

The Historical Speakership

Dr. BILLINGTON. It is my pleasure as Librarian of Congress to be here with you at this commemoration of Speaker Cannon and this happy gathering of so many distinguished and historymaking Speakers of the House. I always say that the Congress of the United States has been the greatest single patron of a library in the history of the world, gathering in books and materials as no other legislature, or no other government for that matter, has done so effectively. The collections come to us through copyright deposit of the creative output of the whole private sector of America, and also include much of the world's knowledge: two-thirds of our books are in languages other than English.

I have to say that all of the Speakers that have been discussed so far, as well as the Speaker yet to come, have themselves played interesting and important roles sustaining the idea that every democracy—and especially one in a big, complex country like this—has to be based on knowledge and on ever more people having ever more access to ever more information. That was certainly true of everyone on the last panel that spoke, and I want to just take a moment to particularly single out Vic Fazio who, in his thankless work as chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch, played a particularly important role in the restoration of the Jefferson Building, without which that beautiful, extraordinary structure would not be seen in the same beauty and majesty that it is today. He also offered the first congressional support for the Library's digital outreach to the Nation, which has now reached the point that we had 3 billion electronic transactions last year. This began in a small way with an important congressional appropriation, even though it has been largely funded by private money.

And I should also mention in that regard the special role that Speaker Newt Gingrich played with his desire to have congressional information placed online: the whole THOMAS system owes a great deal to his initiative and support. I am here in active, humble gratitude for past and future users of the Library of Congress and also to give thanks to the private supporters of this important centennial; the foundations that have also made it possible; and, of course, to the Congressional Research Service under Dan Mulhollan's able leadership for putting all of this together.

My job today is to introduce a real expert on this whole subject, Professor Robert Remini. He is associated with the Library to fulfill a congress-

sional mandate, a mandate from the House in particular, to produce a history of the House of Representatives—one that would have scholarly substance and at the same time be accessible to a broad audience. We have been very fortunate to have enlisted the services of one of the most distinguished of American historians, Robert Remini. He is at present a distinguished senior scholar at the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress. As some of you may know, last week we gave out the first international prize in humanities and social sciences at the Nobel level through a Kluge endowment, and that has enabled us to bring some very distinguished scholars to the Library of Congress. The former President of Brazil, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, just joined us last week. One of the most distinguished of all of these scholars is Bob Remini, and certainly one of the most important of the projects being done there is his history of the House of Representatives.

Despite the bad light and my failing eyes, I will read you some of his many distinctions. He is compiling a congressionally authorized one-volume narrative history of the House of Representatives, which he has called—I'm quoting now—"an extraordinary institution with its vivid and sometimes outrageous personalities." You can see the little bit of adjectival twinkle already even in this brief characterization. He hopes his book will capture—I'm quoting again—"all the excitement and drama that took place during the past 200 years so that the record of {the House's} triumphs, achievements, mistakes and failures can be better known and appreciated by the American people."

Professor Remini was educated at Fordham University, and graduated in 1947 from Columbia University, where he finished his Ph.D. in 1951. He has been a teacher of American history for more than 50 years, the author of a three-volume biography of Andrew Jackson, and many other studies of Jackson's Presidency and of the Jacksonian era. He has also written biographies of Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, and Joseph Smith. We know him as an earlier collaborator with the Library of Congress because he crafted the historical overview to a volume called *Gathering History: the Marion S. Carson Collection of Americana* in 1999. This is one of the Library's most important private collections of American history. It deals particularly with families in Pennsylvania from the early 1800s, and includes the first picture of a human face probably ever taken anywhere by a photograph, which was taken, it turned out, in Philadelphia, and which turned up in this collection. Professor Remini brought it to life in this wonderful volume, as he has brought to life so much of the American past and particularly our history and the functions of our government.

Thus, we have with us a historian who has looked at America through a variety of perspectives from the top down, from the bottom up, through the lives of great men, and through the artifacts of American cultural life. Now he is writing about the legislative institution that for over 200 years

has grown to be the most consequential one in the free world. It is really hard to imagine a person better qualified by his long experience, and, I might add, by his energetic prowling of the halls of the House that he has been doing for the better part of a year. He has won many friends here. It is hard to imagine anyone better qualified by learning, experience, and temperament to undertake this task. Necessarily, his perspective, of course, has given him some insight into the role of Speakers over the years, and it is about them and their activities that he will speak to us this afternoon. So, it is my pleasure to present to you as close as we will ever get to a full chronicler of some of the early history of the House and someone who, with his own energy, vitality, and endless questioning for more than a year now, has this noble task of recording the story of the most important and the most representative legislature in the world. I give you Professor Robert Remini.

Professor REMINI. Thank you very much, Dr. Billington, for that gracious introduction. I have a lot of people to thank. First of all, the Congressional Research Service who invited me here to come and talk about what I'm doing now in writing the history of the House of Representatives. I want to begin by singling out Congressman John Larson, whose idea it was to have a history written of this most important institution. Such a work has never been really done well, but there are indeed many books written about the House. I also want to thank Dr. Billington for inviting me to become a Kluge Scholar, and for providing me with an office in the Library of Congress, where I could write the history.

I wasn't sure I could do justice to this history. I've always done biographies. I've never written an institutional history. But all of the biographies, or most of them, are about people who have served in the House, like Jackson, like Martin Van Buren, like Henry Clay, like Daniel Webster, like John Quincy Adams. And I thought writing such a history would be fun. I could come into Congress and meet all the Congressmen and get involved in congressional politics, observing the problems and challenges that the Members have to contend with.

One of the things that is disheartening to me is that we do not honor the men and women who have shaped this most important institution. And especially the men who were the Speakers. This institution has evolved, and it is continuing to evolve, just as the Office of the Speaker has evolved from what Speaker Foley said was the British system. Which is what the Founders, I think, intended.

When I was researching Henry Clay, a student of mine came to me and said, "What are you working on now?" And I said, "I'm doing a biography of Henry Clay. Do you know who Henry Clay was?" He said, "Sure." I said, "That's wonderful. Who was he?" He replied, "He was the father of Cassius Clay." And he didn't mean the abolitionist Cassius Clay, either.

Who today knows who Henry Clay was, for example? The Senate has selected five, I think it is, of their greatest Senators and recognized them. There is a room where their portraits are displayed. The presiding officers have their busts done after they step down. Two months ago, they had a commemorative ceremony for former Vice President Quayle. If you go into the Chamber of the House of Representatives, what do you see? George Washington—well, that's OK. I mean after all, he is the father of the country—you wouldn't have a republic without him. But what's his relationship to the House of Representatives? He gave it the back of his hand the first time they asked him for the appropriate documents related to the Jay Treaty so that they could legislate the moneys needed to implement the treaty. He wouldn't give the documents to them, replying instead, "If you want to impeach me, then you can ask for these documents." But there he stands. In truth, he is the father of the country and deserving of great honor.

On the other side of the rostrum is the Marquis de LaFayette. Now you tell me in God's name what did LaFayette have to do with the House of Representatives? He was the first foreigner to speak to the House. Big deal. You see what I mean? Rather, we should honor the people who have done important things in the House such as Henry Clay. The Founders, I think, intended that the legislature would be central to the whole governmental operation. Notice the Constitution talks a great deal about the Congress and all of its responsibilities and powers while those not listed are reserved to the States and the people. But then you look at the other two branches, which are supposed to be separate and equal, and there is relatively little discussion. The judiciary—there will be a supreme court and such inferior courts as Congress shall, from time to time, establish. The executive was not much better. He may receive reports from the departments. What departments? It does not say. It was up to the Congress, then, to flesh out these other two co-equal branches.

It was also expected that the men who attended the First Congress would complete the process of establishing the government, and indeed they did. First, they chose a Speaker. As the present Speaker, Dennis Hastert, said, "That's the first office that is mentioned." And in creating the office they were thinking, I believe, of someone akin to the British Speaker, who was nothing more than a traffic cop, recognizing one person over another, calling for votes, being non-partisan.

The Office of the Speaker changed almost immediately with the formation of political parties because then you had two distinct views about how the government should operate. And I must say, as an aside, that what has happened here today having this conference is something that should be done much more often. There ought to be a greater awareness and sense of our past. We honor the living Speakers here present, but how about those who came before? This is, in part, my job and I think the fact that the

Members of the House have asked for a history of their institution shows some indication that they are anxious to have the collective memory of the House preserved and respected.

Theodore Sedgwick was the first Speaker who really used his office in a partisan way. But none of those early leaders were really creative in revolutionizing the office. Not until you get Henry Clay. He was elected on the first vote of the first day of his own tenure in the House. But the Members knew who he was, and his reputation. They wanted somebody who could really lead this country in the direction that they felt they needed to go. And here was a man who saw his opportunity to take an office which was practically insignificant and so reshape it to be the most powerful in the country politically after the Office of the President. Because that is what, in effect, he did. And the Members who elected him Speaker knew he would be dealing with very difficult men, in particular John Randolph of Roanoke. Randolph had been a powerful chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and Jefferson's floor manager in the House until he broke with him. He brought his dogs into the House. How about that? And anybody who tried to interfere, he would strike them with his riding whip. It was chaotic.

Let me give you an example of some of the chaos that we've had in the House. I'm sort of jumping out of the period for the moment, but I'll be right back. I'm quoting from the *Cincinnati Enquire* of June 20, 1884. "If every man in the House should fall dead in his seat, it would be a God's blessing to the country. And in less than two months, we would have a new set of men who would be just as wise and good as their predecessors. Today the Congress is a conclave of hirelings, wind bags, mediocrities and dawdlers. Members of the House are sprawled in their chairs and put their feet on the desks. They abuse door keepers, munch peanuts, apples, tooth-picks, suck unlit cigars. {Uncle Joe Cannon was a great one for sucking unlit cigars.} Spit tobacco on the rugs and carpets and clean their fingernails with pocket knives. No matter how persistently the Speaker pounded the gavel, the representatives kept right on talking to one another. With bar rooms in the cloak rooms and below stairs, whiskey flowed as freely as oratory. Saturdays were special in the House—then representatives could hold forth with bunkum speeches that no one heeded on any subject they pleased and fill 70 pages of the *Congressional Record*."

It was when you had strong leadership and Speakers who embrace a vision of where they think the country needs to go and have the will, the brains, the strength to direct them in that direction, toward that goal, that is when the House really asserts its authority. Clay had his American system, and for 10 years it was the House of Representatives, under his direction, that determined domestic policy in this country, which is amazing. But he had problems in handling particular Members. A man like John Randolph of Roanoke, for example. They finally fought a duel, as you probably know.

Once, they were walking down the street toward one another, each coming closer and closer, neither willing to give way. Let the other man step aside for me. And when they got practically eyeball to eyeball, Randolph stopped in his tracks and he looked at Clay and said, "I never side-step skunks." When Henry Clay heard that he said, "I always do." And he jumped out of the way!

Speakers have to be smart to be great, I find. Sam Rayburn said it best, "You need two things to be Speaker: brains and backbone." I have found that many of the great Speakers have very sharp minds and very sharp tongues. You heard what Speaker Foley said about Speaker Reed—I've got a lot of examples of Reed's quick mind and tongue. For example, he said to one Representative at the time, "You are too big a fool to lead and you haven't got enough sense to follow." In other words you're useless.

Henry Clay, of course, is a very unique figure. And the pity is that he has not had the attention and recognition that the House itself ought to accord him. And, it should be noted, when you don't have a Henry Clay, you get a Thaddeus Stevens, who isn't the Speaker, he's the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, but during Reconstruction, the most powerful man operating in the House. It's not until you get toward the end of the century with Samuel Randall and Thomas Reed that things change, men who then begin to realize that the only way you can really do the people's business and get men to attend to their duties is to use the rules and shape the rules for that purpose.

Many Speakers have described what they believe are the responsibilities of a Speaker. Notice the Speaker today talked about what he felt his duties were. Henry Clay, when he spoke of them, said that they "enjoin promptitude and impartiality in deciding various questions of order as they arise; firmness and dignity in his deportment toward the House; patience, good temper, and courtesy toward the individual Members, and the best arrangement and distribution of talent of the House, in its numerous subdivisions for the dispatch of the public business, and the fair exhibition of every subject presented for consideration. They especially require of him, in those moments of agitation from which no deliberative assembly is always exempted, to remain cool and unshaken amidst all the storms of debate, carefully guarding the preservation of the permanent laws and rules of the House from being sacrificed to temporary passions, prejudice or interests."

Each of the many men who have served in this office tries to describe his duties in a way that recognizes that there is this tension between a man who is really the majority leader of his party and also the presiding officer of the House who is expected to be impartial and even-handed in his relations with all the Members.

In the 19th century, they didn't have a majority or a minority leader as such. Presumably, the man who lost the election for Speaker from the

opposite party was the minority leader. But there was no whip. All of that comes at the end of the 19th century. And the role of Speaker is one in which he uses his office to forward a program or a vision that he has (or is stated in the party platform) that says that these are the things that we stand for, that we feel are important and helpful to the American people, and want to see legislated. Yet he has another role, which is to be the moderator of a number of men who can disagree violently and have in the past actually attacked each other with knives. We have lots of stories just before the Civil War, as you know, when they were physically attacking one another because of their differences over slavery. How do you balance those two aspects of the Speaker's position? Notice that the Speakers today always mention that they tried to be fair in their dealings with all the Members to be sure everybody and each side receives equal treatment. Reed, who was probably the first great Speaker after Clay, said this: "Whenever it is imposed upon Congress to accomplish a certain work, it is the duty of the Speaker who represents the House and who, in his official capacity is the embodiment of the House to carry out that rule of law or of the Constitution. It then becomes his duty to see that no factious opposition prevents the House from doing its duty. He must brush away all unlawful combinations to misuse the rules and he must hold the House strictly to its work." He also said, "The best system to have is one in which one party governs and the other party watches. And on general principle, I think it would be better for us to govern and the Democrats to watch."

He had trouble with the Democrats who would pull what was called a "disappearing quorum." They would call for a roll call, and they were present in the Chamber, and those who did not respond when their names were called were marked absent. Finally, Reed decided he would put an end to the disappearing quorum. So when the clerk called the roll and an individual didn't answer, the clerk was ready to mark him "absent." When the clerk got to the Member from Kentucky by the name of McCreary, who did not answer and would normally be marked absent, Reed directed the clerk to mark him present.

McCreary objected. "I deny your right, Mr. Speaker," he said, "to count me as present." Then Reed very calmly turned to him and said, "The Chair is making a statement of the fact that the gentleman from Kentucky is present. Does he deny it?" So from then on, if a Member was physically present in the House, he was counted present whether he said "present" or not. Sometimes when they would start the roll call, Members would duck under the chairs and under the tables so they wouldn't be seen.

Dilatory amendments were another technique to stall action on bills. Sometimes the session ended with 1,000 bills still waiting for action. When Reed was Speaker not only did they pass all the bills they were supposed to, they appropriated for the first time \$1 billion. And people said, "My

God—a billion dollars.” And Reed responded, “It’s a billion dollar country.” Joseph Cannon inherited this power. Now Cannon was a very gregarious, delightful, loveable tyrant. He used his power to maintain the status quo. They said if there had been a meeting or a caucus to decide whether creation would be brought up out of chaos, Cannon would have voted for chaos rather than creation. Let’s keep things the way they are. This was his motto. When he was the chairman of the Appropriations Committee, he supposedly said, “You think my business is to make appropriations, it is not. It is to prevent their being made.” That gives you some idea of his position. He also said to William McKinley, “That it was easier for a politician to get along with a reputation as a sinner than with a reputation as a saint. I have been accused of being a profane man, who played cards and showed other evil tendencies. While McKinley had a reputation for being thoroughly good and kind and gentle. Who never swore or took a drink or played a game of cards. He couldn’t talk plainly to people because of his gentleness. And he could not take a glass of beer without shocking the temperance people who had endorsed him. On the other hand, I could do much as I pleased without unduly shocking anybody. For little was expected of me. If I showed gentility, I simply caused surprise at my improvement. Or,” he said, “I could throw the responsibility on the newspapers for misrepresenting me.”

Cannon also said that he had looked into the matter of being Speaker. “I have control of the South half of the Capitol. I manage the police, run the restaurant, settle contests over committee rooms and in general, I’m a Poo Bah¹.” The Speaker who followed him was a totally different man. As you know, Cannon became Speaker in 1903, which is 100 years ago. So in that sense, we do honor him particularly today. He showed what it was like to have the kind of government in which nothing really happened. He opposed any kind of reform, whether it came from his own party or not. He disliked Teddy Roosevelt and his program, as well as the program of the opposition.

But he finally pushed it too far. The revolution continued and he was stripped of his powers in 1910. The House then had to remake itself and the Office of the Speaker. You have people coming forward like Nicholas Longworth, who aided the process. When he was elected Speaker he recognized this tension between presiding over the House and leading his party. He said, “I propose to administer with the most rigid impartiality, with an eye single to the maintenance, to the fullest degree, of the dignity and the honor of the House and the rights and the privileges of its members. I promise you that there will be no such thing as favoritism in the treatment by the chair of either parties or individuals. But on the other hand, the political side, to my mind, involves a question of party service. I believe

¹ A reference to a character from Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *The Mikado*.

it to be the duty of the speaker standing squarely on the platform of his party to assist in so far as he properly can the enactment of legislation in accordance with the declared principles and politics of his party. And by the same token, to resist the enactment of legislation in variance thereof. I believe in responsible party government.”

I think, following him, the most important Speaker—and I’m not going to comment at all on those who are still living. I’ll have my say when the book is finished later in a few years—was Sam Rayburn, who presided longer than any other Speaker. He is a fit candidate for recognition as a statesman and great leader. Lyndon Johnson seemed to think otherwise. He claimed, “Rayburn is a piss poor administrator. He doesn’t anticipate problems and he runs the House out of his back ass pocket.” Others had a better opinion in which one man said, “Mr. Sam is very convincing. There he stands, his left hand on your right shoulder holding your coat button. Looking at you out of honest eyes that reflect the sincerest emotions. He’s so damned sincere and dedicated to a cause, and he believes in his country and his job, and he knows it inside out so well that I would feel pretty dirty to turn him down and not trust him knowing that he would crawl to my assistance if I needed him.” I think that almost sounds like what they {participants in this conference} were saying earlier with respect to Tip O’Neill. Rayburn himself said—and I mentioned this before—that a man needs to have a backbone and brains in his head. He remembered Reed, and he said, “I remember him well—big head, big brains.” He added, “I always wanted responsibility, because I wanted power. The power that responsibility brings. I hate like hell to be licked. It always kills me.”

I think what the Speakers, the good ones, have learned is that the only way you get things done is not to treat the Members the way this man {pointing to a picture of Cannon} did, as just servants or slaves to do his bidding. Instead, treat those men as his equal, to whom he can go and make his pitch with all of the sincerity and the passion in him if he really cares about the bill that he’s trying to sponsor, and get these men to know that he feels sincerely that this is what the people want. This is what is good for the country. Because that, in the long run, is what their duty is to the country, to the Nation. They are legislating for all of us and we only hope to God they are doing it for all the right reasons and are led by men and women who care passionately about what they were doing.

My research has taught me something else that surprised me. And that was how intelligent, how gifted so many of the men and women who are Representatives today really are and how mistaken the American people are about the quality of the men and women who serve them. I think it is a great shame, and I hope to do something to change that opinion. Thank you very much.

Dr. BILLINGTON. We're a little over time, but I think we have time for perhaps one question if there is one from the floor.

Question. Is there in Longworth's speakership the beginnings of the process of trying to find the levers by which to recentralize power in the House that continues through Rayburn and subsequent Speakers. Can you speak to that?

Professor REMINI. You see, you have two different types, and I didn't really have time to develop them, in which you get men who are very, very intelligent, quick-witted, well-read. And those who come out of the prairie like Uncle Joe and are much more interested in the process rather than in the results. And they know, of course, that they have these levers of power and they have to use them. When it got to a point where power was misused, then you got a new man, Longworth, who was intelligent, educated, and felt passionately about the House and what he was doing. He was a man of great ability to handle different sides of a difficult question. He could handle difficult people. After all, he was married to Alice Roosevelt, who was a very difficult woman. He knew how to win compromises. You know, I'm going off on a tangent, but I hope I'm making the point.

When I wrote my book on Henry Clay, the title of it was *Henry Clay: The Great Compromiser*. And the editor said that, "No, today people think of compromisers as men and women who have no principles at all." But that is not what Henry Clay was. Henry Clay was looking for solutions to avoid conflict. To him compromise meant simply this: that each side gives something that the other side wants so that there is no loser and no winner. Because if you have a loser and a winner, you are going to perpetuate the quarrel. The only way to resolve these problems is to give a little, to get a little, and be willing to accept that. That's what happened with the Missouri Compromise. That's what happened with the Compromise of 1850. That's what happened with the Compromise Tariff of 1833. And that was the lesson that they understood.

This is what Longworth then tried to do. He wanted to compromise the differences between those like Cannon who wanted an authoritarian kind of leadership, and those who were determined to go the other way and have a freewheeling, very liberal kind of leadership. And it's that kind of individual who can find those means to make men who have to work together co-exist. That's why I think it's important today to have sessions like this, so that men and women of the two different parties can at least speak to one another. Did you notice how often it was mentioned today the civility that once existed seems to have been diminished? Oh, there's always incivility. When Thomas Hart Benton made some remarks that offended southerners, the argument became very heated. When one southerner reached into his pocket and pulled out a pistol, Benton tore open his shirt and said,

“Shoot, you damn assassin—shoot.” And you can imagine what happened in the Chamber.

Oh, there are some glorious scenes of pandemonium in the House and in the Senate as men tried to compromise their differences. And I’m not saying that you have to give up what is essential to your position. But you have to give in order to take. I don’t want to go into any specifics with Longworth as to his style. It would take more time than I have. But it is that kind of leadership, I think, that makes the difference between great Speakers and those who are failures. I’ve always thought that Speakers are like Presidents. We’ve had great ones and we’ve had failures, and a lot of in-betweens. We have the Lincolns and the Washingtons and the Roosevelts who were Speakers, and we also have the Buchanans and the Hardings. The difference, I think, is one in which men try to bring about a consensus for the sake of the American people and what they need and what has to be done.

Dr. BILLINGTON. Many of you will remember that for the 200th anniversary of the Congress, David McCullough spoke to a joint session and pointed out how little attention has been paid to the history of the Congress. He specifically mentioned a large list of Speakers for whom there is no reliable, serious biography. Certainly the historical study of the Congress as a whole is an important and neglected subject. I know that former Congressman John Brademas is trying to set up an institute for the study of Congress at New York University. There is great and growing interest in this subject. So I hope that this conference is not the last where we will get people together so that we hear both from the distinguished Members who have sat in these important positions and from the historical profession that gives us some perspective on it all. I think you will all want to join me in thanking Bob Remini for sharing with us his vitality and enthusiasm, that I think is infectious, and his knowledge. We all look forward to seeing those qualities in the history of the House when it comes out. Thank you again.