Introduction

PAUL FERGUSON: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the University of Maine and the 2013 William S. Cohen Lecture sponsored by the William S. Cohen Center for International Policy and Commerce at the University of Maine.

P.M. Forni is founder of the Civility Institute at the Johns Hopkins University and author of The Civility Solution. “In today’s America,” he writes, “incivility is on prominent display in the schools where bullying is pervasive, in the workplace where an increasing number are more stressed out by co-workers than their jobs, on the roads where road rage maims and kills, in politics where strident intolerance takes the place of earnest dialogue, and on the web where many check their inhibitions at the digital door.” Forni argues that a healthy democratic society depends on the robust practice of civility.

It is my pleasure today to introduce Secretary William Cohen, who will then introduce Senator Alan Simpson. By their stellar examples in public service, each has heightened our understanding of the value – indeed, the necessity – of civility in political discourse. Bill Cohen is known well and deeply respected by each of us here today. The Christian Science Monitor has called Bill Cohen a Renaissance man. What does this say about him? The high compliment would reflect the record he has amassed in his personal and public life. It would include his unique record of being a published author of eleven works of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, a futurist with degrees in classical Latin and Greek, the son of a working class family who rose to the highest levels of our government, serving on the Bangor City Council, in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, and as Secretary of Defense.

From his very first days in public office, Secretary Cohen was singled out as a future American leader. In 1974 Time Magazine cited him among “America’s 200 Future Leaders.” The following year, the U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce named him one of the ten outstanding young men in America. His Renaissance quality was reflected throughout his service in the House and Senate, to which he was elected in six consecutive

39Note: President Paul Ferguson of the University of Maine hosted the 2013 Cohen Lecture. After introductions, Mark Woodward, former Executive Editor of the Bangor Daily News, moderated the conversation between Secretary Cohen and Senator Simpson, and posed questions to them.

Maine elections, winning each by a wide margin. It is reflected in his surprising decision in 1996 to retire from public life to promote international business and through his writings and the media to contribute to more thoughtful public discourse on national political issues. He launched the William S. Cohen Center for International Policy and Commerce at this great university; and inspired creation of the Institute for Leadership and Democracy here, which aims to model the Maine way of leadership exemplified by Secretary Cohen and many of our iconic Maine lawmakers at the federal level.

Perhaps most remarkably, in 1997 President Bill Clinton invited Bill Cohen to lead the Department of Defense, the first time in modern U.S. history that a President chose an elected official from the opposite party to be a member of his Cabinet. After three decades in public service, Secretary Cohen leaves behind a record of unsurpassed accomplishment, integrity and respect; and takes with him unrivaled knowledge, reputation, and relationships across America and the world. Please join me in welcoming Maine’s own Renaissance man, Secretary Bill Cohen. (Applause)

BILL COHEN: Thank you, President Ferguson, for your very gracious and overly generous remarks. I thank you very much for your kind words. Let me thank all of you who are here today, I’ve been looking forward to this for some time. As some of you know, I had the happy occasion to teach at the university for six years before I ran for Congress in 1972.

This annual event is important to me because it has given me the opportunity over the years to call upon many of the people with whom I’ve had the extraordinary pleasure and opportunity to work – from Prime Ministers to Secretaries of State, to Dan Rather, Bob Woodward, U. S. Attorney General Eric Holder, Marine General Jim Jones, and others. It has given me the opportunity to bring them to the University of Maine to have a discussion, and that’s what I would like to do today. I cannot think of anyone that I have wanted more over the years to bring to the university than Alan Simpson.

Alan Simpson is an extraordinary man – a tall, lean, follically-challenged, wise, and witty cowboy from Wyoming. He has managed to take a brilliant mind and leave it with great humor. He is able to say some of the toughest things that need to be said in a way that hits you in the forehead with its precision and accuracy, and then he makes you laugh. He makes you laugh at him, and he makes you laugh at us, at the folly of the things that we do from time to time.

I cannot forget the first time I talked to Alan. We were in the Senate dining room when he came over and said, “I’m really mad. Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) is upstairs, and he’s carrying on this filibuster.” I think it was for a penny a gallon gas tax, maybe five. Alan asked, “Take a look at these few comments I’m going to make on the Senate floor. What do you think?” I looked and said, “I think you better tone it down.” And I took my pen and started to make some alterations to it. Alan took it back and said, “Thanks very much. I think I’m going to give it the way I want to. I’m going to roll this thing up and put it under Jesse’s desk, like it’s a hand grenade.” And, sure enough, it exploded right in front of Jesse.

It said, “Look, you can’t hold and bottle up this institution because of this narrow issue. If you’re going to do that, you had better be prepared down the line, when there’s something that involves tobacco or some other commodity that is important to your state. I’m going to be up there, and I’m going to carry on just like you; so you had better be prepared to deal with me in the future.”

Well, it had the impact Alan hoped for. Jesse didn’t like it; and he carried a grudge for a while until he finally got to know the real Alan Simpson.

Alan Simpson is someone who has been out there from Day One, talking about the Number One issue that we are confronted with, when we see civility having broken down over budgets, over debt, over deficits. How do I introduce this extraordinary man – a man whose father also served as a U.S. Senator and knew and worked with Senator Margaret Chase Smith – and who I then had the chance to serve with on Capitol Hill for eighteen years?

Each Senator is given the chance to write a final essay when leaving the United States Senate, and I’ll read just a bit about what I had to say then. I wrote, in part, “The first order of business in the restoration of confidence in our ability to govern is the need to achieve a rational fiscal policy for our nation. In the past we have paved the road to political success with promissory notes issued in the names of our children. It is a road that can no longer be traveled.

“Not long ago it was customary for parents to borrow money to ensure a better future for their children. Today the ethic of
self-sacrifice has been perversely inverted. Parents and grandparents now borrow from their heirs so they might enjoy the comforts and pleasures of the moment. This is tantamount to fiscal child abuse, where the beatings are inflicted incrementally and the damage is not immediately visible. But eventually the pain suffered by our children will become too excruciating and crippling for them to endure. Unfortunately, the wages of our sins will be paid by others after we have departed from public office or this planet.”

Alan Simpson also wrote of his experience and why he was leaving. At the very end he said, “We cannot make these choices if the federal government runs on auto-pilot. Decisions about such vital issues were made for us long ago through the establishment of mandatory spending decisions that we refuse to change. Liberal or conservative, young or old, internationalist or libertarian, isolationist, businessman or laborer, all of us have had a stake in the ability to affect positive change for the causes that we care about; and this requires us to look anew at the entire machinery of mandatory automatic spending, and to determine how best to prevent it from driving our posterity into bankruptcy.”

That has long been the motivating goal of Alan Simpson.

You all know about his role on the Simpson-Bowles Commission. Since the writing and filing of the commission’s report, he has taken his and Erskine Bowles’ show on the road to say that we are in danger of forfeiting our future; that we’re running a 16 trillion dollar debt; that we know what needs to be done to reduce that debt; that we know what has to be done to reduce the annual deficits; and that we are simply unwilling to measure up to those tasks.

Alan has a great sense of humor, he will make you laugh; but what stands out about him is his courage. He has a backbone of steel. I have watched him take on every major interest in our country – the biggest and the toughest – and has never shied away. He does it with great humor, but he also does it with love. I will end with this story, because I want you to hear from him.

Alan is a marvelous storyteller. He once got up on the Senate floor and said that a friend came to him and said, “Did you hear that Joe Jones passed away?” Alan replied, “My God, I didn’t know that. I’d better write to his widow and express my condolences.” He sat down and penned a beautiful letter to the widow about how important Joe was in his life, what contributions he had made to his fellow citizens, and sent it off. A day or two later, the friend came back and said, “Sorry, I made a mistake, Joe didn’t die.” Alan was beside himself to get in touch with the widow, to say, “Don’t open that letter, don’t open it, just throw it away.” The moral of the story for Alan, and for his Senate colleagues, was, “Why do we wait until the end, until it’s too late to tell someone that we love him?”

That struck me then and has stayed with me ever since. It’s important that we look at Alan as a man of great toughness, of intellect and humor, but also as a man of great heart and love. That’s the reason I wanted him here. Now, I’m going to keep my comments to a minimum, because you hear me talk all the time. But we don’t often have a man of Will Rogers’ insight, wit, and wisdom appear before this audience. Thank you for being here. (Applause)

“There is no trust in Congress today, not even within the parties. Trust is the coin of the realm, and that coin is severely tarnished today. When you lose trust, it’s all gone.” (AKS)

Q&A

QUESTION—Mark Woodward: Again, welcome Mr. Secretary and Senator Simpson. The two of you share much in common. You began and ended your Senate careers on the same day. You were both highly regarded as senators who could work with members of the other party; and in your post-Senate careers and experiences, each of you has served presidents who are Democrats. I would like to start with you, Senator Simpson, and ask you what the experience was like, working with a President of the opposite party.

ALAN SIMPSON: First, if I may, let me say it was easy to gravitate to Bill Cohen when we came to the Senate together. Here’s a guy – warm, witty, savvy, and smart – who knows what the hell is going on; and while everybody has some degree of knowledge, few people have wisdom. That’s what Bill has. And he has an additional trait that is extraordinary – sensitivity. He has mastered the fact that politics by itself is barbaric; you have to have the softening agents of life – books, music, theater, the visual and performing arts.

41In early 2010 President Barack Obama created the bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, co-chaired by Republican Alan Simpson and Democrat Erskine Bowles. Executive Order 13531 called on the commission to address the nation’s fiscal situation in the medium term and to achieve fiscal sustainability over the long run. The commission first met on April 27, 2010. A vote on its final recommendations on December 3, 2010, fell short of the supermajority of 14 of 18 votes needed to approve the report. The eleven members in support included five Democrats, five Republicans, and one Independent; four Democrats and three Republicans voted against. The plan proposed to reduce the federal deficit by nearly $4 trillion, stabilize the growth of public debt by 2014, and reduce debt 60 percent by 2023.
On Trust

There is no trust in Congress today, not even within the parties. Trust is the coin of the realm, and that coin is severely tarnished today. When you lose trust, it’s all gone. That’s the relationship I had with Ted Kennedy and Alan Cranston (D-CA) and Gary Hart (D-CO), who became a very close friend. Now it’s gone, and it will take a long time to repair. Trust them? I did! I didn’t care how they lived or what they did, that’s for a different Judgment Day. For me, did they keep their word? Did we shake hands? Any time Bill Cohen told me something, I put it “in the book.” That’s a long answer,


but I got a load off my chest; and I didn’t answer your question.

Question: So, I’ll repeat the question. In your most recent experience on the Simpson-Bowles Commission, did you feel any restoration of that trust, from your past experience when things worked?

SIMPSON: Erskine Bowles and I suffered a blowback of people who negotiate: you have to know your negotiating partner. Neither of us really knew Barack Obama. We went to him and said, “You’ve appointed us. Is everything on the table?” And the President said, “Yes, it is.” It was a good conversation. Erskine was the last guy to balance the budget as Chief of Staff for Bill Clinton. How did he do it, working for months with Newt Gingrich (R-GA) and Dick Armey (R-TX)? Nobody today would even think that could happen. You have this situation now where you have to know your client and where you’re going in the negotiations.

We put the Commission report on the table on December 1, 2010, and we set the bar high. Obama couldn’t touch it, because his base would have said, “Wait a minute. You said you would cut the deficit in half, and you didn’t do that. You would close Guantanamo, you didn’t do that. Now you’re messing with precious senior citizens’ entitlements. And, buddy, you keep doing that and you’ll be history!” If the President had voted for it, the Republicans at that time would have caucused and voted against it unanimously. That’s the venom that’s in the snake right now.

Question: Mr. Secretary, anything to add on that?

COHEN: Just a couple of words. I’m sort of the accidental Secretary of Defense. Most of my colleagues that I had played basketball with said, “Secretary of Defense? Secretary of Offense, maybe; but 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 re-elected and I had already announced my retirement, we had two meetings. When he decided he was going to offer me the position, I said there are two things that 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 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. Any time you’re going to talk politics, I want out of the meeting; don’t even call to ask. 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. I was never involved in any political discussion. (Applause)

I will tell you, it really was the most rewarding four years of my life. There’s nothing quite like being Secretary of Defense of the finest military in the world. There is nothing that will ever compare to that, just to have the opportunity to represent our young men and women. I know this is Veterans Awareness and Celebration Week here at the university. To be able to serve with some of the best and the brightest, to see these 18 and 19-year-olds who are making extraordinary sacrifices and doing things that are beyond contemplation, actually to be with them and to represent them was the greatest experience of my life. I’m thankful to Bill Clinton to this day for his giving me that chance.

Q

uestion: Were there times when you were walking down the hall and a Republican came the other way and crossed the street? Did you ever have difficulty with any of your colleagues because of your having accepted a position with a Democratic President?

COHEN: Initially, the Democrats were pretty upset with it. They said, “Hey, wait a minute, this guy didn’t vote for you, he didn’t contribute to you, and you’re going to give him one of the top positions in the country? He’s not one of us!” I had Republicans who said, “What are you doing? You’re going to serve a Democratic President? You’re going to give him whatever credibility you have, you’re going to offer it to him? What are you doing to the party?” And I said, “I didn’t know that partisan politics played with the security of the country; I’m going to serve the President to the best of my ability.” (Applause)

On Integrity

I’ll tell you one little story. 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 the Congress that night. They accused me and the President of “wagging the dog,” that we had launched 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, and the plan had been in preparation for some time. 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.”

SIMPSON: The real risk was the zealots who saw the Secretary lending his reputation and his integrity to a President they hated. That was, really, “How could you go and burnish his image, because you are you and we all respect you.” And they do, on both sides of the aisle, and always did. I’ve always said, if you have integrity, nothing else matters; and if you don’t, nothing else matters. It’s very simple. That was the same worry with Norman Mineta (D-CA) when he was asked to serve George W. Bush as Secretary of Transportation (and later Bill Clinton, as Secretary of Commerce). He got the same load that you got. “How could you do this?” He told them the same thing. He said, “If you think I’m going on any political activity for you, get me off the screen;” and he served with the same great distinction.

“What’s happened is that the country has become fragmented in one sense. The American people are not polarized as a general proposition; the political parties are polarized.... The party activists – the most passionate in the Republican and Democratic parties, who go out and pound on the doors and lick all the stamps, et cetera – are driving the agenda.” (WSC)

Q

uestion: The Congress today has abysmal public approval ratings, is considered dysfunctional and immobilized by partisanship. In contrast, you’ve each worked on a number of high-profile bipartisan panels – Watergate, Iran-Contra, the Iraq study group, the Simpson-Bowles Commission – on issues considered controversial and politically-charged; but somehow your efforts produced substantive results. Senator Simpson, based on your experience, can you give us some examples of the legislative process working as it should, and tell us why you think lawmakers then were able to work together successfully?

SIMPSON: 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 and I said, “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.” Father Ted Hesburgh of Notre Dame was the chairman, and serving on that commission were Ted Kennedy, Romano “Ron” Mazzoli (D-KY) and Hamilton Fish (R-NY), Democrats and Republicans alike, and Charles “Mac” Mathias (R-MD). Strom Thurman warned me, “Watch out for this Mathias, Al; he’s a very liberal Republican!”
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.” Once that little meteor went up (the idea had come from Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform), for the ACLU – man, oh, man! – the earth crumbled! Now they’re talking about retina scans and fingerprints, and nobody has written a thing about it. That was a success in its way.

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. You had Sandra Day O’Connor on the last day, saying, “Alan, this term you are using is a split infinitive.” I said, “Sandra, I don’t even know what the hell that is! So, what does it mean to me?” We worked for a couple of years and gave fifty-seven recommendations to the Bush-Cheney Administration, of which they adopted five! Eventually, fifty-seven 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 and whack each other around. Anyway, that was an extraordinary thing.

Your Country, Today

Then came this recent budget thing, and Erskine Bowles and I worked for eight months. We got five Democrats, five Republicans, and one Independent in support of the recommendations, that’s sixty percent of the Com-

mission. How can you get more bi-partisan, with a range from Dick Durbin (D-IL) to Tom Coburn (R-OK)? But people would say, “Well, who’s on your Commission?” And you say, “Well, we got the votes of eleven people, over a range between Dick Durbin and Tom Coburn.” And they say, “Dick Durbin of Illinois? That commie guy from Illinois?” And then, “Tom Coburn voted for it? Tom Coburn, that neanderthal Republican from Oklahoma?” That’s your country today! You just name a person and then they will dissect him or her with partisan shots from the right and the left. It’s a contact sport!

**Question:** Mr. Secretary, do you have any examples of how things once worked, and why?

**COHEN:** Well, you mentioned Iran-Contra. Senator George Mitchell and I both served on that committee; and we wrote a book, *Men of Zeal*43 that I would recommend to you as the single best book on the subject. That was an occasion where Republicans and Democrats had to work together to tell what happened.

The U.S. had a public policy that we would never sell arms to Iran. And we had a covert program that was in fact selling arms to Iran, inflating the price they would have to pay and using the profits from the covert sale to fund the Contra effort in Nicaragua. Colonel Oliver North called it, “A stand-alone, self-sustaining covert capability that was established outside the realm of the appropriation process, that only a few people knew about.” So, you were conducting a foreign policy secretly, of which the American people and most members of Congress had no idea.

It suddenly erupted and became news. Then these Republicans and Democrats came together and said, “Here are the things wrong with this, and why.” And the country accepted it. President Ronald Reagan, to his credit, said, “Look, I didn’t realize I was doing this; but if I did it, it was wrong.” Frankly, because of his popularity he escaped something that President Richard Nixon did not. It wasn’t of the same magnitude as President Nixon; but it came close, because you cannot set up a secret covert capability that has no accountability and the American people are completely unaware of.

**SIMPSON:** I don’t think anyone will ever forget the shot our colleague George Mitchell took at Colonel North during the hearing.44 That was a piece of work I’ll never forget. Powerful!

**Question:** “God does not take sides in American politics?”

**SIMPSON:** Yes. Everyone in the Congress read it, and everybody in the Senate went up to him and said, “You
know, it takes ‘truth to power’ to do that.” It was about America, not Democrats and Republicans, or Contras and Sandinistas. It was powerful stuff. I’ve already been to the Mitchell Lecture at Colby College; and now I’ve paid you back here, receiving nothing at either of these venues. I believe in free speech; but this is ridiculous! (Laughter, applause)

**Question:** How would you compare the environment in Congress when you were there and the way it is today?

**SIMPSON:** Well, it’s not interparty conflict, it’s intra-party. You have Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) standing in the wings, waiting desperately for Dick Durbin (D-IL) to go down in flames because he voted for this package or that. I suppose it looks like something out of Shakespeare standing in the wings, with House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) – who now has paid all his dues to the extremists and others in our party – saying, “You know, I kept the whole thing running for two weeks (during the partial federal shutdown) and you came up with zero! So, the next time you get all keyed up, just know, I ain’t there! I did what you wanted me to do, it was a feckless thing, and you came up with nothing!” An old cowboy in Cody taught me, “If your horse drops dead, it’s better to get off!” So, that has happened.

You have two people in Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) who don’t like each other at all; it’s quite obvious they don’t. When Bill and I worked together, we started with a couple of masters, Howard Baker (R-TN) and Robert Byrd (D-WV), and then we had Bob Dole (R-KS) and Tom Daschle (D-ND) and George Mitchell. The assistant leaders I worked with, Al Cranston (D-CA) and Wendell Ford (D-KY), became dear friends. You had all these serious committees and ranking people. Bill, tell them who those people were and how it worked; you were awesome at that.

**COHEN:** Well, Sam Nunn (D-GA) and I worked together on many things. In 1987 Sam joined me when I undertook to create the Special Operations Command and the Assistant Secretary of Low-Intensity Conflict. Over the objections of the Pentagon, I wanted to create a command designed to take our best and our brightest and use them in a way that they would be aware of the culture, the language, and the traditions of the country they were going to be deployed to. They would be our forward-based eyes and ears, and help us to understand what the country was thinking and to prepare if we had a friend or foe. It was strongly opposed by the Pentagon.

Sam joined me, and the two of us were able to create the Special Operations Command, which today is probably the most in-demand command of all. You have a few people doing lots of things – SEAL teams and Rangers and so forth. It’s calling upon a very select group of our very best to operate in hostile environments without necessarily having to fire shots, but to gather intelligence and help shape the battlefield, if there’s going to be a battlefield. That was one in which Senator Nunn joined with me, we passed it, and now it is one of the most effective commands we have.

“Technology, itself, is neutral. It’s all head and no heart; it all depends on how we’re going to use it. I feel the same way about what’s happened with social media, it’s a river. In a river there is life and regeneration; but it’s also a sewer.” (WSC)

**Question:** Why isn’t something like that possible today? It doesn’t seem to be happening; what is missing?

**COHEN:** What’s happened is that the country has become fragmented in one sense. The American people are not polarized as a general proposition; the political parties are polarized. The American people are basically conservative people, slightly right of center or slightly left of center, given the issue and circumstance. If you’re heading into a depression, you expect the government to take a more active role in trying to resolve the issues; and that puts you further into the Barack Obama camp initially, asking, “What can the government do?”

But if you get too far right or too far left, you’re going to lose the support of the vast majority of the people who are in the middle. What’s happened in politics today is that the party activists – the most passionate in the Republican and Democratic parties, who go out and pound on the doors and lick all the stamps, etcetera – are driving the agenda.

**On Money, Politics, and Self-Government**

Take this in combination with the scandal of money-raising today. It is obscene what it costs today to run a congressional or a senate or a presidential campaign. A billion dollars to run a presidential campaign? You have one individual out in Las Vegas who pledged a hundred million dollars for one of our candidates, a Republican. If you have five or ten mega-millionaires who pledge a hundred million dollars – ten people – you could get a billion dollar campaign! How do you go against that?

What’s happened is that money has become the driving force in politics. Not so much when we were there, but our colleagues who are serving now spend all of their
time – when they’re not at home or on the floor – dialing for dollars, all day long. It’s obscene! If any of you were to stand outside the Senate chamber and watch the gauntlet that members have to run to get to the floor, with people grabbing you by the arm, saying, “Vote up, vote down, we supported you, don’t forget!” You would be pretty upset about the way the country is being run. And that’s what takes place on a daily basis.

It’s money, it’s lack of accountability. It’s also the fact that gerrymandering has really set the stage, so that Republicans just have to worry about someone coming from their right; and Democrats now, someone from their left. The parties are pulling candidates to the extremes, and good people are being punished.

We have Bob Bennett (R-UT), a good friend of yours, Alan, and one of the most conservative senators from the conservative State of Utah. He happened to reach across the aisle on the TARP issue when Barack Obama first came into office; and he was punished for it. A brilliant Senator, punished. It’s money; the 24-hour cable; the talk shows whipping people up; and it’s the phone that we all carry, this thing. Now, you can start a revolution with a Twitter, right? We’ve all seen it happen.

On Working Together

The real issue in this country is, Do we have the ability to govern ourselves any longer? Do we have the ability to try to do what Alan and I did with Gary Hart or Sam Nunn or John Glenn (D-OH), and the list goes on? To say, “How do we work together to make things happen?” We have lost that willingness and ability; and until such time as Republicans (and they’re starting to do it now) speak out against the more extreme elements; and the Democrats have to do the same, and say, “Let’s work together on the big issues, because we know what we have to do.” We know what the Simpson-Bowles Commission recommended. it’s all laid out right there. Here’s how we get control. Here’s how we start reducing the size of this monster that’s going to consume our kids.

_The defense budget can be cut, and it can be cut significantly if you do it the right way, if you tailor it to your strategic needs.... Shouldn’t we be tailoring the cuts to fit the strategy?... We don’t have a strategy today, and we don’t have the tactics._ (WSC)

_Question:_ When you began your careers in Congress, the daily news was encapsulated in a half-hour in the evening, by the three major networks. Today we have the 24-hour news cycle, the advent of what’s called “tribal” media, and cable stations that pander to the extremes on both sides. How can we elevate the discourse and bring greater civility to our conversations, when people do not even begin their conversations with the same set of facts?

SIMPSON: I wrote a book about the media called, Right in the Old Gazoo. It was about me describing the failings of the media; and, boy, I did! David Broder, our pal and wonderful ace reporter, was the best. He read it and said, “Simpson, I agree with about 60 percent of what you say, and the rest is just a screed, it’s a rant; but you’re right!”

Bill was talking about the right and the left. If you’re a Republican seeking re-election and you talk about taxes or revenue, you will be visited by the Club for Growth or Grover Norquist, who will come to your home in a white robe and visit with you. And if you’re a lefty and you suddenly talk about entitlement reform and doing something to precious Social Security to make it solvent for 75 years – a stupid idea, let’s admit that, for God’s sake – you’re going to be visited by the AARP and their local representatives, and the AFL-CIO. That’s where you are right now.

The worst part of it is that if you’re the leader – say, Mitch McConnell, for example – you can come to Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and say, “You keep messing around with Max Baucus (D-MT) and putting together whatever you’re cooking-up over there, then I’m going to make you chairman of the Journal Committee.” Now that may not sound like anything; but then Harry Reid will say to somebody, “You’re working with Saxby Chambless (R-GA) over there, that Republican. Be careful there, because I can put you in a whole new position in the Democratic leadership.” That’s the power that’s being wielded now; and it’s really obvious when you see it up close.

_QUESTION:_ Talk about the media, your experience with the media?

SIMPSON: I always had a rule: when they’re after my butt, answer the phone; and they respected that. I always got in trouble. I’ll never forget about the late Peter Arnett (of CNN). I just had a belly full of him, because every other media person left Baghdad except Peter; and at the bottom of the screen it said, “Our loyal correspondent is speaking in the most difficult circumstances” – that is, he’s being censored. He couldn’t have stuck around any time if he hadn’t said, “Go ahead, tell me what I can and can’t say.”

So I made a beautiful statement that he was a sympathizer. I’ll tell you, the media – I went from the A list to the Z list! Well, he later was the toast of the town – and I was toast!

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Peter later made the final error. He came out and said he really was supportive of our enemies; and they fired him. And guess who called me to talk about it? The media – The Washington Post, the New York Times: “Did you hear about Peter Arnett?” And I said, “No, what?” “Well, they canned him.” “Well, what did he say?” “He said he was very hurt, he realized he ruined his reputation.” Whatever it was he said was pretty hard and pretty tough for him to say. “Now what do you have to say, because you were right in the middle of that?” I said, “Just take his name out and put my name in and you’re the same people that ragged me and now you want me to take a spade of dirt and put it in his face. Stuff it”. Well, that was the last call I had that week.

Think of that. I mean, that’s where they were eating their own young, and it didn’t matter. They’re interested in confusion, controversy, and complexity, not clarity. And as long as the media just consists of those three C’s and not clarity, this country can’t make it. Once or twice a week you read about somebody saying, “We’re sorry we didn’t vet that more.” Yes; but in the meantime, just the wreckage of human beings is left.

**Question:** Any thoughts, Mr. Secretary, on the media and the 24-hour news cycle, and what these are doing to our political discourse?

**COHEN:** What’s happened is, there’s no longer any filter. When we were growing up, waiting for the test pattern on television, you had three networks – Uncle Walter, one with ABC, and David Brinkley – and you assumed they at least were providing a filter for the serious and for the silly, to separate these out.

Today there’s no one filtering the news that’s flowing through. It’s not even news at times. It’s just rumor and speculation and raw sewage flowing through it. That to me is what’s happened with the Internet and social media. It’s like anything else. Everything has its positive side, but it has a negative side as well.

**On Technology’s Mixed Blessings**

We often think about technology in terms of its blessings; but it has a double edge to it. The same technology that Bill Gates has, Bin Laden had. Technology, itself, is neutral. It’s all head and no heart; it all depends on how we’re going to use it. I feel the same way about what’s happened with the social media, it’s a river. In a river there is life and regeneration; but it’s also a sewer. It’s the sewer that fills some of the information that gets into the media; and suddenly – from something that has no basis in fact, that is just scandalous in terms of its allegations – people can be ruined in a nanosecond. People can be eliminated in a nanosecond by being Twitter’ed, or by having a photograph taken that says, “This was one of the bombers up in Boston.” They showed a photograph of such an individual, and his face went around the world. He ended up committing suicide, and he had nothing to do with the bombing.

“All of these other countries are looking at us and asking, “What happened, where have you gone wrong? Do you expect us to follow your lead? You want us to be more like you? No, thank you, we’re doing fine without following you.” (WSC)

We live in a time in which there is no zone of privacy. Take this whole notion that the Europeans are very upset with us; Americans are very upset with us, as well. When asked about this matter, I said, “I’m surprised they’re surprised!” Think about it. When I was Vice Chair of the Intelligence Committee and went to the Pentagon, I assumed every single word that I uttered was being recorded by someone, friend or foe. This is what most people don’t understand. It’s not only our adversaries that are following and monitoring us; it’s some of our closest allies.

When we stepped into the Situation Room at the White House, one of the most secure rooms in America, the first thing we did was to take our phones and remove the batteries. Or, we were not allowed to take the phones in at all, because your phone can be activated remotely and used as a listening device by anyone who has access. We’ve gone from state actors to non-state actors to individuals who now have the capacity to read simply everything.

The notion that suddenly the Europeans are stunned by this – when in fact some of the most stunned have been the most active in stealing our secrets – I took issue with that. There’s a line that has to be drawn; but, frankly, when Google now is upset, my goodness! I can’t open my computer in the morning without Amazon telling me what I should be reading, based on what I have already read. We know that Google is now going to be able to tell each of us who has a cell phone, as we walk by a store, a Starbucks, “Oh, by the way, the special is on with the latte that you like.” They know what you bought the day before or the week before, and you’re going to walk through any mall and your phone is going to be going off, saying what’s on inside, the specials – because they know what your preferences are!

All of this concern about big brother – even while we’ve had lots of little brothers. They’re called credit card companies, and they know everything we do. I had my card cut off a couple weeks ago. I was trying to inquire about a device where I could plug three or four of my
iPhones into this one device; and apparently it struck somebody as unusual, so they cut my card off, called me, and said, “Did you try to make a purchase of such and such?” I said, “That doesn’t sound familiar.” They said “It had to do with computer plug-ins.” I said, “Oh, yeah, that was me.” It was a $28 item. They saw that as an unusual purchase for me, and thought my card had been stolen; so they cut off the card. Your credit card is watching everything you do!

Google now is going to make it so that they can have a Google Glass and monitor everything you do and take a picture of you, et cetera. The notion of a zone of privacy is gone; it doesn’t exist for any of us. The problem is that technology is racing so far ahead of our ability to regulate it, and that’s something we’ve got to come to grips with as a society. The notion that gentlemen don’t read each other’s mail went out in 1929, and it’s not coming back!

SIMPSON: Let me add one thing. I like to say, “What the hell have you got to hide?” And that always irritates people, I’ll tell you. I was once on federal probation for shooting mail boxes and was sent off to the Cranbrook School. I got drunk one night in Laramie, hit a cop, and spent a night in jail. I called this woman I was going with and said, “I need $300 bail.” She said, “Well, I’m working my way through school, buster, so you can find a way and just spend the night.” And I thought, “I think I will marry her” – which I did! (Laughter)

Anybody who believes there’s privacy today is just stupid; and the people who ensure that we don’t have privacy are the media. The first thing they’re doing with (Mayor) Bill DeBlasio of New York City is digging through everything in his background, all the stuff, everything personal. Nothing that has anything to do with policy. I don’t know if he’s a socialist or a commie or whatever the hell he is; the issue is, they’re digging, digging, digging. What’s the purpose of that? Finding the guy smoking pot when he’s 20, sitting under a tree with his hair hanging to his knees, you know. Is this a picture of our candidate for the U.S. Senate? Yes, it is. It’s like, forget it!

Question: We have time for one more question, and could we try to end on a note of hope and optimism? Any observations on what it’s going to take, to get this national dialogue back on the right track?

COHEN: It’s going to take the people of the country speaking out and saying, “Enough is enough!” As many of you know, I spend most of my time traveling around the world – China, India, all throughout the Southeast Asian countries, Oceania, the Gulf States. They look at us with – it used to be with awe, with admiration. Today, it is with astonishment. “This is the United States of America and you’re closed for business? You are the ones who hold yourselves out as the premiere example of what a democracy should be like – multiethnic, multiracial, multireligious, all of the great things that your country stands for – and you don’t have a budget, and you’re not going to get one for the next two or three years? You can’t even make a decision on what needs to be done on the Simpson-Bowles effort?”

On Defense Spending

Think about this, now. I’m here to say the defense budget can be cut, and it can be cut significantly if you do it the right way, if you tailor it to your strategic needs. I like to give a very simple example. Suppose you go to your doctor and the doctor says, “You know, Bill, you could lose about 20 percent of your weight, you’re getting a little bit too soft. It’s not good for your health, and ultimately you’re going to pay a big penalty for it. So, take 20 percent off.” And I say, “Okay, I can do that”, and I rush to my tailor and say, “Take 20 percent off the cuff and 20 percent off the pants;” and I’ve reached my 20 percent – which is absurd, isn’t it?

That’s what we’ve done with the Defense Department, saying “By the way, here’s the way you’re going to cut it: you’ve got to cut 20 percent out and you can’t touch personnel, that’s off the table, you can only touch operation & maintenance and procurement; and you can’t say how you’re going to cut it, you just have to take it evenly across the board.” You say, “My goodness. Shouldn’t we be tailoring the cuts to fit the strategy?”

Sun Tzu said, “Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.” We don’t have a strategy today, and we don’t have the tactics. All of these other countries are looking at us and asking, “What happened, where have you gone wrong? Do you expect us to follow your lead? You want us to be more like you? No, thank you, we’re doing fine without following you.”

We’ve got a lot to do, and that’s one of the reasons the Simpson-Bowles Commission is so critically important. Why it was taken off the table still befuddles me, because

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46 A private college preparatory boarding school in Bloomfield Hills MI, near Detroit. “We welcome motivated students of all races, backgrounds, and orientation to our school. Each of them comes here to learn, grow, and discover who they are and who they have the potential to become.” – Arlyce M. Seibert, Director of Schools, 2013.

47 Sun Tzu (544–496 B.C.) was a Chinese military general, strategist, and philosopher who lived in the Spring and Autumn Period of ancient China. He is traditionally credited as the author of The Art of War, an influential ancient Chinese book on military strategy. The work has been praised and employed throughout East Asia since its writing. In the twentieth century it grew in popularity and saw practical use in Western society, as well.
the commission’s recommendations are responsible and rational; and, yes, they touch all of us. They touch people like me and ask, “Do I really need Social Security at this point in my life? I’m still productive, I’m still working, I can still contribute. Shouldn’t there be some changes made in the growth of these programs as was laid out by the commission? Can’t we sacrifice for our kids, as opposed to borrowing from them now and making them pay our bill?”

On What It’s Going to Take

It’s going to take the American people to say, “We’ve been selfish; we haven’t disciplined ourselves; we’ve gotten soft and flabby in our thinking and in our policies; and we are going to forfeit the future unless we change.” The great thing about this country is that we are so capable of changing, and we will change when we’re forced to do so. The reason I wanted Alan to come and want him to continue to speak out is that it’s going to take people like him who have been willing to take the heat, to take all of the abuse that he takes on a day-to-day basis for saying, “We should be challenging and changing our Social Security programs to make them secure for the future, for the kids who are coming up; and if we don’t do that, then we are engaging in a terrible thing that we’re inflicting our kids and grandkids.”

SIMPSON: Or you could do one other thing. You could go to the town meeting of your elected representatives. Don’t forget that Maine and Wyoming are very much alike; you cast 26 percent of your vote for Perot, we cast 23. People asked, “How did we get Bill Clinton?” I said, “Well, you bonehead, you voted for Ross Perot. What’s your next question?”

Maine and Wyoming are filled with independent and ornery people – my God, just the kind of people you love. (And you’ve got another one now, and that’s Angus King. He’s a piece of work, let me tell you. He’s trying to make things work. He’s not there to see who can torture the Democrats or the Republicans.) Go to the town meeting; and when the elected representative stands there in the glare, looking into the camera, owlish, and says, “I know what the problem is. And we can get it done without touching precious Medicare, precious Medicaid, precious defense, and precious Social Security. God bless you.” You should get up and say, “You, sir, are making a terminological inexactitude, you lying son of a bitch, you!” (Applause)

“It’s going to take the American people to say, “We’ve been selfish; we haven’t disciplined ourselves; we’ve gotten soft and flabby in our thinking and in our policies; and we are going to forfeit the future unless we change.”” (WSC)

PAUL FERGUSON: Well, it’s a little tough to come back on-stage after that colorful show-stopper, Senator; thank you! And thank you, ladies and gentlemen. We’ve been enlightened today in our thinking about the value of civility in politics and leadership by example. I would add just one last thought. The reason we hold this kind of conversation at the university is that we’re pleased and honored to share it with our students, our next generation, our future. Senator Simpson, we are so grateful for your time here, to join Secretary Cohen; and we hope you’ll come back soon.

SIMPSON: Thank you. We’ve spent some wonderful times here in Maine, and I’ve learned to love this state. You have to love it, because it reminds me of my native land of Wyoming – not just in its physical attributes, but in its people. And that’s the best compliment I can give. (Applause)