

Senators John C. Danforth and Joe Lieberman in Conversation: The Role of Religion In America's Broken Politics

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Chancellor Wrighton

Good evening. Great to see so many on a cold, December day, I'm really proud that we're gathered together. We have a special program: Senators John C. Danforth and Joe Lieberman in Conversation: The Role of Religion in America's Broken Politics. We are extraordinarily well rewarded in having the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics here at Washington University. I'm grateful for the support that's been provided to launch this important initiative, and grateful for the commitment that many people have made to become a part of it. Obviously, we have great faculty engaged, and the faculty are led by Professor Marie Griffith, who is the Director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. She holds an endowed professorship in Senator Danforth's name, and we are fortunate that we were able to recruit her to Washington University in 2011 to help us build the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. The origin includes inspired leadership from Professor Wayne Fields, who helped craft what ultimately became a compelling proposal to develop this Center on Religion and Politics. We're fortunate that with Marie Griffith's leadership, we've been able to attract other outstanding members to our faculty, and they have been playing a critical role in the development of the Center.

A very important part of our agenda is to bring to our community, and to the nation, difficult subjects that can be discussed rationally. Sometimes people say that it's difficult to discuss politics and religion, and here we do both. We're fortunate that Marie Griffith is here to guide us in the development of the Center. She earned an undergraduate degree at the University of Virginia in Political and Social Thought, and received a Masters and Ph.D. in the study of religion from Harvard University. She served on the faculty of Princeton University, where she was also Associate Director of Princeton's Center for the Study of Religion, and at her alma matter, Harvard University, she served on the faculty, where she was the John A. Bartlett Professor in the Divinity School. She is a widely published author on the history of American religion, including books that explore the role of evangelical women, the history of Christian influence attitudes and practices related to body image and sexuality, and the important issues we're going to hear about today: the roles of religion and politics in American history.

I feel fortunate to be here tonight on this historic occasion, where we have two prominent national leaders, prepared to talk with us about politics and religion. And we're grateful that both have come to be a part of the program this evening. To formally introduce them, I'd like you to join me in welcoming Professor Marie Griffith.

Marie Griffith

Greetings to everyone joining us here in Graham Chapel, and our overflow space in Umrath Lounge. It is an exceptional honor to be hosting two distinguished statesmen and former US Senators, Joe Lieberman, and John Danforth, and I am delighted to have both of you with us this evening. There are other special guests here whom I'd like to recognize and thank for being present this evening, including Sally Danforth, and other members of the larger Danforth family, Chancellor Emeritus Dr. William H. Danforth, D.D. Danforth Burlin, Mary and Tom Stillman, Tom Danforth, and Eleanor and Ed Shaheen. Welcome to all of you.

Let me remind everyone to please turn off your cell phones at this time, and to silence other buzzing electronic devices.

Just a few words of comment at the outset to help frame tonight's conversation, before I introduce our distinguished guests. Americans today seem to agree on very few things across the board, but a few beliefs continue to unite us. Many of these are positive: the value of our nation's democratic ideals, however often we fall short of them; the soundness of our constitutional principles, however vehemently we argue over their meaning; the core values of freedom, equality, liberty, and justice for all. But we are also united by a growing despair about our current political system. Most everyone across the liberal to conservative spectrum, seems to agree that American politics is deeply damaged. Indeed, as the title of tonight's event suggests, that politics is fundamentally broken. It often feels as if nothing gets done in Washington. Republicans and Democrats seem to despise each other. The most extreme voices appear to win, over and over again, while the larger, moderate middle has to live with the consequences. Most of us today, I think, feel pretty bleak about our political present, and we worry profoundly about the future.

Tonight's conversation is an attempt to intervene in America's broken politics. From Senator Danforth and Senator Lieberman, we can learn much about the current situation, and perhaps, how to be part of the solution. Religion has played a complicated political role in the past, and it still does in the present. Sometimes it exacerbates the polarization, sometimes it improves it. So we want to talk especially about where religion is, or can be, useful, as well as where it just isn't.

My role tonight is a small one – it's to get the conversation rolling and then step out of the way. Our guests will speak for 45 to 50 minutes, and then will have a short time for audience questions to them, and we'll conclude between 8:45-9:00. So let me ask our distinguished speakers to approach the stage here, and I'll introduce them, and please note that you also have their bios on tonight's printed program. Senators Lieberman and Danforth.

John C. Danforth, to my right, is a partner with the law firm of Bryan Cave. He graduated with honors from Princeton, where he majored in Religion, and he received a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, and a Bachelor of Law degree from Yale Law School. He practiced law for some years, and then began his political career in 1968, when he was elected attorney general of Missouri in his first race for public office. He was reelected to that post in 1972, Missouri voters then elected him to the U.S. Senate in 1976, and reelected him in 1982 and 1988. So that he served a total of 18 years there. He initiated major legislation in multiple areas that include international trade, telecommunications, health care, research

and development, transportation, and civil rights. A few years after leaving the Senate, he was appointed Special Council by Attorney General Janet Reno to investigate the federal raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. And he later represented the United States as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations and served as a special envoy to Sudan.

As an episcopal priest, Senator Danforth has been open about his Christian faith and commitments, and he has provided at many important occasions, including the funeral of President Ronald Reagan. He has also written an important book, *Faith and Politics: How the Moral Values Debate Divides America and How to Move Forward Together*, and he is currently completing a new book, for Random House, titled *The Relevance of Religion*.

Most recently, in addition to practicing law, Mr. Danforth has been an actively generous patron of numerous public leaders and organizations, including the Center on Religion and Politics that bears his name at Washington University.

Joe Lieberman is perhaps best known from Yale College, and his law degree from Yale Law School. Three years after his graduation, three years, he was elected to the Connecticut State Senate, and served there for a decade, and then served as Connecticut's 21st Attorney General. He was first elected to the U.S. Senate as a democrat in 1988, and he made history six years later by winning the biggest landslide victory ever in a Connecticut Senate race. In 2000, Senator Lieberman was elected by another overwhelming margin to a third term, and in 2006, he was elected to a fourth term as an independent, winning the general election by more than 10,000 votes. Throughout his more than 20 years in the U.S. Senate, Mr. Lieberman was one of Congress's most influential voices on national security issues, and was the Senate's leading champion of legislation creating the Department of Homeland Security. He also advocated for important environmental initiatives to combat climate change, economic policies for both consumers and business, affordable and accessible health care, campaign finance reform, and public education. And it was he who led the successful legislative effort to repeal the Military's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy, prohibiting gay Americans from serving openly in the military.

Mr. Lieberman has spoken and written widely about his orthodox Jewish faith, and its relevance to politics, and he is the author, among other things, of the 2011 book, *The Gift of Rest: Rediscovering the Beauty of the Sabbath*. Mr. Lieberman now practices law in New York and is co-chair of the American Enterprise Institute's American Internationalism Project, which is a cross-party initiative designed to rebuild and reshape a bipartisan consensus around American global leadership and engagement.

So you've been welcomed, and I think we'll jump right in to the conversation. Our focus tonight is on politics in America, what's wrong with politics in Washington, what can we do to fix the problems. Both of you enjoyed long and illustrious careers in Washington, D.C., and I guess I'll ask you first, Senator Lieberman, when did politics seem to function well, and when did it not, and how can we begin to think better about our broken politics today?

Senator Lieberman

Uh, first, thanks Marie for your very gracious introduction. I think politics functioned better when Jack Danforth was there [laughter]. Let me just say how much I've been looking forward to this evening. I'm really fascinated by the topic, because religion and politics have played a big role in my life, but I really was looking forward to being with Jack and Sally, and just to say how much I admire you and appreciate you. What could be better than being with John C. Danforth at the John C. Danforth Center? I mean, it just doesn't get much better than that.

Okay, so, politics... I came to the Senate in 1989, which was the beginning of Jack's third and last term. I came from Connecticut, where as the old saying goes, politics ain't beanbag, in other words, there was some partisanship to it. But even then, I was surprised at some of the debates that became partisan, such as the debate on whether we should be involved in the Gulf War – give President Bush, 41, authority to go in. I must say that just every year since then, the Senate became more partisan, and I told Jack a story when we were talking about tonight on the phone, which he asked me to repeat, so I will.

Probably five or six years ago – the Senate is so divided, in terms of party, even in schedule. So every Tuesday, Republicans meet separately at their caucus lunch, Democrats meet separately at their caucus lunch. One Tuesday evening, I was at a reception in Washington and ran into a Republican colleague, and I said “How are you doing? Did you have a good day?” and he said “Oh, it was alright, but oh my god, those caucuses kill me!” I said, “What do you mean?” And he said “Well, you know, Senator so-and-so gets up for the first twenty minutes, he's the head of the campaign finance committee, calls our names out and tells us how we're letting him down and we're not raising enough money for the next election. Then Senator so-and-so gets up and talks about how we're going to, essentially, make the democrats look terrible, in what happens on the floor this week, and that goes on for about a half hour. And that leaves about ten minutes for constructive discussion.” And I said to him, “John, I've got to tell you the truth. The democratic caucus is the exact mirror reflection of what you have just described.”

So, we're at a point where this is – George Washington in his farewell address, which reads pretty well after more than two centuries, warned of the danger of factions in America's future. Really, I think he meant parties. That loyalty of members of the government, to their faction, would become more important than loyalty to the country. And I think we're living Washington's worst nightmare now. I mean, I can talk if you'd like about why it's happened, but basically, people who run for the Congress with the best of intentions, most of them, and work very hard to get there, end up acting in a way once they get there because of party divisions, ideological rigidity in a way that cannot really give them any satisfaction. I mean it's not why they ran, and it's certainly not why their constituents voted for them. And the result is a gridlock that makes the government dysfunctional.

If I had to say in one/two simple sentences, why isn't the place working anymore? What does it mean that people are too loyal to party ideology, big campaign contributors? It's because people have lost the ability to compromise. Not a compromise of principle, but if you go into a debate on a major piece of

legislation, and you're going to take the position that if this one piece is not in there, I won't support it, or as some do, if I don't get a 100% of what I want in this bill, I'm not supporting it. The end result is that you, and the Senate, and the country are going to get 0%. Because, you know, we're a country of almost 320 million people represented by 535 people in Congress. We're an extraordinarily diverse country – all of that is represented in Congress. You can't get anything done unless people are willing to be reasonable with one another and compromise, and that's not what's happening now. So we're at a point that the oddity – you know, who was it that had the definition of insanity, that you keep repeating the same fruitless, you keep the same behavior over and over again – the weird part of this is that the net effect of all this as a Congress, is that a historic low in terms of public approval. The numbers hover somewhere around 10% or below. My friend John McCain says that when your numbers are that low, you're basically down to close relatives and paid staff. And usually I say, you know, I'm not so sure about all my paid staff. Anyway, that's a sad introduction with a joke at the end.

Senator Danforth

Joe, thanks for being here. It really is great to see you. Believe it or not, I left the Senate 20 years ago. It's hard to believe. There are only three ways to leave the Senate – two have to do with boxes and you don't want either of those. And I'm not sure I've seen you since, and I just want you to know, you haven't aged a day.

Senator Lieberman

So good of you. That's why I love you, John.

Senator Danforth

I'm fishing, I'm fishing. Well, Joe talked about the Tuesday caucuses, the party caucuses. They have been going on for a long time. I got to the Senate in January 1977, and we had our party caucuses then, and they were reasonable affairs. But, beginning in my last couple of years in the Senate, they changed, and they became basically schemes, to embarrass the democrats. And I take it that it was pretty much the same on the other side, and it's easy to do it, and the way you try to embarrass the other side is, you concoct amendments for members of the Senate to vote on that will put them in a bad light. This is not a new strategy. When Ronald Reagan was first elected President, he put in place, with the help of Congress, what was popularly called Reaganomics, which was essentially, let's cut taxes and trim back some of the spending programs, and the Democrats offered a series of floor amendments, that we Republicans had to vote on, and basically they were to the effect of "let's restore money for the hurt and the lame and the veterans, and so forth, and not give tax breaks to the rich." And that was the kind of thing we had to vote on. The other side has done it to republicans, and so these Tuesday meetings became increasingly "gotcha" meetings, where members of my party would stand up, with glee on their face, and make them vote on it – something that would make the democrats look bad.

Now, my understanding is instead of the parties meeting once a week, on Tuesdays for lunch, they now meet Tuesday, and Wednesday, and Thursday for

lunch. Just as parties. And all of these meetings are in the same vein – namely, let’s do the other guys in, and set ourselves up for the next election. So everything has to do with “Okay, how am I going to gain advantage for my party in the next election?” It really is remarkable, you know we just had an election a month ago, right? And now you’re hearing the TV commentator say, “Well they better get with it in Congress, because in a few months they won’t do anything because another election is coming!” And it’s as though it’s always the election right around the bend and everything that is done in Congress is to try to create an advantage, particularly by offering embarrassing amendments. Well, what’s happened in the Senate is that the Majority leader, now, now outgoing, decided, “well I don’t want that to happen to my party, so I’m going to get control of the floor and not allow any amendments to be offered.” And so, the Republicans say, “and we’re going to do the same kind of thing. If anything comes up, we’re going to filibuster it.” So now, it takes 60 votes to get anything. That is new. I mean, that was the filibuster rule, but when the filibuster is just tried occasionally, okay, that’s what it takes to invoke cloture and then to filibuster. Now, it’s the standard way of proceeding. So the effect is gridlock. The effect is nothing gets done. And that, I think, is the current state of American politics.

Now, I would just – one further thought – and that is, why is it that partisans in Congress take these exceptionally hard-lined positions? Compromise has become a dirty word, “We won’t allow it.” But why is that? Why no compromise? Why is the spirit of compromise – and this really is a big change recently – why is it gone? And it’s gone because politicians want to succeed, the way that they succeed is to get reelected, the way they get reelected is to get nominated, and to get nominated they have to appeal to their so-called “base,” and the base, certainly of the Republican party, and I think increasingly of the Democratic party as well, are the purists. And their view is, “don’t give an inch.” And this is what members of Congress here. Don’t give an inch. So the moral of the story is, that there have to be other voices. And there has to be participation on the part of people who are not just the party regulars who show up in primary elections. Very important for more people to vote in primary elections, and very important for more people to show up at political meetings and be counter voices to what the politicians are hearing.

Senator Lieberman

So, let me just – I agree with everything Jack has said – and I think the analysis particularly about the appealing to the core constituencies, has been heightened by the misuse of a good thing, which was the Supreme Court decision, which I think was in the 60s, *Baker v. Carr*, which said that you had to have, basically the congressional districts had to be about equal, after every 10 year census, because otherwise, people with 200,000 in their district would have more weight in Congress than people with 2 million. And that led to redistricting every ten years, and the politicians took hold of that and drafted the lines to protect incumbents in the Senate, and so the districts became more and more partisan. Basically, to just put an exclamation point afterwards, like I said, most analysts say that out of the 435 seats in the House, almost 400 are really uncontested on election day, on most normal election days. It’s all about the primary. And so, here’s why this has a bad

consequence, this and dependence on partisan and ideological contributors to your campaign – because you won't take a risk. And you can't solve the country's most difficult problems – take the debt, now over 17 trillion dollars, it's hard to believe, and we've done that in the last 14 years. Well, you can't solve that and make everybody happy. You'll do the right thing for the country, you'll probably be unpopular for some groups for a while, in the end I think you'll be popular because the economy will get better, but the whole place is risk-averse because they don't want to offend the partisan group back home.

You know, I thought of something, when Jack was still there, there was a tradition in the Senate (I was thought about it when you were talking about the caucus) that seems quite quaint and outdated now. During my first term, the best I can recall, no incumbent Senator would go into the state of another incumbent from another party and campaign against that person. That happens all the time now. Now you can imagine the effect that has when you get back to the Senate and you go to incumbent Senator B, who you just campaigned against, and ask for his or her support on a bill, you know "hell no! Where were you last November?" [laughs]. So, that's just a little anecdotal response to what Jack has said.

Senator Danforth

When I was elected to the Senate in 1976, I went to Washington, started in the Senate in January 1977, I was then 40 years old, and the republicans only had 38 seats. So, 38 seats is nothing. You know, it's just nothing. And I landed on the Senate Finance Committee, and what a great committee, and it has this terrific jurisdiction over taxation and international trade, health care, social security, all the big issues. And so I, show up, one of 38 republicans, the junior member of the minority party in the Finance Committee, and the chairman of the committee is Russell Long. And one of the great experiences was to know Russell Long! He was just terrific. So, I take my seat, I've never met Russell Long before, this is my first day! And I'm sitting at the end of the table, and the Finance Committee was at work drafting a letter to the Budget Committee about what our plan was going to be for the next year: "Here's what we're going to do this ensuing year." And there was a little pause in the proceeding, and I put my hand up, and I said, "Mr. Chairman?" and he looked down the table at me, and I said "I have an idea." And he said, "Oh? What's your idea?" And hey, I'm a republican, and I said "I think we should have a tax cut." And he said, "How much?" Well, I hadn't thought about that [laughter]. So, I said, "5 billion dollars." Now this is 1977, five billion dollars was worth something [laughter]! And he said, "Alright. Any objection?" Nobody said anything. And he said "that's agreed to." And I thought, "Wow [laughter], this is going to be great!" And so I hustled back to my office and cranked out press releases telling the people of our state that on the first day on the job I'd gotten them a five billion dollar tax cut!

Actually, I had done nothing of the kind. We were writing a letter to the budget committee, it didn't have anything to do with real legislating, but I put out my press release, and here's the question: Why did Russell Long do that? Why did he do that? Senior republican, junior non-entity, one of 38 republicans. Why did he do that? Fast forward eight years, republicans now in control of the Senate, I become

Chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee and I decide I'm going to call on Russell Long and ask him, how do you become a good committee chairman? He gave me two pieces of advice: one is never hold a grudge, because your opponent today, you'll need as your ally tomorrow, and the second was, give everybody on your committee a sense of belonging, a sense of participation, a sense of being part of the action. That's what he was doing for me. He was making me look good. I don't think that's the case anymore.

Senator Lieberman

It's rarely the case, Jack. It's a wonderful story, so it leads me to this response. It reminds me and everyone here that politics is not a science, it's an art. Even though there are departments of political science at great universities, like Washington University. And even though some of the most decisions in politics are based on numbers – the number of votes you get when you run, the number of votes you have to pass legislation – but, ultimately, I say it's art because it really deals with people being able to work together, people being able to trust each other, people feeling like they belong on the committee, and there's very little of this. It's part of the reason why the place is dysfunctional and the parties have dominated. The parties are some of the cause of that, but there's more to it than that – I could go on for too long about that.

Part of it is the schedule of the Senate. I mean the joke in Washington goes the two worst things to happen to Congress were the advent of air conditioning and modern airplane travel. Air conditioning because Congress can stay there during the summer, and before that, Congress used to come in January, and pretty much stay through late Spring and then go home. But air travel, because, generally speaking, Senators arrive for a vote Monday afternoon, a bedcheck vote, so called, usually not a very important one. They work Tuesday and Wednesday. By Thursday, you can talk to Harry Reid in the last several years, and Mitch McConnell will have the same experience next year, the members are going over to the Leader and saying "I've got an event back home," or, "I've got a fundraiser in St. Louis or New York, or whatever. I've got to get out of here early today, Harry, or Mitch!" And by mid-afternoon, sometimes a little later, they're on the plane out of town. When they're there, they're running around at different events. There's very little time for members to get to know each other, and particularly across party lines, because of the division of the caucus and all the rest. So, what I'm saying is that, in the end, the Senate, all the big debates and big issues and real problems, in one sense it's 100 people going to work at the same place every day. And it's pretty much like every other workplace. If you trust the person you're working with, perhaps you even like the person you're working with, you're more likely to cooperate with him or her. And the prospects for that are less and less today, because members really don't know each other that well, outside the 'You're in my caucus, and you're not in my caucus.'

Just a brief story that I remember – I was part of a group with Lamar Alexander from Tennessee that was trying to figure out a couple years ago, how do we break through all of this partisanship? And we invited in two of the senior members of the Senate: Ted Stevens, from Alaska, a republican, and Danny Inouye, a

democrat from Hawaii. Both are gone now, from the Senate and from this earth. Really remarkable people, interestingly both, I believe, the first Senator from their state after statehood, and neither from the continental U.S. They had an unbelievable relationship, for years and years and years, they were the top republican and top democrat on the all-powerful appropriations defense subcommittee, and then the full committee. And you know, they used to say, you have more staff when you're in the majority – when one of them would lose the party majority, the other would come in, and pay for the other's staff, so they could keep the same staff.

Ted Stevens told me a story that was so quaint, he said "You know, one of the reasons how I learned about the Senate – when I first came, I used to carpool in with Mike Mansfield, who was later the majority leader and a democrat, and I forgot, a couple of others. Basically we were in town all the time, and we would rotate when we would leave the car for our wives. You know, this is the old days. And, we just got to know each other." And he told me a story, he said "Once on a bill, I put an amendment on, and a democratic Senator got up and opposed it, and all the democrats fell in line, they were in the majority, and defeated my amendment. And I knew he didn't know a damn thing about it." (If you know Stevens, you'll know his language was a little more flip-the-bird than I have just spoken.) And he said, "I went over to Mike Mansfield, and I said 'Mike, I don't think your folks understand this amendment!' And Mike said, 'Well, tell me.'" And he told him about it, and he said Mansfield moved to reconsider the vote. "Mansfield explained that he had talked to me, and that he thought I was right, and he urged all democrats (remember Stevens is a republican), and he urged all democrats to vote for the amendment, and it passed."

See, that would never happen today. Now, part of it was because we carpooled together, and we knew each other, so I don't know how you get back to that. But, the other thing they did, now don't take this wrong, they used to drink more than Senators do today [laughter]. And, you know what that meant? I mean, the year before I arrived, in what became George Mitchell's majority leader office, or two years before, I gather, it was the Sergeant of Arms office. And every afternoon at about 5, one of the rooms became a bar, and the Senators would come in and have a drink and chat together. And then you do develop – but nobody has the time to do that anymore. So, don't quote me out of context on that.

Senator Danforth

I think that, you know, it sounds like it's not a big point, but it is. Because there is a breakdown in social interaction, I think. And I've really been gone a long time. But, I do know that we had a lot of social interaction across party lines. And when you're in somebody's home, and you know a Senator's spouse, and you know the children of that family, it does have an effect on how you act. I was told by one incumbent Senator, that this person couldn't think of six other Senators he would have over to his house for dinner. And part of it is the cost of living in Washington. You know, it's the Great Populace thing – 'Don't ever give these people a pay raise. Oh, that's terrible, they're in it for the money.' They're not in it for the money. All of them could make more money elsewhere, but they can't afford to have their families

there. And it's just one, little thing. Marie, do you mind if I just briefly, interrupt this program for a commercial message?

Marie Griffith

Go right ahead. About what?

Senator Danforth

Religion.

Marie Griffith

Okay, well, that was next.

Senator Danforth

I want to talk about why this breakdown is, I think, a religious issue. Because, I think that the message that politicians are hearing now – members of the Senate, or members of Congress are hearing – is, basically, from the base, 'Don't compromise. Don't give an inch.' And, from everybody, 'Your job is to give me mine, now. Give me my benefits, and don't raise my taxes.' And politicians who want to be popular, and want to get reelected, a) attend to their base, and b) don't say anything that's not popular. And, I think that the antidote to those messages, is, essentially, religious. Because, I think religion says to the ideologically pure, the true believers, it says, 'You know, that's just politics. It's not absolute. There are no absolutes in politics. It's only politics. It's only sausage making. And it should not be confused with religion.'

Back in 1982, I was running for reelection, almost thought I was going to lose the election. I was in a deep depression – 'Oh my gosh, my whole career is going to be ruined.' And, my daughter D.D., who's here tonight, she was trying, I guess trying to cheer me up. And she said, during my despair, she said, "Well, it's not the World Series!" [laughter]. And, it isn't. And it isn't religion. And I think that religion says, faithful people say, 'Compromise is something that's expected from politics.' Because, if it's not compromising, first of all, it's not respectful – it's a violation of the love commandment – but secondly, it's idolatry. It's making a political ideology an absolute. That is idolatry, it's not making something out of wood, it's making something out of ideas. It's making politics something that it really isn't. And I think that that is really really an important thing for religious people to say to politics.

Senator Lieberman

So, I want to join in your commercial message. I think that's a brilliant insight, and I'd actually in a moment like to get to – how does religion organize itself to influence politics in that way? But, so, let's see, how to best approach it? You're right, religion is really about what ought to be. You know, there's a great Rabbi of the last century, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who talked about there being in the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, two covenants, if you will. One with Abraham, which he called the Covenant of Fate, which is the original covenant, but really what we are, what one is, in this case, as a Jew, but more broadly of course, because Abraham transcends through the monotheistic religions. But then its Sinai, also more broadly,

is the covenant of destiny, which is what we ought to be. And religion, really generally, is about, as you said, what we ought to be. It's about a vision, perhaps a prophetic vision. Politics is, deep in what is, but really at it's best, it tries to mediate between what is and what ought to be. And that's where religion can have an impact, if we can figure out how to organize it. And raising politicians above where they are now, particularly the ones from Congress.

I mean, in the Bible, the Hebrew Bible, the most powerful expression, or illustration of the prophetic vision, is the long journey of the children of Israel through the desert, for forty years. With a lot of difficulties along the way, and making it hard on their leader Moses, and even turning on God occasionally. But ultimately seeing that the way they reached the Promise Land was by joining together and working together. It wasn't easy. And that's what we somehow have to convince our – it may be that you're onto something really unique, because frankly nothing else so far has worked to disenthral those in power in Washington from where they are, and to liberate them back to where I think they really, most of them really want to be. Of course, the point of leverage here, is that most Americans, and most members of Congress, are religious. But, I think, as what happens so much in other parts of our lives, they separate their religious beliefs and aspirations and values from the work that they're doing in Congress. I don't mean, even substantively, I mean the way the way they're going at it. The fact that they've allowed themselves to be trapped by parties that they have made idols, you're right.

Senator Danforth

But I think it's not just the politicians, you know. I mean, the politicians, look, I mean, they're human beings, they want to win, they want to tell people what they want to hear, which is exactly what they do, and what people want to hear is, 'I've got it coming. I've really got it coming. I've been treated so unfairly. You know, I deserve more than I'm getting from politics.' And the politicians say, 'Oh, of course, you're right.' Where's the counter-message to this? And, there was this concept of our first four Presidents. It was early, it was one of the great Republican principles of our first four Presidents, the early days of our country. It was called virtue. And virtue, to them, meant great conduct, but it meant something else. It meant putting – not grabbing everything for yourself, but putting the common good at a personal interest. All of them, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, spoke about virtue. Madison, the consummate political realist, Madison, said, "Without virtue, everything is just going to fall apart." Well, where's that message anymore? It's not coming from politics.

JFK, when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," and he said "Let the world know that we will pay any price and bear any burden in the pursuit of liberty." That was more than 50 years ago. Have you ever heard anything from any politician like that since? I don't think so. I don't think there's any politician who would say you should bear any burden at all, pay any price, however small. No, you should get a tax cut. Keep your social security checks coming. Medicare. All of this stuff, so we've got the 17 trillion dollar national debt, and growing, so where does the counter-message come from?

Marie Griffith

Well, to be fair, I think religion has been part of the problem at times too. Which is, I think the point you're [Senator Lieberman] pointing out. People call themselves religious and maybe behave in a certain kind of way. So it sounds like you're really, both of you, in some ways, talking about cultivating a particular kind, or returning to certain kinds of virtues – or talking about religion in a certain kind of way.

Senator Lieberman

You know, I'm just thinking as Jack was talking, is that if there's a place to be encouraged about this, it is that some of these values, and virtues, are actually still lived out in the lives of people. There's still an awful lot of volunteering, for charitable, or communal organizations, religious, not-religious, etcetera. And it's this fundamental feeling that is real, that is that people get tremendous satisfaction out of, to use a familiar phrase, serving a cause larger than themselves. I mean, at some point, they want to feel that they've done something that may leave the place better when they leave, or is just beyond taking care of themselves. You know, it's perhaps easier for you and me, out of office now, to say, I think there's a lot of people in this country, and it might just be a majority, who would respond to a leader who would challenge them, to be more selfless, to make the country as strong as they want it to be again. And, I hope somebody tries it in the next Presidential election. Because I think it may be that the country is so fed up with the status quo, and knows that it's not just that the government is not producing, that Congress is not producing widgets. The Congress is not solving problems that people have that are real. Whether it's the debt, or the condition of too many of our public schools that are failing a lot of kids, including mostly poor kids, whether it's something like climate change. We have a series of problems that it seems as if Congress is going to wait to become crises or catastrophes before they deal with them, and then it's going to be very hard. So, I wish somebody would come along and appeal to our better nation.

And so, if I had to cite two or three things that got me into public service, it would be that Kennedy inaugural address. I was coming out of, going into college that year. And it wasn't just me, it was a lot of people in my generation, who were catalyzed into public service by those ideals.

Marie Griffith

Well, speaking of problems and issues to be solved – one issue, as you know, that's been facing the St. Louis region. I mean, we're here, just about 10 miles from Ferguson. There's a lot that has been going on there, and I think we talked a little bit in our conference call about ways you might think about bringing some of these ideas about religion, about religious virtue, about bringing people together, to bear, on these kinds of broader issues, that are not only facing St. Louis, of course, but are very live issues across the country. Senator Danforth, would you speak to those issues?

Senator Danforth

Well, two weeks ago last night I guess, when the Grand Jury announcement was made, and then there was all this terrible disturbance, burning, looting, plus the protest, and some of the commentators said, "Well this is heartbreaking, because the stores are being destroyed," and I think for those people, yes. But, I think, this whole thing has been heartbreaking for all of us who love this town. I mean, we love it. When I left the Senate, I didn't leave because I was tired of it, because I didn't like it. I loved being in the Senate – I wouldn't like it now, but I loved it at the time. I wanted to come home. This is our home. If you go around and talk to, just scads of people in St. Louis, you get one message. We love it here. And then, we have become, sort of the national, or international, standard for something awful. And we've got to make it right.

So, I think we need a project here, you know, there's just so many good people in this town. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and thousands. And they're not mean, nasty, violent, racist, people. They're good people. And they take pride in having a community in which they live. So, we've got to make this thing right. And we've got to have a project, in my opinion. And part of the project, a lot of it, is governmental stuff, and people are working on this, so what are we going to do when people say we need more representative police departments? Good, well let's work on that. We can do that. There are ways to do that. People say that these traffic tickets, you know, the speed traps that make money for these little municipalities, basically poor municipalities, that's just wrong, it's just asking for trouble. We can fix that. We can do that. Or the body cameras, if that's a good idea. I mean, there are things we can do, let's get on with it. Let's turn this from being St. Louis being kind of the standard for just awfulness, to a community that can turn it around and I think, that this too, is a responsibility for particularly our religious congregations. It's not just okay, let's change the law on how much revenue municipalities can get from traffic tickets, or let's recruit more African American police officers. That's good stuff to do, but I believe that being a faithful person must entail something more than writing a letter to your Congressman, or your State Legislator. So, what can religious congregations do? What would happen if our religious congregations – I'm a great believer in congregations. Maybe some people worship God on the golf course, but I bet they don't.

Senator Lieberman

[Laughs] They may pray to God on the golf course.

Senator Danforth

More likely, curse God [laughs]. But, let's suppose that our religious congregations started thinking about – okay, let's get some projects going here. You know, let's get some projects. What could they be? Let's support some schools. Our daughter Mary is involved – wherever she is, there she is – in starting this Hawthorne School, it's going to be on North Kingshighway, and it will be a Charter School for girls, teaching them STEM, science stuff. That's a big deal. Why couldn't our congregations say, okay, we're going to help something like that, or we're going to have a mentoring program, or we're going to have a one-to-one relationship with

another congregation in another part of town, we're going to make them stronger, we're going to make them community centers. That's something we can do. And I think that's what people in St. Louis want to do. So, let's get on with it.

Senator Lieberman

Well, I don't have much to add to that. I'd say, Jack, your response is both characteristically constructed, and characteristic of you to take on that kind of personal feeling, of almost like guilt, for this region. I do want you to know from the perspective of somebody who has been in the Northeast since the trouble broke out in Ferguson after the Grand Jury decision, that I don't think anybody I've talked to, sees it as a St. Louis or Ferguson problem. I really don't see it as "That's them," I think people are seeing it as 'Us.' And, feeling that notwithstanding that we have an African American President, notwithstanding that we have African Americans at higher and higher levels at every level of activity in America, there's still a lot of African Americans who are left behind, who are not treated equally. We don't have equal opportunity. And I agree with you. I think in some way, religions, organized religions, religious entities, have pulled off that particular battlefield. I mean, religions were really – a good word for religions here, in American history, religion has played a very constructive role over all. Right from the beginning, the Founders framed our founding documents really on a lot of their religious beliefs: self-evident truth that all of us are created equal and endowed, not by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, but by our Creator, with the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The abolitionist movement was led by religious leaders and religious congregations, and so too was the Civil Rights movement, most particularly Dr. Martin Luther King. But, it's time for religious groups to come back onto the field, and continue the work, because it's not over, the need is not over.

Senator Danforth

I wrote a book several years ago, and it was a reaction to what I thought was the misuse of religion to divide us, and the creation of religiously-fraught wedge issues, and the use of them for political purposes. I wrote that book and Rush Limbaugh spent a couple of segments attacking my book. I bet you've [Senator Lieberman] been the topic of Rush?

Senator Lieberman

Yes. Something else we have in common [laughter].

Senator Danforth

Anybody else? I mean, you haven't lived! [laughter]. But, he said "Oh no, Danforth says religious people should get out of politics." No, I don't think so. I think they should get into it, not out of it. But it's really interesting, religion can be used divisively. Has been used divisively. Look at Iraq – very divisive. That's why we've kept it out, we don't want the entanglement of religion in politics in the United States. We certainly don't want political agendas, we don't want say "This legislation, that. You've got to be for or against it, or so on." I don't think so. But the meaning of religion. The meaning of the word, the root of that word, is the same as

for “ligament”: it means to bind us together. That’s what it means. In Hebrew, “Shalom,” as I understand it, means wholeness. Wholeness. Christianity, in Christ, all things hold together. Holding together, the Ministry of Reconciliation, that really is religion in a constructive, positive way. Not to try to win elections – “I’m on God’s side, you’re not” – but religion is binding us together. And that’s a great national project as well as a great religious project.

Senator Lieberman

Hear, hear.

Marie Griffith

Well, I think it’s a good time for us to get the mics out and open the floor to 15, or so, minutes of discussion, or questions, and I’ll keep asking questions if we don’t have questions from the audience.