

The Importance of Being Elton

by Grace Potter

Elton William Gallegly was not what you'd call a congressional rock star. He was a college dropout, a former real estate broker who'd stumbled into politics the way some people stumble into the wrong bedroom after a night spent downing tequila shots. The wry, wrinkled smile he wore on his congressional portrait looked more like a grimace, as if he, too, was uncertain as to why he'd been awarded the power to influence large-scale change in southern California. His political career consisted of two House committee assignments, a handful of subcommittee memberships and exactly one (unsuccessful) bill to which he could claim authorship. His career fizzled in 2012, when he quietly decided not to run for reelection.

And yet here he is, all smirks and handshakes, strutting proudly into the cabin of a retired Air Force plane that once held Ronald Reagan, accompanied by approximately twenty of his "close friends."

My family and I are visitors at Reagan's presidential library for the day. My parents' goal is to visit all fifteen while they can still travel with relative ease, and my goal is to accompany them whenever I can. Reagan's library is the third on our list.

We've just made it to the atrium which houses Reagan's Air Force One. Its metal exterior glistens in the California sun, a beacon of Reagan's "superb global diplomacy initiatives," according to its placard.

Elton appears to be an unofficial museum ambassador. As we make our way towards the plane exhibit, he approaches us delicately, walking the line between political friendliness and self-important indifference. He eventually comes to a stop a few feet away, giving us a once-over as we shift uncomfortably in his periphery.

“Sorry about the crowd,” he says, finally turning to face us. “I have a few friends visiting me from Canada.” His tone indicates he’s not sorry at all. He offers his hand to my father without introducing himself. “I’m happy you could come out today.” He and my father stiffly clasp hands. Elton withdraws quickly, giving my mother a curt nod.

Elton’s only bill prevented videos depicting animal violence from being bought and sold. It was enacted in 1999 and overturned in 2010. Chief Justice John Roberts claimed the law violated the first amendment; Elton countered by claiming the bill had “exceptions for religious, political, scientific, education, journalistic, and artistic expression.” Despite the bill’s countless loopholes, the decision was not overturned. Its effectiveness as a piece of legislation has not been evaluated, nor has it been revisited by any political official.

The museum docent watches helplessly as Elton ushers us into the plane ahead of himself and his guests. “Enjoy the exhibit,” he says, raising his eyebrows and smiling slightly. He turns away as his friend asks him where he “used to sit.” Elton points vaguely at a chair near the middle of the plane, emphasizing the name “Colin Powell” several times as he speaks. My parents and I steal glances behind us as we pretend to revel in Reagan’s legacy.

As we exit, we hear Elton launch into a long anecdote about “George Two.” He and his friend pass us just as Elton’s punchline lands. The friend laughs. Elton laughs. His hands fly to his stomach, as if his own polite half-jokes are hilarious enough to cause legitimate muscle pain.

Elton drops yet another mention of “his gallery,” walking towards a door labelled “Gallegly.” His American flag pin flashes as the door shuts behind him. The laughs of Elton and his audience fade.

In a speech made at the Gallegly Gallery's opening, Elton claimed he was "deeply moved" to receive an honor as high as a namesake wing in Reagan's own presidential library. One of California's ex-governors shook his hand. Cameras flashed. His wife was home sick with the flu.