



Political Pragmatism Is No Oxymoron

Political debate in this country is clouded by labels. We label ourselves as Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives, maybe even as ultra-liberals or arch-conservatives.

Once you attach a label to your political views, you tend to become stubborn. If you're a liberal, you presume conservatives are all wrong. If you're a conservative, all liberals are stupid. If you're a Democrat, you can't believe in fiscal responsibility that may involve spending cuts. If you're a Republican, you can't come out in support of gun control or a woman's right to choose. You get so entrenched in your own views that you lose the capacity to listen. You fail to see that the other side just might have a point.

Me? I hate labels. I find them constrictive.

People in the media often think of me as a *centrist*. I understand why. It's a label of convenience. Politically speaking, my views are "middle of the road." To most people, a centrist is someone who positions himself right down the middle all the way through.

If I had to choose a label for myself, I'd say I was a political pragmatist. I believe in consensus. I don't think countries should ever be governed along a strict party line, nor do I think people



should ever reflexively vote the straight party line. I take each issue as it comes, judge it on its own merits, and make my decisions from there. In fairness, the more dispassionate you are about an issue, the easier it is to be open to both sides.

Philosophically, that translates into a person whose inclinations are liberal when it comes to social issues, but conservative on economic issues and foreign affairs. A true centrist always stays in the middle and approaches the issue from there, while a political pragmatist will very likely take stands on one side or the other. There are issues that are black and there are issues that are white. Put them all together, and you end up in the middle, philosophically . . . but your views don't always follow the same rigid pattern. Some would say your views don't follow any pattern at all.

I also find that most people who consider themselves politically "in the middle" tend to think like me. We're not strictly liberal, and we're not strictly conservative. And that drives the extremes nuts.

For example, I strongly believe that who you sleep with, or what you do in the bedroom, is really none of my business as long as you're both adults. Keep the government out of our private lives—which, on the surface, sounds like a basic, fundamental, traditionally conservative position. At the same time, I happen to think that if you're a gay couple committed to each other, you ought to be entitled to the same sort of union as any straight couple would. That idea, of course, skews very, very liberal.

You have a right to live your life in the way you choose to live it. Then again, so do I. You have the right to express your opinions, even if they're different than mine. But you don't have the right to impose your will on others. You don't have the right to block the entrance of an abortion clinic to espouse your pro-life agenda, or shut down the Golden Gate Bridge in the middle of the afternoon to protest the war in Iraq, or tie up Friday rush hour traffic on the busiest street downtown just to call attention to your cause, no matter what you advocate or how important you think your position may be. Your right to your opinions, and my right to mine, ends the minute those rights start to impair other people's ability to live their lives in the way *they* see fit.

A political pragmatist is apt to be very liberal, maybe even libertarian, on social issues. On economic or foreign affairs, though,



we're far more conservative. And much of that comes from sharing the viewpoint, traditionally championed by conservatives, that the United States is a damn good country.

For those of us who are in the middle, part of our problem with the far left is the misguided, traditionally liberal belief that somehow we're the bad guys—that the United States imposes its will on other nations and that it's always our fault when things go wrong. Therefore, by implication, all other countries are better.

I don't want to sound like a flag waver, but what country could possibly be better than ours?

You want to live in Cuba? Sure, they may have medical care for all their citizens, but even that comes with a price: You can't speak your mind!

You want to look at the Scandinavian countries? No doubt, there's much that is desirable about their way of life, but look at their rate of taxation. It's worse than ours.

China? North Korea? Russia? Iran? Syria? Get serious!

Think about it objectively, and it's a slam dunk. There's no better place in the world to live than in the United States.

On the other hand, I'm not exactly comfortable with all those ultra-conservatives out there who look at America with blinders on. You know the type. They're the ones who think our country can do no wrong. They're the ones who will never admit that even the United States screws up once in a while, and that we're not as perfect as we'd like to think.

SOMETIMES, GRIDLOCK IN POLITICS CAN BE A GOOD THING

That said, a true centrist is always looking for compromise—and that *is* a fair reflection of the way I think.

I'm a big believer in the "half a loaf" theory. If you can't get everything you want, you try to get part of what you want.

That's why I've never understood why the Democrats nominated extreme liberals such as Michael Dukakis or George McGovern, or why the Republicans nominated an arch-conservative like Barry Goldwater. It doesn't make any sense. You push too far to the outside, and you won't get anything—or anywhere, for that matter.



Here in California, we saw this happening for the longest time with the Republican party. They nearly became extinct. Until Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected governor last year, every major state office in California was held by a Democrat. As it stands, the Democrats still have the majority in both the Senate and the State Assembly.

I thought that was terrible because it left no opportunity for political debate. It was as though we had a politburo in Sacramento: Once the assembly came up with an idea for a bill, they floated it, and then they passed it . . . and the Democratic governor would sign it.

You need to have some variety. You need to have some debate. There needs to be some kind of a check, just like we have a system of checks and balances with the three branches of government.

On the other hand, as strong as the Democrats are on a state level in California, they've made it easy for the Republicans to become increasingly strong on a national level. And I don't want that, either. I don't want the Republicans too strong. I don't want the Democrats too strong.

The problem is, my congressperson is Nancy Pelosi. On a personal level, I just think the world of Nancy Pelosi. I've known her for a long, long time. I respect her. I like her. She is the leader of the Democratic party in the House of Representatives. She also happens to be a classic "San Francisco liberal."

What do I mean by San Francisco liberal? Allow me to explain by briefly going over some of the recent positions taken by our intrepid Board of Supervisors.

Providing food and shelter to homeless people instead of cash is reactionary—that was their argument in the November 2002 election when "Care Not Cash" appeared on the ballot. For that matter, they also held that asking beggars not to aggressively pan-handle anywhere in San Francisco is discriminatory and deprives them of the right to make a living.

One Supervisor not only got into a physical confrontation with then-Mayor Willie Brown, he also scuffled with police officers who were trying to enforce the law. Yet, he was handily re-elected in a crowded field. One year later (as if we needed an encore), this



same Supervisor breached political protocol after his name came up to be temporary mayor while Brown was out of town. Not content with simply holding down the fort for a day, this hothead took it on himself to appoint two people to a powerful city commission and have them sworn into office behind the mayor's back.

And then there was a vote on whether to prohibit urinating in the streets. It lost. Big!!

I've lived and worked in San Francisco for over 28 years. On social issues, I'm as liberal/libertarian as anyone. Yet, compared to some of the clowns we have on the Board of Supervisors, I feel like Jesse Helms.

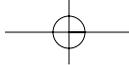
So you can understand that if you're a Democrat, having a San Francisco liberal as your House Whip is like throwing meat to hungry lions. Republicans will eat this up.

Ross Perot used "gridlock" as a pejorative. But I think gridlock in politics can be a good thing.

I want to have contention among my representatives in government. I want to see a battle between the two sides. If neither party is too strong, that leaves the door open for debate, for discourse, for a careful examination of all sides of the issues. If neither party is too strong, that lessens the odds of a "rubber stamp" approval of legislation without any real consideration of the issues at all.

Now some would say that the check for politicians is the election. To some degree, that's true. But look at the election. More often than not, people just aren't voting—at least, they're not showing up at the polls in large numbers, as was once the case. Those who do vote don't always do so intelligently. They're just as likely to vote on the basis of which ad they liked best as they are on the basis of the issues. In this respect, they're not so much voting for one side as they are voting against the other.

Think about most of the political ads we see these days. They hardly ever talk about why you ought to vote for Joe Candidate. Instead, they usually focus on how awful his opponent is. Why? Because that's what grabs our attention. It's the same reason why it's more interesting to watch the scene of a car crash than to watch traffic flow smoothly.



I DON'T WANT TO BE ON ANYBODY'S TEAM

California also has a new system where you can vote in either primary. That has to be one of the stupidest ideas I have ever heard.

Think about it. Logic says, "You're a Democrat, you vote for the Democratic nominee. You're a Republican, you vote for the Republican nominee." But here, you can be a registered Democrat and still participate in the Republican primary, and vice versa. Which means you could have right-wing Republicans stuffing the ballot box for the weakest Democratic candidate, and left-wing Democrats doing the same for an inferior Republican candidate, leaving us to choose between two weak prospects come November.

If you're going to have two political parties, you should only be able to participate in your own party's primary . . . and that's that. Same goes for political candidates. If you're running for political office, you shouldn't be able to manipulate the other party's primary election so as to virtually handpick your opponent in the general election—as our system in California currently allows.

Problem is, for those of us in the middle, it's getting harder to know what either of these parties stand for.

There was once a time when most people thought of Republicans as fiscally responsible. Yet, we've recently seen the Bush administration push through a \$350 billion tax package that only serves to increase our deficit far more drastically than it was before. And these are the folks who supposedly hate spending!

So what do these parties really stand for? What's their point of view?

If we played a game of word association, and you said to me, "Republican party," I'd say, "against abortion rights," "not big on the environment," "ultra-conservative." I'd think of people like Tom de Lay, Bill Frist, Trent Lott, and Ann Coulter. If you said "Democratic party," I'd say "woman's right to choose," "more government is better government," "big on spending." I'd think of Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, Carol Mosely Braun, and Al Gore running far to the left in 2000.

These, of course, are two extremes. That's not the way it should be.



Maybe we're at a point in our society where political parties have outlived their usefulness. Maybe if we didn't feel that we had to be affiliated with one party or the other, we might actually get somewhere instead of being polarized like we are right now by the politics of the extremes.

There is something to be said about the two-party system in Great Britain. At least they're direct and honest about it: You have your liberals, and you have your conservatives.

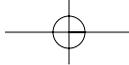
Here in the United States, it's much, much harder to tell the difference. I mean, who's really a Democrat, Zell Miller or Ted Kennedy? Who's more of a Republican, Jesse Helms or Olympia Snow? Given their voting records, Olympia Snow ought to be a Democrat and Zell Miller a Republican. Yet, because they belong to one party or another, they have to follow the party line.

No wonder so many of us are in the middle of the spectrum. There are times when we may side with one political party or another, but it's often reluctantly (or at least, temporary). There's no formal "middle of the road" philosophy, no "voice of reason" center where we can feel comfortable. The Republicans are too far to the right for us. The Democrats veer too far to the left. No third party exists that really matches our point of view.

One of the major reasons why no third party exists is that there's no money behind it.

Sure, we've seen flashes of it. There was George Wallace and the American Independent party back in 1967. You had John Anderson and the Independent party in 1980. Perot and the Reform Party in 1992. The Libertarian party always seems to be on the cusp, but they can't quite get over the top. Then there's the Green party, which some would argue siphoned votes away from Al Gore in 2000 by running Ralph Nader as their candidate—effectively splitting the Democratic vote and enabling George Bush to win.

None of these parties have been able to capture the kind of money and attention that the two major parties have. And after all, monied interests tend to have strong beliefs one way or the other. For every major corporation pushing for pro-business legislation, you have just as many unions pushing for legislation



favoring workers. By and large, it is these two extremes that dictate the agenda.

That leaves people like me, who don't always side one way or the other, smack in the middle. We'd much rather look at each issue on a case-by-case basis, and for that reason it's tough to pigeonhole us.

Now I realize a politically astute person might say, "Ronn, who are you fooling? Liberal on social issues, conservative on foreign affairs—you sound like a neo-con to me."

I disagree. A true neo-con is someone like William Kristol, the editor of *The Weekly Standard*. Now I have great respect for Bill. I've interviewed him many times. I think that when it comes to foreign affairs, we're very much on the same wave length. But when it comes to social issues, I'm not so sure. He doesn't seem too concerned about some of the more uncompromising stands of the GOP in their platform.

That's why I hate labels. I don't want to belong to any one "team." I don't want to feel obligated, or worse still, become complacent. And deep down, most people need the comfort of knowing they're affiliated with somebody. They need to feel some sense of validation of what they believe in right now.

At least, that's what you see with the extremes.

A MAJORITY WITHOUT A VOICE

We've reached a point in politics today where everything is becoming black or white, and ideas have become entrenched. Certainly, that's what you get when you listen to conservative talk radio, or when you watch certain cable news shows. Everyone's coming at it from a particular perspective—that perspective being, "Our way, *always*, is the right way to go." As a result, the majority of us who consider ourselves "middle of the road," who don't quite look at everything that simplistically, are quietly sitting in the background, frustrated, watching and waiting for our moment to speak.

I wouldn't call us a "silent majority"—that term is *so* Spiro Agnew-ish, and besides, you know how I feel about labels. But we



are “silent” in the sense that, again, there isn’t any one, unified platform that can effectively speak for the rest of us. Because contrary to what the far left or far right would like to believe, most people don’t participate in extreme partisan debates. Most people do what I try to do, which is to look at each issue as it comes up, judge it on its own merits, and then make a decision.

Take George W. Bush, for example. Now here’s a man I did not vote for in the 2000 election. Instead, I supported Al Gore—reluctantly, I might add, because I felt Al Gore made a huge mistake when he abandoned the Clinton “New Democrat” positions.

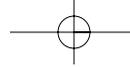
To me, Bill Clinton was an excellent president because he understood the importance of compromise. This was a man who figured out a way to work with Newt Gingrich when nobody thought it was possible: when the Republicans seized control of the House after the 1994 elections. Sure, Clinton may have been a “new Democrat” in that he governed slightly left of center. But he was also very much a political pragmatist. In a word, he was someone I could identify with.

So when Al Gore ran for president, I had hoped he would’ve run along that same platform. But he didn’t. Al Gore’s platform was far, far more to the left than Bill Clinton ever was. The further he distanced himself from Clinton, the more he lost sight of who he was. That was dramatically demonstrated in the debates. There were three debates, and there were three Al Gores: the tough one, the mild one, and the middle one. It was like the Three Bears.

I still voted for Gore, mind you, because candidate George W. Bush was someone for whom I had a visceral dislike at the time. (No rationale behind it. I just didn’t care for the guy.) Besides, I figured if it came down to choosing between someone who’s more to the left and someone’s who more to the right, go with the guy who’s more to the left. That’s just my basic inclination.

That said, I am a pragmatist. I may not have liked Bush as a candidate, but once he was inaugurated he became my president. I respect the office, and I respect the man.

Here’s a guy who (from my perspective, anyway) really knew what he was doing in the area of foreign policy, who essentially said what a lot of us in the middle have been saying for years: that



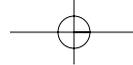
the United States has lost its position of respect in the world. That we had become a doormat in the eyes of quite a few countries, and that as a result we were no longer feared. And that in this turbulent world, if you have to choose between being liked and being feared, better to be feared. There has to be both a carrot and a stick if we want to make sure that countries act in a civil fashion.

So when Iraq came up, Bush took the situation and reacted to it decisively. And of course, the impact of our actions with Iraq went far beyond the borders of that country. The reason there's progress toward peace in the Middle East today is a direct corollary to what we did in Iraq. The reason why Syria is now cooperating with us, as well as why Iran finally finds itself under the microscope, is a result of the war in Iraq. Suddenly other countries are starting to think twice about ticking off the United States. Suddenly they're thinking, "Hey, maybe we shouldn't flaunt our ideas in front of them. There might be sanctions or other repercussions. Maybe we ought to be a just little more cautious whenever we deal with them in the future."

I think that's fabulous. The United States is more of a superpower now than it ever was under Bill Clinton. I think that's a wonderful, positive outcome.

Now, does that necessarily make me a Bush fan? Hardly. Almost every single domestic plan he has for this country, I oppose. I don't necessarily see his tax cut as a stimulus to the economy. I don't believe in "faith-based organizations"—I think there ought to be separation between church and state. I'm appalled at the lack of tolerance his Administration has shown when it comes to the rights of gay people. I don't understand how he (or any other President, for that matter) could possibly be against the idea of prescribing marijuana for medicinal purposes, especially if it could help alleviate the suffering of someone dying from AIDS, cancer, or other terrible diseases. I strongly oppose most of his judicial appointments, which are far to the right. I'm very, very strongly pro-choice, and George Bush is a president who's very strongly pro-life.

And as much as I backed the president on the war in Iraq, that doesn't entitle him to a free pass in that arena, either. In July 2003, when the controversy over the nature of the intelligence on which President Bush based his decision to invade Iraq first became



public, I not only supported the House Investigation Committee's efforts to look into the matter, I strongly called for open hearings. Why would anyone be opposed to finding out the truth? As someone who strongly supported the war—and who took a lot of flak for that, I might add—that support becomes a little tenuous if you won't at least admit to me that something may have been wrong. Or that you know how to start what we did in Iraq (as Tom Friedman might put it), but have no idea how to finish it.

So if the election was to be held tomorrow, and I had to choose between President Bush and someone else, my answer would have to be, "Who's the someone else? Then I'll decide." Like most Americans, I think I'd want to consider that option and see how the rest of the field lines up before I make up my mind.

WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT CHANGING YOUR MIND?

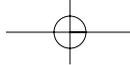
One of the worst things about extremist thinking is this ridiculous notion that changing your mind is a sign of weakness.

Let's say you're a politician. Twenty years ago, or whenever you started your career, maybe your views on abortion were far more conservative than they are today. For whatever reason, your beliefs on the matter started to change over the years. Once you were staunchly pro-life. Now you've evolved into a pro-choice advocate.

Unfortunately, the political environment today is such that if you dare change your views on anything, both sides will hold it against you. You're considered a traitor by your own party for switching ideologies, while the other side labels you a waffler, someone who "flip-flops" back and forth on any given issue.

Former CNN chairman Walter Isaacson made the same point about "flip-flopping" in an interview last year in *W Magazine*. Speaking specifically about Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Isaacson said, "He flip-flopped. And that's the basis for the most common political attack ad. Usually when a leader changes his mind, he looks weak, which is why leaders are often so afraid to change their minds."

I think that's a terrible reality that puts politicians in a classic no-win situation. Stick to your guns for fear of being attacked,



and your opponent will think you're rigid. Shift gears, or at least be willing to *consider* the other side, and you're somehow perceived as weak, unprincipled, wishy-washy, or worse.

The whole idea that changing your mind conveys weakness is not only stupid, it doesn't reflect reality. If it did, then we wouldn't need Gallup polls, surveys, approval ratings, or things like that.

People change their minds all the time. And thank God for that.

Before 9/11, George Bush's approval rating hovered at around 50 percent. In the days and weeks immediately following 9/11, that figure jumped to nearly 90 percent. In times of crisis, people clamor for leadership—any leadership. As a country, we were badly shaken by the events of that horrible day. We looked to the president for confidence, assurance, and guidance, and he more than rose to the occasion.

Same thing happened as far as the war in Iraq was concerned. Polls taken following the State of the Union Address, which the president delivered six weeks prior to the war, showed that Bush's overall approval rating registered at 59 percent—a 33 percent drop from the high he enjoyed in the months following 9/11. Nearly half of the people surveyed expressed disapproval for the way the president handled the economy, while two out of every five were dissatisfied with how he managed foreign policy.

Two months later, when the Iraqi regime toppled, Bush's approval rating shot back up to 70 percent.

This isn't just the case with the president. This happens with any elected official, on any level. Our opinion of how well they're doing their job constantly fluctuates, depending on the economy, on changing events, on the level of unemployment, on any given number of factors.

Military commanders change strategies all the time in the heat of battle. So do our security leaders. "It has been said that the most fatal illusion is the settled point of view," said Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge last year in a speech before the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco. "This is where danger finds easy sanctuary. This is why America's security must also be consistent with changing times."



Implicit in Ridge's remarks was the notion that in this age of suicide bombers, sleeper cells, and bioterrorist attacks, we can never assume that those who don't like us won't try to hurt us. We must be prepared for anything. For the sake of our safety and our way of life, we have to analyze each situation as it comes up and keep our options open.

Funny, but I don't remember anyone blasting Ridge for saying that.

If a quarterback doesn't like the defensive alignment he sees on the field, he calls an audible. Yet no one ever knocks him for that. As a matter of fact, most football analysts would give the quarterback credit for having the foresight to change his mind.

So why the double standard when it comes to politicians?

Changing your mind is no sign of weakness. Changing your mind shows that you've carefully weighed an issue from both angles and that you're open to saying, "You know something? Maybe the other side does have a point."

And if, after weighing both sides, you do find yourself siding with the "other camp," that doesn't make you a traitor. Not in my book, anyway. What that tells me is that you're someone who has looked at an issue carefully and intelligently and come to a decision *on your own*, as opposed to the way your party is "supposed to think."

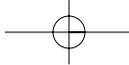
In today's divisive political climate, that takes a lot of courage.

THE ROAD TO NOVEMBER IS THROUGH THE MIDDLE

I often think of what Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords said in 2001 when he switched over from the Republican party and became an Independent. "I didn't leave the Republican party," he explained. "The Republican party left me."

That's the dilemma facing any elected official when it comes to politics today. Doesn't matter whether you're running for senator, governor, or president of the United States—if you want the nomination, you have to win the primary.

How do you do that? By appealing to the fringes: the kind of "knock on doors, work the phone banks, stand outside subway



stations at seven in the morning and pass out handbills” people who really are on the fringes of politics. To win the nomination, they’re the ones you have to cater to, because they’re the ones who are going to go out to the polls on a rainy day and vote, no matter what. Even if it’s an “off-year” election, with only one or two initiatives on the ballot, these people will vote.

With the average person, that’s not always the case. That person may just as easily vote or not vote in the primary or in an off-year election. So in this respect, once again the political parties are controlled by the extremes.

Now that you’ve won the nomination, how do you win in November? By moving to the center. Nothing earth-shattering about that—it’s just common sense. You already have the Democratic vote sewn up. To get the Republican vote (or at least, enough of it to get yourself elected), somehow you have to move to the center. You have to find a way to appeal to the millions of people in middle America who may not (and in all probability, do not) agree with your party’s liberal points of view.

Except you can’t move too close to the center, lest the extremes—the people on the fringes who got you the nomination in the first place—accuse you of flip-flopping. Or worse, stay home on Election Day.

You know what? That’s absurd. No matter which way you go, you wind up setting yourself up to be a hypocrite.

The reality is, if you want to win the White House, you need a candidate who’s willing to say, “This is who I am. I’m not running strictly on the basis of what you or your party wants to hear on any given issue. I’m running on the basis of what I think is right.”

Case in point: Bill Clinton, who ran as a “new Democrat” in 1992. “New Democrat” is just a euphemism for “not being a left-leaning Democrat.”

Another case in point: Arnold Schwarzenegger, who won as a “new Republican” in the recall election last year. Schwarzenegger ran as a fiscal conservative, yet he also espoused views on abortion, gun control and gay rights that went against contemporary conservative doctrine.



EXTREMIST THINKING: KEEP IT SIMPLE AND CHANNEL YOUR ANGER

The problem with polarization is that it's too easy. You look at an issue, see how it plays liberal or conservative, then work backwards to see how it justifies your point. Then you offer simple solutions that have the broadest application possible.

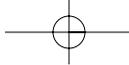
Suppose you're a left wing radio talk show host. A congressman comes up with an idea for a bill that would award amnesty to any illegal aliens who manage to avoid detection from immigrant authorities for a period of five years. You really don't have to think it out. Your response is automatic: "Illegal immigrant, poor people, got to take care of them, got to help them, great idea, let's do it." Doesn't matter how much of a slap in the face this would be to your parents, my parents (who came to the United States in 1940), or any of the countless other people who had to abide by certain rules and certain laws when they first migrated to this country. Why should we give a free ride to illegal aliens, just because they managed to beat the system?

Because you're a left wing radio talk show host, that's why. Regardless of what you may personally believe, you have to spout the party line, lest *you* be accused of flip-flopping.

If you're a right wing host, your take on the issue is likewise automatic: you either blame everything on the liberals, or you pin it on the government. You look for an enemy, be it foreign or domestic, and you point the finger at "them." You hear talk of a bill proposing amnesty for illegal aliens, and it's, "What, are they nuts? We're Americans, dammit! It's our country! We must close off our borders! They broke the law, screw 'em! Send 'em back from where they came!"

There's no room for compassion. There's no reason for it—after all, you're a right wing radio talk show host. It's the same kind of reflexive response . . . only with arch conservatives, it's all about anger and where to direct it.

But that's exactly what extremist thinking does: it forces people to think backwards, not forward. Once you've attached yourself to



a particular political philosophy, you simply work in reverse to justify your point of view. And you do that, of course, by ignoring anything that's on the other side, while latching onto everything that justifies your point.

And you call that freedom of expression?

What's the point of having political debate when you can't even consider the other side?

Political debate isn't just about winning. It's also about listening.

Maybe it's time we ought to think less about winning the argument and more about thinking it through. Maybe it's time we stop talking *at* each other and start talking *to* each other, so that we can at least consider the other side and work toward compromise and solutions.

Not too many talk show hosts can say this, but I'm open to having my mind changed. That's what has made me successful, and I think it's a quality that would make anybody reading this book successful as well. Here's why.

If you open your mind and listen to what other people have to say, you'll learn. Not only that, you'll find that when you talk about an issue—whatever that issue happens to be—the conclusion you've come up with is better, more intelligent, and more clearly thought-out than it would be if you were simply spouting the party line.

Why? Because you came up with the answer yourself. You thought it through, considered every angle, and *made your own choice*, instead of having someone else do it for you.

When you think about it, that's really what polarization hath wrought. That's really where the far left and far right both have it wrong. That's why, as we determine the future direction of this country, we must somehow find a way to bridge the gap between the extremes and bring us all closer to the middle.

And if we can't find common ground, then by all means let's create it!