Thank you, Senator Portman. You are an extraordinary Senator who pays attentions to all details, and it is a pleasure to serve with you in the Senate. It is an honor to receive this recognition from The Ohio State University and to have the opportunity to meet with the Fellows of the John Glenn School of Public Affairs.

These words by John Glenn wonderfully describe the cause that brings us together this evening: “If there is one thing I’ve learned in my years on this planet, it’s that the happiest and most fulfilled people I’ve known are those who devoted themselves to something bigger and more profound than merely their own self-interest.”

The word “hero” is somewhat overused these days. In the case of John Glenn, however, it is fitting. Any one page from his remarkable biography would be more than enough to inspire us – a decorated fighter pilot in World War II and Korea, a courageous test pilot pushing the boundaries of flight and of human endurance, and an outstanding member of the United States Senate dedicated to our nation’s well-being.

Of course, he is perhaps best known as the first American to orbit Earth. The flight of Friendship 7 filled us with both awe and anxiety. It was postponed time and again for more than a month, first due to bad weather, then because of persistent equipment malfunctions. Even on that fateful day of February 20, 1962, Astronaut Glenn sat on the launch pad for three hours while last-minute repairs were made, ready and eager to make history. Most of us pull over in a panic and call Triple-A when the “check engine” light comes on. Not John Glenn.

When that massive Atlas rocket finally blasted off, America and the world heard mission control officer Scott Carpenter say, “Godspeed, John Glenn.” Ironically, the only person who didn’t hear was John Glenn himself, due to a radio glitch. Three orbits and nearly five hours later, despite a heat-shield failure that threatened instant incineration, he brought his spaceship safely home.

John Glenn and the other early astronauts inspired us then, and they continue to do so. In fact, I am proud to note that Dr. Jessica Meir, a biologist from my hometown of Caribou, Maine, has been chosen for a mission on the International Space Station beginning this fall. Being able to “look at this fragile blue ball from outer space” has been her lifelong dream. Instilling in future generations the spirit of daring, of exploration, and of expanding knowledge is a powerful legacy.

After Friendship 7, it would be another 12 years before John Glenn was elected to the Senate, but even as an astronaut he understood a particular challenge facing government, saying, “As I hurtled through space, one thought kept crossing my mind - every part of this rocket was supplied by the lowest bidder.”
When I came to the Senate in 1997, I was named to the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee. I was fortunate to have Senator Glenn as our Ranking Member. He had a total commitment to transparency, accountability, and real results. To him, good government was not a partisan issue; it was a bipartisan responsibility.

The space program advanced the frontier of science and technology. Perhaps just as important, it unified Americans with a shared sense of purpose. Working together, there simply was nothing we could not do, no challenge we could not meet.

Tragically, that is not the case today. We live in a time of ever-worsening divisiveness, a time in which the bonds uniting us that have characterized our country are not just in danger of being lost but, far too often, deliberately discarded. From government to social media – perhaps “anti-social” would be the better term – to the 24/7 news cycle, our discourse is being poisoned by hyperpartisanship, insults, and impugned motives. It is turning us against one another and preventing us from coming together to solve problems. This phenomenon is weakening our sense of community and undermining our willingness to listen to others – especially if they hold political views diametrically opposite of our own.

This modern-day tribalism divides society into “us versus them” as we increasingly isolate ourselves from those who aren’t just like ourselves, wanting to talk only with those who mirror our political viewpoints and listen to the same media sources as we do.

A recent academic study titled “Mass Lethal Partisanship” produced alarming findings. More than 42 percent of Republicans and Democrats said they viewed the opposition as “downright evil” – not just wrong on policy, but apparently in league with the Devil. Roughly one in five in both parties described their political adversaries as less than human and admitted to thinking on occasion that the country would be better off if large numbers of them died. About the same number believe that violence would be justified if the 2020 election does not go their way. This polarization is contrary to the foundation of our democracy.

Politics has been described as the “art of compromise,” but that maxim seems woefully out of fashion today. Sitting down with those on the opposite side of an issue, figuring out which issues matter the most to each side, negotiating in good faith, and attempting to reach a solution are actions often vilified by hard-liners on both the left and the right. Far too often, reaching across party lines – even when it produces results – is greeted with scorn by strident partisans who accuse the compromiser of being a “sellout.”

For too many today, achieving solutions is not the primary goal; rather, it is to score political points, even if that means that the problems confronting our country go unresolved.

Compromise is difficult, but governing without it in a democracy is impossible. A bipartisan solution reached by honest debate and consideration of alternate viewpoints very often is not just the one with the best chance to prevail, but also the best answer. Often, what makes a policy issue challenging is that there are valid arguments and concerns on both sides. In such cases, the optimal resolution accommodates the concerns of the opposing sides to the greatest extent possible.
The vast majority of policy decisions addressed in Washington – whether on taxation, funding priorities, the environment, or a host of other subjects – require a careful and informed balancing of different points of view. In short, they require compromise.

Washington is unlikely to change unless those outside of Washington demand it. We who represent the people of this great nation must put progress over partisanship, statesmanship over stridency, and compromise over conflict.

Unyielding adherence to an extreme position is easy. It is compromise, the hard work of bringing people together to find common ground, that requires determination, intellect, and courage. It may not be easy to feel passionate about compromise, but it is easy to feel passionate about justice, opportunity, and progress.

John Glenn inspired us to look to the stars, to dream big dreams, to imagine the great things we could accomplish as one nation united by purpose, determination, and courage. It is in that spirit that I gratefully accept this award and thank you for advancing those noble principles.