



Opinion

The late Rep. George Brown: A model for bipartisan solutions

By Hans Johnson
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Wrangling between a re-elected president and congressional Republicans over tax rates and federal spending cuts now dominates news from Washington.

But divided government, and pathways of compromise, are nothing new to governance in the Inland Empire.

In fact, few areas of the country feature as many examples of bipartisan problem-solving as this region, from air quality to technology and trade policy. The combination of population growth, immigration and increase of independent voters have made election outcomes in Riverside and San Bernardino counties prone to change and unpredictable. These factors have tended to reward leaders skilled in forging alliances and making deals.

An enduring role model in this mold was George Brown, a Democrat who represented the area in Congress from 1973 to 1999. Brown, a liberal first elected to the House from a district in Los Angeles 50 years ago, was no centrist and no chameleon when it came to campaigning. Nor did he hide his colors on Capitol Hill, holding the first hearing on global warming more than 36 years ago and championing women's equality and right to choose throughout his career.

But Brown's training in science and philosophy and his status as both a conscientious objector to World War II and later an Army lieutenant and veteran gave him a knack for bringing opponents together. He gained solid footing amid the shifting sands of Inland Empire politics, winning 14 elections here. His skills at reasoning and negotiating bipartisan agreements helped resolve many national and international battles of the Nixon and Reagan eras.



The late Rep. George E. Brown Jr.

Brown's recipe for reaching compromise emerges in speeches throughout his career. It had two major ingredients.

First, Brown marshaled the words of sources linked by ideology or affiliation with his adversaries, usually conservatives, to establish a sense of common ground on facts. In the 1960s, he was the first to invoke former president and Republican war hero Dwight Eisenhower's warning about the undue power of the "military-industrial complex" to demand federal oversight and oppose appropriations for the conflict in Vietnam. In 1989, he cited a 1974 report from the CIA stating bluntly that "climatic change is taking place" to break through lingering denial about the environmental impact of fossil fuel use, and to highlight the need for action.

Second, Brown established himself as an honest broker by publicly admitting strategic error and by holding his allies to the same standard as his foes. In 1970, Brown backed away from his own prior demand, the first by any House member, for President Nixon's impeachment so that Congress might have more credibility to rein in administration foreign policy in Southeast Asia. In 1994, Brown, a legendary critic of government secrecy, threatened to use his power as chair of the House Science Committee to subpoena the records of another committee, chaired by a fellow Democrat, in order to expose lavish appropriations steered back to the home district of that colleague.

Brown, of course, did not solve every problem of his era. Nor does his story hold an exact blueprint for overcoming the present standoff over the so-called fiscal cliff.

Still, Brown's example as an agent of compromise at the height of the civil rights movement and depth of the Cold War - a liberal Democrat in a period anchored by two iconic conservatives and fellow Californians, Nixon and Reagan - remains instructive about how to bridge high-profile impasses.

These ranged from the local level, where he and outgoing Congressman Jerry Lewis worked together to expand the Ontario airport, to much greater challenges. Brown broke gridlock to pass laws for U.S. and Soviet scientific exchange aimed at lessening the risk of nuclear war, reparations payments for Japanese Americans imprisoned domestically during World War II, and landmark immigration reform in 1986. This was the last major legislation to create a path to citizenship for millions of undocumented Americans.

As much as Brown's passion for tackling the biggest issues of his era stands out, so does one other dynamic. Brown gained continual insights in fashioning compromise from the demands of coalition-building and campaigning for re-election in a district that never leaned much from its moderate and independent disposition.

Since Brown's passing in 1999, the patterns that tilt Inland Empire politics to the middle have only grown more pronounced.

Those seeking fresh leadership in the country like George Brown's, to resolve the current tax and budget fight in Washington and other big battles to come, should look first to the Inland Empire.

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