Senator Lugar's Final Senate Floor Speech

United States Senate
December 12, 2012

Mr. President, I rise today to address my colleagues on a number of issues important to the future of the United States and to offer some perspective on Senate service.

In a few weeks, I will leave the Senate for new pursuits that will allow me to devote much deeper attention to a number of issues that have been a part of my Senate service. Among these are preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and developing more efficient ways to feed the world. I am especially pleased that I will be serving on the faculty of the University of Indianapolis and helping that institution establish a Washington internship program. I look forward to announcing additional endeavors of service in coming weeks.

My service in the Senate would not have been possible without the encouragement and constant support of my loving wife Char, our four sons – Mark, Bob, John, and David -- and the entire Lugar family. Their strength and sacrifices have been indispensable to my public service. I also am indebted to a great number of talented and loyal friends who have served with me in the Senate, including more than 300 Senators, hundreds of personal and committee staff members, and more than a thousand interns. In my experience, it is difficult to conceive of a better platform from which to devote oneself to public service and the search for solutions to national and international problems. At its best, the Senate is one of the Founders’ most important creations.

A great deal has been written recently about political discord in the United States, with some commentators judging that partisanship is at an all-time high. Having seen quite a few periods in the Congress when political struggles were portrayed this way, I hesitate to describe our current state as the most partisan ever. But I do believe that as an institution we have not lived up to the expectations of our constituents to make excellence in governance our top priority.

Many of us have had some type of executive experience as governors, mayors, corporation chiefs, and cabinet officials. I had the good fortune of serving two terms as the Mayor of Indianapolis prior to my Senate service. For the last thirty-six years, I have attempted to apply lessons learned during those early governing experiences to my work in the Senate. As mayor, my responsibility for what happened in my city was comprehensive and inescapable. Citizens held the mayor’s office accountable for the prosaic tasks of daily life, like trash collection and snow removal, but also for executing strategies for the economic and social advancement of the city.
In legislative life, by contrast, we are responsible for positions expressed through votes, co-sponsorships, interviews, and other means. It takes courage to declare dozens or even hundreds of positions and stand for office, knowing that with each position, you are displeasing some group of voters. But we do our country a disservice if we mistake the act of taking positions for governance. They are not the same thing. Governance requires adaptation to shifting circumstances. It often requires finding common ground with Americans who have a different vision than your own. It requires leaders who believe, like Edmund Burke, that their first responsibility to their constituents is to apply their best judgment.

It is possible to be re-elected and gain prominence in the Senate while giving very little thought to governance. One even can gain considerable notoriety by devoting one’s career to the political aspects of a Senator’s job -- promoting the party line, raising money, and focusing on public relations. Responsibility for legislative shortcomings can be pinned on the other party or even intractable members of one’s own party. None of us are above politics, nor did the Founders expect us to be. But, obviously, we should be aspiring to something greater than this.

Too often in recent years, members of Congress have locked themselves into a slate of inflexible positions, many of which have no hope of being implemented in a divided government. Some of these positions have been further calcified by pledges signed for political purposes. Too often we have failed to listen to one another and question whether the orthodox views being promulgated by our parties make strategic sense for America’s future. The result has been intractably negative public perceptions of Congress. A Rasmussen Reports poll conducted this month found that only 10 percent of likely voters gave Congress a rating of “excellent” or “good”.

For me, the irony is that having seen several generations of lawmakers pass through this body, I can attest that the vast majority are hardworking, genuinely interested in public service, and eager to contribute to the welfare of our country. Often, the public does not believe that. It is easier to assume that Congressional failings arise from the incompetence or even the malfeasance of individual legislators. Or perhaps, as some believe, Washington, D.C. itself is corrupting. It is far more disconcerting to think that our democracy’s shortcomings are complex and defy simple solutions.

The Founders were realists who understood the power of factionalism, parochialism, and personal ambition. They understood that good intentions would not always prevail. Accordingly, they designed a system to check abuse and prevent power from accumulating in a few hands. But they knew that the efficient operation of such a Republic would require a great deal of cooperation. They knew that it would require most elected officials to have a dedication to governance, and they trusted that leaders would arise in every era to make their vision work.

The Senate has a unique role to play in good governance. We have attributes not possessed by the Executive Branch, including staying power. Administrations turn over every four or eight years. But Senators can have careers spanning decades that allow them to apply expertise and political understanding to problems over many years, even as administrations come and go. We also can
confer a bipartisan framework on a policy. Even a small bipartisan group of Senators cooperating on a
difficult problem is a powerful signal of the possibility for a unifying solution.

My hope is that Senators will devote much more of their energies to governance. In a perfect world,
we would not only govern, we would execute a coherent strategy. That is a very high bar for any
legislative body to clear. But we must aspire to it in cooperation with the President because we are
facing fundamental changes in the world order that will deeply affect America’s security and standard
of living.

The list of such changes is long, but it starts in Asia with the rise of China and India as economic,
political, and military powers. The Obama Administration has conspicuously announced a “pivot” to
Asia. At the center of this pivot is China, which exists as both an adversary to certain U.S. interests,
and a fellow traveler sharing mutual goals and vulnerabilities on others. The ongoing challenge will be
for the United States to discern, sometimes issue by issue, whether China is an adversary or a partner.
This calibration will impact America’s relations with the rest of Asia and may ultimately determine
prospects for war or peace.

While visiting Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines in October, I was reminded of the economic
vitality of Southeast Asia and the fact that the ten countries comprising ASEAN represent the fourth
largest export market of the United States. These countries are center stage to the circumstances with
China. We must stand firm with our friends throughout Asia and actively pursue prospects for free
trade with open sea lanes and other policies that will strengthen America’s economic growth.

More broadly, we face the specter of global resource constraints, especially deficiencies of energy and
food that could stimulate conflict and deepen poverty. We have made startling gains in domestic
energy production, but we remain highly vulnerable to our dependency on oil. Perhaps equally
important, even if we are able to produce more energy at home, we cannot insulate ourselves from
energy-driven shocks to the global economy. In other words, we have to cooperate with other nations
in improving the global system of manufacturing and moving energy supplies. Currently, a key to this
is helping to ensure the completion of the southern energy corridor serving Central and Southeastern
Europe and unleashing our own liquified natural gas exports to address the energy vulnerabilities of
our closest allies.

The potential global crisis over food production is less well understood. Whereas research is opening
many new frontiers in the energy sphere, the productivity of global agriculture will not keep up with
projected food demand unless many countries change their policies. This starts with a much wider
embrace of agriculture technology, including genetically modified techniques. The risks of climate
change intensify this imperative.

Even as we deal with potential resource constraints, our country remains vulnerable to terrorism and
asymmetric warfare. Access to the internet and social media has deeply altered international politics,
in most cases for the better. But it also has contributed to instability through sudden upheavals like
the Arab Spring; it has allowed destructive terrorist movements like al Qaida to franchise themselves; and it has intensified risks of cyber-attacks, espionage, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The potential catastrophe remains of a major terrorist attack on American soil employing weapons of mass destruction. If that happens, in addition to the lives lost, our expectations for economic growth and budget balancing could be set back by a decade or more. Having devoted considerable time to this problem, my experience is that there are no silver bullets. Protecting the United States from weapons of mass destruction is a painstaking process that every day must employ our best technological, diplomatic, and military tools.

Amidst all these security risks, we must maintain the competitiveness of the United States in the international economy. We should see education, energy efficiency, access to global markets, the attraction of immigrant entrepreneurs, and other factors as national security issues. My own view is that the fundamentals of American society still offer us the best hand to play in global competitiveness. No other country can match the quality and variety of our post-secondary education. We have the broadest scientific and technological base and the most advanced agricultural system. Our population is younger and more mobile than most other industrialized nations. We still can flourish in this global marketplace if we nurture the competitive genius of the American people that has allowed us time and again to reinvent our economy.

But we must deal with failures of governance that have delayed resolutions to obvious problems. No rational strategy for our long term growth and security, for example, should fail to restrain current entitlement spending. And no attempt to gain the maximum strategic advantage from our human resource potential should fail to enact comprehensive immigration reform that resolves the status of undocumented immigrants and encourages the most talented immigrants to contribute to America’s future.

Faced with immense responsibilities, there is a need to elevate our Senate debate. It is vital that the President and Congress establish a closer working relationship, especially on national security. This is not just a matter of process. It is necessary to undergird national unity in the event of severe crises, such as war with Iran or another catastrophic terrorist attack.

This cooperation depends both on Congressional leaders who are willing to set aside partisan advantage and on Administration officials who understand that the benefits of having the support of Congress is worth the effort it takes to secure it. Currently, the national security dialogue between the President and Congress is one of the least constructive that I have ever witnessed. There is little foundation for resolving national security disputes or even the expectation that this can occur. Before the next 9-11, the President must be willing to call Republicans to the Oval office to establish the basis for a working partnership in foreign policy. And Republicans must be willing to suspend reflexive opposition that serves no purpose but to limit their own role in strategic questions and render cooperation impossible. All parties should recognize the need for unity in the coming year when events in Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, North Korea and other locations may test American national security
in extreme ways.

I commend each of you, my Senate colleagues, for the commitment that led you to stand for election to the United States Senate. Running for office is a difficult endeavor that is usually accompanied by great personal risk and cost. Each one of you is capable of being a positive force for changing the tone of debate in our country. Each one of you has a responsibility not only to act with integrity and represent your constituents, but also to make the informed and imaginative choices on which good governance for our country depends.

I am optimistic about our country’s future. I believe that both internal divisions and external threats can be overcome. The United States will continue to serve as the inspiration for peoples seeking peace, freedom, and economic prosperity. And the United States Senate should and will be at the forefront of this advancement. I thank the chair.