

Rotary
Club of
Charlotte



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

October 31, 2023

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by **Susie Masotti**

Congressman Jeff Jackson, Representing District 14

Congressman Jeff Jackson, representing NC's 14th District served as speaker at this week's Rotary meeting. **Dumont Clarke** introduced Jeff as a father, husband, and soldier. He remains in service after enlisting following the attacks of September 11th and served in Afghanistan. Today he marks his 21st year of service as a Major in the Army National Guard. He earned his undergraduate and master's degrees at Emory University and earned his Juris Doctor degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Jeff served as Assistant District Attorney in Gaston County, where he tried over one hundred cases. He spent eight years as a North Carolina State Senator, representing Mecklenburg County. As a State Senator, he worked to close the consent loophole which was vital for women in North Carolina and was outspoken about the need to reform our redistricting process so that voters can choose who represents them, not the other way around. Now, Congressman Jackson is the first person to represent North Carolina's 14th Congressional District, which includes parts of Mecklenburg and Gaston counties. Jeff's primary "mission" is that he does the right thing at the right time.

Jeff began his remarks by expressing his thanks to his constituents in the newly formed 14th District for trusting them to represent them. He admitted he went to Washington with the preconceived notion that the people there who do the work would be about 70% and that the "noisemakers" would represent 30%. He was pleasantly surprised to find that the noisemakers make up less than 10% and that the remainder are truly there to tend to the people's business. His view is that the noise maker's mission is to

distract, mostly through anger, and that the media reports on those that make the most noise rather than those working daily to get the work of the people done because it makes for good news. He commented that when he leaves the Capitol, he is generally unbothered by the 40+ members of the press since they are looking for those same noise makers, but they don't hesitate to call him and others like him for a reaction or to refute something someone said that day.

Congressman Jackson stated that each representative is asked to serve on two committees. He serves on the Armed Services and Science Committees. He remarked that as a serving member of the military, it strikes him that he gets to listen to Generals whom he finds much more deferential in reminding those they speak to in Congress of their oath to serve the people and that civilians are in charge. It is not lost on him that many of his fellow committee members do not recognize that members of Congress are called to serve in the same manner. As part of the Armed Services Committee and as a member of our military, he is pleased with the level of ethnic diversity in the top ranks of the military which is unprecedented throughout the world.

As a member of the Science Committee, he feels this is important to both District 14 and North Carolina. Jeff admits that serving on the Space Sub-Committee allows him to enjoy having the leadership of NASA call on him and has had the pleasure of meeting several Astronauts. It's surprisingly easy to apply to be an Astronaut; it's an application on the internet. Approximately 10,000 people apply each year and just 10 are selected about every 2 years. His work with Space is fulfilling because it is one of the few areas that bring all of us together for a common goal.

One of the perks of being a member of Congress is being able to get anyone on the phone. When the train derailed in Ohio last year, he asked his staff who he could speak to about this issue, and they asked if he'd like to speak to the head of the Railroad Department. He obviously said yes. Congress is the best place to learn about anything!

As he continued to speak, Congressman Jackson remarked that most of his colleagues are a lot like him – they don't want to be known. They want to do their job and prefer to let the noisemakers draw the heat. Very little of his time is spent on dealing with the issues that the noisemakers are yelling about (less than 5% actually). The recent events regarding the Speaker of the House fight were the result of the noisemakers vs. those wanting to get the job done. The result was a congressman who was not very well known to the public serving as Speaker of the House. It will be interesting to see how it plays out since he is further to the right than his predecessor. Jeff has met Speaker Johnson and while they disagree on many fundamental issues, he is polite and there to get the job done.

The Speakership position is vitally important right now because there is important work that needs to be done. There are three big bills coming up that need to be debated and passed – the Defense Bill, The Reauthorization of the FAA, and the Farm Bill all of which are due before the end of the year. The noisemakers will make their noise about the Budget, but these three bills are equally important to our country.

Sadly, the recent redistricting of District 14 worked out the way he and his team thought it would. The changes in the district created a 30% swing in the other party's favor so he's decided to run for Attorney General. Congressman Jackson commented that he heard the current AG, Josh Stein (whom he called an intellectual giant) was a recent Rotary speaker and taught him that he could be useful in the minority by helping to get things done and letting others take the credit – a strategy that he has utilized often.

Jeff closed his comments by commenting that early in his tenure he began creating social media posts about the issues of the day that he focused on speaking calmly, without “politics” and without the noisemakers. He’s proud that this year his posts have been viewed more than 300 million times which he believes is a sign that our younger generation is not only his largest audience (because they’ve grown up gathering their news in this manner), but they appreciate learning and are more likely to hear what you have to say in this manner. Don’t count out the younger generation: They are listening and learning.

The Congressman was asked if he is elected as NC’s Attorney General how he would combat making main street safer after seeing such a rise in theft (especially in groups). He responded that these crimes are the result of organized crime and the rise in the trade of the drug Fentanyl. While it is easy to focus on the individuals that you see on the news breaking into stores in groups and causing chaos, the true attention needs to be focused on those who are organizing these attacks and on how social media needs to be made a part of the conversation because the stolen goods are now sold via social media platforms and need to be held accountable for engaging in the sale of stolen property.

In response to a question about Congress’ fiscal responsibility and how they control the purse strings, the Congressman responded that neither party wants to talk about the major debt problem that our country faces. There are standard answers to cut the defense budget, but if you completely cut the defense budget, you will not come close to paying off the debt. In the end on this and any other issues our leadership faces aren’t coming up with good ideas, it’s getting enough votes, on both sides, to pass something that will work. Both sides need to solve this and other problems, but it must be bipartisan driven, or it cannot pass. Sadly, both sides just hope that the next big crisis happens on the other side’s watch.

When asked how much damage the noise makers make in Washington, Congressman Jackson replied that not much is going to occur anyway but that they do amplify issues and they do so for their own benefit. In sitting on a committee of 40 representatives, comments are made in order of seniority. It often happens that the 20th person to speak (which shows their seniority) is a noisemaker and that’s who ends up making the cable news, not the 19 people before them that engaged in thoughtful debate. The real committee debates aren’t interesting to the media and not surprisingly the noisemakers “turn off” as soon as the cameras are gone. Sadly, in a federal legislature system, you can become powerful, rich, and famous by being a jerk.

A member asked how individuals who have family and friends on the far left and the far right can engage in working to bring back civil discourse. The Congressman replied that politics got screwed up about 15 years ago when we were all introduced to the 24-hour news cycle, the internet, and social media. These have created echo chambers that reinforce our own beliefs rather than listening to and learning about the issues ourselves and other opinions. We are being driven to our opinions rather than learning about them. He believes that we will grow through this political era because we have a group of younger people coming up who have grown up with this type of information and see them as less susceptible to radical political behavior.

A recording of the meeting can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/880308794>
The speaker’s introduction begins at approximately 20:55 minutes.