

Opening Statement of the Honorable Edward T. Schafer
Nominee to be Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
January 24, 2008
As prepared for delivery

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

I am honored to appear before your committee today. I want to thank Senators Conrad and Dorgan and Representative Pomeroy for your very kind words. It is gratifying that while we have differed politically at times we have been able to work together for the good of our great state, North Dakota. Over the years, I have appreciated your advice, counsel and friendship, and it is an honor to have Team North Dakota introducing me to the committee this afternoon.

And I am extremely thankful my wonderful spouse Nancy is here with me today. Among her many roles in my life, she remains an important connection to farm issues, having been raised on a small grain and livestock farm in north central Montana. Her example of growing up with no running water, the living room couch her bed and swimming in the stock tank, to becoming the First Lady of North Dakota is inspiring and a great example of the values and character that are instilled by a rural lifestyle.

Our youngest daughter is here with us also. Thanks for being with us today Kari. Our other children, Tom and Ellie and Eric couldn't join us, but are gathered around their televisions.

I would also like to take this opportunity to personally thank the 640,000 citizens of North Dakota as they are the supporters, the shapers and the encouragers in my life. Since this hearing room is a bit too small to invite them all here today, I'll have to settle for thanking them from afar.

Mr. Chairman and esteemed members of the committee; you have all seen my resume' so I won't use the Committee's time to discuss at great length my life's professional experience, which I believe well qualifies me for this position. However, I would like to speak briefly about the question most of you asked me when we met face-to-face prior to this hearing: "Why do you want to be the Secretary of Agriculture?"

Answering that question is a good way to start this hearing. How I arrived here today and the path I took through life will, I believe, explain why I want to lead the United States Department of Agriculture.

The first part of my answer comes from former Senator Dave Durenberger and a saying he was given at his swearing in ceremony here in the Capitol. It reads:

"The sign of God is that we will be led where we do not expect to go." I believe God prepared me for this assignment and led me here and for that I am grateful.

The second part of my answer starts with a ship builder. I bet you didn't expect that in an Ag Committee hearing, but my maternal grandfather arrived on our shores in 1901 from Denmark with 7 cents in his pocket, the clothes on his back and this very ring I wear today. He eventually arrived in western North Dakota, not to build ships, but to homestead a quarter section of land. His shipbuilding skills did come in handy when he needed to put up a barn---it looked quite a bit like an upside down boat.

But he was committed to making a better life for himself and his family. He became a good farmer and with his wife Johanna raised seven children.

He had no idea of the influence he would have on generations to come and unfortunately he didn't live to see me elected as the 30th Governor of North Dakota, or be nominated to be Secretary of Agriculture. I believe he would be proud.

On the other hand, my paternal grandfather died when my father was sixteen. Dad decided then to move off the farm and staked out a life in town. As a traveling salesman he discovered a better way to clean and shine linoleum and started selling Gold Seal Floor Wax door to door. Harold Schafer's customers were people living in the farm houses that dotted the land, and gradually, when business built up, the first store accounts were the small rural hardware stores, lumberyards and grocery stores. His business success was based on the economy generated by agriculture.

From both sides of my family, I am a product steeped in agriculture tradition and economy. In my work as Governor, I developed a passion for the rural community, because I saw the value the people living and working there bring to our Republic. There is no doubt in my mind that the agrarian community produces people with the virtues of courage, hard work, justice, honor, truth and hardiness--- the cornerstones that hold up the United States of America.

By the grace of God I have grown up in this free country, the progeny of a homesteader and a businessman. I have had the privilege of carrying the opportunities of my education, experience and heritage to a long and successful career in both the public and private sectors of our society.

When President Abraham Lincoln founded the USDA in 1862, he called it "The People's Department" because of its ability to improve the lives of so many Americans in so many different ways. I arrive here today with my heart in agriculture and my foundation in business; a combination I hope you will agree is a perfect fit for the rigors of administrating and managing the USDA.

I want to express my appreciation to President Bush for nominating me to lead this important agency. And, if I am so honored to be confirmed by the United States Senate for this job, I pledge to work with each of you and this committee during these exciting times for agriculture.

If confirmed, I look forward to having the opportunity to stand along side what I know already to be the great employees of the USDA to help enhance our country's vibrant agricultural economy, advance renewable energy, and protect America's safe and low cost food supply. I will devote myself to improving nutrition and health, enhancing rural infrastructure, promoting good stewardship of our national forests and conserving our natural resources. And finally, if confirmed, I pledge to work tirelessly to ensure USDA programs are administered efficiently and effectively, and most importantly, with fairness and equality. The American people deserve no less from "The People's Department."

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, to start this journey, I humbly ask you for your support for confirmation. I look forward to serving the people of the United States of America.

And if, in some small way, I can contribute to the preservation and protection of our foundational strength through agriculture, then in the end, I believe I will have done my job well.

Mr. Chairman, I submit my comments for the record. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering your and the Committee's questions.