Gov. Rick Perry's Remarks to the Jewish Community Relations Council

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Monday, March 26, 2007

Thank you James (Hogue, chair of JCRC.) It is an honor to be with you, the membership of the Jewish Community Relations Council- and to welcome you to your capital city. Five days ago I returned from a trip to the Middle East, specifically from the United Arab Emirates and the State of Qatar. If my schedule allows, I hope to return soon, this time to a beautiful country perched on a different body of water- Israel.

It seems as if war and strife have existed in the Middle East as long as mankind, whether it was Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, Joshua conquering the land of Canaan, or Nehemiah leading the effort to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem generations into the Babylonian captivity. And ever since a Jewish state was established in the aftermath of World War II, Israel has lived in constant conflict with its neighbors- many of whom do not recognize their right to exist. This tension among neighbors was illustrated in a striking way during a trip I took there more than a decade ago. I was supposed to fly in the back seat of a fighter jet on a quick run over the holy land, but the flight was cancelled because of low-cloud cover and the reality that its not very likely that an Israeli jet will receive a warm welcome if it has to divert its landing to, say, Damascus or Beirut. The mission I was on this time gives me some hope for the future of the Middle East.

In Qatar, we dedicated a new engineering facility where Texas A&M is training 180 students in engineering. Next door are four other American universities offering a variety of degree programs to students that come from all across the region. It seems to me that the long-term peace and prosperity of the Middle East is not dependent upon armies, diplomats or peace-keepers, but educators. The images of war and terrorism we see on TV involving Hamas and Hezbollah, the ongoing war in Iraq, and the rising conflict in Iran create a sense of hopelessness that it is easy to be resigned to, but hopelessness is an emotion we must resist. Because there are solutions. And it begins with education. Education is the antidote to the violence that stems from ignorance, especially education based on Western values. Building campuses in the Middle East, creating partnerships between our medical schools and hospitals half the world away, and providing technical support to improve the economies and wealth-generation of that region is vital.

Of course, all-the-while America and all freedom-loving peoples must take a strong stand that right of Israel to...
exist is never up for negotiation. When Ronald Reagan went to Reykjavik he stated everything was up for negation with the Soviets but two things: our freedom and our future. Our future and our freedom are directly tied to an Israel that is strong and an Israeli people who are free- free to walk their streets in safety and free to live without fear. The voices of six million Jews killed during the Holocaust cry out to us today with the words “never again.” This is why we must never waver in our support for the State of Israel. And it is why, when genocide occurs anywhere in the world, America must speak out. That is why I have asked legislators to require state pension funds to divest of any investments in foreign companies doing business in Sudan. We cannot turn a blind eye to government-sponsored atrocities committed against the people of Darfur who are largely of a different ethnic origin. There is no bond greater than the human bond, and regardless of where we come from, the sound of our last name, the faith that we practice, every human being has a God-given right to live a life of liberty free of oppression and full of hope.

Amidst the recent news coverage about the TYC scandal, the HPV vaccine and my proposal to sell the lottery, you might not realize that this session we have a record surplus and a unique opportunity to invest in our future. But the fact is, we are blessed with the resources at this moment in time to dramatically improve funding and performance at our institutions of higher learning, to offer health insurance assistance to hundreds of thousands of working adults, and to take a major step in the battle to rid the world of cancer. Cancer is a disease that touches virtually everyone. 95,000 people will hear those terrible words, “you have cancer” this year. 34,000 people will die too soon, losing their battle with this dreadful disease. These people are our friends and neighbors, our co-workers and parents, and sometimes our precious children.

I met a young lady from Houston named Heather Burcham who has less than six months to live. She is losing her battle with cervical cancer because it was misdiagnosed for years, and when it was finally discovered, it was too advanced for her doctors to defeat it. Had there been a vaccine two decades ago that would have prevented the spread of HPV and saved her life, you can bet, had I been governor then, I would have tried to make it as widely available as possible. For me it is simple: it is not about the cause, but the cure, and with this vaccine we can save a lot of lives.

That is also why I supported a $3 billion research initiative to fight cancer. With $300 million a year, we can create large, collaborative research projects at our top cancer centers and fund projects that all too often get pushed aside because of limited dollars. I proposed selling the lottery to fund this initiative because instead of spending twice as much on bond financing as we do on actual research with a bond proposal, we can get a larger annual return from the lottery each year just on the interest generated than we get now from the lottery itself. And after ten years, the corpus would still be in the fund generating annual interest. Even my Aggie math tells me that $1.3 billion in annual interest, the rate we would get on average each year, is better than today’s return of $1 billion, and it’s a lot more of a sure bet than lottery revenues, which have a track record of declining with time. I have also proposed using proceeds from the sale of the lottery to provide insurance to more than a half million working Texans. This proposal recognizes the value of treating illnesses before they worsen in a preventive care setting instead of in the emergency room where the human cost and economic cost are exponentially higher.

Lastly, let me talk about the value of a college degree. If it weren’t for Texas A&M, I would still be farming cotton. Now, some folks think that is reason enough to discontinue A&M’s funding. But the greater issue here is opening the doors of higher education to as many young Texans as possible, recognizing a degree of higher learning is a certificate of admission into the global economy of the 21st Century. We live in a knowledge
economy where information travels at the speed of light and opportunity travels to destinations with a skilled workforce and quality schools. My plan would increase financial aid by a whopping 60 percent. It would reward schools for doing what we have always asked, which is to graduate more students, and graduate them prepared for the future. It eliminates unaccountable, earmark projects that amount to pork for politicians, and recognizes that money should follow the students because ultimately we are not in the business of funding nice buildings but educating young lives. We have already begun to leverage the brightest minds in the world with emerging technology grants that can lead to innovations in our lab rooms that one day make profits in our board rooms. (And by the way, despite the corporate greed rhetoric that fills the editorial pages, I still believe it is okay for businesses to make a profit.)

Our youngest generation is our greatest resource. Even a vast commodity like oil will one day run dry, but let that never be said about the potential of the human race. Since you are visiting the capitol later today, I would like to make a suggestion: tell your legislators to get behind efforts to fund our colleges and universities, to improve access to health insurance, and to rid our future of the threat of cancer. It is an honor to spend a few minutes with you today, and to work with you to address common goals and espouse common values. Thank you, God bless you, and God bless Texas.