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COVEY/FERSH: Reaching post-partisanship: Here's how

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OP-ED:

When asked recently how he would manage the inherent competition between his powerful White House staff and his strong choices for the cabinet, then-President-elect Barack Obama responded — "If the tone I set is that we bring [enough] intellectual firepower to a problem, that people act respectfully towards each other, that disagreements are fully aired, and that we make decisions based upon facts and evidence as opposed to ideology ... people will adapt to that culture and we'll be able to move together effectively as a team.&#8221.

If successful, this approach could serve as a blueprint for successful work, not just among the Obama team, but also across partisan lines in Congress, and potentially when it comes to U.S. relations with other nations. President Obama's instincts on how to resolve problems are much needed at a time when the American public is hungry for leadership that unites the country and places problem-solving ahead of partisanship. But while he can do a lot to set the tone, it will be important to embed additional people with real skills - in the White House, in federal agencies, in Congress - so that the implementation of such instincts is not dependent on the transcendent leadership of any one leader or group of leaders.

As last week's party-line vote on the economic stimulus package in the House of Representatives indicated, it will take hard work and know-how to create solutions that unite different factions. The president, his team and Congress can achieve "third-alternative" solutions to major challenges if they are willing to systematically employ proven approaches to finding common ground.

One such approach is synergistic consensus-building, not compromise, a particularly effective tool to address issues of national importance and complexity. Consensus-building is frequently misunderstood. It is not a call to sweep differences under the rug. To the contrary, it only works when people clarify and articulate their differences fully. The key ingredients of consensus-building are bringing a wide range of voices to a common table, ensuring that all parties are open to finding new answers that are better than what they brought to the table, building trust and empathic understanding among the parties, clarifying differences and then securing agreements on common solutions.

We have employed these tools over a period of years, and together are

working on a major project that has produced a strong consensus report from 34 highly diverse, eminent Americans on how to improve U.S. relations with the Muslim world. Participants include: Madeleine Albright, former secretary of state for President Clinton; Richard Armitage, former deputy secretary of state; Dov Zakheim, undersecretary of defense for President George W. Bush; Vin Weber and Steve Bartlett, former congressmen; imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, scholar Vali Nasr, and nine other Muslim American leaders; Tom Dine, former executive director of the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC); Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention; and former diplomats and military officials.

Some members of the group were reluctant to be in the same room at the start. Now, they are working as a team to get their recommendations out to a wider audience through the report, "Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World." Vin Weber spoke for many others when he said: "The report provides clear-headed ideas and analysis that the American public and bipartisan leaders can get behind in working to improve U.S.-Muslim relations. The process by which this group reached consensus is a good model for dialogue for the tough issues the country faces."

America's challenges could not be more formidable. We face a financial crisis, rising national debt, a challenged health-care system, concerns about climate change, crumbling public infrastructure, shortfalls in Social Security, high social service demands and more.

As President Obama has said, no one party has a monopoly on good ideas. Obama, his cabinet and congressional leaders should institutionalize their respect for diverse and even conflicting ideas through the use of collaborative, synergistic third-alternative approaches to addressing the daunting problems of the day. In Buddhism, this is called "the middle way" not a compromise between two different positions, but the adoption of a higher position to which all parties subscribe. It is time to bring talented problem-solvers into all levels of government to employ their skills and train a new generation of leaders to create "win-win" solutions through the power of respectful dialogue.

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