

North American Chair 2001 – 2007



Tom Foley was in public service most of his life. Those who knew him and found much to admire were many. Among the finest tributes offered in his name were remarks delivered during a special ceremony held in the U.S. Capitol on November 18, 2013 by former President Bill Clinton, under whom Tom served as Speaker, and President Barack Obama, who saw in Tom a life devoted to comity and compromise in the public interest. Their remarks follow, as do links to obituaries found in several U.S. newspapers.

Remarks by: The Honorable William J. Clinton, 42nd President of the United States

President Clinton: Mr. Michel may be 90 years old, but he has the spirit of a man half his age and the wisdom of one 10 times his age. We thank him for his remarks. Heather, I thank you, and, Mr. Speaker, I thank you for giving those of us who worked with, knew, and cared about Tom the chance to be here today. I thank you, Heather, for all you did to make his work possible and better.

Mr. President, thank you for being here, and Mr. Vice President, Vice President Mondale, and all the others who have spoken before me.

Shortly after I was elected President, I invited Speaker Foley and Leader Gephardt to come to Arkansas to see me to tell me everything I didn't know that was about to happen to me, which Tom Foley proceeded to do in that calm, restrained, balanced, lyrical way. Tom told me not to be lulled by Bob Michel's friendliness, that he was a very tough adversary, but I could make a deal with him. He told me not to be intimidated, Mr. Speaker, by your bellicosity because you were a brilliant politician, but in the end, we would find a way to do business. He turned out to be right about both things.

His leadership made possible things that mattered to me a lot. Being President is a matter of trying to do what you promised to do when you ran, trying to respond to legitimate impulses that are coming out of the political system across the range, and trying to deal with the unanticipated developments. And if you ignore any of them, you cannot prevail. And if you can't work with the Congress, it's very difficult.

Tom Foley, therefore, was pivotal in our landslide victory for my economic plan and deficit reduction plan, because we won by one vote in the House. And that runaway victory was made possible by the Speaker and everybody else

that voted for it. But also, we just celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Family Medical Leave law, the 20th anniversary of AmeriCorps. They are now part of the pillars of our sense of common citizenship.

Now, I have had Republicans and Democrats come up to me and tell me what a difference the family leave law made for them; young people who belong to both political parties who believed in citizen service and participated in AmeriCorps. He helped make those things possible, too.

And one of the things that I always appreciated about him and marveled at how he could be brutally honest in the kindest way.

It is true, as Leader Pelosi said, that he had a conversion of sorts on the whole question of assault weapons because of an experience he had, but he was very clearheaded. He told me when we succeeded, in no small measure thanks to the leadership of then-Senator Biden, and putting the assault weapons ban back in the crime bill, he said, "You can leave this in here but there will be a lot of blood on the floor if we pass this. Many of us will not survive."

I will never forget the argument I had with him. I said, "Tom, I'm from Arkansas. Both my Senators voted for this. I'm still going to carry it next time." He said, "Yeah." He said, "In 4 years. It's the same thing with your economic plan. People will see that it works and people will see that they did not lose their guns and they still got to defend their homes and go hunting and be in sports shooting contests, but we all have to run before they know any of that. We have enough uncertainty now. If you put this in there, there will be a lot of carnage."

And I thought he was wrong, but he was right. And he lost that election by 4,000 votes. I would be a wealthy man if I had a dollar for every time in the last 20 years I have found my mind drawn to that conversation.

Was it worth his public service? We had 8 years of declining violent crime for the first time in the history of the country. We did prove that it did not interfere with people's Second Amendment rights, but the price was high. What I want to tell you is, appropriate today, that Tom Foley, as nice as he was, as civil as he was, as much as he loved his colleagues of both parties, was one tough guy. This is a man who took up martial arts in his sixties. Now that I am there, I respect it even more.

He risked the broken bones and the torn ligaments and everything. He was tough and he walked clear-eyed into the House, and we put those votes together and the crime bill passed. And those of us who supported it at least think America was much better off as a result. But he knew that, even in the spirit of bipartisanship and compromise, being in public service and making difficult decisions was inevitable and not free, and he paid the price.

Before I came here, I read all the letters that Tom Foley and I wrote to each other. That is a great thing about having a library. Somebody will dig that stuff up for you. Now, here is the one that means the most to me. It says the most about him. He loved being in the House. It hurts to lose anytime, but it really hurts if you're the Speaker, and he knew his district, it turned out, way better than I did, at least 4,000 votes better than I did.

Bob Michel talked about what they did on November 29, 1994. This letter was written to me on November 16, 1994, signed by Tom Foley and Dick Gephardt and Bob Michel and Newt Gingrich, asking that the administration send to the lame-duck session of Congress the legislation to implement the general agreement on terrorism and trade which established the World Trade Organization which I believe has played a major role in lifting more people out of poverty in extreme circumstances in very poor countries, in the last 20 years, than anything else.

He was, in short, dying inside, heartbroken, and he still showed up for work, and he still believed that the purpose of political service was to get the show on the road. I will never forget this letter as long as I live. Dick was hurt, too. He was going from majority to the minority, but Tom Foley had lost his seat in a district he loved. I talked to him about the wrinkles and curves of that district I don't know how many times. But he was doing his job.

I asked him to go to Japan, just as I asked Vice President Mondale to go to Japan, for a very simple reason. After our wartime conflict, they became one of our greatest allies and one of the greatest forces for democracy and security and freedom and growth in the world. They had a tough time in the 1990s. They had their collapse well before we did, and I always believed that the rest of the world was underestimating the Japanese people, their brilliance, their creativity, their technology, their resilience, and I wanted them to know that America still cared.

And when Fritz Mondale was there and when Tom Foley was there, they knew America cared. So I leave you with this. I think they had a good time there, and I think they enjoyed it. I know he did. There were seven Japanese Prime Ministers in my 8 years as President. We are not the only people that have turmoil. The best politician was Prime Minister Obuchi. Tragically, as a young man he had a stroke. He endured for 43 days after his stroke, and when he died I suppose in a busy world full of things to do, it was something of an anticlimax. I was appalled when I was the

only leader of a major country that came to his funeral. But I flew all the way to Japan, spent 7 hours, so that I could go. I liked him, I admired him, and I thought he had set forth a direction that gave Japan the best chance they had to succeed until Mr. Mori took office.

At the end of the funeral, young Japanese women appeared with trays of flowers, and in the site, his ashes were on a high wall that was totally made of flowers of the rising sun, and every person there, beginning with his wife, went up and bowed to his ashes and put a flower on the table until thousands and thousands and thousands of flowers were there creating a great cloud.

He was succeeded as Prime Minister by one of his close allies, and the ally said this Tom Foley and I stayed there for hours and then we went home and watched the rest of it on television until every person had put their flower there, a testimony to the importance of citizenship and believing in the institutions of your country. But the current Prime Minister said this of his friend, "I wonder if he ever dreamed, and if my friend dreamed, I wonder what his dreams were. Whatever they were, I hope they have all now come true."

I did not know Tom Foley well enough to know if he ever dreamed, or if he did, what he dreamed. But I know when he sat with me that day and watched that sacred experience, I saw the well of common humanity we all share across all of our interesting differences.

He gave his life to our country, and I hope his dreams have all come true.

Remarks by: The Honorable Barack H. Obama, President of the United States

President Obama: To Heather and the Foley family, to Tom's colleagues and friends, President Clinton, Vice President Mondale, former Speakers, and those who preceded me, I am honored to join you today to remember a man who embodied the virtues of devotion and respect for the institution that he led, for the colleagues that he served alongside, and, most importantly, for the citizens that he had the honor to represent.

Unlike so many of you, I did not have the privilege of knowing Tom personally. I admired him from afar. But like millions of Americans, I benefit from his legacy. Thanks to Tom, more children get a head start on success in school and in life, more seniors receive better health care, more families breathe easier because they know their country will be there for them in times of need. And all of them, all of us are indebted to that towering man from Spokane.

I think, in listening to the wonderful memories that have been shared, we get a sense of this man, and we recognize his humility. He often attributed much of his success to good luck and he may have had a point. Leader McConnell told the story about his first race. There were a couple of details that got left out. On the way to Olympia to file the paperwork for his first congressional campaign, apparently Tom blew out a tire, so he and some friends hitchhiked to a service station to get it fixed. And then, as they approached the outskirts of the city, they ran out of gas, so they pushed the car up the hill, coasting into town just before the deadline. And Tom went on to win that race by a resounding 54 votes.

So there's no question that there may have been some luck of the Irish operating when it came to Tom Foley, as well as incredible stamina. But what led him to make history as the first Speaker of the House from west of the Rockies was not luck. It was his hard work, his deep integrity, and his powerful intellect, and, as Bob Michel so eloquently and movingly stated, his ability to find common ground with his colleagues across the aisle. And it was his personal decency that helped him bring civility and order to a Congress that demanded both and still does.

Which brings me to a final point. At a time when our political system can seem more polarized and more divided than ever before, it can be tempting to see the possibility of bipartisan progress as a thing of the past old school, as Bob said. It can be tempting to wonder if we still have room for leaders like Tom; whether the environment, the media, the way that districts are drawn, and the pressures that those of us in elected office are under somehow preclude the possibility of that brand of leadership. Well, I believe we have to find our way back there.

Now, more than ever, America needs public servants who are willing to place problem-solving ahead of politics, as the letter that President Clinton held up indicates, as the history of the crime bill shows. We are sent here to do what's right, and sometimes doing what's right is hard and it's not free; and yet that's the measure of leadership.

It's important for us who feel a responsibility to fight for a cause to recognize that our cause is not advanced if we can't also try to achieve compromise, the same way our Founders saw it as a vital part of our democracy, the very thing that makes our system of self-government possible. That's what Tom Foley believed. That's what he embodied. That's the legacy that shines brightly today.

On the last day that he presided as Speaker, Tom described what it should feel like to serve the American people in this city. He spoke about coming to work in the morning and catching a glimpse of the Capitol. And he said that it ought to give anyone a thrill, a sense not only of personal satisfaction, "but very deep gratitude to our constituents for the honor of letting us represent them." And Tom never lost that sense of wonder.

It's interesting as I read that passage, what he wrote, the first time I visited Capitol Hill, Tom Foley was Speaker. I was a very young man and I was doing community work, and I remember seeing that Capitol and having that same sense of wonder. And I think now about Tom Foley being here, doing that work, and inspiring what might have ultimately led me to be interested in public service as well.

When we're standing outside these magnificent buildings, we have that sense of wonder and that sense of hope. And sometimes the longer you're here, the harder it is to hang on to that. And yet Tom Foley never lost it never lost that sense of wonder, never lost the sense of gratitude. What a privilege he felt it was to serve. And he never forgot why he came hereon behalf of this Nation and his State and the citizens that he loved and respected so much.

And so, as a country, we ought to be grateful to him. And to Heather and to the people of the great State of Washington, thank you so much for sharing Tom with us.

God bless Tom Foley. God bless the United States of America.

List of Obituaries

- [New York Times](#)
- [Politico](#)
- [Seattle Post Intelligencer](#)
- [Spokesman Review](#)
- [Washington Post](#)