A Modest Proposal to Restore Bipartisanship to SOTU

A pre-speech summit of POTUS and congressional leaders could help break D.C. gridlock

Richard G. Lugar, Carl Levin, Tom Daschle and Trent Lott

Politico
January 12, 2016

On January 12, President Barack Obama will give his seventh and final State of the Union address before a joint session of Congress. This annual ritual, which will be widely televised, is one of the few interactions between the executive branch and the legislative branch that is grounded in the Constitution.

However, for many years it has been a largely partisan exercise. The president lays out his accomplishments and his proposals, and the rival party passes judgment by applauding or sitting sullenly quiet while the president’s party cheers.

What could be an opportunity to bring the Congress and the president together has instead become the opposite — it widens the gap between the two branches and highlights the partisanship that has riven the government and rendered it dysfunctional.

Some Supreme Court justices have boycotted the speech because of its politicized nature, and some legislators have sought to reduce the partisan edge by sitting with members of the other party (to little effect). The current spectacle reinforces the perception that Washington is gridlocked.

The State of the Union's partisan flavor is all the more disheartening when you consider that it is one of the rare times that modern presidents are in physical proximity to members of Congress. Face-to-face presidential interaction with lawmakers, especially those of the opposing party, is limited almost entirely to ceremonial functions or perfunctory White House meetings intended as photo-ops. Anybody serious about reducing partisanship should want our highest elected leaders to come together for substantive negotiations in a relaxed setting at least once a year.

We call for the establishment of a new tradition, the Executive-Legislative Initiatives Summit — ELIS. This would be a two-day retreat before the State of the Union, perhaps at Camp David, attended by the president and the leaders of both parties from the House and the Senate. The purpose would be to come to agreement on specific legislative frameworks for the coming year. The summit would conclude with a joint news conference by the president and congressional leaders at which they would announce agreements.
ELIS would provide one solution to two problems: It would help restore the State of the Union address to a more uplifting and unifying event, and it would facilitate direct talks among the country’s highest political leaders on substantive legislative proposals. It would provide a productive backdrop for the State of the Union speech a few days later. Partisan differences would still be highlighted, of course, but they would occur in the immediate context of examples of bipartisan agreement that demonstrate our elected leaders can work together. Linking ELIS to the State of the Union would also help cement it in the political calendar and provide a focus for public expectations.

We understand that grand compromises on deeply divisive matters are unlikely to be the rule. But just like a summit with a foreign leader, there will be pressures on both sides to produce “deliverables,” in this case, workable approaches on at least some issues that would provide momentum for bipartisan legislation. As the public learns to expect progress from each meeting, policy experts in both camps will scramble to develop proposals with bipartisan appeal. With luck, the habit of negotiation and compromise will carry over into the rest of the year.

Some politicians will resist this proposal. Presidents may believe any joint appearance with Congress diminishes their primacy. Extreme partisans on either side who scorn bipartisan compromise may work to undermine its productive potential. Cautious officeholders may be reluctant to embrace an unscripted forum with an unpredictable outcome.

But the pending presidential campaign offers an opportunity to break with the status quo. After hyperpartisan primaries, in general election campaigns the opposing presidential candidates usually vow, in one way or another, to narrow the partisan breach in Washington. Once the primaries are over, we expect the two presidential nominees to do so again as they reach out to centrist voters and make their case that they can lead effectively.

The two nominees can prove their commitment to better governance by declaring that they will hold an annual executive-legislative summit. While not a cure-all for what ails Washington, such a declaration nonetheless would be a powerful sign to voters that the candidates are serious about governing and will take political risks to make our democracy work better. We will strongly encourage them to do so.

*Former Sens. Dick Lugar (R-Ind.) and Carl Levin (D-Mich.) each served 36 years in the Senate. Former Sens. Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) and Trent Lott (R-Miss.) each served as Senate majority and minority leader.*

*This op-ed originally appeared in Politico.*