

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT AMHERST
OFFICE OF THE FACULTY SENATE

ADDRESS BY STATE REPRESENTATIVE LEWIS EVANGELIDIS (R-1ST WORCESTER)

I'd like to thank you for having me here today. I guess the first question on everyone's mind is: how tall is this guy? So, I'll just tell you: I'm six feet, seven inches tall — on a good day, maybe six-eight. Nonetheless, I did come here today- I am an elected State Representative. I've just finished my first year of my first term, and I was invited to come here. I'm very honored to be here. I am a graduate of 1983, the University of Massachusetts. I was thinking about what I would have to say to you, and I would be willing to take questions afterwards, so we can talk about anything you want at that time, but maybe I could explain to you how I could leave as a graduate of the University of Massachusetts in 1983 — as an Economics major and as a very idealistic liberal — and the fact that I return today as a conservative Republican. I guess the question would be: "How did this metamorphosis happen?" to quote an Eminem song. I'm going to spend ten minutes or so trying to explain it to you, and hopefully we can engage in some questions about that and questions that are on your mind today.

I will say this: I used what I was taught at the University of Massachusetts. I'm a very, very proud graduate of this school. I learned more about myself, how to think, how to be critically analytical and to not accept what's given to you. I've carried that with me every day of my life, and I think that's a big part of how I continue to think and learn as my life went along, and I'll explain to you where I ended up. I do believe that that is the essence of what we're taught here at UMASS — to be critical thinkers. I also love music very much, and I go to concerts still, which is something most people my age don't do anymore. I've always been really proud of the fact that wherever I go in life, it seems that I meet people who are very interesting, people who are outgoing, people who are musical. I cannot tell you how amazing it is to me how many of them went to UMASS. I've found that maybe five or six of the best friends I have in the world today, two of them are UMASS graduates, and I didn't know either of them when I went here. So I've had a lot of ongoing philosophies that I've carried with me from UMASS, and I just continue to be amazed at the people I meet — including in the legislature now — people who are interesting, who have a different perspective on life. Many of them come from UMASS, and I'm proud to say that I'm part of that. I would like to think that I'm one of those people also.

I guess I'll tell you where it starts for me. One of my pet peeves in life is when I meet people of the same political views at 40 that they had at 20, because — and I think all of you can agree — we're not listening to the same music we listened to when we were 20 years old, and we don't read the same authors we read when we were 20 years old. I have friends who are architects who I tell, "I hope you're not designing buildings like you did when you were 25, when you're 45 today, and I hope you're not still designing those same buildings when you're 65." I'd like to think we all learn — we absorb and we grow. I've quoted Winston Churchill many times as I go around my district and explain my position to people. I say what he said, "To be young and conservative is to have no heart, but to be old and liberal is to have no mind." I often think that that explains a little bit about how I learn and approach life.

I did leave here in 1983, filled with liberal idealism, as I mentioned. I voted for Jimmy Carter. I stood outside at a memorial service for John Lennon when he was shot. I always carried protest ribbons with me and buttons and such. I'm not denigrating any of that. I'm proud to have done all those things, but I found, looking back, that I'm not sure I was really *thinking* when I was here. I've found that part of the culture here was to be liberal. You were indoctrinated to be liberal. It wasn't cool to be conservative. I kind of went along with the crowd because that's the pressure put on me while at UMASS. I'm not saying it's right or wrong — it's just a fact. I don't know if it is still like that today — my suspicion is that it's probably clearly out of the mainstream as far as being liberal — but my point is that, when I reflect back on my time here, I'm not so certain I was really being honest with myself and truly thinking about all the issues when I looked at my political stances then. Part of it was simply fitting in and engaging some of the pressures that come with being a young idealistic college student.

I did realize, after a while, that it seems like a lot of people want you to think like they do. That seems to be the thing in life — whether you're conservative or liberal. It seems like almost everybody wants you to think like they do. I try to tell people: think like *you* — find out what *you* believe in, and don't follow anybody else's dogma. One of the things I'll never forget — it still resonates with me today — is when I was in class with one of the professors I had and somebody challenged one of his theories. He stopped the class and admonished that student, saying, "Don't you ever, *ever* challenge my theories." I remember thinking to myself, "Wait a minute, now." I thought, this was one of the most open-minded people I'd ever met in my life. Then I realized he was very open-minded only until you disagreed with him. I never forgot that. As I sit here today, I don't forget it.

After the University of Massachusetts, I went to the west coast to find myself. I lived in Berkeley, California and actually worked in a construction company where I dug trenches at Lawrence Livermore Laboratories, which was kind of an interesting place back then to be. I returned to the east coast after that and worked in the World Trade Center as an Assistant Commodities Broker. After that, I ended up going to law school — Temple University down in Philadelphia. After leaving the DA's office, I worked as a state attorney down in Dade County, Florida. As a matter of fact, I worked for Janet Reno who became our Attorney General of the United States under Bill Clinton. She was someone who very much impressed me. To this day, she still does. She had integrity. She had honesty. I really admired her as a person. I will tell you this: during the time that I was traveling and performing these jobs, I always thought of politics. It was something I loved — it's a people business, and I enjoy people. I love helping them, and I always wanted to get involved in politics, but I was still learning about who I was, and I was still thinking about the issues. As I went along and studied and supported all the welfare programs when I was younger, I remember reading about how Lyndon Johnson, in 1964, declared war on poverty. I thought of the billions of dollars that well-intentioned people have spent on abolishing poverty in America, and unfortunately I think many of us can sit here today and agree that with all those efforts, we still have as much poverty today in America as we ever did. It made me think: maybe we need a new approach to this. Maybe we have to sort of break down the walls — open the box a little bit — and listen to both sides of the issue here. Maybe there's something being said from people who are generally discarded as not caring about people in the conservative Republican side. Maybe they have ideas that are harsher, but they want to try to help people. So I listened. I paid attention to what both sides were saying. I don't think, for a minute, that people aren't well-intentioned or don't care about others, but when you get into the politics, you have a responsibility to make sure that money is being spent in the best way it can.

So, I certainly believe that many of these programs are essential to maintain, but we should certainly not leave them as they are, we should try to make them stronger in any way we can. I've noticed, in my opinion, that there are certain votes today which seem to be like bribery — saying, we'll give you a little something if you be quiet, so you can have our vote. I'm not saying that the other side doesn't do it, too — there are certain tax breaks that are given to certain people and corporations to get their votes. I think we, as citizens of the United States, have to make sure that we do everything we can to filter through all this and try to figure out what is actually being done to help the problems we have. I will always remember one passage from a book by Alex de Tocqueville. In the late part of the 1800s, he came to America and traveled. In this book, he wrote something that I've never forgotten. He said, "The absolute freedoms of America are tempered by a common sense of morality." To me, that really sums up the greatness of America. How did this country have the incredible freedoms that it had? How did we all come here as immigrants — or as slaves, some — and work together to form what I do believe is a "dream." America really is a dream. It's built on the idea that we can come here, have freedom, and have opportunity as well. The great freedoms we have are always tempered by the belief that we, as Americans, would tolerate freedom but understand the limits. I'm not trying to bring you down or be cynical — because I'm not, I'm a very optimistic person — but I certainly believe America is at a point, right now, where we've lost our common sense of morality. I think there was a time in America where if you, for instance, wrote songs that depicted killing police officers and raping women, people would say, "That is not acceptable. American society is not going to accept that." But today it seems like everything's for a buck — if you can make a buck off it, it's ok — and we've pushed the limits and pushed the limits and pushed the limits. I'm only suggesting to you that this is a concern to me. I think we have to step back sometimes and realize that we are in history. Sometimes you just get lost in the moment, but I think it's important to acknowledge that there is an issue there and something that I certainly am looking and still thinking and still trying to learn about.

I am a Republican representative. I come from Holden, Massachusetts. I grew up in Holden, left for 20 years, and moved back three years ago. I bought my grandparents' house and I live next door to my mom and dad now. I actually have a little trail between our houses — the same trail I used to walk up to visit my mom and dad, which is also the trail my kids now walk down to visit theirs. I find it a very heartwarming story. I really believe I am in a special place, representing a special district, and I have a special opportunity to be a representative. I take it very seriously. I'm very proud and honored to be a representative, as I am for you to invite me here today.

I'm also a certified public high school teacher. When I was in law school in Philadelphia, we had a program in which we could choose to be isolated in an ivy tower in north Philadelphia, surrounded by a very poor area, or we could integrate ourselves into a community. I signed up for that — for the program that's now nationally recognized as LEAP. We would go into the high schools in north Philadelphia and supplement a high school class by teaching constitutional law to kids. I'll tell you, that was such a meaningful class to me. The last day I taught that class, the teacher said, "The students have something for you," and I didn't even know what he meant because I'd never thought about it. He brought me a gift with a card that said, "Every day you came here, I looked forward to coming to school." The reason I say that to you is, I never forgot how much that meant to me, and I always thought about going into teaching because I think it's the greatest profession in the world. I wish our country gave more respect to teachers than they do. Nonetheless, I've always kept that in my heart, and when the time came for me as an apprenticing attorney, I decided I'd like to do something different. So I was a certified teacher, and then I decided to run for office. If I didn't make it in office, I was going to look to become a high school teacher because that's really something I'd like to do — something I'd still like to do someday. I have two children — eight and five years old — who are in the public schools. I'm a strong supporter of public education. I've always done whatever I can to support both lower and higher public education.

One of the frustrating things for me, though, about being a Republican is that when you have that “R” next to your name, nobody gives you money if they’re a teacher. Nobody works for you if you’re a Republican. They simply see an “R” next to your name, even though I support education as strongly as anyone can. I have been certified to teach. I want to teach. I will do anything I can to help teachers. Because I had an “R” next to my name, though, my opponent was endorsed by the Teachers’ Association. My opponent was given mailings and money by the Teachers’ Association. Now, he may have been as strong a supporter of education as I was, but the point is: somebody’s not thinking when that’s happening. They’re just reacting to the fact that I had an “R” next to my name and he had a “D.” It brings me back, again, to the idea that this is not what it’s supposed to be about.

There was a supplemental budget filed recently about funding higher education contracts. It’s remarkable what politicians can do when they have a contract and they have other things they’d rather fund. I’ll be frank with you, some of those other things really aren’t what the average person in Massachusetts wants to have funded, but they’re the first things funded. The point is: a contract is a contract, it was wrong not to fund them. I have supported them. Once again, though, I was receiving letters from either the Massachusetts Teachers’ Association or the Higher Ed — they sent letters to all of us as representatives, and the first line of the letter was essentially: with the House dominated by Democrats, we are completely baffled at how we’re not having these contracts funded. The implication being, of course, with a bunch of Republicans we’d expect this, but with Democrats we wouldn’t. I want to point out one thing to you: there are 23 Republican representatives in the House. All 23 voted to fund those teacher contracts. All 23. We sat with Governor Romney. He doesn’t want to not fund these contracts, he just thinks we have no money. He doesn’t know what to do. But the Governor — we spoke to him — has been clear that he’s going to do everything he can to fund those contracts to the best of his ability. So, people are working on this. It doesn’t matter if you’ve got a “D” next to your name or an “R” next to your name, fairness is fairness, and I’m just trying to point out to you that I think it’s real important that we start looking at people and the issues they stand for.

I will say, about Governor Romney, as I said to you earlier about Attorney General Janet Reno: Mitt Romney, in my mind, is one of the most honest, decent, hardworking people with as much integrity as you could find in a public official. He might not agree with everything, but I’m just asking you to listen to the man and see what he wants to do. He came in here — he’s not from Beacon Hill — he’s not playing by the same set of rules. He’s going to be attacked by the media outlets that don’t want him; they just generally fall in line with parties, and we all know how that works. But the point is: sift through it, keep thinking, keep learning, and listen to what people have to say. He’s out there trying to utilize the money that we have in the best way possible, and that means funding higher education wherever he can. That means trying to help social programs as best as we can. He just simply sees waste and mismanagement. I could save a billion dollars right now, if you gave me the ability, that wouldn’t affect any people in Massachusetts to any real degree, but they’re tied into special interests. That’s where the money goes first, and what’s left is what we get.

So, I just really want to close with the idea that, as you keep going, you’re not done, you haven’t stopped thinking, you’re still reading every day, trying to read as broad of an opinion as you can, you’re trying to find out what the truth is as best as you can without somebody else telling you. So I guess the point is, I stand here today in closing with simply this: vote for the person, not the party. Look at what somebody has to say, and then decide, but don’t bring the preconceived notion that the letter next to their name means they fit a certain list of criteria and you’ve pretty much made up your mind before you’ve listened to anything out of their mouth.