Senators call for “new tradition” of President-Congress summit before State of the Union

Former Sens. Lugar, Daschle, Levin and Lott say current SOTU is too partisan
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WASHINGTON, DC—Former Sen. Richard G. Lugar, president of The Lugar Center, and three other prominent former Senators today called for a “new tradition” of a President-Congress summit prior to each State of the Union address to help break the partisan gridlock in Washington.

In an op-ed in Politico, the four former lawmakers—Lugar (R, Ind.), former Senate Majority Leaders Tom Daschle (D, S.D.) and Trent Lott (R, Miss.), and former Sen. Carl Levin (D, Mich.)—say the current format of the President’s State of the Union address before a joint session of Congress has become too partisan and divisive. They call for an annual two-day Executive-Legislative Initiatives Summit (ELIS) shortly before the State of the Union, where the President and Congressional leaders from both parties would negotiate face-to-face on specific legislative frameworks for the coming year.

Such a summit, perhaps at Camp David, “would help return 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,” the op-ed says.

The four former Senators, who among them served more than 125 years in Congress, say an ELIS is necessary because currently “face-to-face presidential interaction with lawmakers, especially with 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.”

Under the proposal, the ELIS results would be announced at a joint press conference, and would be a feature of the President’s State of the Union address a few days later. This, they say, would soften the partisan tone of the widely-viewed speech, which in its current format “widens the gap between the two branches and highlights the partisanship that has riven the government and rendered it
They say that with government dysfunction likely to be an issue in the fall presidential campaigns, the candidates from both political parties will be encouraged to promise to hold such a summit. This, the op-ed says, “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.”

All four former Senators have been working to make Washington function better. Lugar, who served for 36 years and was chairman of Agriculture and Foreign Relations committees, has made enhancing bipartisan governance a keystone of The Lugar Center. Levin, who also served 36 years and was chairman of the Armed Services committee, is chairman of the Levin Center at Wayne State law school in Detroit, which seeks to improve public policy through legislative oversight.

Daschle and Lott held leadership positions in the House before moving to the Senate, where they each served as Majority and Minority Leader for their party. Both are affiliated with the Bipartisan Policy Center and they have just written a book, "Crisis Point: Why We Must - and How We Can - Overcome Our Broken Politics in Washington and Across America."