



**LIBERTY MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH
AS DELIVERED BY DR. ROBERT M. GATES
AT THE NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER
ON SEPTEMBER 22, 2011**

First of all, I am deeply honored. Thank you, Captain Odierno and Sergeant Graham. Captain, I've had some interaction with your father over time; you follow in a great tradition. And I thank you for both of your service to your country and for the outstanding work of the organizations you represent.

First of all, I would say that this evening is a reminder that astrology exists to give credibility to weather forecasting—and intelligence estimates—so thank you all for your patience.

I'm grateful to Governor Corbett for his remarks tonight and to the other distinguished leaders for their kind words. And a special word of appreciation to Bob and Lee Woodruff for everything they've done on behalf of our wounded warriors and their families.

To David Eisner and your staff, thank you for making today such a special occasion for me. In just eight years, the National Constitution Center has justly earned its strong reputation for creating an innovative museum experience—one that I enjoyed earlier today—and for being a forum for dialogue about America's founding documents and principles.

And, of course, thanks to the Aggie Wranglers, the Air Force's Singing Sergeants, and Richie McDonald.

It is a true honor to join the ranks of the men and women who have received this Liberty Medal. The official citation for the medal talks about honoring those who strive to "secure the blessings of liberty to people around the globe." Yet, in this of all places—where the American creed and system of government was born—and during this of all times—when our nation's capitol appears choked by deadlock and dysfunction—I want to share some thoughts on the state of government and politics here at home, how the institutions set up to "secure the blessings of liberty" for the American people are measuring up at such a challenging time for our country.

In recent years it has become common for pundits and other high-minded folks to lament the rancor of today's politics. Of course, as the historians here at the Center will tell you, American politics was a contact sport from the very beginning—and a dirty one at that. John

Adams, for example, was once called a “hideous hermaphroditical character who has neither the force and firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman.” Nor were the other Founding Fathers spared similar vile attacks.

So vitriol and nastiness in American politics are nothing new. Nor is the failure of our political system to deal with issues that divide the country along ideological, cultural, or regional lines—just think of the years leading up to the Civil War. In more recent decades, crises such as Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-Contra, and an impeachment all convulsed the American political system. In each case, however painful and divisive these episodes were, our governing institutions recovered their equilibrium and ability to function.

And, let us not forget that America’s Founding Fathers designed our system of government primarily to protect liberty—not to promote speed and efficiency. So it is with good reason that Will Rogers used to say, “I don’t tell jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts.”

Having said all that, I do believe that we are now in uncharted waters when it comes to the dysfunction in our political system—and it is no longer a joking matter. It appears that as a result of several long-building, polarizing trends in American politics and culture, we have lost the ability to execute even the basic functions of government, much less solve the most difficult and divisive problems facing the country. Thus, I am more concerned than I have ever been about the state of American governance.

Several developments have put us in this predicament, three of which I would like to highlight in the next couple of minutes.

First, as a result of a highly partisan redistricting process, more and more seats in the House of Representatives are safe for either the Republican or Democratic Party. As a result, the really consequential campaigns are not the mostly lopsided general elections, but the party primaries, where candidates must cater to the most hard-core ideological elements of their base. So how do we ensure that more candidates for Congress are forced to appeal to independents, centrists, and at least some members of the other political party to win election, just as presidential candidates must do?

Second, addressing this country’s most intractable and complex problems requires a consistent strategy and implementation across multiple presidencies and congresses. The best historical example of this was the Cold War. Despite great differences in tactics and

approaches, the basic contours of the strategy to contain the Soviet Union remained constant through nine presidential administrations of both political parties, even between presidents as different as President Carter and President Reagan, as I know from first-hand experience.

But when one party wins big in a “wave election”—of which there have been several in recent election cycles—it typically seeks to impose its agenda on the other side by brute force. This makes it all the more likely that the policies will be reversed in the next wave election and, consequently, all the more difficult to deal with this country’s most serious challenges over time.

I would like to suggest that more humility in victory is needed, and with that a search for broadly supported policies to address our problems—be they the national debt, illegal immigration, crumbling infrastructure, underperforming schools, or our budget deficit—policies and programs that can and must endure beyond one congress or one president to be successful.

Third, there are vast changes in the composition and role of the news media over the past two decades. When I entered CIA 45 years ago last month, three television networks and a handful of newspapers dominated coverage and, to a considerable degree, filtered extreme or vitriolic points of view. Today, with hundreds of cable channels, blogs and other electronic media, every point of view, including the most extreme, has a ready vehicle for wide dissemination. You can’t reverse history or technology, and this system is clearly more democratic and open, but there is also no question that it has fueled the coarsening and, I believe, the dumbing down of the national political dialogue.

As a result of these and other polarizing factors, the moderate center—the foundation of our political system and our stability—is not holding. Just at a time when this country needs more continuity, more bipartisanship, and more compromise to deal with our most serious problems, all the trends are pointing in the opposite direction.

Indeed, “compromise” has become a dirty word—too often synonymous with a lack of principles or “selling out.” Yet, our entire system of government has depended upon compromise. The Constitution itself is a bundle of compromises. Critical ideas and progress in our history often have come from thinkers and ideologues on both the left and the right. But, for the most part, the laws and policies that ultimately implement the best of those ideas have come from the vital political center, and usually as the result of compromise.

I have worked for eight presidents, and I have known many politicians of both parties over nearly five decades, and I never met one who had a monopoly on revealed truth. At a time when our country faces deep economic and other challenges at home and a world that just keeps getting more complex and more dangerous, those who think that they alone have the right answers, those who demonize those who think differently, and those who refuse to listen and take other points of view into account—these leaders, in my view, are a danger to the American people and to the future of our republic.

A final thought. I believe that both Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan were great presidents—one the epitome of a liberal Democrat, the other the epitome of a conservative Republican. They both changed the country for the better, but both were pragmatic politicians willing to compromise in order to advance their respective agendas. Today's political leaders and those who aspire to lead would do well to follow their example. Their willingness to do so will determine this country's future prospects as a great power and as a republic, because the warning given a long time ago by Benjamin Franklin—that great Pennsylvanian—still applies: "Either we hang together or we will surely all hang separately."

Thank you again for this great honor, and God bless our republic and the compromises on which it was founded.