

RURAL BROADBAND INSIGHTS FOR CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE



WITH PARTNER JONATHAN CHAMBERS

Co-ops Connect FYI

By Jonathan Chambers • Sep 13, 2024

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The State of America's Politics



I started working for Senator Jack Danforth (R-MO) in 1987, the year C-SPAN started covering proceedings in the Senate. All the Senate offices tuned their televisions to the activities on the Senate floor.

- Those of us working in the Senate knew when to pay attention to speakers and when to ignore them. Other Senate staff would often remark to me that when they heard my boss speaking on the floor of the Senate, they turned up their televisions to listen.

- **Danforth was one of the few Senators people listened to** because he had interesting things to say.

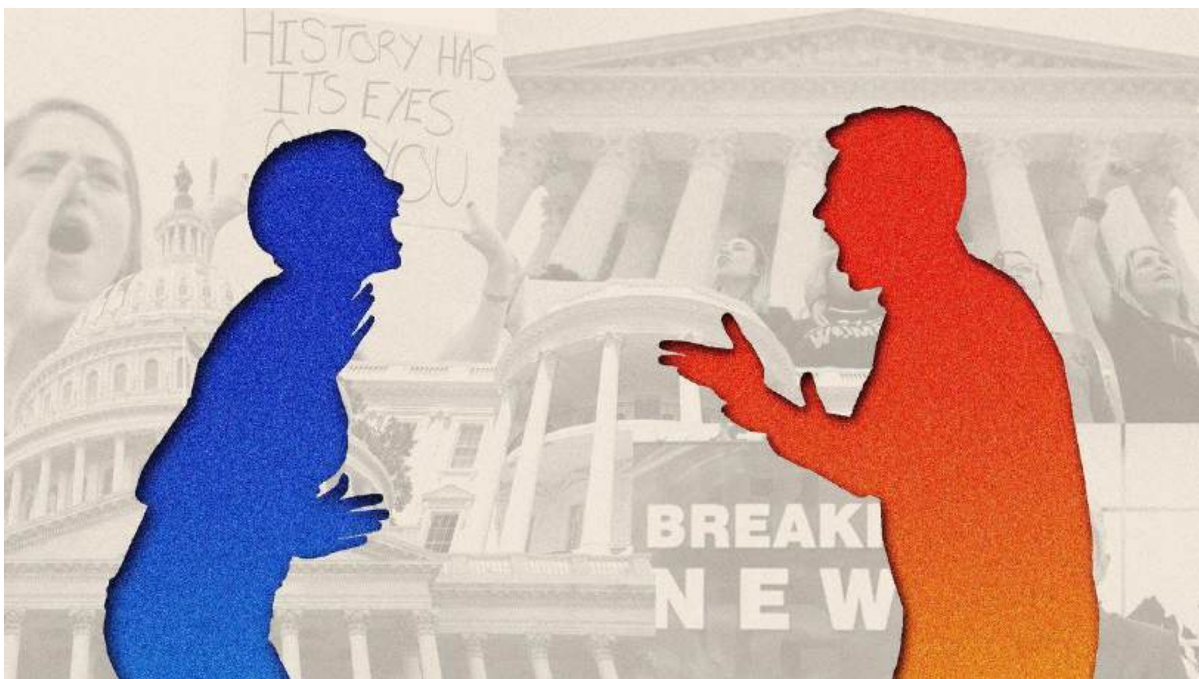
I learned from Jack Danforth over eight years of listening to his speeches:

1. **How to get things done.**
2. **How to make lasting change** for people's lives and livelihoods through policymaking.
3. **The art of compromise**, when to hold fast and when to find a way through politics.
4. **A cadence in public speaking** that I adopted as my own.

Why it matters:

When a friend shared with me a speech Danforth made last week in Kansas City before the Federal Bar Association, I felt that familiar twinge of interest. I haven't spoken to Danforth often in the past thirty years, but **I still could hear his voice as I read his words about politics today.**

Danforth's View of Politics Today



I found the following portion of Danforth's speech worthy of sharing:

“There's no need to belabor a sorry situation. We see it every day. There's nothing uplifting about it. Politics is relentlessly negative. The tactic is to energize the angry base of each party by promoting grievance. Americans learn to think of themselves as victims in a world of us against them. For the left, America is divided between oppressors and oppressed. For the right, ordinary citizens are the targets of elite forces in universities, woke corporations, and the deep state. For the left and the right, feeding resentment and rage is the way to electoral success. And it's the business model of the media, where anger is the means for drawing and keeping an audience. All this makes for extreme polarization. The center no longer exists.

“Right from the start, our American challenge has been to hold our fractious people together as an indivisible nation. But now, our politicians and our media seem to be doing everything they can to tear us apart.

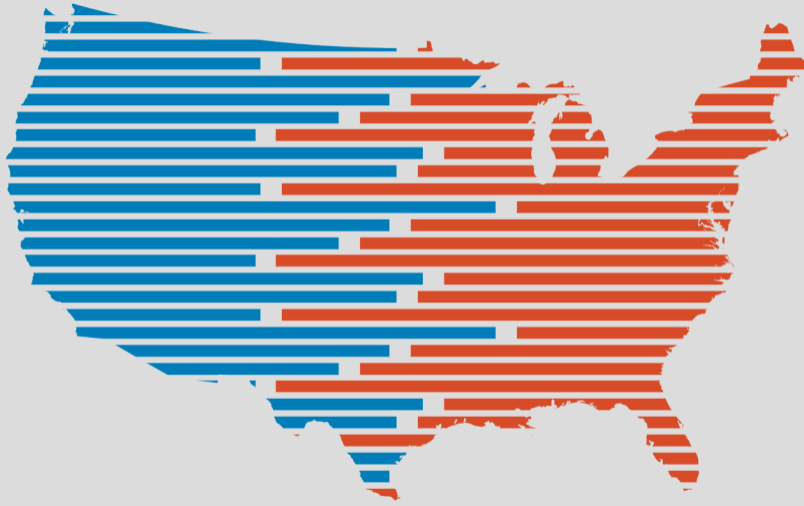
“I'm going to suggest three approaches you and I should take, three ways in which we can help turn this around, if we apply ourselves to the task.

“First, we should aggressively come to the defense of the Constitution, that ingenious structure designed for the purpose of holding America together.

“Second, politics is important, but when it becomes all-important, it is divisive and unworkable. We have blown it out of proportion, and we should put it in its proper place.

“Third, we should appeal to the highest values of our people, when so much in our politics and our culture appeals to the lowest.”

Danforth's Advice for Politics Today



In the address, Danforth goes on to explain what he means by each suggestion.

On the first point, he compares his time in the Senate with current Congress.

- During his 18 years of service, the tax code was drastically simplified; the immigration system was reformed; civil rights legislation was advanced, including for persons with disabilities; telecommunications laws were rewritten; the criminal justice system was overhauled; and federal budgets were balanced. **All through bipartisan effort.**
- Congress was the place where, through negotiation and compromise, **competing interests were held together.**
- Through the committee process, **members had a meaningful role in drafting legislation.**
- **Today, the spirit of 40 years ago is gone.**
- Yet to return to a functioning Constitutional democracy, **Congress must again become a working, legislating body.**

To his second point, Danforth observes that politics today plays too big a role in society.

- The system designed by the framers of the Constitution **requires compromise and prevents the dominance of any interest.**
- **When politics is viewed in absolute, existential terms** – as a battle of good versus evil – our system of government doesn't work.
- He encourages each of us to be “more realistic about the limits of politics and more humble about the righteousness of our positions.”

Finally, Danforth suggests that **power and responsibility lie with all of us.**

- He reminds the listener that “virtue” was a word used repeatedly by our founders.
- He quotes James Madison to observe, “To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea.”

The Better Angels of Our Nature



I reflected on Jack's speech, and wondered whether we still have it in us as a people to find virtue in ourselves and in our adversaries. **Or is**

that notion itself illusory?

Danforth reminds us of Lincoln's 1861 inaugural address, made as seven states seceded from the union:

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Who among our leaders could offer these same words today?

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