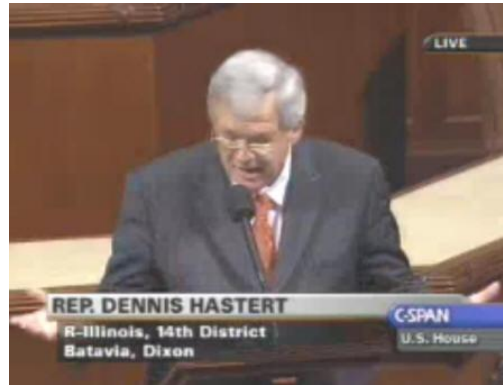




Dennis Hastert

Farewell to Congress



Delivered 15 November 2007

AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Madam Speaker, as members of Congress we are not here just to vote, but to speak -- to give voice on this floor to the aspirations of our constituents. So this place where we speak -- the well of the House -- is very special to me. When I was a freshman Congressman in 1987, I delivered my first remarks from this podium. Twelve years later in January 6th, 1999, when I was first sworn in as Speaker, I made my acceptance speech from here as well. I explained at the time, that I was breaking the tradition of the Speaker by making an acceptance remarks from the -- not from the Speaker's chair "because my legislative home is here on the floor with you, and so is my heart." Well, my heart is still here and always will be.

But the Bible reminds us in the book of Ecclesiastes: "To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven." And I think that pretty much sums up our existence in this place. So now, after 21 years, in serving the people of Illinois in this House, the time has come for me to make my last speech from this podium. Our Founding Fathers envisioned a citizen legislature and it's time for this legislator to return to being a private citizen.

And Madam Speaker, when I was re-elected as Speaker of this House in January of 2003, I was able to congratulate you on being the first woman to be nominated as Speaker. Just four short years later you surpassed that achievement and became the first woman elected as Speaker. And I have to admit that as we went into that 2006 election, I was hoping that you would put off that achievement just a little bit longer. I think all of us in this House, regardless of Party or our affiliation, were proud to be serving when that glass ceiling was shattered.



AmericanRhetoric.com

And I'd also like to thank you, Madam Speaker, for the many courtesies that you've shown to me as a former Speaker of this House during the past year, including the opportunity to formally say goodbye to all of my colleagues here today.

I will get myself into trouble if I start singling out members in these remarks -- and I owe so much to so many of you -- for your friendship, for the many things that you've taught me and for your support during some very difficult days, such as the aftermath of 9/11 when I became a "wartime Speaker."

But I would be remiss if I did not extend a heartfelt "thank you" to my colleagues and former colleagues in the Illinois Congressional Delegation and my Freshman Class of 1986. We've accomplished much working together. And I also want to thank my leader, the gentleman from Ohio, Mr. Boehner, and his fellow Republican leaders who head a vibrant minority -- the largest Republican minority since 1955 -- a minority that is demonstrating to the country that it should -- and I think will -- lead this house again yet someday.

And I also want to thank the Chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, the Dean of this House, the gentleman from Michigan, Mr. Dingell who for four times administered to me the Oath of Office¹ as Speaker. You, Chairman Dingell, and our Republican leader on the Committee, Mr. Barton, welcomed me home to the committee. And I've enjoyed working this past year and we tried to tackle some of the most important issues that face our nation, such as energy security, and healthcare, and telecommunications. And for that I thank both of you gentlemen.

More than 25 years ago, when I entered politics, I never envisioned that this former teacher and wrestling coach from Kendall County, Illinois would have the opportunity to lead the United States House of Representatives. It was you, the members of this House, who gave me that opportunity longer than any other member of my party in history -- and I'm grateful to you.

Becoming Speaker was a very humbling experience -- an opportunity that only 51 men and one woman have ever had since 1789. I suspect that sitting here in this chamber are several men and women who will some day have the honor to be Speaker of this House. But whether that honor comes your way or not -- you're already the trustee of one of the most wonderful jobs that anyone wanting to serve their country can have. You are a member of the United States House of Representatives, entrusted by more than 700,000 people -- citizens to represent them.

Eleven times the voters of the 14th District of Illinois hired me as their representative. It's been a journey that we've traveled together -- and every year brought new challenges. I am proud of so many of the things that I was able to work on over those years: working to make health care more affordable and accessible by creating tax-free health savings accounts; delivering on long-awaited prescription drug coverage for seniors while at the same time modernizing Medicare for the 21st century; passing two of the largest tax relief packages for working Americans in our nation's history, which encouraged Americans to invest and small businesses to grow and to create new jobs; and reducing the unfair social security earnings



limit on our senior citizens that needed to work. And back home in Illinois, I was proud to work on environmental issues like the removal of the dangerous thorium tailings from West Chicago Illinois and preserving the vital drinking water supply of the people of the Fox Valley. But ultimately, the most important responsibility for any of us who serve this House is to provide for the defense of this nation. It's our most solemn obligation.

On September 11th, 2001, I became a wartime Speaker and together we became a wartime Congress. On that dark day, our Congress was united. We were not Republicans or Democrats -- we were just Americans. We stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the steps of this Capitol and vowed to do whatever was necessary. And in the following days and weeks and months, President Bush, Leader Gephardt, and I worked together.

We tried to bind the wounds of those victimized by the attacks. And then made sure it would never happen again. We demanded that our intelligence agencies do a better job of sharing information. Then we gave law enforcement more effective tools and resources to guard against attack. Then we made an unprecedented investment in Homeland Security. And did we get it all right? Of course not. Only hindsight is 20/20. But through those efforts, and the grace of God, we have avoided additional attacks -- attacks on American soil. There's no doubt in my mind that the American people are safer today because of the heroic actions of our men and women who serve our armed services and intelligence agencies, and because of the actions taken here, by our Congress.

It's popular these days to ask political figures what mistakes they've made -- where they've failed. As a former history teacher I know such analysis is best tempered by time and reflection, and that is probably best left to others. But I will say this: I continue to worry about the breakdown of civility in our political discourse. I tried my best, but I wish I had been more successful. When I addressed this chamber for the first time as your Speaker, I noted that "solutions to problems cannot be found in a pool of bitterness." Those words are as true today as they were then. We each have a responsibility to be passionate about the beliefs -- that is healthy government. But we also have a responsibility to be civil, to be open-minded, and to be fair, to listen to one another, to work in good faith to find solutions to the challenges facing this nation. That is why the American people sent us here. They did not send us here just to get re-elected.

As Speaker, I served with two Presidents. President Clinton and I worked together to fight the flow of drugs from Columbia -- drugs that destroy the lives of our children. And despite our differences on some issues, we were able to find common ground on others. For most of my years as Speaker, President Bush has been our wartime President. I believe history will judge him as a man of courage and foresight, as well as resolve. I must say I was proud to serve by his side and honored to call him a friend.

No member of Congress could succeed in serving his or her constituents without the help of a dedicated staff. They often worked long hours and hard days. Many of them gave some of their most productive years to this institution. And I want to thank all of them and each of them for their service.



And I also want to thank all of the people who make (and have made) this great body function on a daily basis: the Officers of the House, the Capitol Police, the Chaplain, the permanent staff. They are dedicated professionals who I came to appreciate even more during my years as Speaker.

I am also blessed to have a family that helped me every day over these twenty-one years: my two sons Josh and Ethan, my daughter-in-law Heidi -- and our newest addition, my grandson, Jack Hastert. And most importantly, I want to thank my wife Jean, who is here in the gallery today. And thank you Jean for the love and the help that you have given me.

In 2003, during the Cannon Centenary Conference on the changing nature of the speakership, I said that "at the end of the day, the Speaker of the House is really just the person who stands up for the American people." That is the same role that every man and woman who serves here should play. Our founders dreamed of a nation, a nation empowered by freedom, where citizens would find justice, where hard working men and women would find economic opportunity. Each of us who comes to this place has different ideas of how to preserve and enhance that dream. It's on this floor of this House where those ideas clash -- peacefully -- and through that struggle our democracy is renewed.

Never lose sight of the fact that you participate in the greatest ongoing democratic ritual in the world. We are, as President Reagan often reminded us, "A Shining City on a Hill." Always be mindful of your duties to your constituents and be respectful of the traditions of this institution.

I pray that God will give you and guide you in all that you do in these halls; that He gives you the knowledge to do the people's work, the strength to persevere, and the wisdom to know when to listen to what others have to say.

And Madam Speaker, there's a tradition among Olympic wrestlers that you leave your shoes on the mat after your last match. Well don't be alarmed Madam Speaker, I won't be challenging the rules of decorum by removing my shoes on the House floor. But I do hope that I have left a few footprints behind that may be of value to those who come after me -- just as I have benefited from the footprints of those who I followed to this most wonderful of institutions, The People's House.

May God bless each of you, may God bless this House, may God Bless the United States of America.

Goodbye friends.

¹"I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion, and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter, so help me God."