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GOVERNOR JOHN A. KITZHABER ADMINISTRATION

Second Inaugural Address, 1999

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WE convene today to celebrate our biennial exercise of democracy and I renew my oath to serve as your governor. We convene today in common commitment to those citizens who have found us worthy of leadership.

I can think of no greater honor than to have your trust, faith and confidence in leading our state for the next four years. And I can think of no more worthwhile task than rewarding that faith by working together with this legislature to meet our fundamental challenges? Good schools; quality of life; healthy, successful children; and, perhaps most important of all, re-creating that sense of community and common purpose which is our heritage – and which has made possible all that we have accomplished s Oregonians.

As we gather here today, I find myself reflecting on the sobering implications of this moment – for me personally – and or this state and nation politically. Personally, this will e my last oath of office as governor of the State of Oregon.

Politically, we gather in the shadow of a trial to impeach our President. These events create a moment in time from which we can look ahead and consider what is happening to civic life in our country and its implications for our future – and from which we can look back and remember why the public enterprise makes sense in the first place.

Like most Oregonians and most Americans, I believe that what is going on in our nation's capital is a debate that is only partly about our President's personally failings or his fitness for office. To a large extent it is a debate about partisanship – partisanship on both sides of the aisle.

This partisanship reflects the fact that politics has moved from the use of power for the public good to the gathering of power for its own sake. The accumulation of power at any cost.

Gone from our national discourses is that element of politics that actually means something to people – what to do with power once it is obtained. Gone is the basic agreement that politics is a process by which challenged are defined and met; a process by which communities – from local, to state, to national – can create a vision of their own future and put in place a plan to achieve it. Gone is the belief that government is a tool by which we can achieve our common aspirations.

Instead, we are left with a partisanship – not only in the political sense – but in the civic sense as well. A partisanship and an attitude that has alienated citizens from their government and from one another – that has degraded our public institutions, that has swept aside community, and has enshrined the individual in its place.

We are left with the veil that all government can do is waste money . . . that government's proper role is to more money and keep more money; that there is no social problem that cannot be solved by a judicious application of personal wealth . . . that no overarching sense of community is needed or, in fact, desired.

And this self-serving attitude offers predictable answers to our greatest challenges.

If you think there is too much crime . . . Buy a security system. Live in a gated community. Buy a gun.

If you don't like our public schools . . . Abandon them. Send you kids to a private school and let those who can't afford to do so fend for themselves.

If you want clean air and water . . . Move to the country. Make pollution someone else's problem.

But individual wealth alone cannot shield us from the fallout of a society that cannot education all of its children, or keep them from crime, or make them successful, or clean its water and its air.

Don't misunderstand me – I believe in creating wealth. And I support an individual's right to do with it what they will. But private wealth will never become a substitute for community.

Here in this chamber we are surrounded by the names of pioneers. They did not buy their way here. They had resources, to be sure. But their migration was made possible only by joining together, by pooling those resources, by becoming a community. Then – and only then – would they take the risk of a lifetime; only then could they cross the Great Plains and the Shining Mountains to create the land in which we now abide. That has always been the Oregon way – and we are its beneficiaries.

Our greatest challenge today is to preserve that way to recognize it for what it is: a touchstone – a past we can invoke to inform our present. We must recreate the politics of community – the politics of progress – and bury the politics of partisanship. If we can do so, no dream lies beyond our grasp.

Our greatest challenge is to make our system of government work here in Oregon even as our national government veers recklessly toward the brink in Washington, D. C.

Our greatest challenge is to demonstrate that in this state we can still come together with open minds – and in a spirit of compromise, to forward a common public agenda.

The history of this state is the history of just this kind of cooperation. Our true heritage lies in our ability to join together to create a place – and a culture that helps define that place. We must not let that spirit vanish from Oregon and I pledge to work with every member of this assembly to help ensure that it doesn't

As I begin my last term as governor – and as we convene the 70th Legislative Assembly – let me share with you some lessons I have learned from my 20 years in public service which I believe may have some relevance to this session and to the public enterprise.

First, good ideas take time. The Oregon Health Plan was first enacted in 1989 but was not fully implemented until 1993. The Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watershed Restoration, the Education Act for the 21st Century – these are works in progress that will take numerous legislative session to fully implement, yet which will reap benefits for generations to come.

This means that we must have clear goals and the patience and consistency to see them realized. It means that we must have the capacity to compromise as long as we continue to move toward our goals.

As Governor Tom McCall said in his second inaugural: "Compromise indeed is bad for the spirit if it limits one's ideas or goals. At the same time, if we renounce realism and gradualism, we may – paradoxically – be frustrated in our ideas, and see the realization of our goals delayed."

Second, there has always been partisanship – but in the past it has been adversarial, not antagonistic. It was played out with civility and collegiality in a debate over different approaches to realizing common goals and visions.

We owe it to ourselves, to Oregonians and to the integrity of this public institution – the government of this level of civility. We must have the capacity and the maturity to separate politics from personalities – to never allow disagreements on matters of policy be reflected in the kind of character assassination that has dominated the national debate over the past month.

Third, what Oregonians expect from us is that we get things done. Oregonians recognize that the major issues with which we must deal – things like education, transportation, public safety, growth and sound environmental stewardship – these issues are not partisan in nature. They affect all Oregonians regardless of where they live, what they do, how much they earn, or what party they belong to. And Oregonians expect us to deal with them. They don't expect that we always agree, but they expect us to be constructive and sincere in addressing the common challenges that face our state.

I have spent much of the last four years – and the last year in particular – defining these challenges and proposing possible solutions. This Oregon Challenge – as I have referred to it over the past year – calls for definitive action in the least three broad areas crucial to Oregon's future.

One of these challenges involves our system of public education, from pre-kindergarten through higher education and lifelong learning. Nothing is more important or more central to our future than meeting the obligation to educate – and to keep educating – the next generation of Oregonians.

We have the means to do so. The question is – do we also have the will? We stand on the threshold of a new century, and the doors of opportunity are open wide. Our challenge is to equip our children – all our children – to walk through them. Let us pledge ourselves to that.

A second great challenge involves preventing crime, especially among juveniles. How we meet this challenge will send a message to the future as to what we really value.

The massive expansion of our prison system shows very clearly that we value punishment. But don't we also value our children enough to keep them out of prison in the first place? Don't we value our families, our neighbors and friends enough to keep them from falling victim to crime? Our challenge is to make a commitment to prevention that is at least as strong as the commitment we have made to punishment. Let us pledge ourselves to do that.

A third great challenge involves planning growth in a way that will actually make a positive difference in how this state develops over the next twenty years. Oregon is bound to attract growth, simply because of what it is. Yet growth is a double-edged sword.

Handled right, it can offer a path to a bright and prosperous future. Handled wrong, it will slice to shreds everything that makes living here worthwhile. And if that happens – if we lose the qualities and attributes that define Oregon itself – we will lose not only our future, but our very identity. Our challenge is to find a way to accommodate growth without sacrificing the special quality of place that makes our state unique. Let us pledge ourselves to do that as well.

This is the Oregon Challenge – and tomorrow we will take up our task of meeting it.

And while I am firmly convinced that resolving these issues is central to our future, I do not presume that the specific proposals I have suggested are the only way to do so. I have no doubt that we will debate these ideas and others in the coming months. But I also know that Oregonians will properly hold us accountable for reaching – or not reaching – agreement on how to move forward.

If we are to be successful in the endeavor, we must recreate the sense of common purpose which has long been the foundation of the community we call Oregon. The nation has often looked to us for inspiration in responsible government, for decency in public affairs, for civil personal relationships and for a respect for the natural world.

These are the virtues that build a community. These are the virtues that have built our state. We must never underestimate the importance – indeed the necessity – of community and the power of place in shaping Oregon’s future. For in spite of our differences and our areas of disagreement, we share a common story, a common heritage and we will surely have a common legacy.

Yet as the stain of rancor and partisanship spreads westward from our nation’s capitol, as our population increases, as we become more ethnically and culturally diverse, as growth begins to alter our landscape and bring into question the limits of our resources – we are beginning to lose this shared sense of ourselves as Oregonians.

We are losing our sense of common history and common purpose – our sense of connection and of community which has bound us together.

And if we lose this connection with one another, this spirit of community and commitment to place – then we will lose not only our identity, but our heritage as well. We cannot, we must not – and we will not allow that to happen.

So today, as we begin the last legislative session of the 20th Century – let us heed the well the words of Wallace Stegner from the “Sound of Mountain Water.” Words written about the West, but clearly inspired by Oregon.

“...one cannot be pessimistic about the West. This is the native home of hope. When it fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the quality that most characterized and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlived its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery.”

No less than that is our goal. One state, one people, one destiny.