

Senate holds key to fixing Washington

By Ira Shapiro , Special to CNN

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Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, left, with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid at the White House after a 2012 meeting.

Editor's note: Ira Shapiro is the author of "[The Last Great Senate: Courage and Statesmanship in Times of Crisis](#)" (PublicAffairs). He was a former Senate staffer and served in the Clinton administration as a trade official.

(CNN) -- The new year has hardly set in and a consensus has formed that the polarization and dysfunction gripping Washington will inevitably continue. A headline in Politico summed it up well: "[New Congress with Same Old Problems](#)."

Fareed Zakaria wrote about "[America's political failure](#)" and the specter of our political system "seizing up." Ezra Klein went one step further, commenting that "while the 112th Congress was surely one of the most broken and incompetent in our history, the worst is probably yet to come."

Everyone can describe the factors that produced America's vitriolic political culture. We are well aware of the various possible remedies, like passing a constitutional amendment on campaign finance, embracing open primaries, establishing commissions to prevent gerrymandered districts, or setting up a requirement of universal voting. But these ideas are many years away if attainable at all.

There is only one prospect for real change in our national politics. America urgently needs a rejuvenated Senate, which has to return to being, as Walter Mondale once described it: "the nation's mediator." The good news is that could actually happen.

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The 2012 Senate elections were a landslide for the Democrats, who won 25 out of 33 elections, gaining blue states and red states, sweeping nine of the 10 most hotly contested elections and bringing in a record 20 female senators.

The Senate results can be read as a repudiation of extremism and obstructionism, strengthening the hand of Senate Democrats while freeing the moderate and conservative Senate Republicans from the death grip of blind loyalty to Grover Norquist, the NRA or the tea party. Republican insiders have already indicated their interest in nominating candidates who might win general elections rather than extreme candidates destined to be defeated.

As America's economic potential remains enviable, our political dysfunction threatens to undermine it. The fiscal cliff was barely averted, but the battles over our economic future will recommence almost immediately. The nation is still stunned by the horrific killings in Newtown and shaken by the implications of Hurricane Sandy.

The country yearns for responsible adult leadership. President Obama will provide it, but he needs the cooperation and engagement of Congress, which the Republican House has proven it cannot offer. The Senate is the only realistic partner to the president in seeking constructive solutions to the nation's challenges on guns, climate change and immigration.



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Most importantly, no one should underestimate the commitment of the senators to our country, and the anger and frustration they



Sen. Reid: We've reached agreement

share about the Senate.

Across the political spectrum, from liberals like Barbara Mikulski, D-Maryland, to conservatives like Jeff Sessions, R-Alabama, there is a demand for "regular order" -- legislation that results from committee consideration, vigorous debate and the opportunity to offer amendments and to reach principled compromises. The Senate has a handful of members deeply committed to absolute obstruction, but the

overwhelming majority of its members sought the office for the opportunity to address the country's challenges in a serious way. They know what the Senate is supposed to be, they hate what it has become and now they have the chance to rebuild it.

Many Americans doubt that the current crop of senators measures up to the stalwarts of the past. No one admires the great senators of the 1960s and 1970s more than I do. But the Senate that convened in the first week of January combines many capable veteran legislators, promising young senators and exciting new arrivals. They can change the status quo.

For example, even in the midst of gridlock in 2012, Democrat Barbara Boxer of California and Republican Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma reached agreement on a major transportation bill, and Democrat Tom Harkin of Iowa and Republican Mike Enzi of Wyoming forged compromises to produce a far-reaching food safety legislation.

Our senators would do well to take a page from history. In "The Passage of Power," his latest volume on LBJ, Robert Caro reminds us that in 1963, exactly 50 years ago, the Senate was paralyzed. It was unable to move on even the tax cut proposed by President Kennedy. But the television coverage of fire hoses and police dogs being turned on peaceful civil rights demonstrators, which changed the nation's consciousness, followed by the trauma of President Kennedy's assassination, and Lyndon Johnson's extraordinary leadership, transformed the Senate. Congress produced the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and a number of great legislative accomplishments. It doesn't take much time, or that many people, to change the Senate.

So much depends on the quality of leadership. We remember the profound impact of Lyndon Johnson, Mike Mansfield, Everett Dirksen and Howard Baker on the Senate. The current Senate leaders, Harry Reid and Mitch McConnell, did not create the hyperpartisan Senate, but it got undeniably worse on their watch. Now, their places in history are on the line. They can be judged failures and quickly forgotten, or they can be remembered as the leaders who played a crucial role in restoring the Senate to its special place in our country. I wouldn't bet against them making the right choice.

Reid has already committed to spearheading needed reforms to the Senate rules, and appears to have wisely decided against ramming through rules changes by a majority vote. McConnell already played an essential role in the last-minute compromise that averted the fiscal cliff, and in doing so, produced an 89-8 Senate vote for the compromise. He remains the key: Will he use his considerable savvy to obstruct, as he did for most of the last four years, or to reach the hard, principled compromises that major legislative accomplishments demand?

Pessimistic observers of our political scene believe that ultimately the Senate can only mirror our deep national divisions. I think this view oversimplifies the complex relationship between voters and their elected representatives.

The senators are supposed to rise above our divisions to find common ground, and by the act of doing so, contribute to rebuilding public confidence and healing a fractured nation. If the Senate returns to being "the nation's mediator," the results of its work can pass the Republican House the way the "fiscal cliff" deal did -- by a decisive vote among Democrats, coupled with a minority of the Republicans.

The men and women in today's Senate have a rare privilege and a special opportunity. They are United States senators. They walk where the greats once walked, and it's time they make us proud again.

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