America at 250: Can Americans Still Compromise?

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David Young: [00:00:00] Welcome to C-Suite Perspectives, a signature series by The Conference Board. I'm David Young, the president of The CEO Center, which is the public policy center of The Conference Board, and delighted to be guest host of today's episode.

Today's conversation is part of a series focused on the US as the country celebrates its 250th anniversary. At a moment of profound political, cultural, economic, and institutional change, we'll explore what the American story can teach us about citizenship, leadership, democratic resilience, and the future of our civic life.

Joining me today is Senator Joe Manchin, who has spent decades in public service and has long been one of the country's most prominent voices on bipartisanship, governing from the center, and putting country ahead of party. Senator Manchin, welcome. So pleased to have you joining us today.

Joe Manchin: Thank you, David. Good to be with you.

David Young: So, senator, let's start by stepping back and looking at the broader sweep [00:01:00] of the American story and the history. The US has always been described somewhat as an experiment. Imperfect, ambitious, often divided, but also capable of renewal and remarkable things.

As the US now marks 250 years, I'm curious to get your thoughts, what do you think the founders would say about where the country is today? And do you think the US has evolved in the way they might have expected and would they feel optimistic, worried, or disappointed, or a combination of all three as they evaluate the US 250 years after its founding?

Joe Manchin: What's been unbelievable this past six months or so as we approach our 250th anniversary, all the documentaries are being done about all of our Founding Fathers: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, all of them, Hamilton, everybody. When you think about what their aspirations were, not living under a monarchy, the King [00:02:00] George of England, and then you look at George Washington could've been the King George of America but decided that wasn't what this was about. And thinking that he could take on the British Empire at that time and be successful.

All of the challenges we've had up until this anniversary of 250 years, I think they would be totally amazed at what they put into motion that we've been able to accomplish. All the sacrifices, all the blood and sweat and tears and resources to get to where we are. Being the innovator, incubator of innovation technology.

Being able to free the world of fascism. World War II, the greatest war that the country, that the world has ever known. And being able to do all that and come out as the strongest, uncontested leader of the free world, and then bring all of them together as their [00:03:00] allies. The only concept was of that to be an ally, that you had to have the desire and love of liberty and freedom that we do, and be able to sacrifice and be willing to sacrifice the greatest, which is your life, for the liberties that you believed in and that you wanted to pass on to future generations.

I think they would be absolutely mesmerized to see, "My God, we never thought this experiment would end up like this."

David Young: Interesting. Yeah, it's fascinating when you say a lot of people, they need a love of liberty and freedom. I'm curious on your thoughts. When we look back at the founding principles, Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the idea of self-government, when we look at today's society and we look at Americans today, what do we think they need to remember most about 250 years ago? And what parts of the founding story or founding principles do you think we've potentially forgot?

Joe Manchin: You know, here's the thing that I'm concerned [00:04:00] about. Over the generations, let's just say the last two or three generations, we have not done a good job of telling the story of all of the trials and tribulations and sacrifices that were made by generations before us, whether it's starting in the 1600s and 1700s, the 17th, 18th century, up to present day, all of the immigration that came here.

I'm second-generation immigrant. My father's side came from Italy. My father was born here, so I'm second generation. My mother's side came from Czechoslovakia. She was born here. So my grandparents growing up were all immigrants from Italy and Czechoslovakia.

I heard all the stories. Now, have I told the stories enough to my children? Do you think my children have told the stories enough to my grandchildren? I don't think so. We all could have done a better job [00:05:00] understanding what was the purpose of coming

here. Why did both grandparents want to come? What was so special about this place?

And when you hear them talk about the liberties and basically the opportunity and the freedoms and being able to work and earn a paycheck and be able to make decisions, they fought for all this. They believed in this. And now we take it for granted.

You asked me, what do I think that our Founding Fathers would think about us. And I think they would be absolutely astonished and amazed at the success, and they would be scared to death of what we're facing today, if we can make it another two, five, or 250 years because of the divisions that come in. There's not one word of politics in the Constitution, not one word about political parties, not a mention anywhere about political parties, except in George Washington's farewell speech of 1796. "Beware of the [00:06:00] political parties, for they can become the engines that allows unscrupulous men to usurp the power from the people."

I ask people today, "Do you think you have a right to vote because you're a US citizen or because you belong to a political party?" And they all tell me, "David, I'm a US citizen." I say. "Guess what? I am too but I can't vote in the primary in West Virginia because it's a closed primary system."

How can you have a representative form of democracy that I am supposed to participate in to elect who I want to represent me? And now the parties have taken total control and they're all griping and bellyaching that the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has taken over the Democratic Party, that the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement or the Tea Party, MAGA far right, has taken over the Republican Party.

Guess what? You reap what you sow. You wanted total control of a political system. You wanted to force feed who people could vote for in a general election and you done it.

Now guess what? You've allowed, [00:07:00] because of the party system, the zealots on both extremes to say, "Fine, we'll outwork you now and we'll take control of that system." And now they're all upset. Guess what? Open the primaries up. Let me make a decision who I would like to vote for on a final general election to make a decision who I want to represent me.

That's all. And if you don't open that system up, we're done. If you allow unscrupulous amounts of money-- the 2024 presidential election, I'm told and the facts, figures I've seen about $24 billion with a B, billion dollars have been spent, American dollars on that election.

Almost 20%, $4.7 billion, came from the billionaire class of people in our country. One class, the smallest class in America is the billionaire class and they put in 20%. An [00:08:00] unsurmountable amount of influence into a system that was supposed to be equal.

So unless we put caps on money, take away Citizens United and get back to the basics

and open up our primaries, we have not fulfilled the destiny that our Founding Fathers sought to have in this experiment we can elect people to represent us.

David Young: You mentioned there was like a system that's going to be equal, and I think today many Americans feel somewhat disconnected from institutions and potentially from one another.

I'm sure there's a role here of social media in being disconnected...

Joe Manchin: Oh my.

David Young: ... from one another. But trust in government, trust in media, trust in business, higher ed, and other institutions has declined significantly while, as you alluded, polarization continues to deepen across political, cultural, and geographic lines.

Just really curious as to your thoughts and reflections on this. When we look at America today, what do we think the country's getting right? Where do we think we're [00:09:00] most off track, especially when we're talking about trust in some of these fundamental institutions that have paved the way to where we are today, and certainly should be paving the path ahead?

Joe Manchin: David, there's no enforcement of being responsible or accountable. It used to be that you couldn't put anything you wanted on the air. The major news networks could not say whatever they wanted to say unless there were facts to back their statements up and their quotes in there.

Today, there is nobody holding anybody in checks and balances. No one's being held accountable and responsible. And if you don't put guardrails on AI, if you think we're misinformed today, just wait for another year or two or five years when AI is fully implemented. I wouldn't really know if I'm talking to you...

David Young: Yeah.

Joe Manchin: ...or talking to a bot. I wouldn't know. Okay? I wouldn't know what you said came from you or you're just basically antagonizing because you're saying things that have no relevance [00:10:00] to truth.

David Young: Do you think it will come full circle? I have a seven-year-old and a five-year-old, right? And part of me thinks, wow, if AI continues down this road and we have these deep fakes, misinformation, disinformation, are they actually just going to not trust anything? And in a weird way, come back to kind of the basics of life, of personal interactions and building deep friendships and getting to know one's neighbor.

Joe Manchin: I think there's some movement in that when they're basically taking away internet access to younger people or taking away your cell phones when you're in school, trying to get them weaned away from this total commitment that we have and total interaction that we have basically with our digital and not our person.

That's what's unbelievable. I can remember when I was starting out in businesses and trying to make a living for my family, I knew where every telephone booth was because I had to stop and check in, whether I had another business call or how they could get in contact with me if they're trying to contact me.

Then we had pagers come out and they would page you and it says, "You better call." So I'd find that [00:11:00] telephone booth and I would call and see what they wanted and things of that sort. And then it just progressed into what we have, absolute, total, instant, 24/7...

David Young: I'm super curious here, and this is off script, but you mentioned the days of the phone booth and your ambition, aspirations. What I'm super curious your initial aspirations and hopes when you were running for office. What were some of the major drivers that made you leave private life and go into the public sphere?

Joe Manchin: First of all, I was 35 years of age. I never thought I'd ever want to be in politics. I can remember growing up, my Uncle Jimmy, A. James we called him, Uncle Jimmy, was very much involved. He got really entangled and committed to the Kennedy campaign in 1960 in West Virginia. John Kennedy, Jack Kennedy, had to win the primary to basically debunk the whole religion concern about Catholics being elected in public offices, and that's where he made his stand.

If he lost the primary in West Virginia, he would've not gone on. It'd been over. [00:12:00] But he won that and basically debunked the whole religious that the Pope will run the country if John Kennedy gets elected. I told my mother, being 13 years of age at the time, I said "Mom, they don't know the Catholics we know if they believe that."

Anyway, so all of that there, David, I've watched all this unfold to the point to where I'm thinking, "My goodness, what are we going to do? How are we going to get back?" I don't know, unless there is going to be guardrails put upon the systems of information. You can't go out and holler, "Fire," and not be held accountable when people get trampled to death, okay?

You will be held accountable and responsible for that. That's still in our laws. But other than that, by God, you can say anything and teach somebody how to build a bomb. They might blow somebody up, they have to be held responsible for that, and that has got to change, and they fight that.

We had Section 230, and I asked some of the old senators when I became a senator in 2010, "How did you allow [00:13:00] to give total immunity to the internet?" And he said, "Joe, back in the '90, '91, '92 when the internet was coming into age, we were thinking about things that should be done, and they came and lobbied. They said, 'If you put any restrictions on us and hold us liable, we will be litigated out of business immediately.'"

If I'd have been a senator at that time, "Okay. How long do you think it'll take you to

mature to be able to survive this as far as court actions? And basically deserving or undeserving, you have to defend yourself." No one ever asked that question. It could've been three years, no more than five, but three years, let's say, that they should have had the immunity of Section 230.

Guess what? We're going on 30, almost 40 years, and they still have that immunity. Okay? Now, some of the courts are breaking that down but not many. And if we're not careful, AI will take it to a complete different level if guardrails aren't put on.

David Young: I want to come back to this idea of [00:14:00] trust and holding folks accountable. What's your thinking around the role of business and the role of CEOs to helping rebuild trust in these critical institutions here in the States?

Joe Manchin: These large mega corporations and these large enterprises, if you will, there has to be some sense of connectivity to the average person.

It used to be, I think it was acceptable or whether it was acceptable or not, but it was not made a big issue when there might've been a 40:1 ratio. So if you were making $10,000 a year and I was making $400,000 a year, that might've been acceptable back then. We never heard much about it, David, back in the day.

You're talking now of absolutely disproportionate amounts of differential within these elites, the elite class of the upper management versus the average working person that's making that possible. They've got so disconnected now that no one trusts [00:15:00] anybody.

You're not doing this because you love our company. You're not doing this because we have the best product. You're doing this because you can maximize your return at the top end. That's what's happened and no one's holding them accountable. If the shareholders are doing good, they don't care. They're happy. Everybody's happy if they're making money.

This society was not built on just basically maximizing return. It was built on a shared amount of risk being taken but an effort being made. And I've always said this: Government was never designed to be your provider. It was designed to be your best partner and everyone had to succeed as a partnership.

That's not the case today. Everyone's not succeeding. And then they talk about all of the problems that we've had and all of the horrible scenarios, and I've said this: I'm not sure any of our Founding Fathers could get elected in an election process in America today with the background they had.

They would tear 'em apart. But the bottom line, we were a growing nation. [00:16:00] There's going to be mistakes. But what was the premise? What was the end game, if you will? The end game was for everyone to be upward bound. Everyone to have the pursuit of happiness. The difference is the political parties have taken that to the, "We're right and

you're wrong if you don't agree with my pursuit of happiness, and everyone should be agreeing exactly how I do."

That's not, no. I take an oath of office to make sure, David, you can do whatever you want to do within the confines of the law, not creating any hardship or detriment to society or anybody else. But don't get upset because I don't agree with you. I'm defending you to enjoy your life. I just don't think I would enjoy it if I was your life.

Or I don't want part of your life, I want you to enjoy it. That's where the Democrats have overreached in all this diversity, equity & inclusion (DEI) and everything else. The Republicans are saying, "We'll tell you exactly how. Just stop this and this." Wait a minute. That's not the pursuit of happiness the Constitution gives me.

The undeniable right that I have, the pursuit of happiness, [00:17:00] liberty, and life. My God, I'll figure that one out. Just don't be upset with me if I don't agree with you, but thank you for giving me that opportunity. We don't teach that anymore, David.

David Young: Yeah.

Joe Manchin: We don't teach that you have that right, and I took an office to protect you to give you that right.

David Young: Senator, we're going to take a short break. We're going to be right back, ladies and gentlemen, with more of my conversation today with Senator Joe Manchin.

Welcome back to C-Suite Perspectives. I'm your host, David Young, the president of the CEO Center, which is the public policy center of The Conference Board. I'm joined today by Senator Joe Manchin.

Senator, before we took the break, you mentioned something that resonated, looking at the end game and this idea of the pursuit of happiness and people's inability to, let's just say, disagree.

I'm reminded in business school, I heard this saying that's always stuck with me, "Say what you mean what you say, but don't say it mean." And I think if that can resonate with people today, it would [00:18:00] help facilitate some more productive conversations. One recurring concern today is whether our political and civic culture rewards the kinds of leadership qualities that democracies depend on.

Jumping to mind here, prudence, courage, restraint, compromise, and the willingness to put long-term interests of the country ahead of short-term political gains. You've often spoke about the importance of bipartisanship and finding common ground. We alluded a little bit to this before the break, but why has that become so difficult today in American politics?

And what does political courage look like today, if even the country still rewards political courage?

Joe Manchin: Political courage is basically can you do what you believe and be able to explain to others in a respectful way, even though they altogether disagree with you...

David Young: Yeah ...

Joe Manchin: ...that there's a purpose, and that's all.

I'm very sorry if I'm in a situation where you think that I'm being obstinate and trying [00:19:00] to block something I just don't believe. You start thinking about how we got to where we are today and why is it so difficult for people to have conviction. Character means everything, David.

If you don't have a person of good character, and I'll tell you this, when you have someone trying to be a nominee to be confirmed on a national level in an agency, and there's background to where their mother wrote a letter saying, "My son's a bad person," maybe you ought to believe that.

When the family turns against other people and says, "This person's not active. They're not correct. There's something not right about my cousin," you ought to believe that. So you need good character but with the system we have, they're rewarded for bad behavior. People go out and say the most outrageous things.

" I love that toughness. That guy's really tough." Yeah. "That woman is really saying exactly what needs to be said." I can tell you things and hopefully do it respectful. My dad always said, "If you could say no with a tear in your eye, you'll be okay." [00:20:00] Because I need to know that if I have to give you bad news, this is harming me.

It hurts me as bad to tell you what I don't want to tell you but what I think you need to know. And you're going to walk away saying, "I'll be darned. Joe said that. But you know what? At least I could tell hurting. He didn't want to tell me, and I appreciate that." You're going to accept that much easier than you will if I had a gleam in my eye that I was happy to give you, and I hope it hurts you, David.

David Young: How do we go and start rebuilding

Joe Manchin: I don't know. You are who you are by how you were raised, where you were raised, and who raised you. Here's the thing, I got caught in a situation the only time in 250 years that the Senate's been evenly divided for the whole Congress.

The 117th Congress that I was in from January 2021, that ended on January 2023, two years. That's 117th Congress. I got caught in a situation, it was 50/50. And we had the majority. I had a D by my name. I'm a Democrat and we had the majority. That meant that [00:21:00] my vote was as powerful-- I guess, every senator, all Democrat senators then-- was as powerful as the president's vote.

I never looked at it that way. I never changed how I voted. I still made my decisions based

on one thing, Dave. Could I go home to the people that love me unconditionally, that always told me right from wrong and expected me to be accountable and responsible for the decisions I make and the words I said?

Could I look them in the eye and said, "This is why I voted for it," or, "This is why I was against it"? That never changed, but everyone thinks, "Oh, Joe got caught in a position. He's as powerful, which Joe's more powerful, Joe Manchin or Joe Biden?" Wait a minute. He's got basically responsibility of the whole country.

I have the responsibility of the people that I represent but also I took an oath of office to defend and protect the Constitution. So I take all of that seriously, but I didn't change how I voted. When you come to me, David, as an equal senator, an equal, and you're asking me to help you [00:22:00] with something, I want to do everything I can to say yes and do what you ask me to do to help you because I know you got elected through the process I did.

You're speaking for the majority of the people in your state, and I know that's a problem. My job was to do this, David. If you can change that just a little bit, make some adjustments or amendments to what you want me to sign onto, I'm happy to do it. And if you can't, I do understand that, and I couldn't be able to sign onto it the way you've given it to me.

But if you would ever change, please come back and see me again because I want to help you. Now, I didn't send you away defeated. Right now you don't have me, but you sure can get me if you want to compromise.

The country was built on compromise. The Founding Fathers knew we had to compromise. They wrote the Constitution. It wasn't a first draft. It was a compromise of many drafts. The Magna Carta wasn't a document of first draft. None of them were. It was compromise. But all of a sudden we can't compromise. [00:23:00] You have a D by your name, I have an R by my name. You're the enemy. I'm the good guy. Boom, boom. That's bull crap.

David Young: I will say this is one theme that's come through as we've looked at America 250 and reflected on the years past and what created the US. One recurring theme that you've just mentioned, Senator, is this idea of compromise. It has always been there and we can't lose sight of the need to compromise.

And I feel like today a lot of people think compromise is a bad thing. We're only where we are today because of compromise.

Joe Manchin: But David, here's the thing. There's not one person in America that has lived any type of a life whatsoever, any challenges in life or any successes, that hasn't gotten there because of compromise.

They didn't go with their plans, "Okay, this is it." They didn't go into the bank and say,

"Okay, this is what I want from you. Give me this much money." There was a compromise. You had to show responsibility and accountability. You had to show that you were worthy of something. There has been personal responsibilities at every step of the way.

I told my kids, I said, [00:24:00] "Look. If you see the person on top of the mountain, they didn't fall there. That person on top of the mountain did not fall there. I'm telling you." Okay? "So are you willing to climb? What are you willing to do to get there?"

David Young: That's fascinating. We've spoken a little bit now about reflecting back. I want to just take a look forward and get your thoughts and reflections.

What does the path ahead look like? Some of the things we've talked about already you've alluded to, like some of the worries and concerns. Personally I'm a glass half full type of guy, where is there optimism or where should there be optimism as we look to the path ahead?

Joe Manchin: As challenged as you think we are, which we are, but that entrepreneur spirit, the ability to dream of something and make it reality. The innovation, the skills that we have, the access to capital to make those dreams come alive, there is nowhere in the world you can do it except here right now.

Now, there's other places that might [00:25:00] be trying to emulate that, but they haven't gotten there yet because the people don't feel like that form of government will allow them to rise to where you can in America. Elon Musk from South Africa to be who he is today, okay? The Jeff Bezos in a garage to be where he is today.

Other countries will not let you get to that height. Now people say, "Oh, they're getting too big." As long as you put the guardrails on of how you want the government to function, no one can get too big in America because we're going to function in a certain manner, and it's going to be about government, it's going to be about the country first, not the party.

It's going to be about them, not us, and you, not me. Once you get that in your head, then you might be in the right position to do some good, but it has to change, and that's what scares me right now. The parties aren't changing. They're a duopoly. This is not based on policy anymore, it's based on a business model, [00:26:00] and they drive the business through basically division and hatred, okay?

They use hatred and they use scare tactics, and they use division. "If I can divide you and tell you who the enemy is, I can scare you what the enemy will do if they get in control. Boom." That drives my business model. Guess what? They're both using the same playbook, and it's just who's the biggest boogeyman, if you will.

It's just unbelievable what I see going on and I do everything I can to stop that. I'm doing all I can to open the primaries up. You have to change the process.

We're going to defeat ourselves by the weight of our debt. No one's talking about the finances of our country. No one. Democrat, Republican, Conservative, Liberal, no one's bringing up. It's not any discussion. No one's holding anybody accountable. And guess what? There's not one family member that can't live today in society without making some adjustments to their finances.

There's not one person at the top of the financial chain that's not concerned about how they stay there. That's by watching their finances. Everybody. They don't want to stress test. We should be stress [00:27:00] testing our Treasury Department.

David Young: Yeah.

Joe Manchin: Very easily. We should have a compromise as to how we save our legacies, which is in Medicare, Social Security.

No one's wanting to talk any of that because you're afraid you might lose some votes. Everyone's afraid of the outcome. And I said, "Listen, maybe if we had term limits, you wouldn't be worried about that." They look at me like I'm crazy. I said, "I had a little lady to me explain 20 years ago that I should be for term limits and I was not."

And I was explaining to her why you would lose all the people with the talent, all the people with the knowledge and experience. She said, "Joe, think of it this way. Maybe if there were term limits, we'd get one good term out of you." And I thought, "Oh, she had me there," because I had no comeback. She's right.

You'd have the courage to do what needed to be done, at least one good term out of your public service. So they're afraid because of their status in saying that.

And I'll give you another hint of what you should look for. When you meet a person who's holding a public office or has held a public office and they introduce [00:28:00] themself to you, "Oh, I'm Senator Joe Manchin," or "I'm Governor David."

David, if someone introduces themself with their title before their name, I'll guarantee you 90% of the time you're going to have a problem with them. They think more about the power of the office, of what they represent than who they are, and that's a problem. That's a lack of character, knowing that you have the ability to still be that same person you were before you went in, and understanding our democracy is you don't own a thing here.

It's not yours. You can't take the office with you. You can't take the title. You can always be an ex-senator, but you can never be a US senator once you leave that. You can be a former US senator. But never a US senator unless you're sitting in the office. You can't use the title, David, US senator once you retire. You can use the title Senator Joe Manchin, but not put US before it, because you're not representing the US anymore.

David Young: Interesting. Some of these issues you [00:29:00] mentioned, these have been recurring concerns. We focus on them at The CEO Center of The Conference

Board. It's debt levels of $40 trillion, right? We're spending more on interest than arguably the defense budget.

Joe Manchin: Yeah. We're doing all this in peacetime.

David Young: Yeah.

Joe Manchin: The last time we did anything even close to this was World War II. Think about it. We're trying to save the world from fascism. We're not in that scenario right now and we're still just piling on more debt. Unbelievable.

David Young: Yeah, some major issues. But also just want to emphasize, when you look at US opportunities say to dream, to innovate, and there's nowhere better in the world than here in the US. It's a nice positive optimistic end but the future path certainly does have its challenges.

Joe Manchin: I would say this to you. The US is like a child growing through puberty with all the acne. Sometimes you get a few warts, and then eventually it turns out to be a beautiful human being.

David Young: Senator Manchin, thank you so much for joining [00:30:00] us today. This has been a terrific conversation not just about America at 250, but the state of our civic life and the leadership and citizenship required to renew the American experiment for the next generation. And just my sincere thanks as well to you, sir, for your service, and also just taking a moment to share your personal stories today.

Joe Manchin: David, everybody said, "How'd you, stand to take the pressure when I was that one vote?" I said, "I never felt any pressure whatsoever because I never changed my voting pattern." I voted for what made common sense to me. I voted for what I could go back home, the people that knew me and trusted me, and give them an answer that they would say, 'That makes sense to me. I can accept that.'"

David Young: Common sense. Yeah.

Joe Manchin: So my book was *Dead Center: In Defense of Common Sense*. And you know why we don't talk about common sense? Because it's so common. It's how you run your life every day. You're expected to. People in the middle do not attract a lot of attention.

They don't get a lot of attention. They don't get you fired up and riled up. They don't get you mad and [00:31:00] I just believe that's where most of us are today until we take back our country and the concept of who we are. Our Founding Fathers designed this experiment for us.

It wasn't perfect. If it was perfect, they'd have said, "To create a perfect union." It was a more perfect union. We're still reaching, and that more's getting bigger and bigger. More perfect union. It's getting harder to attain. But we're trying, greatest country on the Earth.

If you were born in this country, you hit the jackpot.

If you came to this country and now you're a US citizen, you hit the lottery. And my question to you is, how are you going to spend it? You got the jackpot, you were born here. You hit the lottery. How are you going to invest it? Are you going to spend it and waste it? Are you going to invest it? Are you going to share it? What are you going to do with it?

David Young: What important questions, Senator, and thank you for sharing them, and thank you again for your time today. Thank you.

Joe Manchin: God bless America.

David Young: And to you, sir. God bless you. And thanks to all of you for listening to C-Suite Perspectives. I'm David Young, and this series has [00:32:00] been brought to you by The Conference Board.

AUTHORS

David K. Young

President, The CEO Center
The Conference Board

Joe Manchin

Former US Senator

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