

## **Governor Laura Kelly Remarks as Prepared—Landon Lecture Series**

### **“For a Healthier Kansas, We Need a Healthier Political Discourse”**

Good morning. Thank you, President Linton, for that introduction and for inviting me here today. I'm delighted to be with all of you, especially on Founder's Day!

Before I begin, I need to acknowledge the tragedy that took place just two days ago in Kansas City. This senseless violence took a Kansan's life, injured upwards of a dozen children, and has obviously scarred and horrified thousands more.

The prevalence of gun violence has invaded our schools, our campuses, our entertainment venues, our workplaces, and our homes. I look forward to the day when we can have open, honest discussions about the causes and work toward a safer society for all of us.

I am humbled today to join the ranks of esteemed public servants who have participated in this series over the years ... and honored to be the first sitting Kansas governor to present a Landon Lecture since Alf Landon himself did so in 1966. I'm also honored to be the first ever sitting female governor to do so—and hopefully not the last.

Everyone who has stood on this stage owes a debt of gratitude to former K-State President James McCain, who initiated the series as a tribute to Governor Landon.

We also owe a debt of gratitude to his daughter, Nancy Landon Kassebaum, who dedicated her career to serving the people of Kansas, and who has been a great role model for me and for so many others.

For those who may not know, Nancy Landon Kassebaum became the first woman to represent Kansas in the United States Senate when she was elected in 1978, and the first woman *ever* to be elected whose husband had not previously served in government. She was also the only woman in the Senate at that time.

In fact, early in her first term, Senator Kassebaum had to wait in line with the Capitol tourists to use a bathroom, while the male senators had exclusive use of a personal lounge.

And while her father, Alf Landon, did many great things for our state and our country, he made at least one serious miscalculation. He discouraged his daughter from running for that Senate seat in 1978, because, he said, Kansas wasn't ready to elect a woman. Fortunately for Kansas, Nancy ignored him.

Though Senator Kassebaum was—and still is—a proud Republican, she became known for working with her colleagues across the aisle ... like when she teamed up with Ted Kennedy to pass a landmark health care privacy bill.

A few years ago, Senator Kassebaum told me she was convinced she could not be elected today, precisely because of her willingness to work with the other party.

It deeply concerns me that the brand of bipartisan politics practiced by Senator Kassebaum has eroded. And it should concern you, too, because these types of unlikely partnerships are essential in government to truly make a positive difference in people's lives.

Here at K-State, I know you all have a new initiative to make this campus healthier, just as at the state level, we're focused on making our communities healthier by investing in things like mental health services, water quality, and safer roads.

But the longer I'm in this job, the more I've come to believe that if we're truly going to build a healthier future for Kansas, we need to start by making our political discourse healthier ... or, at the very least, much less toxic.

By a show of hands ... over the past few years, how many of you have seen friendships go by the wayside because of political disagreements?

How many of you have had a Thanksgiving dinner ruined by a heated argument over politics?

And, honestly, how many of you feel that someone's political views reflect whether they're a good or a bad person?

Our politics today is tearing us apart. Our friendships ... our families ... our communities...our nation.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

We expect disagreement in politics – that's a good thing. But the idea was that people with differing beliefs would come together to find shared values...common priorities...and the greater good. But that's obviously not happening much anymore.

So what on earth happened? And, more importantly, how do we dig our way back to a healthier politics?

That's what I'll be speaking about here today.

I first ran for public office in 2004 – 20 years ago. In politics, that's an entire lifetime ago. (*And I suspect for many of the students here, that's quite literally a lifetime ago ...*)

So, for those of you who weren't around then, here's what the world looked like in 2004:

- The social network that was then known as “TheFacebook” was still available only on college campuses.
- Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok didn't exist.
- Local reporters covered the statehouse, city halls, and school board meetings. When I was in the state senate, a slew of reporters camped out at the Capitol ready with eyes, ears, and notebooks open, ready to tell their readers and viewers what was going on. Now, with their ranks thinned significantly, much of what happens goes unreported.

In 2004, there were 21 governors who represented states that voted for the other party for president. 13 Democratic governors in red states, 8 Republican governors in blue states.

But in 2022, just 18 years later, there was only one Democratic governor who won in a state that went for Donald Trump the previous election.

**And you're looking at her.**

Over the past 20 years, our politics has become, not just *polarized* ... but, also *nationalized*.

Now you see campaigns for state representative or city council being focused on the same issues you see on national cable news – issues that have little or nothing to do with the constituents they'd actually be serving.

We saw it recently in school board races across our state, with some candidates using national talking points to attack our teachers, our librarians, and our administrators ... instead of discussing the issues actually impacting our classrooms in Kansas – like special education, mental health resources, and school safety.

The same thing happened in my campaigns. Both of my opponents, in 2018 and again in 2022, didn't attack me based on my record, or really anything happening in Kansas. Instead, they ran ad after ad trying to convince Kansans that I'm actually Bernie Sanders in a wig – or Joe Biden in heels.

I ran my campaign on issues the governor of Kansas *actually* has to deal with – balancing the budget, tax cuts, higher education, fixing the foster care system.

It was as if my opponents and I were running for two very different offices.

It's a strategy we're seeing more and more often now.

The campaign debates that voters hear are starting to sound the same – race after race, election after election, whether it's on the local, state, or federal level.

These are the same issues they hear on cable news, on radio talk shows, and see on their social media.

A former Speaker of the House from Massachusetts, Tip O'Neill, used to say: "All politics is local."

And while that's the way it should be, I'm not so sure that's the way it is anymore.

This nationalizing of local politics carries real, and serious, consequences:

First and foremost, voters don't hear healthy, spirited debates about the issues that their local elected officials will actually be responsible for in office.

Second, when candidates aren't taking positions on those local issues, the public is then unable to hold those officials accountable once they're in office.

And third, if campaigns become void of policy and substance, then the only thing voters can choose on is party and ideology. Voters get backed into partisan camps – which, of course, is why political parties often champion this strategy.

The result is, more and more, Americans are simply voting the party line up and down the ticket.

Very few voters across the country chose a candidate of one party for president and another for Senate or governor. Ticket-splitters are an endangered species.

Thankfully for me, we have a few left here in Kansas.

But that's not the reality everywhere else. And when Americans vote for a party regardless of who the candidate is, it makes it that much easier for those parties to win with extreme candidates. They no longer need to appeal to voters in the middle.

Even worse, you're seeing political parties proactively purge themselves of their moderate elected officials – the types who don't always vote the party line, who may actually reach across the aisle to get something done.

We saw that happen here in Kansas under one of my predecessors. In 2012, there was an active campaign waged from within the Kansas Republican Party to defeat the more moderate Republicans in the legislature. It was successful, for all of the reasons I've discussed here today, and it's done great harm to our ability to govern for Kansans.

Just look at Medicaid Expansion. If legislators would expand Medicaid, 150,000 more Kansans would have access to health insurance, and we could lower healthcare costs for everyone else, all at no expense to taxpayers. In 40 other states – including many red states – this is no longer a partisan issue. Those states have gone ahead and expanded Medicaid.

But in Kansas, it remains an ideological battle, in part, because legislative leadership doesn't want to see a Democratic governor get a win.

You know, I want to say to that leadership – look guys, I'm not running again. You can pass Medicaid Expansion. You can do all of the press conferences. You can take all of the credit. I will stay behind the scenes if you'd like. But the idea that people aren't getting the health care they need because of petty, partisan politics, is just shameful.

It's an example of how polarization is crushing our ability to get things done for Kansans.

Imagine for a moment a football field. Like the one at Bill Snyder Stadium, or the one in Orlando. Now, the season is over. The celebrations have ended. All you see is a green field with yard markers.

Most Americans – most Kansans – are ideologically positioned somewhere between the 40-yard lines. They're either a little to the left on an issue or a little to the right on an issue. And some are smack dab in the middle of the field.

However, so many of their elected officials seem to live between the 10-yard line and the endzone – on the extreme sides of the field.

And unless you're Will Howard, it's very hard to get from one endzone all the way to the other.

So, those politicians just stay in their own endzones. They can barely see the middle of the field – let *alone* get there. As a result, they refuse to even discuss – much less find solutions to – many of the key issues that really matter to Kansans. Not just Medicaid Expansion, but on jobs, education, child care, mental health. The inability or unwillingness to build consensus, to find common ground, prevents progress on just about everything.

Now, I'm not saying that we haven't been able to get anything done here in Kansas. Of course we have – but I'll tell you, it's not because of the people who were standing in the endzones. It's because of the people who were willing to come to the middle of the field.

An example of that happened in the fall of 2021. I was headed into an election year and was regularly being called all sorts of names by my opponents – my personal favorite was 'Lyn' Laura.' Republicans were dead set on stopping me from winning that next November.

But then, we were approached by a company who wanted to invest \$4 billion in Kansas. It would be the largest capital investment in the history of our state. It would create 4,000 jobs and put Kansas on the global map as one of the best places in the world to do business. In essence, a huge win for Kansas. But perhaps it would also be a huge win for me politically, at a time when the Republicans were desperate to reclaim the governor's office.

Now, to get this company – *and yes, it was Panasonic Energy* – to come to Kansas, we would need to pass legislation that updated our economic development tools and made the state a more appealing place to invest. At first, it looked nearly impossible. Working together? Quickly? In an election year? Forget about it.

But, because the economy tends not to be an ideological issue, my Republican colleagues came to the table to close the deal. The Speaker of the House, the Senate Majority Leader, and I had frequent meetings, many late night phone calls. We even went on a field trip together. For those moments, we weren't a Democratic governor and Republican leaders. We were Kansas elected officials, doing right by the people we were elected to serve.

That's not the only time we've put partisan politics aside here in Kansas – we've now come together five years in a row to fully fund our public schools... we've eliminated the state sales tax on food... and we've balanced the budget year after year.

But I wish I could say working together happened much more often than it actually does.

From Medicaid Expansion to passing a new round of responsible tax cuts, there is so much more we could get done if elected officials would meet on the 50-yard line.

But look ... there's more to why our national political discourse has eroded than simply how we run our campaigns and what's happening in the Kansas state legislature.

In today's world, it's easier than ever for Americans, and for Kansans, to live in their own bubbles.

Smartphones and social media make it so easy to create your own personal echo chamber – to surround yourself only with those who think like you do.

You know, there was a time when Americans and Kansans actually came together to consume the news, as communities, as a state, as a nation – the daily paper on the doorstep, the nightly news on the television. Everyone watched Walter Cronkite or Barbara Walters.

Now, Americans often only follow news outlets that they find ideologically agreeable.

That *bubble of agreement* that people have created for themselves can be comforting – their own friends, personalized news, curated social media. But in my view, these bubbles we live in are *not* healthy for our system – nor our collective mental health.

So ... how do we break out of them?

Well, I've got a 3-step program for that:

First: Admitting you have a problem. Recognize that you probably do, in fact, live in a bubble.

Two: Be proactive about engaging people in your life who *you know* live outside your bubble – some family members, neighbors, friends.

You know, a friend of mine who teaches at George Washington University told me that he recently assigned his students to interview people in their lives with whom they disagree the most politically. He asked them to listen, to take notes, to think about how they could have civil discussions, and perhaps, to find a way to meet them in the middle. We need more of this kind of discourse – in our schools, in our communities, and, certainly, in our government.

You don't always need to talk politics with people. But make it a point to understand where they're coming from, how their life experiences inform their world view.

And my last step is a call to action of sorts. Ask those people in your life with whom you disagree about politics to join you in, say, a service project. Anything you want to do. Volunteer together at a local food bank. Do a church activity. Visit a senior center. Whatever you want to do.

We need to get back to a place where people can disagree about politics, but still form a bond – still engage in community service and civic life together.

Now, my 3-step bubble break won't fix all of the world's problems. But it would be a start.

As I serve my second term as Governor, I'm committed to doing my part to bring that civility back to our politics.

Some of you may recall that in my re-election campaign, I ran several ads where I was literally standing in the middle of the road – making the case that meeting there, in the middle, is how to get things done.

Since then, I've started a PAC called, *what else?*, “Middle of the Road.” But unlike most PACs, which support candidates on the far left or the far right – mine is about lifting up candidates on both sides of the political aisle who are willing to put commonsense solutions above their political party.

For me, Middle of the Road wasn't just a campaign slogan – it is a governing philosophy.

Building on that, I want to close with a message to the students who are here today, you young adults who might just be starting to iron out your own beliefs and values.

Stay open ... open to new ideas, open to new perspectives, open to people who grew up differently than you did. Be open to changing your mind. Changing your mind when presented with new information and new facts doesn't make you inconsistent, it makes you thoughtful and reasonable.

Each of you has the chance – in fact, the responsibility – to improve our political discourse. It starts with how you interact with the people in your everyday life.

The good news is, for so many of you, the issues that divided your parents' generation – LGBTQ rights, reproductive rights, environmental protections – aren't all that controversial for your generation.

But new issues are arising that will confront your generation – issues about technology, America's place in the world, about what democracy looks like here at home, and, as you're doing here at K-State, about how to make our world a healthier place.

You'll have passionate disagreements along the way ... with your family, your neighbors, your classmates.

But also, *along the way*, let's ensure:

That cooler heads always prevail.

That compromise is always a possibility.

And that the middle of the road is always the road most traveled.

Thank you.