

William S. Cohen

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Why I Am Leaving

Last week I announced that I would not seek reelection to the Senate for a fourth term. I have been moved by the reaction of my constituents and colleagues. Many expressed sadness over my decision, and nearly all were perplexed. Why are so many leaving the Senate? How can the center hold? Won't the system fall apart?

It is not a case, to continue with Yeats's words, "that the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity." Such a poetic construct presumes too much and maligns the character and capabilities of those who have most recently arrived in Congress and those who have chosen to remain.

Those of us leaving the Senate do so for unique and deeply personal reasons. I suspect, however, that we share a common level of frustration over the absence of political accord and the increase in personal hostilities that now permeate our system and our society.

Increasingly, public officials face: too little time to reason and reflect; the hair-trigger presumption of guilt pulled at the slightest whisper of impropriety; the schizophrenia of a public that wants less government spending, more government services and lower taxes; and the unyielding demands of proliferating single-issue constituencies. Too many hours are devoted to endless motion without movement, interminable debate without decision and rhetorical finger-pointing without practical problem-solving.

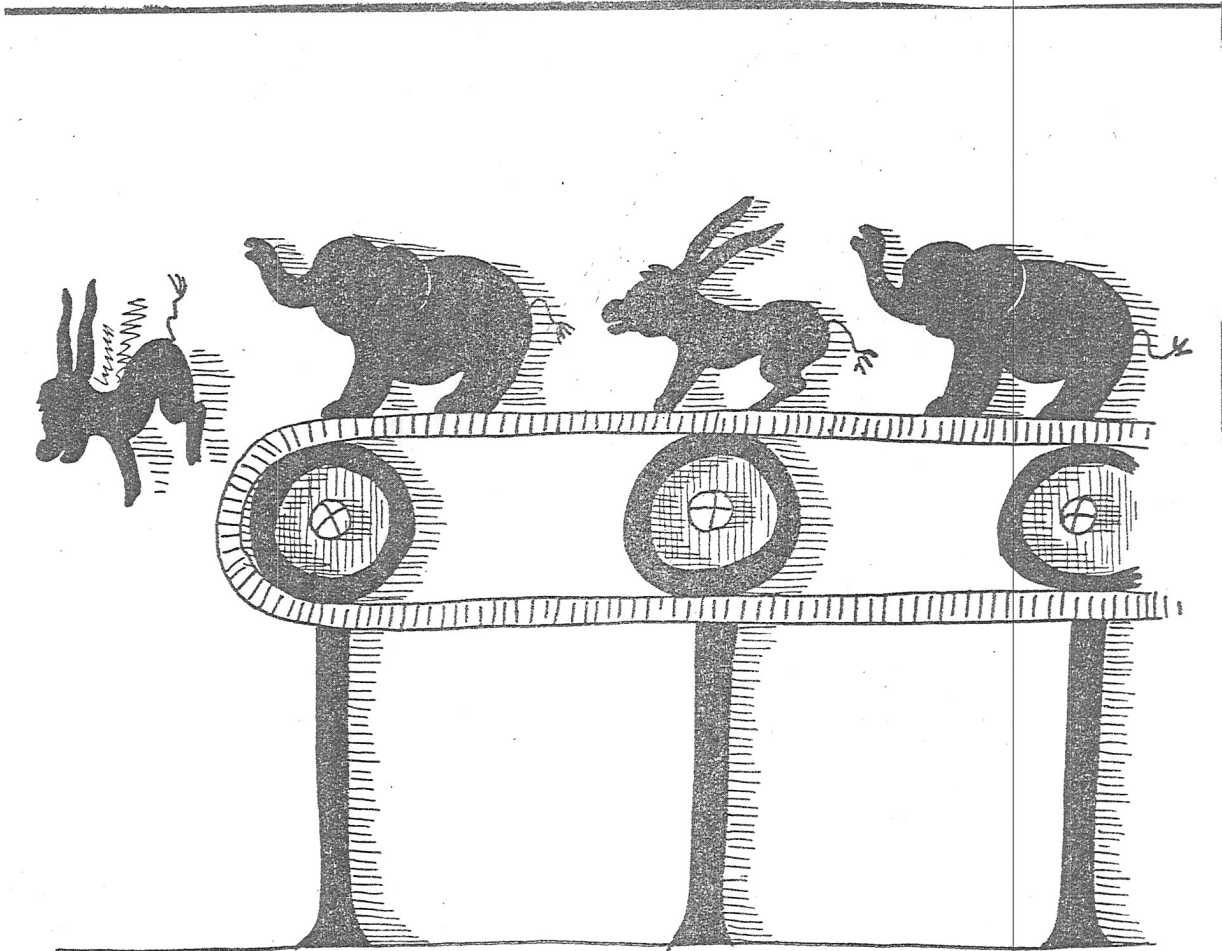
Our republic, we know, was de-

signed to be slow-moving and deliberative. Our Founding Fathers were convinced that power had to be entrusted to someone, but that no one could be entirely trusted with power. They devised a brilliant system of checks and balances to prevent the tyranny of the many by the few. They constructed a perfect triangle of allocated and checked power, Euclidean in symmetry and balance. There could be no rash action, no rush to judgment, no legislative mob rule, no unrestrained chief executive.

The difficulty with this diffusion of power in today's cyberspace age is that everyone is in check, but no one is in charge.

But more than the constitutional separation of powers is leading to the unprecedented stalemate that exists today. There has been a breakdown in civil debate and discourse. Enmity at times has become so intense that members of Congress have resorted to shoving matches outside the legislative chambers. The Russian Duma, it seems, is slouching its way toward the Potomac as debate gives way to diatribe.

We are witnessing a gravitational pull away from center-based politics to the extremes on both the right and left. Those who seek compromise and consensus are depicted with scorn as a "mushy middle" that is weak and unprincipled. By contrast, those who plant their feet in the concrete of ideological absolutism are heralded as heroic defenders of truth, justice and the American way.



BY MARGARET SCOTT

The departure of centrists from party ranks may be cheered by ideologues in the short term. But unless the American people are willing to embrace one party dominance and governance for extended periods (or turn to the British parliamentary model, which I don't recommend), then elements within the liberal and conservative factions will necessarily move back to the center, toward compromise and, yes, consensus.

The American people are experiencing a great deal of anger and anxiety at this time. The stern vir-

tues of self-discipline and fiscal prudence have given way to the soft vices of mindless consumption and selfish gratification. We are now paying for the wages of our sins, and ironically, our citizens are angry with political leaders who have indulged their appetites, purchased their votes and passed the bills to the next generation. The road to fiscal solvency and sanity will not be easy, and it surely will not be paved with the bloated promises or blandishments of political extremists.

I have devoted nearly a quarter of

a century to public service and a search for common ground in a society that is growing in complexity and diversity. Although I have decided to enter the private world to pursue new challenges and opportunities, I remain convinced that the American political system will pass through this transitional phase in our history and return to the center, the place where most people live and a democracy functions best.

The writer is a Republican senator from Maine.