

THE HONORABLE LES AuCOIN

Speech to the Washington County Democratic Party's

Maurine Neuberger Dinner

April 13, 1985

A Call to Action

"We must define a new over-arching vision of the public good and compete for the imagination of the voters. We must do it on the economy...on national security...on all the gut issues. And let me tell you how it's got to be done: We've got to do it by standing for these values again: growth, strength, and personal merit -- values that are larger than our sub-groups, caucuses, and constituent interests."

(See Page 4)

The Honorable Les AuCoin
Speech to the 1985 Maurine Neuberger Dinner
April 13, 1985

Let me read you some important words. Listen to them carefully:
"We cannot begin to understand and attack our contemporary problems if we are bound by traditional labels and the slogans of an earlier era ... All too often, our political debates, our public discourse on current matters, bear little or no relation to the actual problems the United States faces."

It was Jack Kennedy who spoke those words to our party in the 1960s and our party took them to heart. We Democrats have been at our best when we've faced the unknowns of the future with a zest for ideas, innovation, positive change -- but always guided by a fixed set of values.

It is what made us the party of Kennedy; of Wayne Morse; and of Dick and Maurine Neuberger -- individuals driven by restless minds, by moral indignation, and by their commitment to forge a society that lived up to the promise of the American Dream.

The willingness to stake out the lonely territory beyond the conventional wisdom is the hallmark of Dick Neuberger's life. In a time of complacency, Dick challenged us to constantly ask more of ourselves, to open our minds to new ideas and to stand proudly on principle.

In the cold war days, of early 1960, Dick advanced the radical notion that "We need persons with the ability to set up a rural school in the jungle not just people who can operate a machine gun."

What Dick Neuberger saw was that America's claim to world leadership could not be based merely on military or even economic superiority. Instead, he asked, "Why not utilize the enthusiasm and talents of American youth to sell democracy abroad?"

He had a young seatmate on the Senate floor and they loved to talk ideas. Jack Kennedy was that seatmate and after Dick's death, the Neuberger idea of a "Youth Training Corps" came to fruition in the Peace Corps of the New Frontier - and that idea became a force for understanding and a challenge to a generation.

Dick Neuberger - and Maureen, who worked so closely with him - challenged each of us with their spacious vision of America. A vision as compelling now as a generation ago. A vision that still calls our party to action.

As we gather here tonight, our party faces a new set of challenges. The handwringers say we are witnessing the demise of the Democratic Party. We can survive them. But what we probably can't survive are Democratic leaders who believe them or who fail to honestly face up to the factors that give rise to them.

Tonight I want to discuss our party. I want to assess its real opportunities and its real dangers, exaggerating neither.

I want us to honestly take stock of the Reagan phenomenon.

But, most of all, I want us to take stock of how well we've been expressing our values. For if we do these things honestly enough, soon enough, and well enough, we'll not only find the road back -- we'll guide America to a new era of security and prosperity.

Can we start by admitting it was more than TV presence that beat our national ticket in November?

In the last four years, I've gone toe-to-toe with Ronald Reagan time and again. Two years ago, I came within 12 votes of overriding his veto of my housing production bill.

And two weeks ago, my allies and I came within six votes of stopping him on the MX missile. I think I have a good working understanding of how this man manages to keep pulling rabbits out of his hat, just when you think he's on the ropes. Its not just TV. Its that he is speaking to, and reaching, something basic in America and we're not. And let me explain.

Given these struggles and others I've just mentioned, given Ronald Reagan's substitution of a weapons policy for a foreign policy, given his use of deficits to reduce domestic resources, given his use of arms control talks to promote an arms race -- what is it that can we say tonight about Ronald Reagan?

Well, Ronald Reagan may be a great communicator, but looking at America's long-range good, one thing's for sure: He's certainly no day at the beach. But in the last few years, Democrats haven't exactly been a weekend in the country, either.

In 1976, Democrats led the Republicans by almost 25 points as the party that would do a better job of keeping the country prosperous. By 1980, the two parties were even. By 1984, the Republicans held a 25-point advantage.

And this is the core issue by which people judge their own well-being. That's also why last year Republicans became the party of hope and change, pre-empting the spirit that was the heart and soul of the Democratic Party for most of the Twentieth Century.

We cannot hand these issues to the Republicans and expect to remain the majority party. Nor can we win by sitting still, staying out of the line of fire, and simply hoping for a new recession to blame on the Republicans.

We must, instead, define our own over-arching vision of the public good and compete for the imagination of the voters. We must do it on the economy...on national security...on all the gut issues. And let me tell you how it's got to be done: We've got to do it by standing for growth, strength, and personal merit -- values that are larger than our sub-groups, caucuses, and constituent interests. These had been our party's values throughout the 40s, 50s, and 60s. But, by 1984, we had stopped evoking them, and the Republicans -- of all people -- stole them.

To the public, the national Democratic party -- the party of innovation -- became the party of the status quo. The programs inspired by our values took the place of our values. This party was so intent on inventing new ways to redistribute the wealth that it stopped thinking of ways to create new wealth, failing to remember that real opportunity can be created only in an expanding economy. And by trying to be everything to everyone, we somehow became less than the sum of our parts.

We must never, ever -- as some revisionist voices in the party are now suggesting -- turn away from our traditional commitment to workers, women, the poor, and minorities. But we must never, ever become so captive of our own constituences that we fail to remember that politics is a process of addition, not subtraction, and so we also must reach out to the small businessman, the progressive professional, and the entrepreneur. And these things can be done if we once again espouse those unifying values of growth, strength and personal merit.

If we make this the contest with the Republicans I am confident of the result.

After all, who has the best ideas for America's future growth? The Republicans who have given us a tax code that permits 9,000 corporations to escape taxation? Or the young new Democrats who advocate a modified flat tax that lets investments go to the most promising American enterprises?

Who has the best ideas for America's security? The Republicans who are buying a new round of first-strike nuclear weapons which the Soviets will surely duplicate? Or Democrats who are pushing for a comprehensive missile test ban that will stop the Soviet threat and do it for free? We Democrats believe in only using the military as a last resort, rather than a first resort, to ensure our place in a safer world -- so that then it will be the result of a coherent policy, which is more than you can say about the Republicans, who cost us 300 marines in Lebanon.

And let me ask: who has the best ideas for rewarding individual merit? The Republicans who would keep the children of blue-collar and middle-income families from attending our best colleges, no matter how bright they are? Or the Democrats who would save college student aid and encourage firms to loan scientists, mathematicians, and advanced technology to our schools?

I think the answers are obvious: It's not the Republicans. And certainly not in the area of the economy, for today they are creating a bubble of false security -- and pushing the price off on our children to pay tomorrow.

My friends, by adapting new solutions to the problems of each new generation, our party overcame the Depression, won the peace, conquered outer space, and gave us the highest standard of living on earth.

The Democratic Party also gave us the civil rights laws that were the nation's first frontal assault on bigotry. And that has special meaning for a woman who is with us tonight, Louise Botteri, who was a young Italian Catholic girl growing up in Beaverton in the 1920s, a time when the Ku Klux Klan was strong enough to put on the ballot and pass an Oregon initiative that made it a crime for families to send their children to parochial schools.

After some six decades, Louise can still see the tears on the face of the priest who came into her classroom at St. Cecilia's to tell her and her schoolmates that the KKK's initiative had passed, closing their school.

For Louise Botteri, and millions of other Americans, the Democratic Party's commitment to human dignity and fundamental decency is no abstraction. Ask Louise why, after all these years, she's a Democrat.

The Democratic Party is also the party of personal freedom. And that has special meaning for Rod and Dorothy McKay, who are here tonight and who know all too well how precious and fragile liberty can be.

In the 1950's Rod's brother was a member of the Worker's Alliance union in Oregon, on his way to building a new life for himself and gaining American citizenship. But Joe McCarthy's witch hunt smeared his patriotism and put an end to his hopes. So for the "crime" of seeking a better life, Rod's brother was deported.

For Rod and Dorothy McKay, and millions of other Americans, the Democratic Party's commitment to individual liberties is a commitment worth keeping through the decades. Ask the McKays why, after all these years, they're Democrats.

Our party has done all this and more.

It also gave us the Homestead Act, through which the government gave my grandfather not a guarantee but a chance to work the land near Madras, Oregon, and raise a family in simple dignity.

It gave my mother a Social Security survivor's check, the only help she had in raising two sons on her own and living to see this son elected to Congress.

And another of our party's inventions, the G.I. Bill, allowed me to work my way through college. It took eight years and part-time jobs plus army savings, but, by God, I made it. You ask me if I know why I'm a Democrat? You bet I know why I'm a Democrat.

And when Trina O'Brien of Pointer Junior High School, who earlier this evening entertained us on the flute, when Trina takes her place in the world, I want her and her generation to be proud, as Democrats, of the way you and I responded to the challenges we faced, helping make theirs a better life.

And it is that belief -- in the constructive, prudent use of government of government to improve all of our lives -- that's at the heart of our debate with the Republican Party of Ronald Reagan, a party that sees government not as an instrument for change but as an mankind's inherent problem.

Sure, our party has made mistakes. But they've been mistakes of the head not of the heart. And they've been mistakes that come from taking risks and charting new courses not, as that party's have been, the mistakes of turning away from human needs and human potential, or of turning away from America's future. The Democratic Party can recapture the confidence of the American people in the Eighties, but only by challenging the imagination of America with ideas that prepare this country for its economic future.

We must be the party that negotiates fair trade agreements, or it won't be done. We've got to be the party that encourages investment in high growth industries, or it won't get done. And we have to be the party that promotes research and development that give rise to new technologies, new industries and new jobs, or it won't occur.

But the fact of the matter is that economic growth is going to be stalled until we take meaningful action to reduce the Reagan deficits. And, if we are serious about our commitment to the fundamental value of economic growth, real deficit reduction must be at the top of the Democratic agenda.

Given this reality, shouldn't our party be the party that has the discipline to pass an across the board budget freeze?

For decades, we've talked about correcting the inequities of a tax code that provides shelters and loopholes for the wealthiest people in our society but that socks middle and lower income families; and yet -- despite the sound starting point for tax simplification advanced by Dick Gephardt and Bill Bradley -- we're on the verge of letting Jack Kemp and Donald Regan steal the jump on this issue.

After all our talk, shouldn't we, at long last, be the party that makes a simpler, more equitable tax code a reality?

How about the lost art of diplomacy. Stop for a moment -- what was the last major diplomatic triumph this country has had? Wasn't it, as Mario Cuomo said at the convention last summer -- Jimmy Carter's miraculous Camp David agreement? Do we really feel good about the way we entered and left Lebanon? About our war-making role in Nicaragua? About our "constructive engagement" in South Africa?

Shouldn't we be the party that says "no" to military intervention in Central America, and instead of using our CIA, finally, at long last, uses our diplomacy and our aid to create an atmosphere for real stability for our southern neighbors.

And, as the party of Dick Neuberger who saw a way to give young people a challenging opportunity to serve their country in a stimulating fashion, shouldn't we challenge a new generation with a program of universal national service?

These ideas are just a start on creating a new Democratic agenda. Our party must, of course, do more. But this new agenda will enable our party to make a strong case to the nation that our party is undaunted by the sweeping changes of the last decade.

In no other state have these changes been more apparent than in Oregon. We've been hurt badly but we're starting to diversify, and in doing so we've rediscovered the creative strength we can unlock when the private and public sectors work together, like we have at the Oregon Graduate Center, where research is underway to increase timber harvest utilization without hurting environmental values and at Oregon State, where they're developing new ways to harvest the sea and regenerate our fishing industry.

This is the type of partnership that shows once again that our most important investment for the future is what helps people. If we adhere to that truth, and to our rich legacy, together we can lead this state and this nation into the future with a party that is reinvigorated from the grassroots on up.

But while we innovate, while we explore, we're also going to need a lot of good old-fashioned political elbow grease.

The Republicans already have a specific plan for every year up to 1990. The legislature we elect that year will draw the Congressional district lines for the next decade. The Republicans plan to control the counties, then the state, and let me tell you why. If current census trends continue throughout the Eighties, Oregon will get a sixth U.S. House seat by 1992.

And if we let the Republican Party control redistricting in 1991, then we can write off any chance of winning that new House seat and of holding some we already have. How many times will it take 'til we know that electing even one Smith is one Smith too many.

Let me tell you that this is one Democrat who knows how formidable the national Republican political machine is and who knows that, given the Republican advantage in fundraising and political technology, it's tough enough to beat them as it is. The last thing we need to do is let them draw the lines.

Our party has to be ready for the critical elections of '86, '88, and 1990. Throughout America, in state and local government as well as on Capitol Hill, young new Democrats are advancing new ideas and proving -- day in and day out -- that our party is pragmatic and progressive, competent and compassionate.

But the future of our party does not depend solely on those of us in public office; it lies with each of you and on the strength of each succeeding generation. Not so many years ago, it was this party's Demo Forum that produced Neil Goldschmidt, Vera Katz, Earl Blumenhauer and Les AuCoin. And now it is our responsibility to provide similar opportunities for those who follow, so they too can solidify and deepen their own commitments to the timeless values and future promise of this party: economic growth, strength, and personal merit.

Those values and that promise are at the heart of the vision stated so clearly by Jack Kennedy when he said:

"I believe . . . in the promise of producing a society so abundant and creative and so free and responsible that it can not only fulfill the aspirations of its citizens, but serve equally as well as a beacon for all mankind."

My friends, our truest challenge as a party and as individuals is to live up to that vision. If we do so, our party's future will be as rich with promise as its past has been in accomplishment.