I thank you for inviting me to come to Brockport to talk about last fall's elections. I come--I must warn you--as a political scientist, not as a pundit. And I come to talk about an event that no political scientist could predict and about an aftermath that no pundit can keep up with. Certainly it was a fascinating election. Certainly it was a gift to political scientists. And probably it was an historic election. But it's going to take a lot of time and a lot of Ph.D. theses before we decide whether or not "historic" is the correct description. In the meantime, of course, the politicians and the pundits are on the move. Historic or not, the repercussions of the election are being felt and are being reported in the media every day.

When I read the papers the day after the election, I knew, intellectually, that something very unexpected and very interesting
had happened. And when I went to Capitol Hill in mid-December, I experienced those same feelings first hand. A defeated Ohio Democrat, with whom I had travelled on the campaign trail, was packing up his office records to leave the House; and he was asking me about job prospects in teaching. On the other hand, a victorious Pennsylvania Republican, with whom I had travelled during the campaign, was packing his office records to move into a bigger House office; and he was asking Newt Gingrich for an appointment to talk about welfare reform. What a difference! And when I walked past the huge House caucus room, there were 100-150 reporters and several banks of cameras waiting for the Republicans to come out of their meeting and tell the world whatever they had decided. When I happened to go by the floor of the House a week later, I saw one young man guarding a side door and drinking a Coke. "What's going on in there," I asked. "The Democrats are having a caucus," he said. Those are big differences! And they hit me between the eyes.

BROCKPORT SPEECH (2/19/95)-2
So the first lesson of the election was made amply clear—up close and personal: there were big winners and big losers. And it was not hard to tell which was which. No wonder the Democrats and their fellow travelling pundits were speaking of the election in the language of destruction and disaster—as a political earthquake or a political tidal wave. And no wonder the Republicans and their fellow travelling pundits were speaking of the election in the language of improvement and uplift—as a clear mandate for reform or a successful revolution. The bottom line result of the election, we all know, was that the Republicans took control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. They took control of the Senate, too; but they had already done that three times in the 1980's, which lessened the novelty—though not the importance—of that feat. I shall talk later about the Senate. But for now, I want to concentrate on the House.

I want to begin by thinking of the House election, in the broadest sense, as an exercise in representative government—as proof that
representative government works in this country. If the founding fathers were looking down on election night, I am sure they were smiling. Because winners and losers changed places and we got an alternation in power. It is true, of course, that the founders did not think in terms of parties, but they did advocate and expect that elections would bring about some alternation in terms of who was running the country and who was not. Instead, for forty years, one party—the Democrats—had been in control of the House—the very institution which was designed to be, and is—among our national institutions—the one closest to the people. Between the Civil War and 1954—when the Democrats began their winning streak—no one party had ever controlled the House for more than 18 years at a time. Students, like those we honor this evening, came to Brockport, studied Congress, left, got jobs, raised families, sent their children to Brockport and considered it a law of nature that the House was Democratic. While it is hard to say just how long is too long, it is not hard to say that 40 years is way too long to go without an alternation in power—especially in "the people’s
chamber" in a representative system of government. And so, we might begin by saying that November's election outcome was the best thing that could have happened for the country in terms of maintaining our system of government.

By the same token, if we think about the current political situation, we can also begin by acknowledging the very large effects that 40 years of one party rule had on the system—the largest of which was steadily deteriorating citizen support for Congress as an institution. On the part of the Democrats—who were in power—those 40 years gave us arrogance and irresponsibility—best personified by those unchanging warrens of old-style political patronage—the House bank and the House post office. On the part of the out-of-power Republicans, 40 years gave us the frustration of an oppressed minority that sparked and produced the popular anti-congressional proposal for term limits. And from the combination of Democratic arrogance and Republican frustration, 40 years gave us an increasingly polarized, partisan and gridlocked BROCKPORT SPEECH (2/19/95)-5
House of Representatives. And from all of this we got, worst of all, a steady increase in public cynicism, anger and contempt for Congress and for the politicians who populate it.

Had we not had 40 years of one party rule in the House, I would argue, we would not have had the House bank and post office scandals, we would not have had the movement for term limits, and we would not have had in 1994 a situation where only 18% of the citizenry voiced any degree of approval of Congress.

Personally, I think we would have been better off without any of these outcomes. And we can talk about that later. The point I want to make now is simply that we must begin any look at the 1994 elections and beyond by recognizing the profound effects--especially the negative effects--of 40 years without an alternation in power. Our representative system had gotten badly out of whack.

The election was, of course, a spectacular victory for the
Republicans and a huge defeat for the Democrats. The Republicans gained 52 seats in the House—giving them a majority of 230 out of 435. They gained 8 Senate seats, plus one switch afterwards for a majority of 53 out of 100. [And they captured 11 governorships for a majority of 39.] One pundit captured the magnitude of it all by saying that it had now become possible to drive from Portsmouth, New Hampshire to the west coast without driving through a single Democratic House district!

As you might expect from these results, the election was more partisan than usual. People who called themselves Republicans, who often voted Democratic for their member of Congress, voted more Republican for Congress this time than they had since before Ronald Reagan. Independents voted more Republican than they had since before Ronald Reagan. Perot voters who split their congressional votes 50-50 in 1992, went 2-1 Republican in 1994. And, parenthetically, among the 21% of the voters who said they listened to radio talk shows, 64% voted Republican. It should also be noted

BROCKPORT SPEECH (2/19/95)-7
that self-identified Democrats voted slightly more Democratic than previously—which tells us that the election was polarizing as well as partisan.

As these figures indicate, the election was also more national than usual. When political scientists look for explanations of congressional elections, they usually begin by swearing allegiance to former Speaker Tip O'Neill's famous proposition that "all politics is local" (his book). The idea is that congressional elections are driven by the popularity and the personal accomplishments of the local candidates—and mostly, we know, the incumbent candidate. Sometimes, however, politics is distinctively national, not local. And 1994 is one such time. This time, politics was unusually national. Most of the seats the Republicans captured from the Democrats, for example, were in districts where George Bush had done well in 1992—thus indicating that people were bringing their local votes into closer alignment with their national presidential votes.

BROCKPORT SPEECH (2/19/95)-8
The explanation for the change rests heavily on the idea that the Republicans succeeded in imposing their national issues on the 1994 electorate in such a way as to override local issues, thus Republicanizing and nationalizing the election. The Republican issues were similar to those which had brought them so much success in five of the last presidential elections—low taxes, low inflation, law and order, less intrusive government. In November, with the Democrats in control of both the Presidency and Congress, that is, with divided government ended, those voters who had strong anti-government predispositions had no difficulty knowing which was the party running the entire government. It was the Democrats. The voters identified them as the governing party and threw them out. It was a markedly anti-Democratic election. Amazingly, not a single Republican incumbent lost—not in the House, not in the Senate and not in a governorship.

If, then, we think of the election, overall, as more partisan and more national than usual, the most interesting results occurred in
the south. As a result of the election—and for the first time ever—a majority of House members from the south are Republicans. And nearly every pro-Republican voting statistic in the election registered most strongly in the south—particularly among white males. Black voters remained, as always, overwhelmingly Democratic—although lower than normal turnout among black voters may have hurt some Democratic candidates. Nationally, white males voted more Republican than white females. But white males in the south voted even more Republican than white males nation-wide.

Attitudes toward President Clinton had some impact nationally, and again white southerners disapproved of Bill Clinton more than white voters nation-wide. White southerners were more conservative on the issues—particularly on cultural issues—than white voters nation-wide; and southern white men were the most anti-Clinton and most conservative voters north or south. Indeed, some pundits have described the election as "the revolt of the angry white males."

To which I would add "angry southern white males."

BROCKPORT SPEECH (2/19/95)-10
For most of this century, the south has been a centerpiece of the Democratic electoral coalition—"the solid south" it was called in Franklin Roosevelt's day. That solidity has been steadily weakening ever since Republican Dwight Eisenhower carried a few southern states for president in 1952. In 1972, Republican Richard Nixon carried a majority of the southern states—all of them in fact. And four times since then—Ronald Reagan twice and George Bush twice—Republicans have taken a majority of the southern states at the presidential level. But the 1994 election was the tipping election in terms of congressional seats.

In November, the Republicans captured 19 Democratic seats in the south, and it gave them a 73-64 majority. For one quick and visible effect of this change, just look at the new Republican leadership. Speaker Gingrich—Georgia, Majority Leader Armey—Texas, Majority Whip DeLay—Texas, Chairman of the Tax Committee, Archer—Texas, Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, Livingston—Louisiana. And the newly elected second-in-command party whip in
the Senate, Trent Lott-Mississippi. Bob Dole is the only non-
southern Republican leader left, and he seems pretty anxious to
give it up for another job. The Republican party in Congress has
taken on a dominantly southern look--as it never had before. And
that may well be, in retrospect, the most important thing about the
1994 election. Surely, southern Republican strength will be
relevant for the future play of the two parties and for the
presidential election of 1996. How relevant it becomes will, in
turn, tell us how historic it is.

Thinking historically, we can look at the 1994 election as part of
the long-term, pro-conservative tide that has been flowing in the
country since sometime in the mid 1960’s. New Deal liberalism, we
might say, reached its high water mark with the election of Lyndon
Johnson over Barry Goldwater in 1964. When pollsters asked
citizens in that year about desirable government power, 70%
(equally split) answered either that government should use its
power more vigorously or was using it just right. Today, those
numbers would be totally reversed. Johnson’s Great Society program, then, gave us a major civil rights bill, Medicare, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the anti-poverty program, a Department of Housing and Urban Development, and other programs which pushed up domestic spending. At which point the Vietnam war intervened, conservative intellectuals produced a smaller-government, free market agenda and Republicans began to dominate presidential politics.

Indeed, but for a couple of accidents, all our presidents since 1964 would have been Republican. Jimmy Carter, I would argue, was a product of Watergate. Bill Clinton was the product of a dismal campaign by George Bush. That is, the 1992 presidential election was Bush’s to lose and he lost it.

If we think of this long-term, pro-conservative, pro-Republican trend and if we think of the 1994 elections as part of that trend, today’s question becomes: where are we now--in the middle of the...
trend or near the end of it or what? Can the Republicans capitalize on their victory and consolidate their power in both Congress and in the presidency--something they have not done since 1954? Or, can the Democrats hang on or reverse the trend.

As I say, I am no pundit. And anyone who knows politics knows that 20 months is a political lifetime--especially with a volatile electorate. For now, however, the Republicans clearly hold the initiative and the momentum--intellectually as well as politically. And the elections have left them in good shape for the next campaign--in two other important ways. Because political money always flows mostly toward the incumbents, regardless of party, the Republicans are now on the receiving end of that natural money flow. For years, the Democrats enjoyed that advantage. This year, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee already finds itself $5m in debt.

Secondly, the 1994 state legislative elections brought into office
a huge influx of 460 new Republican state legislators--the farm
teams from which the largest number of congressional candidates
have traditionally come. Political scientists have maintained that
the 40 year dominance of Democrats in Congress owed a great deal to
the fact that they recruited better, more experienced and more
ambitious candidates to run for Congress. That advantage, too,
will swing to the Republicans as they increase the size of their
talent pool in the state legislatures.

What happens from now on will depend a lot on the performance of
the Congressional Republicans. So let’s talk about them for a
little bit.

When an election is over, and political people move from the
business of campaigning to the business of running the country, the
first thing they do is work out an interpretation of what the
election was all about. In the early transition period there are
always numerous interpretations. Bill Clinton produced several
different ones all by himself. Interpretations are important, not because they are right or wrong, but because politicians act on them. Academics may decide years after an election what the voters were saying. But politicians have to decide long before that; because they use their interpretations to help guide their activity.

Bill Clinton is still trying to decide what the election meant and his actions reveal that fact. We can return to him in a minute. The interpretation of the election that matters most for now is that of the winners. And the winning Republicans decided immediately to interpret the election as a mandate to enact their Contract With America. Academics know that 65% of the voters say they never heard of the Contract. And knowing that the Contract was put together with focus groups and polls, we will say the election carried no such mandate. It does not matter. The House Republicans say it did and they are acting on their interpretation.

That is what matters.
Which brings us to the most fascinating part of the post-election drama--Speaker Newt Gingrich, his company of supporting players and
his whole Newt world. Of special interest to political scientists who
study Congress, is the way the Republicans have organized the
House. For they have reversed a trend that began eighty-five years
ago--with the overthrow of Speaker Joe Cannon in 1910--to
decentralize leadership in the House, to devolve power to
committees and to subcommittees and to their leaders. Gingrich has
orchestrated the recentralization of party leadership in the House
with himself at the apex, with the close support of an inner circle
of like-minded colleagues, an outer circle of sympathetic
colleagues and with the shock-troop-support of the 73 new freshmen
members--otherwise known as the Shiites of Congress. In this
respect, it is important to note that nearly two-thirds of all
House Republicans have come to the House in the last three
elections. And there are very few of these newcomers who do not
owe Gingrich for something--campaign help, advice, committee
position or intellectual leadership.

BROCKPORT SPEECH (2/19/95)-17
He has hand picked committee leaders, regardless of seniority, hand
picked memberships of some committees, manipulated some
subcommittees and their leaders, decided which committees should be
eliminated, set the time table for the remaining committees to
report, and dominated the media with running accounts of what he
was doing and why. We’ve seen nothing like it in my years of
study.

All the speakers I have known came to their job by getting on the
leadership ladder, courtesy of some patron already on the ladder
and rising to the top spot by accommodating to others and by
seniority. They were not leaders by virtue of their policy
positions and they did not bring with them to the top position a
loyal following based on their intellectual or policy leadership.

We would have to go back to Henry Clay, I think, to find the only
other speaker who came to power as a policy leader with a like-
minded policy following.

BROCKPORT SPEECH (2/19/95)-18
That's what Newt Gingrich has been. Ever since he came to Congress in 1978, he has had one goal—to produce a Republican majority in the House. He organized and slowly expanded a group of House soulmates in the Conservative Opportunity Society, he used the House as a bully pulpit to attack the Democrats, to attack his own party's moderate leadership, to attack the House of Representatives as an institution, to attack and force the resignation of a Democratic Speaker, Jim Wright, and in 1988, won a tough campaign for party whip by a two vote margin, the position from which he launched his campaign for the top job.

Speaker Newt Gingrich is, therefore, another one of the outcomes we got from 40 years of one-party rule of the House. Had we had an alternation in power, we would have gotten a different kind of speaker—not one who had spent his House career in confrontational activity, fostering and feeding anti-congressional sentiment and anti-congressional policies. But he has achieved his 16 year goal.

Surely, he is one of the most skillful legislative politicians of
the 20th century. And he has the 1994 election outcome--which he predicted, incidentally--to prove it.

Since January, he and his troops have been on a 100 day forced march through the various provisions of their Contract With America--a uniquely unifying party program. The bills they have passed are designed to down-size government and to show that government can act--that a party can make a promise and fulfill it. On both counts it seems to have been successful so far. At least, Congress' approval rating has jumped 20 points from its pre-election low.

Republican cohesion in the House has been, thus far, quite remarkable; and I would guess that it will hold at least until the August recess. Ronald Reagan held his party cohorts intact until that time in 1981. After which his troops started looking toward the next election and partisan trench warfare set in. Nineteen ninety-six, being a presidential year, may follow a similar
Besides which the Republicans—for all their voting unity—are not a homogenous group. Even the freshmen—who, after all, forced Gingrich to accept a six-year limit on his term as Speaker—will not hold still. They have come of age in a time when it is natural to challenge authority. Some will likely tire of lock step support, while others will likely balk at what they see as excessive compromise. And Republican moderates, as many as 60 by some counts, may—as we can already see on foreign policy and welfare reform—force compromise.

For all of Speaker Gingrich’s talents, the bare-knuckled, bomb throwing way he fought to the top leaves him without any cushion of good will among Democrats. While he may be the godfather to the Republicans, to Democrats he is the man they love to hate. And the fact that he sometimes gives them a taste of their own 40-year medicine, adds to the enmity. From Day One, the Democrats have
been hassing Gingrich--attacking his book deal in the media and attacking his parliamentary procedures on the floor. Their hostility has taken a public toll.

In the polls, Gingrich's modest favorability ratings invariably trail behind his negative ratings--by 48% to 38% in one poll, 38% to 31% in another. But he can talk solace in the news that he remains less recognizable than Judge Lance Ito. Predictably, Gingrich will talk himself, brilliantly but erratically, in and out of trouble throughout his tenure--not unlike the President. But Democratic harassment is not a policy. And the House Democrats seem not to have decided at all what the election was about, have no program of their own on the horizon, and seem to be floundering their way toward the next election.

Finally, the House Republicans must cope with the Senate Republicans whose members did not sign the Contract, whose moderates are more influential than their House counterparts, whose
leader, Bob Dole, is more pragmatic and less ideological than Speaker Gingrich, and where the rules and traditions have yielded an altogether more bipartisan, accommodating way of doing business. On matters like the balanced budget amendment, on the tax cut/deficit reduction trade-off, crime and welfare reform—the overall Senate perspective is different than that of the House. Prodded by an impatient public, senators will probably come along on most issues, but at a policy price and at a slower, more deliberate pace of their own choosing. The House passed the balanced budget amendment in two days; the Senate has been debating it for 18 days with no end in sight. As of this week, the House has passed seven of the eleven contract items, and the Senate two.

Which brings us to the President—a big question mark. Without a doubt, Bill Clinton was hurt badly by the election results. I do not purport to know what he will do—and I’m not sure he does either. Here, though, are some elements of his situation as I understand it.

BROCKPORT SPEECH (2/19/95)-23
First, he did not know how to interpret the election. How much was it a fundamental rebuke to him and his policies, how much was it simply an extension of the 1992 message that the voters wanted a change, but faster and how much was it that he had not been successful in explaining and publicizing his accomplishments. "I hear you," he said; but it has not been clear what he heard. Some interpretations would lead him to change his policies, some would not; some would lead to cooperation with the Republicans, some would lead him to stand and fight the Republicans. For a couple of months, he wavered and pundits speculated. Since his State of the Union Message, he seems to have decided on a little of each. Or as one pundit has put it, he has three answers to the Republicans--yes, yes but and never.

But, the second part of the President's equation is that whatever he decides, he has lost the initiative in policy making. It is the Republicans who are now in control; and they have set the public agenda. The focus is on Congress. The President's sweeping
proposals for a set of middle class tax cuts and his retraining proposals have been largely ignored. He can react and counter-punch, but his capacity to lead has been undercut by the election. Newt Gingrich has the bully pulpit, not Bill Clinton.

His loss of the policy initiative might be mitigated some if he enjoyed wide personal popularity. But he does not. And that further weakens him--especially with his fellow Democrats in the Congress. Very few members of Congress are willing to hitch their political future to his and to go to the mat for him. Only those--like the African American and Hispanic Democrats in Congress, who have no where else to go. Indeed, those two groups of House Democrats have lost more of their power as a result of the elections, than the President has of his. Most Congressional Democrats, however, do not need and do not fear their party leader. They will set their own course--or drift, as seems more likely.

The President's fourth problem comes from the way his first three
problems are played by the media. It was extremely telling, I thought, that whereas the media pundits almost unanimously panned and derided his State of the Union speech, public reaction to it was overwhelming positive. Whereas the pundits found it too confusing and too long, the public saw it as a welcome combination of conciliation and backbone. And his popularity rose as a result of it. But the media now interprets whatever he does in political and strategic terms--was he or was he not "moving to the center," was he or was he not his old indecisive self. Whereas the public seemed to be able to imagine a fresh start, the media seemed unwilling to cut him any slack at all.

His speeches are seen as carefully calculated media events and not policy commitments. He's trying to "look presidential" they say. And they are promoting the idea that he will be challenged in a primary--and they are hoping that he will be. Any behavioral change is interpreted as further evidence that he never had a solid core of commitments--only ambition--and that he is trying once
again to reinvent himself. In short, media treatment of the
President makes it certain that his image will continue to get in
the way of his accomplishments.

Compared with the day he was elected, therefore, Bill Clinton has,
today, less popular support, less of a policy initiative, less
support of his party in Congress and less benefit of the doubt from
the media.

So, is he going down the drain and out of the picture? Not yet.
He still has some things going for him--not the least of which is
his own intelligence, experience in the job and his campaign
skills. He is, after all, the President, holding an office that
commands great respect and bestows a great deal of attention on its
occupant. He has the veto power, which allows him to pick and
chose his policy fights with the Republican Congress, when to say
"never"--as he has already said on assault weapons, "cops on the
street," and the presidential role in foreign policy. And, not
least, he has the possibility that the Republicans will screw up--
by over-reaching or under-achieving in policy terms, by fighting
among themselves--especially if their presidential nominating
contest heats up--or by their inability to ward off a third party
candidate.

We should not forget that twenty percent of November's voters said
they would support Ross Perot or a third party in 1996. And a more
recent poll showed that 27% of the citizenry were either negative
or neutral toward the two major parties. Those kinds of figures
suggest that no matter what we say about Republicans and Democrats,
Gingrich and Clinton, a significant minority of Americans may have
already tuned out of our every day conventional two-party politics.
General public dissatisfaction is an unnerving threat to both
parties. But in 1996, it would be a more "significant" threat to
the Republicans, because a third party candidate (except for Jesse
Jackson) would probably help reelect Clinton--much as Perot helped
To conclude, the 1994 elections brought a welcome measure of stability to our representative system of government, even as they substantially shook up its various elements. So how will the new configuration work itself out? As I say, I am not a pundit. And I have no idea what the situation will be when the next group of Pi Sigma Alpha students are recognized for their accomplishments. I can predict only that we are in for a wild and woolly 20 months of political activity. And while, as citizens, we may occasionally get quite depressed over this activity, as political scientists, I have to admit, we will love it.