

Western Governors' Association
Sunday June 29, 2008

Transcript of Keynote Address by Tom Brokaw

I am a child of the American West. Born in the northern latitudes of South Dakota to a mother and father who grew up in railroading and farm families in the formative years of the 20th century. I was raised on the prairie hard by the Missouri river of Lewis and Clark, getting my first rifle at age 10, fishing every day in the summer months and spending many a cold night in those cheap army blanket lined sleeping bags that we all knew in the fall and winter months.

Since then, of course, I have spent so much of my life as I am drawn annually to the American West. Here in Jackson Hole, I've climbed the Grand and Mount Moran, and I've fished the Snake and South Fork. I live not enough in Montana.

I started my network career in California where Meredith and I did long backpacking trips on the Pacific Crest. I learned to ski in Utah at Park City when the only restaurant was "cook your own steak" in those days. I've spent a lot of time skiing in Colorado and on my 65th birthday, I snowshoed to the top of Aspen Mountain and spent the night in a hut with my friend Aaron Ralston – the young climber who cut off his arm in Blue John Canyon in Utah and we did one of the most memorable documentaries I have ever been involved with on his epic experience.

I have fished the Deschutes River in Oregon. Had an epic trip on the Middle Fork in Idaho. I've climbed Mount Rainier in the State of Washington. I've hiked in Arizona.

I've shot quail in Texas and in New Mexico. I've missed more quail than I've shot in Texas and New Mexico. So I come to you as someone who has a great appreciation not only of this region and the culture and especially the people and the way we get things done out here.

One of Governor Schweitzer's aides said to me earlier – We get along because we have to get along." Life can be difficult in the American West.

I also grew up with native americans. Some of my closest friends when I was a youngster were Sioux who I didn't know at the time, spoke Lakota at home and I relished the tales of mountain men such as Jim Bridger.

A cherished the stories of Lewis and Clark in their journals the description of vast herds of elk and bison, packs of wolves and the sulking coyote, the yip of a prairie dog as they rounded the bend in the Missouri River that brought them into the American Savannah which came to be known as the Dakota Territory.

As a boy I would spend many nights on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River, looking to the West -- those trackless prairies and tried to imagine what it must have been like to have been the first settlers to push their oxen across the unbroken prairie or into the

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mountain passes, drawn by opportunity to settle in one of the most majestic pieces of geography anywhere on this precious planet.

What courage they had and what vision, thank God, they had to give us first Yellowstone and then Glacier and Grand Teton, Yosemite and Bryce and all the national parks.

In 1950, after the War my father bought the only brand new car he ever owned and as a family, we embarked on a wandering pilgrimage across Wyoming, Yellowstone Park, the Great Salt Lake, the Mormon Tabernacle, and Nevada and into California, our family instant constant awe of the towering mountain ranges and vast sweeps of glacial till.

We were thrilled by the sight of antelope racing along fences lines or herds of majestic elk making their way slowly across mountain meadows. Working cowboys pushing heifers and their new born calves to summer pastures.

As a young man, however, when I came of age, I decided to leave all that behind and head for the bright lights of big cities but within a few years I had a longing to return – and so I did. First as an itinerant backpacker, occasional climber, hunter, angler and summer resident of Colorado, California, South Dakota and Montana.

Then in 1989, I decided the commitment had to be deeper so Meredith and I bought into a ranch in Montana, thinking it would take care of itself while we enjoyed the river running through it, the sagebrush horseback rides and the climbs to nearby peaks.

Oh my God, the naïveté. The West is at once exhilarating and challenging environment. You come to the West on it on its terms, not yours. The grass, the water, the timber, the droughts, the fires, the weather. One of my very favorite books, as a matter of fact, Governor Freudenthal was a book called Weeds of the West, published by the University of Wyoming Extension Service. I had it out to all of the first time visitors who come from the East and they are still trying to find the plot when they get through with it.

But, then too there are those rewards unmatched anywhere in the world: the space, the throat catching beauty, the wildlife, the constant presence of Mother, Mother Nature in her grandest form, often violent, sometimes cruel but always awe inspirational and humbling.

In my one modest corner of Montana before the summer is out I will have seen herds of antelope, elk, mulies. I'll keep watch for a resident wolf pack, a pair of wily local coyotes, lions will come through the ranch at the end of August probably looking for new groceries. The first bear sighting is always a family ritual that we love to share with our grandchildren. I'll try to keep my friendly lab from rattlesnakes as big as gasoline hoses and from that badger family with cute faces and vicious appetites. Bald and golden eagles will soar overhead. A brace of Sand hill cranes has already set up shop for the summer. I hope again this summer we'll see the long billed curlews returning to our tall grass.

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And the rainbow, cuts and browns will, I hope, rise to my PMDs, caddis, blue winged olive or green drake.

I will be renewed by all of this and I will, as I do every summer, tell our visitors from the East. “Yes, the sky is always this big -- and those are bison, not cows in need of a shave.” As I need not tell this audience, America is looking to the American West as it hasn’t since the 19th Century. Every issue in our 21st Century culture is front and center in your region, Global climate change, energy, water, population expansion, immigration, economic enterprise and economic justice, balancing the equation between human desires and needs and nature’s needs and desires.

Here’s the good news, the citizens and their leaders in the West have a rare opportunity to prepare for this momentous change, to engage in a dialogue and develop common goals and approaches. More than ever, these challenges will transcend state lines so the West more than ever before will have to think regionally and in a bipartisan fashion.

It doesn’t mean the Montana bobcats or Grizzlies will have to roll over in front of the Wyoming Cowboys – or that the Utah office of economic development will have to stop courting California businesses -- or Colorado ski resorts will have to say. “Ya know, Jackson Hole ski resort is a pretty good place as well.”

We can still keep the pride in our states and what we stand for. The state pride and the fierce independence of the American West can remain intact but to survive and to thrive, to protect in advance all that is unique and precious about this magical region will mean more cooperation and a greater shared vision.

And what is most special about the West is Mother – Mother Nature. The mountain chains, sweeping prairies, long shorelines, great lakes and wild rivers, vast forests -- and the wildlife. The native creatures who have always been here -- and must always remain for they are central to the DNA of this unique region.

Their only vote in their interests is our understanding of our stewardship – as keepers of Mother Nature’s creatures that make our unique planet whole and vital. As we depend on them for biodiversity, for keeping our eco systems healthy and whole, as we depend on them for sport and for sustenance, for the sheer thrill of seeing them in the wild, they depend on us to keep their world a fit place for them to live and thrive.

We knew sometime ago through science and observation that their world is changing and we have an opportunity to make sure it is changing for the better and not just for the worse.

Freedom to roam – the network of wildlife migration corridors is just such an imaginative and sensible approach. It requires the most active and serious consideration – and urgent action. It can be a model for other regions of other challenges, a template for cooperation and vision.

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In my lifetime I have seen so many perilously, close calls: when I was a child I remember the streams of the Black Hills around Lead, site of the Homestake gold mine, were toxic with run off. Now they're healthy and full of life.

In our West boulder Valley of Montana and throughout the West the skies are rich with bald eagles which were almost lost to indiscriminate pesticide use. Catch and release as a central element in angling has helped the trout population flourish – and all the economic benefits that come with it.

California lost the grizzly bear but now it's determined not to lose the salmon – and those living in the salmon nation of the Pacific Northwest are making a valiant and wise fight to keep that primary fish a fixture in the salt and fresh waters of the region.

We have bison on our ranch – and whenever I look at them and realize how frighteningly close we came to lose that magnificent native animal in the West I am renewed in my determination to keep our little piece of geography wildlife friendly.

I am personally excited about the West coming back into the national consciousness because I know the people here – across the political spectrum, representing so many cultures and so many financial interests, so many ideologies – are always first and foremost citizens of the land that they inhabit. They vote in high proportions and anyone who has ever been to a city or county commission meeting in the West knows they're not afraid to speak out.

As the governor indicated I did write a book called the Greatest Generation and I often think of that generation whenever I arrive here now in the 21st century because it would have been easy for them to come home from that Great War, put down their weapons because having suffered the deprivations of first the Depression then the war and say I've done enough I've done my share but they didn't. Instead they gave us new art, new science, new regions, new visions. They were always the "Can do" generation as well as the Greatest Generation.

And then I wrote a book called "Boom" – about the trials of the 1960s and in particular about 1968. That traumatic year when 16,000 young Americans were lost in Vietnam. And one of the great prophets of our time, Dr. Martin Luther King was gunned down in Memphis. Bobby Kennedy was shot to death in a hotel pantry in Los Angeles as he was trying to become the democratic presidential nominee.

We had a counterculture arise in our midst in which young people rejected everything that their parents had stood for – institutional authority and marital contract. They turned to a drug culture as a means of escape.

Somehow we survived that. And we did so in part because of a remarkable event that went to unnoticed at the end of that year. While all of that was going on in America – at Cape Canaveral, three test pilots who had become astronauts were preparing to go to the

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moon on the Apollo 8 mission to rendezvous with the lunar surface so we could have a manned landing the next year.

James Lovell who was one of those astronauts – a man who later, gave us the famous phrase – Houston, we have a problem. James Lovell I went to see in Chicago two years ago. We talked about that epic journey that he made. He said he stood on the gantry getting ready to be loaded into the lunar space craft. He looked down the causeway at the cars that were streaming into Cape Canaveral at about 4 in the morning to cover the launch. He had been so concentrated on preparing for this journey to the moon that he had not been paying attention to what was going on in the “other” world – the upheaval politically and Vietnam and what was going on in the counterculture. But then when he saw those press cars coming he said to him, “My God they are serious. We’re going to the moon.”

They launched and made a rapid orbit of the earth and took off for the moon. Two hundred and fifty thousand miles later on Christmas Eve, they said to Houston, “we think we’re here but we don’t see the moon.”

Houston fired two small rockets – the front half of the spacecraft tipped over and for the first time human beings were looking at the back side of the lunar surface from less than 50 miles away – gray and lifeless, foreboding.

They dropped their flight plans, they rushed to the windows, and they stared in a sense of awe and bewilderment. As they emerged from the backside of the moon, they saw something that no one had prepared them for because no one had ever seen it before.

There in the distant void was a small beautiful orb, delicate white filigree clouds, deep blue seas, rich green of the rain forest, the crystal white of the ice caps – it was Mother Earth. And Jim Level put his thumb up and he could hide the entire Earth beneath his thumb and it gave him perspective that he carries with him to this day saying that that is our station and we are all responsible for one another.

And on Christmas Eve the three astronauts broadcast from the moon from Genesis, chapter 1, verses 1 through 10. Beginning, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” and then Frank Borman, the commander of the mission, concluded with verse 10, “and God called the dry land earth, and the gathering together of the waters, he called sea, and God saw that it was good.”

All of God’s creatures now are counting on us to make sure it stays good.

Thank you all.

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