



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Senator Martins: Lessons of 9/11

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So it's the 11th anniversary of 9/11 and I couldn't help but reflect on how different things are. After that horrible day, we couldn't have been prouder to be Americans. Not only did everyday people from every background come together, but even our political parties seemed unified in purpose. Of course, different ideologies still existed, but adversity made one thing clear: we were Americans first. I'd go so far as to say that from terrible tragedy came a genuine appreciation for each other.

All that stands in stark contrast to the tone of our nation today after the recent political conventions. The win-at-all costs mentality means common sense and common courtesy are now on the backburner and hate and divisiveness are the order of the day. What's shocking is how people buy it, hook, line, and sinker. A good deal of post-convention reaction genuinely surprised me. I even watched one woman online – a convention delegate mind you – say she would kill Mitt Romney.

Why is this happening? Part of the problem comes from behind-the-scene spin doctors who artfully dodge issues and any real solutions that might be unpopular. They would rather whip people into a frenzy and that's most easily done by giving them an enemy. It was author E.B. White who wrote, "One of the most time-consuming things is to have an enemy."

Lately, we're being told our enemies are our neighbors and that's a shame.

When they finally do touch on issues, it's hard to make any sense of them. Now it's no revelation to anyone that I do try to take in news from all sides. (Wouldn't you love at least one major news outlet that was un-biased?) Just like you, I'm trying to cut through the noise to understand the complex challenges our nation faces. Yet even with my political experience it's frustratingly difficult. It makes you feel like the luckless Charlie Brown trying to kick that football as Lucy assures him she won't move it. Just when you think you've grasped where the truth lies, someone goes and moves the football.

I'm sure you know what I mean. You hear about an issue, with the exact same numbers and details, but on two different news outlets that in turn offer wildly differing interpretations. The truth must be out there somewhere but major media are too busy being extensions of political parties to actually look for it. That's a shame too.

So what are we to do? How can we collectively make informed decisions about policies and the people making them? Our goal should be to first raise the level of political discourse in our country, not among politicians, but amongst ourselves. Let's face it. If we all agreed on everything all of the time, we wouldn't need government. Then, we might be able to acknowledge that our neighbors are not our enemies. People with different histories are simply at different places in their lives and need different things from government, so they carry different opinions. It doesn't mean they're not valid, it means they're different – and that's all it means. We also have to avoid the crazy talk. There is a way to fight for your beliefs without destroying the character of those who don't share them. If someone is seeking out what's best for them, it doesn't necessarily mean they want what's worst for you. Regardless of what we've been told, the opposition does not eat their young, I assure you.

Last but not least, let's not lose faith. Our country was founded on solid principles of democracy and democracy isn't easy. It's not supposed to be. Our founding fathers designed our system of government to foster discussion with the hope that through discussion we'd find ways to get things done. Unfortunately, these days it appears that discussion has given way to derision and mistrust. We're better than that.

Time and again, when faced with a challenge, our country has always come together united in a common purpose. We're struggling to find that today, that common voice, but it's there. Today, it's easier to attack than find common ground, easier to dig in our heels than extend a hand.

As we consider the legacy of 9/11 on this, its 11th anniversary, let's consider the triumph of the American spirit in the post 9/11 attacks. Let's consider the state of our national political dialogue and let's hope that we can rekindle some of the common purpose that brought us through those terrible days as we struggle to find our way through these difficult times.