

Arizona's Statesman: Congressman John J. Rhodes

Leaving Congress

By 1980, John Rhodes had been Minority Leader for seven years. As he so aptly put it, “first, a Minority Leader wants to lead a majority, not a minority. Second, until his situation improves, he wants to lead a cohesive, effective minority.” Rhodes found his position challenged by freshman members who wanted a more aggressive leader who would be receptive to “new ideas.” Among these was Newt Gingrich of Georgia.

Rhodes knew that if there was to be a contest for leadership of the House Republicans, he could win, but his victory would engender major divisions within the party. It was not his style to undertake a campaign that would damage either the House of Representatives that he loved so well, or the post of Minority Leader. Therefore, he decided that he would run for his seat in the House; that if the Republicans won a majority, he would serve as Speaker; but if there was not a Republican majority, he would not be a candidate for Minority Leader.

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John Rhodes was re-elected to his seat in the House with a whopping 73 percent of the vote, helped Bob Michel become Minority Leader in his stead, and happily took a position on the House Rules Committee. It was his last term in Congress, having completed thirty years of meritorious service — for which he would later be honored with the Congressional Distinguished Service Award.



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In 1982, John Rhodes gave the following speech, which consisted of his farewell remarks as well as his assessment of the state of the country and his vision for its future. He chose to have it presented here unedited, and wrote this introduction shortly before his death:

At that particular time in our history, the possibility of an attack by Russia across the north German plain was very present and threatening. At the same time, the domestic economy was not in as healthy a position as it needed to be, so the means of attacking both of these problems were important to the people of our country. I submit this entire work because I think it is important to know how we were thinking in 1982. In many ways, these thoughts are just as fresh today as they were then. In other ways, of course, developments in our relationships and our strengths and in the world in which we live have changed so much that we would want to make some drastic changes in the remarks and the capabilities set forth on April 20th, 1982.

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Just before he retired from Congress, Mr. Rhodes published an amended and expanded version of his Floor Remarks in the prestigious journal, *Foreign Affairs*. The abridged article is presented here because of its remarkable prescience and because it demonstrates John Rhodes's statesmanship. In this essay, the Congressman expounds upon the issues he believed of were (and are) of the greatest importance to the well being of the United States: the development and widespread use of alternative energy; the importance of a strong, goal-directed, forward-looking foreign policy; and the interdependence of foreign policy and the U.S. economy.

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FLOOR REMARKS BY HON. JOHN J. RHODES RE: DEFENSE

Mr. Speaker, today you will hear a discussion of the defense of our country from a garden-variety Member who has the vanity to profess some knowledge in the field. I received an Army commission by completing the ROTC course at Kansas State University in 1938. I was also a member of the Arizona National Guard prior to, and for some years after, my election to the Congress. I have a certificate of completion of the Associate Course of the Army's Command and General Staff College. I am now a retired colonel in the Judge Advocate General's Corps.

More important, I served for almost five years as a member of the Defense Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. Later, as Minority Leader of the House, I was an ex-officio member of the House Intelligence Committee. I have a lasting personal interest in the field of geopolitics and in global strategy.

I have always classified myself as a hawk where matters of defense are concerned. I feel that the communist world is absolutely serious in its intent to master the whole globe whenever it can do so. It continues to probe wherever it can find weaknesses, and if and when the ultimate weakness appears, I have no doubt that it will move to take advantage of that situation as rapidly and effectively as possible.

Yet I feel that our defense posture needs constant examination and re-examination. Right now is a period in our history when such re-examination is long overdue. Not only have we fallen behind the Russians in some very important categories of armaments, but our economic and fiscal situations are worrisome, to say the least. Thus, we have two problems: (1) rearmament, to deter effectively any attack, and (2) rearming at a price our economy can support. Not easy.

The defense of the country must be a part of foreign policy, and the framers of foreign policy must be constantly aware of our defense strengths and weaknesses. Too often, persons in control of both our defense and foreign policies are individuals who have only superficial knowledge in the field, or who have gathered their knowledge from having served in similar capacities in the past and are, therefore, guided by the methods and ideas of the past. Not since Richard Nixon have we had a president who really had a personal understanding of foreign policy. Not since Dwight Eisenhower have we had a president with a personal understanding of our defense needs and capabilities. Unfortunately, the result has been a failure to develop our foreign policy and our defense strategy along the lines which would utilize the strength of America. Instead of building on our strength, we have reacted to the initiatives, both in diplomacy and in military developments, of other nations. Too often, ours has been a policy of response, not innovation. Naturally, other nations choose to center their activities in areas in which they are strong and we are weak. As a result we are, in effect, playing in their ball park and by their rules, not ours.

Soviet Russia's great strength is the availability of huge quantities of manpower, which hang like the sword of Damocles over all of Western Europe. The Russian soldier can be inducted, trained, and maintained for a much smaller outlay of goods and services than can his American counterpart. The Russian soldier is used to the Soviet society and economy, a system in which ambitions are stultified by the limitation of opportunity. On the other hand, the American soldier eventually wants to get back into civilian life, make some money, provide security for himself and his family, lead the good life and, if he is very ambitious, perhaps go to Congress some day. The result is that there is no way that the United States can, except in an all-out war situation, compete with the Russians in volume of manpower. Our military has problems in competing with the blandishments of civilian life—theirs does not.

So, in preparation for war, or in acting to deter it, we should not rely on superiority in manpower. We do not have it. So where do we go?

You would think that a nation with the advanced technology and industrial capabilities which the United States possesses would be able to offset this manpower gap by the production and use of better and more sophisticated weapons. But something is terribly wrong with the manner in which we utilize our economic power for military purposes. For instance, we seem to be incapable of building a tank which is the equal in firepower, durability, and maneuverability with those of other nations. When I was on the Defense Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee, we finally had to give up on building the Main Battle Tank (MBT) 70. I suggested to the then Secretary of the Army that it shouldn't be too long before we could take the expertise that we had acquired from that abortive attempt and develop another tank. He calmly told me that it would take ten years to develop another tank. I was never able to find out why this was so, but obviously it was. Something must be wrong with the manner in which the Pentagon sets about to develop a new tank and produce it. And, of course, this is just one example. We could go into many other areas, such as attack helicopters, in which we should excel and don't.

It is true that much of what we buy for the military is new, and certainly is not for sale at any hardware store. Therefore, cost overruns can be expected. But I am bothered by the apparently widespread practice of making deliberately low estimates on the cost of new weapons systems. The name of the game is to get the contract at any price, get the military committed to you, then raise the price. The result is horrendous cost overruns. There have to be better procurement methods than those we now use.

In other words, Eisenhower was obviously right when he said that the military industrial complex needed to be watched. It does. And it isn't being watched to the point that it must be in the future. This adds up to a major defect in our military posture—in our ability to build a defense our economy can afford. It must be remedied.

So why is it so necessary that we have a superior tank anyway? We certainly need tanks to defend our own country, and our own hemisphere. But the main reason that we now need tanks is to blunt any armored attack by the Russians across the North German Plain.

Our foreign policy and our defense policy are largely geared to defending Western Europe from a Soviet attack. We have some 350,000 American troops permanently stationed in Germany for the purpose of containing such an attack until the total strength of NATO can be mobilized to defeat the attack and hurl it back.

As a nation, we have been preoccupied with Western Europe ever since World War I. Before World War I, Western Europe was the undoubted master of the world. Through their colonial systems, the nations of Western Europe, including England, controlled most of the globe. The industrial and technological might of Western Europe exceeded that of all the other nations of the world. Obviously, if any one nation had been able to obtain hegemony over all of Western Europe, that nation could have become the undisputed master of this globe. The objective of our foreign policy was at that time, and has been ever since, to keep any nation or combination of nations from acquiring that hegemony.

But the situation today is entirely different. The power of Europe is infinitesimal compared to the dominant position which it occupied prior to World War I. Its colonial system is gone, and while its scientific and technological capabilities are indeed formidable, they are not in the dominant position which they occupied in the early part of the century. Yet we continue to base much of our foreign policy and our military planning on the needs and wants of the nations of Western Europe. I think it is becoming increasingly apparent that this policy needs to be re-examined.

Keeping 350,000 troops in Europe, and keeping our total force ready to operate in a European war, is obviously a real drain on our economy. It is true that some European nations bear part of the expense—sometimes grudgingly. Yet when we try to defend Europe at less cost in assets and manpower, we usually are met by firm opposition. For instance, President Carter tried to get the agreement of the nations of Europe to deploy a neutron bomb. This weapons system, if in place, would be the most effective deterrent of all to a massed land attack by the USSR—much better than any number of allied tanks. The neutron bomb could destroy Soviet tanks and personnel without doing significant or lasting damage to the cities and populations of our allies in Western Europe. It is ideal for the purpose of deterrence. Yet the governments of Western Europe will have no part of its deployment.

Other than economically, why was it necessary for us to have this weapon? A brief look at the map of Europe should answer that question. Practically all of the American troops in Europe are located in central and southern Germany. In the early days of the NATO Alliance, these troops were supplied by supply lines across France from the French Atlantic ports. When DeGaulle decided to, in effect, pull out of NATO, it became necessary for new supply lines to be established. Those lines run to the Belgian, Dutch, and German ports on the North Sea. Thus, supplies for American troops must cross the North German Plain which, of course, is the most likely avenue of attack by the massed Russian armies. In a very few hours these supply lines could be interdicted, and the American troops in Germany could either be prisoners of war, hostages, or engaged in fighting desperately to maintain a defense perimeter without the requisite supplies of ammunition, equipment, and reinforcements.

An alliance which is truly reciprocal will last, but one which is not has numbered days. The refusal of the NATO allies to allow deployment of the neutron bomb certainly did not indicate any concern for the obviously exposed position of American troops in Germany, nor for the continued drain on the American economy. Is concern a one-way street in NATO?

Also, I think we were all disappointed by the fact that the nations of Western Europe were so lukewarm in their support of our efforts to free the American hostages from our Embassy in Tehran. I think it is also interesting that there is no plan for Europe to take any part in the massive undertaking to defend the areas of the Persian Gulf from which comes most of the oil for Europe. In fact, the NATO nations have steadfastly refused to move outside of Europe, in effect leaving the rest of the free world for us to defend.

We even see some of our allies actively aiding rebels in Central America against governments which have our backing. If “linkage” is to be applied to our relations with the USSR, and it should be, perhaps the same principle should apply to the actions, or lack of action, of our allies in various parts of the world.

I don't believe the nations of Europe are adopting the policies which they now pursue because they don't like the United States. They are doing so because they perceive their own best interests to be in a closer rapprochement and détente with Eastern Europe than we seem to want. Here is evidence. They are perfectly willing to trust the future of much of their energy supplies to a gas pipeline from Siberia which Russia could cut off at a moment's notice. The energy supplied through this pipeline could be used by the Russians to blackmail Western Europe.

Western Europe's reactions to the invasion of Afghanistan and to the Polish situation have been measured, to put it mildly.

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