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For more than 200 years, a uniquely American story has unfolded here in the chamber of the United States Senate – a fascinating, inspiring, and often tumultuous tale of conflict and compromise, reflecting the awesome potential of our still young democracy—and its occasional moments of agonizing frustration.

For much of my life, this story has intersected with my own in ways that have been both thrilling and humbling.

As a 14-year-old boy, I sat in the family gallery of this chamber, watching as my father took the oath of office as a new Senator.

A few years later, in 1962, I sat where these young men and women sit today, serving as a Senate page. John F. Kennedy was our president and Lyndon Johnson presided over this body.

Eighteen years later, in the autumn of 1980, the people of Connecticut gave me the honor of a lifetime when they asked me to give voice to their views, electing me to serve as their United States Senator.

For the past thirty years I have worked hard to sustain their trust. I am proud of the work I have done, but it is time for my story and that of this institution, which I cherish so much, to diverge.

Thus, Mr. President, I rise to give some valedictory remarks as my service as a United States Senator from Connecticut comes to a close.

Now, it is common for retiring Senators to say the following; “I’ll miss the people – but not the work.”

Mr. President, you won’t hear that from me. Most assuredly, I will miss the people of the Senate. But I will miss the work, as well.

Over the years, I have both witnessed and participated in some great debates—moments when statesmen of both parties, gathered together in this hall to weigh the great questions of our time.

And while I wish there had been more of those moments, I will always remember the Senate’s debates on issues like Central America and Iraq, campaign finance reform and securities litigation, health care and financial reform.

And when I am home in Connecticut, I see the results of the work we did every day.

I see workers coming off their shifts at Pratt & Whitney, Electric Boat, and Sikorsky, the lifeblood of a defense manufacturing sector so critical to our national security, and to the economic well being of my state.

I see communities preparing for high-speed rail and breaking ground on new community health centers,

I see the grants we fought for helping cities and towns to build sustainable communities and promote economic development.

When I am home, I meet parents who, because of the Family and Medical Leave Act, don't have to choose between keeping their jobs and taking care of sick children.

I visit with elderly folks who will no longer have to choose between paying for their prescription drugs and paying for their heat.

I hear from consumers who have been victimized by unfair practices on the part of credit card companies—and who will no longer be subject to those abuses.

And I meet young children who, through Early Head Start or access to afterschool programs, have blossomed academically in spite of difficult economic circumstances.

As proud as I am of the work that has made these stories possible over the last three decades, I am keenly aware that I did not do any of it alone.

Until this last Congress, with rare exceptions, every major piece of legislation I authored that became law, including the ones just mentioned, had a Republican cosponsor as well as support from my Democratic caucus.

So, to my Democratic and Republican Senate colleagues who joined me in all these efforts, I say thank you.

I also want to thank the unsung heroes of this institution: the Senate staff and my personal staff.

It would be a grievous understatement to say simply that they make the trains run on time. Without them, the trains would never make it out of the station.

The floor staff, the cloakroom professionals, and the hundreds of unknown and unseen people who show up every day to make this critical institution of our democracy function—without them, no Senator could fulfill his or her obligation to the American people.

Many of my personal staff and Committee staff are present in the Senate gallery today. And neither I, nor the millions of Americans whose lives you have enriched and whose burdens you have lightened, can ever thank you enough. I only hope that your time with me has been half as fulfilling as my time with you.

Of course, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the people of Connecticut whose confidence, patience, and spirit has given my life and its work meaning. As rich as our common language is, words cannot come close to capturing the depth of my affection for and appreciation of the people of Connecticut.

For almost four decades – three terms in the House of Representatives, and five terms in the Senate, you have entrusted me to labor on your behalf. I thank you.

And lastly, my family. My parents are long since deceased, but their guidance, inspiration and example have never departed.

For the past 30 years, I have sat at this same desk occupied by my father during the 12 years he served here.

His courage, character and conviction have been a constant reminder of what it means to be a United States Senator.

I thank my siblings and their children and other relatives for their enthusiastic support, particularly during the rough patches. From time to time we all need the safe harbor of family at the darker moments.

To Jackie, Grace and Christina, who have supported and inspired me every day: You mean more to me than I could ever say in these few short moments, so come January, I'm glad I'll have more time to say it more often.

And to Jackie in particular: You have been my anchor to windward in the rough and turbulent waters of public service. When it was the darkest – you were the brightest. So to you and my two young ladies: I love you more than life.

As this chapter in my career comes to a close, a new chapter in the Senate's history is beginning. When this body is gavelled to order in January, nearly half its members will be in their first term.

And even though I could spend hours fondly recalling a lifetime of yesterdays, this new Senate—and the nation—must confront an uncertain tomorrow.

So, rather than recite a long list of personal memories or revisit the video highlights of my Senate service, I'd like to take this brief time to offer a few thoughts to those who will write the Senate's next chapter.

I will begin by stating the sadly obvious: Our electoral system is a mess. Powerful financial interests, free to throw money about with little transparency, have corrupted the basic principles underlying our representative democracy. And, as a result, our political system at the federal level is completely dysfunctional.

Those who were elected to the Senate, just a few weeks ago, must already begin the unpleasant work of raising money for their reelections six years hence.

Newly-elected Senators will learn that their every legislative maneuver, their every public utterance, and even some of their private deliberations, will be fodder for a 24/7 political media industry that seems to favor speculation over analysis and conflict over consensus.

This explosion of new media brings with it, its own benefits and drawbacks—and it is occurring at the same time the presence of traditional media outlets are declining.

So while the corridors of Congress are crowded with handheld video and cell phone cameras, there is a declining role for newspaper, radio and network journalists reporting the routine deliberations taking place inside subcommittee hearings.

Case in point: Ten years ago, 11 or 12 reporters from Connecticut covered the delegation's legislative activities. Today there is only one doing the same work.

Meanwhile, intense partisan polarization has raised the stakes in every debate and on every vote, making it difficult to lose with grace, and nearly impossible to compromise without cost.

Americans' distrust of politicians provides compelling incentives for Senators to distrust each other, to disparage this very institution, and disengage from the policy making process.

These changes have already had their effect on the Senate. The purpose of insulating one half of the national legislature from volatile shifts in the public mood, has been degraded.

And while I strongly favor reforming our campaign finance system, revitalizing and rehabilitating our journalistic traditions, and restoring citizen faith in government and politics, I know that wishes won't make it so.

I have heard some people suggest that the Senate as we know it simply can't function in such a highly charged political environment, that we should change Senate rules to make it more efficient, more responsive to the public mood, more like the House of Representatives, where the majority can essentially bend the minority to its will.

I appreciate the frustration many have with the slow pace of the legislative progress. And I certainly share some of my colleagues' anger with the repetitive use and abuse of the filibuster. Thus, I can understand the temptation to change the rules that make the Senate so unique—and, simultaneously, so frustrating.

But whether such a temptation is motivated by a noble desire to speed up the legislative process, or by pure political expedience, I believe such changes would be unwise.

We one hundred Senators are but temporary stewards of a unique American institution, founded upon universal principles. The Senate was designed to be different, not simply for the sake of variety, but because the framers believed the Senate could and should be the venue in which statesmen would lift America up to meet its unique challenges.

As a Senator from the State of Connecticut—and the longest serving one in its history—I take special pride in the role two Connecticut Yankees played in the establishment of this body.

It was Roger Sherman and Oliver Ellsworth, delegates from Connecticut to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 who proposed the idea of a bicameral national legislature.

The Connecticut Compromise, as it came to be known, was designed to ensure that no matter which way the political winds blew, or how hard the gusts, there would be a place for every voice to be heard.

The history of this young democracy, the Framers decided, should not be written solely in the hand of the political majority. In a nation founded in revolution against tyrannical rule, which sought to crush dissent, there should be one institution that would always provide a space where dissent was valued and respected.

E Pluribus Unum – out of many, one. And though we would act as one, the Framers believed that our political debate should always reflect, that in our beliefs and in our aspirations, we are, in fact, many.

In short, our Founders were concerned not only with what was legislated, but, just as importantly, with how we legislated.

Now in my years here, I have learned that the appreciation of the Senate’s role in our national debate, is an acquired taste.

Therefore, to my fellow Senators who have never served a day in the minority, I urge you to pause in your enthusiasm to change Senate rules.

And to those in the minority who routinely abuse the rules of the Senate to delay or defeat almost any Senate decision, know that you will be equally responsible for undermining the unique value of the United States Senate, a value greater than that which you might assign to the political motivations driving your obstruction.

But in the end, this isn’t about the filibuster. What will determine whether this institution works or not, what has always determined whether we will fulfill the Framers’ highest hopes or justify the cynics’ worst fears, is not the Senate rules, the calendar, or the media.

It is whether each of the one hundred Senators can work together – living up to the incredible honor that comes with the title, and the awesome responsibility that comes with the office.

Politics today seemingly rewards only passion and independence, not deliberation and compromise as well.

It has become commonplace to hear candidates for the Senate campaign on how they are going to Washington to shake things up—all by themselves.

May I politely suggest that you are seeking election to the wrong office. The United States Senate does not work that way, nor can it, or should it.

Mayors, governors, and presidents can sometimes succeed by the sheer force of their will. But there has never been a Senator so persuasive, so charismatic, so clever, or so brilliant that they could make a significant difference, while refusing to work with other members of this body.

Simply put, Mr. President, Senators cannot ultimately be effective alone.

As I noted earlier, until last year's health care bill, there had not been a single piece of legislation I had ever passed without a Republican partner.

Of course, none of those victories came easily. The notion that partisan politics is a new phenomena, or that partisan politics serve no useful purpose, is just wrong.

From the moment of our founding, America has been engaged in an eternal and often pitched partisan debate. That's no weakness. In fact, it is at the core of our strength as a democracy, and success as a nation.

Political bipartisanship is a goal, not a process.

You don't begin the debate with bipartisanship – you arrive there. And you can do so only when determined partisans create consensus – and thus bipartisanship.

In the end, the difference between a partisan brawl and a passionate, but ultimately productive, debate rests on the personal relationships between Senators.

A legislative body that operates on unanimous consent, as does the Senate, cannot function unless the members trust each other. There is no hope of building that trust unless there is the will to treat each other with respect and civility, and to invest the time it requires to create that trust and strengthen those personal bonds.

No matter how obnoxious you find a colleague's rhetoric or how odious you find their beliefs, you will need them. And despite what some may insist, you do no injustice to your ideological principles when you seek out common ground. You do no injustice to your political beliefs when you take the time to get to know those who don't share them.

I've served with several hundred Senators under every partisan configuration imaginable: Republican presidents and Democratic presidents, divided government and one party control.

And as odd as it may sound in the present political environment, in my three decades here, I cannot recall a single Senate colleague with whom I could not work.

Sometimes those relationships take time, but then, that is why the Framers gave us six-year terms: so that members could build the social capital necessary to make the Senate function.

Under our Constitution, Senators are given six years, but only you can decide how to use them. And as one Senator who has witnessed what is possible here, I urge each of you: Take the time to use those years well. I pledge to you, your tenure here will be so much more rewarding.

More importantly, you will be vindicating the confidence that the Framers placed in each person who takes the oath of office, as Senator, upholding a trust that echoes through the centuries.

I share the confidence that Roger Sherman, Oliver Ellsworth, and the Framers placed in this body and in its members. But I am not blind. The Senate today, in my view, is not functioning as it can and should.

But look around you. This moment is difficult, not only for this body, but for the nation it serves. And, in the end, what matters most in America is not what only happens within the walls of this chamber, but rather the consequences of our decisions across the nation and around the globe.

Our economy is struggling, and many of our people are experiencing real hardship – unemployment, home foreclosures, endangered pensions.

Meanwhile, our nation faces real challenges: a mounting national debt, energy, immigration, nuclear proliferation, ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and so much more. All these challenges make the internal political and procedural conflicts we face as Senators seem small and petty.

History calls us to lift our eyes above the fleeting controversies of the moment, and to refocus our attention on our common challenge and common purpose.

By regaining its footing, the Senate can help this nation to regain confidence, and to restore the sense of optimism.

We must regain that focus. And, most importantly, we need our confidence back – we want to feel that same optimism that has sustained us through more than two centuries.

I am not naïve. I am aware of the conventional wisdom that predicts gridlock in the Congress.

But I know both the Democratic and Republican Leaders. I know the sitting members of the Senate. And my confidence is unshaken.

Why? Because we have been here before. The country has recovered from economic turmoil. Americans have come together to heal deep divides. And the Senate has led by finding its way through seemingly intractable political division. We have proven time and time again that this Senate is capable of meeting the test of history. We have evidenced the wisdom of the Framers who created its unique rules and set its high standards.

After all, no other legislative body grants so much power to each member, nor does any other legislative body ask so much of each member.

Just as the Senate's rules empower each member to act like a statesman, they also require statesmanship from each member.

But these rules are merely requiring from us the kind of leadership that our constituents need from us, that history calls on us to provide in difficult times such as these.

Maturity in a time of pettiness, calm in a time of anger, and leadership in a time of uncertainty – that is what the nation asks of the Senate, and that is what this office demands of us.

Over the past two centuries, some 1900 men and women have shared the privilege of serving in the Senate. Each of us has been granted a temporary, fleeting moment in which to indulge either our political ambition and ideological agenda, or, alternatively, to rise to the challenge and make a constructive mark on our history.

My moment is now at an end, but to those whose moments are not yet over, and to those whose moments will soon begin, I wish you so much more than mere good fortune.

I wish you wisdom. I wish you courage. And I wish for each of you that, one day, when you reflect on your moment, you will know that you have lived up to the tremendous honor and daunting responsibility of being a United States Senator.

But now, to quote St. Paul, "...the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

So Mr. President, it is with great pride, deep humility and incredible gratitude, as a United States Senator, that I yield the floor.