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THE BEST THOUGHTS OF THE BEST MINDS ON CURRENT NATIONAL QUESTIONS

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Ideas, Policy, and Politics

THE ROLE OF INDEPENDENT RESEARCH IN PARTISAN TIMES

Address by **STROBE TALBOTT**, President, The Brookings Institution

Delivered to the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, March 28, 2006

The fact that one of our nation's Founding Fathers should also be the founder of this university is a good starting point for my remarks. Thomas Jefferson personified—perhaps even epitomized—the proposition that good governance is based on good ideas, and that good ideas are based on respect for facts, rigor in thinking, rationality in debate, and civility in discourse.

Moreover, Jefferson's name is associated with the word Independence, with a capital "I." Two of the three accomplishments for which he wanted to be remembered were the Virginia statute on religious freedom and the Declaration of Independence. And the third accomplishment of which he was so proud—this university—was created with another I-word in mind: the impact it would have on public affairs, especially through the education of good citizens and leaders in both political parties—to wit, UVA graduates such as Ted Kennedy and George Allen.

"Independence" and "impact" are two thirds of a trinity of virtues that are critical to public policy research. The third, overriding virtue, I'm sure you'd all agree, is quality—as in intellectual quality: the kind of quality that can only be attained in an atmosphere that fosters the right combination of discipline and imagination, an openness to the constructive criticism of peers, and the active encouragement of a diversity of views.

Those basic values—quality, independence, and impact—are important not just to Mister Jefferson's university and to the center that Burkett Miller established here, but also to the institution that Robert S. Brookings founded in Washington. We have a common stake not just in upholding those values, but in defending them when they're in jeopardy, as I think is the case today.

Before I elaborate on that point, let me give you a bit of background about Brookings. We're celebrating our 90th anniversary this year—which makes us only half as old as UVA. But that still makes us among America's oldest think tanks. Robert Brookings was a mid-western businessman and philanthropist who came to Washington at the invitation of another one of those UVA-educated leaders, who happened also to be a professor and a self-described Jeffersonian. I'm referring, of course, to Woodrow Wilson. We think of ourselves as engaged in a form of education ourselves. We're constantly learning things, and we try to help educate the public as well. That's why we take pleasure in being one of the few think tanks with a "dot.edu" rather than a "dot.org" address in cyberspace.

Over the past nine decades, Brookings and like-minded institutions have simultaneously concentrated on informing the public about the major issues of the day and playing our own part in generating ideas about how our nation might better govern itself and lead the world. In the 1920s, we helped the government learn how to establish a modern accounting and management system; in the '30s, we helped create Social Security; in the '40s, we had a significant hand in designing the UN and the Marshall Plan; in the '50s, we worked to improve the presidential transition process and modernize the military; in the '60s, we contributed to the case for deregulation; in the '70s, the design of the Congressional Budget Office; in the '80s, it was tax reform.

In the last twenty years, we've turned our attention to developing new approaches to healthcare, tax policy, education, welfare, public service, campaign finance, and the new international security environment that has come with the end of the Cold War and global integration. In the wake of 9/11, we've ratcheted up our search for more effective ways of organizing the U.S. government to defend our homeland and advance our national interests abroad.

Now, issues of governance and leadership are, by definition, political. "Political" means that they are, quite properly, subject to the push and pull of partisan interests—and, I'd add, partisan passions. That raises an issue that avowedly nonpartisan organizations like ours, yours and mine, must face: what does that adjective, nonpartisan, really mean?

First, I should explain why we at Brookings use that word rather than "bipartisan." Bipartisanship implies cooperation between Republicans and Democrats (which—don't get me wrong!—we're all for). But in addition to the lonely but relevant case of Senator Jim Jeffords, there are lots of Americans who don't associate themselves with either party. A truly nonpartisan institution respectfully rejects the notion that truth and wisdom are necessarily to be found in one major party or the other.

Nonpartisanship, in other words, is a corollary of the principle of independence. It means that the public-policy scholars most worth listening to—however they might register and whomever they might vote for—develop their ideas independently of any platform, agenda or party line. They find solutions to today's most pressing and—by definition, complex—problems, as opposed to finding a rationale for their own established views. Or to put it differently: nonpartisanship is a frame of mind, one that was captured nicely by Daniel Patrick Moynihan—a Democrat with a Ph.D. who worked for Richard Nixon. "We're all entitled to our own opinions," said Professor/Ambassador/Senator Moynihan, "but we're not entitled to our own facts."

That frame of mind prospers on this campus. It also prospers inside the walls of Brookings. But it's not doing so well in the city where I work and where you visit from time to time. Brookings, as you may know, is located just off DuPont Circle. That puts it a mile from the White House, two and a half miles from the Capitol, three miles from the Democrats' and the Republicans' national committee headquarters—and eight miles inside the Beltway. That means we're at what might be called the Ground Zero of intense, often destructive partisanship. Those of you who tune into what happens in Washington could be forgiven for thinking the whole city is a civility-free-zone.

Note that I said "intense, destructive" partisanship. Partisanship is not only, in and of itself, a natural and healthy part of our political system—it's institutionalized in the two-party system. The same could be said of polarization. Barry Goldwater had a valid point when he said that our elections should offer the American people "a choice, not an echo."

A second point that offers some consolation is that partisanship in the negative, divisive sense isn't always and everywhere as bad outside the Beltway as it is inside (which is one reason I'm always looking for an excuse to get out of town). Our scholars have learned from their extensive work in cities and states that mayors and governors tend to follow the doctrine associated with the name of Fiorello LaGuardia: when it comes to picking up garbage or fixing potholes, there is no Democratic or Republican way to do it right.

A third point I try to bear in mind—especially when I'm in the presence of professors of American history—is that polarization is not new, nor is it as bad as it's been in the past, say, in the 1860s, or, for that matter, the 1960s, when I was an undergraduate at one of the many campuses in this country that was in turmoil.

But just because partisanship and polarization have gotten out of hand in years gone by is not an excuse for being complacent when it happens in the present—especially when it's toxic in new and ominous ways. That, I fear, may be where we are now.

By any measure, the United States Congress is not just more polarized than it was a generation ago—the polarization has become structural. Let me explain. One of several reasons that there are fewer moderates in Congress is that electoral redistricting has made many seats safe for one party or the other. All too often, that means either there's virtually no competition at all, or the only meaningful competition takes place in primaries, not in the general election. As a result, candidates spend more energy winning the support of activists in their own party than in appealing to potential cross-over voters in the other party.

Once candidates are elected and report for duty in Washington, they find that they are subject to leaderships on both sides of the aisle that have become much more dogmatic about enforcing the party line.

On top of that, as recent headlines have reminded us, legislators have more sense of obligation to the growing army of lobbyists who fund campaigns and who use legislators as surrogates in waging their own ideological or parochial battles. All this encourages the noisier, more militant wings of the parties to square off against each other.

Enter the fourth estate as an accomplice to the problem. Many in the media have an interest in covering politics as combat rather than as a deliberative process. This is partly a function of the commercial environment in which newspapers, magazines, and networks compete for readers, viewers, and listeners. Major news organizations have watched their market share fall. They are losing their audiences to specialized publications, cable television, talk radio, internet Web sites and blogs—all of which are more focused on "narrowcasting" to the tastes and opinions of consumers rather than broadcasting to the American public at large. These new competitors often slant their coverage in one direction or the other in order to go after constituencies with explicit political orientations and agendas. Even if these newcomers don't succeed, as some fear they will, in driving the established networks and newspapers to extinction, there's no question they have added to the pressure on the media at large to be more "edgy," more opinionated—and, hence, more polarized—and polarizing.

If I seem a bit worked up on this subject, it's because I was a journalist for 21 years. One reason I loved that profession was that it paid me a decent wage to continue my education, see the world, and, through columns and analytical pieces, participate in the national debate. But another reason I loved it was that much of the proprietorship of the media, when I was getting my start, saw itself as being not just a business but a public trust. That's far less true today, to the detriment of the public good.

Now, you sometimes hear conventional wisdom to the effect that it's all the public's fault: Americans want to be entertained by shouting matches between pundits or politicians. Therefore, they—the audience—are to blame for hyper-partisanship in the media.

Polling data suggests otherwise. Self-described moderates are still a plurality among voters, as they have been for the last forty years.

There's no denying that today's polarization does reflect some changes in society. While the number of self-described moderates has remained a steady plurality of 40 percent over the last forty years, self-described liberals and conservatives have sorted themselves more consistently along party lines. Like-minded people at either end of the political spectrum tend to seek out ideas, neighbors and, not surprisingly, leaders that conform to their own views.

Nevertheless, on most issues—including some of the most politically explosive—majorities or large pluralities favor moderate positions. For instance, polls suggest that the country is nearly evenly divided between those who describe themselves as pro-choice and pro-life. More significant than that roughly even split is another set of polling data: 55 percent of Americans believe that abortion should be legal under certain circumstances, while only 26 percent believe that it should always be legal and only 17 percent say it should never be legal. In short, the country is more moderate than

the political background noise would suggest. Citizens want their leaders—and those who advise them or comment on their performance—to be arguing about what's best for the country, not calling each other names.

Higher levels of polarization impair the nation's ability to come together in meeting our greatest challenges. As a general proposition, that means balancing diversity with unity—a goal that's captured by our nation's motto: "E pluribus unum." Translated from Latin into practice, that means: politics should be more about finding common ground than staking out a battle ground.

As for our present situation, I'll grant that there have been a few examples in recent years of a bitterly fractious Congress mustering bipartisan support for some important measures—welfare and education reform, improvements in homeland security and the reorganization of the intelligence community, and tightening up the rules for corporate governance, to name a few.

But polarization has still gotten in the way of common sense and sound policy where it matters most. Take the function of Congress providing advice and consent on judicial appointments. The fact that Congress last year narrowly avoided "going nuclear" on that subject was a wake-up call about the extent to which both the courts and Congress have been affected, and I'd say infected, by polarization and the wrong kind of partisanship.

Another example is advocacy of an open international trading system. That's become a third rail in American politics: speak out for it and you risk being fried. It hasn't always been this way. During the Cold War, presidents and congresses were able to build broad national coalitions in favor of free trade regardless of which party controlled either or both branches of government. Such coalitions are much more difficult to forge today.

A number of candidates in the 2004 Democratic primaries treated the "outsourcing" of service-sector jobs as though it was the greatest menace of our day. Republicans, long the party of free trade, still imposed steel tariffs and pilloried the President's top economic advisor, the highly regarded Harvard economist Gregory Mankiw, for merely suggesting that outsourcing might have some benefits for the American economy.

So what should be a bipartisan effort to increase our competitiveness in the global economy and to address the needs of Americans displaced by international trade now risks becoming a contest to see who's in favor of the highest walls—either against imports, or immigrants, or both. That's bad for everyone—it's bad for all Americans, and for the whole world.

More generally, the tendency to frame political choices in win/lose, winner-take-all terms has inhibited progress on transnational issues like global poverty, climate change, and non-proliferation. On the home front, it has had a comparable effect of generating more heat than light on issues like Social Security, healthcare and worker training.

The most glaring example of this whole problem is our failure to restore our nation to a condition of fiscal sanity. The $300 billion annual budget deficit and our $5 trillion national debt pose a challenge that can only be met with the restoration of bipartisanship of a kind that we arguably haven't seen since Harry Truman made common cause with Arthur Vandenberg on how to rebuild Europe and wage the Cold War.

And speaking of national security and foreign policy, we're going to need the same kind of bipartisanship if we're going to deal with Iraq in a way that salvages our interests. On the surface, the stances of the political parties toward Iraq appeared to converge considerably in the course of the 2004 campaign. To some extent, that illusion persists. Neither political party, after all, is proposing a drastic or immediate reduction of military force levels or military spending.

Below the surface, however, a real chasm exists between Democratic and Republican bases. Less than half of those who identify themselves as Democrats believe that the best way to ensure peace is through military strength, while a lot more than half—nearly 70 percent—of Republicans are on the other side of that issue. That gap between the parties has grown considerably over the last decade. This gap has many implications, but certainly the most basic is that our political leaders will have a much harder time putting together a comprehensive national security strategy capable of gaining broad-based public support, let alone addressing specific challenges such as the war in Iraq.

I can tell you from my own recent travels to Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East, that our friends abroad are not just concerned by this structural divisiveness in our politics—they're truly alarmed, especially with regard to Iraq. Whatever their skepticism about the way the war started, they don't want it to end in an American debacle. They're also worried that the troubles we're having in Iraq are creating a backlash against international engagement more generally—maybe not isolationism in the 1920s and '30s sense, but in a latter-day version that combines xenophobia and protectionism. So what does all this mean for institutions committed to nonpartisan public policy? For starters, one way is to lead by example—that is, to create and sustain an atmosphere that actively—indeed, proactively—encourages collaboration on projects without regard to party lines, that brings people of different backgrounds and perspectives together. This is a difficult balancing act. It requires that institutions like ours cultivate a diversity of perspectives within our ranks. But it also requires that scholars with different viewpoints actively work together to address policy challenges.

When Brookings does a joint event or joint project with an institution that is avowedly conservative or liberal—and we reach out in both directions—our purpose (and we hope theirs) is to bridge the partisan divide—not to debate, however politely, back and forth across that divide. In other words, we try to avoid what we call the "Crossfire" trap: that is, letting the two outfits in question get type-cast as representing opposite and predictable sides in the national debate.

If that's Scylla, then Charybdis is the "two-handed trap," as in: "on the one hand, on the other hand"—that is, feeling that we've always got to reflect both sides of a contested issue.

That, too, is something to avoid. Our job should not be to forge compromises or to aim for the middle (which, by the way, is a moving target in the American political spectrum). Being nonpartisan doesn't mean being "policy-neutral"—a phrase, and a concept, that is anathema to our goal of being policy-relevant.

Once scholars have used the best tools of social science to come up with innovative solutions to tough policy problems, they should be expected to put forward their policy findings and prescriptions forcefully. That doesn't mean there's a "Brookings line" on any subject, any more than there's a "UVA line" (except maybe with regard to certain sporting events). Our attitude with regard to product—that is, in our case, the analysis and recommendations that our scholars come up with—is to let the chips fall where they may, as long as our people adhere to the highest standards of intellectual rigor and collegial conduct.

What does this mean in practice? Well, letting the chips fall where they may means—to mix a metaphor—not loading the dice. The main combatants in today's political battleground—politicians, party leaders and advocacy organizations—are always in search of ideas that serve their strategic objectives. Some research organizations are happy to supply these ideas: they take as their starting point a set of policy objectives defined by political operatives, and then tailor their research to buttress those pre-set positions. This approach has been called "Jeopardy research," a reference to the TV game show where the host provides the answer and the contestants do battle to come up with the right question.

In our business, the competition also often revolves around large cash prizes. As on other fronts of the political wars, money is a hugely powerful weapon. There are plenty of funders out there who think they've got the right answers already and are looking to sponsor research that will support them.

Quite simply, that is something a truly independent, high-quality research outfit must avoid—literally, at all costs, and there will be costs sometimes.

While we're on the subject of money: a lot of it these days is going not into research per se but into the presentation and marketing of that research. A recent study by Andrew Rich, a professor at City College in New York, caught my eye because it punctured the myth among liberals that conservative research organizations have out-spent liberal and mainstream organizations. Quite the contrary, avowedly conservative organizations, at least in the time frame Rich looked at, were outspent—by a considerable margin. Yet these conservative foundations—and the policy institutes that they support—had, according to Rich's data, greater impact. That was, at least in part, because they put a significantly higher percentage of their budget into outreach than nonpartisan institutions.

Avowedly liberal organizations have taken notice. Several of these have copied the "war-room" model, focusing on the drafting of talking points for like-minded politicians, or developing so-called "wedge-issue legislation," with the sole purpose of advancing the political fortunes of a political party or its candidates.

Obviously, nonpartisan institutions like ours need to steer clear of any arrangement that smacks of compromising the quality and independence of their work. That said, we've got to be more focused on identifying our intended consumers, and trying harder to reach them through the various media that they use—from the web and e-mail, to talk radio and cable television, to handheld devices and, yes, cell phones. Otherwise, we won't be fulfilling the third element of our trinity: impact.

Therefore we have to convince our own funders that the ability to disseminate our work is crucial—and therefore worthy of their support—along with the research itself.

A final word about how we can strengthen the trinity as a whole. We'll enhance the quality, independence and impact of our work if we're more aggressive and imaginative about partnerships. The basic premise here is that—while there will always be incompatibilities between and among institutions, and while there will always be an inescapable element of competition in those relationships—we absolutely must shift the ratio of competition to collaboration more in the direction of collaboration.

At Brookings, we have increased our partnerships with scholars at other institutions across the political spectrum: the Urban Institute, the Cato Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for American Progress, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Hoover Institution—and, yes, the Heritage Foundation.

I think the next couple of years—i.e., as we head into the 2008 presidential campaign—give us an opportunity for more broad-based collaboration than has been the case in the past. That's because the 2008 race is shaping up to be the first one in 56 years—since 1952—when neither ticket will feature an incumbent president or vice president. That could mean—let's hope it does mean—that the two parties will be more open than usual to fresh ideas without quite as much of a partisan stamp to them. We're going to be doing some sustained, focused, ambitious work of our own based on that premise, including through collaboration with outfits up and down Think Tank Row and around the country.

In that venture, as in others, universities are vital partners for us. They're the keepers of the gold standard for the intellectual values we strive to uphold; they're the source of the latest methods for research in the disciplines we apply to the policy world; they're often the source of our scholars themselves. And many of them see value in joint projects with think tanks like ours.

So on that note, I think I've come full circle—to the common ground—and common mission—between universities like this one, founded by Thomas Jefferson, and think tanks in the capital of the nation he led.

With that, I thank you for your attention and look forward to our discussion—including on how we can work together in a way that would have made Thomas Jefferson, Robert S. Brookings and Burkett Miller proud. ◆