

Defending the Core

Remarks by Steve Russell – Oklahoma Liberty Conference, February 20th, 2010

Many of you came today with an expectation of learning what we are facing in Oklahoma. On the subject of Liberty, what we are facing is no different here than anywhere else in our country. As great as our state is and as independent as our people are, we still find ourselves with a huge deficit. Not merely in budget, but *mostly* in the ideas of what separates us as Americans from any other people in the world.

I believe our greatest crisis today is finding individuals who understand just a few things on what it means to be an American and are willing to defend those basic distinctions. Plainly, they are Freedom of Speech, Belief, Assembly, the Right to Bear Arms, being secure in our Property, and having equal protection under law. These are embodied in the 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 14th Amendments. As a state, having the right to stand in the gap for our citizens when the Federal Government has not been granted certain powers is also paramount. That is embodied in the 10th Amendment.

These are the core principles that make us different, unlike any nation in the world. These are the rights that we must safeguard, and when imperiled, we must staunchly defend. Yet today, we seem more interested in creating and defending government entitlements than in shoring up and defending our liberties. Let me give you a few examples of how this hits home in Oklahoma.

Every year, our legislature creates an average of over 400 new laws to complicate the lives of Oklahomans. Thank God we are only a part-time legislature. Lest we be dealt with too harshly, that figure is whittled down from several thousand bills. From 1988 to 2004, we have successfully passed laws that grew our state government by 149%. This outstripped the combined totals of inflation and population growth by 123%. This is not nationally—this is right here in Oklahoma. After 2004, we've seen no appreciable difference in the figures since Republicans began to come to power. The government and entitlement growth disease is clearly bi-partisan.

Today, Oklahoma ranks as the 5th most over-governed state in our Republic. From 2000 to 2009, private sector jobs increased not quite 3%, while State Government employment increased over three times that to nearly 10%. Local Government increased by a whopping 27%. What does that mean? If you look at this auditorium, it means that one in every six Oklahomans here is probably a government worker of some kind. So what impact does that have if you sit in this room and don't have a government job? It means that it will now take 17 of you to pay the taxes to employ each state worker. It will take 29 of you to fund a *local* government worker. The ratio is out of whack. So is the mentality that allows it to grow.

Here is the mentality in a nutshell. I get a government job in Oklahoma. I expect to be entitled to that job and to a government check for the rest of my life. Told by my association or union I am not content with the wages to which I was hired, I then demand better pay. I scream for more resources and cry foul that there are not enough people in

my department. I suddenly feel like I can't do my job and I actually come to believe it. Productivity decreases. I then lean on lawmakers to give me what I want or else. I make sure to elect those I want to blame for the next round of the game. That accomplished, I watch the government growth games play out each year at the capitol while individual liberty suffers because my agency and all the others demand new reach into *your* life, new encroachment on *your* livelihood, new taxes from *your* paycheck and new fees from *your* pocket so I can help you. Kind of makes you sad, doesn't it.

But even if we fixed government growth we still don't have time for personal liberties because we haven't even put a dent into the waste, fraud and abuse embodied in Oklahoma's common and higher education system. Education spending today could have operated our entire state in 1996. Today it accounts for over 55% of the state's budget—one of the highest in the country—leaving hundreds of other agencies and services to scramble for the 45% of crumbs that remain. If the state's budget were a ham sandwich, we would see two fat hobos crying starvation as they devour over half the sandwich while 18 other hobos try to divide what is left.

“More!” the fat hobos say. “If you don't give us more, then you hate teachers and hate children and you care nothing about the future of Oklahoma!”

No, what we hate is theft and waste of government tax dollars earned by the people of Oklahoma.

We actually *do* care that only 1 in 4 of our kids today can name the first president of the United States. We *are* concerned that 25% of 4th graders cannot read at a basic level, shedding light on why only 80% of children graduate our high schools. We are amazed that Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia have less school districts added together as Oklahoma does by itself, yet, they have *11 times our population!* We wonder how Iowa, with our *same* population can operate with 50% less state superintendent overhead and still outscore us at nearly every level on the ACT for high school seniors. We get angry when we discover that a school superintendent made \$502K a year in 2009. We are stupefied that one-third of the school superintendents make as much or more than a Brigadier General in the US Army and many make more than General Petreus, who is responsible for all the combat troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Still, maybe there is hope if we can just get our kids to college. Forget it. You can't afford their fees, mismanagement and luxuriant spending on the state doll fed by your tax dollars. What future will there be for the working man and woman, whose wages have increased only 150% since 1994 while a college education for their children has increased \$430% during the same period, leaving middle class Oklahoma without a 'Hope' or a 'Promise.' But thank God we give away college tuition to so many who do not have the stability or discipline to stay in class so they can contribute to the pathetic 17% percent graduation rate of Oklahoma's college freshmen. We feel cheated when we hear that college presidents make half a million a year on public monies or decline their provided housing and car so they can convert it to salary and earn a higher retirement from the taxpayer's pockets.

You see, we don't hate teachers or children at all. We hate dishonesty—something we should have learned was bad at school. And besides, education in Oklahoma has been fixed. We fixed it with the tax on cigarettes and alcohol. We fixed it with para-mutual betting. We fixed it with oil and gas revenue streams. And then we really fixed with Casino gambling and the state lottery. So please educators, don't give us the broken record when you come to us for more on State Question 744.

One thing we haven't fixed with education is the spine of lawmakers willing to say, "Enough! Make do with what you have and prepare to be audited." And because we have such chiropractic deficiencies, the educational lobbyists knock off the state coffers like a convenience store every year because they know they will get a pay off.

So, we find ourselves observing a giant shell game of grab all you can. It almost seems there is a race to plunder the state coffers. In the rush to keep up with it all and thereby become distracted, we find our liberties quietly eroded by laws that want to restrict your beliefs; silence your views on traditional marriage; prohibit assembly; declare your land blighted so it can be usurped by collegiate or city growth; restrict your right to carry a firearm so you can be murdered by a Harvard-educated Neurobiologist professor on a college campus; put your personal life history in a computer chip with a bio-metric photo ID just so you can drive a car; and make you out to be a domestic terrorist when all you did was come home from a war fighting real ones.

What can we do? ...There are a few things. First and foremost, we must support and defend the Constitution of the United States. We must do it with the civility and cunning allowed by the Bill of Rights of our great nation. To do that, we must know them. Once we know them, we can use the Bill of Rights as a measuring stick for any piece of legislation that comes our way. No matter how good it may sound on the surface, if the proposed laws encroach on our free speech, assembly, worship, bearing of arms, rights to property, and the right to be treated equally under the law, *then* we must have the courage to fight them. While we muster this courage, we must also have the courage to stand for those we disagree with—those whose beliefs and speech, though differing from our own, must also be guaranteed. When we find ourselves among those that can do that, we must choose among ourselves those willing to represent us. We still have that freedom.

In the interim, take a stand on the issues. If we as lawmakers do not adequately represent you, school us. Be willing to listen in return. That vote that seemingly supported sex offenders might have been about not wanting a 'Sharia'-like law that would enslave an American with a dog collar or bracelet after he or she has fully paid their debt to society. That vote against education funding was not against teachers or children, it was a demand for bloated educational bureaucrats to make cuts and 'make do' like your family does when it is a little short. That vote that was supported by some dark-skinned American who speaks a foreign tongue was as much about protecting all Americans' free speech, not just those who look and sound like us.

As important as all this is, we must discipline ourselves as well. What good is a society full of cynics and critics whose personal conduct is nothing but shameful? If we sprinkle salt, shed light and speak truth, others will begin to get it. Today is proof of that. Focus the energy and issues on our basic constitutional liberties and we will see them last longer. Teach them to your children and they will take up the torch, just as each of you had someone to pass it to you.

We must also realize that many in our state and nation will continue to believe we should measure truth with a rubber ruler, stretched to any viewpoint or situation. Our conscience however shouts above the din and tells us what is good and what is bad. There are major differences between what is good and right about the American way of life and why it is bad if we do not defend it. Many today look beyond our shores and suppose that we created our enemies and we have much to learn from them. They don't see the harm in taking up their philosophies and political viewpoints. They just can't understand why we are so concerned and level charges of Xenophobia, dementia and educational deficiency.

If we look at the differences between what our country stands for and what the enemies of our nation stand for, we should see that true Americans seek peace and justice. We go through great expense and pains to protect the innocent. We even shroud the accused in innocence until proven guilty. Our enemies seek terror and enslavement of innocents. They wrestle no conscience to protect innocent lives, willing even to blow up children if it achieves their goals. Their plots and plans center around the infliction of suffering and misery on innocents to achieve their goals.

Americans investigate and uncover instances of injustice within their own institutions, whether they are military or governmental. America exposes the wayward soldier or politician that has abused his authority, holding them to account, and most often it is not an *outside* agency making such discovery. Our enemies, on the other hand, revel in the use of unjust means to seek to destroy the widespread trust in public institutions through the systematic spread of fear and terror. And when the government or military attempts to uphold justice, officials in charge are targeted and brutally murdered along with their families.

America believes in a world that respects individual freedom. It accommodates other lines of thinking without giving up what makes us American. Our enemies hold no such views. They brutalize and restrict freedoms at every turn. They force individuals to conform to a narrow view or face the threat of death.

Americans extend tolerance to others, even when they know that such tolerance can get out of hand if abused. Our enemies put tolerance to the sword, condemning anything but their narrow beliefs as worthy only of death and destruction.

In view of these differences, the last thing we need to do is accommodate those who share no love for our American freedom and way of life—even if they are American. We must face our enemies and make no apologies when we defend our freedoms. If our enemies are domestic, we must face them within the full extent of the law. If our enemies

are foreign, we must rally to those who bear the greatest burden in our defense. As Americans, we can be accommodating, but we can never accommodate evil on the premise that we are no better than anyone else. The American way of life *is* better. If it were not so, there would be nothing left worth defending and you would not be here.

Despite the moodiness many here may feel today, I challenge you to never lose sight of who we are as a people. We were endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights. Learn what those rights are. Defend them with civility but also with iron determination. Understand that the battle between what is good and what is evil has not changed-only the number of foot soldiers willing to take up the fight. May you be such people. Go in the confidence that God still sits on His throne. Keep the faith. Don't ever quit. God bless you all.

Steve Russell, an Oklahoma State Senator, is a veteran of Afghanistan and Iraq. He commanded a battalion that was central to the hunt and capture of Saddam Hussein. He is a national speaker with Premiere Speakers Bureau and has had opinion pieces published in several national publications. He also serves as Chairman and Founder of Vets for Victory.

Note: The information for much of these remarks was based on research available from the Oklahoma Council for Public Affairs.