

2007 Inaugural

Lieutenant Governor Dewhurst, Speaker Craddick, Chief Justice Jefferson, members of the Legislature, my fellow Texans: the oath that I have taken this morning confers upon me not only a public office, but a public trust. I accept it with humility, knowing to whom much is given much is expected in return.

Texas has given me more than I could ever give back. It was here that I discovered life and met my first love: the First Lady of Texas, Anita Perry. Had we not served one day in office we would feel eternally blessed because of the gift of two wonderful children: Griffin and Sydney.

I am also glad to be joined by two Texans that raised me in a home filled with love...and who taught me the value of respecting everyone: My parents, Ray and Amelia Perry.

Mom and dad, how can I sum up more than five decades of love and sacrifice but to say thank you, and I love you.

As a state that has always proudly rolled out the welcome mat, please join me in giving a Texas-sized reception to four special guests from Mexico...Governor Gonzalez of Nuevo Leon, Governor Hernandez of Tamaulipas, Governor Herrera of Vera Cruz, and Governor Garcia of Zacatecas.

(pause)

As we gather today, there is great reason for optimism in Texas. We have a record budget surplus, jobs are at an all-time high, children's test scores are improving, home and medical insurance costs are decreasing, school finance is out of the courts and school property tax rates are on the way down. On top of that, the Aggie basketball team is ranked in the top ten in the nation. Apparently, hell has frozen over.

I don't mention these successes to downplay our great challenges...but because they stand in great contrast to uncertain events across the world.

We are now in an era of great global anxiety. Two conflicts on Israel's border...and one in Iraq...threaten the stability of the entire Middle East...as well as the safety of America's bravest men and women.

Our greatest threat is no longer a Cold War enemy that advances a Godless ideology, but fanatics that kill the innocent and themselves in the name of a Higher Power. Rogue states and terror cells have made nuclear proliferation a greater threat, and leaders in Europe and Latin America have risen to power and popularity based on anti-American appeals.

We face not only a war on terror, but a war on drugs that brings violence to our border and carnage to millions of American families.

The 21st Century has begun with no shortage of human suffering. New treatments for the American victims of AIDS have seemingly insulated us from rampant suffering on two continents: Asia and Africa.

And an even more insidious disease...human hatred...has claimed many more lives...infecting tribes, ethnic groups and nations that commit genocide in places like the Sudan while much of the world stands idly by.

We cannot ignore the challenges beyond our borders any more than we can the problems we face at home...whether it is poverty in Mexico, hopelessness in Africa or homelessness in Austin.

It is this perspective that shapes my view on immigration. We are both a nation of laws and immigrants...the former protect us, the latter enrich us.

Every nation has a sovereign right to control its borders. Our porous international border is one of the greatest threats to this nation's security. Securing our border is more complex, however, than building a border-wide barrier.

Strategic fencing makes sense in densely populated areas...but a comprehensive border security solution requires additional manpower and the use of technology. We have shown Washington what works. With Operation Rio Grande, we have increased patrols, cut off common illegal crossings, and reduced crime in sheriff-patrolled areas by 60 percent during intensive surge operations.

I believe we can secure the border without compromising our economy...and we can implement a guest worker program without compromising our security.

Illegal immigration drains the resources of our schools, our hospitals and our law enforcement agencies. But I do not believe it is realistic to deport 12 million people already here illegally. We have to understand why millions of people come here, and why many more have died trying...it is for something as basic as the freedom to find a job and feed their families.

I know illegal immigration and border security are polarizing issues. To those on both sides of the issue, I simply make one request based on the words of the prophet Isaiah, "come now, and let us reason together."

Let us choose to sit down together and be a part of the solution rather than a source of division.

I start from this premise: we must secure the border with manpower, not unmanned walls. We must have a guestworker program that recognizes the economic contributions of foreign workers and the desperate conditions that bring them here. And we must oppose amnesty because those who come here illegally should not be able to receive citizenship ahead of those who migrate here legally.

My vision for Texas is a tremendous tapestry of diversity woven together by common threads. We are of many faiths, traditions, heritages...but we are all Texans. And in Texas, it is not your identity that matters most, but your ideals.

There are no black, white, Asian or Hispanic dreams. Take away what's on the outside, and you see a common thread on the inside...the human desire to live a life of meaning, purpose and fulfillment.

And even when we disagree, we can engage our differences in a discussion that unifies rather than divides...that lifts up the hopes, dreams and aspirations of all people without casting a single soul aside.

For much of the world, age-old conflicts derive from differences of tribe and tongue. It produces a cycle of violence that never seems to end. Yet, here we are...as diverse a people as any state in the union...and we share a bond that is much deeper than what could ever divide us...our common bond as Texans.

It's not that we have a history of solidarity. 140 years ago a segment of our people was enslaved and considered less than equal. But we are overcoming past prejudice for the sake of the common good.

On this stage is the descendent of a slave who was once sold as property on the steps of a Central Texas courthouse. Today, Wallace Jefferson walks up the steps of our highest civil court in Texas, not only a peer among nine equals...but as our chief justice.

I believe hatreds that are centuries old can be extinguished by one courageous generation. If hatred is something that can be taught, then so can the greatest attributes of any society:... "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." As the Apostle Paul wrote, "against such there is no law."

We are a nation of great ideals...the greatest of which is the belief that all men and women were born to be free. For freedom to work, we must all be committed to another important ideal... "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights."

I don't believe in prescribing equal outcomes...but I do believe in preserving equal opportunities.

And I also believe no great society can be built...or maintained...if we cultivate in our children the vanity of self rather than the virtue of selflessness.

Young Texans must never be taught about rights without also learning about responsibilities. Only when we embrace the responsibilities of a free society can we achieve the greater social good.

As a society, we have a responsibility to those who languish in poverty...to empower them with the tools needed to live a life of self-sufficiency. We have a responsibility to the most vulnerable among us...the young and the aged...those who are sick and those who live with disabilities...and that is to protect them, nurture them and empower them to overcome all obstacles. And we have a responsibility to future generations...to leave them a world that is safe, an environment that is healthy, an economy that is strong and a government that is honest.

But we must not proclaim the responsibilities of a free society and ignore the responsibilities of free individuals.

For more than a generation our culture has emphasized a message of self-indulgence at the expense of social obligation. We have reaped the consequences in the form of teen pregnancies, divorced and broken families, and a cycle of incarceration that joins young men with their fathers behind bars.

The fabric of our society is not government or individual freedom...it is the family. And the demise of the family is the demise of any great society.

Past generations have not fought and died so that children would have the freedom to gun down other children. No, they didn't die so that parents would have the freedom to starve their babies so they could spend their last dime on the next drug-induced high. And no, they didn't die so that video games, television and the Internet could raise our children instead of two loving parents.

We must never mistake freedom for license...one is a right, the other leads to bondage.

While there are limits to what government can accomplish, there are some things it must do.

When a child is born into an abusive home...government must intervene and provide safe sanctuary. When a child is sent to a school that doesn't educate them...government must demand change, not defend the status quo. And when a child goes down the wrong path because they have no one to look up to...they must not only learn about sobering consequences, but life-redeeming second chances.

There is nothing so powerful as the testimony of a changed life and a redeemed soul. Without forgiveness and compassion, there can be no redemption. And where would sinners like me be if there weren't?

There were times in my life when the only solace I could find was the quiet outdoors where I could wrestle with my thoughts and talk to God. It was then that I asked the pointed questions: what exactly am I doing with my life, and what does it all mean?

Over the last 30 years...because of the grace of God...I have learned my purpose. It is not to build a majority political party...nor to hold power for the sake of holding power...it is to build a Texas of limitless possibility. And it starts with our children.

Imagine the possibilities in a Texas where every child is educated...every graduate has access to a good job...every life deemed precious.

Imagine the possibilities in a Texas blind to color, class and ethnicity...where no one is invalidated because of their heritage, but valued because of their humanity.

Imagine the possibilities in a Texas where every man, woman and child is able to put behind the past, to grab hold of their promise, to press on to be who they were created to be.

We have our differences. But, we cannot bridge those differences as long as we live in the past. Reconciliation requires forgiveness and a forward-looking spirit.

Texas is better off when Republicans and Democrats work together. Our potential is too vast to be spoiled by a politics leavened with partisanship. There is so much we must do together.

Together, we must work to make our border more secure and our neighborhoods safer.

Together, we must find solutions to the high rate of the uninsured and to the high cost of health insurance.

Together, we must commit to excellence in higher education as it prepares the workforce of the future.

Together, we must ensure that property tax relief is not only substantial...but long-lasting.

Together, we must pass budget reforms that protect the taxpayers.

And together, we must engage in a debate and a dialogue characterized by civility and consensus.

(pause)

We have come together before to solve the greatest of problems. A little more than a year ago, when hundreds of thousands of our neighbors and fellow Texans suffered through two devastating natural disasters, Texans showed the power of example and the power of our ideals. With open arms we embraced those with nothing but the shirts on their backs. We opened our homes and houses of worship...our convention centers and our modern day coliseums.

We nursed the sick...we fed the hungry...we housed the homeless. For every first responder there were many more volunteers. And the world saw in us...for that brief moment in time...what it means to reach beyond the comfort of our own existence to aid the least among us.

They saw the concern of the Good Samaritan...with neighbor helping neighbor.

What they saw, in short, was the Texas we know and aspire to every day.

If we live lives of selfless sacrifice and love, the meaning of our lives reaches beyond the grave and transcends space and time to leave an enduring mark of eternal goodness.

I wish from this grand stage our government might be so noble...so compassionate...so visionary as the highest aspirations of our people. That we might surrender to causes greater than self...that we might give voice to the voiceless...and hope to those yet born. And that we might use this great opportunity...just this one chance...to do that which endures forever.

The world is watching. Once again, let's show them what it means to live with one another, to love one another and to be Texans.

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