

Worldviews in Conflict

by Tom Allen

The topic of this series is so timely. Once again we are a few days or a week away from another threat of shutdown of the federal government, and two weeks after that, another of the debt ceiling crises that seem to come up regularly now.

It's amazing to me how different the environment is today from what it was when I left Congress in 2008; on the other hand, it's not very different in terms of what the members of Congress actually believe and say. Some are just more stubborn than others used to be. I'm not going to talk much about how politics was played in earlier times in Maine and the nation, however. You will notice how many "formers" there are on the speakers' list for the series. We are all formers, except for Angus King who is a "current," but the rest of us are all formers, and some have a lot longer history in politics than I do.

SOME PARTIAL TRUTHS

I want to concentrate on the topic of why we are where we are nationally and to some extent in Maine—although Maine is still different from what's going on in the U.S. Congress—and I will note some of the differences as we go along.

A reviewer of my new book (Allen 2013) said, "Tom Allen has a different take on political polarization." I do. I wrote the book, in fact, because I was dissatisfied with the public commentary. With some exceptions, I didn't think that people were getting the source of polarization right when they wrote about Congress, and I wanted to say my piece.

When you have gone through a career as I have, and you get quoted for a sentence or two in the newspapers and on television, you want to tell a longer and more complete story to people. I wrote the book because there were a number of explanations for the polarization that I thought were only a bit of the truth.

First, members of Congress don't live in D.C. any longer; they don't socialize on weekends the way Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neal did, and that's the cause. Not really!

Second, congressional redistricting now shapes uncompetitive districts and allows Democrats and

Republicans alike to have safe seats; therefore, they no longer have to appeal to the middle. There is some truth to this, and when you look at the number of congressional districts that are no longer competitive, they are the vast majority. Party primaries are structured so that the more extreme candidates in both parties tend to get nominated. Then, because so many are running in safe congressional districts, they get elected. There is a built-in bias, in that primary elections are now structured against people who are more centrist and able to reach out to the middle.

Third, 24-7 cable news coverage. All-politics-all-the-time, with people on the TV shows who are over-here and over-there, with not many in the middle because they just don't keep the ratings up. The media loves controversy to keep the ratings up.

Fourth, it's all about the money and the power. Republicans and Democrats alike are captured by big money. I'm going to make the case that it isn't on either side. I'm not saying it isn't partly about that, because these are human beings, after all.

Fifth, the American people continually elect selfish jerks who go to Washington, forget who sent them there and why, and lose contact with the people back home. Not really true. There are good people on both sides of the aisle.

And finally, it is argued that the House and Senate rules have been manipulated—in the Senate by the minority or the majority, and in the House particularly by the majority—and a lack of trust has grown out of this sort of unrestrained combat over the rules.

IDEAS MATTER

After 12 years of listening carefully to my Democratic and Republican colleagues in Congress, I believe something else is going on. What is most fundamental is this: We debate issues, and ideas actually matter. They matter on the floor of the House, they matter in terms of what we say to the media, and they matter in the Democratic and the Republican caucuses. In those rooms, closed to the press, debates over policy always intertwine with politics. They are intense, and people

get angry and yell at each other. They wouldn't do this if it were all just about power and money, and just staying there. Most members of Congress, on both sides of the aisle, care deeply about the ideas and causes they took with them to Congress. I'm saying that these ideas matter; they really matter! And the big ideas—what I call *worldviews*—matter most.

I picked topics for my book that did not include abortion, gay marriage, immigration, and all the other social issues where you can understand that people feel intensely and why bridging those gaps in belief is really difficult. I picked topics of the kind that used to be subject to negotiation and compromise and are no longer, in a time when every political issue is infected with partisan combat. I picked four topics: budget and taxes, Iraq, health care, and climate change.

These four topics involve different subjects and factual evidence and need thoughtful approaches. Yet, they now appear to be part of a whole in Congress, as if something not apparent were tying them all together. Otherwise, the two parties would not have been so fiercely divided on such disparate matters. Interest group politics can explain some of the differences. Each party appeals to and is supported by different combinations of business, labor, and other organized interests.

Today, however, interest group politics is often overwhelmed by worldview politics, a widening and hardening conflict between those who believe that the mission of government is to advance the common good, versus those who believe that government is an obstacle to that end. If this is true, all domestic issues merge into one—into an unproductive, irreconcilable, ideological conflict about the role of government itself.

You, the citizen, do not get off scot-free, however. Ultimately, this conflict is less about the role of government than the enduring tension between individualism and community in American politics and culture. It is, therefore, as much about the electorate as it is about our representatives. That, in a nutshell, is what I'm saying.

TWO WORLDVIEWS

One worldview is grounded in the quintessential American value of self reliance. I call that worldview *individualism*. It's what we teach our children: "You can be anything what you want to be if you work hard enough. You have to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. You can't be dependent on other people. You make your own life." We believe this. It is good advice.

There's another view, however; it is what I call *community*. It grows in part out of our religious traditions. We have come to relate to one another through connection to a higher being, however we may define this. It grows out of James Madison, who believed he was creating a tradition of civic republicanism in which we are all joined together in a common, democratic experience—one where everyone as a citizen is in some sense equal to everyone else. This binds us together.

These are the two big ideas, I believe, in American politics and political culture. What interests me now is that Americans have become sorted, divided into two groups with respect to government, depending on whether we are primarily individualist or interested in community and working together. Importantly, these are the lenses through which we absorb information. We tend to take in information that supports what we believe and to shut out information that challenges what we believe. This is true across the board.

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There are other kinds of lenses as well. One is simple: some people see the world in black and white, and some see the world in shades of gray; we're just wired differently. George W. Bush, by his own admission, didn't do nuance; he saw the world in black and white. Barack Obama, I believe, sees the world in shades of gray.

Isaiah Berlin wrote a little book in 1953, against the background of our great ideological struggle with fascism and communism, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. I read it a long time ago and it made a deep impression on me. The title is taken from a fragment of a Greek poem that goes like this: *The fox knows many things, the hedgehog knows one big thing*. Berlin was talking

about how people may be looked at as if falling into one of two groups.

One group, characterized as “the fox,” enjoys and even revels in the diversity, the contradictions, and the confusions we human beings bring to this world; these people say that’s the way the world works. The other group, “the hedgehogs,” focuses not just on one thing necessarily, but tends to order the world according to a single, structured view. That’s why we have religions that are more structured, more literal, on the one hand, and more open and diverse, on the other. We have groups in our politics that are just the same. Take a look at today’s political situation in the United States. A lot of it is about individualism vs community and about how we are wired to approach public issues through that singular lens.

I would summarize it this way: the public is more diverse today than members of Congress. Most Republicans in Congress tend to see government as (1) by its very nature infringing on individual liberty, (2) creating a culture of dependency among those it serves, and (3) screwing up just about everything it does. These views are deeply held, and when you connect them to American individualism and self-reliance, you can see that it’s pretty deeply rooted in the American experience.

On the other hand, most Democrats in Congress look at the government and say, “Government is one way, with the right programs and the right approach, to create opportunity for people who weren’t born with it or, for whatever reason, don’t have it, so, it can be a positive force for good.” Democrats would say, “This is how we deal with pressing public issues: government is a major vehicle by which we tackle education, health care, environmental issues, and economic issues. We work at these through our government.” The conflict between these two worldviews sets and drives us apart.

--- DANGEROUS CONVICTONS ---

I’m now going to explain *Dangerous Convictions*, because I chose for my book a title that creates some confusion. The title comes from a quotation from Frederick Nietzsche who said, “Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.” He was saying that once we believe something so strongly that we reject any evidence to the contrary, we are in big trouble, and this would be shorthand for what we are seeing in the U.S. Congress today.

Let me say as a Democrat that Democrats have done a lot to make this situation worse. I’m not talking

about all the bad things that each party has done to the other. I’m concentrating here on a set of Republican ideas that I believe are not supported by evidence or by expertise, particularly in economics and science; because the hope for America is that we may have a more pragmatic Republican party that will work with Democrats across the aisle. It is a little unusual for me to try and make the case for a different kind of Republican Party that would be more competitive with the Democrats, but that is a large part of why I wrote the book.

“Tax cuts pay for themselves.” We heard this all the time. It wasn’t true, it was never true. It is theoretically possible to be true in certain circumstances, but by and large, if you cut taxes, revenues go down. The idea that tax cuts will always stimulate the economy so much, the economy will grow so fast, and you will make up all those lost revenues and gain revenues for the federal government isn’t true, but that assertion was made over and over again. The Bush tax cuts passed in 2001 and 2003 were enormous and were rigged to be even bigger than they appeared on paper. By the time 10 years had passed, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office figured that they had drained the federal treasury of \$2.9 trillion.

Now, let’s just say that \$2.9 trillion is a really big number. It is beyond comprehension. In July 2010, when we already knew that was the trend and it would wind up there, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell stood before the press and said, “The Bush tax cuts stimulated the economy so much that they increased federal revenues, [and] I’m sure that is the position of all Republicans in the Senate.”

This is one of those moments when you ask, “How can someone say that, and how can the media report it without saying, ‘You’re nuts!’?” But many of the major media outlets today see it as their role and duty to report what each side says and just let it go at that. Here’s the difficulty with this: if you are an American citizen, you have all this information washing over you, and it’s hard to cope with it all, sort it all out, and make meaning of it.

Bruce Bartlett, who served Jack Kemp, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush, has written a book called *The Benefit and the Burden* (2012), a fabulous book. He points out that when Reagan got the big 1981 tax cut passed, he increased deficit spending dramatically, and his budget chief, the supply-sider David Stockman later said, “We were mistaken, I was mistaken.” Reagan raised taxes 11 times, and nobody knows that. Bush 41 did it once, and Bush 42 did it zero times.

Bartlett said that he's never heard a conservative say, "There is some level of taxation below which you should not go." Former Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, whom I wouldn't hold up as a leader of the Republican Party, was asked this question during her 2012 campaign: What should the appropriate level of federal taxes be? She responded, "Zero," confirming what Bruce Bartlett had said.

What I'm trying to convey is the importance of ideas. I'm going to divide the room. Whatever your political views, you on the right side are absolutely committed to smaller government and lower taxes. That is your abiding belief; you have to develop policies to fit. On the left side, it's "opportunity, responsibility, community." That was Bill Clinton's 1992 slogan and is what you believe in, whatever policy you may have to develop.

For those of you on the right with the smaller government, lower taxes mission: What are you going to do about health care? You've got a system before ObamaCare, one that isn't functioning, with 30 million people who do not have health insurance, and tons of small businesses who can't afford to cover their employees. While you think on that, I offer the same assignment over here on my left to the people who are okay working with government, to work through opportunity, responsibility, community.

It's a whole lot harder for the small government, lower taxes group to come up with a policy that will cover a large number of people and still satisfy that core principle. Remember "repeal and replace ObamaCare?" Over and over again, it's been a number of years now, they have talked about repealing and replacing ObamaCare, but there's never been a Republican proposal put forward that would come close to covering the 30 million people, fully implemented. The reason is, it's too hard—there is no proposal out there.

Not many people know that ObamaCare came from the conservative Heritage Policy Foundation. Two of the central components of the Affordable Care Act were grounded in work done at the foundation in 1989 by Stuart Butler, a smart and able guy. The core elements of Butler's idea were (1) instead of having a single-payer system, you would have regulated exchanges where private insurance companies would compete for beneficiaries; and (2) you wouldn't have an employer mandate, you'd have an individual mandate. By the time Obama took office and was pushing his health care plan, Republicans had abandoned the Butler approach, and they haven't adopted another

since. Butler's plan was about as conservative as you can get and still be comprehensive. This is why ideas, why worldviews, matter tremendously in your ability to deal with difficult issues.

I used to have a speech that my staff called my "pronoun speech." I basically worked American politics into two pronouns, me and we; I still think it works. Health care politics in particular is about how much voters care about other people's health care. Many times someone would ask me, "Why should I pay for people who can't afford their own health care?" Part of the answer from the left is, "If you don't, you will pay more; if we don't share the burden of insurance, share the burden of bad things happening to anyone of us, we will not be as strong or healthy as a society."

Today, of course, we're still fighting this battle. The arguments of those who wish to defund ObamaCare portray it as a disaster for the American people, a disaster for business, the worst thing that ever happened. They say, as Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) does, "We have to stop it before it gets implemented because once it is implemented people are really going to like it!"

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Iraq is the most interesting nondomestic issue of our time in terms of these competing worldviews. To my mind, the single most stunning fact about the decision to go into Iraq is this: the U.S. National Security Council never had a single meeting to debate whether to invade Iraq. Not one, it was just done. If you have a worldview that is based on core principles that are not going to be changed by evidence, you really don't need to listen to evidence, and that is what the story of Iraq is about.

Just prior to "shock and awe," Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told the president that he was determined that after the military victory the Defense Department should control the reconstruction period,

not the State Department, which he believed would be there too long. Rumsfeld wanted to get in and get out. A month before the invasion he gave a speech and said, “The reason why is this: if you stay, you will create a dependency among the Iraqis.”

Dependency. You hear that word over and over again. If self-reliance is the principal American virtue, dependency is the principal American vice. That’s why I think even the conflict in Iraq is driven by how much respect for evidence decision makers have and the information they need to make a data-based decision, as opposed to going in and doing something because they think they need to and can make it work.

I suspect the reason they never had a meeting to debate going into Iraq is that the president didn’t want a big fight between Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary Rumsfeld. Powell did meet with the president and said, “If you go into Iraq, it’s like crystal glass; it will shatter, and we will have to pick up the pieces.” And he proved to be right.

The fourth substantive chapter of my book is on climate change. The defining environmental issue of the twenty-first century, it carries enormous consequences and potential costs if we don’t do something about it. Yet the parties are so fundamentally divided, they can’t even agree that there is a problem. Certain people who deny climate change have made it clear—particularly the Cato Institute—that admitting that climate change is real will give government more power over the economy. Meanwhile, Harvard’s Greg Mankiw the former head of President George W. Bush’s Council of Economic Advisers, wrote a recent column for the *New York Times* (August 31, 2013) in which he said it was time to take a look at a carbon tax.

Let me divide the room again. For those of you who want small government and lower taxes, you are confronted with climate change and carbon taxes are your solution. That’s what Republicans should be arguing for, except for one thing: they have campaigned for decades against any and all taxes, so you must call it a carbon fee. You can see again that we get boxed in by our big ideas and we shut off data, information, and possible solutions. This is what happens on the Republican side. They basically argue that the party system is broken; the parties are divided, and the Republicans have become essentially an outlier on the political spectrum, not accepting conventional mainstream science and economics, and as a result offer little to do about anything.

FIXING THE PROBLEM

So, where do we go from here? How do we fix it? The last chapter is always the hardest to write when you have to explain where you think we need to go.

I think part of the problem is media coverage and political campaign messages that have been dumbed down even as our problems get more complex and it gets harder and harder for people to sort out the different messages.

When I look ahead, I am an optimist. If I look back at the twentieth century, I would say it was a century of enormous ideological and devastating conflict, of all sorts of wars, mostly about different ideologies and worldviews. I believe the twenty-first century is going to be marked by global collaboration on a scale we’ve never seen before, driven in part by increasingly integrated economies. If Greece goes badly, it does damage to Europe, and if Europe has problems, the United States and Asia do too.

That’s what has happened in the last couple of years, and it will continue. That’s why when the central bankers and the finance ministers in the developed world are trying to figure what to do about the worst recession and economic downturn since the Great Depression, they are talking to each other all the time. They may not agree, but they are talking to each other all the time.

This broader communication and collaboration between nations and groups may be threatening to people who worry about our independence and self-reliance. It raises all these questions in spades. It’s driven by the vastly improved communications we use all the time, by the spread of education, and by what I call “compelling ideas” that simply catch on. At the end of the day, the questions are, Are we going to be okay with this developing world that is coming whether we want it or not? Are we trying to shape it so that collaboration will work while protecting individual rights, or are we going to be afraid of it? There’s a real difference there.

Finally, I would say that both of the worldviews I have mentioned, individualism and community, are deeply rooted in American culture. They are us. When you realize this, it means (at least I hope it means) that you will gain a little extra tolerance for those who have diametrically opposed views from your own. I believe that if we are going to get this right, if we’re going to move beyond the kind of dysfunction and polarization that we have today, it will be because people better

understand these two worldviews as the source of the polarization. We will need a more honest conversation.

I finish with this, from near the end of my book. People will always be divided between those who largely see the world in black and white and those who see it in shades of gray. But most of us value both self-reliance and working with others. However inarticulate we may be, we speak both our first language of individualism and our second language of community. These core aspects of the American psyche, the yin and the yang of what it means to be an American, have been split apart by worldview politics. We are unlikely to recover a productive balance without an honest conversation about them.

I close with this thought. For all my alarm at the frozen state of today's political discourse, I believe that by some not-yet-visible process, we Americans will find our way to a more pragmatic public leadership, one inspired by a clearer commitment to the public good. It may be a long road, but it is a road we will find over time. As long as we keep these two ideas in balance—self-reliance and community, working together as individuals—we will be a stronger and better country.

Questions and Answers

[Editor's note: A few of the questions and responses that were tangential to the topic of "Politics Then and Now" have been omitted.]

In your book, you say you see no way out of our current political polarization without a sustained public dialogue about individualism and community in American life. There is much caring attention in Maine to the core values you cite. Some may remember Ellen Goodman, who used to write a syndicated column for The Boston Globe. Goodman has long spent her summers on a Casco Bay island where she owns a cottage. She once wrote that she goes there every summer "to watch my island neighbors struggle successfully with the ongoing tension between individualism and neighborliness." Is there anything that Maine, itself, has to offer the nation in this regard?

ALLEN: Absolutely. There are a lot of things about Maine that are really special, and what I appreciate most is probably the sense of independence. Massachusetts wanted to get rid of us in 1820; we were way too independent even then. We have space, you know, and the kind of pressure that you feel in big cities is missing here.

We have space, we have time, and we can relax. One of the reasons that we do better politically is that we have something like 500 municipalities and 200 school districts, and everybody knows someone who has served in some sort of government capacity. We have a high voter turnout. People are used to working through our governments. There is a lot more tolerance here. I have never heard Susan Collins or Olympia Snowe say that tax cuts pay for themselves. They have never adopted the rhetoric of the right wing of the Republican Party.

I believe that...we Americans will find our way to a more pragmatic public leadership, one inspired by a clearer commitment to the public good.

All this keeps American politics in Maine dialed down. The Maine tradition is you just don't pick people for office who are way off on the left or way off on the right. The sense that we have to work together is a high priority for Maine people. If you look at Colin Woodard's book, *American Nations* (2011), we clearly live in a different place. The Northeast, as he points out, was settled by people from different ethnic groups and religious traditions from those who settled other parts of the country. He makes the interesting point that despite the fact that Americans move from one part of the country to another, we tend to adopt the values of the place we're going to. As a result, some of our regional and ethnic differences tend to persist.

I certainly feel, and always felt in Congress, that the people from the South are really different. People between the Rockies and the Mississippi are substantially different from the people in the Northeast, along the East Coast, in Middle America, and in the Far West. There are different values, different outlooks, and different concerns. Some of it is religion. Someone can write a book about religious traditions across America, and I'll bet these would track to a large extent with differences in political traditions as well.

Accepting your view that our convictions are deeply rooted, how do you explain that our elected officials

were able to reach compromises in the past, while they are now unable to do so?

ALLEN: That's a great question. When I worked for Ed Muskie from 1970 to 1971, I followed politics all the time, and people worked across the aisle much more effectively. When I was in college, the leading book on the presidency was by Richard Neustadt (1960), the gist of which was that the power of the president is ultimately the power to persuade. Well, not now. Now, the president has almost no power to persuade anyone on the other side of the aisle and limited power to persuade people in his own side. I think that the parties were different then and the public too. You had southern Democrats and northern Republicans then, and there was a lot less diversity within each party. The parties were divided by many topics; sometimes it was economic issues, sometimes it was regional issues, divided by industries or agriculture, or whatever.

Today, the parties are divided largely by worldviews. And when you're divided by fundamental worldviews, these cannot be compromised. That's why I divided the room, to see if you can build a comprehensive health care policy on smaller government and lower taxes. That's what is different today: we are divided differently and more deeply. There is a book, *The Big Sort* (Bishop 2008), that argues that Americans are gravitating toward places where people live who are like themselves in this regard. So, we're more and more listening to and talking to people with whom we already agree and our views are not being balanced by people with significantly different opinions. That's a big part of the problem.

Can you give us an example of Democrats being boxed in by their own ideas?

ALLEN: Republicans primarily have a hard time getting away from ideological convictions; Democrats primarily have a hard time getting away from constituency demands. When I was in office and spent most of my time on health care, I would get bombarded with requests from Democrats to support a single-payer system, the Canadian system in particular. The system in Canada works well and provides better care for less money than the system we have. I never supported it. A lot of Democrats did because they were boxed in by the idea of it and by their constituencies.

Democrats get attached to particular constituencies, whether that be government employees, teachers, or

seniors on Medicare, that we can never make any changes to Medicare or Social Security; we can't even consider chained CPI,¹ which would drop benefits for Social Security by a very, very small amount over a number of years. And once you get locked in like that, and you have a system such as Social Security that does need some adjustment, you have little room, if any, to compromise.

Do you think that greater collaboration may yet be forced by serious crisis such as that caused by climate change?

ALLEN: Collaboration is being forced already. It may take a year, but after the 2012 election, suddenly immigration reform is on the table. It hasn't passed the House, and may not, but it sure got a lot of attention in the Senate. There was a big push to pass immigration reform—including a pathway to citizenship—by Republicans who never supported it before. In the immortal words of Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina (with whom I have served and whom I actually like a lot), "What are you going to do?" he asked. "The Republican Party is in a demographic death spiral, and we better do something about it." Now, that's probably not the purest motives for doing immigration reform, but I'll take it.

When I mentioned Greg Mankiw's article on the carbon tax, I mean there are a few people who see the writing on the wall. Over the next 10 years, and it may take that long, we'll see a real struggle within the Republican Party, between what I call the conservatives and the libertarians. If the conservatives win, we will have over time a more pragmatic Republican Party, a somewhat more moderate, but at least a more pragmatic party. This is how it is going to turn out, at the end of the day—if the Republicans cannot compete in presidential elections, there will be more and more who will say that we've got to do something different. And they may compete in the House elections for a while; but in 2016, Florida, which was a swing state in 2012, will have some 900,000 more Hispanic voters. Some of these swing states may no longer be swing states in 2016 and 2020, unless there is a remaking of Republican Party to give itself broader, less ideological appeal.

Tom Mann and Norman Ornstein argue in their book that, in the end, "the voter must take ultimate responsibility for healing a broken and very, very dysfunctional

political system.” This is surely true. At the same time congressional districts have been gerrymandered to strengthen partisan division in primary elections that are structured to favor extremists. What, if anything, can the average voter do to overcome these obstacles and regain a voice in the electoral process?

ALLEN: I certainly think that redistricting reinforces the problems we have in the House (although the problems in the Senate and the governorships suggest it's not all about redistricting). First of all, don't assume that any one voter can fix the problem, but every one of us has a voice and every one of us has a vote. This makes a difference if you can find ways to weigh in. There is almost always a political group pushing one cause or another, and being involved in these activities over time makes a great difference. After all, none of us expects to change the world. (Well, maybe some do; I think I never did, only to make a contribution.) And I think that's how you do it, you find a group.

With respect to congressional redistricting, I really believe in a system like we have in Maine, and the system in California; you need a commission with judicial review, to take it out of the hands of the legislature. Ultimately it has to be out of the hands of the legislature, because they will protect their own, on both sides of the aisle, and the public will suffer.

For many decades from the 1930s to the 1970s, economic differences among voters were closely related to party affiliation. Upper income people tended to support Republican candidates, while lower income groups favored the Democrats. Despite growing income inequality in the United States in recent years, economic factors now seem to be less relevant to how people vote. Why do you think this is the case?

ALLEN: Education is more important than it used to be, and the voting pattern shifts depending in part on education. Another part is change in the nature of work itself. I was speaking recently to a man with a small publishing company. In 1960, he said, 80 percent of the jobs in America were unskilled, and now that number is just about 20 percent. In manufacturing and other areas, the demographic group that's been hardest hit by change is white men. As women have entered the workforce in record numbers and established themselves, all those blue-collar jobs that men used to support a family have receded. Politically, there is some anger there. As you

know, the conservative vote today is increasingly older, white male, and southern and rural. Those tendencies are shaping where we are going.

So, tell us: where do you get your optimism?

ALLEN: It's genetic. People often say things are only getting worse and worse. My response is, No trend lasts forever; it just doesn't. At the end of my book, you'll see a passage from Reinhold Niebuhr that sums up how I feel: "We cannot complete in our lifetimes the things we would like to see happen. We must, therefore, rely on faith, hope, and love." Somewhere down the road, the problems that worry us so much now will be resolved to a greater or less extent. And future generations will be dealing with different problems. 🐟

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ENDNOTE

1. Editors' Barringer and Palmer note: The Chained Consumer Price Index (C-CPI) is a time-series measure of the price of consumer goods and services created by the Bureau of Labor Statistics as an alternative Consumer Price Index. It is based on the idea that in an inflationary environment, consumers will choose less-expensive substitutes. This reduces the rate of cost of living increases through the reduction of the quality of goods consumed. The standard or "fixed weight" CPI also takes such substitutions into account, but does so through a periodic adjustment of the "basket of goods" that it represents, rather than through a continuous estimation of the declining quality of goods consumed. Application of the chained CPI to federal benefits has been controversially proposed to reduce the federal deficit

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