

Introduction

Thank you for that wonderful welcome. It is such an honor to be here at the beautiful Reagan Library to share my thoughts on our Party and our mission today. There is no better place to have these conversations.

I first visited the Reagan Library years ago. My husband Bryon and I stopped on a business trip. We were a bit lost at first, and I admit: I was just overwhelmed that I was *actually here*.

We met Peggy Grande, President Reagan's longtime executive assistant. She shared personal memories of a man I had admired since I was a little girl.

At one point, I found myself alone at the memorial outside. In a quiet moment, I reflected on a man whose leadership inspired the world at a time of turmoil. All I could do was bow my head and thank the Lord for sending such a man of strength and hope to lead our country.

Back in the gift shop, I of course purchased one of his replica cowboy hats – I couldn't resist. That hat hangs in my office today beside a portrait of President Reagan in his signature hat, with that wide, hopeful smile on his face.

Much more recently, I had the opportunity to visit the Reagan Ranch – that was a dream come true. Because while this magnificent library felt so impressive to me, the ranch felt familiar. In a way... it felt like home.

Growing up in the West

Growing up in South Dakota, my heroes have always been cowboys. My dad was a farmer and rancher, a real-life cowboy, who worked harder than anyone I have ever known. Tough as rawhide, he lived a life of integrity. He expected his children to be excellent.

"We don't complain about things," Dad always told us, "We fix them."

Free time on the ranch was rare. We hunted in the mountains with our horses. We checked cows on Sunday afternoons. We watched John Wayne movies. "The Duke" had a famous line that my Dad loved to repeat on long days at our ranch: "We're burning daylight."

And I remember there was a gate on our farm, leading from the pasture to the barn. For years, I lead our horses through it. There was a sign that hung above that gate that read, "There is nothing so good for the inside of a man than the outside of a good horse."

It wasn't until I was older that I realized that was a favorite phrase of Ronald Reagan's... So, if you want to know what President Reagan meant to my dad, a man who worked, who depended on God and the dirt for his livelihood, that tells you all you need to know.

Political awakening

Like many families, we rarely discussed politics around the table. On our ranch, our politics were *lived*, not *talked about*. We knew we had freedom and personal responsibility. We knew we needed to use both to make our corner of the world a better place and serve others. It wasn't any more complicated than that.

I was nine years old when Ronald Reagan was elected President. When I saw a picture of him in a cowboy hat, I was all in for The Gipper.

Later, I read of Reagan's genuine sorrow at having to leave his ranch to return to the White House. I didn't know what that felt like until I became governor and found myself feeling the same way. When home is heaven, you hate to leave.

It's an incredible honor to serve as South Dakota's first female governor – and also its 33rd governor. As you all know, Ronald Reagan also served as his state's 33rd governor. It's a small similarity, but one that's very special to me.

Our present danger

The world is a very different place today than when President Reagan was in office.

I recently came across a speech President Reagan gave during the Cold War. It reflected so much of today's tensions. I feel his words resonate with us now. Here they are. "To every person trapped in tyranny, including the Ukraine, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Cuba, and Vietnam. We send our love and support. Your struggle is our struggle. Your dream is our dream. And someday soon you too will be free."

PAUSE

What is happening in Ukraine today is tragic. I want to recognize the Reagan Foundation for awarding President Zelensky the Reagan Freedom Award. President Zelensky has demonstrated his bravery to the world by his willingness to speak truth and fight for freedom for the Ukrainian people.

May God bless him and the people of Ukraine.

It may seem ironic that the very first Freedom award was presented to Mikhail Gorbachev by President Reagan himself. What a hopeful time that was. But decades later, Gorbachev's successor is attempting to destroy his legacy. Make no mistake, Vladimir Putin is an evil man, who like other dictators throughout history despises freedom and hates those who seek it.

We are watching daily assaults on democracy, and they are a reminder to us all of President Reagan's famous words: "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free."

That is why in 2020, more than any Governor in America, I traveled to 17 states to campaign for President Donald Trump's re-election efforts. I knew elections have consequences and I did not want to wake up and have a leader who wouldn't put America first. His administration restored America's dominance on the world stage, made us energy independent, feared by our adversaries and respected by our allies. He created an economy, pre pandemic, that was one of the strongest this nation has ever seen and I wanted it to continue. And he defended our borders. A country with no borders is no country at all. That is why I have deployed the South Dakota National Guard to ensure our southern border is secure.

Unfortunately, with the help of the mainstream media, Joe Biden, was elected President of the United States. Sadly, America's president today is not fighting for our freedoms. He is not protecting those freedoms. In fact, Joe Biden is doing just the opposite.

In our time tonight, I'll share just a few thoughts first on our international challenges and then on what we need to do here at home. And I'll say at the start: if we defend democracy in Ukraine but lose our fundamental freedoms at home, then we will have failed.

International challenges

Joe Biden has been wrong on every major foreign policy decision he has been a part of for over 50 years.

If the leadership in White House had reflected "Peace through strength" by supporting our military; by standing strong against Iran, North Korea, and China; by not facilitating a devastating, disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan that resulted in the death of 13 American patriots... then we would not see an emboldened Putin.

Even now, President Biden doubles down on weakness. He's crippled our domestic energy supply by shutting down the Keystone XL pipeline – which was to come through South Dakota – while allowing Nord Stream 2 to continue to operate. Biden continues to rely on Russia to broker a nuclear deal with Iran while militias launch rockets at Americans in Iraq. Biden is also asking the dictator in Venezuela to pump more oil at the same time he muzzles American energy producers. It's absurd – and worse, it empowers America's adversaries while making us weaker.

These are clear threats to the security of the United States. But there are more.

China's ruthless Communist leaders are not only strengthening their military, they are manipulating their currency, stealing our IP, using regulations to create unfair trade practices and paying lip service to agreements from the UN while the US is held to a different standard.

They also have their sights set on our food supply. They are buying up our chemical, fertilizer and processing facilities that put groceries on the shelf. When another country *grows* our food, they *control* our food. And when they control our *food*, they control *us*. This is all a part of China's plan to control the United States.

It is the president's job to address these challenges. Joe Biden either cannot or will not be the leader America needs.

Domestic trials and what we want to conserve

When it comes to domestic policy, things are not any better, and we are burning daylight – inflation, surging gas prices, keeping supply chains intact, food security. Joe Biden's indecision and weakness is having irreversible consequences for American families, workers, and their children. We need a leader with vision and strength to correct our nation's current course – And, fast.

The great American story has been turned to a dark chapter. Pain, fear, and doubt echo the Carter years. Some say it is worse, because Democrats have a much more sinister motivation for embracing socialist policies than they did decades ago. Today, Democrats are about control.

The question before us is what is the Republican party going to do about it?

Abigail Adams once wrote, "The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in the contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues."

We confront great necessities today. Leading our country through them will require all that is best in us as a party and as a people. Our party was born during a national crisis, on the eve of our bitter Civil War. Under Lincoln, Our Republican Party freed the slaves and preserved the Union. Which means from our earliest days, the purpose of the Republican Party has been preserving the dignity of every American's life and holding our people together in times of turmoil.

So we need to ask ourselves: as conservatives, what do we want to conserve? What do we want to save and keep for our kids and grandkids?

Put simply, the greatest country in human history. Our founders built something the world had never seen before. They took the best of Western Civilization from Jerusalem to Athens to Rome to London. They brought together Faith, Reason, Law, and Representative Government. And in Philadelphia in 1787 they put all of that together to craft the Constitution of the United States.

They set out a Bill of Rights making clear certain rights could never be infringed upon: The right to speak and assemble, the right to worship – and act on those beliefs in the public square, the right to arm ourselves, the right to a fair and equitable criminal justice system.

They acknowledged rights come from our Creator, and free people honor their Creator when they exercise those rights to govern themselves wisely.

The Left's assault on fundamental freedoms today

But our rights and our freedoms have come under attack in an unprecedented way the past two years. Our public officials grabbed unconstitutional power over American families, workers, and students when a global pandemic gave them an excuse. The media stoked fear. National health experts manipulated data and ignored science. Dr. Fauci outright lied repeatedly, using his title and position as a political weapon against the American people.

And sadly, I watched people across the country roll over and give up their freedom.

Because government told them they could not hold gatherings, they gave up their freedom of assembly. Because government told them they couldn't go to church, they gave up their freedom of religion. Because government allowed citizens to be canceled and their opinions silenced, they gave up their freedom of speech.

The Left wants to criminalize dissent: when someone raises legitimate concerns on any number of issues from: election integrity to COVID-19 to climate change to Critical Race Theory being taught in schools – if you dare speak up, you get professionally ruined, punished, or – worse yet – prosecuted.

The role of the Republican Party: South Dakota as a model

The Republican Party must be the party of freedom. Republicans must roll back Joe Biden's assault on the Bill of Rights. Freedom of speech, assembly, and religion; the freedom to bear arms; the ability of the states to retain their own prerogatives are essential to our society's basic fabric and prosperity.

The American people are the most creative and innovative in human history. Those natural gifts flourish under freedom. They wither without it.

It matters who's in charge. And as a party, we as Republicans will have failed if we do not make very clear the consequences of having Democrats in charge.

Look from state to state and compare the difference between Democrat and Republican leaders. In Democrat states, families are devastated financially from mandates and closures. Having lost precious time in the classroom, kids have fallen behind.

Economies have been crippled by regulations and restrictions. Law and order has been eliminated by leaders who embrace criminals and embolden them by disrespecting law enforcement and the judicial system. People in those states are losing hope. It's heartbreaking.

Now look at South Dakota. When I ran for Governor, I told South Dakotans we could be an example to the country. Because we were a smaller state, we could do things faster more efficiently. As Justice Brandeis (BRAND-ICE) said, "The states are the laboratories of democracy," Our state could be a pilot project for the nation, enact conservative reforms and prove they create more success and opportunity for our people.

I had no idea our opportunity to be that example would come during a pandemic.

I would wager few here followed me during my eight years in Congress. You got to know me because the liberals started kicking me in the head for decisions I made during the pandemic. From Elizabeth Warren to Rachel Maddow, night after night on national news I was "reckless", "irresponsible", and "dangerous." At one point, George Stephanopoulos actually asked New York's former Governor Cuomo to give *me* advice!

Yes, that Governor Cuomo – who sent vulnerable seniors to their deaths in nursing homes and then covered it up.

Pause

I made my decisions differently. I listened to the experts. We studied the science. We researched the data. And then I took it all one step further: I talked to my general counsel and constitutional experts because I wanted to fully understand what authority I had, and what authority I *didn't* have. Because I believe that when leaders overstep their authority, especially in a time of crisis, that's how we break this country.

South Dakota was the only state in the nation that never once closed a single business. I never even defined what an "essential business" was because I don't believe Governors have the authority to tell you your business isn't essential. We never stopped people from going to church. We never mandated anything.

Applause

I stood in front of my people and told them I was going to trust them. I was going to give them all the information I had and let them use personal responsibility to make the best decisions for their family. And we would get through this unprecedented challenge together.

South Dakotans were worthy of that trust. Today South Dakota has the nation's number one economy. We had the least amount of businesses closures from the pandemic, the least amount of hours lost by workers, and the least amount of wages lost by employees. When the president offered elevated unemployment benefits, I was the only

Governor in the country that turned him down. I said, “thank you, Mr. President for the flexibility but we don’t need it. Our people want to work.”

We have taken in historic revenues from our thriving economy even though South Dakota has no income taxes, corporate or personal, no personal property taxes. All we have is a 4 ½ cent sales tax.

Since I have been Governor, we’ve paid off debt and funded trusts and reserves to historic levels. We’ve invested in dams, railroads, and infrastructure. I had a vision to bring high speed internet to every corner of the state during my years as Governor – we fully funded the project in *just one year*. We cut taxes and regulations. We signed constitutional carry and waived all fees for permits. Now in South Dakota it won’t cost you a penny to exercise your 2nd amendment rights. My state will even pay for your federal background check.

South Dakota now leads the nation in educational outcomes for children because our kids were in the classroom throughout the pandemic.

While Democrats played on fear, in South Dakota, we trusted in the Constitution and freedom. We gave people hope. We held public events to celebrate it. For Independence Day in 2020, beneath the faces carved in granite on Mount Rushmore, we showed America that it is good and honorable to revere past leaders. That we can and *should* learn from our history, not tear it down.

We just did what Republicans have said for years they believe. And it worked. Our state is thriving, and our people are happy.

Last year alone, we lost over 100,000 Americans to drug overdoses. In South Dakota, we also focused on the drug problem in our state. In 2020, just two states had declining overdose deaths: New Hampshire and South Dakota. New Hampshire’s rate dropped by half a percent. *South Dakota’s dropped by 16 percent.*

When states defunded police and disrespected law enforcement. I began a messaging campaign directed specifically at law enforcement. I said, “If you want to live somewhere people will respect you, come to South Dakota.” In one week more than 900 law enforcement officers raised their hands and said, “I want to live in South Dakota” – since then thousands have made our state their home.

I also brought and signed into law the strongest bill in the nation to protect girls sports. It is about fairness – about giving young women an opportunity to succeed. We also banned critical race theory in our schools and took action at our universities. Since I took office, we have passed, and I have signed into law over a dozen pro-life bills.

South Dakota has a AAA credit rating and a fully funded pension plan. We have a constitutional requirement to balance our state budget. In short, don’t you wish *you* lived in South Dakota?

Republican principles make us strong at home and in the world.

These policies were all inspired by Republican values and principles. *They work.*

These values make us strong at home. They also make us strong in a dangerous world....

In Congress, I served on the Armed Services committee and traveled abroad: Israel, Jordan, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, China, Norway, Greece, Italy, Egypt. Of all those trips, there is one I will never forget: my visit to South Korea and the Demilitarized Zone.

I can still picture today the South Korean soldiers lined up along their country's border facing the North. The North Koreans soldiers were just yards away facing them with their feet firmly on their soil. Between these two enemies stood our troops. Americans. Keeping peace.

The North Koreans soldiers tried to antagonize our warriors, spitting on them, shouting at them, taking pictures of them, trying to break their composure. Yet, our men and women stood strong, stoic, and firm. If ever there was an example of the role America plays in the world, it was there – in the flesh. Peace through strength. Everyday. Always.

Applause

That strength begins at home. And we use that strength as a foundation on which to stand amongst other nations as the world's most powerful.

In the past, as a party, we have been tested. There are many examples of Republicans rising to the challenge of the day, but unfortunately there are examples where we as a party have failed. We fight amongst ourselves, concerned about political polls, while losing our focus on the families in our communities living under the crippling burdens of bad policies and laws.

When I first became Governor of South Dakota in January of 2019, I immediately introduced a bill into our legislative session that would have required more civics and history education in our classrooms. I felt our children truly did not understand the gift they had been given by being born in this great country. It was Republicans who killed that legislation. They felt it would be too much of a hardship to change the curriculum that had already been established, they did not want to divert the time and energy away from other studies the teachers and administration may deem more important.

Some Republicans voted against it just to oppose me. They had wanted someone else to be Governor. They were more interested in fighting me or not rocking the boat with the teachers' union. They weren't even focusing on our children, the next generation.

Two short years later, CRT has infiltrated our nation's schools and parents are rising up to fight for their kids. These very same legislators have now joined with me to pass legislation banning CRT, and they support teaching true American history in our classrooms.

And when it comes to putting the hard work in to govern, at times the Republican party has refused. Instead of educating the public, people talk in soundbites. Instead of listening to debate, we shout each other down or jump on Twitter. Instead of thinking about the long-term consequences of our actions, we get worried about the next election.

During the pandemic, I found I couldn't just make decisions for my people, but I needed to explain to them why I was making the decisions I was making. I held a whole press conference on the Constitution, what power it gave to the federal government, to myself as Governor, but more importantly, the power it gave to them... the people. I gave a press conference on our state motto, "Under God the people Rule." I even gave a press conference on the need for perspective, encouraging people to shut off the tv and go for a walk. People need leaders who are willing to spend hours researching, studying, working, and communicating on issues that are important to our families.

When I was first elected to the state legislature years ago, I had a neighbor give me some advice that I have never forgotten to this day. He said, "Remember Kristi, every day you are in legislative session, our way of life is in jeopardy."

His message was clear. What we do matters. What we don't do matters. What we say matters.

Every bill that is introduced in South Dakota during our legislative session goes through a bill analysis by our staff. On this analysis there are several questions that must be answered. What will happen if this bill becomes law? What will happen if this bill does not become law? How much will this bill cost the taxpayers if it is enacted? The answers to these questions give me the information I need to decide whether or not I should support the bill or sign it into law should it make it to my desk. The very last question on the bill analysis form says, "What will be the impact of this legislation on the next generation?" You see, I don't want to only think about what will happen next week or the next year should this bill move forward...I want to know what the long-term consequences are for the next 10, 15, 20 years. We must know the precedent we are setting with each policy we embrace and what the impact on our kids and grandkids will be.

While our actions as leaders are far reaching, so are the words we use. The way we talk to each other has consequences. My advice to the Republican party is to get over yourself. We all have people in our lives we have stopped talking to, we have been offended by, or believe they are too far at the other end of the political spectrum from us that there is no sense in wasting words on them. We need to get over ourselves. And start by listening. No one feels like anyone listens to them anymore. Listen carefully.

Ask questions. Build a relationship. When I married my husband, some of his family members were Democrats. Today, most are registered Republicans. This didn't happen because I blew them up at the Thanksgiving Day table. It happened because we built a relationship, asked questions, talked, and found we had much more in common than not. If we do not do this, the Republican Party is missing an opportunity to restore America to what its founders intended. A nation of free men and women.

If Ronald Reagan were leading the Republican party today, there would be some who would say he is way too conservative for our times. There would also be other Republicans who would attack him, for being willing to work across the aisle to fix problems and make progress. The Republican Party is the answer to the challenges of today, but only if we remain true to our principles, and follow through on our promises to the people. And we must convey our message in a way that brings hope. Our world is desperate for optimism. As Republicans, what we believe works! It creates opportunity and freedom for all. If we can convey that optimism successfully, we will draw people to us, and bring hope for the future to all Americans.

America's strength lives in its people

To close, let me borrow words from one last cowboy: Teddy Roosevelt. "It is not in the still calm of life or the repose of a pacific station that great characters are formed."

We have seen great character at work before in our history. I come from the plains – the wide, open place of purpose and possibility. But at the other end of our state, there lies the granite faces of some of the greatest – Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln. They remind us that we do have the grit, tenacity, and values to preserve a more perfect union.

Yes, we believe in great character. But we don't think it can *only* be found in great leaders. America is *bigger* than our leaders. When the Founders gathered in Philadelphia in 1787, they spelled out exactly where the government gets its power – the people.

James Madison said in Federalist 49: "The people are the only legitimate fountain of power."

If America's public servants return to that belief – and embrace it – then America will be free, prosperous, and safe again. If they don't, then we won't.

What we loved about President Reagan is what our country is desperate for today: leaders who believe in the goodness of America, who see hope for its future and who are willing to gather our resources, will, and courage to make it real.

America is burning daylight. It is up to us Republicans to bring that message.

It is not for us to give up. It's for us to reach deep. To get up every day and build a country where men and women are free to think, speak, create, believe, and build. If we do this, we will call forth that strength that is the birth right of every American. We will meet the test in our time, here at home and beyond the shining sea.

I know we can. I believe we will. Thank you, and may God continue to richly bless the United States of America.