

America at 250: Compromise for the Common Good

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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 here at The Conference Board, and delighted to be guest host of today's episode.

Today's conversation is part of a series focused on the United States and the American experiment. 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 leadership, citizenship, democratic resilience, and the future of our civic life.

Joining me today is Congressman Don Bacon, who represents Nebraska's Second Congressional District in the US House of Representatives. Congressman Bacon grew up working on a farm in Illinois. After college, he joined the US Air Force and served nearly 30 years as a specialist in electronic warfare, intelligence, reconnaissance, and [00:01:00] retiring as a brigadier general. He has also received the Air Force Distinguished Service Medal and two Bronze Stars, among other honors.

In 2016, Congressman Bacon was elected to Congress, where he serves on the Armed Services Committee and the Agriculture Committee. He is also active in many congressional caucuses, including the Main Street Caucus and the Problem Solvers Caucus.

Congressman Bacon, welcome. We are so pleased to have you joining us today.

Rep. Don Bacon: Well, thank you, David. Thanks for that kind introduction.

David Young: My pleasure. So let's begin by stepping back and looking at the broader sweep of the American story. Before, as we were prepping for this call, you were just saying how much you study American history, and you admire it. And the US has always been somewhat of an experiment: imperfect, ambitious, often divided, but also capable of renewal.

As the US marks its 250th [00:02:00] anniversary, what do you think the Founders would say about where the country is today and how it's evolved over the last 250 years?

Rep. Don Bacon: They would be shocked. They created this new fledgling country with 13 states. Now we have 50. We have Alaska and Hawaii. I think if they came here today, they would be amazed at how big we are. We have the world's largest economy. We were the superpower in the 20th century and the 21st century, and they created this new country. And I just think they would be shocked by how successful we have been.

And I think they would have some concerns. Now granted, Washington and Hamilton and Adams wanted a stronger federal government. They saw, they perceived a future with bigger cities and manufacturing. Thomas Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Aaron Burr, a few of these other guys out there, they wanted more states power and more of an agrarian. [00:03:00]

So I think you'd have some difference of opinions if they came here today, of what America really is and how good is it. But I think they would be shocked just how powerful 50 states and how financially prosperous this country is. So I think they would have to be pretty proud of themselves if they came here. There are some differences between our Founders and what they wanted, so you'd have some differences of opinion, too.

David Young: Yeah, interesting. So it's a little bit of a mixture of being optimistic, worried, a little bit disappointed, but overwhelmingly surprised at, kind of in a weird way, how successful the experiment has worked out, but also the challenges that they've and the country has faced over the last 250 years.

Rep. Don Bacon: 13 small states became a country. Now we're 50. We have about 20% of the world's GDP. They would've been shocked by that. And then, the fact that we defeated communism, we defeated fascism. We have a war against global terror. I mean, I think they'd just be shocked [00:04:00] by it all.

I think they'd have some warning signs, and we could come back to that. I think they'd be shocked at our \$40 trillion debt. That's not something that, I think they would warn us right now, "Hey, you better take care of this problem before we go through a 1929 depression."

And I think they would also be concerned about the anger and hate that Americans have towards each other. You know, George Washington didn't want parties. He called them factions, and he saw them develop during his presidency. He saw the Federalists become a party, and then he saw the Democrat-Republicans, they were called, eventually

became Democrats, but it was Democrat-Republicans, and they hated each other. I mean, Jefferson hated Hamilton, distrusted George Washington. In fact, Jefferson created a newspaper anonymously to go after Washington when Jefferson was the Secretary of State for Washington.

But Washington saw this whole thing develop. He didn't like it. it bothered him. We should be [00:05:00] Americans first, not Federalists or Democrat-Republicans who hate each other. I think if he came here today, he would say, "Wow, the Republicans and Democrats are eating each other up at the expense of the country."

I think they'd be shocked and amazed at how successful our country's been, but they would have some concerns.

David Young: Yeah. It's that line that you've just said, let's be Americans first, I think resonates strongly in today's climate.

When you look back at the founding principles, and we look at the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the idea of self-government, what do you think Americans most need to remember at this moment if they looked back at the founding years and the motivation that gave birth to the US experiment?

Rep. Don Bacon: The Constitution was a tremendous compromise. It was a compromise between big states and small states, between big cities and farmers. And people that had a lot of different ideas what a country should look like. And they had to sit in a room and figure out how to build [00:06:00] this democracy. In fact, they were scared of a pure democracy, so they created a republic that limited democracy.

That's why we got the Constitution, the Bill of Rights eventually, and things like this. You know, in France, during the French Revolution, if you had a majority in the parliament, you could just execute someone. They did not want that.

David Young: Yeah.

Rep. Don Bacon: They wanted a republic that had limits to the power of the democracy, but yet where the people were sovereign, and they had to try to create that balance. It was a massive compromise, and today, compromise is a bad word, but yet our country started on the premise of compromise.

And today, I mean, I get told all the time I'm a compromiser. I get people from MAGA, so-called MAGA guys that I'm too ready to try to make a deal. And you see it on the other side of the aisle, too. You see it in the primaries right now. A lot of more pragmatic Democrats are getting beat in the primaries by hardcore people on the left. And so you get it on both sides right now. This country cannot function without [00:07:00] compromise and consensus. Our Constitution is built on the cornerstone of consensus-building.

David Young: Yeah. It's interesting you talk about compromise and consensus-building.

Today, many Americans feel somewhat disconnected from institutions and honestly, perhaps, from one another. Trust in government, in media, business, higher education, and other institutions has declined significantly while polarization continues to deepen across political, cultural, and geographic lines.

When you look at America today, what do you think the country is getting right, and where do you think we're most off-track when we're trying to build the future of the US?

Rep. Don Bacon: I do believe in local governance.

David Young: Yeah.

Rep. Don Bacon: We're seeing it in our hometowns. I mean, I love my hometown of Papillion. It's well-run. The schools are well-run. The more local the government, I think the more effective, for the most part. I [00:08:00] mean, some of our big cities are struggling, but then, our Founders really wanted the majority of the power at the local level.

The federal government was only supposed to do Article I, Section 8, of the Constitution, has very specific duties. Everything else is supposed to go to the states and local government, or no government at all on some stuff. Let people decide for their own families. I think we have that right. Our federal government's struggling right now, though. It's trying to do too much. I think we've overstepped Article I, Section 8.

And because of the three branches of government, and the legislative branch having a bicameral, it's very hard to move things, move quickly. And if you're trying to do too much, that means you're not doing too much well. With our form of government, it was really meant to let the states carry the heavy load here, and we're struggling.

We're struggling on the basics. Trying to secure our borders, which the president has sort of done by fiat, but Congress should have had a hand there, which we need immigration [00:09:00] reform. We got to reform our mandatory spending or go bankrupt. And there's things that we have to do, that's disaster is staring us in the face. We got to move. And our federal government's got to figure out how to work together to solve some of these issues.

David Young: You sit in a unique position as a member of Congress. From that perspective, it gives you an incredibly important lens on business, government, and society. What do you think national leaders most often understand or misunderstand about how Americans are experiencing this moment?

Rep. Don Bacon: Too many people monitor their social media, and it becomes reality. And I sometimes, I'm guilty of that. I'm proud to be able, I have an avenue, a platform that I can voice my opinions, and I have roughly 100,000 people listen to what I have to say. The other day, I had a post that 5 million people looked at. It's a neat avenue to be able to [00:10:00] input into our national dialogue. But if you really look at the numbers, only a

minority of people use X, for example, and Facebook.

And I think a lot of our politicians live in that world, and I think it can be misleading. If I looked at strictly my social media, I think I would be in a fake universe, right? You got to get on the streets. That's why it's so important if you're an elected leader to, you got to get off social media, and you got to walk the streets. You got to go to forums. You go to you know, Rotary Clubs and speak. Go to Lions Clubs and speak. And you get a different sense of reality when you do that. It's a little more grounded. Social media, I think is, there's a lot of people that are governing and living in the world of social media, and it's destructive.

David Young: And would you say that would be one of the biggest challenges to democracy and shoring up trust in today's institutions and elected officials?

Rep. Don Bacon: I think it is, because if you read your [00:11:00] social media, a lot of it's conspiracy. It's one-upping somebody else. It's all about getting the upper hand and shaming the other guy, and it's not really a healthy dialogue out there. I like to think I'm a Christian first, American second, and I know my faith teaches me to have the Golden Rule and to not attack someone who's attacking me, to be more diplomatic. I tell you, it's a lot harder to do that on social media.

David Young: Yeah.

Rep. Don Bacon: It's easier to do it in person. But social media is a lot more destructive.

David Young: You've also, as I said in the introduction, you've served this nation in multiple ways for many, many years. I'm sure you have a deep sense of national purpose and mission behind just what the US stands for and what lies ahead.

Do you think the country shares that sense of national purpose? And if it doesn't, how do we look at rebuilding it?

Rep. Don Bacon: There is a [00:12:00] divide. I think we have different views. And we've always had a different view. Even, like I was mentioning right up front, Jefferson wanted an agrarian society. Hamilton wanted a more urban manufacturing society, a more DC-centric governance. Jefferson wanted the prominent power to be at the state level.

So we've had these issues from day one, and that's why we have government, and we have elections. It's the majority gets to input into it, yet the Constitution put so many brakes and so many roadblocks into getting significant things done, cause it's trying to create slow movement, and it wants consensus before it goes out, before things get changed.

So it really sort of inhibits radical changes, which is good, I think, in the end. But my view of, I really see America as the shining city, just like Ronald Reagan said, on a hill for democracy, where the people are sovereign. We have elections. We have Bill of

[00:13:00] Rights, where we protect the minority from the majority. And I love what our country stands for.

And also, economic freedom has created the world's greatest economy, and it's elevated more people out of poverty than any other type of economic systems out there. I'm really proud of what our country stands for. And I believe that we should be active in the world, working with other countries, working with NATO allies, working with Japan and Australia, like-minded countries, cause we can't do things on our own against Russia, China, Iran. We can't do it all on our own. We need good allies, but yet if we, if America's not a strong voice, Russia and China will fill that void in a much different world.

I have that worldview, and I will tell you that it's up for grabs right now. My view is, even in my own party there's disagreement. There, there's a little bit of an isolationist strain in the Republican Party itself. So this is why [00:14:00] we debate. This is why we have elections. And this is why even when I'm not in Congress anymore, I plan on trying to be very active advocating for a robust America.

David Young: We're going to take a short break right now and be right back with more of my conversation with Congressman Bacon.

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 delighted to be joined today by Congressman Don Bacon of Nebraska's Second Congressional District in the US House of Representatives and continuing this fascinating conversation.

Congressman, one recurring concern today is whether our political and civic culture rewards the kind of leadership qualities that democracies depend on. Prudence, courage, restraint, compromise, that we talked about earlier, and the willingness to put the long-term interests of the country ahead of short-term [00:15:00] political gains.

Do you think—and again, you sit in a unique position here, so I'm really curious as to what you'll say here. But do you think the country still rewards political courage, or have we created a system that in some way, shape, or form punishes it?

Rep. Don Bacon: We have a shirts-versus-skins mindset right now. The other party is bad. We are good. We must demagogue the other party. And I see it from the leadership of both parties. Now, President Trump, unfortunately, may be one of the worst at this. He totally demagogues the other party. And I get it, there's a lot of bad things going on on the Democrat side. But if you listen to the Democrats, we're terrible, as well.

And so it's a lot of demagoguery, a lot of hate. And so therefore, if you try to work across the aisle, you have a hard time in your primaries. And I've seen a lot of great members of Congress right now struggling just to get out of the primary because they're, I think they're being statesmen versus [00:16:00] being a partisan Republican or a partisan Democrat.

A case in point. John Cornyn, I think, is a good man, but he lost his primary. You know,

Cassidy, Senator Cassidy from Louisiana, was a great voice on healthcare, but we're going to lose him cause of a primary. And Senator Tillis decided not to run. But we're losing a lot of people who are, I would say, Americans first over Republican and Democrat.

David Young: Yeah.

Rep. Don Bacon: And I want, I'd love to go back to the days where we have more of a larger voice for statesmen. Cause right now, what we need more than anything is Republicans and Democrats willing to come up with solutions on how to get us out of this \$40 trillion debt spiral, that at some point that house of cards will collapse. And we'll have a 1929 again, depression. But we need to solve that now. And right now, Social Security will go d- insolvent in six years. Where's the statesmen who are standing up saying, "Let's fix this before people get a 22% cut [00:17:00] in their Social Security, which will happen in six years.

We also need legal immigration. We have a 1.7 birth rate in America, a declining workforce, and yet we have businesses looking for labor, employees, and they can't find them, which means our economy is being handcuffed. And so we do need to have some smart, legal immigration to keep us at a steady workforce anyway. And these are things that I think statesmen would tackle.

David Young: Why do you think compromise—we've mentioned kind of throughout the conversation today the importance of compromise, and compromise has taken place in every part of American political life for 250 years. Why has it become so difficult in American politics today?

And I'm thinking through trying to identify what the problem is. Is it with elected officials? Is it political parties? The role of media and social media or voters or the structure of the system itself? Or is it a mix of all of the above and [00:18:00] somewhat a consequence of modernization?

I'd just be curious as to what your thoughts are when we look at compromise. And when we speak to the American voters, how do we course-correct this?

Rep. Don Bacon: What I find is emergencies force us to course-correct, but I would sure like to solve a problem before an emergency.

David Young: Before.

Rep. Don Bacon: Right? We shouldn't have an emergency that forces us to make a fix. So like on 9/11, we had an emergency, and we realized we had intelligence agencies that weren't sharing data with each other just cause it was the culture. It wasn't intentional. So we tried to fix that. You could say same thing after Pearl Harbor.

You know, 1929, I'm reading a book right now called "1929," and if you read how we got into the Depression, it's like how do we let that happen? We created a big stock bubble,

and 90% of it was funded by debt. And then when the bubble went broke, everybody went bankrupt. And we had a thousand [00:19:00] banks go insolvent. Some of this stuff looks sort of common sense in hindsight. I think today, if we don't fix the debt problem and a few other things, we're going to hit a crisis, and it will force us to fix it. And I think if we were smarter, we would fix it ahead of time, not let the crisis hit.

I do believe that what has helped create this, part of it is gerrymandering. When 90% of our congressional districts are highly Republican or highly Democrat, that has not given us a good incentive to work together. Not even 10% of the congressional districts today are competitive. I'm in one of the most competitive districts in the country, but I'm only one of 30, roughly, districts that are competitive out of 435. So even when you have a swing, you're going to have maybe a five-seat majority for the Republicans and then maybe a five-seat majority for the Democrats just cause we're so divided by districts.

We would be so much better off if we had 100 districts that were within four or five points, [00:20:00] and so you get a better vibe of where the people are at. Congress, we were supposed to be the People's House. We're supposed to reflect the temperature of the people. It's hard to do that when you're 50/50 divided by district.

David Young: Yeah.

Rep. Don Bacon: I also think that the social media has exacerbated—people get on the news that they like. They only hear things that they like. The algorithms steer messages that you like to you. And I see it all the time. If I Google something on shoes, I get 100 shoe advertisements. I like shirts with different color collars. Things coming down now, I get tons of ads on those specialized shirts.

David Young: Yeah.

Rep. Don Bacon: The computer systems or the applications direct things that you agree with, and it sort of becomes an echo chamber. We're all living in echo chambers. Different ones, though.

David Young: I'm curious by when you say, we're the People's House, and we're supposed to reflect the views of the people, and there are significant generational differences now in American [00:21:00] society. I think the Founders placed enormous emphasis on civic virtue, personal responsibility, the obligations of citizenship. But today, there's an ongoing debate about whether Americans still share a common understanding of what citizenship requires. And I think part of that question is also do Americans across different generations understand the responsibilities placed upon them and what has come before in building this great, great nation?

How do we help the younger generations understand both the promise of America and also the work required to preserve it?

Rep. Don Bacon: It's hard to replace a good mom and dad. Good moms and dads teach

their kids to be involved in their local community, to be involved in the school boards, be involved in the city council, care about your housing, subdivisions, governments, to be involved in that. And schools can help compensate, but it really—we need good moms and dads to teach good [00:22:00] citizenship and virtue. I appreciate my, there were some ups and downs in my family growing up, with the divorces and stuff like that, but my dad sure taught me how to be involved in the local politics and the local parties. And so at the age of 13, I was going to events and listening to the local politicians speak, and I was sort of riveted by it all.

But being involved and taking ownership of your community is so important. And also realizing you can't get everything your way. It's so frustrating in Congress. As clearly as I see some issues, I'm lucky if I can get 80% of anything I like. And that's if I get anything at all. So that's part of politics. It is about what is it going to take to get 218 votes in the House, and how do you get 60 votes in the Senate? And that normally means you don't get everything you want. And sometimes you got to be taught that. We're taught today if you don't get 100%, then vote no, and disagree with it. Well, that means you get nothing done.

[00:23:00] And I do think there is generational differences. The young generation today, they didn't see even 9/11, believe it or not. Right? 9/11, a lot of folks are—but when I was serving in the military as a general, there were people coming in the military who were born after 9/11. And I retired 12 years ago. And a very few people remember the Cold War and our role in it, and hardly nobody today remembers our role in World War II.

And yet what those experiences taught us that America has to be leaders in the world and involved. But we're losing that memory, and so therefore you're seeing more isolation. Why do I need to be involved in Europe? Why do I need to help Japan with China? Why should I be involved in any of that? Well, because we learned in 1940s and 1950s, '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s that America had to be involved. Otherwise our world becomes a more dangerous place.

David Young: You mentioned the importance of families and schools. Thoughts on the importance of, businesses, and [00:24:00] especially CEOs, of leading with integrity and helping build the American Dream?

Rep. Don Bacon: All leadership comes back to character. I always tell folks that to get ahead in our country, you got to have character, you have to work hard, and you have to have the Golden Rule. And our corporate leaders need to set the example. And obviously, I think the employees, when they see that, they embody the culture of their company. And it's really important for the corporate leader to set that example, set the standard, and the culture of the company, set that example.

You know, I have a saying, I said it yesterday on social media, "Lead from the front unless you're in the chow hall." That's something I got out of my time in the military. If you're in the chow hall, go last, but otherwise you got to lead from the front and set the example and do the things that you're asking other people to do. I do advise CEOs and

other corporate [00:25:00] leaders, don't just be a leader in your business. We need you on the radio. We need to hear from you on the newspapers.

I'll give you an example. Most of the CEOs I talk to in Omaha will tell you, "Don, we need immigration reform. We need more legal immigration." But if you poll it, it doesn't even poll in the top 10, right? And so I told them, "Hey, I agree with you, but there is no support for it in Congress cause there's no support for it in the American people right now." And so if you want to get support, you got to get on the radio. You need to be doing editorials in your paper. And you got to make the case why we need more legal immigration, and what things can we do.

So for example, I support, hey, if you go to college here, say you're from India, and you go to college here at University of Nebraska, and you want to stay in America, I think you'd be a good person to stay here, right? Cause you went to school here, and we'd love to hold on to you. But we need to have that dialogue, and there's not enough of it right now, and I think our corporate leaders know what's needed to grow economically. We got to hear from 'em more.

David Young: Final question for [00:26:00] you. America at 250 is not only a moment to look backwards. I think it's important also to look forward and ask ourselves, what kind of country we want to become as we continue? I think one of the themes that's come up in this conversation is, we're always constantly evolving. There are always going to be challenges, and the importance of compromise. But as you look forward, what gives you hope about the country as we look towards the next 250 years?

Rep. Don Bacon: Warren Buffett's got a great saying, "Never bet against America." We have a dynamic power in our country cause we have entrepreneurs, innovators, we have freedom, economic freedom. And creative people make such an impact in our country, and that's what gives me hope, is our economic freedom is a power that's not seen in most of the world. And America embodies this innovation, risk-taking. And we've been that way from day [00:27:00] one. It's just part of our DNA as Americans.

And I, I love it. People come to our country, and they come from a country that is economically stale, stagnant, and they come here, and they thrive. I just find it amazing. If you look at just the Indian-Americans in our country right now, they're the top income earners, and yet were held back in their own country. They come here, and they're thriving, and it's true for all ethnicities. And that's what I love about our country. We're Americans because of the freedom that we have and the shared values of the Constitution and the Declaration. That's what makes us American.

But we do have some big problems ahead that we got to crack. We got to crack this deficit that's looming, and it's over 100% of our GDP. It's a huge red flag. We got to come up with some immigration reforms. We got Russia who hates us, who wants to undermine us at every step. China hates what we stand for, as well. They want to undermine us. Of course, we have terrorism in the world. We got significant [00:28:00] threats. We got some significant problems that we have to overcome, and it's going to take Americans

working together to do it, which means the underpinning problem of all this is the hyperpartisanship, and we got to find a way to get past it.

David Young: Congressman Bacon, thank you so much for joining us today. I think this has been a terrific conversation about more than just America at 250, to be honest with you, and more than just the state of our civic life and the leadership and citizenship required to renew the American experiment for the next generation.

If I'm leaving today's conversation with one central thing, it comes to the saying that you just said at the end there, never bet against America. Which is something to be encouraged about despite the challenges you mentioned: debt, immigration reform, and the geopolitical ecosystem that we live in today. But I just want to thank you from The Conference Board. It's meant a great deal to all of us, and we wish you all the very best on—

Rep. Don Bacon: Thank you.

David Young: [00:29:00] —the next adventure that you embark on.

Rep. Don Bacon: I'm very grateful that you're interested in hearing my perspective, and I appreciate the opportunity.

David Young: Well, you're most welcome. And thanks to all of you for listening to C-Suite Perspectives. I'm David Young, and this series has been brought to you by The Conference Board.

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