

(Excerpt) Remarks by Lauri J. Fitz-Pegado

April 5, 2016 Department of Commerce

Ron Brown

20 Year Commemorative Event

To the extended Commerce family assembled, I am humbled and honored to share a few reflections with many of you who have your own memories. For those of you who didn't know Ron Brown, I welcome the opportunity to share why so many of us will forever treasure our experiences with him.

His loss, and that of 34 others who died on St. John's Mountain in Croatia, changed the lives of so many of us forever. Today is a tribute to all of them; all of the Commerce employees (our colleagues and friends), the other Agency representatives, the corporate executives, journalists, and crew. All mourned by their friends and families.

Whether he was family, friend, colleague, mentor, boss, or legend, Ron Brown left an indelible impression on all he touched. He had an uncanny ability to make a person feel as if he was the only one in the crowded room, or that the advice she proffered was the most important to him – at least until he actually did the opposite of what was advised!

Risk taker, independent actor, trailblazer, and master negotiator – just a few apt descriptors of Ron Brown. He was not good at staying in his lane, which often landed him at odds with others. That never stopped him, however, if he thought he could resolve a dispute our country confronted with China in the human rights area, or advance our relationship through delivering a message on the political front to a leader in Zimbabwe. Somehow, the style in which Ron Brown delivered tough messages to world leaders found resonance and not deaf ears.

He was a man before his time. He aspired to be and actually was "first" in so many things – first African-American partner at Patton, Boggs and Blow; first African-American Chairman of the Democratic Party; first African-American Chair of an Inaugural Committee; First Cabinet Secretary confirmed to serve in the Clinton Administration; first African-American Secretary of Commerce. But as first, he never wanted to be the only nor the last. He believed in the politics of inclusion and constantly pulled others into his orbit, his ascent, provided employment opportunities, challenged people to realize their potential, and had extremely high performance expectations for himself and those around him. In simple terms, he expected us to do the work required. He also was diligent about doing his own work.

As a testament to all of these attributes, were the many talented Commerce employees who perished with him on this mission. You can be sure that he walked the aisle of that plane sharing a joke, asking about a family member, asking for advice, in equal measure with his security officer, Duane Christian, to International Trade Administration Assistant Secretary Chuck Meissner.

To that title of first, I would add the word “responder.” Ron was a “first responder.” As is often the case with first responders in an emergency, he left the ladder down so that he could ensure that others could be pulled up, or could climb up. He said: “Politics, life, and business are not spectator sports. You have to get involved to get ahead. Most importantly, when you reach that level of success, keep the door open and the ladder down for others to follow.”

We, who were privileged to know him over many years through the good times and challenging moments, appreciated his ability to laugh. We laughed with him, sometimes at him, and even laughed instead of crying. (Many of you out there know exactly what I am talking about!)

A man with a swagger, who was always impeccably dressed, was only occasionally seen in a pair of jeans, pressed with creases; who was quick in private to refer to a foe as a “chump;” who bragged about “taking” President Clinton on the basketball court with a 20-footer, all net, (which I am sure rivaled Chris Jenkins’ winning shot last night). He was always patting the hair on his expanding bald spot; how he loved to eat and got ornery when he was hungry. Remember how he would bite his index finger when he was finding it hard to stay awake in a meeting, and what about how he pronounced the word “terrible” as if it rhymed with gerbil. TERBIL.

He engendered in all of us a sense of loyalty and respect. And, he protected us as if we were family.

During his tenure in this building, he achieved many firsts for others, for Commerce, for the Administration, for the US, and for many countries of the world. To name just a few of the things achieved under his leadership — first trade mission, commercial office, and Minister Counselor appointee in South Africa. (Democratic Party Chair Ron Brown was among the very first American dignitaries to meet Nelson Mandela after his release from Robben Island. Alma Brown, Party Vice Chair Lynn Cutler, Bill Morton, his longtime aide who died in the crash, and I shared that historic moment with him in Soweto at the Mandela home in 1991.) He promoted the tag line “Africa Matters” in speeches here and on the continent. He opened the doors of recognition of the importance of a US-Africa relationship – developing new partnerships, educating companies and Members of Congress, and being the first Cabinet Secretary to focus on Africa. He encouraged President Clinton to make his first trip to the continent. To this day, in many countries of Africa, Ron Brown is remembered and revered.

He created the Advocacy Center to support American companies competing against the Europeans to win billions of dollars in contracts abroad, a basic tenet of his hallmark concept, Commercial Diplomacy; the concept of bilateral commissions, beginning with South Africa and expanding with many countries throughout the globe, building business centers in the former Soviet Republics, in emerging markets; and the first trade mission and commercial office in Vietnam since the war. He navigated the appointment of the first career Ambassador from the Foreign Commercial Service.

I have named only some of his achievements in the trade and commercial diplomacy sphere. Others leading agencies at Commerce at the time could name many more: such as Larry Irving from NTIA, Ev Erlich and Paul London at the Economics and Statistics Administration, then Chief Scientist Kathy Sullivan at NOAA, Arati Prabhakar at NIST, and Mary Good at the Technology Administration. Ron

Brown was Secretary of Commerce for only 3 years, two months and a few days. He was 54 when he died.

I was participating on one of those “firsts” when the plane crashed; on that first trade mission to Vietnam since the war, opening the first commercial office. We all remember where we were, what we were doing when we heard the tragic news. Many of us have stories about how or why we might have been on the fatal flight. It was the only foreign trip I had not been on with him in the last six months of his life. He had truly traversed the globe, leading trade missions, inaugurating new offices, negotiating deals, and resolving disputes. It was as if he was racing against time.

Ron Brown, first responder, was on a mission to determine how to restore this war torn region. With him were Commerce employees, and other agencies, young and seasoned, black and white, Americans and Croatians, corporate executives and a journalist. Characteristically, the last photos of him were in Tuzla, smiling and eating with the troops. He insisted on taking McDonalds hamburgers to the troops before continuing on to Dubrovnik.

My friend Earle Scarlett, a career foreign service officer whom Ron had met earlier, was among the last to see him and his staff in Tuzla before they boarded the plane. He reported in a cable to the State Department, on April 5, 1996, "...figuratively, Secretary Brown hoisted the US flag with reminders of the critical role the US had played in halting the conflict in Bosnia Herzegovina, and the commitment to revitalizing communities ravaged by the war... Brown's manner implicitly reminded his audience of the value of simplicity and carried the message of the responsibility of the US in global affairs ... he embodied the virtues of the US in his last official meetings in Bosnia Herzegovina: resolve and respect for all; sincerity and compassion for the abused and disenfranchised ... his performance was memorable ... in uncharacteristically casual attire, Secretary Brown blended into the scenery as he called for peace and reconciliation, clearly at a heavy personal cost."

It is always amazing to hear of the lives Ron touched, the people he knew. Whenever the agenda was being set for a foreign trip, we all knew that we must include an opportunity for him to reach out to the community; to see the real people, where they lived or worked. Whether in Brazil, India, or Russia, Ron was interested in conveying a message that went beyond promoting trade. He wanted to reach small and micro-enterprise owners, to demonstrate concern for social issues, and to indicate the Clinton Administration's interest in those segments of society that historically had been marginalized. Admittedly, in those days, it was easier to visit such places. I remember throngs of children and adults surrounding him and Alma on Gore Island in Senegal, children in a favela in Rio, throngs in Mumbai, and a stroll through China's Forbidden City.

Many were surprised at the Ron Brown Scholars event on March 17 that honoree Ervin “Magic” Johnson in a heartfelt speech revealed that his success in business is due to Ron Brown's advice, advocacy, and introductions. He said, “I owe who I am today to him.” The Ron Brown Scholars program today, inspired by his example, counts almost 400 scholars who carry on the legacy – all impressive and accomplished, dedicated to public service. Two are here today, Morgan and Cassandra, with their leaders Michael Mallory and Vanessa Evans. We are so very proud of you, we are here for you and wish you continued success.

So 20 years later, how are we honoring and even exceeding the legacy? In tribute to the bonds he promoted among us, we remain in each other's professional and personal lives – we continue to laugh and cry together. When we look in the mirror, can we say that we have upheld the commitment, the service, the mentoring, the inclusion, the trailblazing spirit? While it may be hard to be first, are we first responders; are we present at all?

I was asked to fly to Dubrovnik from Vietnam to participate in the departure ceremonies and to fly back in the C-130 with the Commerce employees who awaited the ill-fated plane on the ground in Dubrovnik – Morris Reed, Ira Sokowitz, Bob Taft, and then Croatian Ambassador to the United States Miomir Zuzul. We will never forget those 13 hours, our thoughts, reflections, and conversations as we flew home to Dover Air Force Base, sometimes quietly staring from our jump seats at a sea of 33 flag-draped coffins.

Ron Brown said, "Great teams work harder after a tough loss." Well, this April 3, 1996 loss was truly tremendous as is our loss of April 3, 2016. We must continue to work harder with the many challenges that our country confronts today. We must continue to remember those losses, those who died, but maintain our resolve to make a difference as they did. Most of all, we must ensure that we don't let life get in the way.