Address at the Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy: "Embracing Governance over Partisanship"

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I thank Dean Kuniholm for his generous remarks. I am very pleased to be at Duke University and the Sanford School. I had the great pleasure of serving in the Senate and on the Foreign Relations Committee with Terry Sanford. I was inspired by his concept of “outrageous ambition,” which undergirded his innumerable achievements, including the founding of this school.

In a few hours, President Obama will address the nation on his priorities for the next four years. Although he had a safe margin of victory in November in the electoral college, his percentage of the popular vote barely cleared 50 percent. Many of the nearly half of Americans who voted against him are manifestly resistant to reconciliation, and he must deal with a highly partisan Congress where the ranks of centrists in both parties have been diminished.

Across a wide range of domestic and foreign issues, there is a common perception that Americans are inextricably divided in ways that we were not several decades ago. I was struck by a report in the Washington Post the weekend of inauguration that recounted how workers at a factory in the small town of Fremont, Ohio, had segregated themselves ideologically to the point that the facility’s two break rooms were divided between Obama’s supporters and detractors.

Common perceptions are not always correct. And it is one of the roles of a great school of public policy like the Sanford School to test political assumptions. We should be skeptical of claims that the current era of partisanship is unrivaled, especially in a country that fought a civil war, and more recently, went through the upheavals associated with the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement.

But we have to come to grips with the repeated failure of our national government to respond to obvious problems, such as the budget deficit. And we cannot ignore the increasingly uncivil tone that penetrates American political dialogue. For this reason, one of my first acts upon retirement was to join the board of the National Institute for Civil Discourse, an organization that includes Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, along with Senator Tom Daschle, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, and a number of other former officials who believe that too much of American political rhetoric has become destructive.
The question all of us must ask is whether today’s partisanship is merely the cyclical intensification of a common condition of American democracy that echoes back to the Founders, or at least to the Jefferson-Hamilton split within George Washington’s cabinet. Or whether it is the source of fundamental dysfunction within our government that requires not just awareness and patience, but a solution.

My own view is that our current partisan atmosphere is unique in character, if not intensity. More troubling, it is unlikely to recede without a concerted effort to change our political culture and institutions.

Partisanship is a necessary byproduct of our democracy. But we see innumerable examples of both parties failing the most basic tests of governance. Congress has not passed an annual budget resolution in almost four years. During 2012, Congressional leaders were so pessimistic about the prospects for legislating in an election year that by May almost every important issue had been deferred to the lame duck session in November and December. Even then, on the important issue of the fiscal cliff, Congress and the President were capable only of a last-minute fix that merely deferred budget battles for a couple of months.

For me, the most compelling evidence that partisanship is out of control is the degree to which it has penetrated foreign policy deliberations. It was never strictly the case that “politics stop at the water’s edge.” But there almost always was an undercurrent of bipartisan cooperation between party leaders on national security that facilitated joint action in a crisis. That is not the case today.

Increasingly, Congressional foreign policy involvement is starting and stopping with simplistic debate on immediate foreign policy controversies that are reflected in the 24-hour news cycle. Congress is largely failing to pursue systematic reviews of the most strategically important questions in foreign policy. These include whether the Administration’s proposed “pivot” to Asia is well considered; what an anti-terrorist campaign spanning decades should look like; and how we should respond to global resource constraints.

Faced with reflexive partisan roadblocks, Congress has retreated from legislating on foreign policy. Congress has not passed a comprehensive Foreign Affairs Authorization bill since 1985, and a serious attempt by both houses to do so has not occurred since 2005. Treaty ratification during the Obama Administration has come to a virtual standstill. Some of you may be aware of the partisan travails facing high profile treaties such as the Disabilities Convention and the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea. But in the last Congress, even non-controversial, job-producing tax treaties with friendly countries such as Hungary, Luxembourg, and Switzerland have been held up.

During foreign policy crises, Congress has been unable to muster a consensus for legislative action. In 2002, Congress authorized the military intervention in Iraq that occurred the following year. But Congress was unable to coalesce behind a unified perspective as the war evolved. In 2011, as President Obama committed the United States to hostilities in Libya without a Congressional vote,
Congress was unable to effectively defend its prerogatives or even decide on the terms of a meaningful debate.

Senator Chuck Hagel’s recent difficulties during the Senate’s consideration of his nomination to be Secretary of Defense offer another example of the politicization of national security policy. Senator Hagel clearly is qualified for the position, and he reflects the President’s views on many issues. In fact, if a Democrat with the same qualifications as Senator Hagel had been nominated, that candidate would have been confirmed with relatively little controversy. On most issues, Chuck Hagel is more conservative than John Kerry, who was confirmed as Secretary of State with only three negative votes.

Senator Hagel’s main transgression is that he is a Republican who has questioned policies that are sacred among most conservative Senators. These include whether the surge in Iraq was worth the lives lost, whether the current high levels of defense expenditures make strategic sense, whether nuclear forces can be reduced further, and whether there are non-military options in dealing with Iran. One can disagree with his views on these questions, as some Senators clearly do. But overall, the intensity of opposition that Senator Hagel is encountering is grounded in the resentments of some conservatives inside and outside the Senate who regard his independent thinking as political blasphemy for which he should not be rewarded.

We have heard some commentators assert that the Republican Party has become so rigid that even President Ronald Reagan would not be regarded as a conservative today. Ideologically, President Reagan’s devotion to the principles of smaller government, entrepreneurship, and personal freedom matched any of today’s conservative leaders. But President Reagan also embraced compromise and other necessities of governance that many conservatives now reject. He began most of his policy battles by espousing conservative principles, but he did not let his ideology paralyze his fundamental responsibility to govern. Many Republican members of Congress today are unwilling to risk any appearance of accommodation for fear that it might conflict with their pledges or the purity of their rhetoric. A no-compromise vision of conservatism may score points with conservative talk show hosts and campaign givers, but in a democracy, leadership requires an officeholder to compromise, to prioritize, and sometimes to reverse oneself.

A pure application of President Reagan’s philosophy would have prevented some of his most important accomplishments, including the 1983 agreement to extend the solvency of Social Security, the 1986 tax reform bill, and his outreach to the former Soviet Union on arms control.

Our system is producing fewer leaders who are placing governance above ideological purity. This has several causes, including Supreme Court decisions that allowed non-attributable and unlimited political expenditures and redistricting processes that have created many uncompetitive congressional districts that reward extremism in both parties.
But perhaps the most potent force driving partisanship is the rise of a massive industry that makes money off of political discord. This industry encompasses cable news networks, talk radio shows, partisan think tanks, direct mail fundraisers, innumerable websites and blogs, social media, and gadfly candidates and commentators. Many of these entities have a deep economic stake in perpetuating political conflict. They are successfully marketing and monetizing partisan outrage. In some cases, these partisan practitioners are true believers whose economic interests coincide with their political views. But in other cases, they are just executing a business model predicated on appealing to the prejudices and fears of their adherents.

This industry has expanded in conjunction with the development of communication technology. As news sources have proliferated and consumers have moved away from newspapers and broadcast television, the economic model of traditional journalism, as well as its standards, have become increasingly difficult to sustain. Outside the constraints of responsible reporting, entrepreneurs have attempted to capture audiences by peddling sensationalism, conspiracy theories, and an “us-versus-them” mentality. This is not entirely new, of course. Some newspaper giants of the past, like William Randolph Hearst, were adept at using the power of their papers to drive a political agenda. But before the dawn of the internet, reaching a significant audience was an extremely expensive endeavor. The vast majority of Americans got their news from network television, their local newspaper, and a few dozen national newspapers and wire services. Almost all of these sources had a stake in reaching an audience that included people from the entire political spectrum.

With today’s technology, anyone can start a website or a blog in search of a specialized audience. Many purveyors have found that the entertainment value of inflammatory partisanship and confrontational rhetoric offers the best chance to find and hold readers or viewers. Many Americans now see the President as a Socialist aiming to destroy the American way of life, while others see the Republican Congress as an insensitive tool of the rich aiming to destroy the poor and middle class.

Hyperbole in the media is backed up by the enormous independent expenditures of super-pacs and wealthy individuals. Meanwhile, think tanks with overtly partisan aims develop intellectual justifications for the perspectives of their side. The cumulative result is that extremism has a much greater chance of being rewarded electorally than it did even a decade ago, and good governance has suffered.

Under these new conditions, how do we establish greater political civility, foster more meaningful policy debates, and incentivize public officials to put governance first? The actor who could have the greatest short-term impact is the President, himself. President Obama is perfectly situated for leading a campaign to reduce partisanship. He does not have to face election again, he is a unitary actor, and he enjoys overwhelming approval from his base.

If I were advising the President on his speech this evening, I would tell him that he must give attention to uniting the country, not just as a means to pass his priorities, but as an end in itself.
In his recent inaugural address, President Obama gave the unmistakable impression that he would fight budget battles on a partisan line. Absent from the speech was any signal that he intended to tackle the debt in a way that might require sacrifice from anyone other than the very wealthy. But at $16 trillion, the debt is the 800-pound gorilla of American governance. As a practical matter, all other domestic policy depends on constraining the budget, while maintaining economic growth. A series of partisan stalemates over tax and spending policy could sink our economy and undercut the President’s legacy.

A partisan President can be skilled, honest, effective, even iconic. But if he or she fails to be a unifier who expands the governing coalition beyond 50 percent and knows when to temper the political demands of supporters, it is difficult to achieve greatness.

I would hope that the President would call Republican leaders to the White House for extensive talks on the budget and the direction of U.S. foreign policy. These meetings should be private, informal, and unhurried to allow for a real exchange of views. They also should be regularized to improve communications and build trust. This is not something that the President can delegate. He should commit himself to the hours necessary for this process to succeed.

Beyond Presidential leadership all who care about the future of our country should be thinking about how we lift ourselves out of political dysfunction. We should be considering how to support candidates who place governance ahead of partisanship and avoid pledges that limit their flexibility. We should be reconsidering campaign finance rules with the aim of at least increasing transparency. And we should be holding public figures in media and politics to a higher standard of civility in their rhetoric.

None of this will happen overnight. The essential first step is developing awareness of the problem and joining in the belief that a remedy can be found within our democratic traditions. I thank you for thinking through this problem with me, and I look forward to your questions.