

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

Overcoming Divided Government

January 14, 2011

Dear Colleague:

It is with honor, gratitude and respect that we serve with every other member of the United States Congress. The people who come to serve in the Senate and House as members and as staff have chosen to devote their lives to the honorable cause of improving this nation. It is true that many of us see very different means to achieve those ends, but it is the commitment to seeing our nation and people succeed that binds us.

As we all know, the tenor and debate surrounding our politics has grown ever more corrosive – ignoring the fact that while we may take different positions, we all have the same interests. This departure from statesmanship and collegiality is fueled, in part, by contentious campaigns and divisive rhetoric. Political differences will always generate a healthy debate, but over time, the dialogue has become more hateful and at times violent. But now the opportunity before us is to bring civility back to politics. It is important to show the nation that the most powerful deliberative bodies in the world can debate our differences with respect, honor and civility. It is not only possible, but it is something that nearly all members of Congress truly desire. To that end, we should set a small, but important, new tradition in American politics.

At the State of the Union address on January 25th, instead of sitting in our usual partisan divide, let us agree to have Democrats and Republicans sitting side by side throughout the chamber. Beyond custom, there is no rule or reason that on this night we should emphasize divided government, separated by party, instead of being seen united as a country. The choreographed standing and clapping of one side of the room – while the other side sits – is unbecoming of a serious institution. And the message that it sends is that even on a night when the President is addressing the entire nation, we in Congress cannot sit as one, but must be divided as two.

On the night of the State of the Union address, House and Senate members from both parties ought to cross the aisle and sit together. As the nation watches, Democrats and Republicans should reflect the interspersed character of America itself. Perhaps, by sitting with each other for one night, we will begin to rekindle that common spark that brought us here from 50 different states and widely diverging backgrounds to serve the public good.

We plan to send the attached letter to both House and Senate leadership indicating an intention to pursue a bipartisan seating arrangement. If you are interested in joining on this letter, please have a staff member contact Hillary Daniels at Hillary_daniels@markudall.senate.gov or 4-5298.

With respect and admiration,



Mark Udall
United States Senator



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

January 14, 2011

Dear Majority Leader Reid, Speaker Boehner, Minority Leaders McConnell and Pelosi:

We, the undersigned members of Congress, believe that partisan seating arrangements at State of the Union addresses serve to symbolize division instead of the common challenges we face in securing a strong future for the United States.

As we all know, the tenor and debate surrounding our politics has grown ever more corrosive – ignoring the fact that while we may take different positions, we all have the same interests. This departure from statesmanship and collegiality is fueled, in part, by contentious campaigns and divisive rhetoric. Political differences will always generate a healthy debate, but over time the dialogue has become more hateful and at times violent. But now the opportunity before us is to bring civility back to politics. It is important to show the nation that the most powerful deliberative bodies in the world can debate our differences with respect, honor and civility. We believe that it is not only possible, but that it is something that nearly all members of Congress truly desire. To that end, we suggest setting a small, but important, new tradition in American politics.

At the State of the Union address, on January 25th, instead of sitting in our usual partisan divide, let us agree to have Democrats and Republicans sitting side by side throughout the chamber. Beyond custom, there is no rule or reason that on this night we should emphasize divided government, separated by party, instead of being seen united as a country. The choreographed standing and clapping of one side of the room – while the other side sits – is unbecoming of a serious institution. And the message that it sends is that even on a night when the President is addressing the entire nation, we in Congress cannot sit as one, but must be divided as two.

On the night of the State of the Union address, we are asking others to join us – House and Senate members from both parties – to cross the aisle and sit together. We hope that as the nation watches, Democrats and Republicans will reflect the interspersed character of America itself. Perhaps, by sitting with each other for one night, we will begin to rekindle that common spark that brought us here from 50 different states and widely diverging backgrounds to serve the public good.

With respect and admiration,