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Speaker  
U.S. House of Representatives  
1987-1989

Member of Congress  
12th District, Texas  
1955-1989

## A Personal Letter to the U.S. Congress

Dear Members of Congress:

For the past twenty years since retiring from Congress, I have refrained from burdening my former colleagues or their successors with unsolicited advice. I'm reasonably certain you aren't suffering any lack of it!

Why write now? Recently, at eighty-six, I've become painfully aware of a phenomenal crystallizing of public perception among many ordinary citizens. That perception really needs to be addressed.

While reportedly giving broad support to the aims espoused by our new president, a great many average Americans express fears and forebodings that – where actual legislation is concerned – large campaign contributors hold most of the trump cards and too often call the shots in Congress.

The sudden outspoken burst of anger evoked recently by the million dollar bonuses was a case in point. It was not an isolated incident, I believe, but the culmination of the whole series of unfortunate events that have combined to persuade people of modest-to-average economic circumstances that their government has abandoned them.

My youth was rooted in experiences of the Great Depression and World War II and crowned by thirty-five years of service in the U.S. Congress. I love the Congress and deeply respect its function. It is against this backdrop that I measure events.

We'd probably agree that the most prominent historic characteristic distinguishing our country from others has been the ever-renewing promise of social and economic upward mobility. That commitment that each succeeding generation shall live more comfortably and work more productively, earn more and learn more than its predecessors – well, that's been "The American Dream."

It has permeated the ranks of low- and middle-income Americans with its promise of equality. It achieved great momentum – in fact became our driving force in the years that followed World War II.

Our Cold War victory owed less to our preachment that communism was a lousy system, and more to our proofs that democracy was working better for the average man and woman!

In these last few years, however, that dream has suffered a gathering disenchantment. The outspoken anger that greeted the rash of million dollar AIG bonuses, and the bitterness that accompanies bank and auto bailouts without visible indication of reforms in lending and interest-pricing practices, give rise to a new sort of public despondency.

When Congress rejected a bill to rein in the lenders, I heard surprisingly widespread taunts that “the banks own Congress.” Mention Health Care reform and you’ll hear a grim retort that the insurance industry controls Congress.

Rising unemployment figures, stagnant and even falling pay scales, the ever-widening gap between richest and poorest, the continuing outsourcing of jobs and investments to low-pay countries – all give rise to an unhealthy disillusionment as to whether our government really cares a darn about average working people.

What I am hearing with increasing intensity may not be new to you. I have no magic potions, but for all my life I have loved the Congress, and respected its place in our scheme of things, and the prevalence of these attitudes is painful to me.

May I offer a few personal thoughts? They’re based upon the conviction that Americans want to believe, but need reassurance that their Congress really cares about and has faith in ordinary wage-earning folks like them.

1. It might help to devise some method of incentivizing low-wage foreign trading partners to increase worker remuneration in their own countries – to the end that their own workers can afford to become customers, of their own products as well as ours.

2. America's economic future depends profoundly upon ever-increasing percentages of high school and college graduates. Growing drop-out rates are anathema. Galloping tuition rates have made university an unaffordable option for increasing numbers.

Probably the best public investment in my lifetime was the G.I. Bill of Rights. By dramatically increasing the percentage of my generation that could attend college, it enormously enriched not only our country's social fabric but our public tax coffers as well. It paid for itself many times over in public budgetary enrichment. Qualifying for higher incomes, typical Americans paid vastly more in taxes.

A determined effort to increase college affordability – by tuition grants to military veterans and some certain others (AmeriCorps-type public volunteers). This could go a long way to restore and rebuild America's middle-income base.

3. Our country needs to restore its good faith relationship to the new generation of wage-earning Americans. One fairly obvious step could lie in the proposed Employees' Freedom of Choice legislation. It would guarantee workers the right to choose whether or not to join and be represented by a labor organization.

Union auto and airline workers, through their unions, have patriotically and selflessly agreed to share wage sacrifices to help save their endangered industries – sometimes when employers and CEOs were enjoying more than 100 times their individual earnings.

An act of faith such as this proposal expresses in America's embattled working men and women would seem a not inappropriate gesture of good will. And deservedly so. There's not a more dependably patriotic segment of our society than the ordinary rank and file wage earning American work force.

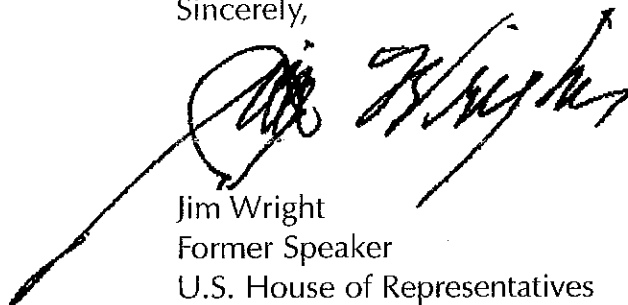
In our free enterprise society, buying power is the indispensable oil that lubricates the machinery of prosperity. The more widely dispersed it is among the population, the healthier and more indestructible is our society. American business prospers best, and longest, when the members of America's far-flung work force can individually afford to buy all those things it and its employers turn out for sale. That, I'm convinced, is the key to lasting American-style prosperity.

We have revived this base before, and doing so always seems to spark progress toward all our characteristically American goals.

At least that's my more or less personal reading of our inspiring history, and I thank you greatly for bearing with me.

Very best regards.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Wright". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left and then curves back under the name. The letters are dark and well-defined against the white background.

Jim Wright  
Former Speaker  
U.S. House of Representatives