

NAFUSA Remarks

October 26, 2018

NOTE: The remarks were delivered on the Friday evening prior to the shooting at a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburg where eleven people were killed.

Thank you very much Hal. I am so honored to be here tonight.

Well this is certainly NOT the speech that I thought I would be delivering at this time of this year. Wow! How things can change.

I want to thank so many of you in this room for all that you did to help make a dream of mine come true. And it was folks on both sides of the aisle, which I think is a testament to this organization.

I particularly want to thank my Clintonista colleagues. They were with me every step of the way, from their financial contributions, to coming in to help canvass, to being there with me on election night.

The very first week of the campaign I got a call from my buddy Doug Turner who was the campaign Treasurer. Money was just trickling in and he said “Do you know some guy in California named Gregory Vega?”

“Sure” I said, “he’s one of my former US Attorney buddies”

“Well he just maxed out to you!”

I laughed and said “Well I’ll just deduct it from his Alabama football ticket tab!”

About a week out from the election Greg and Walter Holton and Don Stern came down spending the last days traveling with me and helping out however they could. Along with Rick Deane they were there on election night, which was truly remarkable.

What was perplexing though was their nickname they gave themselves. While in every race I have known it was always the “team” with the candidate’s name so you

would expect “Team Doug” or “Team Jones.” But not here - Greg decided it should be Team Vega. And so it was.

Seriously though, having former colleagues from all parts of the country come in was incredibly special and meant the world to me and Louise.

But if you followed my race at all, and even followed what I am trying to do in the Senate, you will likely see the significance that NAFUSA has played. In his outgoing remarks as NAFUSA President a few years ago Rick Deane called NAFUSA “perhaps the last true bipartisan organization in the country.” I think that is certainly true and I can tell you that the relationships that I built with NAFUSA, and my work on the Board and as an officer helped mold my campaign message of reaching across the aisle and bi-partisanship. More importantly it has guided my work in the Senate.

But let's face it – we are living in a pretty politically toxic environment. It is straining families, friendships and as we have seen last year in the Congressional shootings, Charlottesville and this week's slew of explosive devices sent to political figures and media outlets, I am afraid that we have moved into dangerous territory.

Every moment in history is important, but I contend that we live in a very important time. Our moment and how we behave in it will set the course of our nation for generations.

We live in a time where intolerance is acceptable. Where notions of civility have been thrown out. Where arguments often turn to personal insults – in real life and on the web. Some of our leaders, on both sides of the aisle, promote this environment, using hate and prejudice and ridicule as a means to winning elections and gaining power.

I think we must reject this leadership and all that comes with it. We are called upon to set a higher moral tone. To leave our children with a land of grace. Civility is the hallmark of a mature democracy. Arguments can differ and be well reasoned. We can disagree without insult. The personal has no place in our dialogue. You can disagree without having to defriend. Leaders should win by sharing a compelling vision of the future. Hate and ridicule should be left behind.

There are of course many examples of such vision – for instance, landmark legislation like the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. But one of the best examples is right here in the State of Tennessee, where over the last four decades political leaders ran their campaigns with ferocity but then handed off to their successors in another party more opportunities to make things work for Tennessee, winning intense national competitions for Nissan and Saturn manufacturing plants, enacting four major road plans to build the nation's best four lane

highway system to support those plants, they overhauled Medicaid to provide better health care, improved the education system, rejuvenated their major metro areas and generally increased the standard of living for their citizens in every major category. And as documented in a new book by Keel Hunt titled “Crossing the Aisle – How Bi-Partisanship brought Tennessee to the 21st Century and Could Save America” due out in a couple of weeks, it all began on a winter’s day in January of 1979 with what Hunt describes as a “6 hour boot camp.”

Democrats had totally dominated Tennessee politics for a century but in November of 1978 Lamar Alexander, a 38 year old Republican who had walked the length of Tennessee in his campaign shocked the establishment by winning the Governorship. He was set to be sworn in on Saturday, but earlier in the week it was learned that then Democratic governor Ray Blanton had signed pardons for 52 State inmates, some hardened criminals. It was a national story and a disgrace for the state. Now, three

days before the scheduled inauguration Alexander and state officials, all of whom were Democrats, learned that a new round of pardons was imminent.

Over the course of about 5 hours Alexander and his team and other state leaders, having satisfied themselves that an early swearing in was constitutionally permissible, devised a plan to have Alexander sworn in that very afternoon, 3 days ahead of schedule. They all knew the historic nature of what they were contemplating but they also knew what they had to do for the citizens of Tennessee with total disregard of their political allegiances.

Late that afternoon they gathered in the Old Supreme Court building – Democrats Ned McWherter the Speaker of the House, Lt Gov John Shelton Wilder, Secretary of State Gentry Crowell, Attorney General Bill Leech and Chief Justice Joe Henry. As Hunt describes it “into this comfortable monopoly of Democrats strolled an

inconvenience – Republican Governor-elect Alexander” who was sworn in about 6 pm, three days earlier than planned.

Although that may not sound like that big a deal, it really was. The hand off of power 3 days early from a party who dominated the political landscape to the opposition was both historic and remarkable in their rapid resolution of the crisis.

Lamar Alexander, now my Senate colleague, described the five hours of secret negotiations as “a sort of boot camp for how we could work with each other and that started with one word: trust.”

In a TV interview that evening McWherter, who was really a giant of a man was asked how it felt as a Democrat to hand over power to a Republican, but before he could even finish the question McWherter cut him off with a curt “I’m a Tennessean first.” And with that the interview was ended.

In those few hours key political leaders of both parties came to know, trust and rely on one another to achieve results, and opened the door to a very different future. What followed was 40 years of bipartisan collaboration to get Tennessee to the point it is today.

What is especially interesting for us, is that it all started with a noon phone call to Governor-elect Alexander from a staunch Democratic US Attorney, who had actually been appointed to a state judgeship by Governor Blanton before being appointed as US Attorney. He was aware of the FBI investigation into the granting of the pardons and learned that morning that another round was coming. But instead of calling Attorney General Griffin Bell or going through all of the DOJ protocols that existed at the time, he took matters into his own hands and picked up the phone and called the Governor-elect, who he barely knew, to advise him of the urgency that he take office immediately. It was that call that jump started the discussions, or boot camp, to have an early swearing

in later that very day. So in reality that one phone call, from a Democrat to a Republican, also jump started the bipartisan collaboration that has lasted for forty years.

Of course it should come as no surprise to us that a US Attorney would act this way, but it is something we should still be proud of and celebrate even today, and especially tonight. And you have probably figured out by now that the US Attorney who made that call is our own Hal Hardin.

We need to try and get back to those days.

It has been a tough week. Everyone has expressed shock and anger but some simply do not make the connection that words and rhetoric can have serious consequences. You have seen what I am talking about so I don't have to repeat it here. But I do want to make clear that while I personally believe that the President is the offender in chief here, he is not alone. I have seen Republican friends and colleagues harassed in Restuarants

and airports and in the halls of the Senate office buildings in part because of the urging of certain Democratic leaders to do so.

I grew up in a city where the civil rights movement played out on a world stage. Where a governor and a police commissioner fanned the flames of racism and hatred with their rhetoric. You folks know my history and you understand that I know about as much about that history of racial violence as anyone and I can tell without any hesitation that those four young girls died in a bomb blast because members of the Klan were empowered to violence by the rhetoric of political officials of the day. They did not direct them, or tell them to do anything explicitly but let no one ever doubt the link between those bombings and bomb attempts to the words and rhetoric of certain public officials.

Words, like elections, have consequences.

But with all of the potential physical danger that comes with such rhetoric the real danger is in how it is ripping apart the very fabric of our society.

Families turn on each other and refuse to communicate.

Friends quit calling and seeing each other.

And social media has given a megaphone to anyone who wants to use it regardless of tone and tenor of whatever they want to say. Folks somehow feel it is ok to be both profane and hateful when on a social media platform and that is now spilling over into direct conversations. People say things to each other and about each other on social media that they were have never said face to face just a few years ago but those face to face confrontations are becoming more and more frequent thanks to social media and the divisive political rhetoric that we are bombarded with everyday.

It is becoming harder and harder to have a civil discussion where politics is concerned. And it affects everyone, of every age, of every race, of every religion.

Earlier this week I overheard a conversation that my wife was having with my 87 year old mother who was telling her about a call she had with what had been one of her best friends, who just happens to be very conservative in her politics. This was someone who my folks had gone to football games with, had sat up at the hospital with, had been to children and grandchildren activities with. Mom had just called to ask how she was after a couple of health issues but her friend took it upon herself to launch into me about my Kavanaugh vote and about President Trump. Well my mom, even at 87 is no shrinking violet and you damn sure don't attack her son for anything so she fought back. The conversation got really ugly and now I don't know if their friendship, which had been so solid and so dependable, will survive. And I have to say that makes me very sad.

To get where we need to be, we need to learn to recognize certain things.

First, we have more in common than all the differences that divide us. I truly believe that most American families, no matter their political persuasion, wake up worried about the same things. Can we pay our bills? Is my healthcare intact? Are we saving enough? Will the kids be alright?

These worries create a common ground. If you are worried about the same things, then there must be certain solutions we can agree on to fix those things. We will not agree on everything, but it may be more than you think. Americans are proficient in the art of compromise. For 250 years we have weathered many storms and found ways to work together.

Think about the healing needed after the Civil War. Think about Abraham Lincoln when he said, "we are not enemies, but friends." Think, for a moment, about events

in my lifetime: the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the Civil Rights Movement. In some ways, these events ripped us apart, but it was in the aftermath of such calamity that we found our strength and came together.

We really need to start working on that now.

It was Robert F. Kennedy who once said – “We might wish we lived in more tranquil times, but we don’t. But if our times are difficult and perplexing, so to are they challenging and filled with opportunity.”

Our challenge – each of us – is to do our part, to have those dialogues, to engage in civil discussion and respect and demand that our public officials and candidates do the same

No one is better to meet that challenge than members of NAFUSA, where both politics and bipartisanship is in our DNA. Use the opportunity to lead by example – to sometimes do as Hal did, and as my friend Lamar Alexander and the cadre of Tennessee Democrats did that

January afternoon in 1979 – to put state and country above political party. As you can see outside this hotel, in this incredible city of Nashville, the results can be downright amazing.

Thank you so very much.