

Gov. Pritzker Embarks On Second Term With Renewed Optimism And Hope For Illinois' Future

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SPRINGFIELD - During the campaign last year, I drove all across the state, and I couldn't help but notice some signs in people's yards that said, "FIRE PRITZKER." I was concerned about this until my kids pointed out that when people in their generation think something is really cool they say, "That's FIRE!" So, I want to take this moment to thank everyone who put up those very encouraging signs!

Today, as every day, I feel blessed to stand with my compassionate and dedicated partner in governance and your Lieutenant Governor, the outstanding Juliana Stratton.

Officially retiring today is one of Illinois' finest leaders ever. His legacy stands as an example to everyone who aspires to serve the public interest. On behalf of the people of Illinois, please join me in giving thanks to our inimitable Secretary of State Jesse White.

I want to acknowledge other distinguished guests here today: Beginning with the love of my life and the First Lady, MK Pritzker — and our children Teddi and Don Pritzker. Chief Justice Mary Jane Theis, House Speaker Emanuel “Chris” Welch, Senate President Don Harmon, Leader Tony McCombie, Leader John Curran, Attorney General Kwame Raoul, Secretary of State-elect Alexi Giannoulias, Comptroller Susana Mendoza, Treasurer Mike Frerichs, Members of the General Assembly, Members of the Congressional delegation, Governor Jim Edgar, Governor Pat Quinn, and National Guard Adjutant General, Major General Rich Neely. To all of you, on behalf of the people of Illinois, thank you for your service and your sacrifice.

Four years ago, I stood on this very stage and laid out a vision for change in Illinois, one that was elevated by our shared hope for better days ahead and forged by a common belief that the smarts and hard work and the goodness of Illinoisans has always overcome adversity.

Our hope was buttressed by the past resilience of our people, who have survived wars and a Great Depression, two global pandemics, devastating tornadoes, fires and floods, yet who have made this the birthplace of national movements for justice, world renowned advancements in innovation, and cultural achievements second to none.

Our hope is perhaps rooted in our unique ability to endure Midwestern winters year after year, knowing there is always a glorious summer on the way.

Our hope is spurred on by the knowledge that the doomsayers who eagerly prophesy total misery every time Illinois faces an honest challenge — have unintentionally inspired a generation of leaders with a resilient optimism for our future.

The hope we share, the hope I expressed at my first inauguration, was born of a truth lodged firmly in my heart — that Illinois has always stood at the intersection of American ambition and human resilience. And that combination is what has made this the greatest state in the union.

So four years ago, with hope in our hearts and persistence in our souls, we went to work.

And we got BIG THINGS DONE.

We balanced the budget and got credit upgrades. We raised the minimum wage. We're modernizing our transportation systems. We legalized cannabis. We protected reproductive freedom in our laws.

We took nation-leading climate action that's growing our energy production, instituted nursing home reforms to increase staffing and safety, saved taxpayers money by consolidating pension systems, and provided real middle class tax relief to help families overcome inflation. We added better paying jobs, grew our economy to a trillion dollars, protected workers' rights, and expanded healthcare coverage.

Amid a rise in intolerance and fascism throughout the United States with increasing attacks on our most vulnerable populations, Illinois has decisively moved to protect civil rights, human rights, and voting rights by enshrining them directly in state statute.

We did all those things while fighting to survive a historic crisis – one that has left a deep imprint on every one of us.

One of the realities I learned about being a Governor is that there is no permanent playbook to follow. Every four years brings different challenges than the four years past. All that you can do is become a student of history and of the people who came before you, to try and learn from their victories and their defeats, their triumphs, and their challenges.

I've taken to learning from the words and actions of past Governors, regardless of their political affiliations or leanings — though let's be honest, in Illinois choosing which ones to learn from can be a challenge. But we've had more than 200 years of governors and — regardless of the adversities they faced — most of them put the people first. And I've tried to discern from the things those governors said publicly, what they may have been wrestling with privately.

Dwight Green became Governor of Illinois in 1941. He was the prosecutor who successfully put Al Capone behind bars and fought organized crime in Chicago in the 1930's. When he won the governorship, he was suddenly faced with leading one of the largest states during a time of global upheaval.

His First Inaugural Address was given on January 13, 1941, as a World War was raging on but before the United States had been drawn in. Green's tone was somber but bullish. He said:

“The political upheavals in Europe resulted when the people lost faith in the ability of their governments to meet their needs. Here in America, where the ideals and hopes of freedom still prevail, we must never permit the same tragic spirit of despair to overcome us.”

By the time Governor Green gave his Second Inaugural Speech on January 8, 1945 – the world weariness he must have felt seems to peek through as he talks about the waning days of the war:

“Throughout the decades, Illinois has written many illustrious pages into the history of our country. Now, in more than three tragic years of all-out warfare against the destroyers of freedom...our men and women have inscribed new and even more glorious chapters into the record of patriotism. By their incomparable bravery...they have sanctified the final victory.”

I suspect that Governor Green, wrestling with the unbearable cost of a terrible conflict, was attempting to comfort his people in that Second Inaugural Address, to express how deeply he felt the loss of the 18,601 Illinoisans who were killed during World War II.

I think everyone here knows a little about that feeling of loss. Over the last three years, we lost 35,814 Illinoisans to COVID-19. That grief and the desire to comfort are all too familiar to me.

There's a day that stands out over others, and it was the day in September of 2020 when I sat in the chapel at the University of Chicago, listening to the husband of Joyce Pacubas-Le Blanc – one of the first nurses to die of COVID-19 in Illinois. Lawrence LeBlanc spoke of the intense love he had for his wife. He ended his tribute to Joyce saying, “If I had another 10 lifetimes to live and I had to choose, it would be with her.”

I did not know at that point that the pandemic would rage on to even higher peaks for another year and a half, that so many more people would die or fall ill, that the disruption to our lives, our well beings, our livelihoods was far from over. But that evening at that chapel, I just knew that I was the Governor, and I had a responsibility to Lawrence Le Blanc and his beloved Joyce, to honor his words and her passing and to make real the sacred prayer I said nearly every day at the podium: “May their memory be for a blessing.”

The difficult thing about governing through unprecedented times is that it's your job to set the precedent, to find a path, even when none appears to exist...to lift up the front-line heroes, the essential workers on whom we all rely, to make the hard decisions to protect those doing the very hard work of keeping us all together.

As Governor it's your job to plan for the future, even as you continue to grapple with the past. That's a lesson tucked into Governor Green's Second Inaugural Speech, which while filled with somber remembrance, also set a second term agenda for post-war Illinois even before the war ended.

So today, as Illinois continues its progress overcoming our historical fiscal challenges and a deadly global pandemic, I come to you with an agenda as ambitious and bold as our people are, thinking not only about the next four years, but about the next forty.

Our long-term ambitions must begin with a focus on the people for whom we are building. No policy proposal I could advance will have a greater impact on our future than the quality care and education we afford to our very youngest residents. For more than 20 years before I became Governor, I worked with national leaders and experts in early childhood development to make it a national policy priority. It's time for Illinois to lead.

The research is clear. Quality childcare affords parents the opportunity to work or attend school and pursue greater economic security. And preschool improves academic success for our children, yields higher graduation rates, raises lifetime earnings potential, and saves taxpayers money.

That's why I propose we go all in for our children and make preschool available to every family throughout the state. And let's not stop there. Let's provide more economic security for families by eliminating childcare deserts and expanding childcare options.

It's also our obligation to make college more affordable by removing financial barriers. That's why we need to bring down the cost of higher education. Since I took office we've increased scholarships by more than 50%. Now let's focus on making tuition free for every working-class family.

Of course, none of this matters if you can't afford a life-saving prescription or procedure. We already capped the cost of insulin, but we ought to continue making healthcare coverage more affordable and more widespread. Healthcare is a right, not a privilege.

Focusing on the future of working families and making everyday life easier and more affordable for people is what I believe government ought to be all about.

We've done a lot on this in recent years. Balancing the budget, paying off debt and eliminating interest on overdue bills has made it possible for us to provide tax relief. Let's work toward more permanent tax relief. Improving our roads has saved hundreds of dollars a year for drivers, which matters even more when you know that one flat tire or

one auto repair can lead to a genuine fiscal emergency or even the loss of a job for many people.

Lifting up working families and children also means doing everything we can to free them from the dangers of gun violence.

Four years ago, during my first Inaugural Speech, I memorialized the victims of the Mercy Hospital shooting. A few weeks after I took office in 2019, I stood with the people of Aurora after the Henry Pratt Company workplace shooting. And as we gather today, we acknowledge the victims of the Benito Juarez High School shooting just this past month.

I'm tired of living in a world where a mass shooting needs a title so you know which one we're referring to.

Hospitals, high schools, homes, parades, offices – there is no place, geographic or otherwise, that has been spared from the threat of gun violence. Whether it's ghost guns, high powered semi-automatic rifles, or modified rapid-fire handguns, dangerous weapons are putting families and law enforcement at risk.

Now, I'm a firm believer that government functions best when we look for compromise. But I'm done with the NRA having its way when it comes to mass shootings. Why do we allow anyone to easily purchase a rapid-fire, high-capacity weapon that can kill dozens of unarmed people in under a minute?

When I campaigned for reelection and promised to pass an assault weapons ban, eight states already had one. Very soon, Illinois must be the ninth. And we ought to have a real accounting of the assault weapons currently in circulation. Let's get it done, and then the federal government should follow our lead.

One thing last year proved is that if given the chance, a bunch of right-wing judges and legislators will take away women's rights. Well, Illinois spoke loudly and decisively in 2022 and declared that in the Land of Lincoln, we trust women! The right to privacy and bodily autonomy demand that we establish a constitutional protection for reproductive rights in Illinois. The extremists still want to take away a woman's right to choose, and I don't intend to let them. That's why yet again, on women's rights, Illinois will lead.

Finally, our success as a state goes hand in hand with a determination to fight against a rising tide of hate. Old evils will always find new haters to bring them back to life. Yesterday's Father Coughlin becomes today's Tucker Carlson. Racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia have existed in some form or another throughout our entire history.

For some, the ugly voices that sing those discordant notes sound like siren calls. Their message is amplified by elected officials or political grifters who look to harness the tremendous power of hate for their own ambition. They pledge allegiance to our nation with one hand and then usher in the means of its destruction with the other.

Years before I ever thought about running for Governor, I was approached by a man named Sam Harris about the possibility of helping to build a Holocaust Museum in Illinois. Sam sat down at my conference table and conspicuously propped his watch up on its wristband, and he said, "I just need three minutes of your time."

What I didn't know is that Sam had been a highly successful insurance executive earlier in his life and this is how he would start every meeting. Those three minutes turned into ten years of my life working to build the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center.

But it was Sam's personal story that has had the most impact on me over time. You see, Sam is a Holocaust survivor himself.

He was born in Deblin, Poland, and when the Nazis invaded his town, they murdered Sam's parents, all his relatives except two sisters, and all his friends. Sam miraculously escaped extermination in two concentration camps, the conditions of which are almost unspeakable. Yet somehow, he survived.

After the war he was placed in an orphanage in Poland, and eventually was adopted by Dr. and Mrs. Ellis Harris in Northbrook, IL.

Sam is remarkable. For nearly 30 years he has traveled the country to tell his story to impress upon people that when hatred and bigotry go unchecked, democracy will come to an end, and even lead to genocide.

I've learned an awful lot from Sam. And I've realized that for my entire lifetime, progress has been made against bigotry and intolerance. But not anymore. None of us should ignore that our nation has slid noticeably backward, and dangerously so.

Just in the last few years we've seen gunmen killing dozens of Jewish and Black parishioners while they prayed. Swastikas spray painted on Jewish grave markers. Anti-vaxxers attacking Asian American seniors. Vandalism and intimidation against Muslim Americans and the LGBTQ+ community.

Hate crimes are increasing at an alarming rate.

Sam's story reminds me today, as I start a second term as your Governor, that the battles for freedom and democracy that Governor Green thought we had fought and won, are being fought once again right here at home. That old evils must be faced head on yet again by a new generation.

But I bring hope to the battles ahead, because time and time again, the people of Illinois prevail when challenges arise. The families of Taylorville didn't give up when a tornado wiped out 100 homes and 22 people were injured. They helped each other out and the community came together to rebuild. When schools closed for 8 weeks in 2020, 300 volunteers from Lombard, Villa Park and Oakbrook Terrace rode on a fleet of school buses and provided curbside delivery of 32,000 meals to 3,200 low-income children who would have otherwise gone without a meal. When food banks were facing shortages during the worst of the pandemic, Central Illinois farmers delivered tons of free produce.

Hate needs two things to thrive: the sense of helplessness that fertilizes hopelessness — and the willingness of powerful people to cower in front of a lie.

Illinois, we have power and we have hope — and a genuine goodness that is rooted in being the place in this country to which all people can come and live free.

We must recognize that hate can wield enormous strength — but we must remember the fortitude with which we have always confronted it.

Our history gives me hope and confidence that we will never falter. I'm honored to stand alongside you as we face the battles ahead together as One Illinois.

God bless you, God bless the great state of Illinois, and God bless the United States of America!

Monday, January 9th, 2023

Remarks As Prepared For Delivery