

Remarks by Chairman Oberstar

Thank you to the U.S. Capitol Historical Society for your continuing love of the institution of Congress, and of the House of Representatives, the first body of Congress described in the first Article of the Constitution. Thank you, Don Young, for being here tonight. Thank you, Bud Shuster, for being here earlier, and thank you to my dear wonderful friend John Mica. Thanks to all the members of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, to the members of the U.S. Capitol Historical Society and to Bob Roe. Bob comes back frequently. If you let him come back to the committee often enough he'll take the gavel and he'll run the committee again. Bob, thank you for coming tonight.

Jean said to me I hope you're going to be Oberstar 2. She's Oberstar 2. She gives 60 second speeches, and she's from New Orleans, where they talk endlessly. This is really a very special evening. Thank you to the Capitol Historical Society for honoring the Committees of the House.

In 1787 the Framers of the Constitution were debating Article I. The debate went all day, between having a three-year term for House members or a one-year term for House members. It was Roger Sherman of Connecticut who offered the proposal for a one-year term with the commentary, "Frequent elections are necessary for the good behavior of rulers, lest they become accustomed to the place of government and take on the habits of the place." That's called Potomac fever today. The debate went on all day and at about 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon Charles Pinckney of South Carolina suggested a recess "that we might have dinner." They had some wine "to meditate thereupon and come to a better resolution." (He probably said it in Henry Brown's accent but I can't replicate the South Carolina accent.) So the Constitutional Convention adjourned, the members retired and they had a drink in Philadelphia. The next morning, like committees today, they convened, and passed a proposition for a two-year term for House members, without debate and with unanimous vote. Now, today they call that a backroom deal, done in secrecy. At the same time there were two proposals for Senate terms. One was for a fixed term and the other was for life service, life tenure. Some Senators still believe they have a life-time term. The Framers eventually settled on the six-year term, with Senators elected by the most populous branch of the state legislatures. We're still putting up with that curse.

This room, the Cannon Caucus room, has very special significance. In 1955 my predecessor, John Blatnik took over the chairmanship [of the Subcommittee on Rivers and Harbors] after his third term in Congress. Today members think that if they've served six months and are not a subcommittee chairman, "Oh my God, I've failed! What's wrong with the system? Is it working? I want to be a chairman!" He [Blatnik] waited his time and became the chairman of the subcommittee. Then he took a tour. He talked to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and said, "I want to see what you do." They started from Lock and Dam 3 just below St. Paul, and traveled the Mississippi River all the way to New Orleans, which is Jean's home. Jean says our committee actually controls the Mississippi. Right! It just so happens that the Mississippi River rises just outside my Congressional District in Minnesota and goes all the way to New Orleans. Louisiana got all the pollution; Minnesota got all the clean water. Jean says that's why they have such good bread in Louisiana, made from the Mississippi River water, because it has all the values of the other states it passes through along the way.

Blatnik traveled down the Mississippi, and he was looking for the navigational obstructions, the locks and dams that weren't adequate size for the barge traffic, and the other obstacles to navigation. But as a biochemist, what he saw was the pollution in the rivers. By the time he got to New Orleans there were phenols, raw phenols bubbling in the water. They took a

sample and they analyzed it, and Blatnik said, "This is awful. This is toxic. We're killing people." Upon coming back to Washington, he said instead of fixing the locks and waterways, he wanted to clean the water.

So he got together with Murray Stein, a lawyer of the public health service in what Blatnik described as the seventh subbasement of HEW - the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. HEW was in a building that was built as a public works project in the 1930's on Independence Avenue. Blatnik went down to see Murray Stein and said, "I have this idea." Then Stein said, "I've been waiting for years for somebody to want to do something about water quality." Blatnik replied, "We need legislation to clean up the waters of America. We need research; we need first to know what's causing pollution; we need to know the chemicals going into the water. We need an enforcement program and we need funding to help cities build sewage treatment plants."

With that idea in mind he said, "Let's invite other Members of Congress." He talked to Bob Jones who was elected with Blatnik in 1946 in a class that included Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. How about that for a historical coincidence? He said, "If we invite members, everybody will come." He reserved this room, the Caucus Room of the Cannon House Office Building. It didn't have all this decoration. It was dreary. There was gray paint on the ceiling, I remember, when I started here. He handed a mimeographed letter out to his colleagues inviting them to a discussion about clean water. He said, "We'll fill this room." The time and day arrived. John Blatnik, Bob Jones, and Murray Stein were the only three people in this room. The only three people in the room! They said, "Well, we've got nowhere to go but up." That's how the clean water program got started.

The Committee on Rivers and Harbors was the first committee of the First Congress in 1789. That was even before Bob Roe served on the committee; even before I served on the committee. I started here as clerk of that subcommittee. Clerk - we didn't have fancy titles in those days. Clerk! We had to go and scavenge paper for the staff to print letters. Sterlyn Carroll was the full Committee clerk. Sterlyn and I would go around and scavenge paper. We had to go out and scavenge office furniture. It was a big deal in those days. Today, you just put in an order and it comes. We had to go around and scavenge it out of rooms. If someone wasn't in the room we would go take a chair and bring it to the committee. I tell you this is real. I'm not making this up, this is real and we lived this. Those were the real days of hard scrabble life of the committee.

This was the committee that in 1789 passed one of the first bills of the First Congress to establish and maintain a lighthouse at Hampton Roads. Subsequent acts of the First Congress established a lighthouse at Cape Henry at the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay, and established the revenue cutter service to collect duties on inbound cargoes to pay the debts of the Revolutionary War. In subsequent years we weren't too worried about paying the debts but we were interested in building America. The Constitution directs the Congress to establish and maintain post roads; that also became the work of the Committee on Rivers and Harbors.

Rivers and Harbors: the first settlers of this country came by the water. The major cities of America were ports before they were cities. Only two major cities in America do not exist on the water, Denver and Atlanta. Denver has a thing they call a river but it's a creek. Let's not dignify the subject. Seventy-five percent of the population of this country still lives along the water. The water was critical for the movement of people and goods, and as we developed the interior of the nation our committee was critical in the development of the canals. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 said that the waters of the Great Lakes and their watershed and the carrying places between them are, and forevermore shall be, free and open to navigation without charge.

In 1848, President James K. Polk proposed a toll on waterways and on canals. A Member of Congress rose in 1848 to say we shall never build the canals if a toll is imposed; we shall not build them until the cargo has been in them for a while, and we have the revenue from which to pay the tolls. The Member defeated James K. Polk's proposal. That Member of Congress was Abraham Lincoln.

Our traditions in this committee are deeply rooted in the history of our country and its evolution of the movement of people and goods. The tradition extends to this very day. It is perhaps because of the nature of our jurisdiction that we have differences on policy and approach but we don't have the deeply divided, divisive moral issues like Education and Labor has to deal with, that Health and Human Services has to deal with. Our issues are issues on which we could have a Solomon-like resolution. Are you going to cut the baby in half or do you want to come to some other resolution? We come to that kind of agreement.

One of my treasured memories was in the House-Senate conference on TEA-21 (The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century). We were deep in discussions with the Senate. Senator Chafee looked across the table and said, "Well, Bud Shuster, you're not for this Davis-Bacon stuff are you? You're not a Davis-Bacon guy." Bud Shuster said, "No, I'm not but that's Jim Oberstar's issue and I stand with Jim Oberstar." Chafee looked at him, "Well then we better conference about that." The next day there came an issue on the environment. Chafee looked at me and said, "Well, Jim, you're not for this environmental degradation stuff are you?" I said, "Well, that's not the case. This is Bud Shuster's issue and I stand with Bud Shuster." John Warner from Virginia, said, "Johnny, I think you're getting the message. We better caucus on this stuff."

We stand together and we reach an agreement. We stick together. We prevail for the good of America. John Mica and I have stuck together. This committee has stuck together. America is a better country for it. We will have a better future for it. I thank you all for being here tonight to celebrate the history of the committee on public works, the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.