Capitol Hill today. It's not such a big deal. Overcome huge barriers in terms of sexism.

Disability issues -- when you and I were kids and families had a baby born with a disability, it was an embarrassment in the part of the family. Kids were institutionalized. Today we have come a long, long way as a result of the ADA and other programs where kids with disability are loved and welcomed into our schools. They're part of our community. We have made more progress on that than anyone would have dreamed of.

And last but certainly not least, and I know this first-hand because the State of Vermont helped lead the effort with regard to civil unions. If you and I were talking 10 years ago and you said, "You know, I think that maybe some of the more conservative states in America gay marriage would no longer be a big deal in the year 2015," you would have thought that would be completely crazy, right? And yet I go to kid's schools in the State of Vermont. I go to the conservative parts of the state, and I ask kids, "What do you think about gay marriage," and they look at me like I'm crazy. What are you talking about? What's the problem? It's not a problem.

So, you ask me about optimism. Those are the areas, some of the areas where we have now taken it for granted. Yeah, you've got a Black President of the United States. So what? Twenty, thirty years ago no one would have dreamed that would be possible, so I believe we have the capacity to change. I think what we're up against now,

by the way, is something tougher though because you're taking on the greed and the power of a billionaire class of the Koch Brothers who are ought to destroy Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, et cetera, bring us back to the 1920s and have the money to try to do that. This is a tough fight, but I am optimistic. I think we have the capacity to bring change to this country, and we have done it in recent years.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you, Mark, for allowing the Senator to listen to his wife's advice. That was very helpful. Dave, could I -- oh, no, okay. Who do we have over there? The gentleman who's got his hand up right there? Thank you. Could you identify yourself?

MR. PLUNK: Yes, my name's Peter Plunk. Senator, I'd like to ask you your opinion on the speech that Prime Minister Netanyahu is planning to give to Congress, and would you consider boycotting it?

SENATOR SANDERS: Yes. I think, look, we have a -- again, people disagree. The President of the United States heads up our foreign policy, and the idea that the President wasn't even consulted. That is wrong, and not a good thing for our country.

MR. DIONNE: Are you thinking of not going?

SENATOR SANDERS: Yes.

MR. DIONNE: Have you decided yet or --

SENATOR SANDERS: Yeah, I'm not thinking I'm not going. I am not going. I may watch it on TV, but I'm not going.

MR. DIONNE: How many of your colleagues do you think are going to do that? Do you have any sense --

SENATOR SANDERS: E. J., you're sounding like the media. You want me to speculate? I don't know. No idea.

MR. DIONNE: Yeah, I am the media.

SENATOR SANDERS: Oh, that's right. (Laughter)

MR. DIONNE: The lady at the front here, please.

SENATOR SANDERS: Anything, but don't ask me to speculate.

SPEAKER: This verges on speculation, but I appreciate your votes against the Gulf War and the Iraq War, and I wonder what we can do and what you think we can do to stop this path that we're on of endless war?

SENATOR SANDERS: Well, thank you for phrasing it that way because that is exactly what my nightmare is, is endless war, endless. Look, it goes without saying that this ISIS -- it is beyond pathetic to think that this is going on in the year 2015; the barbarianism that we're seeing. And anyone who tells you that they have a magical solution to this problem is kidding you. They don't.

But what I do believe the most important thing that we can do is to demand that the people in the region play an extremely active role militarily and politically. It will shock people in this room to know that the country that has the fourth largest defense spending in the world is not France, not the U. K. It is Saudi Arabia, owned by a group of billionaire folks. Well, you know what? That's their neighborhood, and I think the United States and the Western world should be very supportive, but I think nations in that region are going to have to put some real skin in the game, more than they are right now.

MR. DIONNE: Do you imagine a use of force resolution against ISIS that would be framed in a way you could vote for?

SENATOR SANDERS: Again, I don't -- look, ISIS is beyond -- what they have done is -- you can't even speak about it, it is so horrible. And I want to see them destroyed, but as this woman aptly pointed out, there are some of my colleagues in the

Congress who really have in mind an endless war.

I mean God knows how many years we were in Afghanistan and Iraq. I was Chairman of the Veterans Committee. We've got 500,000 men and women who came back from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD and traumatic brain injury. Thousands of lives have been terribly impacted. I do not want to see an endless war in the Middle East. I don't and having said that I don't have any magical solution, but I think that the heart of it has got to be regional activity on the countries who are most impacted by it.

MR. DIONNE: Let me just press you on that because this is not a speculative question. This is if President Obama called you up and said, "I know, Senator Sanders, there are a lot of people in the Senate and House who are very reluctant to keep at wars in the Middle East, and yet you agree -- we agree that ISIS is a particular threat. Can you write me a resolution that you could vote for?"

SENATOR SANDERS: Well, again, the devil is always in the details, and I don't want to speculate without seeing a document, but I think it's fair to say I do not disagree with the air attacks that the United States is coordinating, for example. What I just don't want to see is a ground presence and never-ending war.

MR. DIONNE: Who else? The lady in the back on the aisle? Those two folks on the aisle. Yeah.

MS. BERNSTEIN: Leandra Bernstein, *Sputnik International News*. Just had a follow-up question on what you've raised about the oligarchical trend in U.S. politics, and I'd just like to know what kind of impact that has on the United States as a world leader, so how this trend in the U.S. impacts economic justice world-wide?

SENATOR SANDERS: Thank you. That's a great question. I mean, I'll answer it in a couple of ways. First thought, the way it impacts American politics, and again I don't mean to -- everyone knows my political views so I don't need to be overly

partisan here, but if you were the Republican Party or any group of people you really think that you would put up the Keystone Pipeline as your first order of business? I'm against the Keystone Pipeline; fought it very hard, but there are people who disagree with me.

Do you really think that a Canadian pipeline which will provide 35 permanent jobs is the most important issue facing America you would make U.S. Senate one? That's your first bill or do you think it may have something to do with the fact that the Koch Brothers are major owners of leases in that part of Canada?

How it impacts our foreign policy is that I'm afraid people who have the money will have more influence than will ordinary Americans in that respect. I'll give you one example of something where I want to applaud the President. This did not get a lot of attention. The people of Greece are hurting terribly. Unemployment in Greece is 25, 26 percent. Their economy has shrunk by a quarter. There are people living in dire poverty right now, and right now what you're having is an effort on the part of the European Central Bank to talk about more austerity for Greece rather than letting the new government start implementing the agenda and the promises that it made, and President Obama spoke up on that issue and talked about how more austerity in a country whose economy is shrinking is not the way to go.

But to answer your question globally, the problems that we're facing in the United States are not dissimilar to what many other countries are facing around the world. More and more wealth and income inequality, more and more austerity, and I think the American people have got to work with people around the world to say that when you have a handful of billionaires owning as much wealth as half of the people in this world, we need radical changes in the way we do economics.

MR. DIONNE: The gentleman right there, yes.

MR. CHECKO: Thank you. Larry Checko, (inaudible) Central. I agree with most of what you say, Senator. I would offer one caveat. If you're going to invite people to Vermont, to Burlington, do it in the summertime.

SENATOR SANDERS: Ah, the skiing is good.

MR. CHECKO: But keep away from speculation, I might offer this as a comment. What scares me a little bit is are you willing if you don't go over to the Democratic side to run as a Democrat, would you run as an Independent, only because are you willing to be the son of Ralph Nader?

SENATOR SANDERS: No, I will not. I will not be a spoiler. There are ways to do this, but let me make it very clear. I will not be a spoiler and elect some right-wing Republican.

MR. DIONNE: The gentleman in the back. Somebody tell me when we are running short of time. We're at the end? All right, I'll let the -- this gentleman will ask the last question, so you have a heavy weight on your shoulder.

SPEAKER: It should be a good one. Senator, thank you. I've talked to some of your constituents in Vermont, and they have said something that they like about you and the charm about you is your independent nature and the fact that you charm everybody, I know.

SENATOR SANDERS: I don't know if that's the word they usually associate with me. (Laughter)

SPEAKER: I'm keeping it nice.

SENATOR SANDERS: Acquired taste.

SPEAKER: The fact that you're an Independent, they like that. Do you think that if you become a Democrat to run for President, does that hurt you with not only your constituents in Vermont but people around the country who may vote for you and

like the fact that you are not affiliated with the party right now?

SENATOR SANDERS: Well, that is the (inaudible) as I mentioned earlier. I think -- I could be wrong in this, but I think in the last election, for example, in Vermont I think we got about 25 percent of the Republican vote, which is illustrative. I think you have a lot of working-class Republicans who are not uncomfortable with what I am saying, and I think in Vermont and around the country you have enormous numbers of people who say "You're not a Democrat. You're not a Republican. I don't know what you stand for, but I'm with you," because there is so much frustration with the two-party system, so yes, that is one of the calculations.

On the other side, and this is why I'm getting balder and balder trying to figure these things out. On the other hand, you know what? I am not Mr. Bloomberg of New York, and I don't have billions of dollars, and to try to put together an Independent political effort, you would have to spend an enormous amount of time and money and energy getting on the ballot in 50 states. Will the media cover you if you run as an Independent? So, these are some of the issues that I'm wrestling with.

MR. DIONNE: I just want to close by saying that the late Mike Harrington used to say that he was for the left wing of the possible, and I think that Senator Sanders is pushing the definition of the possible, and I thank him and all of you for a very enlightening exploration of what can be done, and if I may use the phrase what is to be done. Thank you very, very much. (Applause)

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