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Gibson leaving Congress in bipartisan frame of mind, mixed emotions on Trump

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NEW PALTZ >> Republican U.S. Rep. Chris Gibson is departing office comfortable that he consistently worked across the aisle to pass legislation, but convinced Congress is in dire need of reform.

Speaking Monday to about 35 people at SUNY New Paltz, Gibson said among the most satisfying legislation he has been involved in drafting results from collaboration with a Democratic counterpart, such as [U.S. Rep. Tim Walz of Minnesota](#).

“We co-authored the [Beginning Farmer and Rancher Opportunity Act](#) and it was written by a farmer, not a lobbyist,” he said. “President Obama put 70 percent of that into law in the federal farm bill.”

Gibson said he has had two basic stipulations for supporting legislation.

“One, is it constitutional?” he said. “Two, is it good for my people? If the answer is yes to both, I’ll vote for it, whether or not a Republican authored it.”

Gibson began his congressional career in 2011 by voting contrary to most Republicans, who spearheaded reauthorization of [the Patriot Act](#).

“I fought and bled for this country, but I didn’t do [it] so I could go down to Washington and shred the Constitution,” he said. “There are issues with the way that law is constructed. ... There is a stipulation in regard to wiretaps that allows for essentially roving wiretaps with only a general description.”

Gerald Benjamin, director and associate vice president for regional engagement at SUNY New Paltz’s Benjamin Center, noted that Gibson is completing a self-imposed, three-term limit with high ratings for bipartisan work in the House of Representatives.

“Congress Gibson has been one of the most active Republicans to collaborate across the aisle,” Benjamin said. “He is consistently named among

the top Republican Congress members in the nation in a bipartisan index by the Lugar Center and the McCourt School of Public Policy.”

Gibson said the incoming administration of President-elect Donald Trump should be given an opportunity to make policy changes for the nation.

“I think we need to give him a chance,” he said. “Here is a guy that, candidly, it’s not clear what he believes in. He has said things over time that contradict and, I think, as somebody who has been elected, we now need to give him the opportunity to build coalitions and to serve us.”

However, Gibson said Trump needs to be held accountable on the core issues aired during the presidential campaign.

“It was jobs, it was rising wages and it was reform,” Gibson said. “He said the system is rigged. I spent six years in Washington, D.C., [and] I agree with him. I think the system is rigged. And he said he wanted to drain the swamp, and I believe he’s right, I think we need to drain the swamp.”

Gibson, who lives in Kinderhook, said he withheld his opinion throughout the campaign because he felt it would be better for voters to hear the thoughts of those looking to replace him.

“What you needed to do is [hear from those candidates](#),” he said. “You didn’t need me to be some sort of foil or tool to set this thing up.”

Gibson also said the presidential race was a “repudiation of the media’s coverage of the campaign, because what we noticed with you ... to be candid, is you would call whenever there was an issue that resonated that you tried to put Republicans in a light that made them appear on the defensive.”

Among the issues avoided by Gibson during the campaign was the “Access Hollywood” tape, in which Trump boasted how he would grab women by their genitals and made a lewd description of efforts to seduce former “Access Hollywood” co-host Nancy O’Dell. On Monday, Gibson, the father of two daughters and a son, finally did comment on the controversy.

Gibson said the tape made him feel “obviously repulsed. There’s no question that behavior is reprehensible.”

Gibson waited until after the two-hour event to clarify a statement by moderator Susan Learner that the congressman did not think Trump should have the launch codes for the nation’s nuclear weapons.

“I said I had concerns and, when he nominated [retired Gen. James]] Mattis to be secretary of defense, I thought that was a very good choice,” he said. “He is somebody I think who has been under stressful circumstances. He is an avid reader, he’s an intellectual, and I think that addresses a fair amount of my concerns.”

Under current law, the president alone has authority to launch a nuclear attack and does not need to consult with the secretary of defense.

Gibson, who served 24 years in the U.S. Army and was awarded four Bronze Stars and a Purple Heart, earned a doctorate in government from

Cornell University and taught at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point.

Among issues Gibson said should be watched closely is the number of military generals that Trump has selected for his Cabinet or to serve in another advisory capacity.

“I think that has to be discussed,” he said. “This is where we have to have this conversation. I don’t think there’s a right answer. ... There has to be a serious discourse, there has to be a give and take, a discussion about what the role of these individuals are.”

Gibson said the inner workings of party politics was evident in Washington and it was apparent that his instincts about the people he served was better than those of Republican leadership.

“They always were trying to get me to hire these national consultants, and ... my team is local,” he said. “I have local folks, and they tried every time to get me to hire these high-priced consultants, and they actually kind of got me over a barrel on the third [congressional race].”

Gibson said Republican party leaders in March 2014 said the party would not fund his campaign if he opted against their advice.

“It was like an intervention, if you will,” he said. “I didn’t know I was heading to an intervention, but that’s the way interventions go, so I go to this meeting ... and they’re telling me why I’m going to lose ... and they had data upon data upon data upon data.”

Gibson said his concession to party leaders was to hire a consultant who had lived in Greene County for a campaign that he won by a 30 percent margin.

However, Gibson added that his track record for making reasoned decisions also served him well after the Patriot Act was reauthorized without his vote.

“I got called down to the principal’s office. It was very uncomfortable,” he said, “but here’s the good news ... when you withstand that, they eventually have to find that vote, so they walk past you. So the next time there was a big issue coming up ... they left me alone because I said ‘no’ and I meant it.”

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