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## Jim Webb and the Populist Pitch

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By David Ignatius  
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Sen. [Jim Webb](#) is talking about his mother's family, which lived in hardscrabble eastern Arkansas during the Great Depression and was so poor "there was nothing -- not even money." [The Democrats](#) built their party around such people, Webb is saying, while the Republicans never cared about them.

And then the freshman senator from [Virginia](#) begins quoting some [lyrics](#) from "Song of the South," recorded by the country rock group Alabama:

*"Well somebody told us Wall Street fell,*

*But we were so poor that we couldn't tell.*

*Cotton was short and the weeds were tall.*

*But Mr. Roosevelt's a-gonna save us all."*

That kind of populist anger is part of the Democrats' past, and Webb argues that it's the party's future as well. But he worries that "the people at the top of the party don't comprehend the power of that message" and that as a result the Democrats may miss their best chance in a generation to reconnect with the American middle class.

"The Democrats need to embrace the fact that the greatest issue in America today is economic fairness," he says. He argues that if the Democrats construct a "fairness agenda" that tilts toward workers and away from corporations and the rich, "they will win big." [John Edwards](#) hasn't had much luck so far with the issue, which he has made the centerpiece of his presidential campaign. But some influential Democrats, including former Treasury secretary [Lawrence Summers](#), share the focus on fairness.

Webb is a quirky, sometimes cranky ex-Marine who is just settling into his new digs in the Russell Senate Office Building, where we met for a conversation last week. He takes positions that set other Democrats' teeth on edge -- proclaiming his support for gun ownership and criticizing liberal "interest groups" that he says have come to dominate the party. Some might question whether he's really a Democrat at all, since he served in the [Reagan administration](#). But that didn't stop the party leadership from choosing Webb to deliver a stinging Democratic [response](#) to [President Bush](#)'s 2007 State of the Union address.

Webb articulates what may be the wild-card issue of the 2008 campaign. There is a deep anger these days among middle-class Americans who feel abandoned by the elites in both parties. That anger surfaces on pocketbook issues that affect working people -- immigration, outsourcing of jobs, and the trade and tax boondoggles that broadcaster [Lou Dobbs](#) rages against each night on [CNN](#).

"The average American worker sits there feeling the impact of globalization and immigration. They need people sticking up for them," says Webb. Though he doesn't criticize any politicians by name, he scolds what he calls "the Rubin wing" of the party, which supports the pro-investment policies advocated by Clinton administration Treasury Secretary [Robert Rubin](#).

Webb was making these arguments about the forgotten middle class long before Dobbs got the message. In 1995, Webb wrote a manifesto headlined "[In Defense of Joe Six-Pack](#)" for the [Wall Street Journal](#). It was a defense of poor and middle-income whites, whose share of household aggregate

income was declining even as rich Americans grew richer. But it was also a tirade against President [Bill Clinton](#) and other elitist liberals "who excused themselves from the dirty work of society when they were younger" and "have mandated an 'equal opportunity' bureaucracy in the military, government and even industry that closely resembles the Soviet 'political cadre' structure, whose sole function is to report 'political incorrectness.'" Whew!

On the issue of fairness (if not political correctness) some influential Democrats are starting to come Webb's way. In a [recent paper](#) for Rubin's own [Hamilton Project](#), Summers and fellow economists [Jason Furman](#) and Jason Bordoff made a powerful case for restoring the progressivity of the tax system. They found that in 2004 the top one-tenth of 1 percent in America made as much before-tax income as the bottom 28 percent combined. Actual federal tax rates on that top one-tenth have fallen sharply, from 60 percent in 1960 to 34 percent in 2004.

Webb's "fairness agenda" is political dynamite, in the best and worst senses. It's a powerful rallying cry, but it could turn into protectionist demagoguery if it isn't managed carefully. But Webb has one big thing right: America is becoming a more stratified society, in which the rich receive a disproportionate share of the growth in national income.

Denouncing the fairness argument as "class warfare," as Republicans like to do, may not work this time. The Democratic candidate who gets the fairness issue right could find a new way to rally the party and the country.

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