

Speech to Business or Civic Group

Good Evening, Thank you for inviting me to talk with you this evening. You and I have a lot in common. We are all Marylanders. Although I live in a rural area and you live here in the great Baltimore-Washington metro area, we are similarly concerned with the futures of our communities, and we share a concern for the future of our state and nation. This evening let us focus on our similarities, not our differences. I want you to see rural Maryland as part of the fabric of which suburban and urban are also part. Because only if we see our state whole, in fact only if we see America whole, can we make progress on our shared goals.

Set up: we are alike, we are interconnected, we are part of a system. In this speech the writer defines the system as Maryland. But it could be as small as a town or as large as the nation.

Too often, we overlook the obvious reality that the lightly populated counties, small towns and cities that make up rural Maryland are similar in many ways to our urban centers. The national and state issues that dominate what people think about, the policies and forces that influence the economy, the difficulty getting health care, the worry about quality education, the desire for clean air, water, and a healthy environment—these are things we all care about and are concerned with.

A definition of rural America that avoids farming, country, rural as defining words.

In fact, we even make our livings in much the same way. I own a business, as do many people in my town. I do not farm. In fact, in my region and this is true for the nation as a whole, only a small fraction of us are farmers. About 20 percent of our region's total gross output comes from forestry or farming or other resource-based industry. We make our money from commerce, industry, service business, and retail. Or we make it as artists, craftsmen, and professionals. In other words, we do what you do in the city.

Examples help. Use concrete examples of how your audiences are alike and of interconnectedness.

We also overlook the truth that our regions, that is urban areas and rural areas, are highly interdependent—and in the new global economy in which we all participate, this is more true than ever, and even more important.

Let me give you an example.

Picture me, my body, for a moment, as the nation—the body politic if you will. You, in the big city, are at the very heart of our nation, right here in the center of my chest. I, in my small town, am way out here at the end of this arm; my town is this hand.

Introduce a model early. The model is a metaphor for how we are part of a system, and if any part weakens, it hurts the entire system.

Slowly this tourniquet--think of it as made up of old policies that no longer work, as, public under investment--starts to tighten

around the arm. Not too bad at first. Then things begin to get tight. And out here in my small town, things will shortly be downright blue. Now you, right here in the center of the chest, seem to be okay. But you are about to lose your hand. When it no longer functions, you have lost one of your most valuable assets. As a nation, a body politic, we are weaker. The tourniquet of old policies and underinvestment has pinched a region's circulation and we both suffer.

Right now, a number of outdated or poorly thought out policies literally cut off economic growth in rural areas. Policies as diverse as the way we regulate health care to the way we fund schools, to our national farm and trade policy hamper our progress.

And I would say the same is true for urban areas.

Consider health care for example. In my county we have a difficult time attracting doctors, so we have a difficult time accessing health care. In the metro area, there are many doctors, yet there is still an access problem: not everyone has insurance or can afford to pay, for example. So we both have a health care access problem.

Or education. We have a difficult time attracting teachers. We would like to pay them more and we need to build a new high school. You have a hard time attracting teachers to work in some of your inner city schools. And you would like to pay them more and build or improve your schools.

Or poverty. Many people think of poverty as an urban issue. Or they think that rural poverty is somehow gentler. In truth poverty is grinding no matter where it is found. Across the country there are more poor rural communities than poor urban communities, and the same is true here. So we share these concerns. And we also share the desire to continually boost economic development so more people have more opportunities, so we reduce poverty overall.

And, we share a desire to develop our communities. Community development programs work wonders in our rural neighborhoods just as they work wonders here. Improving our housing stocks, re-energizing main streets and shopping districts, creating youth centers—these are all investment in the future whether they are in my town or in your city.

We also share our successes. Here's an example. My company makes quality control test kits for bio-technology companies. We

Advocates for rural issues often have specific concerns: for example poverty, or education, or community development. Any of them can be worked into the speech. Not all need to be mentioned. You could craft a speech that focused on only one policy. The important point is to show how it is also a concern to the audience.

do business all over the country and have some international customers. My company puts substantial tax and investment dollars into our state. It brings in talented people. We generate business for shopkeepers, and they buy, incidentally, from businesses located here in the city—perhaps represented here in this room. I bank with one of the state's bigger banks. My employees also pay taxes and invest in the community. They have families; they raise our state's next generation of workers and citizens.

Here's a final example, an example of how a loss in my community is also a loss in yours. A friend of mine farms. He primarily grows soybeans. Government farm policy pays him a subsidy. But that subsidy has been static. And prices have been falling because of global competition. However, he feels trapped in the system. He has a huge investment in equipment for growing soybeans and he knows soybeans. He has spent a good deal of time learning everything about them. But now they are not very profitable for him.

He can sell his farm to a conglomerate which has huge machines and can farm his land and the land of ten of our neighbors with half the people. Or he can find a different market. He can branch out into something new.

I cannot tell you what the best alternative is for him. I can tell you the best alternative for the region, and for the nation, is that he find a new, lucrative market. And, with some help, he will.

But if he leaves, this is what happens: an important economic driver is gone. A mechanic that used to fix his machinery folds up shop. An implement and fertilizer sales company closes its door. The merchant in town who sold all of them sundries has lost three customers. He orders less from his regional distributor located here in the city. The distributor orders less from the manufacturer in Texas.

And, here in the city, you no longer have the advantage of one of my friend's sidelines: he grows the best sweet corn, tomatoes, green beans, and other table vegetables to be found under the summer sun. And he sells them at the farmers market here. As we lose farmers, we lose the great value in fresh foods, locally grown. We also lose the strategic advantages that come with a local agriculture base. If this nation ever loses the ability to feed itself, we will truly be in trouble.

These are examples of causation, of how policies have rippling consequences in a system—as small as a town or as large as the nation. One is an upward spiral: the businesses succeed; the other is the effects of a loss of a business. Try to show that it is a loss not just to the local area, but to the whole state.

I could substitute any number of industries for the farmer in my example. I could have talked about the button factory or the bottler or the steel fabrication plant. My point is, we need to recognize that we share these concerns and that the best solutions will be the ones that are balanced and meet both our needs.

When all the state and federal dollars go to curing gridlock around the urban beltways rather than into comprehensive transportation systems, rural areas suffer. But because we are interdependent, you will also feel the pain.

When school construction money is distributed on a basis that is less than fair, the children in one of our communities will suffer. Their pursuit of education will be hindered, their future a little dimmer, and then they do not contribute as much as they might to our shared efforts as a state in this global world.

There are many things we can do to address these concerns. We can update our national policies. We can improve state policies, and we civic and business leaders can take an active local role.

I want to leave you with examples of what successful policies might look like. Let's go back, for a minute, to my own concerns about finding more doctors and teachers for my county. One place we can start to solve these problem is at home. We can raise and spend some money to improve the county's public health facilities. We can work as a community and state government to create local incentives to attract doctors. But there is a huge role here for national health policy. What if, for example, the federal government created more scholarships for doctors willing to spend five or more years in rural communities?

Let us apply that example to teachers. Imagine the results if the federal government created scholarships—lots of them, to encourage young, enthusiastic teachers to work in rural systems. Imagine the results if the state joined that effort and added its own incentives. And the county. What if the town every year threw a recruiting party? Or was able to create housing benefits? Imagine the results and the forces moving for positive change in our state.

What if federal farm policy encouraged new, lucrative crops and entrepreneurial approaches to developing new markets? Imagine the results if trade policy and the national governments approach encouraged regions to create industry with indigenous competitive advantages. And what if the brain power of local universities and

Solutions need to be present: When appropriate, include actions for local, state, and federal levels, as well as private actions.

community colleges joined in this effort? Imagine the results if venture capitalists invested in this work.

These kinds of positive changes are happening on a limited scale in several regions. Universities, state agencies, and others are finding new markets that draw on a region's competitive advantages. There are some national programs and large non-profit groups supporting rural development. Now we need to get national policies that move away from supporting commodity agriculture, for example, to supporting new, entrepreneurial approaches. We need to create policies that help rural residents and recent rural graduates retool for new markets. We need to encourage rural entrepreneurship.

You can help. When you get involved in thinking about where our country should be investing its resources, read about it in the news, or talk with policy makers, think about how the action might help, or harm the rural areas of our state, like my small town. And think about the many ways we are connected, you and I, to our nation's economy and future prosperity. We are all, literally, in it together.

What is good for my region is good for yours. What is good for the hand is good for the heart. We will not, as a nation, do as well as we can if all regions do not do well individually

If you can point to local examples of success, do. Position change on the positive side of rural policies

Reinforce the theme of interdependence