

Book
Signing
Speech

Thank you very much.

If you can imagine that you are now standing barefoot in the cool surf of Santa Monica Beach in California, turn your gaze landward and consider how far it would be to walk to Washington, D.C. If you can further imagine having arthritis and emphysema and a bad back and all the other dysfunctions that accumulate over eight decades of unsheltered living, then you are now in a position to understand that I indeed felt quite uncertain about my prospects for success as I began my 3,200-mile walk to Washington. I didn't know if I could really make it all the way. I didn't know if I could make it all the way across Los Angeles -that's already quite a walk. But I felt compelled to give it a go.

I did it because the Members of Congress were saying that Americans did not care about the need for Campaign Finance Reform. This walk was the only Way I could think of to show that at least this old lady cared. I had lived too long, through too many wars, to feel any other way about what was going On in Washington: the selling of our democracy to the highest special interest bidders. We the People had become We the Taxpayers, We the Suckers in a Game played by the economically elite for their own benefit.

So I took a walk to cool down, to rediscover the good things about America, and to show I cared.

Along the way, over the 14 months, I talked to thousands of people. Many were not conversant with the term ³campaign finance reform,² but nearly all of them were upset that special interest money was drowning-out the voice of average citizens. People understood that very well, and were -and are<full of despair for their country.

Many of these people became my new and dear friends. My life has changed because I made this little leap of faith into the hearts of Americans.

The first person to accompany me on my walk was the 84 year-old West Virginia Secretary of State, Ken Hechler. Ken is a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives and a former speech writer for Harry Truman.

For Ken, who sees coal companies ravaging his West Virginia mountains under the protection of corrupt politicians, campaign finance reform is the key issue in American politics. In the months ahead, he would be an invaluable problem solver and friend. He walked with me from Pasadena to Twentynine

Palms in the California desert, which is quite a walk for an old man. He would rejoin me many times in the months ahead. I was never sure at first if his passion was for reform or for me, but, at my age, whatever puts a little spring in your step is welcome.

³Let's go,² Ken said, and off we went. After so many years fettered by age, parenthood, and the burdens of two death watches -my husband and my best friend. Walking, I felt free and full of youthful spirit.

One never loses one's youth. It is always just hiding under the wrinkles, excited for a chance to be out in the open air again. Ken and I walked through Los Angeles like a couple of twenty year-olds, though our reflections in the store windows showed something else again. My advice is to not look too long at that reflection, which is the book of the past. Life is in the moving on.

Gradually, the green of Los Angeles turned to the brown of the Mojave Desert.


Here is a snapshot from my book:

To begin a day's walk in California's Mojave Desert is like stepping into a child's drawing: Odd, Dr. Seuss-style cacti interrupt a dot pattern of

endlessly repeating gray bushes; the sky is crayoned a solid, royal blue with a brilliant sun; layers of purple hills extend in endless vistas to the next valley and next again. There is no sound but the mesquite-scented breeze whishing lightly across the brittlebush and the occasional flinch of some tiny, prehistoric creature under dry sticks a few paces ahead.

After I had walked a hundred miles of the Mojave through pleasant days and bitter cold nights, the winds began to rise. Dust blew across the highway and whipped around, more than once sending me staggering. It grabbed my straw hat repeatedly and sent it wheeling across the highway. It was my late friend Elizabeth's poor old garden hat, and it was not to last much longer--nor were my old bones, I thought.

Even at its harshest, the desert is a meditation, where the mechanisms of politics and oppression seem distant and otherworldly. One can consider such things more creatively at such a distance. And old age is no shame in the desert: Save for my walking companion, I saw no creature less wrinkled than myself.

 I am here: that is the sole fact from which, in the desert, all distractions fall away. The desert teases

with the idea that spiritual enlightenment, elsewhere requiring a lifetime of discipline, might happen almost effortlessly here. This tease is not malicious, I think, but the natural warp of things in the neighborhood of great truths. Indeed, most of our great spiritual stories begin in the desert, where there is less to misdirect our attention from the fact of our mortality and our immortality.

Time hardly bothers with the desert. The roads in the rocky soil where George Patton trained his tank corps are still visible, and there are bits of thick, broken steel and smashed jeri cans out in the brush. At night you can imagine the squeaky tanks in the distance, driven endlessly by the boys who went to North Africa and Europe to defend democracy and who never came back. The stars are unbelievable.

I was still something of a desperado in those first months of the walk--roaming over the dry and blank space remaining at the end of a life. Or was it the lull between acts? Who can ever know at such times? There is an urge to just walk into the desert, away from the road and be done with it. There is also an urge to have some ice cream with chocolate sauce. Life is what we patch together between those competing desires.

The blowing sand of the Mojave was difficult. The sun was unrelenting by day, and the nights were freezing. But there were pleasures. One morning we nailed an old political sign to a telegraph pole and used a length of rope to bend it into half-cylinder shower stall. We hung a bag of warm water high on the pole and, my!--true luxury! The north side of the shower was unprotected from view, but there was nothing in that direction except a hundred miles of desert, unoccupied by anything but snakes and perhaps wide-eyed varmints watching from the brush. Fighter jets, which regularly zoomed inches apart over the Mojave on their way to gunnery practice, thankfully did not do so during my shower. I wouldn't have wanted to cause a mid-air accident.

Well, the Mojave and the Arizona deserts were a little too much for me, and I ended up in a hospital in Arizona.

The hospital staff, quite interested in my mission, became like the pit crew of a very old race car. Nurse Jan told me I must learn to eat three good meals a day or I'd never make it. I promised to get a little cutting Board and keep a pocket full of vegetables with me as I walked--which I never did.

A nice fellow, John, insisted that I must take in more water each mile. He said I was seriously dehydrated.

David, a nursing school student, talked passionately about the plight of poor people in America, and he knew how connected their fate is to the corruption of politics and, therefore, how my mission was a good one. Russ, who has worked as a desert firefighter, Was very interested in my trek because he believes that we cannot do much to protect the environment until we get corporate money out of politics. Even in the space of a hospital ward, one could see how all reform roads lead to campaign finance reform. The things Americans deeply care about are not being addressed by their government, and they know it.

I made it to Phoenix, and then to Tucson where, as I passed a notorious biker bar, I saw that they were all outside cheering me and waving their beers at me. They invited me inside for a cool one, which I accepted--though I had a soft drink, as I was soon to meet with a Congressman. I sat on a beautiful Harley-Davidson, owned by a Vietnam vet who said he understood very well what I was walking for and we had better get our country back from the special interests while there was still time. ³Amen,² I said, tilting my drink. The interior of the bar was almost pitch black, cool and smelling of malt. A road-hardened woman with overflowing, tattooed breasts gave me the most wonderful, crying hug. As I left,

they offered to keep an eye out for me on the highways, which they indeed did.

In the deserts of New Mexico, I stayed one night in the trailer home of Virginia Hallack.


³Now, Doris. Sit down right here, and I will give you a concert!² she said after dinner.

I sat and sipped my tea as she picked eighteen instruments off the wall one-by-one and played and sang ³On the Road to Mandalay² for the rest of the evening. Trumpet, fiddle, flute, banjo, and on and on, with vocals in her high-pitched voice where breath would allow. It may seem comical as I describe it, but it was in fact quite something. Here was a woman in the vast desert letting her every breath make the best music she could muster. Your breath can blow through more instruments than you can imagine, and they were all there at Virginia's.

So she sang, strummed, pounded and blew her song into the night as I tapped my toes. I imagined that the lizards and the desert rabbits outside were doing the same, swinging back and forth with a smile and a loving stare at Virginia's little trailer in the desert, all of us amazed at what can be done with the breath of a life.

And so I was amazed at the breath of my own life, as I continued on, approaching the vast, formidable expanse of Texas.

So here we go on a desert morning, bound for the Texas line: The friends are ready. Test the shoulder of the road to see if the gravel will roll under foot or hold firm. Begin the walk, raising the old flag high. Find the curve of each foot that works best to avoid the sharper pains. Keep a straight posture and land easy to keep the dull pains of the spine from spiking Too often. Keep an eye to traffic, but scan the ground in front of each step--a fall could be a great disaster, as we ancients are made of china. Wave a hand to the people passing by. Breathe deeply, for old muscles need their oxygen. Remember to constantly sip water from the backpack's plastic tube. Another step and another, chugging along now, with the far horizon sometimes visible from atop a rise or around a bend. Be a good sport and chat it up downhill with today's companions, but save precious breath going uphill. Keep going. One-half mile already down. Above all, grasp that we are here now, in this beautiful place and moment. And so it goes, with always a new plant or animal to discover and the clouds of the sky forever presenting a changing gallery of sublime colors and shapes beyond imagination to distract us from our

pains.  Ten miles a day. They tick off. In a week, you have gone another sixty miles.

It took four months to walk across Texas. I have so many wonderful friends now from that wild state. And then through Arkansas.

I walked into Arkadelphia through sweltering 105-degree misery. But here was heaven: a real town with a fine main street and lovely shops and homes. Our little band of walkers had a lemonade at Percy Malone's drug store.

The central part of Arkadelphia's downtown was flattened by a tornado in 1997, only two years before my walk. It was restored to beautiful standards and in record time. The center of the damage was Percy Malone's drugstore, which has been rebuilt from scratch. It fits nicely with the historic buildings nearby. Percy introduced himself to us and told us the whole, harrowing story of the tornado.

I don't know how Arkadelphia got such quick and first-class disaster relief from the federal government, but they did.

In other news, Percy Malone is one of then-president Clinton's oldest and best golfing friends. Percy's computer was where the huge and important Friends of Bill mailing list was managed for the president.

Now, the fact that the leaders of Arkadelphia knew the president may or may not have helped them get faster and better assistance from the government. I think the government should have helped them quickly, and I'm glad they did. But it may be a case study to demonstrate that access is important in politics. We need to look at how people get that access. Friendships and loyalties and long histories will always create access, and that is fine. But being a citizen in a district should automatically come with pretty good access to the elected representatives.

Giving money to a candidate cannot help but translate to access. It is a natural thing, even though it is wrong, for the public official who provides special access for his or her campaign donors is stealing that access away from the citizens of the district to whom it rightfully belongs. But as long as there are big political donations, there will be that sale of stolen goods.

This case study in access should come just as I was walking with political activists John and Mary Rauh from back home. John said we do not have to have big political contributions in our politics at all.

After lunch at Percy's, John sat down with me and with the others walking with us and made the argument that getting ³soft money² out of politics is important, but it wouldn't do the whole job. Soft money is the money given to political parties by corporations, unions and the wealthy, so that the laws limiting what can be given to candidates are circumvented. The parties, in turn, give that money to the candidates. John said the real solution is the public financing of campaigns, as now exists in Arizona, Maine and Vermont --and Massachusetts if the legislature will do the right thing and fund the voter-approved program.

Here's how public financing works: First, it's voluntary, so there are no constitutional problems about limiting anyone's rights. The candidate who wants to participate has to personally collect a certain number of qualifying signatures and small contributions --usually in the five dollar range--from people who live in the district. This demonstrates community support. Someone who has long been

active in a parent-teacher group or scouting or some such thing will have an easy time of it. Someone who Has not helped their community will find it hard sledding. When the candidate meets these requirements, the campaign receives advertising money from the state election fund. The candidate must agree to neither raise nor spend any other money. That neatly gets special interest contributors right out of the picture. The cost of such a system is about one-tenth the cost of paying off special interest contributors with tax breaks and other favors.

In my childhood, it was expected that the community would put up the speaking stand and promote the candidate events so that voters would know all about the candidates. Public elections should in every way be funded by public money, or our elected representatives shall evermore be governing under the influence.)

As of Arkadelphia, I started talking to people about the clean money option of public financing.

In Memphis, Tennessee, I walked with the sanitation workers who walked with Dr. King on his last earthly day. They gave me one of the original protest signs, which says, ³I am a man² -an eloquent appeal for human dignity.

They told me that campaign finance reform must happen if social justice is to move forward in this nation.

Then Kentucky, Ohio, and the fearsome mountains of West Virginia.

Climbing the Appalachian range was difficult for me, as there were often blizzard conditions to walk in. I am not sure how I made it, except to tell you that if you will put one foot in front of the other, and if you dress for the occasion, you can go about anywhere you want.

I stopped in Cumberland, Maryland to celebrate my 90th birthday. The townspeople marched me through the beautiful streets, singing ³This Land is Our Land.² The moment, like so many other moments, was fully worth the entire walk. ~~and had~~

The snow on the eastern slope was too deep to walk. Luckily, I am an old cross-country skier, so I strapped ~~them~~ ^{skis} on again and skied for 100 of the last 180 miles to Washington.

On the day I walked to the Capitol Building, 2,300 people were walking with me. We arrived at the

Capitol steps with bagpipers and dozens of Members of Congress. Hundreds more were waiting on the steps. I can't recommend this sort of thing enough. You really must arrange a welcome for yourself like that someday.

It was indeed our Capitol, our government that day. It must be so always.

If I have any single message for you, it is that it is never too late to get in shape. It is never too late to do a great thing for yourself. It is never too late to go in search of your deepest values and your wildest dreams of brotherhood. Everything still awaits you. Everything is still laid out in front of you. It isn't even over when the fat lady sings, for I had more than a few of them sing, and still I had a hundred adventures more.

Let me tell you that the issue I walked for is far from resolved. The Senate has approved the McCain-Feingold bill, but there is a good chance it will die this month in the House of Representatives.

and the President has signed it

Here is our national problem: The cost of our elections has sent our senators, representatives and presidents running away from us in every direction to raise money. The interests of Americans of modest