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Former Speaker Paul D. Ryan: A “Time for Choosing”
Remarks (as prepared for delivery) at the Reagan Library
Thursday, May 27, 2021

Thank you, John, and thank you all. It’s great to be here again, and I appreciate your very kind welcome.

I have the honor of serving with John and Fred Ryan on the library’s board of trustees. And though I may not be the most powerful Ryan on that board, I love being a part of it, and I was proud to be asked.

For more than two years now, I’ve been strictly a private citizen – with no complaints about that. Your invitation brings me here only as a lifelong admirer of President Reagan, and a believer in all that he stood for.

So it’s a real privilege to kick off the Reagan Library’s “Time for Choosing” series. It’s a chance to share a few thoughts about the man, about the cause that defined his career, and about the future of the party he led. Ronald Reagan had nothing but good influence on the Republican Party in his own time. I have a feeling you’ll agree that we could sure use more of it today.

I’ve been here a few times before, and whenever I look around this beautiful place, I think of how much my own life was influenced by the ideas and spirit of someone I never met. Even forty years after President Reagan’s first inauguration, we all remember him with a special respect and affection. He was exactly the man America needed at a crucial moment. We appreciate him only more from a distance of time.

To this day, whenever I’m asked to describe my political outlook, there’s no term that fits more comfortably than “Reagan conservative.” I guess it started with my Dad, who was also named Paul. He wasn’t really a political type, but there was never a more enthusiastic Reagan voter in the State of Wisconsin.

I remember in 1980, when I was ten, Dad pointed out a geographical connection – that the Rock River that ran through Janesville, Wisconsin

flowed straight down past Dixon, Illinois, where our new president had spent his youth. For a kid, there was something nice in knowing that he'd come from the same part of America we did. It was a long time before I ever took an active interest in politics. And when I did, I just naturally identified with the ideas of Ronald Reagan.

Early in my career, I spent a lot of time in the company of Jack Kemp, a wonderful guy I still miss. And being around Jack was a daily immersion in the big-hearted spirit of Reagan conservatism: its whole creed of free enterprise and endless opportunity . . . the limited role of government in a free society . . . respect for the rule of law and a system of checks and balances... the rights and dignity of every person. . . and America as a country like no other, with work in the world that only we can do.

The eight years of the Reagan presidency stand as evidence of all that those ideas can accomplish. Just think how different the world would look today, without this one man whose arrival in American politics still seems providential.

It's a measure of his impact that there are statues of the man, not just here in Simi Valley, but also in our Capitol Rotunda . . . in London . . . in Gdansk, Poland, and in Warsaw . . . in Budapest . . . in Berlin near where the wall used to be . . . and in many other places where Reagan will always be an honored name. Our fortieth president now belongs to another era. But the ideas he championed – they're universal. They are as hopeful and compelling as ever.

Consider the background of one new member of Congress – Victoria Spartz of Indiana. She's an immigrant from Ukraine who didn't arrive in the United States until 1998, when she was 20. Socialism might now be fashionable among some members of the House. But I have a feeling they're going to hear from their colleague Victoria, who has seen socialism up close and knows where it leads. And how did this representative, born in the Soviet Union, begin her service in Congress? She arranged to take her oath of office standing by a portrait of Ronald Reagan.

If we're looking for good signs in the Republican Party, this freshman member of the House – along with others such as Young Kim from down in Orange County, Maria Elvira Salazar of Florida, and Tony Gonzalez of Texas – are high on the list. And looking for the good signs is what we

should be doing, even if 2020 and 2021 have been a tough and disappointing time for the conservative cause.

Here's another good sign: With a strong showing of conservative candidates, Republicans last year came very close to regaining a House majority. No one expected that, especially in an election cycle when we lost the presidency, and then the Senate in a runoff.

Of course, since 2016, we've learned to get used to big and unexpected things happening in American politics. Even for our good showing in the House, 2020 left Republicans powerless in Washington. Even worse, it was horrifying to see a presidency come to such a dishonorable and disgraceful end.

So once again, we conservatives find ourselves at a crossroads. And here's one reality we have to face. If the conservative cause depends on the populist appeal of one personality, or on second-rate imitations, then we're not going anywhere. Voters looking for Republican leaders want to see independence and mettle. They will not be impressed by the sight of yes-men and flatterers flocking to Mar-a-Lago.

We win majorities by directing our loyalty and respect to voters, and by staying faithful to the conservative principles that unite us. This was true even when the person leading our movement was as impressive, polished, and agreeable as they come.

Maybe you recall Ronald Reagan's parting words, in the proper farewell of a successful, two-term president. Here's how he acknowledged his reputation as "The Great Communicator." He said, quote:

"I never thought it was my style or the words I used that made a difference: it was the content. I wasn't a great communicator, but I communicated great things, and . . . they came from the heart of a great nation – from our experience, our wisdom, and our belief in the principles that have guided us for two centuries."

Now, President Reagan might have been underrating his talents just a bit. But he was right that leaders and eras come and go, and it's only the cause that endures.

That is critical to remember right now. And frankly, I don't think anyone should have trouble recalling our fundamental convictions. We have a Democratic administration, Senate, and House that are challenging those convictions, and will keep doing so day after day.

As we watch progressives work every lever of power in the elected branches, we'll have all the reminders we need of why conservatives believe in limited government, spending discipline, economic opportunity, pluralism, and personal freedom.

We're now seeing how one-party rule from the left holds up in a center-right country. Joe Biden was put into the presidency by swing suburban voters – the kind who normally vote Republican, but in this case did so only for Congress and not for president. They expected a left-of-center unifier. The problem is, he has focused on unifying, not the nation, but the Democratic Party, surrendering to its progressive base.

It's not been 6 months, and already the administration is working toward over six trillion dollars of new spending – this even with a deficit that ran more than 200 billion dollars last month alone. What is not covered with more borrowing will be funded with higher income taxes, payroll taxes, capital-gains taxes, estate taxes, and more.

In 2020, the country wanted a nice guy who would move to the center and depolarize our politics. Instead, we got a nice guy pursuing an agenda more leftist than any president in my lifetime. These policies might have the full approval of his progressive supporters, but they break faith with the middle-of-the-road folks who made the difference for him on Election Day.

For conservatives, this painful existence as the opposition can actually be an opportunity. Out of these years can come a healthy, growing, and united conservative movement . . . a movement that speaks again to the heart of a great nation.

Consider how much we got done before the defeat of 2020. When we controlled the levers of power, what did we accomplish? Well, I was lucky enough to be Speaker of the House during that time. And the answer is that Republicans in Congress delivered on goals important to conservatives going all the way back to Goldwater and Reagan.

They include a vital rebuilding of American military and intelligence capabilities, so that determined rivals cannot overtake us. The United States answered serious threats in serious ways, with tough measures against China, Russia, Iran, and other hostile actors.

We eliminated some of the worst excesses of the regulatory state, allowing for greater freedom and economic growth. We made good on a promise to veterans that the VA would better serve them, and be held accountable when it fell short. In criminal justice, we corrected some terrible wrongs, to give worthy people a chance at life beyond prison. We made serious progress in ridding our country of human trafficking and rescuing its victims. All this and more, along with Senate-confirmed Supreme Court justices who endured vicious attacks from the left, and who will be a credit to their country for decades to come.

And then there was the first major revision of the tax code since 1986. The previous code was what people had in mind when they talked about “the swamp.” It was a constant drag on productivity and entrepreneurship, driving capital and jobs out of the United States. It was such a fixture that few people thought it could be reformed, and most had given up trying. We needed to lower the rates, clear away the favors and the clutter, and sharpen America’s competitive edge. Tax reform was a big piece of business . . . I’d worked at it myself for two decades in Congress . . . and in 2017, we got it done.

This is the main reason why, at the start of 2020, the United States was seeing such powerful and inclusive economic growth. We saw increased revenue from a broader tax base . . . capital and jobs coming back to America . . . the best wage growth for low-income earners in more than a decade . . . and unemployment at a 50-year low, for every demographic.

These historic reforms were a triumph of practical conservative policy . . . a model of the shared prosperity and upward mobility we have always talked about. It was the populism of President Trump in action, tethered to conservative principles. And if anyone wondered back in January 2020 what could possibly cut short this expansion of opportunity in America, we now know the one-word answer: pandemic.

That calamity, along with some fiascos of the president’s own making, set the scene for our present challenges.

To his credit, Donald Trump brought many new voters into our party, and we want them to stay. He's a former president now, but the issues and values that held so many Republican voters, and turned so many Democrats into Republicans, still matter.

I'm proud of the longstanding promises Republicans made good on in those years. By any measure, it is a plus that we are now a party that more working people can identify with, a party that takes American sovereignty and the security of our border seriously. We're the party that has no illusions about China and its influence in the world – and that, too, is a change for the better.

In a lot of manufacturing towns, and in other once-forgotten places, people know who's speaking for them – and more than that, who's listening to them. Like the Reagan Democrats of another time, these voters feel respected in our party – respected for the work they do, for their way of life, for their love of country. And I can't think of any better evidence that the Republican Party has been doing at least a few things right.

Having joined our ranks in the last five years, moreover, there is no reason these voters cannot go on adding their conviction and support to the conservative cause. All good meaning people, from every background, should feel welcome in the forward-looking, inclusive, aspirational movement that we must be.

Take the populist energy of recent years, combine it with the core principles of conservatism, and the result will be a coalition even broader and stronger than yesterday's Republican Party.

So often, too, Republican populism is just the natural response to progressive elitism and the overreaching agenda that goes with it. Never before has the left wing of the Democratic Party held such influence as it does now, and we're seeing how that works out. I'm betting that most Americans will not take well to more policies of wealth redistribution . . . more federal interference in their lives . . . more globalism at the expense of the national interest . . . and daily, never-ending instruction in political correctness.

The least appealing feature of the party in power is its constant use of

identity politics. So many issues, on the left, bring out the same dreary view of America as a collection of groups in perpetual conflict with each other.

What we could once dismiss as pretentious academic theory, confined to overworked dissertations and obscure journals, somehow has become Democratic Party orthodoxy. Everything has to be about race, gender, and class. Every person is just a stand-in for one group interest or another. That's identity politics – constantly accusing, suspecting, claiming victimhood, pulling us apart from one another. And lately, all of this has gone from ideology to obsession.

But as the left gets more “woke,” the rest of America is getting weary. It's exhausting. And we conservatives have to be careful not to get caught up in every little cultural battle. Sometimes these skirmishes are just creations of outrage peddlers, detached from reality and not worth anybody's time. They draw attention away from the far more important case we must make to the American people.

Culture matters, yes, but our party must be defined by more than a tussle over the latest grievance or perceived slight. We must not let them take priority over solutions – grounded in principle – to improve people's lives.

Because politics based on racial or other identity is always a path to deeper and deeper hostility, with sad and harmful consequences. It is precisely the opposite of conservative thought. And we need to be frank: Today, too many people on the right are enamored with identity politics in ways that are antithetical to Reagan conservatism.

The whole idea in this country is that every person has worth, and that our dignity, rights, and responsibilities all belong to us as individuals. The key identity we all share is our humanity. The group we all belong to is a free society, where we all get to think for ourselves, where everyone has something to contribute, where everyone deserves a chance to rise. In any time, and especially now, these conservative principles ring true, and they will always draw more men and women to our cause.

Conservatism leans heavily on the wisdom of natural law, which can raise our sights beyond the selfishness and grievance-collecting of tribe against tribe. Conservatism also places a premium on private virtue – believing, as

the Founders did, that a free society depends on personal values such as honesty, duty, self-discipline, and a basic concern and respect for others. The state does not exist to remake society or to reorder our lives. As President Reagan observed, government “cannot be clergyman, teacher and parent. It is our servant, beholden to us.”

Along with this comes a confidence in the people themselves to make their own decisions, as responsible members of the good, caring, fair-minded society that our Constitution was designed for. Listening to the progressive left sometimes, you can easily overlook the irreplaceable role of families, churches, and communities in shaping the character of our country. For the left, it's always about expanding government power. And no matter how much they get, it's never enough.

If ever there was a moment to put forward our ideas and draw a bold contrast it is now. Though I've been out of office for a while, and might not be fully attuned to politics on the ground, I really don't see America in 2021 answering to the rallying cry of socialism. Being fashionable is not the same as being popular. We're really expected to believe that a whole new generation is captivated by the ideas that have repressed people and sank economies from Europe to Latin America? I'm skeptical.

The debate here is between the dependency, conformity, and enforced poverty of socialism, versus the life-changing opportunities that only free enterprise gives. For conservatives, we've been down this road before, and once again we have the winning case.

Among other assets going forward, the conservative movement is seeing a new generation of leaders – and not only in elected office. We have a growing contingent of writers and commentators, men and women of talent and wit, who also have broad and diverse followings. As progressives become more candid than ever in how they view America and its history, conservatives are almost alone in affirming the greatness of this country, and the profoundly good influence the United States has had in this world.

Some very popular conservatives are skilled exponents of the American creed at its best, and devastating analysts of liberalism at its worst. It turns out there is a huge audience of men and women with minds of their own, who know the difference between being informed and being indoctrinated. Who doubts that this audience will only expand, as more Americans seek

escape from the liberal echo chamber of the establishment media?

People in this country are going to be looking for competence and to conservative ideas. They will want alternatives to the coercive policies and stale platitudes of the progressive left. And in the face of some pretty tough policy challenges, we'll need to raise crucial issues whether Democrats want to hear about them or not.

I think of the federal debt, which hardly comes up anymore even though the debt is now about 28 trillion dollars. We were forced to take extraordinary measures to respond to a global pandemic, but that effort is not permission to adopt a policy of limitless spending. Many consequences would arise out of a debt crisis, all of them bad, some of them catastrophic. If we want to remain the biggest economy, keep our standard of living, keep the dollar as the world's reserve currency, and meet all our obligations to seniors, to veterans, to the poor and the disabled – it all comes back to spending discipline and the tax revenue that comes only with a pro-growth agenda. Everything rides on America getting ahead of this problem, and if conservatives do not show the way - and too often we have not - then no one else will.

The same is true when we think about complex and growing challenges to the security of our country. It's more than a matter of sustaining military and intelligence capabilities, in which we can never afford to be second best. That's the most basic of our responsibilities. We're in an all-inclusive competition against authoritarian regimes that want to supplant American influence wherever they can. They'll take any opening, exploit every weakness, and they're not much constrained by our standards of honor or fair play.

We cannot take our special place in the world for granted. Our alliances, our friendships, the whole community of values among free nations – together, these express the noblest aspirations of humanity, and they always need careful tending. American leadership has made all the difference for 75 years, and that means it is crucial but not inevitable.

If our influence ever faded, by choices or miscalculations of our own, it would become a lot easier to picture the world as repressive, surveillance states like China see it already: A future in which pervasive state control over the individual is the model to follow, instead of the natural rights of

men and women, and a future of freedom.

How many times did we hear the namesake of this Library remind us that America isn't just a place on the map, defined by blood and soil – it's an idea. America is humanity's best attempt at upholding the truth that everyone is created equal – that the condition of your birth need not dictate the whole course of your life. And that word, "created," is still the key to it all, because it reflects the true wisdom of our founding. You can listen to any peddler of the latest collectivist doctrine, or any propaganda from some Big-Brother regime. But you will never hear a creed more revolutionary than the American idea that the rights of every person are endowed by God, not granted by government.

That creed has always been the best thing we have going for us as a country. It has universal appeal that no ideology centered on the power of the state can ever match. The test, as always, is to keep faith with our most basic ideals, and today they are challenged from within and from without.

If we fail this test, it will be because the progressive left will have won by default. It will be because the conservative cause, which has been the protector of our great American creed, lost its way and followed the left into the trap of identity politics, defining itself by resentments instead of by ideals. It will be because we mistake reactionary skirmishes in the culture wars with a coherent agenda. It will be because we gave too much allegiance to one passing political figure, and weren't loyal enough to our principles.

I know my party well enough to believe that is not our destiny. As long as America stays confident in the ideals of our founding, our country will forever stand as the alternative to tyranny of every kind. And even after the setbacks of 2020, it will be up to the conservative movement, as it always is, to serve those ideals with conviction, heart, and respect for the American people.

Americans, as our fortieth president said, are "hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic, daring, decent, and fair." Those words describe the man himself, and they remind us of the generous spirit that overcomes setbacks and achieves great things. With that example, with the best that is in us, and by speaking to the best in our country, let's press on with the conservative

cause, and return that cause to a governing majority.

Thank you very much.