Gov. Rick Perry: Scouting's Values Are Worth Fighting For

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

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Thank you, Jerome [Jerome Garza, Regions Bank Vice President] for that kind introduction and thank you for your support of Scouting. Mayor Leppert, it’s great to be back here in your town and even better to see your degree of support for the Scouts. And Craig (Watkins, District Attorney), it is my sincere hope that the Scouts are so successful turning young men into responsible adults that your job as district attorney someday becomes obsolete.

I want to thank Senator West for inviting me to be here. For those of you who know Royce, he can be a very persuasive man, but he didn’t need to turn on any of his legendary charm to get me here. When I get an invitation to help the Boy Scouts, I’m halfway out the door before I hang up the phone. Royce inspires all of us with his work on Scoutreach, spreading the Boy Scout message into the inner city.

Scoutreach and its efforts to touch lives where hope is but a fading memory is worth every call you make, every dinner you attend, and every check you sign. Scouting has the unique ability to elevate a young man’s perception of himself, expand his understanding of the world, and enhance his vision for the future in ways that other organizations simply cannot.

The Boy Scouts of America have been helping me focus on what’s important since I was a very young boy. I would go so far as to credit the Scouts for the successes I have achieved in my life. Based on my personal experience and from a vast body of evidence, I believe the Boy Scouts are one of the most important organizations in our entire country. No other organization has salvaged more lives, built more confidence, or created more leaders. Scouting changed my life and should continue, free of interference, to change lives well into the future. I believe this strongly because I am the father of an Eagle Scout, and a product of Scouting myself.

I grew up in the kind of place that Scoutreach targets on the rural side. Called Paint Creek, it is a small, farming community too small to even be called a town. We lived 16 miles from the nearest post office. We had two churches back then, the Baptist Church and the Methodist Church, your choice. We also had a small school for grades one
through twelve, and an attractive compensation package for teachers. They didn't have to worry about the cost of housing because they lived on campus. As you might imagine in a place like Paint Creek, there was a tight sense of community that centered on school during the week, and Scouting on Saturdays. On Saturday mornings, one of the parents, or as we got older, one of our fellow scouts with a hardship license, would pick everybody up and take us to our 9:00am meeting. It lasted all day.

As the son of a cotton farmer, I had more than my share of the great outdoors, but I lived for our quarterly trips to Camp Tonkawa. It may have been “rustic,” but, for me, it was heaven. We camped out, explored nature, spotted wildlife, learned the skills of the outdoors, and listened to old war stories from our scoutmaster, a World War II veteran and a 1932 graduate of Texas A&M, Gene Overton.

It was the time of our lives, and it beat doing chores or hanging out with my older sister. And, nowadays, as Denzel told us earlier, those kinds of activities definitely beat running the streets, dodging drug dealers, and struggling to stay alive 'til age 18. But you are helping young men succeed on those goals with the Boy Scout lessons of self-reliance and selfless sacrifice. Unlike so many influences in their world, Scouting teaches young men the value of perseverance, that good things come to those who work hard, and finish what they've started. It teaches our youth to respect the outdoors and to be stewards of the land God has graced us with. It teaches them a code of honor, and that you can never trade your integrity for something better. And it teaches young scouts to respect one another and respect those in positions of authority, a quality that is greatly lacking in our society today.

I would offer that all those values are in decline across popular culture and, by extension, in our communities. For lack of a better word, our nation is caught up in a culture war and the Boy Scouts are the listening post on our perimeter. The attacks they endure are the same fights that are headed for other private organizations and threatening our families. They merely get hit first because they are so visible and so steadfast.

Those attacks show no sign of letting up, but I have seen a groundswell of defensive support. In fact, I believe we are approaching a tipping point in our society. But our work is far from done. Because, if you believe there is such a thing as right and wrong; if you believe there are acceptable standards of behavior; if you believe that ethics cannot be made up on the spot or fabricated to fit the situation; if you believe that judges should make decisions based on the law rather than popular opinion or their own personal agenda; and if you believe that this very nation came into existence because of what George Washington called “divine Providence;” then you have a stake in this war.

Earlier this year, I saddled up and charged into the middle of this fray when a book I wrote about Scouting was published. It's titled, “On My Honor: Why the American Values of the Boy Scouts Are Worth Fighting For.” This book is my attempt to clearly state the importance of Scouting values and more precisely draw the battle lines in this vital conflict. With it, I hope to let the world know that this conflict isn't just an intellectual exercise: it is a battle for the very future of our country. And I am donating all proceeds from the book to the Boy Scouts legal defense efforts, to allow them to continue the good fight.

Earlier, I was so proud to listen to Denzel as he talked about the impact that Scouting has had on his life. He will remember forever his trip to the World Jamboree, just like I still remember my trip to the National Jamboree when I was 14. President Lyndon Johnson flew in by helicopter to speak to us, and Lady Baden Powell attended her last Jamboree. That week at Valley Forge, I was a proud member of a movement of young men learning the values essential to a civil society. A little less than 200 years after George Washington and his men persevered in the snow, we experienced the greatness of America, a land of freedom that they fought and died to defend.

We were in some ways the fulfillment of their distant dreams. And so, today, my fear is not that we will lose our freedom to a superior power, but that the decay of our society will lead us to trade our freedom for shortsighted
self-indulgence. For more than a generation, our culture has emphasized a message of self-indulgence at the expense of social obligation. We have reaped the consequences in the form of teen pregnancies, divorced and broken families, and a cycle of incarceration that joins young men with their fathers behind bars.

The foundation of our society is not government or individual freedom, it is the family. And the demise of the family is the death knell of any great society. Fortunately, we have the Boy Scouts to strengthen our young men in their convictions, to prepare them to lead families, and help them discern between liberty and license. The former is a God-given right, the latter leads to decay and oppression. Scouting works because it directs young men away from the pursuit of vanity and toward causes greater than self. Defense of such a transformation is worth everything we have.

To all of you gathered here today, I applaud you for serving this great organization that teaches our children the virtue of hard work, the rigor of self-discipline, and the importance of respect for others. Yours is a noble cause, and the results of your efforts here in the country’s fourth-largest council are remarkable.

When a group of young men step away from the television and the Internet to do more than half a million community service hours in one year, you’re doing something right. When your membership continues to grow when many Councils across the country are shrinking, you’re doing something right. When 834 young men become Eagle Scouts in year, you’re DEFINITELY doing something right. To continue their track record of rescuing young men from a bleak future, these good people need resources like your time, your money, and your voice. To everyone here today, to every person associated with Scouting, I encourage you to press on—as the Scriptures say, “do not grow weary in doing good.”

Our children deserve our best effort. They are worth the war we fight to defend scouting and the values it instills. Don’t ever give up. The great majority of Americans are with you, as are millions of Texans.

Thank you, God bless you and may God continue to bless the great state of Texas.