

Reflections on the Role of the Speaker in the Modern Day House of Representatives

Mr. MULHOLLAN. It is my great pleasure and honor to introduce Robert Michel, who served in the House of Representatives from 1956 to 1994 and was the Republican leader from 1981 until his voluntary departure from the House.

I think it is appropriate on this day after Veterans' Day to acknowledge Mr. Michel's service with the 39th Infantry Regiment as a combat infantryman in England, France, Belgium, and Germany from February 10, 1943 through January 26, 1946. He was wounded by machine gun fire, awarded two Bronze Star medals, the Purple Heart, and four battle stars.

In 1993, Mr. Foley said of Mr. Michel, "As prevailing political philosophies have changed over the years, Bob Michel remains steadfast in his commitment to consensus in the interest of the nation and the institution of the House of Representatives." It is the esteem that Mr. Michel holds for this institution of Congress for which we are all grateful. Thus, it is so fitting that he introduce our next Speaker, Dennis Hastert, who, on assuming the speakership of the House, was quoted as saying that he would try to emulate "the humility and grace of his one-time mentor, Bob Michel."

Mr. MICHEL. It was indeed a distinct honor and privilege to serve, and what a fulfilling experience it was. I've enjoyed so much this morning's session listening to the comments from all those who participated. My role here at the moment is to introduce the current Speaker and I relish that opportunity.

In times of crisis, the United States always seems to find exactly the right leader—maybe we're just plain lucky. Maybe it's the flexibility and the responsiveness of our political system. Or maybe it's the working out of divine providence, although it is probably not politically correct to say such a thing these days. The House of Representatives in 1999 found in Denny Hastert exactly the right person for the right job at the right time. In sports, we say about certain players that they lead by example. In 1999, the House, where words mean so much, was at a point where rhetoric could not do the job of healing and renewal. The House needed a leader who would lead by example. The House didn't need any more hype. It needed reason to hope. The House needed a leader who was capable of walking

the walk, not just talking the talk. The House needed someone with a solid foundation of character on which, over time, trust could be rebuilt.

The House found all of these things—yes, and much more—in Denny Hastert. Winston Churchill once said short words are the best words. And old words, when short, are the best of all. Churchill in this, as in so many other things, was right. When we think of Denny Hastert, we think of old words, simple words, strong words. Words like trust and strength, fairness, faith, decency, honesty, integrity and courage. History will say of Denny Hastert that in a moment of institutional crisis, the House of Representatives was led by his example, strengthened by his resolve, and renewed by his character. It is a distinct honor and high privilege for me to introduce a man who continues to lead by example, my dear friend, the Speaker of the House, Denny Hastert.

Speaker HASTERT. Bob, thank you for that very kind introduction. I want to thank you, Bob, for what you've meant to me. You were my first mentor here in Washington.

You, Bob, the man who should have and deserved to be Speaker, taught me the value of patience. You took me under your wing when I first came to Congress, and you showed me how Congress worked. You helped me with my committee assignments, and gave me my first leadership responsibility heading up the Republican leader's Health Care Task Force in response to First Lady Hillary Clinton's efforts on health care. You taught me that it is the workhorse who wins in the legislative game, not the show horse.

Your cheerful demeanor hid a will of steel, and your abundant common sense served your colleagues and your country well.

Bob, we know that you are going through a tough time with the loss of your beloved wife Corrine. We share your grief. Know that our thoughts and prayers are with you during this most difficult time.

I appreciate this opportunity to reflect on my current job. Clearly, the role of the Speaker has changed over the years. It has changed because of the times, because of those who have occupied the office, and because of the nature of the institution.

Joseph Cannon, the man from Danville, ruled from the Speaker's chair with iron power. Tip O'Neill ruled with Irish charm. Newt Gingrich brought star power to the office. Sam Rayburn ruled for a generation, while Joe Martin had only a fleeting chance to assert Republican control.

Each used their principles to guide them in times of great challenge. O'Neill was challenged by a popular President, Carl Albert was challenged by a constitutional crisis, Rayburn through war, and Tom Foley by a series of institutional crises.

I have my own set of principles that have worked for me.

I never thought I would be Speaker. I didn't run for the job. I didn't campaign for it. I didn't play the P.R. game. I just did my job as best

I could for my constituents and for my colleagues. In fact, if you had asked me to predict Newt Gingrich's successor, I wouldn't have been on my own list.

My first principle is one I learned from my friend Bob Michel. To be good at the job of Speaker, you must be willing to put in the time to be a good listener. By this, I mean you must listen to the Members of the House.

Before I became Speaker, I thought I knew the importance of paying attention to Members' needs. I had served in the whip organization when Bob Michel was leader and I served as chief deputy whip when Newt Gingrich became Speaker.

When you are a whip, you need to listen, because to get and win votes, you need to hear what the Members are saying. But when you are Speaker, the sheer volume of voices is increased, and the problems become more difficult to solve. I learned that the best way to find solutions was to get people around the table to talk it through.

When you have a small majority, like I have had for pretty much my entire tenure, you have to do a lot of listening. And when you talk, you have to keep your word.

That brings me to my second principle. When you are Speaker, people expect you to keep your word, and they will not quickly forgive you if you cannot deliver. I learned that keeping your word is the most important part of this job. You are better off not saying anything than making a promise that you cannot keep. And you have to keep both the big promises and the small promises.

My third principle is that a Speaker must respect the power of regular order. I am a regular order guy.

I think it is important to rely on the committees to do their hearings and markups. I don't like to create task forces to craft legislation. The committees are there for a reason, and we should use them. There are times when you need to establish working groups to coordinate the work of standing committees when big projects cross jurisdictional lines, but those working groups should "coordinate" not supplant the committee structure. I have also found that it is easy to find the problems in legislation through the committee process.

My fourth principle is that while a Speaker should strive to be fair, he also is judged by how he gets the job done.

The job of the Speaker is to rule fairly, but ultimately to carry out the will of the majority. Unlike some other parliamentary bodies, the Speaker in the U.S. House of Representatives is the leader of his party. He is not merely a disinterested arbiter of parliamentary rules. This creates a unique tension within the Office of the Speaker. It is not always easy to be fair when you have a vested interest in the outcome. But if the chair

is seen as being unfair, the likely result is a breakdown in parliamentary comity. We take the job of fairness very seriously.

We seek our best parliamentary experts to serve in the chair as Speakers pro tempore, people like Ray LaHood, Doc Hastings, Mac Thornberry, Mike Simpson and others. We also have professional Parliamentarians who avowedly are non-partisan. Charlie Johnson and his team play a critical role in advising me on jurisdictional referrals and parliamentary judgments from the chair. This is traditional stretching back beyond Louis Deschler, and it is a good tradition. We make certain that those serving in the chair do not serve on the committees of jurisdiction for the business on the floor.

And we try to be fair in the Rules Committee process. We guarantee the minority the right to recommit the bill with instructions, giving them one last chance to make their best arguments to amend the pending legislation.

But while we strive to be fair, we also strive to get the job done. We are not the Senate. The rules of the House, while they protect the rights of the minority, also insure that the will of the majority of the House will prevail.

So, on occasion, you will see us taking effective action to get the job done. Sometimes, we have a hard time convincing the majority of the House to vote like a majority of the House, so sometimes you will see votes stay open longer than usual. But the hallmark of an effective leadership is one that can deliver the votes. And we have been an effective leadership.

My fifth principle is to please the majority of your majority. On occasion, a particular issue might excite a majority made up mostly of the minority. Campaign finance is a particularly good example of this phenomenon. The job of Speaker is not to expedite legislation that runs counter to the wishes of the majority of his majority. As in campaign finance reform, our majority thought it was a bad bill that weakened the party structure and promoted abuse by special interests. As a side note, the emergence of 527 organizations in the next election will prove our point that special interests, and not political parties, will have more influence because of campaign finance reform. So we fought the efforts by advocates of campaign regulation to pass it. They did what they thought they had to do, getting enough signatures to sign a discharge petition. I made them go through that process twice in order to prove two points. First, I wanted my troops to know I opposed the bill. Second, I wanted to let them know that I had no choice but to schedule the legislation. I was not going to abandon my party's position under any circumstances.

On each piece of legislation, I actively seek to bring our party together. I do not feel comfortable scheduling any controversial legislation unless I know we have the votes on our side first.

My sixth principle is the Speaker's job is to focus on the House and nothing but the House. This is a big job. It is a time-consuming job. And it is an exhausting job. I said that when I became Speaker, I would focus only on running the House. And I found out that means more than just sitting in the Speaker's chair. It means doing those things necessary to keeping the majority, whether that means fundraising for incumbents or campaigning for challengers. You don't see me spending too much time on television shows, or giving big speeches. I have no interest in running for President or making the jump to the Senate. This is an important and big job. And it requires singular focus to get it done.

My final principle is my most important principle: Never forget who sent you to Congress in the first place—your constituents. I get home to Illinois every weekend. Of course, it is nice to see my wife, who inevitably gives me a list of chores to complete when I get there. But it is also important to see my friends and my constituents.

It is very easy to get lost in the muddle of Washington, DC. The world of amendments, campaign fundraisers, motions to recommit, and jurisdictional battles is foreign to Yorkville, Illinois. As a matter of fact, most of my constituents are none too impressed with the trappings of power. My constituents sent me to Washington not to argue, not to debate. They sent me here to get the job done. They are not content to play the blame game, they don't want to hear about how this bill died in the House or that bill died in the Senate. They want us to pass laws that make their lives better.

When I go home, I am not Mr. Speaker. To my wife and friends and voters, I am Denny. And I tell you, that healthy dose of humility does me a world of good every time I come back here to Washington. It helps me to connect to what the American people are really thinking about, and it helps me to understand what concerns my colleagues are facing.

At the end of the day, the Speaker of the House is really just the guy who stands up for the people of America. In our Constitution, the Speaker of the House is the first officer mentioned, because in our system of government, it is the people who rule. Since January 1999, I have had the great honor and privilege to be that guy. Thank you for inviting me here today and for this most fascinating symposium. I wish you the best of luck the rest of the day.