

UC Irvine

CSD Working Papers

Title

Politics IS a Contact Sport: The 2001-02 Peltason Lecture

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1qw266p8>

Author

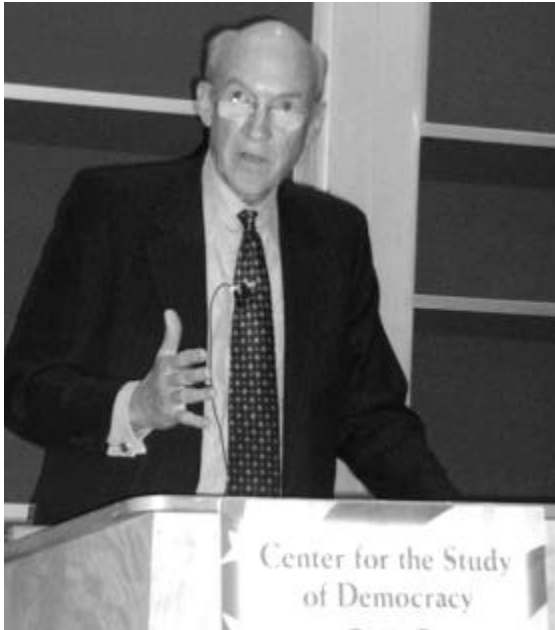
Simpson, Alan K.

Publication Date

2002-04-01

CSD Center for the Study of Democracy

An Organized Research Unit
University of California, Irvine
www.democ.uci.edu



It has been a great honor, a privilege and a real pleasure to be here at UC Irvine and to come to know Jack and Suzanne Peltason.¹ It seems to me upon observation in these last days that without question Jack and I severely over married! So I am very proud to be here at this podium that bears your names--it is a great honor for me.

This is a remarkable community. Ann I have walked the whole campus and the park, and driven around the city and learned the history of the Ranch, and of its benefactor and

its unbelievable planning. To see what you have done here with planning and zoning is the key to this remarkable community. I just say to you who live here and work here and go to school here--well done to all of you, you must be very proud!

So much has happened in these United States in the last months. Months of war and economic and corporate confusion (spelled ENRON and Anderson). These are troublesome times in many ways. Now there is the terror and anguish of the Middle East. So many suggestions, so many proposals, so many peace plans, so many ideas. I have been asked all week; and I ask the students: "What are your thoughts." It is total confusion of the first order.

¹ Copyright 2002, Alan K. Simpson. Simpson delivered the 2001-02 Peltason Lecture at the Center for the Study of Democracy, University of California, Irvine (May 2, 2002). The Peltason Lecture is funded by a grant from the **William and Flora Hewlett Foundation**, and their support is gratefully acknowledged.

What confounds and dumfounds us all in these times, and there is plenty of blame on all sides, is that what we see now has nothing to do with the "rules of war". When I was in the infantry in Germany at the end of the Army of Occupation, we knew about the rules of war. Whether they were followed I do not know. Those are difficult things to discern. The rules of war, Geneva--whatever there was that was crafted by humans in that city--those have vanished in the vapors of insanity. They are all over. We must deal with sick people of all races and creeds who are "true believers". I always have had a lot of trouble with 100%ers. Show me a 100%er and I will show you someone I want to stay away from. They have an odor; they have gas, ulcers and BO. They seethe. True believers are even a step up. Imagine that these true believers think that the doors to salvation and a livid and lustful afterlife are to swing open, and eternal loving arms are to gather in those who choose to sacrifice their own flesh and blood to blast and incinerate their fellow human beings while at work, play or worship. And they pick up \$30,000 for their family in the process. To destroy innocents, and to fly innocents into buildings, filled with innocents. I do not get it. You will just have to excuse this old cowboy. I think this is pure unadulterated evil. It is pure hate. Hatred corrodes the container it is carried in; always will, always has. This is a war against innocents, and targeted so. It is very, very vexing. We saw with our eyes the unimaginable take place; an act of pure hate and evil that is quite beyond our cognitive powers to discern. September 11th is unthinkable to the rational mind. There was an old cowboy in Wyoming who said "Simpson, this is rattlesnake venom in human fangs". Mayor Andrew Young called it "the rape of civilization". That is very graphic.

Things will never be the same. We have been violated, we will be forever on guard, wary of others, a bit spooked. Our precious feelings of comfort, quiet, privacy, safety, security, and even freedom itself have been brutalized and twisted.

But we Americans are a very resilient, strong and fiercely independent lot. The task is set. The mission is firm. The resolve is steady. The leaders are thoughtful and many are well seasoned, and they are leading. It is a powerful and yet measured response. The poisonous tentacles of the octopus will be found. You know they are not going to stop. They will be crushed and disabled so that that the ink sack can never blind or maim or kill again. All of it, of course, dependent upon our allies and friendly Arab nations, hopefully. It is about as steady on course as we can go for now. We must keep up the pressure, and yet never let revenge take the place of justice.

I travel a great deal, a lot since September 11th, and what I find is that people are finding humor again in their lives. Maybe ironic humor or skeptical humor, but that is still better than no humor. Humor is the cooling ointment that gives us laughter to soothe the burning pain of these last months. My mother said, "humor is the universal solvent against the abrasive elements of life". I like that, I remember that.

People ask me "What are you up to, what are you doing?" They say it with some alarm usually. I left the U.S. Senate when I knew it was time. There was a town meeting in Laramie and a guy got up in the back and said "Two terms for you guys. One in Congress and one in prison." That will take a hell of a lot out of a town meeting, I will tell you that. But the worst one, the most offensive (it galls me yet to speak about it) was in Cody, Wyoming, my hometown, at the Irma Hotel. Buffalo Bill built that hotel for his daughter; it is a lovely old place. I am in there; it is a Saturday morning. I have my grubs on; I look like a crane wandering around the swamp. Cowboy boots on, too, which makes me about 6'10". I am paying the bill and a guy comes up and says, "Anybody every tell you that you look kinda like Al Simpson?" I smiled and said, "Yeah, they do". And he said, "Makes you kinda mad, don't it!" That gives you a signal that maybe you should move on. It is a subtle thing.

So they came up to me and asked if I would go to Harvard for a semester to teach. I said "teach what?" I said, "I could not have gotten into Harvard if I had picked the locks!" At no point in my academic endeavors did I ever, ever attain cum laude; I graduated "thank the Lawdy" at every step! So I went to Harvard and taught there for four semesters. Annie and I lived in Eliot House; and we had no kitchen. It was like being on the GI Bill again. It was a wondrous experience. We loved it, we really did. It was very special. Now I teach at our alma mater--the University of Wyoming. It has been a great adventure. We love it. These university visits are also wonderful breaks. These are great fun. This one has been especially pleasing.

But there is so much to do in the country, so serious are the problems. So complex the questions, so obscure the answers. But in my mind--now, do not throw anything, I am a Republican, just relax--I think we have a very direct and able group of people leading the United States at this time. These are people who know each other; they are loyal people. I think they are doing a very adequate job at least, and splendid if you may, of guiding the ship of state in this very troubled and turbulent sea. We are fortunate. They are here to lead, and it is a very competent and commonsense Cabinet. You see them on television each day. We listen to them,

and we even may--I know some may not--trust some of them. I know that is difficult for some people, but it happens.

As we debate the serious issues of due process, civil rights, military tribunals, and ethnic profiling--and these are very tough and fair questions--remember that the people held in Guantanamo are not citizens of the United States. Remember, too, that there is an Executive Order that provides for their care, their food, their shelter, their observation of their own religion, and many other things.

Have any of you read the order that put the people in Guantanamo? It would be a good idea; a sobering thing. It really is a very interesting document, just a couple of pages. I always tell students that everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but no one is entitled to their own facts. When you run out of facts, it is my experience that people flee to the use of emotion, fear, guilt or racism. Watch it. That is how you pass or kill a bill; that is how it works. I never fell for it, never have, never do, and I have dealt with all the stuff that fills the cup: immigration and refugee policy, veteran affairs, social security, the aging committee, and nuclear high level waste. When people run out of facts they grab a placard and run it up a wall--and then use emotion, guilt, fear or racism. I tell students do not ever forget that, because I know how that works.

This Cabinet includes two people who know more about ethnic profiling than many of you here. One is Spencer Abraham, who "looks like them." He is a Lebanese-American and a fine Senator from Michigan. He represented the largest community of Lebanese outside of Lebanon itself. He has told me of the pain that sometimes goes with that.

Then there is another guy, a little guy who I knew at the age of 12 when he was behind barbed wire at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center between Powell and Cody, Wyoming. His name is Norm Mineta, and he is now the Secretary of Transportation.

We had a Scoutmaster when I was age 12 who said that in the next week we were going to the "Jap Camp"--because that is what it was called--it was the War Relocation Center at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. There were ten of those camps--Manzanar in California, and in Colorado, New Mexico and elsewhere--to move them to the interior and away from the coast of California. A Japanese submarine had lobbed some shells into the California coast in the spring of 1942. People asked how the submarine knew how to get here; people thought they must have been guided here. That started the fear and the exodus. People were taken to the Santa

Anita racetrack, told they had one suitcase each, and put them on a train to Park County, Wyoming and other centers.

The Scoutmaster said we were going out there for a scout meeting. We said "No, we're not." We could see the barbed wire 20 feet high, searchlights, and machine guns at every corner. We said we were not going there--even a 12-year-old could figure that out. The Scoutmaster said that these people are American citizens and some are Boy Scouts just like you, working on their merit badges. I told my parents that they wanted us to go to the Japanese War Relocation Center. My dad and mom said go ahead. All the young men from the Center were in the U.S. military; everyone from 18 to 28 was in the U.S. military. My parents said that we would meet a lot of nice grandmothers, and mothers, sisters and guys about our age--12 year olds. So I went.

That is where I met Norm Mineta. We nearly wrecked the place. We directed water into others' tents. We tied knots in other people's sleeping bags. We had a most marvelous relationship.

We kept track of each other, and when he became mayor of San Jose I wrote him: "Do you remember the fat kid from Cody?" He said he sure did. We went to Congress together. He was a Democrat, I a Republican. We served together on the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian. He is a very dear and special friend--as Ann knows. When we see each other we break each other's eyeglasses embracing. What a guy! I talked to him just last week. He is doing America's business, and he will do it with great, great skill.

I just throw that in to show you who there is in the government who will be sensitive to these things that concern us all.

This administration is one of plans, goals and objectives--people who are not there to lead only if something is popular or whether the overnight tracking poll discloses what should be done the next day. They are not much into that. Tom Daschle is a leader. He and Trent Lott are trying to work together. They do not work together like George Mitchell and Bob Dole worked together; it is not that fluid. Speaker Dennis Hastert and Dick Gephardt are closely coordinating. Remember if you will that Newt Gingrich and Gephardt never spoke to each for a five-month period. Never said a word. The worst thing you can do in politics, or marriage, or country interchange is to give each other "the ice treatment". Everything goes to hell. It is the same with politics and with nations. It can not work, it is just impossible.

One thing that I see is that Daschle's toying with the idea of running for the presidency will hurt his ability to lead. They will say that instead of being the majority leader and leading, he has his finger in the air to run for the presidency. They will say "We know that is what you are doing, you are not leading anymore". I do not know why he did that, but he did.

People will always ask me, and it is always fascinating, "What has happened to civility in Congress?" "What has happened, can you describe it if you can?" I always say that Congress is a true representation of the American public. When you see a parent jump out of the stands and pound an umpire at a Little League game, do not blame Congress for that. That is a long way from Washington. Or when somebody clobbers another person with a hockey stick and kills them, do not blame the Congress for that. Or when someone flips you the bird and runs over you in road rage, do not blame the Congress for that. This stuff goes on all over the society, and it does not start or end at Congress. Just a tip, I thought I would throw it in.

Remember that the true nature of those of us in politics sees it as a contact sport and we love partisanship and politics. That is our native state; that is our nature. You see that now. I always say to my class "Yes, I see that you do not like this: it is frustrating and banal, nutty, and politicians are goofy"--and students do not like partisanship and politics. Well, if you do not like partisanship and politics, move to a country where they don't have any. Then write me a letter in six months and tell me how much fun you are having in a country with no politics and no partisanship: Loss of freedom, loss of assembly, loss of free speech, all the precious things that we cherish. I also tell students that you can not hate politicians and love democracy, because you can not have one without the other--as much as you might like to do so.

I also say that compromise is not a filthy word. The word compromise does not mean that you are a "wimp". As I said, show me a 100%er and I will show you a person I want to stay away from. A zealot is a person who having forgotten his purpose redoubles his efforts. So you have to stay away from those people. Compromise is the only way you legislate. You can learn to compromise on an issue without compromising yourself. That is a very critical and important part of legislating.

Remember that the electorate last November was saying: "Will you make it work, please, make it work?" It is ever more true now, and I think you know that politicians listen. I believe that the far right and the far left will not carry the day on any significant issue that we will face in these next months. With a Democratic Senate and a Republican House, I see various leaders

who I did not think would make the grade, who are growing. I asked Senator John Stennis of Mississippi, the lion of the Senate in his older years, what the difference was between the Senate now and the Senate when he came. He said: "Alan, it is my personal opinion that some grow, and some swell." And so it is.

You have a budget surplus that is so long ago now that it is hard to remember. It is gone like squash vines in the wintertime. All resources will be strained: taking care of New York City, airlines, job losses, stability, homeland security, defense. All big ticket items. What we are rolling into the air and over the ground over there per month is big time. Things that we thought were vital or seemed so vital before September 11th have now diminished in importance. But since then we have done an education bill that is the most sweeping bill in the last 30 years. You do not read about that. It was done by Ted Kennedy and George W. Bush. Interesting.

Another example is campaign finance reform. I do not know what it will do, but I can tell you that I voted for the first McCain/Feingold bill and I will tell you why. I would have voted for the second or the third or the eighty-third version of it because everybody had lost their way in that operation. First, the AFL-CIO organized COPE, and boy, it worked! They elected a lot of people and they were tough. So the business community said that we need something to offset COPE, so we will have PACs--Political Action Committees--with "voluntary" employee contributions. And that worked.

But several years ago the philosophy changed. PACs were formed for big business, or the NRA, or teachers or whatever. Then their leaders said that the guy that the PAC has been supporting might not get elected again as chairman of the committee, and that the Democrats (or the Republicans) might take over. So they decided to kick some money over to the Democrats (or the Republicans). When someone in the PAC said, "But they don't vote for us, ever", the response was "I know, but it is called CYA, so get it over in there." That is the way it worked. I saw that happen all the time. There is an ancient word for that, and it is called "whoring." So I said--that is enough for me. I would get rid of PACs, I would get rid of soft money, and I would get rid of the whole works. I do not know what will happen, I do not know whether it will hurt. Campaign finance reform is here. There will be lawsuit after lawsuit because Senator Mitch McConnell does not die easily. He is one tough cookie.

A farm bill is just aces away from getting passed. Patient's bill of rights legislation is very close to the final version. It works.

The only thing that does not work, and this program will eat the lunch of all of these students, is that we can not do anything about the entitlement programs. It is the word itself that is killing us. "Entitlement" means that you reach a certain age of life, and regardless of your net worth or income, you are "entitled to" money from the federal government. Trying to pry it out of the hands of the people who are "entitled" is impossible. It was the most frustrating thing I was ever in. It is killing us.

We can not make any changes in Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, Part B premiums, or private accounts. Try it, just try it. This is because of at least one group called the AARP: 33 million Americans bound together by a common love of airline discounts, RV discounts, automobile discounts and all such. Their magazine comes to you when you are 50, showing the sleekest gray haired cats playing tennis and golf. Yet the editorial comment is that everyone over 65 is foraging in an alley eating out of a garbage can. It is a phony-baloney operation in my mind. They do not care a whit about their grandchildren. If they did they would be doing something to help.

Then take the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare; that is led by Martha McSteen and her deceptively frail group. Then there are the Gray Panthers and the Silver-haired Legislators. I am telling you that they do not give a whit about young people. They see young people as those walking around with their baseball caps on backwards, walking on their pants; doing Beavis and Butthead, listening to Snoopy, Snoopy Poopdog or whatever that is. The seniors just say let 'em sink; if they are that clever and out of touch, let them go earn a living. It is not right, and it is sad; but I can tell that the seniors will come up after this and rag me after I finish.

I always used to bring my own chart on Social Security. It used to carry it; it was a huge thing. I would ask, "Are any of you in the audience age 67 or 68?" Someone would say "Yes", and I would say "Look at this". When I was 14 I put \$5 into Social Security, and so did you. When I was a little older I went to college and I could not earn \$3000 in a summer, no one ever did in the 1950s. So I put nothing in. I got in the Army and put nothing in (you do now, but not then). Then all the time I practiced law--18 years--I never put in over \$874 a year and neither did anyone in this audience. Not one of you. Now people get stuck and they are putting in six or eight grand a year, I know all that because so was I. I am drawing out now \$1840 a month.

I will have it all back in three years. If you retired in the 1980s you got it all back in the first two and a half years.

What can we do about it? Nothing, absolutely nothing. In the year 2039 Social Security will be paying only three-quarters of its benefits instead of the full benefits. Who is doing anything about it? You can count on nothing being done.

Here is one for you if you are one of those who really care, if you are one those who really care down in your bosom. Button your shirt, your heart will fall out! Part B Premiums on Medicare are for physician reimbursement, durable goods, wheel chairs, and very valid things. I do not take it, you will know why in a minute. Twenty-five percent of that premium is paid by the beneficiary, that is all. Senator John Chafee, Pat Moynihan and some of us tried to say that if a person earns over \$75,000 a year--after deducting Social Security, pensions, military benefits--they should pay the whole premium, which is about \$200 a month. What do you think happened to that issue? The mailman from Sun City had a hernia hauling the mail--saying that you can not possibly begin to affluence-test seniors. I say to you ladies and gentlemen, if we do not begin to affluence-test seniors, then we will not make it. There will be nothing left. In the year 2010 60% of the entire U.S. domestic budget will be going to people over age 60. And just wait until they work in prescription drugs.

What a wonderful thing that the richest people in America are paying only 25% of the premium on Part B Medicare, and the people in the kitchen over there are paying the other 75% --the people you say you really care about. What a phony-baloney kind of thing.

We will cover the Middle East in the questions. All I can say is that at least something is happening now that is positive. Nothing will ever happen until they quit occupying the territories. Until that is done, nothing will happen. We have been there. Ann and I went to Nablus one day, and I have never seen hate in anyone's eyes as we saw in Nablus as they looked at that armored car we were in. Hate, pure, pure hate. This is almost not now about Israel and Palestine; it is about Sharon and Arafat. That is the trouble with it all right now. Two people who really are intractable and difficult to say the least.

There are two things on the horizon for you young people that I want to share with you. You ask what are the biggest problems. Let me tell you that among all the young people we see, we do not see any "people" problems. What a wonderful, wonderful group. And that is at Harvard, and Laramie and Irvine.

I tell them I think political correctness is absurd, and let me tell you why; it only takes a minute. Political correctness is very stifling and smothering. It is almost like being mugged; it is like wearing duct tape over your mouth. Because if you harbor prejudice, bias and "stuff " down inside, why not get it to the surface in the sunlight and deal with it; instead of letting it rot around in the subterranean caverns of the darkness of your heart and soul. That is not a good way to live. That will give you gas, ulcers and heartburn. Then to hear people say "I don't ever have a feeling like that." Phew. Come now. They go home and say, "God Almighty, I could have kicked that guy in the leg." I am not saying that you should stir things up, but get in there.

So I say today, during questions you can ask anything you want. Public, personal, private --I don't give a whit. Anything, back to my darkest past when I slugged a cop or whatever it is that you want to bring up.

There are two issues not dealt with because they are filled with emotion, fear, guilt and racism; because of this again, facts have been pushed to the background. The first issue is nuclear high level waste. Whether you like it or not, there are 106 reactors in America. Sitting next to those reactors are 41,000 metric tons of spent fuel under 60 feet of demineralized water loaded with Boron. It is a beautiful looking pool; it is radiant blue, and you can walk right over the top of it on a track and look right in it. There is no containment above it. There is nothing magical about what is holding it; it is concrete. If the water disappeared from on top of it, it would become re-critical in 10-14 days. It does not mean that it would blow up, it would just start to crackle again--since it is spent fuel.

I walk into buildings where people are holding placards, they are both nuts, because one says "Nobody has ever been killed" and the other says "Hell no, I won't glow". So I have to wander around between these two, and meanwhile if anything happened to those structures this country would be in trouble. You would have to get the treated water back on it quickly. So when you hear people say, and any politician could really score with this audience by saying, "You'll never bring one casket of that down this highway, or down this railroad." My answer: "Then what the hell are you going to do with it?" Then they kind of freeze up. They will say we could fly it to the moon, or do this or that.

How many of you know that we have already invested \$8.5 billion in Yucca Mountain? \$8.5 billion is already in the hole, so you know where the next nuclear repository will be. It will be in Yucca Mountain. I drew up that bill along with Gary Hart, Bennett Johnston and Jim

McClure. The law is taking place today. We knew that the government would pick a site, and we knew the governor would veto it. So we put in a provision that within 90 days, with no amendments, no intervening debate or anything, there would be a "yes" or "no" vote. That meter is running. They will do it. If they do not do it, we have to find another site. I can tell you that I do not know whether the stuff is going to last down there for 5,000 years or 10,000 or 100,000, but I can sure tell you what will happen with re-racked pools sitting next to 106 reactors in 100 years. I can really tell you what will happen to that: lots.

The second issue is the population of the earth. We do not talk about that one you see, because political correctness can guide you away because then you get into ethnicity, religion, abortion, contraception and more. So just let that one slide, too. The population of the earth from the beginning of time to 1940 has doubled since then. It will double again by the year 2076. How many footprints do you think will fit on the earth? How many resources will be consumed?

The Sierra Club will not even touch this issue; they ought to. It is really quite more valuable to deal with this than to worry whether there is methane gas in cows or worry about the stuff in the bottom of shaving cream cans. This is big time. Civilizations have disappeared because they chopped the last piece of wood, or ate the last fish. That is the way it worked in Tecal and Maya. It happened; consume all the resources and then you die. So I want to say to you young people that you ought to take a look at these two issues. You will get hell for it.

I happen to be pro-choice. I have always been pro-choice. I do not even think male legislators should vote on the issue. I can tell you that all our party has to do, if they would, is just say that "abortion is a deeply intimate and personal decision, and out of respect for each other it will not be part of the platform". My party destroys itself; they will do it again and again. Then they sit around and bitch for four years. The most amazing party. I stick with 'em because I love 'em!

Finally, when I dong on the media I really enjoy that. I have never won. People ask me what is it you want to do to curb, limit or restrict the media. I say that I have not the slightest desire to curb, limit or restrict the media in any way. I just want to stick it in one ear, and out the other! It is called the first amendment, and its mine, too. "Oh," they say, "I didn't think you would mean to curb the media". But I reply that you asked the question.

I have to quit now to have time for questions. The questions will be pungent and I will try to defend myself. Now go ahead and ask, and thank you.

ALAN K. SIMPSON, Wyoming's former senior U.S. senator, was one of the most provocative and articulate members of the U.S. Senate in the last quarter century. The son of a U.S. Senator from Wyoming, Simpson served as Senator from 1979 to 1997. He was Assistant Republican leader in the Senate for eight years, and was known for his bipartisan work on immigration, veterans' affairs, nuclear waste policy, and other issues. After retiring from the Senate he was a visiting lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. He has written, *Right in the Old Gazoo* (1997), a critical view of the media's coverage of American politics and politicians. Simpson now teaches at [The Alan K. Simpson Institute for Western Politics and Leadership](#) at the University of Wyoming.