Interview

A Breath of Fresh Air in Congress

— Dr. Ritch K. Eich, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA

Isaac Newton once wrote, “If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” I recently enjoyed conducting an interview with the Republican freshman U.S. Representative from Michigan’s 3rd Congressional District, Peter Meijer, when this famous leadership quotation came to mind.

In Meijer’s personal life and in his public service, the congressman indeed stands on the shoulders of giants. His great-grandfather, Hendrik Meijer, a Dutch immigrant, established the grocery store Meijer in Greenville, Michigan in 1934, borrowing $388 to stock the place. Together with Peter’s grandfather and father, the Meijer family went on to build the leviathan Meijer grocery-department store retailer with more than 255 supercenters across the Midwest.

In Congress, Peter Meijer is clearly cognizant of Republican icons like Gerald Ford (whose former congressional district he now represents), Dick Lugar, Olympia Snowe, John Warner, Nancy Kassebaum, Arthur Vandenberg, John McCain, and others who came before him and were larger than life.

Full disclosure: I first met the Congressman’s grandfather, Fred, and his grandmother, Lena, at my wife Joan’s high school reunion in Greenville, Michigan, many years ago. Joan’s parents knew the Meijer family. My father-in-law called him Freddy (I, of course, never did). Greenville High School reunions are a very big deal, with much of the community attending the annual alumni dinner, and the Meijers always attended, without any fanfare. Fred Meijer served on the board of directors at Butterworth Hospital when I was an executive there. He was one of the most down-to-earth, kind, and beloved men I’d ever met. He never came to board meetings unprepared and made time to visit the patient care units to thank the staff and distribute his trademark Purple Cow coupons. The coupons were redeemable for a free ice cream cone at any Meijer store. I don’t believe Fred was ever without them.

In the case of Peter Meijer, the apple didn’t fall very far from the family tree! As Hank Meijer informs us in his written introduction to the 1995 book, Fred Meijer: In His Own Words, Peter Meijer’s grandparents were hardly your typical business people. Critical of the war in Vietnam, Fred was a dedicated member of the Urban League who pushed for hiring African Americans in West Michigan. And, he assisted in bringing integrated housing to the city of Grand Rapids.
Early advocates for the environment, Fred and Lena Meijer would later spur and frequently fund many major civic projects ranging from walking and biking trails to parks, from gardens to hospitals, and from universities and museums to the arts. Lena Meijer, a cashier in the first Meijer supermarket, and Fred, maintained the thrifty mindset of those who grew up in the Great Depression and made sure that those less fortunate would benefit from their success. In business or at home, theirs was a genuine, loving, and full partnership. Fred and Lena Meijer passed away in 2011 and 2022, respectively.

In the House, 34-year-old conservative Peter Meijer is a breath of fresh air. While I have never met him in person (our interview was by phone), he appears to be studious, humble, candid, thoughtful, serious, and articulate. The Congressman seems proud to serve his constituents and doesn’t take them for granted. Meijer personifies a host of Midwestern values, including a strong penchant for bipartisanship. Not only did he join the Bipartisan Congressional Caucus soon after being sworn in, he is also involved with the political group With Honor, an organization dedicated to helping elect “principled, next generation veterans” – Republicans, Democrats, and Independents – to Congress.

During our interview, he impressed me with his command of several major issues facing the United States, especially in foreign affairs and national defense. The combination of his army service and NGO experience in Iraq and Afghanistan have prepared Meijer well for his membership on the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Homeland Security, the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the Committee on Science, Space & Technology.

At first blush, readers might be tempted to think Meijer is having second thoughts about voting to certify the 2021 presidential election, or being among only 10 House Republicans to vote to impeach former President Trump, or voting to hold Steve Bannon in contempt of Congress for refusing the subpoena to testify before the January 6th Committee. But if Meijer has proven anything in his first year in Congress, it is that he is unafraid to speak his mind, is not risk averse, and has the courage of his convictions despite death threats, distasteful tweets, and other manifestations of voter wrath.

Like his trailblazing grandparents, Peter Meijer believes in following the rules, knows the importance of honesty, champions the underdog, and, perhaps most importantly, believes in the dignity of each person, regardless of whether they agree. Meijer knows our country has much bigger problems that need solutions and he worries more about solving those problems than keeping his seat in the House.

A CONVERSATION WITH REP. PETER MEIJER OF MICHIGAN

The following is a transcript of my conversation with Rep. Meijer on January 18, 2022, slightly edited for publication.

DR. EICH: The Republican Party seems a far cry from what it used to be. Many would say it’s been torn asunder by former President Trump’s big lie about the 2020 presidential election
being “rigged.” How do you see today’s Republican Party, both nationwide and in Michigan? Do you see any chance of a new Republican Party arising?

**REP. MEJER:** That future is uncertain. I think it depends on the actions of those in the party right now. I give them credit for bringing energy that was lacking (in the 2010s). It was momentum from back in the 80s and 90s and not adapting to the way the country had changed. They had energy and enthusiasm and it could be rocket fuel. You could harness it and get the right nozzle and it could take you to the stars or it could blow up on the launchpad.

I think that is one of the challenges here. Without that sense of direction, you have seen a splintering and uncertainty, and I think the country needs a conservative movement that is focused on governing, that is focused on results-based approaches. I think that’s lacking in our political system across the board, which to me is something essential to the long-term strength and prosperity of our nation.

**DR. EICH:** The Vice President said on “Face the Nation” that her two most serious concerns about our national security are (1) climate change and (2) the threat to democracy. How do you respond to that? What are your two top concerns for our national security?
REP. MEUER: I agree climate change is a serious concern, but it might be that the most important, pressing foreign policy challenges all stem from the post-Cold War uncertainty about leadership from the West. As you know, we pivoted from the defense-related posture from the Cold War to economic ties, economic alliances, economic growth surpassing defense alliances and defense-related investment, which I think in many ways is positive – focusing us to tie the world together. It had negative impacts in the United States, especially in places that had a concentration of manufacturing and extractive industries.

But you also can’t miss, looking over the long arc, all the threats that are facing us right up close. Afghanistan is very personal to me as I worked there for a couple of years on the humanitarian side of the House. The fact that we have completely turned our back on a country where the U.S. development assistance and investment comprised a majority of their non-illicit GDP, and then we just kind of pulled that rug out from under them. It baffles me that the Biden Administration doesn’t appreciate the reason why we had to go into Afghanistan in the first place: because of a security vacuum and a state collapse that then gave room for violent transnational jihadists taking root so while they’re trying to avoid bad headlines and focus on domestic priorities, the transnational jihadist group is gathering strength and challenging the Taliban for governance (ISIS-K).

I have long been a proponent that we can’t get trapped, we need to make sure we never repeat the mistakes that led up to 9/11. We must respond strongly so that that never happens again. At the same time, we are dealing with the threat of China and their economic and military might challenge us for global supremacy. We have fewer strong states that could nevertheless be strongly destabilizing (like with Russia) and too, rogue states like North Korea and others – all of which are significant threats which we cannot take our eyes off.

My longstanding frustration and critique of U.S. foreign policy is that we look at the world as a series of problems to solve and then when we think something has been solved or we no longer have to worry about it, we just forget about it until it becomes a problem again, rather than looking at the world as a series of challenges that we have to manage, that we have to keep our eye on, that we need to make sure they don’t get to a point where it becomes a problem – that you mitigate rather than having to react.

DR. EICH: It appears China and Russia have agreed to work together militarily as allies. We see them conducting military exercises together, for example. Are we prepared for this?

REP. MEUER: That’s always been the stance that underpins our defense posture for the post-Cold War period and then the ability to fight a two-front war or be able to respond, not just be looking through a soda straw but to have that flexibility and capacity. I don’t know what happens if Russia says, “We are going to invade Ukraine,” and China says, “Great, we will make a play for Taiwan in 48 hours.” The fact that they don’t know what the response will be, but maybe are expecting the United States to just send some angry letters, I think is tremendously destabilizing.

And, the secondary part of my critique of U.S. foreign policy on the U.S. defense side is that we say basically that we are going to do nothing or we are going to respond with military force. That leaves a whole continuum of options, many of which fall in the asymmetric realm, that could prevent us from having to get to the point where force is on the table. I think we should speak softly and carry a big stick, and I think that we shouldn’t be overextending ourselves, in
getting to the position where we got ourselves into Iraq and Afghanistan where we find ourselves in the middle of another country’s civil war.

But that doesn’t mean we can just say we have two oceans on either coast and we can wall ourselves off from the world. But if your approach is (like we essentially were with Syria) that we are going to do nothing or fire some cruise missiles ... whew! Where is the strategy? You have tactics but they aren’t building toward anything. Our failure to have a longtime view gives us that vulnerability.

Getting back to your original question. It worries me. We tried to take congressional action toward the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline and the Democrats in the Senate, just mere hours after they were lambasting filibustering as a relative of segregationists and Jim Crow, were employing the filibuster to stop sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.¹

We have a good set of packages around decreasing economic dependence on China and increasing our basic and applied research so we are making the investments today we should have been making a decade or two ago. Sometimes even when we are saying the right things, we are not practicing what we were preaching or not aligning our investments with our rhetoric. That’s something I think Congress is acutely aware of, but the reality is absent significant executive political will, nothing is going to happen.

**DR. EICH:** Should service members who refuse to get vaccinated be discharged?

**REP. MEUER:** As someone who served in the military, I got poked with a whole bunch of needles and some were still rather experimental like anthrax or small-pox vaccinations. I understand why we got them, but they had far less of an impact on unit readiness than COVID-19 has had. So, when you have naval vessels or army units that are not in deployable status because of a pandemic, that is interfering with readiness, that is significant. That’s where I come down on the military vaccination component.

**DR. EICH:** How concerned are you about extremism in the military?

**REP. MEUER:** I think it kind of comes in waves of sensationalism around that subject, so it is really hard to get a clear vision. I have always struggled to find a study that I didn’t dig into and not come away with many questions; what they ultimately do is problematic in terms of their methodology. So, for a very long time any ties to neo-Nazi groups or organizations that expressly intend to violently overthrow the government or that advocate racial superiority, there was a red line that could be cause for discharge, including when I was in the military. Where is that line drawn as it relates to the First Amendment? This is a hard line to draw, but I think we need to be very thoughtful about it so that you are not going into the same trap that the media sometimes does. Social media has not been helpful in drawing clear lines nor have elected officials.

¹ *Editor’s Note:* A vote taken on GOP Senator Ted Cruz’s bill on January 13, 2022 (prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine) that would sanction entities involved with the fossil fuel pipeline running from Russia to Germany was defeated 55-44. Ahead of the vote, Senate Foreign Relations Chair Bob Menendez (D-NJ) urged members to vote against it, lobbying for his own bill that would have imposed sanctions only if Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to invade Ukraine, arguing that any pre-hostility sanctions might trigger Putin into a premature war. Russia formally commenced its hostilities against Ukraine on February 24, 2020.
**DR. EICH:** As a member of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus in Congress, what has this caucus done to make things better with regard to reducing polarization in Congress or is this just impossible? Do you feel you are making progress with that group?

**REP. MEUER:** The Problem Solvers Caucus has an equal number of Republicans and Democrats, and we take the Noah’s Ark approach, two-by-two, pair it up. I think it has been a very effective group for getting to 80% of the issues that the public wants addressed, ones that Congress hasn’t taken a leading role in because of intractable partisanship. It has been a wonderful vehicle to introduce good pieces of legislation that are not partisan and to find a co-sponsor on the other side of the aisle that will help push some of those efforts forward. It’s by no means a panacea but is definitely a step in the right direction.

**DR. EICH:** Columnist David Brooks has written that he thought the events of January 6 were “so horrific and so disgusting” that people would see the Trump period as terrible and the former president would “fade away.” According to Brooks, now, “If anything, he is stronger in the Republican Party.” What is your strategy to win reelection?

**REP. MEUER:** Do the job, do the job well, and demonstrate to the constituents and voters that I have earned the privilege of being reelected and that in their eyes I should continue to hold this office.

**DR. EICH:** Given your military and civilian service in Iraq and Afghanistan, what leadership qualities best translate into elected public office?

**REP. MEUER:** The lessons I took away, especially from my grandfather but also my grandmother and the way they viewed the world and our place in the community, is that everyone is worthy of respect, everyone has value and should be listened to. It included treating people with dignity and respect no matter their background.

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— Rep. Peter Meijer

These values underpin any strong community and living them costs you nothing but makes all the difference between starting off a relationship or interaction from a point of skepticism or starting off from looking for where there may be strong bonds that can be built upon.

And I think our politics could use more people starting from the point of saying, “Where do we agree and where can we build from here,” rather than focusing on the few areas of disagreement and defining each other based on how we are different rather than what unites us.
Commentary
Too often it seems to me that when we’re asked what kind of leaders we need today, there is a tendency to ignore the past. I believe that is a major failing.

I am not now, nor have I ever been, a particularly political person, certainly not a card-carrying member of a political party. While some view consistency as boring, I have always voted for the person I believed would do the best possible job. In coming to a conclusion, I consistently sought evidence of a tradition of bedrock values and leadership success. In retrospect, sometimes I’ve been right, sometimes wrong.

In an attempt to assess Congressman Peter Meijer’s potential for continued enlightened leadership in a party deeply wanting at present, I found it fruitful to reexamine several leaders, most from the past. Here are capsules of some of the numerous contributions of seven men and women from different fields of endeavor who exemplify values-driven leadership. In each instance, their mastery of the subject matter, their genuine desire to listen to and understand the other side’s point of view, and their sheer determination to do what they believe to be right distinguishes them.

- **Franklin Delano Roosevelt:** As Jon Meachem reported in *The Soul of America*, economist Rexford Tugwell, an original “Brain Trust” member, believed “it was part of his conception of his role” that Roosevelt “should never show exhaustion, boredom, or irritation.” We have witnessed too many instances where business, political, media and sports leaders have lost their cool in public, hindering their ability to secure support and sullying their reputations in the process. FDR’s inner discipline to avoid such traps was underpinned by his stalwart faith. FDR was the architect of the New Deal that lifted Americans from the misery of the Great Depression, putting the nation and its people back on the path to prosperity. He tried to keep America out of World War II while supporting our allies in Europe, but ultimately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, FDR brought the United States into the war, which turned the tide for the allies.

- **Rachel Carson:** Sarah E. Boslaugh’s narrative of Rachel Carson’s life and her highly powerful book, *Silent Spring*, is revealing. Carson was a groundbreaker in so many ways. Her love of nature at an early age paved the way to her unearthing the environmental movement at home and abroad. At Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham University), her goal was to be a writer. Fortunately for us, she instead majored in biology. Unheard of in 1929 for a woman, she won a scholarship to Johns Hopkins for graduate study. She became a celebrated marine biologist, environmentalist, and author. And she served as editor-in-chief for the *U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service*. Her greatest leadership accomplishment, to paraphrase *The Salt Lake Tribune* reporter Tom Wharton, was awakening our need for people from all walks of life to come to terms with nature. Rachel Carson was a true social revolutionary.
Andrew Jackson Higgins: The World War II genius “problem solver,” master boatbuilder, industrialist, and entrepreneur was a former lumberman, a rough-hewn, innovative, hard-drinking perfectionist whose credo was “never accept no.” A Nebraska-raised Irishman with enormous loquacity, charisma, and bluster, Higgins was a high school dropout shunned by New Orleans society elite as an outsider. He was no sycophant which likely increased the jealousy and resistance of the Navy’s engineers in the Bureau of Ships as he lacked the pedigree of eastern seaboard shipyard magnates. Initially, the Navy tried its best to ignore Higgins but after test designs failed, it finally agreed to test Higgins’ boat which succeeded. The Navy finally relented, awarding him the contract. Historian Douglas Brinkley wrote in the May/June 2000 issue of American Heritage that “by September 1943, 12,964 of the U.S. Navy’s 14,072 vessels had been designed by Higgins Industries” (more than 90% of our Navy then was Higgins-built). General Dwight D. Eisenhower spent an enormous amount of time hammering out details for the Normandy landing including ensuring Allied forces had enough reliable landing craft, essential to minimizing loss of life and a successful invasion. The GIs called them “Higgins Boats.” Notably, Brinkley also reported that Higgins Industries employed some 20,000 workers at its zenith in integrated workplaces. Together, Blacks, Whites, men, women, seniors, disabled veterans, and young people produced 700 boats a month.

Katherine Johnson: Among her many inspiring leadership qualities, two of the brilliant NASA mathematician’s skills were her passion for math coupled with her fearlessness in the face of stultifying
discrimination against African Americans. Known as a “human computer,” this brilliant woman’s uncanny ability to calculate and analyze flight trajectories and launch windows with little technological assistance helped send astronauts to the moon and bring them back safely. The former teacher, spouse, mother, friend, and colleague stood tall by asserting herself with numbers that didn’t lie. Her trailblazing eventually led to the grudging acceptance of African American women in the U.S. space race.

• **James A. Baker III:** The former Secretary of State, Secretary of the Treasury, White House Chief of Staff, and manager of presidential campaigns has received myriad plaudits for his long-distinguished leadership in service of four U.S. presidents (Ford, Nixon, Bush ‘41, and Bush ‘43) and our country. Among numerous leadership attributes, four qualities in particular stand out for me. All are adroitly addressed in *The Man Who Ran Washington: The Life and Times of James A. Baker III*, the 2020 bestseller by Peter Baker and Susan Glasser. First is Baker’s constant pursuit of compromise. Second is his steadfast desire to restore American credibility abroad often through restraint, especially in the use of military power. Third, the former Marine and Houston blueblood lawyer was a skilled strategist who could be bold but sought results that were doable and realistic. And, fourth, Baker took great lengths to ensure there were no interagency fights back home when he was engaged in diplomacy abroad. If there is one word in particular that best describes Baker, it must be his “influence.”

• **Christine Lagarde:** In addition to her amazing success in top jobs in government, the private sector and international organizations, Lagarde has been a beacon for the advancement of women. In a 2013 interview with the editor-in-chief of the *Harvard Business Review*, we learn that in practically every leadership role she has held, she’s been a change agent, challenging the rigidity of corporate cultures, implementing stronger accountability measures, eschewing micromanagement, and bringing people together to “spark new ideas.” The energetic French politician and former head of the International Monetary Fund is now the first female president of the European Central Bank. In a commencement address to graduates of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government as reported in the Summer 2012 *Harvard Kennedy School Magazine*, she gave a prescient warning: “Borders, barriers, walls have come down” allowing a high degree of interconnection, she
said, but, “there are many more walls that are being built or that people try to build. Physical walls, political walls, mental walls. Reconciling these interconnections and their benefits together with governments with a view of making it better ... will be a real challenge in the years to come.”

• José Ramón Andrés Puerta: When one sees the words “hunger” and “disaster” in the same sentence, invariably the name “José Andrés” surfaces. The Spanish-born celebrity chef, restaurateur, philanthropist, humanitarian, emergency preparedness teacher, and visionary leader has few equals. In the aftermath of the devastating 2010 Haitian earthquake, he founded the nonprofit World Central Kitchen to quickly mobilize means of providing healthy food to people affected by disasters. At the time, he had been engaged in charitable work for more than a decade. In the extensive March 26, 2020 TIME article by Sean Gregory, he acknowledges that while the government often responds slowly and unevenly, “Andres’ rapidly expanding charity... is as prepared as anyone for the moment(s) of unprecedented global crisis.” The National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. recently honored Andres by placing his portrait in its permanent collection.

Each of the seven previously profiled leaders has brought great value to society. Collectively, their leadership attributes include the following common 10 threads:

- Faith
- Honesty
- Sagacity
- Conviction
- Gumption
- Mettle
- Ebullience
- Passion
- Knowledge
- Drive

Let us hope that other political hopefuls can follow the fine example set by these seven leaders as well as Rep. Peter Meijer and elevate our nation even further in the political, environmental, scientific, financial, and social realms.

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**About the Interviewer**

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