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Farewell Address to the U.S. House of Representatives



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Mr. Speaker, political careers tend to end in one of three ways: defeat, death, or retirement. And despite the fervent and mostly noble exertions of my adversaries over the years, I rise today to bid farewell to this House under the happiest of the available options.

I wish to begin the end of my congressional career by publicly thanking for the last time as their representative the people of the 22nd District of Texas. Everything I have ever been able to accomplish here I owe and dedicate to them. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve them here. And, Mr. Speaker -- the real speaker, he's on his way -- I want to tell the real speaker it's been an honor to serve with Denny Hastert, and who is my good friend, my most trusted partner and colleague, and I want to take just a moment to congratulate him myself on becoming the longest serving Republican speaker in history.

What a blessing this place is, Mr. Speaker. What a castle of hope this building is, this institution is for the people of the world. It's one of those things in political life that you always know but seldom notice. The schedules we're forced to keep during our days in Washington are not always hospitable to sitting back and reflecting on the historical significance of our surroundings.

In the weeks since I announced my retirement, however, I found myself doing just that. I noticed things like I haven't in years. I noticed the monuments on The Mall. I noticed that in Washington's obelisk, the father of our country is represented not as an object of glory, but as a dutiful sentry at attention minding his post for eternity. I noticed that under Jefferson's dome the statue of the man is relatively understated while his etched words still thunder from the marble with the power to drive history.



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I noticed that Lincoln's chair, the man who sought above all peace and reconciliation, keeps one of his hands in a perpetual fist. I walk these halls with a keener perspective. I notice now the statues of old and great and, in some cases, almost forgotten heroes that line the halls of this building that stand in Statuary Hall.

In these halls, I have also noticed in recent weeks the number of tourists in the Capitol who speak no English. They are not from America, most of these visitors, and yet in a certain sense of course they are. They may speak Italian or Polish or Japanese, but the freedoms they enjoy, both here and in their own countries, have been inspired, won, and secured by the ideals and the courage and the compassion of the American people. These pilgrims come from all over the world to the House of Representatives to sit up in these galleries, photograph the statues, and stare up at the Rotunda, to bear witness to the awesome feat of human liberty we have achieved right here. The dome above us, Mr. Speaker, is a lighthouse, a star even, by which all the people in the world, no matter how oppressed, how impoverished, how seemingly without hope can chart a course toward security, prosperity, and freedom.

It is worth considering -- though I'll admit, it is considerably easier to consider after you've announced your retirement -- whether the days we lead here, the debates we wage, the work we do is always worthy of the elevated ideals embodied in that dome. I submit that we could do better, as could all people in all things at all times, but perhaps not in the ways some might think. In preparing for today, I found that it is customary in speeches such as these to reminisce about the good old days of political harmony and across-the-aisle camaraderie, and to lament the bitter, divisive partisan rancor that supposedly now weakens our democracy. Well, I can't do that because partisanship, Mr. Speaker, properly understood, is not a symptom of democracy's weakness but of its health and its strength, especially from the perspective of a political conservative.

Liberalism, after all, whatever you may think of its merits, is a political philosophy and a proud one with a great tradition in this country, with a voracious appetite for growth. In any place or any time on any issue, what does liberalism ever seek, Mr. Speaker? More. More government, more taxation, more control over people's lives and decisions and wallets. If conservatives don't stand up to liberalism, no one will. And for a long time around here, almost no one did. Indeed, the common lament over the recent rise in political partisanship is often nothing more than a veiled complaint instead about the recent rise of political conservatism.

I should add here that I do not begrudge liberals their nostalgia for the days of a timid, docile, and permanent Republican minority. If we Republicans had ever enjoyed that same luxury over the last 12 years, heck, I'd be nostalgic too. Had liberals not fought us tooth and nail over tax cuts, and budget cuts, and energy, and Iraq, and partial-birth abortion, those of us on this side of the aisle could only imagine all the additional things we could have accomplished. But the fact of the matter is, Mr. Speaker, they didn't agree with us. So to their credit, they stood up to us; they argued with us, and they did so honorably, on behalf of more than 100 million people, just like we did against President Clinton and they did against President Reagan.



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Now it goes without saying, Mr. Speaker, that by my count, our friends on the other side of the aisle lost every one of those arguments over the last 22 years, but that's beside the point. The point is, we disagree. On first principles, Mr. Speaker, we disagree. And so we debate, often loudly, and often in vain, to convince our opponents and the American people of our point of view. We debate here on the House floor; we debate in committees; we debate on television and on radio and on the Internet and in the newspapers. And then every two years, we have a huge debate. And then in November, we see who won. That is not rancor -- that is democracy.

You show me a nation without partisanship, and I'll show you a tyranny. For all its faults, it is partisanship, based on core principles, that clarifies our debates, that prevents one party from straying too far from the mainstream, and that constantly refreshes our politics with new ideas and new leaders. Indeed, whatever role partisanship may have played in my own retirement today or in the unfriendliness heaped upon other leaders in other times, Republican or Democrat, however unjust, all we can say is that partisanship is the worst means of settling fundamental political differences -- except for all the others.

Now, politics demands compromise. And Mr. Speaker, and even the most partisan among us have to understand that. But we must never forget that compromise and bipartisanship are means, not ends, and are properly employed only in the service of higher principles. It is not the principled partisan, however obnoxious he may seem to his opponents, who degrades our public debate, but the preening, self-styled statesman who elevates compromise to a first principle. For the true statesman, Mr. Speaker, we are not defined by what they compromise, but [by] what they don't. Conservatives, especially less enamored of government's lust for growth, must remember that our principles must always drive our agenda and not the other way around. For us, conservatives, there are two such principles that can never be honorably compromised: human freedom and human dignity.

Now, our agenda over the last 12 years has been an outgrowth of these first principles. We lowered taxes to increase freedom. We reformed welfare programs that, however well-intentioned, undermined the dignity of work and personal responsibility, and perpetuated poverty. We have opposed abortion, cloning and euthanasia, because such procedures fundamentally deny the unique dignity of the human person. And we have supported the spread of democracy and the ongoing war against terror, because those policies protect and affirm the inalienable human right of all men and women and children to live in freedom.

Conservatism is often unfairly accused of being insensitive and mean-spirited, sometimes unfortunately even by other conservatives. As a result, conservatives often attempt to soften that stereotype by over-funding broken programs or glossing over ruinous policies. But conservatism isn't about feeling people's pain, it's about curing it. And the results since the first great conservative victory in 1980 speak for themselves: millions of new jobs, new homes, and new businesses created thanks to conservative economic reforms; millions of families intact and enriched by the move from welfare to work; hundreds of millions of people around the world liberated by a conservative foreign policy's victory over Soviet communism; and more than 50 million Iraqis and Afghans liberated from tyranny since September the 11th, 2001.



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To all the critics of the supposedly mean-spirited conservative policies that brought about these results, I say only this: Compassionate is as compassionate does.

Now, when I say that word, Mr. Speaker, "compassionate," my thoughts turn to one person: my wife, Christine. Twelve years ago, Christine became what's called a court-appointed special advocate for abused and neglected children, and soon thereafter, we became foster parents ourselves to three such children. Over the last 10 years, I have spent more time and energy on the plight and needs of abused and neglected children than on any other single issue. It's an issue that transcends politics, let alone partisanship, and one that will continue to command a disproportionate amount of my time as a private citizen.

I am concerned, however, about whether it will receive the attention it deserves here in Washington, D.C. And because this is the last time I may ever command the attention of the House and of the national media, I will make one more plea before I go. The catastrophe of America's child welfare and foster care systems is a national outrage, a government failure, and a bipartisan embarrassment. Congresses, administrations, governors and state legislatures of every party and ideological bent for almost 100 years have thrown abused and neglected children into a vicious cycle of violence, fear, and instability. Children who have already been beaten and betrayed by the people supposed to love them the most are routinely tossed from one temporary placement to another, often 10 to 20 times during their most formative, vulnerable years.

The system we have created still includes perverse economic incentives that deny children permanent homes, and in some states, still lacks meaningful child monitoring or even background checks for prospective foster parents. The courts charged with overseeing each case are overrun with unrelated duties, so the thankless, unexciting work of looking after foster kids is just set aside in favor of more glamorous cases on the docket.

Bureaucracies layered one on top of another consign these children to the perdition of government foster care for years at a time and with little or no effort made to finding them permanent, loving, forever families. Instead, every few months, these children throw their despair and distrust into a black plastic trash bag along with their few belongings and head off to the next place, the next letdown. They are abused and neglected long before they ever reach our abusive and neglectful foster care system, and once in, things often only get worse.

Children are dying, Mr. Speaker, inside and out, and it's our fault. There is legislation now waiting in the Senate to help expedite interstate placement of foster children and within its narrow focus this bill will do some good on the margins of some cases. And I'm proud of what little I have been able to accomplish for these children over the years, but in truth I have only moved mole hills, not mountains.

So I leave you today not by asking that someone take up this cause, but by asking that all of you do; that you listen to the stories of these children and the stories that they tell -- and study the broken system we have created for them, and help them. For God's sake, help them. I ask this of Republicans and Democrats alike; not in the name of bipartisanship, but in the name of principle.



Which brings me back, Mr. Speaker, to those memorials and those statues. The great Americans honored here in bronze and marble, the heroes of our history and the ghosts of these halls, were not made great because of what they were, but because of what they did. George Washington and Abraham Lincoln have almost nothing in common with Junipero Serra and Jack Swigert, except the choice they each made: to live, to fight, and even to die in the service of freedom. We honor men with monuments and not because of their greatness or even simply because of their service, but because of their refusal even in the face of danger or death to ever compromise the principles they served. Washington's obelisk still stands watch because democracy will always need a sentry. Jefferson's words will still ring because liberty will always need a voice. And Lincoln's left hand still stays clenched because tyranny will always need an enemy. And we are still here, Mr. Speaker, as a House and as a nation because the torch of freedom cannot carry itself.

Here on this floor, I have caught and thrown spears of every sort. Over the course of 22 years, I've probably worked with and against almost everyone in this chamber at least once. I have scraped and clawed for every vote, every amendment, for every word of every bill that I believed in my heart would protect human freedom and defend human dignity. I have done so at all times honorably and honestly, Mr. Speaker, as God is my witness and history is my judge. And if given the chance to do it all again, there's only one thing I would change: I would fight even harder.

This place has given me so many memories, so much life. For 22 years, I have served as best I knew how. In this House, I found my life's calling and my soul's savior. Eight years ago, I witnessed evil in the murder of two Capitol Hill police officers, one just outside my office and another, a very dear friend, on my protection detail inside my office itself. And five years ago, I witnessed unparalleled courage as their surviving comrades stood at their post inside this building during the frantic evacuation on 9/11. They are around us every day, the Capitol police force, members -- I tell you, those police officers are members and staffs own personal army of guardian angels. They are the bravest men and women serving under this dome and I offer them now one more time my great respect and admiration.

Because believe it or not, Mr. Speaker, this is a happy day for me, though admittedly perhaps not as happy as it is for some of our old friends on the other side of the aisle. But nothing, not this retirement, not tough losses or old wounds can detract from the joy that I feel and the blessings I offer to this House and its members. I say goodbye today, Mr. Speaker, with few regrets, no doubts. And so with love and gratitude for friend and foe alike, patriots all, I yield back the floor of our beloved House and I exit as always, stage right.