



January 5, 2012

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE BIPARTISAN LEADERSHIP OF THE U.S. CONGRESS

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Boehner, Leader Pelosi, Leader Reid, and Leader McConnell:

Last year, we wrote to each of you out of great respect and admiration with a simple request. We asked that members of Congress sit together rather than in partisan seating during the President's State of the Union address. This request came out of our view at Third Way that it is possible to debate passionately, yet thoughtfully, on the most important issues facing the nation. We pointed out that the partisan vitriol that had come to dominate Washington served only to diminish both the institution of Congress and our ability to solve the nation's pressing problems. Thanks to an outpouring of support from both sides of the aisle, this request became a reality and more than a century of tradition was turned on its head.

The country has just experienced another year dominated by partisan arguing and finger-pointing, and it is no coincidence that never in our memory have we seen a public so disappointed in Congress. The American people want their leaders to at least try to work together to address the great challenges facing us, and instead they see endless and seemingly pointless bickering. In short, the dialogue in Washington isn't working for anyone—not Congress, not Americans, and not America.

To that end, we respectfully offer three suggestions that take modest, but important, steps toward a more respectful and constructive debate.

First, we urge the leaders of both houses of Congress to permanently retire partisan seating at the State of the Union. As we noted last year, the spectacle of one side of the room leaping to its feet while the other sits glumly on its hands is just that—a spectacle. On this one day, when the entire nation pauses to listen to its President, Congress should sit together to show the country that we are one nation, even more than two parties.

Second, we propose an annual bipartisan congressional retreat—one weekend set aside each year where the House and Senate each hold bipartisan gatherings that are off-the-record and not public. In 1787, Americans with great regional

differences and viewpoints gathered for four months and created a blueprint for the nation. Let's set aside one weekend each year—between the days of May 14 and September 17 when our Founders breathed life into our union—where Congress holds a Spirit of 1787 retreat to restore the bonds that make us a great nation. Every week there are partisan strategy meetings held by congressional leaders that are attended by the entire caucus of elected members of your respective parties. Let's spend some brief time during the year where members of the opposite party break bread, get to know each other, and have in-depth discussions. The ability to do great things for the nation rests in large part on the quality of individual relationships established across party lines.

Third, we urge a brief return to constructive and positive dialogue. We ask that for the twenty-four hours immediately preceding the start of the State of the Union address, members of Congress of both parties, the party's national and congressional campaign committees, and the President speak only about the merits of their ideas, not the demerits of ideas coming from the opposite political party. We are not asking for a complete ceasefire. We are not saying that members of each party cannot disagree. We simply ask that for one full day, this disagreement be voiced solely by making the positive case for one's own ideas. It might make for less fireworks on television for one day, but it will certainly ensure a more informed electorate.

We are not naïve. We do not expect these changes to suddenly get our economy moving, to create jobs, or to defeat our international foes. But we hope that they can help make some progress in restoring a sense of common purpose in the institution you collectively lead.

Last year, when we made the request on State of the Union seating, we did not know how Congress or the American people would react. But Congress came through and the American people were heartened. They did not see it cynically despite their negative views toward Congress. Sitting together again, committing to a weekend together, and debating our ideas for one full day solely on their merits will be met with the strong approval of the American people. Let's make one day about our love of this nation and end, for a brief moment, the partisan warfare.

With great respect and admiration,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan Cowan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jonathan Cowan
President, Third Way

cc: President Barack Obama
DNC Chair Debbie Wasserman-Schultz
RNC Chair Reince Priebus
DSCC Chair Patty Murray
NRSC Chair John Cornyn
DCCC Chair Steve Israel
NRCC Chair Pete Sessions