Montana Democratic Convention

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Introduction

Thank you for that moving introduction, Mike [Cooney]. It sounds so good, most folks must think you're moonlighting as my staff director.

In January, when George Bush came to power in Washington and Stan Stephens came to power in Helena, we heard a lot about a "new breeze" and the "winds of change."

Well, they've kept their promises. There sure has been a lot of wind. And hot air.

But not much change.

Instead, it's the same old thing. Inspiring words. But the deeds don't match.

The Republicans talk about economic development. Then, for the eighth straight year, they try to kill the Essential Air Service program, which provides an economic lifeline to seven Montana communities.

They talk about compassion. Then they slam the door in the faces of Montana veterans trying to get medical treatment at Miles City. And they force rural hospitals all across Montana to the brink of extinction.

They talk about crime, and a war on drugs. Then, in the dark of night, the moving vans pull up to the FBI headquarters in Butte. Salt-Lake City or bust. But we're told not to worry. Montana, they say, will be left with the "minimal acceptable" FBI contingent.

They talk about bipartisanship and goodwill. Then they give us Lee Atwater and the politics of sleaze. Here at home, some Republican officials have gone beyond partisan politics to poison politics -- dividing Montanans, setting Montanans against one another.

We all know what's going on. It's a tactic as old as politics itself. If your rhetoric is hollow, your ideas are bankrupt, and you have no constructive solutions to offer, there's only one thing left. Inflame, distort, and frighten. Stir things up enough, and maybe people won't catch on. This seems to be the current Republican strategy.

It's the usual Republican strategy. But it won't work. Because we're not going to let it work.

Montanans are looking for leaders who are ready to look the future square in the eye; who want to build rather than
destroy; who want to bring people together rather than drive them apart; who reject the all or nothing false choice between good jobs and a clean environment; who understand and build upon the bedrock values that bind us, one to another.

The Democratic Message

This, my friends, is what the Democratic Party is all about. Progress. Unity. And bedrock Montana values.

It's time to reach down deep, draw on these strengths, and inject some fresh thinking into Montana politics.

We Democrats aren't always absolutely perfect ourselves. Like most organizations, we tend to cling to the political dogmas of the past. That must change, if we are to succeed and represent the people.

Remember who we are. We're the party of the average working family. The little guy. The middle class.

As times change, the concerns of the average voter change. The Democratic agenda must keep pace.

Voters remain concerned about the classic Democratic issues: fairness, civil rights, excessive concentrations of economic power, a decent minimum wage.

But they're also concerned about America's status in a changing world; about too much spending on bombs, bullets, ballistic missiles, and defense contractors and not enough on education, jobs and economic growth; about other countries not paying their fair share.

Montanans are concerned about drugs, crime, the cost of health care; about education for our families. Most important, Montanans want an economy that provides good steady jobs at good pay for themselves and for their children.

We have to present Montanans a message that combines classic Democratic themes with constructive solutions to these tough new problems. By doing so, we can breathe new life into Montana politics.

We can begin by setting our sights high and wide. We live in an ever changing, dynamic world. Fully 70% of American products and services face international competition--frought with danger and filled with opportunity. We must more aggressively seek projects and jobs for Montana. And we must help restore our country's economic strength - - open up foreign markets, reduce the trade deficit. Export products rather than jobs. Montana products. Montana wheat and barley, beef, log homes, lumber, plywood. And Montana silver belt buckles from Montana Silver-Smith.

Economic Strength

When Democrats talk about knocking down trade barriers,
some people accuse us of being protectionists.

I wonder if they've ever heard of Mike Mansfield. Mike saw that our economic future depended on expanding world trade. He convinced Montana Democrats long ago, and we remain firmly committed to his vision.

In fact, when I went to the Senate 10 years ago, I took Mike's advice to heart. I joined the Senate Finance Committee, which writes the trade laws. And I made trade one of my top legislative priorities.

The objective is simple. To open world markets for Montana products. And then help Montana companies exploit the new opportunities to the hilt.


Senator Lloyd Bentsen and I have been working hard at this. We've been cooperating with the Bush Administration. So far, the Administration is doing a good job of implementing last year's trade bill.

But some Montana Republicans seem to be annoyed. They think I'm being a little too hard on the Japanese.

But remember. The Japanese didn't eliminate the beef quota because they thought we were nice guys. No. They opened their two billion dollar market for one simple reason -- they were afraid of what would happen if they didn't.

That's not protectionism. That's standing up for our interests.

Investing In Montana's Future

Here at home, we also have to invest in our state's economic future.

Many Montanans are frustrated. They're working hard. Study after study shows that they're the best employees in the world. Yet, despite all that hard, honest work, we don't see much of the dazzling growth enjoyed by Americans in other parts of our country.

Something not quite right is going on here, and we might as well face up to it.

This country was built on the idea of common enterprise. E Pluribus Unum--one out of many. No region should benefit at the expense of another. We're in this together, and we should pull each other along.

It's not a Democratic idea. Or a Republican idea. It's a basic AMERICAN idea, and has been from Lincoln, to Roosevelt, to Eisenhower, to Kennedy. It's the idea that built the railroads. And funded the land-grant colleges. The interstate highway system.
But it's fallen out of favor.

And it's been replaced by a race to get rich quick. Laissez faire. Let the chips fall where they may. If urban centers thrive at the expense of rural America, that's the way it goes. If you don't like it, you can pack up and move to Phoenix.

We've seen banking policies that shift capital to urban centers, so that small town entrepreneurs can't get a loan to start a new company. Transportation policies that make it impossible to get from here to there. And telecommunications policies that prevent rural areas from keeping pace with fast-breaking new technologies.

These policies are no accidents. They were implemented by eight years of Republican rule. They're helping New York and Los Angeles. And they're hurting Montana and other western states badly.

It just isn't right. This is ONE COUNTRY. And Montanans shouldn't have to leave home to make a living.

It's time to restore the old-fashioned notion of common enterprise. The positive effort to see that EVERY REGION of the country benefits from economic growth.

I'm not talking about a hand-out. Or big government spending. Or volumes of red tape. I'm talking about taking basic steps to promote economic recovery in rural America.

Democrats are prepared to do precisely that.

It starts with education. Montana's school system is our secret weapon for the information age. Montana Democrats have led the way. Leaders like Judy Jacobson, Mike Kadas, and Nancy Keenan. And, of course, Pat Williams. Let me tell you something. Pat was the Education Congressman long before George Bush even THOUGHT of becoming the "Education President."

Our commitment to education must include a commitment to fight the scourge of drug abuse. This is not just an urban problem. It's here. The methamphetamine labs. Crack. Even the gangs. We need to fight a real war. One that includes the FBI, which wants to stay and fight by folding up the flag and flying over the horizon.

A solid, drug-free education is the smartest investment of all. But we also need good air transportation. Capital. And telecommunications.

Restoring funds for the Essential Air Service program is the first step.

And just this week, Senate Democrats produced an economic development package designed to help Montana businesses keep pace. It provides seed money to capital-starved Montana entrepreneurs. And it establishes an innovative new program to bring state-of-the art telecommunications services to
This may not sound glamorous. But look at it this way. Air service, capital, and telecommunications will be the Interstate Highways of the 21st century. Montana needs, and deserves, the best of all three.

Montana's Way of Life

There's another element to the economic equation. One that's often overlooked. You can call it the environment. Or health care. Or decent social services. It's really Montana's way of life. Why we live here.

It's special. And valuable. And fragile. And it's inextricably related to our economic future.

Take health care. The Medicare cuts of the early eighties put our 35 small hospitals on the path to extinction. Think about that. When a small town hospital closes, you might as well put up a billboard, "Don't locate your company here, because this town is dying."

I've been working with Montana seniors and hospitals to reform the rules and keep these hospitals open and to provide home health care, respite care and long term health care. We've made progress, and we'll make more. It's not just a narrow health care issue. It's health care at a price we can afford. And it's jobs.

The same is true of the environment. Montanans want clean air, clean water, and protection from toxic superfund dumps. Not because we're "tree huggers." But because we know that a clean, attractive environment is not an economic burden to be squandered. It's an economic BENEFIT. And if we're smart, we can use it as a strong selling point to attract new industries.

Working Together

That's the way I see it. Restoring America's strength. Investing in our future. Maintaining the Montana way of life.

It comes down to respect for the concerns of the average, quiet Montanan.

This comes home to me every month, when I spend a full shift working next to the men and women who are the backbone of our state.

These workdays tell me a lot about myself -- and why I'm a Democrat.

One day I walked the potlines at Columbia Falls Aluminum. One fellow I worked with had been there 22 years, the other, 10 years. Both were grateful for having good paying jobs and the time to hunt & fish in some of the best country in the world.

One cold winter day I worked the Montana Tunnels Gold Mine
floating the metal concentrate out of the crushed rock. We have 
a growing and important precious metals industry in our state.

I worked at the flour mill here in Billings, sacking flour 
and loading box cars. At the end of the day with all the 
kidding, joking and comrading, it was tough to leave, knowing I 
wouldn't be there with my new found friends the next day.

And at the Broadwater Day Care Center, I bathed and fed a 
man stricken with Alzheimers. I delivered meals on wheels to 
some of our immobile elderly in the twilight of their lives. I 
helped a former Carroll College professor, stricken with an 
aneurism, regain lost cognitive and motor skills.

These people are the heart and soul of Montana.

And they represent they basic, decent, hardworking, caring 
values that made each of us a Democrat.

*       *       *

Tonight, we must rededicate ourselves to our people, and 
to their values.

I want to make the American dream what it used to be -- a 
Democratic dream. I want to restore the confidence that by 
working hard, you would provide for your family and someday get 
ahead. I want average working Americans to regain control of 
their economic destiny. I want to build a new Democratic era 
as grand, as rewarding, and as secure as the one the great 
Democrats before us began.

And we look forward to the next election and the decade 
ahead with optimism.

We alone can answer the questions that matter -- how to 
create permanent and rewarding jobs, how to restore excellence 
to our educational system, how to provide every farmer, every 
teacher, every parent and every Montanan with the tools they 
need to compete.

The answers to these questions provide the real future of 
the Montana Democratic Party. We know who we are and what we 
care about.

And we're determined to make a difference.

Thank you and good night.