

**Remarks by Senator Gordon H. Smith
Accepting The Media Institute's
Lifetime Achievement Award
October 20, 2021**

Ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to receive this Lifetime Achievement Award from The Media Institute along with fellow honorees, former FCC chairman Bill Kennard and Norah O'Donnell. I knew Norah when she was working a beat on Capitol Hill – I think it was for *Roll Call* – but now every evening ... to watch her anchor the “CBS Evening News” ... I'm very proud of her and she is my friend then and still.

I haven't chosen to read a speech but to outline a few of my thoughts to share them with you. A Lifetime Achievement Award has caused me to reflect back on a lifetime here, much of it spent in Washington, D.C., and reflect on how I came to be here and why I'm still here, but why I'm soon leaving.

I was born in Pendleton, Oregon, to a father who was a food processor, who accepted a job when I was 2 years old to serve on the staff of President Dwight Eisenhower. My mother's maiden name was Udall, and so you can say in some sense I was born to the battle of peas and policy and politics – and I have loved it! I have loved life. I have loved my time in this great city of Washington, D.C.

I suppose in my youth, the most exciting night was always election night because around our dinner table, policy and politics were often the topic of discussion. I remember vividly when I was 8 years old ... my mother awakening me on January 20, 1961 to tell me to dress warmly because we, our family, were going to the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy because our cousin Stuart Udall was becoming his Secretary of the Interior.

I remember that occasion well – it went deep into my soul – not just the president's clarion call to a new generation of Americans to ask not what your country could do for you, but what you could do for your country. I remember the roar of the cannon. I remember his beautiful bride. And the whole occasion struck me as important, something praiseworthy, something to be aspired to, something to value.

And so as I grew older, I served as a paperboy for two newspapers that don't even exist today – the *Washington Evening Star* being one of those and the *Washington Daily News*. As a newspaper boy, I suppose I became a news addict. I would read the headlines and I'd read the stories, and I'd come home and I'd say to my mother, “Mama did you read this story?” And she would often say, “Remember, Gordie, the best way to ruin a good story is to hear the other side.”

I've never forgotten that. I never lost my passion for policy and hearing the other side because in politics, what you see kind of depends on where you sit, what you've experienced in life ... and to respect that experience in others as you hope they will respect and value your experience.

Whatever leads to a more perfect union is something I grew up aspiring to and thinking of as important.

All my life – if you had asked me when I was 8 years old, or 10, or 12, or 20 – maybe I was an unusual kid, but I know I would have told you that I had this latent, nagging desire to be a U.S. senator. Some people I would share that with would look at me with some skepticism, I'm sure. But as I went on in life and became a bit proficient in law and then successful in business, I began to have this midlife crisis approach this nagging boyhood aspiration to get into the arena.

I remember vividly during the administration of President George Herbert Walker Bush the billboard that someone had put up in Pendleton with the president's picture. This must have been after the successful Iraq war and as part of the 1,000 Points of Light. There was, next to his picture, this quote from President Bush: "There could be no definition of a successful life that does not include service to others. Find something to do. Get off the bench."

That impacted me. I thought about it over and over again, and that led to my putting my hat in the ring for a state senate seat that ultimately led me to a U.S. Senate seat, which against all odds I held for 12 years.

As part of policy and politics, the central plank in all of this – and in my service – was the First Amendment to the Constitution. Consider what it says: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

I love how that builds on itself. The two religion clauses really are about the freedom of conscience, the freedom to think and decide what you believe. And then building on that ... if you're allowed to think and believe something for yourself, you need to be able to speak about it, and if you have the freedom to speak about it you should be free to publish it, and if you want to publish it you can then assemble people to your cause, and once you assemble them you can redress grievances with government. You see how it all fits together, how central it is to our freedom as human beings, as American citizens: from conscience, to speech, to publishing, to assembling, to redressing. It's called democracy.

One of the things that happens when you're nurtured at the knee of a Udall mother is to always try and make the world a better place. Spend your time on earth to keep the second great commandment, which is to love your neighbor, to find ways to serve, just as President Bush was admonishing me to do from a distance on that road sign, that billboard.

Well, when I left the Senate, I felt somewhat adrift and wondered what to do. I was privileged to work in the law offices of Covington and Burling, and doubly privileged when the National Association of Broadcasters reached out to me and invited me to be their CEO. Why? Because every day a broadcaster goes to work, he or she also goes to work as a public servant.

In this capacity as CEO of NAB, we run a big trade show (sadly Covid has canceled it a couple of times). We have many visitors from South America, the southern hemisphere, the Americas.

They come to the NAB show ... and they asked me to come and speak to their conference. It was being held in the ancient city of Montevideo, Uruguay. My broadcast host met my wife and me and was giving us a tour of the ancient city of Montevideo. There used to be a big wall around the entirety of the community but now there only stands, in a park, the entrance of that ancient city built 400 years ago by the Spanish. It's still a beautiful entry gate, and I noted the keystone that held it all together.

During this tour, my host asked me what I was going to speak to them about and I'm sure it was contemporary NAB issues. And when I explained that to him, he said, "Could you not speak to us about the First Amendment and the freedom of the press and speech?" And I said, "Why would you want me to speak to that?" and he said, "Because a lot of us who will come to this conference are one year and one election away from losing the freedom of the press."

It was stunning to me and as I thought about the pivotal role we at NAB, and newspapers, and The Media Institute have when it comes to freedom of the press. I thought of a keystone and that 400-year-old Spanish gate, but that is the keystone upon which all of our rights hang.

This is what Benjamin Franklin said: "Freedom of speech is a principal pillar [I'd call it a keystone] of a free government. When this support is taken away, the Constitution of a free society is then dissolved and tyranny is elected on its ruins."

Thomas Jefferson said: "Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press and that cannot be limited without being lost." I like that. I believe that. And that's what this host was saying to me: Some of us may lose it unless we learn how to do our job to preserve it.

I think it's important for us who love freedom of speech and freedom of the press to remember this: There was probably no president in our history who was more vilified and attacked and abused than Abraham Lincoln during the most horrendous time of civil war and civil disruption and violence in our history. And yet Abraham Lincoln said, notwithstanding all the vilification (again I love this quote): "Let the people know the facts and the country will be safe."

Well, in this digital age where misinformation and fake news are running rampant on social media, I'm particularly honored and fortunate to stand with what survey after survey shows is the best source of finding the facts – and that's among radio and television broadcasters. I'm thankful to them that they've included me in their number for these 12 years – 12,000 radio and television stations – these people who go to work every day, yes, to earn a living, but more, to help their local communities and to give every local community and its people the facts so that they can decide.

Thank you again for this tremendous recognition. It has been my great honor to work alongside each of you to tell both sides of the story and thereby to protect our nation's keystone: the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Thank you. God bless you.

Transcribed from Senator Smith's extemporaneous remarks