

The Courage to Compromise:

A Lesson for Today's Politicians

During my thirty plus year career in the FBI, and lengthy tenure as the Chief of the FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit, I confronted difficult interpersonal conflicts on a regular basis, often with individuals or groups whose strong beliefs, inflexible interpretation of events, or sense of being victimized brought them into conflict with law enforcement. At first glance, interacting with such individuals could appear hopeless based on their inability to see any solution other than having their demands met. These individuals often viewed compromise as a sign of acquiescence or weakness, especially in those situations where their behavior was influenced by an outside audience. The sad and pathetic state of political discourse among our elected leaders in Congress today is reminiscent of the same challenges my fellow negotiators and I faced in peacefully resolving conflict. With the hope of changing the state of this discourse, I offer some insights from a career in crisis negotiation.

Despite the enormous challenges involved in securing cooperation from individuals acting on strong emotion rather than logic, law enforcement negotiators are successful in achieving peaceful outcomes over 90 percent of the time. We do this through thoughtful listening and demonstrating that we understand the perspectives of the other party. This is neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Our key response consists of a sincere and genuine acknowledgement of their point of view. We also try to stay flexible in finding a solution they can accept. Even though they see events differently than we do, we remain respectful, genuine, and non-argumentative. It's important not to demonize our opponents or engage in name calling, which only inhibits cooperation. This demonstrates respect and helps achieve a calmer atmosphere in which a more flexible approach to problem solving can take place.

If we were able to achieve this high level of success in real "life and death" situations, then why can't the approaches and techniques used

be even more successful in less life threatening political disagreements? The answer is that today's extreme political climate does not encourage or reward cooperation and compromise. In fact, it seems that today's politicians are more interested in appealing to their partisan base of support rather than in trying to work together for the common good with those who have a different perspective. How can we encourage our politicians to be real statesmen rather than trying to be the most outspoken and unyielding voice for their political ideology? I believe we accomplish this important transition by demanding courage from our politicians. Our political leaders need to find the courage to do what's best for the country, even at possible risk to their political careers. This is what real statesmanship is all about. It's important for these politicians, as well as the voting public, to understand that only a spoiled child expects to get his or her way all the time. This is not how real life works and it's certainly not how government functions best.

So how do they do this? I have three simple suggestions: First, they must jettison any agreements, promises, or representations made for political expediency which ties their hands. Politicians must have the courage to say that their only obligation is to the citizens of our nation and to the premise that as elected officials they will devote their full energy to achieving the best possible results for the American people, even if that means compromising on strongly held positions. A workable, albeit imperfect, deal is better than no deal.

Second, the opposing parties need to pledge to stop making statements that demonize their opposition, and follow through on that pledge. For example, calling the President a socialist or saying that everyone in the Tea Party is a racist are clear examples of the sort of rhetoric that only inflames the debate. Politicians should be encouraged to state that their opponents are honorable individuals who have different perspectives. This approach shows respect. It creates a climate where people can work together rather than a climate of attack-and-defend. All the surveys I've seen show that the public has grown weary of name-calling.

Third, substantive negotiations between party representatives should be done away from the media spotlight. Standing in front of a media

camera in the Capitol rotunda attacking the other side only encourages politicians to gravitate to inflexible polarized positions. Positions taken publicly, in front of the camera, must be defended. Defense of hardened positions does not encourage exploration of alternatives. Compromise is best undertaken away from the media spotlight. Compromise should be given a chance to take seed and nurture before being laid open to attack.

The solution to our current political dysfunction lies in political courage; to compromise, to meet the opposition halfway, and to avoid inflammatory statements and finger pointing. If my colleagues and I could successfully negotiate with common criminals and even terrorists by following these principles, why then can't our politicians be able to courageously negotiate with each other?

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