

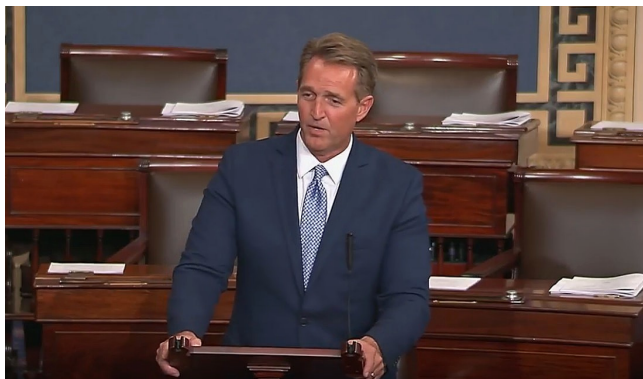


AmericanRhetoric.com

Jeff Flake

Senate Floor Speech Announcing Retirement

delivered 24 October 2017, Washington, D.C.



[AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio]

Mr. President, I rise today to address a matter that has been very much on my mind.

At a moment when it seems that our democracy is more defined by our discord and our dysfunction than by our own values and principles, let me begin by noting the somewhat obvious point that these offices that we hold are not ours indefinitely. We're not here simply to mark time. Sustained incumbency is certainly not the point of seeking office, and there are times when we must risk our careers in favor of our principles.

Now is such a time.

It must also be said that I rise today with no small measure of regret: regret because of the state of our disunion; regret because of the disrepair and destructiveness of our politics; regret because of the indecency of our discourse; regret because of the coarseness of our leadership; regret for the compromise of our moral authority -- and by "our," I mean all of our complicity in this alarming and dangerous state of affairs. It is time for our complicity and our accommodation of the unacceptable to end.



AmericanRhetoric.com

In this century, a new phrase has entered the language to describe the accommodation of a new and undesirable order, that phrase being the "new normal" -- that we must never adjust to the present coarseness of our national dialogue with the tone set at the top. We must never regard as normal the regular and casual undermining of our democratic norms and ideals. We must never meekly accept the daily sundering of our country -- the personal attacks; the threats against principles, freedoms, and institution; the flagrant disregard for truth and decency; the reckless provocations, most often for the pettiest and most personal reasons, reasons having nothing whatsoever to do with the fortunes of the people that we have been elected to serve. None of these appalling features of our current politics should ever be regarded as normal.

We must never allow ourselves to lapse into thinking that that is just the way things are now. If we simply become inured to this condition, thinking that it is just -- it is just politics as usual, then heaven help us. Without fear of the consequences and without consideration of the rules of what is politically safe or palatable, we must stop pretending that the degradation of our politics and the conduct of some in our executive branch are normal.

They are not normal.

Reckless, outrageous, and undignified behavior has become excused and countenanced as "telling it like it is" -- when it is actually just reckless, outrageous, and undignified. And when such behavior emanates from the top of our government, it is something else. It is dangerous to a democracy. Such behavior does not project strength because our strength comes from our values. It instead projects a corruption of the spirit, and weakness.

It is often said that children are watching. Well, they are. And what are we going to do about that? When the next generation asks us, "Why didn't you do something? Why didn't you speak up?" What are we going to say?

Mr. President, I rise today to say: enough.

We must dedicate ourselves to making sure that the anomalous never becomes the normal. With respect and humility, I must say that we have fooled ourselves for long enough that a pivot to governing is right around the corner, a return to civility and stability right behind it. We know better than that. By now, we all know better than that.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Here, today, I stand to say that we would be better served -- we would better serve the country by better fulfilling our obligations under the Constitution by adhering to our Article 1 - "old normal," Mr. Madison's doctrine of separation of powers. This genius innovation which affirms Madison's status as a true visionary, and for which Madison argued in Federalist 51, held that the equal branches of our government would balance and counteract with each other, if necessary. "Ambition [must be made to counteract] ambition," he wrote.

But what happens if ambition fails to counteract ambition? What happens if stability fails to assert itself in the face of chaos and instability? If decency fails to call out indecency? Were the shoe on the other foot, we Republicans -- would we Republicans meekly accept such behavior on display from dominant Democrats? Of course we wouldn't, and we would be wrong if we did.

When we remain silent and fail to act, when we know that silence and inaction is the wrong thing to do because of political considerations, because we might make enemies, because we might alienate the base, because we might provoke a primary challenge, because *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*, when we succumb to those considerations in spite of what should be greater considerations and imperatives in defense of our institutions and our liberty, we dishonor our principles and forsake our obligations. Those things are far more important than politics.

Now, I'm aware that more politically savvy people than I will caution against such talk. I'm aware that there's a segment of my party that believes that anything short of -- of complete and unquestioning loyalty to a President who belongs to my party is unacceptable and suspect. If I have been critical, it is not because I relish criticizing the behavior of the President of the United States. If I have been critical, it is because I believe it is my obligation to do so -- and as a matter and duty of conscience.

The notion that one should stay silent -- and as the norms and values that keep America strong are undermined and as the alliances and agreements that ensure the stability of the entire world are routinely threatened by the level of thought that goes into 140 characters¹ -- the notion that we should say or do nothing in the face of such mercurial behavior is ahistoric and, I believe, profoundly misguided.



AmericanRhetoric.com

A President -- A Republican President named Roosevelt, had this to say about the President and a citizen's relationship in -- to the office (quote):

*The President is merely the most important among a large number of public servants. He should be supported or opposed exactly to the degree which is warranted by his good conduct or bad conduct, his efficiency or inefficiency in rendering loyal, able, and disinterested service to the Nation as a whole.*²

He continued:

*Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that there should be...full liberty to tell the truth about his acts, and this means that it is exactly as necessary to blame him when he does wrong as to praise him when he does right. Any other attitude in an American citizen is both base and servile.*³

President Roosevelt continued:

*To announce that there must be no criticism of the president, or that we are to stand by a President, right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American public.*⁴

(Unquote).

Acting on conscience and principle in a manner -- is the manner in which we express our moral selves and as such, loyalty to conscience and principle should supersede loyalty to any man or party. We can all be forgiven for failing in that measure from time to time. I certainly put myself at the top of the list of those who fall short in this regard. I am holier than none.

But too often we rush to salvage principle -- not to salvage principle, but to forgive and excuse our failures so that we might accommodate them and go right on failing until the accommodation itself becomes our principle. In that way, and over time, we can justify almost any behavior and sacrifice any principle. I'm afraid that this is where we now find ourselves.



AmericanRhetoric.com

When a leader correctly identifies real hurt and insecurity in our country, and instead of addressing it, goes to look for someone to blame, there is perhaps nothing more devastating to a pluralistic society. Leadership knows that most often a good place to start in assigning blame is to look somewhat closer to home. Leadership knows where the buck stops.

Humility helps; character counts.

Leadership does not knowingly encourage or feed ugly or debased appetites in us. Leadership lives by the American creed, *E pluribus unum*. "[Out of] many, one." American leadership looks to the world, and just as Lincoln did, sees the family of man. Humanity is not a zero sum game. When we have been at our most prosperous, we have been at our most principled; and when we do well, the rest of the world does well.

These articles of civic faith have been critical to the American identity for as long as we have been alive. They are our birthright and our obligation. We must guard them jealously and pass them on for as long as the calendar has days. To betray them or to be unserious in their defense is a betrayal of the fundamental obligations of American leadership; and to behave as if they don't matter is simply not who we are.

Now the efficacy of American leadership around the globe has come into question. When the United States emerged from World War II, we contributed about half of the world's economic activity. It would have been easy to secure our dominance keeping those countries who had been defeated or greatly weakened during the war in their place. We didn't do that. It would have been easy to focus inward. We resisted those impulses. Instead, we financed reconstruction of...shattered countries and created international organizations and institutions that have helped provide security and foster prosperity around the world for more than 70 years.

Now it seems that we, the architects of this visionary rules-based world order that has brought so much freedom and prosperity, are the ones most eager to abandon it. The implications of this abandonment are profound and the beneficiaries of this rather radical departure in the American approach to the world are the ideological enemies of our values. Despotism loves a vacuum and our allies are now looking elsewhere for leadership.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Why are they doing this? None of this is normal. And what do we, as United States senators, have to say about it? The principles that underlie our politics, the values of our Founding, are too vital to our identity and to our survival to allow them to be compromised by the requirements of politics, because politics can make us silent when we should speak, and silence can equal complicity.

I have children and grandchildren to answer to.

And so, Mr. President, I will not be complicit or silent.

I've decided that I would be better able to represent the people of Arizona and to better serve my country and my conscience by freeing myself of the political consideration that consumed far too much bandwidth and would cause me to compromise far too many principles.

To that end, I am announcing today that my service in the Senate will conclude at the end of my term in early January 2019. It is clear at this moment that a traditional conservative, who believes in limited government and free markets, who is devoted to free trade, who is pro-immigration, has a narrower and narrower path to nomination in the Republican Party, the party that has so long defined itself by its belief in those things.

It is also clear to me for the moment that we have given in or given up on the core principles in favor of a more viscerally satisfying anger and resentment. To be clear, the anger and resentment that the people feel at the royal mess that we've created are justified. But anger and resentment are not a governing philosophy.

There is -- There is an undeniable potency to a populist appeal by mischaracterizing or misunderstanding our problems and giving in to the impulse to scapegoat and belittle -- the impulse to scapegoat and belittle threatens to turn us into a fearful, backward-looking people. In the case of the Republican Party, those things also threaten to turn us into a fearful, backward-looking minority party.

We were not made great as a country by indulging in or even exalting our worst impulses, turning against ourselves, glorifying in the things that divide us, and calling fake things true and true things fake.



AmericanRhetoric.com

And we did not become the beacon of freedom in the darkest corners of the world by flouting our institutions and failing to understand just how hard-won and vulnerable they are.

This spell will eventually break. That is my belief. We will return to ourselves once more, and I say the sooner the better.

Because we have a healthy government, we must also have healthy and functioning parties. We must respect each other again in an atmosphere of shared facts and shared values, comity and good faith. We must argue our positions fervently and never be afraid to compromise. We must assume the best of our fellow man, and always look for the good. Until that day comes, we must be unafraid to stand up and speak out as if our country depends on it, because it does. I plan to spend the remaining 14 months of my Senate term doing just that.

Mr. President, the graveyard is full of indispensable men and women. None of us here is indispensable; nor were even the great figures of history who toiled at these very desks, in this very chamber, to shape the country that we have inherited. What is indispensable are the values that they consecrated in Philadelphia and in this place, values which have endured and will endure for so long as men and women wish to remain free. What is indispensable is what we do here in defense of those values. A political career does not mean much if we are complicit in undermining these values.

I thank my colleagues for indulging me here today. I will close by borrowing the words of President Lincoln, who knew more about healthy enmity and preserving our founding values than any other American who has ever lived. His words from his First Inaugural were a prayer in his time and are now no less in ours:

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break [our] bonds of [affection]. The mystic chords of memory...will [yet] swell [the chorus of the Union] when again touched, as surely as they will be, by the better angels of our nature.⁵

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.



AmericanRhetoric.com

¹ A reference (and arguably an allusion) to the President's use of Twitter, which, as of this address, limited the character count of an individual "tweet" to 140.

² Roosevelt, T. (7 May 1918). *Roosevelt in the Kansas City Star; wartime editorial, Sedition, 149*. At: https://archive.org/stream/rooseveltkan00roosrich/rooseveltkan00roosrich_djvu.txt

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Abraham Lincoln, *First Inaugural Address*