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Baker addresses declining civility, increasing partisanship in politics

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Civility and the spirit of cooperation have disappeared from national government and politics, James A. Baker III stated in a keynote address Jan. 17 at Rice's Baker Institute for Public Policy. Baker pointed out that his remarks were presented in the spirit of nonpartisanship.

Having served as secretary of the treasury under President Reagan, as secretary of state under President George Bush and as White House chief of staff for both presidents, Baker has witnessed firsthand many of the changes in politics he cited.

"Excessive partisanship has gripped Washington for the past 25 years," he said, offering several examples:

- The political system has been criminalized, resulting in "gotcha politics" in which the candidate wins by having an opponent investigated.
- The criminal justice system has been politicized, with the Senate sometimes destroying a candidate's reputation during a confirmation process that was meant to be just a review of qualifications.
- The old cycle of politics and then governance has been replaced with a permanent campaign, hindering the likelihood that opposing political parties will cooperate for the common good.
- The language of politics has been debased by the most outrageous and outspoken partisans because the media are more prone to give them attention.

Baker said such mean-spirited hyperpartisanship breeds cynicism and damages the nation. "There are a lot of good people who would never consider government service because they're unwilling to subject themselves to the personal humiliation that that service often entails."

The honorary chair of the Baker Institute at Rice said he is convinced that the American people have become weary of gotcha politics and that they would respond well to leaders who have a positive approach and who keep their promises — even when it's inconvenient to do so. He advocated a revival of "the honorable art of political compromise."

“Healthy partisanship mediated through our institutions of government is how we work things in a representative democracy,” Baker said. “The challenge is to disagree without being disagreeable and to be adversaries without becoming enemies.”

He acknowledged that the decline of civility and cooperation in government took several decades to occur, so restoring them won’t be quick and easy.

“But it really has to be done,” Baker said, “and with leadership, I’m optimistic enough to think that it will be done.”.