Denison University Lugar Symposium
Keynote Address

By Senator Richard G. Lugar (Ret.)
Denison University
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I am honored to welcome all of you to the inaugural Lugar Symposium. I am excited to be a part of this program that has been constructed under the visionary direction of Dr. Andrew Katz who leads the Lugar Program in Politics and Public Service. I am indebted to President Adam Weinberg for his steady encouragement of my association with Denison, his energetic leadership of the University, and his personal friendship. It is also a special pleasure to be reunited with my colleague Senator Bob Graham. We served 18 years together in the U.S. Senate, during which time I developed a deep respect for his thoughtful approach to legislating and his devotion to our nation’s security and prosperity.

I want to begin by sharing something that I did this year that very few public figures have done recently -- I admitted to being a member of the Republican Establishment.

Renee Montagne of National Public Radio began an interview earlier this year by suggesting that I might fit the description of a member of the Republican Establishment and asked me if I would agree. I had a nice laugh, but confessed that I would be a good suspect.

Anything associated with the establishment of the right or the left, of course, is not in favor in the current American political climate. Though few can define exactly what is meant by “the establishment” it has become a codeword in the presidential election for real and imagined failures in Washington D.C. This isn’t anything especially new. Presidential primary elections almost always feature candidates who bill themselves as outsiders striving to change the process. This appeal to voters from outside the system is a natural and useful part of our democracy that stretches back at least as far as Andrew Jackson.

Yet there are elements to the candidacies of self-described outsiders in this election that are breaking the mold. Most of the notable anti-Washington candidates of the past four decades were experienced governors who vowed to bring to the Federal Government the successful practices and programs that they had honed in their states. Among these were the winning candidacies of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. All communicated detailed programs and legislative visions during their campaigns. In contrast, the most successful outsiders of this cycle – Donald Trump and Ted Cruz – have no experience as a governor or mayor. Ted Cruz occupies a Senate seat, but his
The Lugar Center, 1455 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 1125, Washington, D.C. 20004   T: 202.816.3333
www.thelugarcenter.org

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tenure has been short and he has devoted his time to institutional opposition rather than legislating.

Moreover, in this election too often an anti-establishment posture has been used as an excuse for irresponsible behavior and statements. This draws attention and distinguishes a candidate from the crowd, but ultimately it hurts the reputation of the United States and our own political process.

Frequently, candidates have excused their incivility by saying that they are giving voice to an angry majority. Elections create storylines and myths, in part because reporters and commentators need points of reference. This year, one of the dominant storylines has been the rise of the angry voter. Implicit in this storyline is that voter anger is justified and will only be relieved by overturning the system.

I have no doubts that some voters are motivated by their anger and some of this is justified by failures in our political culture. But the results of this anger are not always validating. Anger disconnected from a realistic reform agenda and lacking in respect for pluralistic views is not a political virtue. It is possible for anger to be real and heartfelt, but simultaneously misguided and destructive. We know from numerous lessons of history that popular anger can be manipulated in ways that lead to intolerance, civil unrest, violence, and self-destructive national policies.

The current presidential candidates are not the first to stoke this anger. In a terrific piece in the New York Times last weekend, Arthur Brooks of the American Enterprise Institute, distinguished between the ideal of a “competition of ideas” and the reality of our current political commentary, which “is more contemnptuous than angry, overflowing with sneering, mockery and disgust.”

But even though the candidates have not originated this divide, their behavior has excused the growing disrespect Americans have for fellow citizens with different political views. A study published last year in the American Journal of Political Science by Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood found that discrimination against opposing partisans frequently exceeds discrimination based on race. Moreover, the authors underscored: “Unlike race, gender, and other social divides where group-related attitudes and behaviors are constrained by social norms, there are no corresponding pressures to temper disapproval of political opponents. If anything the rhetoric and actions of political leaders demonstrate that hostility directed at the opposition is acceptable, even appropriate.”

The American political system clearly is failing in some dramatic ways. In my view the principal cause of this failure is the widening partisan gulf, which many of our presenters tomorrow have attempted to study and quantify. And yet the answer of many voters to these deficiencies has been to support candidates who exemplify partisanship, confrontation, and political coarseness. We are at risk of attempting to solve our problems by doubling down on their main cause.

In the process, this election cycle has devalued many traditional political virtues that most American voters have embraced for decades, if not centuries. At the risk of damning these traits, for the moment let’s call them “establishment virtues.” I would focus on four of them: civility, experience, studiousness, and compromise. Most, if not all, of us would say that these four traits are desirable in
our political system and in individual candidates, and indeed, in our interpersonal relationships. All of us prefer people in our lives who treat others well. We hire people ranging from doctors to plumbers to professional athletes based on their experience and qualifications for the job. We celebrate studiousness in both youth and adults so that we can advance our understanding of the world. And we embrace the need for compromise in resolving personal and business disputes.

Yet in this election cycle we have seen these virtues not just deemphasized, but scorned. Civility is equated with weakness, experience with corruption, studiousness with pedantry, and compromise with a lack of principles. Instead, candidates have run on vacuous and sometimes cartoonish proposals that lack any political realism or programmatic details. Carpet bombing ISIS, deporting 11 million undocumented immigrants, and having Mexico pay to build a wall blocking the entire length of our southern border may be powerful cathartic symbols, but such proposals cheapen political debate and alarm friends and allies overseas. Even Bernie Sanders’ call for free tuition at all public colleges funded by taxes on Wall Street is little more than an aspirational talking point that glosses over the consequences such a plan would have for the viability of private colleges, the quality of university educations, the ability of universities to conduct research, the size of budget deficits, and numerous other factors.

This would be a fascinating political science and linguistic experiment if we weren’t engaged in the serious business of electing a President and Congress.

Clearly the four virtues I have cited, are not just establishment virtues. They are American virtues, because they are necessary for the orderly and productive operation of our Constitution and they have been tested by generations of Americans who found that good governance depends on them. A reading of Constitutional era literature underscores how much the Framers valued compromise among well-informed, experienced leaders who would work with each other in a civil framework of laws.

Like many of our panelists tomorrow, The Lugar Center has taken up the challenge in attempting to measure and define what is happening in American political life. Of primary interest is our Bipartisan Index, which was developed in cooperation with the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University. The Index measures the frequency with which members of Congress co-sponsor bills introduced by members of the other party and the frequency with which their own bills are co-sponsored by members of the other party.

We have released scores for the 113th Congress, the first session of the current Congress, and lifetime scores for the Senate that stretch back to 1993. Not only do we have scores for individual members, we have been able to track the performance of the entire House and Senate since 1993. Our data shows a steep decline in bipartisan behavior surrounding bill sponsorship and co-sponsorship beginning in 2001. The scores reached their nadir in the 112th Congress before a slight uptick in the 113th. But the last two full Congresses were by far the least bipartisan among the eleven that we have studied. We also found that our formula ranked the two surviving current members of Congress in the Presidential race, Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders, as the two least bipartisan Senators in 2015.
Consistent with this, our historical Senate scores found that a generational shift has taken place regarding the willingness of new Senators at the progressive and conservative ends of their parties to engage in bipartisanship. For example, we found that Republicans who began their Senate career since 2005 occupied nine of the bottom twelve spots among the 227 Senators serving since 1993. All nine of these contemporary Republicans have significantly lower lifetime bipartisan scores than Senator Jesse Helms, who was considered to be the most conservative Republican of the 1980s and 1990s.

Similarly on the Democrat side, we found current liberal Senators with far lower scores than liberal icons of the recent past like Ted Kennedy, Paul Wellstone, Daniel Inouye, John Kerry, and Tom Harkin. I would also note that Senator Bob Graham had an excellent lifetime score, ranking 35th out of the 227 Senators in the study.

I take the long view that the current partisan era – like past partisan eras – does not have to last forever. The pendulum can swing back with surprising speed. My hope is that it will not take a grave crisis that threatens the safety and prosperity of the nation to rekindle a broader appreciation of civility, experience, studiousness, and compromise in our political leaders.

I would conclude with a simple declaration that represents my own vision of what candidates should communicate when running for high office. I am grateful that Senator Graham is here today, because I know that he brought these sentiments to his own long service to our nation:

I affirm that members of the other party love their country and are people of good will, and I will avoid portraying them as unpatriotic or disloyal.

I believe that members of the opposing party can contribute to good policy. I will explore opportunities to work with them and will attempt to include them in early deliberations on my initiatives. I recognize that bipartisan support from elected officials broadens public acceptance of new laws and policies and improves the chances that they will be successfully implemented.

Even as I participate in partisan debates and work on behalf of my party, my first motivation will be a careful reflection on what is good for the country. I will avoid legislative and policy actions that have no purpose other than to score partisan political points.

Although I will advance arguments consistent with my own political philosophy, I will study issues in depth with an open mind. I will consider multiple points of view and avoid an exclusive reliance on my party’s positions and talking points.

I will maintain my civility, even when others around me do not. I will measure my words, to avoid inflammatory rhetoric that often is destructive to the political process and national unity.

Such a statement would not play well in our current political environment, but I believe most Americans recognize that we have to find ways to resolve our disputes and work together. I appreciate all that each of you are doing through your work, your study, and your personal interactions to
advance political understanding and bring greater unity to American society.