



October 28, 2005

Leon Panetta Tells Cal Poly Audience the U.S. is 'Governed by Crisis'

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- Former congressman Leon Panetta drew a crowd of some 500 people to Cal Poly's Spanos Theatre Nov. 28 to kick off the university's 2005-06 "Provocative Perspectives" speaker series.

In an hour-long speech that opened and closed with standing ovations and was frequently punctuated with applause, Panetta, who served as chief of staff during the Clinton administration, said the United States is currently being "governed by crisis."

It's time for the nation's leaders to tell the truth about Iraq, the economy, health care, national security and global warming, he stressed.

Panetta said that John F. Kennedy, with his "Ask not what your country can do for you ..." speech, was the president who most inspired him to go into public service. That spirit of dedication and self-sacrifice is missing in today's leadership, he said.

Now, leaders are more concerned with raising money for their next campaigns than they are in solving problems, Panetta said. They are "governing by crisis" rather than by leadership, which is easier, because they don't have to do anything that might offend someone. "It's a good way to stay in office," he quipped.

But there's a price. People lose trust in leadership, and that threatens democracy. Democracy depends on trust, he said. "Why can't the president and the leadership say it straight?" Panetta asked. "The American people are waiting for leaders to tell it like it is."

It's time to face reality about health care -- 46 million Americans go without, he said. Time to tell the truth about Homeland Security -- a "monstrous bureaucracy" created to prepare for disaster but, after Hurricane Katrina, a bureaucracy which allowed a part of this country to turn into a third-world nation, he said.

Instead of facing issues and doing something about them, the nation's leaders are sitting back and allowing the crises to continue, Panetta said. The challenge now is to restore trust, and to do that, leaders must set a clear vision about the kind of country they want this to be in the next 20 years, he told the audience.

They also need to build consensus and be willing to sacrifice for the future, he stressed. And leaders must be honest -- with themselves and with the nation. "Often in Washington, this is a lesson that's never learned," Panetta said. "But being honest is what it's all about."

Panetta said he is especially worried about what the future has in store for young people. Surveys conducted by the Panetta Institute at CSU Monterey Bay have shown that today's college students believe they are the first generation that will not have a better world to live in. And they believe the United States will not be a world leader in the future.

For the past 200 years, the government has been committed to fulfilling the American dream of creating a better life for its children, Panetta said. That was the case for his own father who immigrated to this country from Italy.

His father's occupation was listed as "peasant" when he arrived at Ellis Island. When Panetta asked him why he came 3,000 miles with nothing but the shirt on his back, his father replied, "We honestly believed we could give our children a better life."

Unfortunately, that dream is slipping away, Panetta said, because the nation's leaders have lost touch with the true meaning of democracy. "Democracy survives because we are taught basic values, basic ethics."

The country's forefathers did not agree on everything, he said, but they did believe that "a wise people will elect wise leaders, and those leaders will exercise good judgment." They were also willing to sacrifice for the common good.

Panetta believes leadership can blossom if there is bipartisan commitment and cooperation, but he said he doesn't see much hope in that happening soon, because both parties are in the trenches "firing grenades" at each other.

"In reality, people sense the same concerns," he said. "This country is not red and blue. I believe we are all red, white and blue. We need candidates who will speak to how to unify the nation."

Panetta's remarks drew repeated applause at the packed 7:30 a.m. breakfast event. "You want me to start a movement?" he asked the enthusiastic crowd near the end of the speech. "Today, consider it a fact that we are starting a movement (for change) in this country."

He also hinted he may run again for public office. When asked, Panetta said he might run again if the right opportunity came along. "That's neither a yes or a no," he said.

The next speaker in the annual Provocative Perspectives series will be Victor Davis Hanson, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institute, syndicated columnist and author of "Mexifornia: A State of Becoming." Hansen will examine immigration issues in his speech on campus Dec. 1.

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