

Speech June 16, 2009 on Floor of Congress

First let me thank my colleagues in the Association and especially President Jay Rhodes and Vice President Dennis Hertel, and all the Officers and Directors for this unique honor. When I learned of it I was surprised, touched and proud to receive it. I was also humbled. I am very much aware that this award could have easily gone to anyone sitting here. If the Rules of the House were different I would acknowledge the presence of my wife Marcia, who is the leader of the Frey “clan.” (*Marcia will you please stand*). If I were able, I would also acknowledge my family here today, including my oldest daughter Julie, her husband David and my grandson Alex; my daughter Lynne; my son Louis III, and grandson Braxton; my daughter Lauren, her husband Frank, and their three children, Bailey, Alexis and Abigail; and my youngest daughter Chris. I am blessed to have such a large and loving family.

I had the opportunity to read many of the fine addresses made to this group by previous award recipients, such as President Gerald Ford, Senator Bob Dole (R-KS), Senator George Mitchell (D-ME), Congressman Tip O’Neill (D-MA), Congressman Tom Foley (D-WA), Congressman John Rhodes (R-AZ), Congressman Matt McHugh (D-NY), Congressman Jack Kemp (R-NY), Senator Dan Coats (R-IN) and Congressman Bob Michel (R-IL). I enjoyed each and every one of them, and especially enjoyed their descriptions of *why* they loved the Congress. Though I share their feelings toward this venerable institution, I cannot match their eloquence.

So, I thought it best that I talk about a dream that has been with me since I became involved in politics. It is the same dream that our founding fathers had as they created a new and bold experiment in governing; a dream that ordinary citizens would have the democratic dispositions, the motivations, and the civic skills to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Indeed, citizen engagement is the pillar upon which the American experiment rests. It seems to me that one of the core responsibilities and challenges that we – as the nation’s public leaders – must meet is that of ensuring that the next generation is equipped and motivated to exercise the rights and meet the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.

I have spent a good part of my life working with young people to help educate them to become active and responsible citizens. Looking back now, it is ironic that I was never interested in politics until I was in my mid-20’s. I made up for lost time by running for Congress when I was 32 years-old and winning against

great odds. What I learned from this race and my service in the House is that education, particularly civic education, is vital to the health of the polity. Jefferson eloquently expressed the relationship in a letter to Colonel Charles Yancey on January 6, 1816, when he said that: *“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”*

Looking at the national landscape some 200 years later, it seems that Jefferson’s admonition needs to be repeated widely and often, for many of our citizens simply do not understand what they have been given by our forefathers. Kenneth Tolo of the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas concluded several years ago, based on a 50 state study of the condition of civic education that the *“lack of civic engagement and civic literacy among American youth is widespread.”* He added: *“They know very little about even the basics of the American constitutional system, they have no historical perspective on the development of the nation and its relations with the rest of the world.”*

Statistics nationally (and in Florida) reflect a civically illiterate population. In a recent survey (2008) sponsored by The Florida Joint Center for Citizenship (founded by Former Senator Bob Graham (D-FL) and myself), and the National Conference on Citizenship, my home state of Florida, ranks 47th in average rate of volunteering, 49th in the percentage of citizens who attend public meetings, and 40th in the percentage of citizens who have worked with others to solve a community problem. Furthermore, 1 out of 3 freshmen in High School do not graduate (45th in the nation). I am sad to say that Florida scores 47th in overall civic health. The state is in critical condition.

Though Florida stands out, the national picture of our civic health is not good. The 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress in civics, conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, showed that:

- 73% of students in Grade 4 could not identify the Constitution from among 4 choices as the document that contains the basic rules used to run the United States Government;
- 75% of the students in Grade 4 could not identify the three parts of the Federal (national) government of the United States out of 4 possible choices;
- 94% percent of students in Grade 8 could not give two reasons why it can be useful for a Country to have a Constitution; and

- 91% of the students in Grade 12 were unable to explain two ways that Democratic society benefits from citizens actively participating in the political process.

The 2006 National Assessment in civics by the same agency offered no comfort that things are getting better. In that examination, only about one in four, or 24%, of fourth graders scored at or above a “proficient” level of civic knowledge and only 22% of eighth graders did so. Among High School seniors, who were eligible to vote in the 2008 election, almost three out of four did not score high enough to be called “proficient” in civics.

Even attending college does not appear to produce the enlightened citizens that our nation’s founders envisioned. A 2005 University of Connecticut study tested 14,000 Freshmen and Seniors at 50 colleges and universities in American History, Government, International Relations and market economy and found the average grade of Seniors was 53.2%. It is just not the young people. A statewide Florida Bar survey (2005) of adults found that:

- 41% percent could not correctly identify the 3 branches of American government;
- 54% could not correctly describe the meaning of “separation of powers”;
- 39% could not correctly describe the meaning of “checks and balance.”

A University of Central Florida survey of Central Florida citizens (2005) asked if they could name the state’s 2 U.S. Senators – Bill Nelson and Mel Martinez, who live within a mile of each other in Central Florida.

- 2 out of 3 Central Florida residents could not identify either of Florida’s U.S. Senators, and
- Among the group 18-25 years-old, 9 out of 10 could not identify either Senators Martinez or Nelson.

In the Florida 2006 September primary, which nominated a Governor and U.S. Senator, the effective winning vote was 5.1% of the adult population. (The turnout was 19.6%, only one-half of the people who can register do so, i.e.. 10% of the population; to win you need 5.1% of the adult population).

While there was a surge in interest in the 2008 election, a survey by the National Conference on Citizenship indicates that a majority of citizens report that they don't expect to take any action on major campaign issues after the election. I could go on with more upsetting statistics, but the point is clear: America's civic health is in need of serious attention.

But there is an answer. We are the answer. There is no better group to address this problem and provide the needed leadership than the Former Members of Congress. We have been privileged to be one of the 9,985 Members of the House or 1,261 Members of the Senate, or 649 of us who have served in both bodies. If your addition is slow, the total number who have, and are serving in Congress is 11,895. Just look at what an incredibly small percentage of our population ever had the opportunity that we had. If you just use today's population of about 300 million, the percentage serving in the Congress is .003965%. When you and I were sworn in we did not take an oath to the Democratic or Republican Party. We swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic. We are in a unique position where we are out of the highly-charged and intense partisanship that exists today in our beloved Congress but are battle-hardened and knowledgeable. We now have a different goal. That goal is not to be re-elected or to see our party be or stay in power. Our goal is to build and sustain educated citizens who make their own mind up based on facts and reasonable debate.

Each of you has won in the biggest league going and served in the most important legislative body in the world. You didn't get there by accident. The Country has been good to you. You and I know we will never pay the Country back for what we have received. We as a group have an opportunity to make the difference. Changes can be made, young people want to learn, listen, and be involved if they are asked to do so. In fact, it may be that the biggest barrier to engaging young people is simply not bothering to ask; by failing to provide a pathway to participation.

The schools are certainly not offering a pathway. Former Senator Graham (D-FL) and I have been trying to get Civics taught beginning in 3rd Grade in Florida. Only one semester of Civics is now taught in middle school. Unfortunately most of the teachers that are now required to teach Civics in Middle Schools have never had a College Civics courses. Civics is taught as a spectator sport rather than a participatory sport.

If you do provide a pathway, they will come. The Lou Frey Institute of Politics and Government at the University of Central Florida had its 13th semi-annual Symposium entitled: *The First 100 Days: Policies and Approaches for the New Administration* in April. We had over 500 young people attend during the daytime session and close to 600 to come back to hear Larry Wilmore of “The Daily Show” discuss his view of politics at the evening session. Several thousand more watched on the Internet. In Florida we have established at the University of Central Florida a High School Civics Academy, which has been going for the last 3 summers. It is opening eyes and changing lives. We are starting a College Civic Academy and a program that engages Local Officials as classroom teachers. All these efforts have one goal: to ask young people to participate in the system and to provide them a pathway for doing so.

The Former Members Association has already taken the first steps toward becoming a leader in civic education. The Congress to Campus program is a great success. We have also been successful in publishing a book in 2002 used in schools, entitled *Inside the House: Former Members Reveal How Congress Really Works*. The second book is at the printer’s now and is entitled: *Political Rules of the Road: Representatives, Senators and Presidents Share their Rules for Success in Congress, Politics and Life*. Charles Cook, editor of *The Cook Political Report* said that it is: “A great contribution to the understanding of Capital Hill and how it works and how to succeed.”

We, (the Former Members) in coordination with the Office of the House Historian and the Florida Joint Center for Citizenship are working right now on a program to educate young people throughout the Country through the Internet. We intend to have interesting and intelligent discussions on controversial issues without any personal attacks or screaming. Some of our programs will be date sensitive, such as energy, Afghanistan, global warming, and others will be evergreen, as the budget, the committee system, and the Electoral College. These 50-minute Internet lessons will be planned by teachers with 30 minutes devoted to a discussion of the issues and 20 minutes for teacher participation through a lesson plan. Eventually we will have the ability to have students in “real time” question the panelists. We will create “The University of Civics Literacy on the Web,” open to all and the price is right.

Thank you once again for giving me this honor. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to use this as a rallying call to teach our young people and all those who are interested in what this wonderful Country is about. What we need to do is to follow what the “Greatest Generation” did after WWII.

In eulogizing the late Gerald R. Ford, former NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw said:

“When that generation came home from war they were mature beyond their years and eager to make the world they had saved a better place. They re-enlisted as citizens and set out to serve their Country in new ways with political differences but always with the common goal of doing what’s best for the nation and all people.”

My colleagues...lets join together, re-enlist and be the leaders in restoring civic engagement and civic literacy to our citizens.