



Tonic for a divisive Congress: Look to the 'spirit of 96'

BY JEFFREY PHILLIPS AND SUSAN LUKAS, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS — 02/03/19 11:00 AM EST
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A month into its occupation of Capitol Hill, the 116th Congress already shows signs that its capacity for divisive infighting will rival, if not best, the impressive displays of its predecessor. Everyone, it seems — the headlines, TV talking heads, think tanks, taxi and Uber drivers, bartenders — is fixated on this newest incarnation of divided government.

Congress long has used caucuses to mitigate the divisive threat posed by “factions”; for example, it established the [Democratic-Republican caucus](#) in April 1796 to oppose a treaty with Great Britain that unfairly treated American sailors. The concept took hold: during the 115th Congress, the House [list of registered caucuses](#) ran 107 pages.

Over the history of Congress, divided government has been the rule and divisiveness certainly is not a new phenomenon. Yet, legislation has been passed (or at least had gotten a good hearing). It’s now commonly acknowledged that the vicious partisanship dividing Washington today has reached unprecedented virulence.

The costs have reached into the nation’s active and reserve military: the U.S. Coast Guard, unfunded during the shutdown, [could not pay its force](#) or retirees. Credit problems could imperil a Coast Guardsman’s security clearance, and that’s a readiness problem for the nation as well as a personal crisis for a brave, skilled public servant.

According to the [Congressional Research Service](#), caucuses in the House and Senate can “serve as a vehicle for the resolution of issue and policy differences between committees, parties, or the two houses,” facilitating legislative action. Caucuses “can coordinate across party lines and bring adversarial groups together,” wrote Susan Webb Hammond in her 1998 book, [Congressional Caucuses in National Policy Making](#).

With the Founding Fathers' version of a government checked and balanced by equal branches apparently in decline, the fruit of present-day division is a mire of paralysis. The opinion seems to be that nothing will get done because the government is too divided. But must that be the case? Is there not ground for mutual understanding upon which to build common cause?

There is such ground, and if you'll pardon a pun, that "ground" is the muddy boots terrain of shared military experience. Of 535 members of the House and Senate, 96 are serving or have served in the military; those 16 who are currently serving are members of the Reserve Components — the reserve units of the armed forces (including the Coast Guard), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration ([NOAA](#)) and the [Public Health System](#); and the National Guard.

Of these nearly 100 members — nearly one-fifth of the House and Senate — [seven are women with military experience](#), a record number of women in a session of Congress with such experience. They and their male colleagues who served during Desert Storm, operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom and innumerable other deployments are relatively young men and women with a presumably firm grasp on the realities of contemporary American life.

Notwithstanding party differences, with the associated range of views on various issues, nearly 20 percent of Congress thus shares a profound commonality, rooted in the imperatives of service — acceptance of shared and individual sacrifice in service to something "higher." In their case, that something is the nation itself.

These Americans come to Congress with shared experiences. They come to Congress with a desire to serve the nation and do what is best for the country. They come to Congress looking, as is the wont of military people, to solve problems.

Beyond veterans themselves, many members who did not serve in the military have mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews who did. The odds are good: according to a 2015 [Rand Corporation paper](#), "Between 9/11 and September 2015, 2.77 million service members have served on 5.4 million deployments across the world."

Of that number, almost a million have been members of the Reserve and Guard; nearly 40,000 now are activated. Their kin experienced the pride, anguish, cohesion and identity of families with a loved one in harm's way.

It is not unreasonable to expect of this commonality an increased capacity to seek understanding. We should expect that our veterans and our serving reservists in Congress seek ways to work together — on matters of national defense and matters far afield from the military. We should expect these patriots to lead in a triumph over the present divisiveness in our constitutionally divided government.

ROA supports such collaboration. To complement the existing Reserve and National Guard Caucus in the House of Representatives and Senate National Guard Caucus, we are working with the Senate for the appointment of a minority co-chairman in its Reserve Components Caucus so that it can get fully into action on a bipartisan basis on behalf of our Reserve force.

We support robust, active military-oriented caucuses because they can facilitate good military legislation and policy. We believe, too, that any forum in which members of different "tribes" meet, mix and achieve acts of communication can lead to greater understanding. The salutary effects of that dynamic can reach beyond the matter at hand.

With so much of such depth already in common, those in Congress who have worn the nation's uniform are the natural leaders in a campaign to bring our divided government beyond divisiveness.

Theirs is a record that inspires our confidence during this clear and present crisis.

Jeffrey Phillips is executive director of [ROA, dba Reserve Organization of America](#), open to all ranks and promoting a strong, ready reserve force. A retired U.S. Army Reserve major general, he served in the Regular Army for nearly 14 years.

Susan Lukas, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, is ROA's director of legislation and military policy.

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