

# CONGRESSMAN FRANK WOLF

## Remarks at Commonwealth Prayer Breakfast Richmond, Virginia • January 11, 2012

On the day my wife, Carolyn, and I visited Independence Hall with one of our grandsons, our guide shared a story I will never forget—and it is a story that has particular relevance today.

She told us that in September of 1787, on the final day of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, eighty-one-year-old Benjamin Franklin is said to have wept when he signed the document.

James Madison, in a letter to Thomas Jefferson describing the scene at that historic gathering, wrote: “Whilst the last members were signing it, Dr. Franklin motions toward the president’s chair (George Washington), at the back of which a rising sun happened to be painted, [and] observed to a few members near him, that painters had found it difficult to distinguish in their art a rising from a setting sun.”

And then Franklin commented that during the course of the session he had “often looked at the painting behind the president without being able to tell whether it was a rising or setting sun.”

Franklin concluded: “Now at length I have the happiness to know that it is indeed a rising, not a setting sun.”

History proved Franklin right. He was witnessing the dawn of a new nation.

It seems that every politician since has relished giving speeches in which they say that the sun has barely begun to rise on our country and that America’s best days are ahead. As much as I long for that to be true, I can’t help but wonder if America’s best days are behind us. And I don’t think I’m alone.

There is a palpable national anxiety born of certain realities which contribute to this sense of foreboding—exploding debt and deficits, shuttered factories, an acrimonious tenor to our national discourse and a feeling that we’ve lost our moral and spiritual bearing as a country. Just look at the debate in Congress the last few months.

People fear—and I fear—that these stark domestic realities have broader implications—that America’s influence is waning globally and that our “shining city on the hill,” “the last best hope of man on earth,” is dimming. I personally have never been more concerned about our country’s future.

We are \$15 trillion in debt and that debt is rapidly growing. It is projected to hit 17 trillion at the end of this year. And our biggest bankers are countries like China and Saudi Arabia. Do we really want to be beholden to the likes of these governments?

America’s fiscal crisis has implications today but it also has a direct bearing on future generations of Americans. At his 1796 farewell address, our greatest president, George Washington, admonished his fellow countrymen, “We should avoid ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burden of which we ourselves ought to bear.”

An appropriate charge for today’s political leadership.

Niall Ferguson, the noted British historian writes: “While most historians see the collapse of empires in ‘cyclical and gradual terms’ the reality is that they tend to collapse rapidly.”

He goes on to say: “Great powers and empires are complex systems, made up of a very large number of interacting components that are asymmetrically organized, which means their construction

more resembles a termite hill than an Egyptian pyramid. Such systems can appear to operate quite stably for some time. But there comes a moment when complex systems ‘go critical.’ A very small trigger can set off a ‘phase transition’ from a benign equilibrium to a crisis. A single grain of sand causes a whole pile to collapse.”

Ferguson points to empires from ancient Rome to the Ming Dynasty to the Bourbon Monarchy to the former Soviet Union, all of which collapsed suddenly. Oftentimes their collapse was preceded by out of control debt and in many cases moral decay.

Consider the words of Norm Augustine, the former chairman and CEO of Lockheed Martin who since retiring has devoted a great deal of time trying to get business leaders and others to focus on the critical issue at hand. He said: “In the technology-driven economy in which we live, Americans have come to accept leadership as the natural and enduring state of affairs. But leadership is highly perishable. It must be constantly re-earned. In the 16th century, the citizens of Spain no doubt thought they would remain the world leader. In the 17th century it was France. In the 19th century, Great Britain. And in the 20th century it was the United States. Unless we do things dramatically different, including strengthening our investments in research and education, the 21st century will belong to China and India.”

With these historic realities as our backdrop, we have to wonder whether we’re headed down a similar road. A sobering thought to be sure, but if our nation’s leaders aren’t asking these questions, who will?

So today, as we begin a new year, with so much at stake in the life of our nation, I want to focus on what kind of leaders we should strive to be—and humbly exhort us to pray that we might lead with excellence during these perilous times, with the profound hope that the sun will once again rise on this land. I want the sun to rise, not set.

We should aim first and foremost to be men and women of character. We can begin by examining our own hearts and asking ourselves the question, what kind of person do I want to be? What kind of leader do I want to be?

Author Steven Covey, who has written a number of self help books, has observed that in

the first 150 years of our country, character—honesty, integrity, courage—were the things we measured a person by.

But in the last 50 years, our measure of a person is largely personality traits. Is she a good communicator? Is he a nice guy? If these are our measures, is it any wonder that it often feels as if the “giants” of industry, government and even religion have left the field?

Who are the giants of today? We would be well served to return to our roots; to expect more of our leaders than charm or even eloquence.

The name of Moses is carved in the wall across from the Speaker’s rostrum in the House of Representatives. When Moses was choosing helpers to lead Israel, his father-in-law, Jethro, gave him this advice in Exodus chapter 18: 21, “Select capable men from all the people, men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain.”



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Isaiah chapter 1:17 says: “Learn to do right, seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow.”

And Micah chapter 6: 8 says: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to have mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

I challenge myself—and you—to follow these guidelines: to be a person who fears God, to be trustworthy, to be a person of integrity who pursues justice, and to do all of these things in a spirit of humility.

We must seek to know our own hearts; our weaknesses and imperfections, and be vigilant in guarding against such failings, even as we pursue these worthy ends.

I must continually ask myself: Do I want to be a man of excellence or a man of expedience; a man of principle or one who seeks to be popular; a man who looks for the right thing to do and does it, or a man who finds the easy way around whatever I’m facing.

One of my favorite plays is “A Man for All Seasons by Robert Bolt.” It is a historical account of one chapter in the life of Sir Thomas More. In one of the most convicting scenes, More is asked by the Duke of Norfolk to go along with him and others for the sake of fellowship and publicly agree with King Henry VIII.

More says, “And when we stand before God, and you are sent to paradise for doing according to your conscience, and I am damned for not doing according to mine, will you come with me for fellowship?”

Sometimes we may find ourselves standing alone on difficult issues.

Such situations will test our character, for the words of Bobby Kennedy, “Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society.”

Kennedy continues: “Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality of those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change.”

May we be men and women of moral courage and character.

Secondly, we must seek to foster reconciliation within our

country. Being men and women of reconciliation is a difficult but critical task in today’s environment. At times the divides between us seem insurmountable. The Congress has never been more divided.

But what we need in our country and world is reconciliation—reconciliation between races, religions, countries, spouses, between children and parents, between neighbors and between political parties.

Today, regardless of your religious views, consider the teaching of Jesus who is one of the greatest authorities on reconciliation.

Jesus stressed the importance of forgiveness and of loving one’s enemies.

In Matthew chapter 18: 21 and 22, Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.”

When I think of reconciliation in the political arena, William Wilberforce comes to mind. Wilberforce brought together a group of British parliamentarians from across the political spectrum committed to abolishing the slave trade in England at a time when the country’s economy was dependent on this injustice. The elimination of the slave trade is what Wilberforce is most known for, but he and his friends were active in at least 69 different projects focusing on issues such as prison reform, education, child labor conditions, and the reformation of culture, including anti-gambling.

Almost 30 years ago I joined a small group in the U.S. Congress modeled after the Wilberforce group. We meet together weekly in the House Chapel for fellowship, Bible study and accountability and encouragement.

Hebrews 10:25 tells us, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.” Indeed this group has been a source of strength and encouragement for me.

When my hands are hanging down and my eyes burn, this fellowship group has provided a place of refuge and support. In the group, my best friend is former member of Congress Tony Hall, a Democrat from Ohio. Tony and I disagree on many issues, and it was

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not uncommon for us to leave the chapel to vote and one of us would vote yes and one would vote no.

But our relationship transcends party. Tony and I have traveled together. Our families are close. Tony has even contributed financially to my campaigns. In fact, Tony was asked to speak along with me today and would have been here, if he weren't out of the country.

Our friendship is a testament to the fact that when people meet together respectfully and begin to listen to each other and work toward reconciliation, it changes the nature of the way they conduct their business on the floor of the House and in committee meetings. If you pray with and for someone, and they pray for you, it is hard to then turn around and attack them, and much easier to work with them.

My relationship with Tony has shaped my time in Congress. When Tony was in Congress we worked together on many issues of the day: human rights, hunger, religious freedom, blood diamonds. And we still work together.

I believe that if we can come together in a spirit of civility and reconciliation, finding common cause on issues of shared concern, we can help transform the country. While most of us operate in the political realm, I think it is important to recognize that the problems facing our country are not purely political, or even mostly political, as such the solutions will not ultimately come from government.

That is not to say we who are in government cannot improve things greatly, because we can. But we do our nation a disservice if we assume that we can solve all of our problems politically. For I would argue there is something far greater that is ailing our country, something that is profoundly moral in nature.

There is an insidious relativism that teaches that concepts of right and wrong are old-fashioned, antiquated and even judgmental. Vices are elevated, virtues are mocked. Faith is squeezed out of the public square. Our culture is coarsened as a result. These seemingly intangible realities have profound implications.

More than 150 years ago, French statesman Alexis de Tocqueville came to these shores seeking to understand the secret of America's greatness.

De Tocqueville wrote: "I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers—and it was not there ... In her fertile fields and boundless forests—and it was not there ... In her rich mines and her vast world commerce—and it was not there...In her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution, and it was not there... Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

De Tocqueville's observations were in keeping with our founding fathers' understanding of what would be necessary for this experiment in self-governance to flourish. They believed in the triangle of first principles: freedom requires

virtue, virtue requires religious faith, faith requires freedom.

George Washington knew that religion—I would say faith—and morality are the most important sources of character and are necessary for the maintenance of public justice, order and prosperity. As such, in our political activity we should focus on creating a national climate where conscience is cultivated and character flourishes. It is to that end that public policy, political and social, must be directed.

Is our country close to a tipping point or a turning point? Many times people don't want to hear the truth. As it says in the Simon and Garfunkel song "The Boxer," "Man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest."

Decline is a choice. Conservative *Washington Post* columnist, Charles Krauthammer, recently wrote: "For America today, decline

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is not a condition. Decline is a choice. Two decades into the unipolar world that came about with the fall of the Soviet Union, America is in the position of deciding whether to abdicate or retain its dominance. Decline—or ascendancy—is in our hands.”

You and I, we the people, get to determine whether the sun is rising or setting on America. Indeed there is much that is in our hands. We can choose to be men and women of integrity and character. We can make difficult decisions even if it means standing alone. We can lead with humility and seek to foster reconciliation. We can acknowledge the moral dimension of our problems, and fight to make America good so that she may remain great. And perhaps most importantly, we can pray.

You have come to this prayer breakfast presumably because you believe in the power of prayer. I am reminded of an experience I had years ago. I was at restaurant in my district—the Marco Polo in Vienna—when an elderly woman with an eastern European accent asked me why I thought the Soviet Union had collapsed. I gave a reliable Republican response. I talked about Ronald Reagan, and Margaret Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II, all of whom came on the world scene at the same time. I talked about the arms race and the evil empire speech. She let me finish and then told me that she believed that USSR had collapsed because people of faith all over the world, including those suffering behind the Iron Curtain, had been praying for decades for that to happen.

I was struck by her answer, and reminded anew that I too had prayed for the collapse of the Soviet Union from the time I was a child. Likely not an explanation that would resonate at the State Department, or the Defense Department or the NSC. But I believe it to be true. And so in that spirit, believing that God answers prayers, we have gathered today.

In 1 Timothy 2:2 we are urged to pray for “all those in authority, that we may live peaceable and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

Indeed we should be praying for those in authority in every area of life—government, business, religious institutions, the military, family, education, media and culture.

In John 12:42-43, John says many of the leaders of the time “loved the praise from men more than praise from God.”

They were concerned with their popularity. What about us? Each of us needs to examine our own heart. We must lift up our leaders and pray for them to have the wisdom and the courage to make sound decisions that are good for the future of our Commonwealth, our country and our world, even if doing so is difficult or unpopular at the time.

So we return to our original question: Is the sun still rising over America? Or is it about to set? If we are indifferent to the signs of economic and moral collapse, then Niall Ferguson’s prediction will come true: America will rapidly decline. And then we, and everyone else, will live in a more dangerous world.

In returning to his farewell address, George Washington said “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.” The general was right. Will we remember and act on his warning? If we do, then America’s best days will still be ahead and the sun will truly have just begun to rise on this country.

Finally, we should pray that God’s favor would rest on this land, that a new dawn would break and America’s best days would be our legacy to our children and grandchildren.

May God continue to bless America. ▣

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