

“Kansas at 150: Our Past as Prologue to Our Future”
Remarks for the Washburn University Kansas Day Celebration
January 28, 2011

I am honored and grateful to have been invited by my friends here at Washburn and the Center for Kansas Studies to make remarks on this very special occasion celebrating our state’s 150th birthday. And knowing that previous speakers in the Center’s Kansas Day series include noted historians, former Governor Hayden, and Wes Jackson, my friend from Salina and the Land Institute, makes this a real privilege.

Twenty-five years ago, I had a similar opportunity as Governor to speak on the occasion of our state’s 125th anniversary. As you can imagine, the world has in some ways dramatically changed. In 1986, a postage stamp cost 22 cents and we were paying an outrageous 89 cents for a gallon of gasoline. IBM unveiled their first laptop and no one had to be asked to turn off their cell phone or blackberry at an event like this one. On the global front Ronald Reagan was President and Margaret Thatcher Prime Minister. We were dealing with-Iran Contra and fears from the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. While things have indeed changed, there are common challenges, concerns, as well as opportunities that transcend the years and tie our experiences of 1986 to today.

I’ve always believed we can learn much from our history and my ten years as the Archivist of the United States strongly reinforced this view. In serving as Archivist, I appreciated the words that President Franklin Roosevelt spoke when dedicating the Roosevelt Presidential Library to preserve the history of his presidency and the times. He said, and I quote: A nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. And it must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people to learn from the past that they can gain judgment in creating their own future.” Unquote.

The “Past is Prologue” message has been a guiding principle for historians and archivists, as well as for this former dairy farmer. This is why I’ve chosen as

my topic “Kansas at 150: Our Past as Prologue to our Future.” How we learn from our history can guide our steps in moving forward.

And what I take away from our history is this: Kansans have always faced challenges – that is why our state motto is “Ad Astra per Aspera” or “to the stars through difficulty”. And we Kansans have always stepped up, adapted, and made pragmatic changes to ensure a better future for our children, our state, and our nation.

In 1861, Kansas was literally born days after South Carolina seceded from the Union marking the start of the Civil War. Bleeding Kansas was the mantle for the state’s opposition to slavery, which ultimately led to Kansas joining the Union as a free state. Those dark days of our early history stir powerful images of figures such as John Brown and of course Abraham Lincoln, father of the Republican Party. Born in the midst of controversy, the young state found its way under the leadership of progressive and confident public servants and engaged citizens. These remarkable leaders and their contributions to Kansas have been examined in depth in Homer E. Socolofsky’s book on Kansas Governors and Robert Richmond’s “Kansas: A Land of Contrasts” and I have drawn on these two as principal sources for these remarks.

No governor could have been more challenged than our first governor, Charles Robinson. He entered office with a sizable debt, no money in the treasury, and the mandate to recruit troop quotas for federal service. He rose to the occasion providing the executive leadership to not only meet these demands, but also to lead the formation of the first state government, the judiciary, and a state agricultural society.

In the early 20th century, governors such as Edward Hoch, Walter Stubbs, Benjamin Paulen, and Clyde Reed moved the State forward during times of crisis and prosperity to make life better for the people.

These men emerged from the progressive wing of the Republican Party and inspired our citizens to support decisive action. Under their bold leadership, the people amended the constitution to:

- enact the first state income tax and
- to allow the state to receive federal funding. This enabled us to invest in our highways and major infrastructure.

With the support of the legislature,

- They established commission government for towns and cities.
- They reformed the civil service to reduce partisan influence.
- They provided for teacher training through the normal schools.
- They enacted child labor laws and established the juvenile court system, and
- They got state tax support for public education.

All of these bold steps positioned the state to move forward in the 20th century.

Of course no discussion of Kansas leaders would be complete without acknowledging the leadership of Alfred Landon or Frank Carlson. Landon, a product of the progressive wing of the Republican Party, responded to the needs of the Great Depression and adopted a conservative budget approach creating the “cash basis law”. His action moved Kansas into a more fiscally sound status far ahead of any other state at the time. He also advocated for federal programs, and created the research arm of the legislature, the Legislative Council, the first of its kind in the country. This dramatically increased the efficiency and professionalism of that branch of government. Although Landon was clearly a believer in a strong free enterprise system, he also believed in regulating the excesses of capitalism and supported organized labor.

Frank Carlson, serving from 1947-1950 provided the stewardship to wisely invest the sizable budget balance after WWII in new highway programs, support for education, and a transformation of the state's mental hospitals. He later remarked that he considered the reform of the treatment of mental illness his major contribution.

All of these innovative forward thinking initiatives that I have mentioned were championed by progressives who were all Republicans.

Now, during that period there was even an occasional Democrat elected, such as Walter Huxman. In the late 1930s, Huxman had the remarkable experience of requesting the legislature approve a one percent increase in sales tax, and having the Republican legislature give him two percent. Now I can't think of any recent experience to compare to that one.

Continuing progressive initiatives have not been absent from our later history as a state. During my adult lifetime, the state funded and implemented several new highway programs and passed and secured funding for a state water plan. The state passed reform that led to the Unified Court System, raised taxes to better fund our schools, and reorganized the executive branch, including four year terms for Governors. Most recently, the Kansas Legislature recognized the economic opportunities in the fields of bioscience and biotechnology, and enacted legislation creating the Kansas BioScience Authority. In 2004 Governor Kathleen Sebelius signed the law and today the Authority is a major force in the economic growth of Kansas. All were steps that will have a positive impact on Kansas for years to come.

Kansas has also historically relied on strong representation on the national stage. Our congressional delegations have long understood the importance of federal dollars to many key areas of our state. The efforts of our congressional leaders brought federal funding for all levels of our education system and for building our current systems of reservoirs, water, wastewater, and transportation. Without such support, realistically these significant infrastructures would likely not have been attainable for Kansas.

Kansans can also be proud of and grateful for our native son, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who led what has been called our “greatest generation” to victory in Europe during WWII, and led the country in our post-Korean war years. It was the implementation of his vision that gave Kansas and the entire nation the vast interstate highway system that opened up commerce and travel across the country.

Kansas events and Kansans have contributed to or been evident in most aspects of American life. I’d be remiss not to recognize the transforming case in 1954 of Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education. It stands as a milestone in our nation’s cause for civil rights.

And here are a couple Kansans who are either outstanding or simply “stand out.” How can we not mention Carrie Nation of Medicine Lodge. She led the national crusade for prohibition and succeeded in having Kansas enact prohibition a full 38 years before the federal government passed the 18th Amendment. As an aside, did you know Kansas has never ratified the 21st amendment repealing prohibition?

Then we had Doc Brinkley the “goat gland doctor” setting up shop in Milford. People from all over the world visited his clinic and listened to his radio station, one of the most powerful radio stations in the nation. Aside from the Finney Bond Scandal in the 30’s and how the votes for Governor in 1930 were counted in a race Doc Brinkley probably won, the state has been pretty free from corruption, a record we can be proud of and a claim many states cannot make.

Throughout history, the thing Kansans, and the men and women they elected, had in common was a belief in making changes that would help the state and the people. They were willing to take risks, even raise taxes when necessary. They also reflected the pioneer spirit of the people of Kansas, who when adversity presented itself, never considered a retreat but rolled up their sleeves and found new innovative ways to make things better. These leaders and the people they served consistently lived up to the state motto: “to the stars through difficulty.”

This brings me back to the beginning of this speech and 25 years ago. On the day before Kansas Day, everyone at the capitol was busily engaged in the plans for the 125th celebration. Astronauts and Kansans Joe Engle, Ron Evans, and Steve Hawley were arriving to join in the festivities. On television, we watched in horror at the explosion of the Challenger in space, which killed everyone on board, including Christa McAuliffe, the public school teacher who had joined the mission. It was a tragedy that many of us still remember. And it was certainly a solemn reminder of the many sacrifices Americans make every day for the advancement and welfare of this country. In my remarks on the Capitol steps the next day, I recognized the many benefits that we receive because individuals, like those on board the Challenger, were willing to take such risks. I said and I quote: Those pioneers of an earlier day took risks, and they knew the consequences of those risks. We earned the label of “bleeding Kansas” before the experiment concluded with our admission to the union as a free state on January 29, 1861. In the process, those who gave their lives and experienced personal tragedy for a cause molded this state’s character. And it is that same character which continues to move this state forward today.” Unquote. For me those words are still appropriate.

Now certainly, the last few years have brought great hardship to many Kansans, and the nation. Kansas has historically endured extremely difficult times, such as the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl Days, which clearly surpass our current challenges. Yet, it is easy to be pessimistic today as we gather. The financial recovery is slow and state resources are limited. Projections for a quick recovery are rare if not nonexistent. But I remain an optimist. Our glass is half full, not half empty. And while the problems today may be more severe than those of the 1980s, there are many similarities to the ones we faced during my tenure in office.

At that time, the recovery from a recession was proving to be a very slow process. There were still a loss of jobs; the federal government was cutting state support and individual benefits. The economic kingpins of the Kansas economy, agriculture, oil and aviation were in dire circumstances. All of this brought more

and more pressure on families, and state and local government. And then there was the national debt, over 2 trillion dollars, the highest in the history of the country. Sound familiar?

So what did we do? In 1986, our slogan for the 125th was “125 and coming alive”, and it was truly an accurate reflection of the mood of the state. The people and leaders were anxious to get the state moving and if that meant making bold changes on all levels of the government, they were up to the task. In the election of 1986 the people approved six amendments to the state Constitution, including a major change to our property tax structure, establishing the state lottery and pari-mutuel wagering, and allowing the county option for liquor by the drink. The gaming laws were key to the funding of the new economic development initiatives of the state, including the creation of the Department of Commerce. For the first time, the state had a comprehensive set of tools to partner with the private sector for economic growth. And here’s the kicker, this was all done by a Republican-controlled legislature and this lame duck Democrat Governor.

I know this was all before 24/7 Cable news, Internet blogs and entertaining talk show hosts masquerading as objective political reporters. I admit it was easier to engage in practical politics that worked for the people in our earlier history.

So why is there a difference today? Senator Bob Dole often called the eighteen months after an election before the start of the next campaign the “window of opportunity”. He felt this was the time the people’s business was conducted and the campaign was put on hold. Today that window doesn’t exist, not even one day, much less months of time. The politics of black and white, I’m right and you’re wrong, may work in a campaign, but accomplish nothing in addressing the complex challenges of governing. Vicious personal attacks and dogmatic adherence to ideology on either the right or left do not further any agenda but the agenda of defeat.

I remember my days in government as a time when politicians could start the day playing a game of racquetball, spend the day vigorously debating issues, and end the day together for dinner. On the economic front, there was not the vehement rich versus poor rhetoric that over simplifies our economic problems today. There was an understanding that a strong growing middle class was good for the wealthy, for our state, and for our nation - it was a win-win proposition. The feedback we received from the people was on broader topics, not just “wedge” issues, designed to divide us.

And there was also a real effort to inform, not just incite voters to support a particular candidate or proposition. The danger of continuing as we are was vividly brought home to us in Arizona on January 9 when Congresswoman Giffords was attacked while meeting with her constituents outside a local grocery store. Six people were killed, including a nine year old girl who had been elected to her student council and attended the gathering to see how democracy works. While no one knows why the gunman targeted Ms. Giffords, I have to believe that the poisonous environment in which much of politics is conducted today has led to the rising threat levels to public servants. Democracy cannot survive in an environment in which public officials and their constituents cannot safely engage in honest debate and interact together.

So, how do we get back on track?

After I left office I was a visiting professor at Wichita State. One of the books I used at the time was “In Search of Excellence” by Peters and Waterman. They proposed a simple one, two three system to succeed. One, establish your values, Two, adhere to those values, and Three be willing to change everything else to succeed. Too often we confuse tradition, the way we have done things in the past, with values. This confusion interferes with our ability to see and act on necessary changes to our detriment. We certainly don’t have to change everything but we must be willing to make the changes needed to progress and enable our children and grandchildren to compete in the new world reality. In

the past, Kansans were ready for that challenge. Will we be ready as we move into our next 150 years?

As always, the foundation for progress will be the attitude of the people and our leaders. With that as a given, I'd like to spend a few minutes talking about some areas that I believe on balance are core to the future of this great state.

First, long term vision-not short term fixes. Our citizens and our leaders must work together to maintain a long-term view of today's actions and not limit our advances to just short term fixes. We must be willing to make investments that allow us to progress and compete. The reality is that we no longer just compete with Missouri or Illinois - our main competition today is China, India and the rest of the global markets. Yes, these investments require use of tax dollars. And I know today cutting taxes is a popular and common political theme. But take a moment and look back at our history. Where would we be if our earlier leaders had chosen to take the easy and popular route and failed to invest in our infrastructure and education? I remember assisting in the successful recruitment of an out of state company's move to Kansas and one of the primary issues was finding a location that offered a strong special education program. Business does not always locate to the area with the lowest taxes. The reality is that most businesses just want to be taxed fairly, recognizing the need for supporting education and infrastructure.

Next, education. The importance of education cannot be over emphasized. That has always been the case, but today it is true more than ever. Our children, grandchildren and future generations do not and will not just compete within this state or nation. They are and will continue to be engaged in an intense worldwide competition. An excellent educational system is paramount to their success. In the past, the public education system has been improved by school consolidation and the school finance act that works to make sure the quality of a child's education is not determined by the wealth of the district where he or she resides. While additional funding decisions will no doubt be required, the excellence of

the Kansas education program, both K-12 and higher, will require more than just funding. Changes in structure and policies are at issue. We cannot let the traditions of the past “that’s the way we’ve always done it” stand in the way, when so much is at stake. We have to separate the tradition from the values and put everything on the table for discussion.

Just as important, if not more so, is the role of education in the viability of our democracy. Strong democracy relies on an educated electorate. A public education that empowers our children and grandchildren with the skills of critical thinking will strength our nation for generations to come.

Third, collaboration and partnerships. A cooperative relationship between all levels of government is essential. Blasting Washington has become a popular battle cry, but it simply does not make “good sense” any more than the state just dumping responsibilities arbitrarily back to local government. Kansas and for that matter many other states do not have a sufficient tax base, particularly with infrastructure, to financially do the job by themselves. In addition, the competition around the world is investing heavily in research and future jobs will go that way. The fact is that this country’s need for more basic research is at a crisis stage and depending on state-by-state initiatives or corporate funding will not meet the need. A partnership between Kansas and the federal government has and will continue to benefit the state economically and strengthen the nation on many fronts. A recent example of how this type of partnership can work is the soon to be built Kansas National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility in Manhattan.

However, partnering with Washington does not mean we must always agree with federal actions. We should always be advocating for our state’s interests and offering constructive alternatives, but to act as if we do not need or want a federal partnership is against our best interests.

Finally, the current political climate. One thing I know is that politicians react to the political environment they are in and will change if they sense a new wave or direction from the people. Our elected officials, on the other hand, must be willing to take the issues to the people, provide critical information and gain

their support. All of us – politicians and citizens alike - need to lower the volume and be willing to have a positive exchange of information and sincerely listen to the other side. As President Obama said recently at the Tucson Memorial, “how we treat each other is entirely up to us...and the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us.”

Without question, I acknowledge that we as a state are facing very complex challenges in an even more complex political environment. But I have faith in Kansas and its people.

On January 14th, 1986, I made my last state of the state address. That was 25 years ago and the words I spoke then to my fellow Kansans are still relevant today. I said then and I quote “I want the legacy of this generation of Kansans to be one of viewing progress as a never-ending process. I want us to be able to show that we recognized those things that must remain unchanged, and we preserved them and that we had the foresight to determine what needed to be altered and we did it. ” Let us take our place among other generations of Kansans who made decisions not just for today, but for tomorrow. And not just for ourselves but for all Kansans.

Thank you very much.