



UTAH GOV. SPENCER J. COX

**2024 STATE OF THE  
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Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Madame Lt. Governor, my best friend Abby and to Utah's public servants and my fellow Utahns gathered here tonight: Welcome.

I want to especially recognize Sen. Baldarree, Rep. McPherson and Rep. DeFay. Congratulations on joining the best legislative body in the country.

We have much to cover in a short amount of time, and so I'll ask again like I did in previous years to please hold any applause until the end of the speech, no matter how difficult that may be, especially for Mike Mower in the gallery.

In 1847, a group of peculiar people arrived in Utah, but what they found was a place that Native Americans already knew was quite different than anywhere else.

Our mountains are taller. Our snow is deeper. And our red rock is otherworldly.

We have natural wonders impossible to describe like Goblin Valley, Dead Horse Point, the Coral Pink Sand Dunes, and Pando, the largest living organism in the world (Am I right Rep. Stratton?)

The famed explorer John Wesley Powell described his Utah travels thusly: "Past these towering monuments, past these mounded billows of orange sandstone, past these oak-set glens, past these fern-decked alcoves, past these mural curves, we glide hour after hour, stopping now and then, as our attention is arrested by some new wonder."

And the only thing weirder than the landscape?... the people who would inhabit it.

We have strangely spelled town names like Tooele and Mantua and even stranger spelled names for our people. While many of us have a grandfather named LaVar or LaVaun, now each of us has a niece with names like Saydee and Lakynn with extra E's and N's and Y's just strewn about willy-nilly.

In Utah, we dine on fry sauce, funeral potatoes, and dirty diet sodas from our neighborhood Swig.

We play the lottery in Idaho and buy our fireworks in Wyoming.

We build rockets in Box Elder County to send astronauts into space, and once they arrive they can look back to see the Utah mine which produced the copper needed to send them there.

To work in that mine and many others across the state, immigrants came from all over the world, including our Greek American friends who developed the incomparable pastrami burger, a Utah original.

We have a Hawaiian ghost town of Iosepa in Tooele County, a gas station in Hanksville built inside a mountain, and I challenge you to find another store on the planet more eclectic than Smith & Edwards in Ogden.

We believe in the Bear Lake Monster, and some of you here tonight are Delta Rabbits and Jordan Beetdiggers.

I'm sure this is all what our first Territorial Gov. Brigham Young had in mind when he said, "This is the right place."

But there is another way in which Utah is different, and even a little weird. Despite being a small, oddly shaped state out West, Utah continues to dominate endless lists of national rankings. Utah was recently named the best state to start a business, the most charitable state, and the state with the most independent people. We were even named the No. 1 state for trick or treating ... but I know that won't stop Sen. Cullimore's efforts to help us reach even higher heights.

Probably my favorite ranking comes from U.S. News and World Report where they evaluated all 50 states using thousands of data points and more than 70 different metrics in eight categories. Their goal? To determine definitively, which is the best state. And for the very first time in 2023, Utah was named the best state in the nation. Period.

And while it is surely fun to tout that ranking — and I certainly have — I'm much more interested in why we are objectively the best state. And I'm most interested in how we keep it that way.

I think there are two more rankings that can help us answer those questions.

The first comes from a research study on the American dream, which experts simplified into an analysis of social mobility — which in simple terms means, "If you work hard, you'll get ahead."

After looking at measures of social mobility in entrepreneurship, institutions and the rule of law, education and social capital, the study concluded that Utah was the best state in the country for social mobility. The American dream lives here. You see, in Utah, we still care about our communities. We still care about our neighbors. We still believe that we can solve problems and help those who are struggling. We know that we have a duty to give back and lift others.

The second study is even more fascinating to me. In September, the National Bureau of Economic Research released a robust study on zero-sum thinking. They define zero-sum thinking as: “the belief that gains for one individual or group tend to come at the cost of others.” In other words, if you win, then I lose. This type of thinking is deeply associated with a scarcity mentality. Not only is every person out for themselves, but so is every group or identity — and identities become paramount; race, religion, political party. My team can only win by tearing your team down.

This scarcity mentality also leads to false choices. You either care about the Great Salt Lake or you drive a John Deere tractor. If you want lower taxes, then you must hate public schools. If you have concerns with a federal regulation, then you definitely want to start drilling for oil under Delicate Arch.

I promise it feels so good to fall into these traps. There’s no feeling more enjoyable in the short term than righteous indignation. Sadly, a majority of people in a majority of states are now acting that way — as zero-sum thinkers with endless pity parties and complaints of victimhood. They are buying what the conflict entrepreneurs in our politics and media are selling.

But not so much in Utah. It turns out that Utahns, far more than people in any other state, reject zero-sum thinking. Utah still believes in the win-win. We reject false choices and help others succeed. We see abundance in place of scarcity.

Utah, it turns out, is weird.

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Our prosperity and abundance mindset was on display in last year’s legislative session. Told that we had to choose between reducing taxes and supporting our teachers, we rejected that false choice. Instead, we delivered both the largest tax cut ever by a huge margin, and the largest increase in teacher salaries in our state’s history. Even better, over the past three years we have reduced taxes by over \$1 billion and, for the first time, the average Utah teacher is now paid more than neighboring states like Colorado, Arizona, Idaho, Nevada and New Mexico.

But we went even further. We enhanced career pathways and apprenticeships, froze college tuition, and made school choice available to all Utahns. And oh, by the way, Utah is now the best state in the nation for providing more per-pupil funding to high-poverty districts versus low-poverty ones.

We were also faced with drought and water insecurity, and rejected the scarcity mindset that tells us we have to choose between prosperity or water security. Over the past two years we have

provided more than \$1 billion dollars in water conservation and infrastructure funding. But even more importantly, the people of Utah have responded by using less water. While it's easy to convince people to conserve during the driest year, Utahns shocked the experts last year by using even less water in one of the wettest water years in our state's history.

In fact, in the driest part of our state, despite a historic water year and a 5% increase in service connections, Washington County decreased its total water use by 1.2 billion gallons! This is proof of a paradigm shift. Utahns are doing the right thing, without the heavy hand of state government.

The best news of all is that our reservoirs currently sit at 82% full — 24% above average. This provides us with a springboard for the ongoing implementation of conservation projects. And, it means that, as we have promised, we will save the Great Salt Lake.

Utah's ability to solve hard problems received national attention when Rep. Teuscher, Sen. Cullimore and Sen. McKell decided to take on the plague that social media has unleashed on the mental health of our youth. In a rare display of national bipartisanship, I have received messages from Republicans and Democrats in other states, members of Congress and the President himself thanking us for leading the nation to save our kids. While we still have more to do, I am grateful for the courage of Republicans and Democrats in this room who were willing to put these companies on notice that our kids' mental health is more important than their profits.

Sometimes, though, politics is binary. It's not always possible to find a win-win. But even then how we win absolutely matters. I know last session, there were difficult and controversial bills, including a pause on transgender surgeries and puberty blockers for minors which I supported. I know there are people impacted who are angry and upset with me and with many of you gathered in this room. I want to thank Sen. Kennedy for helping to navigate the debate with compassion. Every other state that has passed this law did it along partisan lines, end of story. And yes, we did the same in Utah. But that's not where the story ends, and that's what makes us different. At the same time, we also unanimously passed a ban on conversion therapy and approved \$1 million in funding to provide additional talk therapy for our transgender youth with one primary goal: to help those kids and let them know we want to keep you here. We want you to stay with us. Even when we disagree, and disagree passionately, we must still love.

Oh, and speaking of how weird Utah can be ... at the bill signing banning conversion therapy, Equality Utah and the Eagle Forum stood side-by-side. Sadly, while almost every media outlet in the country wrote about the controversial bill, this one got very little attention. And yet, it shows that we still have the ability to solve hard problems and work together in the Utah way — by disagreeing better.

That's something that, as chair of the National Governors Association, I've been working on with my fellow governors. There's a real desire all across the nation to Disagree Better — the Utah way — to remember how to stand up for our own beliefs without demonizing our opponents.

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And so we find ourselves at the beginning of another 45-day legislative session. I wish I could report that we had solved every issue, but we know we have more to do.

The most pressing challenges in our state today relate to growth. I was recently asked, "Is Utah growing too fast?" This question implies zero-sum thinking. I think the reporter was surprised by my response. "The only way to not grow is to suck at being a state. And I'm not interested in that. I want Utah to be the best place to live in the nation. I want Utah to be the best place to start a business. I want Utah to be the best place to have a family. And if that attracts people, well, we live in a free country and a free market."

I would love to build a wall around our state — and get California to pay for it — but that is not going to happen. And so it is up to you and me and all of us to make sure that we grow in the right way.

To that end, I believe the single largest threat to our future prosperity is the price of housing. Period. Housing attainability is a crisis in Utah and every state in this country. But remember, we are weird. We aren't like the rest of the country. No one has figured this out yet, and I truly believe that we can.

For more than a century, homeownership has been the cornerstone of the American dream. It is the key to financial independence and the ability to break away from government support. Homeownership is also the key to family and community. People who own homes care more about their mayor and school board. They care more about their neighbors. Homeowners have more financial capital and social capital.

And most importantly, homeowners have kids — which again, back to that weird thing — it turns out that all those late-night comedians who made fun of us for having so many kids, guess what, that's the number one reason our state is No. 1.

That is why I have proposed the Utah First Homes program, with the audacious goal to build 35,000 starter homes in the next five years. While we need more of everything, my focus is on affordable, attainable, single-family, owner-occupied, detached housing. Most of us grew up or

started our own families in a 1,300-square-foot home. Our kids and grandkids are desperate for this opportunity. The greatest generation did this after WWII and we can do it again.

The American dream is alive in Utah, but it will be dead soon if we don't get this right. Utah must lead the nation with bold and innovative solutions.

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Now, there is another troubling trend happening across our country: the growing crisis of homelessness. All across America, in our most iconic cities, people are suffering and dying on the streets. Tents and camps metastasizing. Assaults, shoplifting and vandalism skyrocketing. Citizens scared to walk down their streets or play with their kids in public parks.

But, there is nothing that requires us to be like the rest of the nation. I refuse to believe that our capital city must suffer the same fate. Not on our watch. Zero-sum thinking says that we must choose between compassion and accountability. We decline that offer. There is nothing compassionate about allowing people to suffer and die on our streets and there is nothing compassionate about allowing laws to be flagrantly ignored and broken. We can provide help and demand accountability.

Unsanctioned camping must end. We will provide help and services for those in need, real consequences and jail for those who willingly break the law, and civil commitment when absolutely necessary.

Now when I talk about accountability, I'm also referring to us as public servants and the way these dollars are spent. You deserve to know where every dollar is being spent and if it is actually working. If it's not working, then we should move it to a place where it will or not spend it at all.

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Of course, there are many other issues that need "Utah weird" solutions. This session, we have opportunities to continue supporting our teachers and improving education. We can work to remove unnecessary government regulations. We can significantly increase the number of licensed professionals to help those struggling with mental health. We can strengthen families, including better understanding the struggles of boys and men and providing more opportunities for women and girls. We can continue to close the divide between rural and urban communities, making sure that opportunity exists in every corner of our state.

And finally, I ask you to support the service initiatives I've proposed this session, especially new paths for high school and college students to give back. I confess that I still beam with pride, probably more than I should, when I see the flagpole I put up in our cemetery for my Eagle Scout project. The rootedness that comes from rolling up your sleeves to make the place you live better is a defining feature of our state's culture, and I want to preserve that for your kids and grandkids, and mine.

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On that note, I started this speech talking about how weird we are.

I'm hoping you will permit me a little personal privilege to share a story about a remarkably weird person. His name was Iven Roy Cox and he was my grandpa's brother. Iven grew up in my small town of Fairview. I just thought he was a quirky old guy. He had a prosthetic arm and only three fingers on his other hand. At Christmastime he would come to our house and sing Christmas carols — alone, with a tape recorder of his own voice so he could harmonize with himself.

When I was 15, he passed away. It was at his funeral when I realized how truly unique he really was. You see, it turns out that Iven was the closest thing to a real-life George Bailey from the film "It's a Wonderful Life" of anyone I have ever met.

My great-grandfather had purchased the Fairview telephone company in 1919. In 1939, a terrible snowstorm knocked down telephone lines all over town. Iven, then age 25, bundled up and went out to help restore phone service. Unbeknownst to him, a high voltage power line had fallen onto the telephone line. When he cut into the wire with a pair of old, uninsulated pliers, 6,000 volts of electricity shot through his body. As he lay smoldering in the snow, everyone assumed he was dead. Miraculously, he survived. But he lost his left arm and two fingers on his other hand. As people always do in Fairview, the community rallied to help and support him.

Later he would marry and celebrate the birth of his first child, a baby boy. Tragically his wife died just months later. Again, the people of Fairview rallied to help and support the young widower and his baby. In fact, several women in town volunteered to take turns watching and caring for the little boy, feeding him, reading to him, helping him to find some sense of family and normalcy.

Those two tragic and traumatic events would have shattered most people. But somehow, Iven became even stronger and more determined. He figured out how to climb telephone poles with one arm and string wire with three fingers. He married an amazing woman and helped to raise her daughters. He took over the phone company and ran it for 40 years.



But more than anything, he spent the rest of his life giving back to the community that saved him. He volunteered to be the town's scoutmaster, learning how to swim with one arm and tie knots with his three-fingered hand. He bought a station wagon and learned how to drive with his disability so he could take the young men on campouts.

He spearheaded the local chapter of the Lion's Club, volunteering and gathering donations for humanitarian projects all over the world — donating more than \$1,000 even though he couldn't afford it.

Iven wanted to help local families buy their first home or car, but there was no bank in Fairview to lend them money. So he set out to recruit one. When every bank turned him down, he decided to start the first credit union. Eventually, he convinced Far West Bank to take a chance on the sleepy town.

The company he ran was always on the verge of bankruptcy, not because it didn't have potential, but because Iven was generous to a fault. He donated to every cause in town, whether the company was profitable or not. He refused to send delinquent accounts to collections. He knew what hard times felt like and he was sure he didn't want to make them harder.

Iven was also a man of deep faith. He believed there was a higher power that had saved his life and carried him through the darkest times. He believed that "when you are in the service of your fellow beings you are only in the service of your God." He served three missions for his church. On the back of his business card — remember he ran a telephone company — read the words "Pray. Call home often. It's Free."

If a homeless stranger was passing through town, they stayed at Iven's home.

If someone was hitchhiking, he picked them up.

When he noticed the elderly in town struggling with loneliness, he started the first senior citizens program.

In his later years, I would often see him sweeping the sidewalks on Main Street, just to make the town a little nicer.

Talk about a weird guy.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think we need more of this kind of weird today. I think we need to amplify and preserve this type of weirdness as if our state's future depends on it. I am convinced it does.

There's a little park in Fairview today where kids and families come to play. It's appropriately called the Iven R. Cox Lion's Park. I hope you get a chance to visit it sometime. I want to recognize Iven's son, Branch, and his family for carrying on Iven's incredible legacy of service.

The truth is that Iven didn't change the world. But he changed Fairview. I've come to believe that is far more important. I was inspired at our One Utah Summit this year by the author and pundit Charles Cooke who said:

"I often think that we give young people bad advice when it comes to politics. We teach them about the most important and pivotal moments in American history; and then we encourage them to go and change the world....[F]or most people, [that] actually isn't an especially useful goal... We would be in a better place as a country if people resolved to go and change their town, or their community, or their local food bank."

You see, while the world around us is staggering a bit. From war. From loneliness. From contempt. There are Iven Coxes in every community in this state. At least there used to be, and we need them now more than ever.

Fortunately, we are in a room full of them tonight. People like Greg Buxton, Dan Johnson, Mark Wheatley, Robert Spendlove, Susan Pulsipher, Jay Cobb, Marsha Judkins and Steve Lund.

All of you are following in the footsteps of Iven. For 45 days, you and your families are sacrificing to better your communities.

I love you all for doing this. I really do. Even you, Phil. And you, too, Brian. I only got to serve one year as a member of the Legislature, and Abby will tell you that in my 20 years of public service as a city councilman, mayor, county commissioner, lieutenant governor and governor ... that one year in the House was my absolute favorite.

My friends, the State of the State is as strong as it's ever been. And I'm convinced with every passing day that the source of our state's strength is what for the longest time people told us was our weakness. We're different. We're weird. The good kind of weird. The kind of weird the rest of the nation is desperate for right now.

And I'm praying we can keep it that way.

So, stay weird, Utah. And may God bless each of you. And may God bless the great state of Utah.