SALON

Former congressman Tom Allen: GOP speaks a different language

You try serving with these Republicans: I spent 12 years in Congress and lost hope that we could talk to each other

By: Tom Allen – February 9, 2013

Twelve years in Congress. Daily conversations with Republican members of Congress. Bipartisan trips abroad with time to talk at length. Work on legislation of mutual interest with members across the aisle that I respected and admired. But those dozen years left me alarmed and frustrated by the inability of Republicans and Democrats to comprehend each other well enough to work together on our country's major challenges. We share the same titles and vote on the same legislation, but we see the world through dramatically different lenses.

It's those lenses that interest me most. To be sure, multiple other factors feed polarization and congressional gridlock. Cable TV 24-7 news has broadened coverage, but the scramble for ratings favors short segments with guests representing both ends of the political spectrum, not the middle. These days, political campaigns never end; there is little breathing space for governing without looking toward the next election. Vast sums of money and highly organized groups create pressure on elected officials not to stray from the party line. House and Senate rules can be used for partisan purposes. Redistricting every decade creates chances for parties to draw lines that favor them for years. But in my experience, our greatest challenge is first to understand and then to bridge the gap between the dominant but incompatible worldviews of the two parties.

Nothing I had learned about politics before my election prepared me for the intense polarization of contemporary congressional politics. When I first went to Washington to work for Sen. Ed Muskie in 1970, Republicans and Democrats debated public issues vigorously, but there was more genuine give-and-take and mutual respect, and the players did not treat politics as a blood sport. Six years on the Portland City Council taught me that most local issues could be resolved without petty or partisan combat.

Dwight Eisenhower accepted the major legislation of the New Deal. John Kennedy started the legislative push for a substantial tax cut. Lyndon Johnson came from a Senate known for working across the aisle. Richard Nixon signed clean water and clean air legislation. Ronald Reagan raised taxes many times to deal with mounting deficits created by his 1981 tax cut; George H. W. Bush did the same, to resounding criticism from the Right. Bill Clinton antagonized elements of his Democratic base by supporting a balanced federal budget, free trade and welfare reform.

George W. Bush was different. His election in 2000 was, in hindsight, stage two of the Newt Gingrich revolution. Senator Lincoln Chafee (R.-R.I.) recalled, shortly after Bush's election, that Dick Cheney quickly laid out to a small group of moderate Senate

Republicans, “a shockingly divisive political agenda for the new Bush administration, glossing over nearly every pledge the Republican ticket had made to the American voter.” In his first term, President Bush abandoned international treaties, invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, and drove through two massive tax cuts that primarily benefitted wealthy Americans.

Bush’s 2004 reelection campaign employed “microtargeting” as a part of their successful strategy of mobilizing the Republican base instead of reaching out to the middle. That political strategy was consistent with the Bush administration’s style of governing and the way Gingrich and Tom DeLay controlled Congress: Drive through the most right-wing policy that the Republican caucus could support; only move legislation that has the support of a substantial majority of the majority party; take no prisoners.

As I listened over the years to baffling arguments in committee, on the House floor or in private conversations, I lost hope in our capacity for bipartisan agreement on our major public policy challenges. On budgets, taxes, health care and climate change, the evidence that mattered to us made no difference to our Republican colleagues. What Democrats took as well-established fact, Republicans understood as easily dismissed opinions. When we wondered, “Do these guys believe what they say?” our answer was usually no. But if the Republicans didn’t believe the things they were saying, they were extraordinarily gifted performers on the House floor.

Our debates over particular budget and tax policies, health care, global warming or Iraq were not driven by the details of the legislation. Differences over health care reform became more about the role of government than the critical health care trifecta of cost, coverage and quality. To some, President Bush’s decision to invade Iraq seemed grounded in family history — the failure of his father to “take out” Saddam Hussein. In addition, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stripped the military leadership of much of its desired invasion force and pushed for a rapid turnover of responsibility to Iraqis because he didn’t want to create a “culture of dependency” among that population.

Taxes evoke intense emotions unrelated to their economic consequences. The Republican tax cuts were less connected to an established theory of economic growth than to convictions that tax cuts “pay for themselves” and the government is “too big.” Moreover, the proponents believed that individuals know best how to spend “their own money” — even though individuals don’t generally buy fighter jets or bridges, or spend their money on pensions or health care for people they don’t know.

On economic issues, most Democrats accept mainstream Keynesian analysis about the federal government’s capacity to reduce the adverse effects of recessions by stimulating aggregate demand (private and public) through a combination of spending increases and tax cuts. Republicans, on the other hand, are drifting with no coherent economic theory. The scientific consensus on global warming has been denied by the Right primarily because it is “an inconvenient truth” that would require Republicans to rethink the role and responsibility of the federal government.

Again, it’s not the difference of opinions across party lines that matters but the inability to understand and value what the other side is saying. The ideological gridlock that plagues our government and politics now has multiple sources and is beyond the scope of this book. However, I believe that such an inquiry should start with the changes in the nature and reliability of work, particularly for American men, over the past four decades. Those changes are undermining the ability of individuals to control their own destiny.

Yet economic dislocation and fear of change seem to be reinforcing attachment to the core American value of individualism and breeding hostility to collective action.

Whatever the socio-economic factors that feed our discontent, our system of government was designed by James Madison and the founders to foster sustained deliberation by representatives of the people who would be committed to acting in the "permanent and aggregate interests of the community." Too often, the Congress in which I served responded to the short-term interests of particular industries and groups. The Senate, once recognized as the "world's greatest deliberative body," hardly warrants that title today.

In short, although other explanations for our dysfunctional polarization abound, ideas do matter, especially when bundled into disparate worldviews. They have a power of their own that profoundly affects what politicians and the public say and how we act. Despite much of the press commentary, heated political rhetoric on major issues isn't all for show or about pandering to voters, gaining or retaining political power, or soliciting campaign contributions. Members of Congress are, in general, not that detached or disinterested in policy issues. They care, most of them passionately, about the outcome of a debate, although less about the details than the direction the legislation represents.

Republican and Democratic weekly caucus meetings are not open to the press or public. But the arguments about legislation and strategy inside those rooms are typically passionate, vehement debates often as contentious as what happens on the House floor. Democrats argued forcefully to persuade their colleagues to support particular policies; I know the debates were just as intense in the Republican conference.

All too often, the default analysis of a politician's position, argument or action is self-serving. If he takes a position for or against a climate change cap-and-trade approach, it is to protect his political career back home. If she attacks an opponent over policy or blocks a bill from coming to the Senate floor, it is to gain some personal advantage. The simplest analysis of an action is to attack the actor's motives. These default analyses are not always wrong, but they are too simple to be always right. Personal political motivation is always an appropriate area of inquiry, but it is not the only one.

Democrats see Republicans as inattentive to evidence and expertise, unconcerned about Americans struggling to get by and reflexively opposed to government action to deal with our collective challenges. On the other hand, Republicans see Democrats as the party of a government that routinely infringes on personal freedom, as creators of a "culture of dependency" among people who should stand on their own and as promoters of change from traditional values that will leave us weaker than before.

These different perspectives drive congressional debates far more than the immediate subject before the House on any given day. Above all, the abiding clash between the view of government as a vehicle for the common good and the view of government as an obstacle to progress and personal freedom sits close to the center of our ideological gridlock. That's why I believe that Congress is best characterized as a forum for interest-group politics overlaid by worldview politics, and it's the latter struggle that contributes more to the dysfunctional nature of the institution.

In Budget Committee hearings and on the House floor, Republicans constantly disparaged "government" and "spending" without reference to particular agencies or programs. Their arguments, vague to us and principled to them, were faith-based —

impossible to prove or disprove with data. Why do Democratic members of Congress not accept Republican rhetoric of hostility to government and taxes as a legitimate point of view? Because Democrats believe that government is a vehicle for advancing the common good. Why do Republicans seem so contemptuous about Democratic objections to “tax cuts for the rich?” Because they believe that more money for private sector “job creators” means more jobs for everyone.

To each side, the positions of the other make no sense and therefore cannot be honestly held: “They” are lying; “they” will say anything to gain or hold political power; “they” are undermining America’s strength and prosperity.

In short, what primarily drives us apart as politicians and Americans is not petty or even personal; the positions of the other side appear so extreme, so incomprehensible that they must be resisted. Both sides are engaged in a battle over what it means to be an American and what the lives of our children and grandchildren will be like far into the future. Republicans and Democrats today have incompatible worldviews about how we should relate to other human beings, what individuals can be expected to do alone and what we should do together.

The principal reason for our polarization is the increasing incompatibility of Democratic and Republican ideas about individualism and community. The inability to compromise is primarily driven by the growing ideological rigidity of Republicans, which has become hostile to almost any form of government action across a wide range of disparate subjects.

The sources and power of that ideological rigidity are worth further examination. The set of ideas that led American conservatives into what is essentially a libertarian camp were not much in evidence for the 25 years after the end of World War II. Then they grew, promoted by thinkers like F. A. Hayek, Robert Nozick and, perhaps most significantly, Ayn Rand, whose two novels about heroic individuals captivated many Americans.

A second important factor was the organization and funding by wealthy American conservatives of right-wing think tanks, university chairs, and ultimately mass media, talk radio, and Fox News. The Fox News Channel has captured a significant portion of the American public with its emotional, opinionated commentary, but it is frequently judged the least accuate news channel with the least well-informed audience.

Another factor was the explicit strategy developed by Newt Gingrich when he entered the House of Representatives in 1978 — a strategy designed to win power for his party by portraying Congress as a corrupt institution not to be trusted by people outside of Washington. In his first term in Congress, Gingrich participated in a program of the American Enterprise Institute tracking members of Congress over several years. He had from the beginning a fully formed strategy for winning control of the House by intensifying “public hatred of Congress” so the voters would throw out the majority Democrats. It was a remarkably successful political strategy but achieved at great social cost.

THE EVOLUTION OF REPUBLICAN DOGMA

By the time I was elected to Congress, the development and dissemination of theories of radical individualism had been accelerating for almost three decades. The turmoil of the late 1960s frightened many of America’s business leaders, who saw an emerging younger generation with little faith in the free enterprise system. In 1971 the U.S. Chamber of Commerce circulated a 5,000-word "manifesto" by Lewis Powell, "Confidential Memorandum: Attack on the American Free Enterprise System." Powell, who later served on the Supreme Court from 1972 to 1987, called for "careful long-range planning … [and] a scale of financing available only through joint effort."

In the 1970s, right-wing philanthropists and business leaders created or expanded the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute and the Business Round Table. Expansion into journals, talk radio and cable television followed to drive the message that government was always the problem and free markets the solution. Over the next three decades, public confidence in government collapsed. The repeal of the "fairness doctrine" in 1986 opened the door to the vociferous media partisanship exemplified by Fox News and much of talk radio.

The election of George W. Bush in 2000 gave the right wing of the Republican Party unprecedented access to the White House. Grover Norquist, as head of Americans for Tax Reform, the leading anti-tax group in Washington, is the author of the "Taxpayer Protection Pledge," which Republicans sign to promise never to raise taxes in any circumstances. He organizes weekly strategy sessions of Republican activist groups every Wednesday morning, which have been called the "Grand Central Station of the conservative movement." The Wednesday meetings are attended by the National Rifle Association, the National Federation of Independent Business, and a variety of other right-wing groups, each with its own agenda. The rules are that participants have to stick to the group consensus even when a particular issue has no impact on them. I remember getting faxes from business organizations on issues that had no observable connection to that group's agenda.

With George W. Bush in the White House and Karl Rove attending the Wednesday strategy sessions, Norquist became an insider, not part of the GOP fringe. Rove and Norquist were in frequent, even daily, contact. Privatizing government functions, restraining government oversight of markets and cutting taxes were the core principles — apparently regardless of evidence of the short- or long-term consequences.

For several decades federal spending has been mostly between 18 percent and 20 percent of GDP. Yet in November 2011 Grover Norquist told Steve Kroft of the CBS program "60 Minutes" that America had functioned "for a long time and quite well" with the federal government funded at 8 percent of GDP. Kroft pointed out that the 8 percent funding was early in the 20th century before Social Security and Medicare; he asked Norquist if he believed the government has "any obligation to the poor or the elderly or the unemployed." Norquist replied, "It should stop stepping on them, kicking them and making their lives more difficult." In other words, if you are old, poor, or unemployed, you're on your own.

Since Norquist had secured pledges from all but six Republican House members, their refusal in 2011 to agree to repeal some of the Bush tax cuts was a foregone conclusion. Why did Republican candidates and congressmen put themselves in thrall to a libertarian with such extreme views? I suspect because otherwise they would be likely to lose a primary election. How can Congress have a rational debate on tax reform if one side will never consider tax increases regardless of national need or circumstances? How can the country adapt to a changing economy or to changing demographics like the aging of the Boomer generation with its attendant increase in the cost of Medicare and Social Security?

DUELING WORLDVIEWS: INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMUNITY

The fabric of our government was woven with certain threads in mind. James Madison warned that the new government could not merely be a forum for regulated competition among private interests: “The public good, the real welfare of the great body of the people, is the supreme object to be pursued; and … no form of government whatever has any other value than as it may be fitted for the attainment of this object.” The Founders also understood that self-interest was built into human beings and needed to be checked and balanced by the structure and processes of government.

Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican president, used a simple principle to define the appropriate scope of government, which reflected his understanding of the common good. He wrote in 1854, “The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done but cannot do at all, or cannot so well do, for themselves, in their separate and individual capacities.” President Richard Nixon could be described as operating on that principle when he approved legislation creating the Environmental Protection Agency and clean water and clean air programs.

But it is not always evident what we should be expected to do on our own and what we can accomplish better together. And that is the core of Republican and Democratic differences about the role of government.

For as long as I was in Congress, rank-and-file Democrats complained about the failure of our leaders to get our message right. But enormous amounts of time, energy, talent and resources were spent on improving our communication with the public. Republicans did the same. Their advantage was that by portraying themselves as the party of individual responsibility, they were tapping into the most powerful strain of American culture. As a progressive party determined to make government work well, Democrats had to construct arguments in America’s weaker second language of shared responsibility for each other.

Any anti-government party also has a structural advantage, because it is so much easier to block new legislation or regulation than it is to work through the extensive process of consultation and collaboration to put them in place. Democrats have to build broad-based communities before they can enact an agenda of change. Moreover, compared to parliamentary systems of government, our checked-and-balanced Senate, House and presidency create an advantage for inaction. As Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein have so carefully documented, our constitutional structure does not work well with ideologically polarized parties.

The Democratic Party today has a broader constituency than the Republican Party, demographically and ideologically. Dick Gephardt used to say with pride that House Democrats were the only caucus of the two legislative bodies that “looked like America.” We had about three-fourths of the women in the House, almost all of the Hispanics and all of the African Americans during most of my tenure. The open struggles between liberal and moderate to conservative Democrats in the House and Senate reflect the diversity of the party. The “moderate” Republicans in the House and Senate are now a very small minority with limited influence.

If all this is true, why were Republicans in control of Congress and the White House for so long, why did they wield such influence in the minority and why have they returned to the majority in the House? Democratic members of Congress are often puzzled by the political power of Republicans, who to them seem comparatively disengaged in public issues and overly attentive to the interests of the prosperous and powerful. I believe that the political strength of the Republican Party is the public's perception that they are the more articulate champions of the "first language" of American individualism that is central to the way we define ourselves.

As Americans, we all believe in working hard, pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps and making our own way in the world. But if we alone are responsible for our own success, we alone are responsible for our failures.

The logical corollary is that those who fail in work or some other aspect of life have only themselves to blame. They are not our responsibility. That's the dark side of this profoundly American idea; it helps rationalize public policies that leave people on their own — without health care, an adequate education or job opportunities.

The idea (in its purest form) that we control our economic destiny seems archaic in a globalizing world in which jobs can be moved overnight not to the next town, but halfway across the planet. That idea can still be a powerful motivator for hard work and individual achievement. But its impact on American society depends on whether it is balanced with broader values about our mutual responsibility for others.

The resurgence of Republicans in the 2010 congressional elections, despite Republican responsibility for the continuing economic turmoil that had led to their epic losses in 2008, demonstrates a tragic irony: Individualism is a powerful political message, but dressed in libertarian clothing, it is a weak foundation for coping constructively with the intertwined, complicated challenges of the 21st century.

In American culture and politics, the defining tension between individualism and community need not be as divisive as it has become. As individuals, most of us value both self-reliance and support given to or received from others. Often, we promote the values of self-reliance even as we act, privately or publically, to help those who are less fortunate or to find other ways to strengthen our communities.

DIVERGENT MORAL MATRICES

Those worldviews have a moral component. In his recent book "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion," the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt analyzes the different "moral matrices" of American liberals, social conservatives and libertarians. Haidt's research into group psychology led him to a "moral foundations" theory that highlights the variation in moral views by culture and economic class. The six core values (and their opposites) are care (harm), liberty (oppression), fairness (cheating), loyalty (betrayal), authority (subversion) and sanctity (degradation). American liberals value care, liberty and fairness, in that order, but they lack strong attachment to the values of loyalty, authority and sanctity. As an example, their comparative lack of attachment to sacred symbols is one reason why the Constitution and the American flag have more *symbolic* significance for conservatives than liberals.

Social conservatives (for Haidt, they are not identical to the Christian Right) in America respond to all six core values more or less equally. They are primarily attracted to the idea of preserving the institutions and traditions that sustain a moral community, whereas liberals are more open to change. Because liberals value care and compassion for the oppressed more than conservatives do, they are likely to conclude — incorrectly —

that conservatives do not care at all about other people. American libertarians, like liberals, score very low on valuing loyalty, authority and sanctity, but they also rank lower than conservatives on care for others. Personal liberty and faith in free markets are by far their dominant values.

Despite the attention of the media for several decades to the Christian Right or “social conservatives,” I am convinced that the Republican Party, both in Congress and among the population, has been evolving toward more rigid libertarianism — in the sense that personal liberty and free markets have become the dominant component of their political value system. Their intensifying hostility toward government action has pushed them to deny clear and compelling evidence rather than concede a role for government. In short, as Haidt observes, human beings are “deeply intuitive creatures whose gut feelings drive our strategic reasoning,” which makes it “difficult — but not impossible — to connect with those who live in other [moral] matrices.”

The competing worldviews in American politics, whatever mix of personality type, attitude, ideology or moral framework they may be, are shared by the voters and their representatives. Congress is more polarized than the public, but people are increasingly sorting themselves into the party that fits their worldview and less to the party that seeks to protect their economic interests.

Differences between worldviews, being much more deeply rooted, are more difficult to compromise than differences in economic interests. In fact, the notion of compromise seems hard to apply to competing worldviews. At least two factors are reinforcing the sorting of the electorate into competing camps. The first is media coverage of politics; the second is the increasing sophistication of candidates, pollsters and media consultants in appealing to the emotions and attitudes of the public.

We will never return to the days when the evening news was considered a loss leader and a public contribution by the national networks. Today, though, 24-7 cable news coverage produces intense competition for audiences and ratings. Conflict and controversy sells. In general, short segments hold people better than longer interviews. Politicians and other guests learn that sound bites and a few short sentences fit the medium; nothing complicated can be covered in a matter of a couple of minutes. All of these factors mean that opinion is stronger than evidence, emotion more effective than reasoning, and clarity more easily absorbed than complexity. The result, on the whole, reinforces the differences between the parties and obscures opportunities for constructive dialogue.

After more than a decade with effective pollsters and media consultants, I am amazed by the sophistication of political advertising now produced for candidates and outside interest groups. Polling, focus groups, dial testing to get audience reactions to planned political ads and a host of other techniques are used to fine-tune candidate messages and advertisements for maximum impact. Thirty-second ads are designed more to move voters than to inform them — which cannot be done easily in that time frame. Effective ads tap into the public’s predispositions in order to move people toward or away from a particular candidate. Consequently, the most powerful vehicle for communicating with the public during elections, and often between elections by interest groups, is not capable of providing detailed information, and other sources like newspapers, journals and campaign materials typically reach fewer people.

The rise of a powerful partisan media is both responding to and accentuating the polarization of the American electorate. In “Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the

Conservative Media Establishment," the authors, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella, rely on extensive media research to argue that "Rush Limbaugh, Fox News and the opinion pages of the Wall Street Journal constitute a conservative media establishment" that has taken on what used to be political party functions, including vetting Republican candidates for president. These three media outlets adopt two consistent strategic frames to advance the conservative cause: First, the mainstream media is "biased" in favor of liberal positions; second, they provide "balance" by promoting conservative positions.

The audience for Limbaugh, Fox News and the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal have the demographics of the core Republican base: middle-aged white men, churchgoers and Southerners." Because of the sources of its information, that audience is becoming even more hostile to Democratic positions and candidates.

For the country the more troublesome impact of the conservative echo chamber is on Republican officeholders and candidates. The three principal conservative media outlets just mentioned have combined to validate true Republican principles and candidates from those considered less pure or reliable. That media pressure to conform to party orthodoxy has been reinforced by millions of dollars raised by conservative groups to attack Republicans in primary elections. The Club for Growth, Americans for Tax Reform, Americans for Prosperity and emerging conservative Super PACs have driven congressional Republicans to the libertarian cause by openly opposing candidates and incumbents perceived to be insufficiently true to those groups' definition of party principles.

In short, partisan conservative media and its less influential imitators on the left are inviting their audiences to see the political world in black-and-white, conservative and liberal, good and bad, with the result that for the public and elected officials, it is harder to find common ground.