

**American University
Kennedy Political Union**

Sen. Susan M. Collins

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Thank you, Val. It is an honor to be part of this outstanding Kennedy Political Union lecture series. I thank the student government here at American University for this opportunity, and the AU College Republicans and students from the Great State of Maine for their hospitality. One of those students, by the way, is Molly Herman, the daughter of my Senate colleague, Angus King.

For nearly a half century, the Kennedy Political Union has distinguished itself by bringing to this university a truly remarkable range of speakers. At a time when free and open debate is being stifled on far too many college campuses, your commitment to providing a forum for all political views is commendable. From Van Jones to Ron Paul and Bill Clinton to Dick Cheney, your lecture series has been devoted to hearing diverse viewpoints.

The American people have made it clear that they are fed up with the gridlock that has prevented congressional action on too many of the serious problems facing our nation. In fact, one poll showed that Congress' approval rating among the American people is in the single digits – ranking below colonoscopies and root canals. At least those two procedures come with anesthetics.

But this raises a larger question: Is the hyperpartisanship that grips Washington a symptom or the cause of the divisiveness that we see throughout our society?

In asking this question, I am reminded of the response former Senator Lowell Weicker once gave to an unhappy constituent. When the constituent angrily denounced Senator Weicker and his colleagues, saying “you are all a bunch of liars, thieves, and womanizers,” Senator Weicker calmly replied, “Well, it is, after all, a representative form of government.”

The “symptom or cause” question may seem to be a variation on the famous “chicken or the egg” dilemma that has puzzled philosophers and scientists from Aristotle to Stephen Hawking. When it comes to the role of civility in all aspects of life, we do well to remember that we get a chicken by hatching the egg, not by smashing it.

As our Constitution was being developed, legend tells us of a conversation between George Washington and Thomas Jefferson in which our first president applied the metaphor of the cooling saucer to the Senate. He compared the House to hot tea, which was then poured into the cooling saucer of the Senate, reflecting a more deliberative approach. The conversation may be apocryphal, but there is no doubt that the founders of our nation recognized the need for a legislative chamber in which the heat of political passions could cool.

The Senate was designed expressly for that purpose. It is there that the interests of small states and the minority point of view are to be protected. It is there that raw political power should give way to statesmanship. It is an ideal we have seen played out by the great Senators of the past, names like Vandenberg, Clay, and Webster. It is an ideal that we have embraced in Maine by sending thoughtful and respected leaders to Washington like Margaret Chase Smith, Ed Muskie, Bill Cohen, George Mitchell, Olympia Snowe, and Angus King.

Since I was elected to the Senate more than 19 years ago, I have witnessed a withering of this culture. Now, ideology and partisanship dictate far too much of our conduct. Obstructionism is too often employed for its own sake. Base motives are alleged for reasonable policy differences, allowing legitimate differences to evolve into bitter personal disputes. The cooling saucer more and more resembles an overheated skillet.

Which brings us to the other side of the equation – the role that society plays in Washington’s division and dysfunction. From how we recreate to what we think, America appears to be pulling apart into factions. Today, polarization even shows up in where we live. Through a phenomenon called “residential sorting,” a Pew Research Center study finds that conservatives are consolidating in rural areas and outer suburbs, and liberals in inner suburbs and urban centers. We are isolating ourselves from those who aren’t just like ourselves.

This is exacerbated by the gerrymandering of congressional districts that packs highly partisan voters into discrete “safe” districts, where the extremists in both parties play a disproportionate role in selecting the nominee who will inevitably go on to win the general election. As a result, moderates and independents are marginalized and their influence diminished.

It is alarming that the Pew study found that a growing number of Republicans and Democrats view each other not just as the opposition party, but actually as a threat to our nation’s well-being. The more politically engaged a person is, the more likely it is that he or she has adopted this apocalyptic view of people who could be their neighbors, soccer coaches, and school-board members. It seems that we need to revise the old saying that familiarity breeds contempt, as the evidence mounts that unfamiliarity is the real culprit.

This problem is exacerbated by the 24/7 news cycle, and by cable and radio shows that simply reinforce the political convictions one already holds rather than exposing us to alternate viewpoints. The Internet magnifies this tendency by allowing people to tailor their information narrowly. Additionally, anonymous, crude insults fill vast expanses of the Internet. Social networking sites can bring people together, but they also can drive people apart and cause real harm when gossip, rumors, and outright lies reach a larger and larger group of true believers.

For too many today, achieving solutions is not the primary goal; rather, it is to draw sharp distinctions and score political points, even if that means that the problems confronting our country go unresolved. Let me illustrate with one of our urgent problems – the mass shootings that cause so much grief and yet produce so little action. I know this is a particularly acute

concern of your generation, whose lives have been shaped by such tragedies as Columbine, Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, and Orlando.

After the Orlando massacre this June, we learned that the killer was an ISIS sympathizer who had been on the TSA's Selectee List. The No Fly list and the Selectee list are the two watchlists used by TSA to identify known or suspected terrorists who are too dangerous to fly at all or at least warrant careful additional screening. The Orlando gunman was on the selectee list for approximately 10 months, but then he was off the list when he purchased the two guns used to kill 50 people and injure scores more.

In the wake of this attack, Senate Leaders scheduled two votes on two partisan proposals that every Senator in the Chamber knew were destined to fail. One of the proposals was from Senator Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat, and one from Senator John Cornyn, a Republican. These were nearly identical to proposals that the Senate had voted upon and failed to pass in December after the San Bernardino shooting. Sure enough, the Senate voted on both proposals and, as was inevitable, both failed. But I could not let the saga end there.

The terrorist attack in Orlando was a call for compromise, a plea for bipartisan action. In an effort to bridge the partisan divide and get something accomplished, I built a strong bipartisan coalition of my colleagues who worked hard to draft a compromise based on a simple premise: if you are too dangerous to fly on an airplane, you are too dangerous to purchase a firearm.

Our group included Senators from across the country and across the ideological spectrum. I joined with Democrats – Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota and Martin Heinrich of New Mexico – and Republicans – Jeff Flake of Arizona and Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire – to craft an amendment that we thought could gain support from both sides of the aisle.

Some of our group originally had supported Senator Feinstein's amendment; some had supported Senator Cornyn's approach. But all of us were committed to getting something done on this vital issue. We believed that working together we could listen to the heartbroken families in San Bernardino and Orlando by taking common sense action that did not infringe on Second Amendment rights but that would help prevent known or suspected terrorists from legally buying a gun.

After many hours of negotiation and compromise, and many weekend calls and text messages, we reached a consensus. Our alternative, bipartisan amendment would prevent individuals on the "No Fly" or the Selectee Lists from purchasing firearms, while ensuring that no American is deprived of his or her Second Amendment right without an immediate opportunity to appeal to a District Court judge. It also required the FBI to be notified immediately if someone who had been on either of these lists within the past five years purchased a firearm.

If our amendment were enacted, the FBI would have been notified immediately when the Orlando killer purchased the first firearm in the weeks leading up to the shooting. Then the FBI would have been notified a second time that the former terrorism suspect was seeking to purchase additional firearms in a short period of time. Surely, that would have caused the FBI to

reopen its investigation of him. Perhaps, if our proposal had been in effect, that massacre would have been prevented.

Our compromise sought the middle ground between Senator Feinstein's broader proposal to bar guns sales to those in the far larger federal terrorist screening database, which contains 1.1 million individuals and a great number of unverified allegations, and Senator Cornyn's proposal to bar gun sales only after federal authorities had demonstrated probable cause that the prospective gun purchaser was a terrorist. My view is that the database Senator Feinstein wanted to use is too big and ill-defined. My view of Senator Cornyn's proposal is that if authorities have probable cause, that person should be in custody, not in a gun shop.

When our amendment came to vote on the Senate floor, there was a procedural effort to kill our "No-Fly, No-Buy" compromise. In the face of this effort, a majority of the U.S. Senate voted to keep our amendment alive, demonstrating that there is strong bipartisan support for common sense legislation that would help keep guns out of the hands of terrorists, while protecting the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding Americans. And I'll note, there were two Senators absent who would have supported us. I was very encouraged by the majority vote in support of our amendment, and I am continuing to work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to advance this vital issue.

Each mass killing seems like a recurring nightmare, and each failure by Congress to address this crisis is a replay of the hyperpartisanship that prevents progress. My goal is to avoid this "Groundhog Day" syndrome where we go through the same motions with the same lack of any results. We had voted on two proposals which everyone knew would fail; I chose to offer a new approach.

Believe me, the lengths – or should I say depths – some will go to try to win their argument by attempting to destroy those with whom they disagree is astonishing. After the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in late 2012, I called for legislation to better prevent gun purchases by criminals and those who have been adjudicated as being dangerously mentally ill, and helped lead a bipartisan effort to strengthen laws that prohibit a person from deliberately purchasing a firearm for someone who is barred from buying a gun.

In response to my support for reasonable background checks for gun buyers to prevent criminals and individuals with severe mental illness from buying firearms, a far-right group produced negative television ads in which I morphed into Barack Obama. That's quite a trick.

Unyielding adherence to an extreme position is easy. It is the hard work of bringing people together to find common ground that requires determination, intellect, and courage. Whether Washington leads the nation in incivility or merely reflects our society, we each can play an important role in elevating the level of discourse.

In Washington, we who represent the people of this great nation must put progress over partisanship, statesmanship over stridency, and compromise over conflict. That would produce a very different legislative climate, one in which the objective is to solve the problem, not just to score political points.

A return to civility and a spirit of compromise must be driven by concerned citizens, and you will have to lead the way. That means continuing to work here at American University, in your communities, and in your careers to call for a renewed social climate characterized by civility and respect for differing viewpoints.

Thank you, and I am happy to take your questions.