

Congressman Bob Michel  
Bicentennial Remarks  
March 2, 1989

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President pro tempore<sup>senator</sup>, Byrd,  
Mr. Majority Leader Mitchell, ~~distinguished~~ *my colleagues*  
~~guests:~~ *and distinguished guests.*

That stirring rendition of "America the Beautiful" speaks of the natural wonders of this great land -- its "spacious skies" and "purple mountain majesties" /

But equally as beautiful is our legacy of self-government, because it is a beauty we have created ourselves /

With God's help and our own work / we have crafted a way of living together in community / guided by the ideals of justice and equality before the law /

Nothing beneath the spacious skies is more beautiful than human beings working out their destiny in freedom // In that sense, our country has for 200 years indeed been America the beautiful /

And Congress is a major part of that creation

One of the most gratifying events in each session of Congress is the return of former members to this chamber/

It is a special day for all of us, filled with memories/ The continuity and traditions of this great institution are embodied in our welcome of old friends and colleagues

Today, in a similar spirit, we are gathered in honor of other former members of Congress, the 65 representatives and 26 Senators who made up the First Congress

It is difficult for us to think of them as colleagues/ We are, after all, separated by 200 years/ We can no longer see them as they were/ They have become a legend and it is the legend we see/

In one sense, it is good we have this legend/  
A nation needs its legends as much as it needs its  
heroes/

But it is good for us to recall today that the  
Congressmen we discern across the chasm of the  
years were also creatures of flesh and blood/ not  
the demi-gods of legend/

They had to make the same kind of decisions we  
do./ They had to answer the same questions:

Will it be by "<sup>ye?</sup>~~aye~~" or "nay" on this vote?/

Shall I compromise/or shall I fight?/

How can I balance the desires of my  
constituents with the harsh necessities of  
governing?/

Like us,/ and like all those who came after  
them,/ they had to work for ideal political goals/  
with imperfect human abilities/

I can remember when I first came to the House.  
*I looked with awe upon Speaker*  
~~I saw~~ Sam Rayburn and Joe Martin, Senators Ev  
Dirksen and Richard Russell and so many others. ~~I~~  
~~was in awe of them.~~

But now I ~~am~~ *find myself* a veteran of the legislative  
wars I might tend to think I have become all too  
sophisticated, not easily impressed.

But today, once again I feel that sense of  
awe and of humility as we commemorate the giants  
of the First Congress.

In this ceremony, we stretch forth our hand to  
them as colleagues, across the centuries. <sup>and</sup> We say  
to them:

"If we have not matched your record of  
accomplishment, we hope at least we have been  
worthy of your trust."

Separated by time, but united in duty, we say  
to Daniel Carroll of Maryland; George Thatcher of  
Massachusetts; Speaker Frederick Muhlenberg of  
Pennsylvania, and all the rest:

Honored Congressional colleagues, thank you,  
for your sacrifices and your achievements,  
Because of you our country is truly "America the  
Beautiful"

*And now I have <sup>###</sup> an ~~introduction~~ introduction to make.*

If I may paraphrase one of our former  
Congressional colleagues, the members of the First  
Congress left us a legacy "far above our power to  
add or detract" by our rhetoric,

At this point in our celebration, therefore,  
what we need is not more Congressional prose but  
the fiery, living, truth of great poetry

We are therefore fortunate indeed to have with  
us today the Poet Laureate of the United States,  
Howard Nemerov,

His work has been described as a combination of "modern sensibility with a classic elegance"

He has been the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the National Medal of the Arts, and among many other recognitions, the prestigious Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1981

He is also a novelist, essayist, critic and teacher, a Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, and distinguished University Professor of English, Washington University in St. Louis.

If these achievements were his only contribution to our civilization, he could be content. But he made another kind of commitment -- during World War Two, he flew more than 100 combat missions with the Royal Air Force and, later, with the <sup>U.S.</sup> American Army Air Force.

Howard Nemerov was once asked about the problem of poetic inspiration.

He said:

"The impulse comes from unexpected oddities."

"Unexpected oddities"<sup>pause</sup> sounds exactly like much  
of what goes on in some of our debates so he  
should feel right at home on the Floor of the  
House

*Mr. Speaker, my colleagues Ladies & gentlemen*

It is my great pleasure to introduce the Poet  
Laureate of the United States, Howard Nemerov.

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