

Book Speech - Florida, August 2006

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 nine 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 campaign finance reform, 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 solve and friend. He walked with me from Pasadena to Twenty-nine Palms in the California desert, which is quite a walk for an old man. He would rejoin me many times in the month 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 you step is welcome.

“Let’s go,” Ken said, and off we went. After so may years fettered by age, parenthood, and the burdens of two death watches- by 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 he store windows showed something else again. My advice is to not look too long at the 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. 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 boy who went to North Africa and Europe to defend democracy and who never came back. The stars are unbelievable.

I am 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 path together between those competing desires.

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

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

“Now, Doris. Sit down right here, and I will give you a concert, 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 “On the Road to Mandalay” 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.

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 in N. H. 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 'soft money' 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 Connecticut.

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 said, 'I am a man' -- 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 out 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 91st birthday. The townspeople marched me through the beautiful streets, singing 'This Land is our Land.' The moment, like so many other moments, was fully worth the entire walk.

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

place.

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, people

from all over the country, 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.

Here is our national problem. The cost of our election has sent our senators, representatives and president running away from us in every direction to raise money. The interests of Americans of modest means, and the interests of a healthy planet, have taken a back seat to the demands of multinational corporations and billionaires, who now control our elections.

The best jobs of our middle class have been wiped out by big box stores and the exporting of our jobs. It continues in a way that gives people great fear for their own futures. The safety nets such as Social Security and our Bill of Rights, are being cut from under us for the financial benefit of a few. The gap between the rich and the poor has never been wider.

We have let the corporations invade our White House our Senate our House of Representatives, and the administrations of our states. The division between the rich and the poor has never been wider. The answer to our problem is Public funding of our elections. Clean Elections. You have such a bill on your ballot in 2006 and if you pass it, the whole country will be so proud of you. My efforts today are concentrated on such a bill being passed in N. H. We have Maine, Arizona and Connecticut with a Clean Elections bill, and California will have such a bill on their ballot also.

You can help by getting the vote out in 2006, and making sure that all the votes are counted. I wish you good luck in both instances, as does the rest of the country.