

Opening Remarks on the Nomination of Pam Bondi to be Attorney General of the United States

By: Dave Aronberg

In 2010, after serving eight years as a State Senator in Florida, I ran for Florida Attorney General. I faced a fellow State Senator in the Democratic primary, and one of three Republican candidates in a potential general election. Pam Bondi was one of those three candidates. This was her first run for any political office, and she was the only candidate in the race on either side whom I did not know.

At our first candidates' forum, she came up to me with a big smile and told me her younger brother worked with me at my old law firm as a summer associate, and had very complimentary things to say. That was vintage Pam Bondi: My potential future opponent immediately disarmed me by ignoring partisanship to reach out as a fellow human being.

Pam won her primary, and I lost mine. I then endorsed my Democratic colleague in the general election, and then Pam won that election too. Despite the fact that I was on the other side of the aisle, and did not support her campaign, Pam called to offer me a position as her "Drug Czar," to combat the opioid epidemic that was ravaging Florida, and to shut down the state's ubiquitous "pill mills" that fed the nation's addiction. She offered me this position because she knew from the campaign trail that fighting the opioid epidemic had been my career priority and an important part of my campaign platform. It did not matter to her that I had a "D" after my name. She believed I was the best person for the job, regardless of party affiliation.

I accepted the position and received a little pushback from my side of the aisle for joining her team, but nothing compared to what Pam Bondi received. At a party event, one county Republican chairman was so angry that he raised his voice and put his finger near her face to condemn her decision. He didn't argue that I was unqualified, just that she was resurrecting a Democrat's political career who had just lost badly in a statewide election. On that, he may have had a point: I served

as Drug Czar for two years and then got elected as a Democratic State Attorney for the next three terms. But you don't wag a finger in Pam Bondi's face and get away with it. Pam is kind and genuine and loves people, but she is also tough as nails.

Pam met this guy's fire with fire, putting her own finger in the party leader's face to defend her new employee, and she didn't care that I was a Democrat or that she didn't know me that well at the time, or that one day this could help me run for office again. She didn't do it because one day she hoped I would have her back during a Senate confirmation hearing. It was just the person she was and still is.

When AG Bondi and I began our anti-pill mill initiative, seven people a day were dying from prescription opioid overdoses, and there were more pain clinics in Florida than McDonald's in Florida. A year later, she convinced a reluctant Republican-dominated legislature to pass crucial, long overdue reforms, including a prescription drug monitoring program that dramatically reduced doctor shopping. AG Bondi used her bully pulpit and her bipartisan relationships to get it done. Today, Florida's pill mills are no more, the steady stream of cars from Appalachia that constituted the "OxyContin Express" are a distant memory, and countless lives have been saved because our state's days as the drug dealer for the rest of the country is an ignominious part of our past.

Pam Bondi and I have always had our political differences, although that has never come between our friendship. I supported the Presidential campaigns of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. I've been outspoken on cable TV and streaming channels on a host of legal issues, including the dangers of targeting one's political enemies, and was critical of the Durham investigation, which led to questionable criminal cases and embarrassing acquittals. A prosecutor's job is to follow the evidence and the law, without fear or favor. Pam Bondi is a 20-year prosecutor who understands this. Even if she does something as U.S. Attorney General that I disagree with, I believe that she will always remain tethered to the law.

And there are some important issues where she and I are in complete agreement, such as the need to stop the inflow of deadly fentanyl that has become by far the largest killer within the ongoing opioid epidemic. We agree on tough punishments

for those who engage in the modern day slavery known as human trafficking, and for laws that allow victims to have their low-level crimes expunged and to utilize the T-visa program when needed. We agree on the need for treatment courts, which have proven to be a better alternative to incarceration with a lower recidivism rate for many non-violent drug offenders. And we agree there should be a stronger response to the growing number of antisemitic incidents in our country and especially on college campuses.

Senators, I am grateful for the time to speak with you today and look forward to answering any questions you may have.