

Confrontation and Cooperation: How Can We Work Around Partisan Gridlock?

13 April 2010

SPEAKERS:

THOMAS MANN

Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution

BOB BARR

Former Senator and Presidential Candidate

REV. CLETE KILEY

President, Faith & Politics Institute

MODERATOR:

JONAH WITTKAMPER

Director, Search USA

DESCRIPTION AND MAJOR POLICY POINTS

WASHINGTON, DC – The February **Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum (CPRF)** was held at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) on April 13th, 2010. The event was attended by individuals from government agencies, think-tanks, non-profits and local universities attended. The CPRF is organized by the non-profit organization **Search for Common Ground**, and is co-sponsored by the **Alliance for Peacebuilding, American University, 3D Security, Council on Foreign Relations, George Mason University, Johns Hopkins University, Partners for Democratic Change, United States Institute of Peace and Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.**

Problems

One area of consensus about the problems that face Congress was the issue of the emphasis of pursuit of the party's interest overwhelming all other considerations. Mr. Barr emphasized that the current system is very closed and was created by the parties for their own use, making it very different for non-party members to have input, much less get on the ballot. In order to have any input people must belong to one of the two parties, stifling independent thought and agency. Mr. Mann pointed to the current and recent behavior of the Republican Party as an example of how parties put the best possible way to gain or hold power above all else. Man explained that the Republican Party chose its strategy of delegitimizing President Obama before his inauguration. The GOP never had any interest in working with President Obama and ignored or abused Democratic overtures and efforts towards bipartisanship. As a result the Democrats harmfully altered their own proposals for an unrealistic attempt at

bipartisanship. Man further explained that the most realistic thing to do in this polarized climate is for parties to use majorities and mandates when they get them. Rev. Kiley approached the question of partisan single mindedness from the perspective of the individual members of Congress who can be marginalized or even targeted by their own parties. He recounted his experiences with his reflection group, contrasting the excitement of democratic members anticipating capturing the Senate with their frustration and sense that their voice wasn't being heard. Examples of well known targeting of members of Congress include the Blue Dogs on the Democratic side and RINOs (Republicans In Name Only) in the Republican Party.

The panelists also tended to agree on the damage done by the current language of political discourse, criticizing extreme and inaccurate portrayals of policies and issues by the media and by other politicians. Rev. Kiley focused on the polarizing use of apocalyptic language, the use of names, and often first names, rather than titles to delegitimize politicians and the dangers of demonizing one's opponents. He explained that language that goes down the road of demonization is destructive and dangerous, designed to dehumanize opponents and apocalyptic language is particularly dangerous, saying that "when you release it you release something powerful that you have no control over."

Solutions

The Panelists agreed on the importance of having effective moderates involved in policy-making as a way to mitigate the current conflict. Mr. Wittkamper discussed moderates' potential as bridge builders with diverse enough viewpoints to reconcile the wings of the parties. Mr. Barr also emphasized the importance of behaving in a moderate way to achieve things pragmatically even if politicians do not have moderate ideals, citing the achievements of Presidents Reagan and Clinton as examples of successful presidents working with Congresses controlled by the opposition. He argued that this sort of cooperation, however grudging, is healthiest for the country as it avoids the monopolistic tendencies of single party government and encourages consensus.

All of the panelists spoke in favor of making some sort of holistic change to how we approach partisan issues, as Mr. Mann argued that all of the structural changes he proposed are insufficient to transform the problem in a timely fashion. Mr. Barr discussed the idea of increasing the cultural focus on clear and direct thought rather than reaction, teaching ourselves as a country to take time to think things over and consider issues more deeply. Rev. Kiley emphasized the importance of the tone of debate and focusing on the fact that ideological opponents are human beings no matter how removed their positions are.

In response to a question about alternative dispute resolution (ADR) being applied to politics, perhaps in the form of a neutral arbiter like the Congressional Budget Office, Mr. Barr and Rev. Kiley responded very positively. Rev. Kiley described his own reflection group's successes in self-regulating the tone of its discussion and ability to "leave incivility at the door" without ignoring their own personal philosophies. Other trainings or bipartisan events have also been very successful in bringing people together, most notably the Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage. Mr. Barr strongly supported the importance of bipartisan events, even things as simple as a retreat with Members of Congress's families, taking them away from the divisive atmosphere of Congress and softening moods and behavior with the presence of loved ones. He also agreed that increased use of ADR in the political process could be a very good thing and could be used to incorporate outside groups as well as to ease the current process.

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