

Achieving and Preserving the Promise of America

LARRY ECHOHAWK

You might think that a person that ran in a recent election for governor and lost would be severely disappointed, but to be here on the BYU campus and a part of the law school faculty has brought great joy and happiness to my wife and me and our family. I am so pleased to be here on campus and to have this opportunity to speak today.

I want to speak about facing challenges, about achieving our full potential, and about receiving help from others as we progress along the path of life. I want to begin with a story that illustrates these points. It concerns a young man who was seeking to become the best he could be—a champion. He wanted to be a wrestler; fortunately, he had a good coach that wanted to work with him. The two of them worked very hard for some time to prepare him to be a champion wrestler. They finally got to the point where this young man entered a wrestling tournament where he would have a chance to prove himself.

Because he had worked very hard preparing, he started the first match and was successful. He then went on to the second match. As he moved through the brackets, he won again and again until finally he got to the championship round. There he faced the true

challenge of his life because he faced off against a young man that had never lost a wrestling match. This true champion had never lost because he had perfected a wrestling hold known as the pretzel. Whenever this true champion caught someone in the pretzel hold, he had always been able to pin him.

The coach told this young challenger, “When you go out there in this championship match, whatever you do, don’t let him catch you in the pretzel hold!”

The challenger looked at his coach and said, “I understand.” He went out there and, as he had done in all of the previous wrestling matches, he fought his heart out. He got ahead in points and, with just about a minute to go, he was in the lead. It looked like he was going to achieve his dream. But then, what had happened so many times before happened to this young challenger—that true champion caught him in the pretzel. As soon as the coach saw that, he knew what was going to happen. He couldn’t bear to see this young man’s dreams dashed, so he looked away.

Larry EchoHawk was a professor of law at Brigham Young University when this forum address was given on 23 May 1995.

All of a sudden, a roar went up in that gymnasium. The coach turned around just in time to see these two bodies come flying up off the mat, arms and legs going every which way. For the first time a challenger had escaped from the pretzel! He was on his feet, he still had the lead in points, the clock was running down, the buzzer sounded, the audience went ecstatic with excitement because this challenger had reached his goal. The coach was the most excited of all as he ran across the mat and grabbed the young man's shoulders. He looked him right in the eye and said, "I just have to know. How did you escape the pretzel?"

That young man looked back at his coach and said, "I don't know, Coach. When he got me in that hold, I knew exactly what it was—it was very painful. I heard count one. I heard count two from the ref. I knew I was going to get pinned, and, at the last moment, I opened my eyes and right in front of my mouth was a toe." He said, "Coach, all I could think of was 'Bite that toe as hard as I could!'" He said, "That's exactly what I did. It's amazing what you can do when you bite your own toe!"

Now I have presented the secret—if you want to achieve your dreams and reach your goals and meet those challenges, just remember to take off your shoe and bite your toe!

Back in 1990, when I ran for attorney general of Idaho, I felt challenged. I was seeking to become the first in my political party in twenty years to be elected to that office and the first in my county in thirty-eight years to win an election for any statewide elective office. Perhaps most interesting, I was seeking to become the first American Indian in all the history of the United States to win an election for a statewide, state constitutional elective office. Those were the three challenges I felt in my heart. That wasn't enough, though. I read from one of the leading political analysts in the state that "Larry EchoHawk starts the election with three strikes against him." He wasn't talking about my three challenges. He said, "Larry EchoHawk is a

Mormon Indian Democrat." If you know Idaho, that's strike three.

What they didn't realize was that I had a strategy. My strategy was to convince the people of Idaho that EchoHawk was really an Irish name; thus I could take one of the strikes away and be able to succeed. Seriously, EchoHawk is the name given to my great-grandfather. He gave me a proud name and a proud heritage.

EchoHawk did not speak English. He was a Pawnee Indian born in the mid-1800s. The Pawnee people did not have, as we have today, a first and last name given to them. But the elders of the tribe chose individual names for something about them. Thus EchoHawk was named by the elders of the tribe. Among the Pawnee the hawk is a symbol of a warrior. My great-grandfather was known for his bravery. He was a Pawnee Indian war scout, but he was also a quiet man. He did not speak of his own accomplishments, but other members of the tribe did. As they did so, it was like an echo from one side of the village to the other, and thus he got his name—EchoHawk—"the hawk whose deeds are echoed."

I never knew my great-grandfather, or even my grandfather, but the stories have been passed down from generation to generation. EchoHawk faced enormous challenges and hardships that I'm sure I cannot fully comprehend. At one time, history teaches us, the Pawnee people occupied an area of nearly thirty million acres of land in what is now known as Nebraska. The Pawnee people were estimated to have numbered about 25,000. In the winter of 1874, at the age of nineteen, EchoHawk was marched away from his home to the Oklahoma Indian Territory and placed on a small reservation that was not a part of the Pawnee homeland area. There on the Pawnee Indian reservation in Oklahoma he was one of less than 750 Pawnee people remaining, devastated over the years by disease and conflict. Perhaps the greatest sorrow he experienced was the loss of the homeland

and the inability to go to see his ancestral grave sites, to go to the sacred areas, to pursue the buffalo herds as his forefathers had done. But he was a survivor.

The pain that EchoHawk experienced in his generation did not cease. My father and his father experienced hardships far beyond, I'm sure, anything that I have faced in my life. But even in my generation, my older sister was sent home from school because she was the wrong color. I remember the years that I sat in grade school classes when I would cringe if I heard the word *Indian* mentioned because Indians were described as savage, blood-thirsty heathens—renegades.

There were all kinds of questions that arose in the mind of a young Indian student about who I was and whether I had self-worth. I had no expectation in those early years of going on to achieve a college education—it wasn't something my family did. But out of that pain was born promise—the promise of America. Six of six children born to my parents went to college—four graduate degrees, with three becoming lawyers. Four of us were educated here at BYU. We have received the best that this country has to offer. We have realized the full promise of this great nation.

Perhaps I felt this more than at any other time on election night in 1990 as I received word that I would have the opportunity to serve as Idaho's thirtieth attorney general. I remember receiving that call in a hotel room in Pocatello—the city where I had raised my family. The news media was beckoning to me to come out and make some statement about my victory. I remember sitting on a bed with my young son—he was about five years old then and the youngest of six children. He had fought very hard to stay awake that night, but because it was late he hadn't been able to and had fallen asleep. As I sat there, I looked at him and thought back over where I'd come in life and about what I might say to the news media. After a few moments of reflection, I walked out

and stood in front of the news reporters with my father, the grandson of EchoHawk, at my side. I glanced over at him and saw tears in his eyes; it was very touching to me. I had my brothers and sisters and my wife and children at my side as I spoke from the heart to express the feelings I had inside.

I remembered words that I had heard when I was fifteen years old, spoken by a black civil rights leader on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. I repeated them from memory.

I . . . have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." . . .

I have a dream that my . . . children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. [Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963]

I believe in America. I believe in the spirit of America—the spirit that says that regardless of who you are, regardless of your religion, your race, your ethnic heritage, your economic status, you have a right and a potential to claim the promise of this great nation. America must be a land of opportunity for all people.

I want to express gratitude for the people who have helped me receive that promise. Just about a year ago, I was in the spacious office of the attorney general of the state of Idaho. I had a visitor come to see me that I had not seen in more than twenty-five years. His name was Boyd Camphuysen. He, along with Lee Pearson, had come as missionaries to my family when I was fourteen years old. Boyd Camphuysen had baptized me. It was an emotional moment. I could see it in his eyes as he thought back to me as the young man he had taught. He had marked my progress over twenty-five years. A seed had been planted. He had helped that

process, and many people had nurtured it over the years.

I am grateful to a mother of six that taught her children to thirst for education, perhaps because she had only an eighth-grade education. I am grateful for a father who took his six young children and had them work at his side to provide a living for the family, which taught us the value of work.

I am grateful for the opportunity to come to this institution of higher education and to be touched by so many people. I came as an athlete, and I was touched by people who worked in the athletic department—people like Glen Tuckett; my defensive back coach, Dick Felt; even the equipment manager, Floyd Johnson. They helped teach me.

One of the great lessons I learned came from LaVell Edwards, who was instrumental in recruiting me as a football player out of Farmington High School. He was the number-one assistant coach at that time and over the defense where I played. One of the great lessons that he has taught, and I'm sure it has to do with why he has been so successful, is that the most important thing to success is *not* the will to win. Kind of a strange statement coming from a football coach—you'd think the first thing he would say would be, "The most important thing is that you've got to want to win!" Coach Edwards said to his players, "The most important thing to success is the will to prepare." What he taught to the football players is that you've got to go out Monday through Friday and work as hard as you can so that on Saturday, when you show up in a blue uniform ready to play and you want to win, you're prepared to win. That's the most important thing. A great lesson learned in life that applies in whatever challenges you take up is the value of work; it will help you to achieve your goals and your dreams.

I want to say a word about those who were involved in Indian education at the time I was here on the BYU campus. These are my mentors

as well—people like Paul Felt and Dale Tingey and many others who served with them. But there was a leader that had a special impact on me, and I want to take this opportunity to just make mention of a man that I met soon after I was baptized at the age of fourteen. He was an apostle who came to a small LDS community—Kirtland, New Mexico—to attend a youth conference for Indian people. There was a lot of excitement generated because he was known as a person who had a deep love for the Lamanites. I remember how the anticipation built up. Finally, as I was gathered with a number of other youth waiting on a softball field, an automobile pulled up. Some people in business suits got out and began to walk across the field. We were waiting to meet this special person. As they walked up, I wasn't sure which one he was until, finally, the short one with a raspy voice spoke up. Within just a few minutes he broke down the barrier that was hard to break down with young Indian students. He befriended us. We went inside, and we listened to what Spencer W. Kimball had to tell us.

As a student on the BYU campus, I had an opportunity to listen to him on other occasions. I want to take this opportunity to read to you part of a speech that he gave to Indian students at BYU when he was serving as the prophet and president of the Church. These are his words:

In 1946, I had a dream of your progress and development. Now this is precisely what I dreamed, this was my vision for the people of the Book of Mormon. I got up from my bed and I wrote my dream, and this is what I wrote. As I looked into the future, I saw the Lamanites from the isles of the sea and the Americas rise to a great destiny. I saw the people of Lehi as engineers and builders. I saw you in political positions and functioning as administrators of the land. I saw you as heads of government of countries, and states, and cities. I saw you in legislative positions, where as legislators and good Latter-day Saints you were able to make the best

laws for your brothers and sisters. I saw many of you becoming attorneys and becoming the solution to the world's problems. I saw you as owners of industries and factories. I saw you as doctors as well as lawyers looking after your people. Now that was my dream; maybe it was a vision; maybe the Lord was showing to me what this great people would accomplish.

Those words have had an enormous impact upon me and I'm sure upon others. I carried that statement with me for many years to help me as a blueprint of life to help invest in me a dream.

Mentors are people that are there to reach out and to uplift, inspire, and to help others. One of my mentors in life is my older brother. For many years I've been known as John EchoHawk's little brother. John EchoHawk was one of the first American Indians to obtain a law degree in this country. As he was graduating from law school, he came to me. Usually he's a very, very quiet person and seldom opens up, but I remember the occasion when he did.

He said, "Larry, I think you ought to go to law school." This was a big change because I was on the path to becoming a coach and an educator. He said, "I think you ought to go to law school. It will give you the power to change."

When he said that, I thought he meant the power to change me or to put me in a position to get a better home, to make more money, or to have a better personal life. But then I realized that's not at all what he was talking about. He meant the power to change the lives of other people for the better. He was talking about our school motto: "Enter to learn, go forth to serve"—a familiar message to us on campus. It was not new to me.

As I grew up in my home, my parents practiced a tradition that had been handed down from generation to generation in our family known as the "Indian giveaway." In times of celebration as well as in times of

mourning, in the Indian culture you give what you have to others to bless their lives. Thus, when I was growing up, I saw my parents take people into our home to help sustain them. In the early years of my life I thought I had more brothers and sisters than I really did. I saw my father give his prized possessions away to other people simply because they admired something that he had, and he demanded that they take it. My father exemplified strength of character through giving what he had to help other people.

Over a year ago, on a very cold and dark day, I was walking down the center line of an Idaho highway. It was a sight that I will never forget. On this very cloudy day there was a line of cars with flashing police lights parked on both sides of the highway for about a mile. I was on the way to a funeral service for a father of four small children. His name was Wade Feldner. He'd been gunned down by a fourteen-year-old. As the attorney general of Idaho, I attended that funeral and graveside ceremony. It was impressive to witness the kind of support that was there.

As the ceremony concluded at the grave site, I remember walking up to the widow, Sherry Feldner, and extending my hand saying, in a very quiet voice, "I'm deeply sorry for the loss that you and your family have suffered."

As soon as I said this she just broke down with emotion, and we embraced. After a moment, as she regained her composure, she looked up at me and said words that I will never forget: "Please, Mr. EchoHawk, do everything you can to make sure that this does not happen to anyone else." You might imagine the kind of burden I felt as the chief law enforcement officer of the state to try to do my best to fulfill that charge. And the thoughts of that moment have haunted me since that day. But I've also realized that is not just my burden, it is a burden that we all share to make sure that we reduce the pain in our society and that we bring forth the promised America in the lives of all people.

One of the greatest threats that we face in this nation today concerns the hearts and minds of our young people. We see increased violence among our youth, we see more and more of our young people suffering from abuse, we see our prisons beginning to overflow. These are not just things I've read about in the newspaper. I've actually seen the devastating consequences of what happens in our society very directly. I've even had to witness, in my capacity as attorney general, the execution of a person that committed society's highest crime. I've seen both sides; I've seen the worst, and I've seen the best.

I would just like to close my comments today by giving you a challenge to get your education and to work hard. But remember

that when you leave this campus, you go forth to serve—to serve others, to help this be a better world. Don't be overcome by discouragement and frustration as these problems mount, because that world beyond the sheltered world that you are in now is out there waiting to try and test you. Don't be overwhelmed. I'd like to leave with you words that I heard in the formative years of my life, words spoken by Senator Robert F. Kennedy: "Some [people] see things as they are and say, why; I dream things that never were and say, why not" (see George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*, act 1). I have seen what was, but I see very clearly what we all can become, and I, too, say, Why not? I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.