

Opening Day Remarks
Wednesday, January 7, 2015

Members of the House, guests and friends: Welcome, all of you, to the 2015 legislative session. For the ninety-eighth time, a new General Assembly has convened. I thank all my colleagues, and the people of Missouri, for the privilege of holding this gavel and allowing me to serve you in this office. Let me also thank the members of my family who are here today to support me, and who have stood beside me throughout my time as a public servant.

In our ranks this afternoon, we count 32 new members from all walks of life. If you are like me, every day you walk in the Chamber, you will be inspired and in awe of its historic and timeless beauty. There's no experience quite like your first day as an elected legislator, and we congratulate each of you on your arrival.

At our best, this House can be an impressive sight, and I hope this session will find us often at our best. As your new Speaker, I pledge to do all that I can to keep business moving along in the right direction, and in the right spirit befitting of this majestic setting.

When the two parties extend respect and courtesy to one another, that can be a victory all by itself in politics. To the surprise of some, many of us are actually friends in this chamber, no matter which side of the aisle we're seated on.

There's never a disagreement that can't be handled in a friendly, fair-minded way. That's not the same as pretending we don't have disagreements – of course we do. But if six years around this capitol have taught me anything, it's that a little good will and trust can go a long way. We can disagree without being disagreeable.

So much of our work here, after all, is carried along by consensus. By far most bills that pass this House receive a substantial, bipartisan majority. They don't involve Republican issues, strictly speaking, or Democratic issues. Often they just come down to the basics of good government – constitutional functions and practical, attentive service to the diverse districts that we represent. When those fundamentals are the focus, we can hardly go wrong.

As for the broad direction of policy in this session, it seems to me that this has been set by the people themselves. The voters of Missouri sent an unmistakable message in November, delivered in person today by at least 117 of us.

This session and beyond, I will add my voice and my vote to the decisive majority that the voters have given us. I come to this position as a frank believer in certain principles of government, starting with a preference for individual freedom over the power of the state. I am skeptical of an ever-expanding public sector because I put my faith in the private sector and private enterprise – which is, and will always be, the true source of prosperity for our people.

In any state, there's always a temptation for government to go beyond its proper limits, intruding on the rights and responsibilities of the citizen. We've been warned about this by, among others, Ronald Reagan. "Government," he said, "cannot be clergyman, teacher, and

parent. Government is our servant, beholden to us.” That’s a timeless piece of wisdom, and if we keep it in mind, then we will always do right by the citizens of this state.

In this legislature, let’s avoid repeating mistakes that we’ve seen play out at the federal level. Whether it’s overregulation of the economy or the practice of living off borrowed money, these policies do not serve our country well, and they won’t work any better in Missouri.

There is an ongoing competition among the states – for investment, development, and jobs – and these days it’s getting serious and it is too often a battle we lose. Like any competition, it requires discipline, above all spending discipline. Problems cannot be solved just by throwing more money at them and declaring Mission Accomplished. We must be good stewards of taxpayer dollars and insist our monies are spent in a more effective and transparent manner.

By standing together in support of the families and businesses of Missouri, we will rein in the ever-expanding government bureaucracy and foster the freedom of workers and innovators to do what they do best.

Together, we will provide the kind of opportunities that will encourage and foster economic growth and job creation.

Together, we will challenge our educational institutions to put students first and to graduate students at all levels who are ready to compete in a 21st century economy.

And together, we will work to ensure the doors of opportunity are open to everyone who wants to, and is willing to, put in the hard work and sacrifice necessary to succeed.

As this state moves forward, we want everyone to feel empowered to achieve their dreams - no matter their age, their region, or their race. We want everyone to have their chance at a quality functional education, their opportunity to get ahead, their equal opportunity to participate in the economy of our state.

No one in this room needs any reminder of how things can look when that kind of hope is missing. The national attention our state received last year isn’t what anyone would have wished for. But the story and narrative which is missing about Missouri is the goodness and character of our people. We live here. We see it every day.

We saw it again during those nights in late November when some of our bravest and finest Missourians against great odds risked life and limb to protect the innocent and keep the peace in the midst of the growing chaos. Among those many dedicated first responders were the men and women of the Ferguson Fire Department, the Metro North Fire Protection District, as well as fire departments from Pattonville, Maryland Heights, Florissant and throughout the St. Louis and surrounding areas.

These men and women endured the violence and danger of that night as they worked to keep the people safe by fighting the many fires that were set. They showed an unwavering commitment to their duties even as they were at times forced to drop their hose lines to take cover from the

hundreds of gun shots fired and the debris that was being thrown at them. In the face of great danger, these men and women came together to work tirelessly as one and their selfless actions saved countless lives, homes and businesses.

For their courage and commitment to service we are forever in their debt, and we are reminded of the respect we have for all of our fearless firefighters, emergency personnel, and police officers who save lives and defend our communities.

Joining us today in the upper gallery are:

Fire Chief Floyd Renner and Firefighter Dave Volze from the Metro North Fire Protection District;

Fire Chief Terry Loehrer from the Pattonville Fire Protection District;

Deputy Chief Tim Dorsey from the West County Fire Protection District;

And Mark Woolbright with the International Association of Fire Fights Second District.

I ask them to please stand, and for all of you to please join me in honoring these incredibly brave individuals who put their lives on the line to protect our communities.

And today, let me make this pledge to all of our public safety personnel and first responders that this body will do its best to get answers to what happened that night, and as speaker I will do everything in my power to make sure it does not happen again.

You know a place best when you love it, as every one of us loves Missouri. We wouldn't have sought these offices, campaigning on all our different ideas, if we were complacent ... if we thought that our state needed no improvement. This is a time of change and aspiration in Missouri, and a clear sense of purpose is always welcome in this old capitol. Our agendas may vary, but our aspirations for Missouri are the same. So as we turn to our official business, let's gather up all of that conviction, all of that creative energy. And let us achieve real things, and make a real difference for the people who sent us here.

I might add that one way to serve the people is to keep listening to them. All wisdom does not begin and end in this House or in government. And as we in this legislature set standards and rules for others to follow, let the highest standards be the ones we apply to ourselves. We should do the right thing because it is the right thing to do and not for personal gain or self promotion.

Do not take this time for granted, because the privilege that you and I enjoy – is not forever. It will not be long before we leave this Chamber, clear out our offices, and that will be that. And trust me... that time comes quickly. What better moment to think about your last day than now, here on your first day? We all want it said of us that we used our time well ... stayed true to our principles ... worked with one another ... and that we brought only credit to the Missouri General Assembly.

For this session, at least, all of that is a story yet to be written. No session ends as it begins and today I am excited for this session that begins right now. And if I might add just a thought to the chaplain's fine words: May we do our work with excellence and honor. And may the good spirit of this day still be with us when that work is done.

Colleagues and friends, I thank all of you for the privilege of serving as your speaker.