

Enough Is Enough

Senator Bill Cohen

I'm sort of the accidental Secretary of Defense. I didn't know Bill Clinton personally. I had shaken his hand a couple of times at various functions. When he got reelected and I had already announced my retirement, we had two meetings. When he decided he was going to offer me the position, I said that there are two things we have to agree on.

Number one, you have to understand that if you offer me this job and I agree to accept, I'll be on your team, and you will never have to worry after a Cabinet meeting whether I'm in a back room calling my buddies up on the Hill, saying, "Look what these guys are talking about." You'll never have to worry about that. You will have trust in me and you'll have to trust me. And [second] I want something from you. If you offer it and I take this position, I want you to agree never to engage me in a political meeting. You let me run the department and I will serve you as well as I can, but never engage me in any of your political discussions. He said, "You've got it," and he kept his word.

There came a moment when we launched the mission called Desert Fox, a four-day bombing campaign in 1998 against Saddam Hussein. The Republicans thought we were playing politics with the military and insisted that I come up and address a joint session of Congress that night. They accused me and the president of launch(ing) this attack in order to avoid an impeachment resolution that was forthcoming. I took three hours and spoke to all of my colleagues in a closed session and persuaded them that this had nothing to do with what was going on politically. This had to do with the security of the country. They finally accepted it, and I put it on the line, saying, "After 24 years on Capitol Hill, if you think that I would risk my reputation to do this, then you've misjudged me."

Senator Alan Simpson

(Senator Simpson was asked for examples of lawmakers being able to work successfully.)

The first one that hit me was just a few weeks after we came to the Senate, when they appointed the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy. Howard Baker (R-TN) put me on it. Father Ted Hesburgh of Notre Dame was the chairman, and serving on that commission were Democrats and Republicans

alike. We did our work and came out with two bills, one on illegal immigration and one on legal immigration. The legal immigration bill never worked because we tried to put in a more secure identifier system, which the right and the left then labeled a "national ID card."

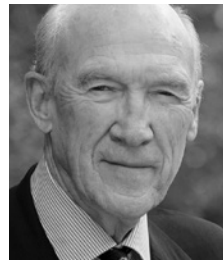
Then, the Iraq Study Group. Ten of us: Sandra Day O'Connor (R-AZ), Leon Panetta (D-CA), you know the cast. We worked with them all, and we had to agree on every single word. We worked for a couple of years and gave 57 recommendations to the Bush-Cheney administration. Eventually, 57 of them were adopted—the surge, all the rest of the stuff. And then people say, "Why don't you work together?" Well, we did! People say they want bipartisanship, but they really don't. They would rather fight. 🐉

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William Cohen served in the U.S. Senate from 1978 to 1996 and as U.S. Secretary of Defense from 1997 to 2001. Cohen has established the William S. Cohen Center for International Policy & Commerce at the University of Maine. In 2002, he received the Woodrow Wilson Award for Public Service from the Smithsonian Institution.



Alan Simpson was a U.S. senator from Wyoming from 1979 to 1997, where he held the position of Assistant Majority Leader for 10 years. He then served as director of the Institute of Politics at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University from 1997 to 2000 and in 2010 cochaired the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform.