

PRESS RELEASE

Bipartisan spirit, public service prized qualities in politics

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A woman in the audience approached the microphone Sunday night for what those at the Lied Center expected to be another question for former Sen. Howard H. Baker.

Instead, the woman implored the senator, with his wife, former U.S. Sen. Nancy Kassebaum Baker, R-Kan., to write a book on civility in government and politics. Baker, a Republican from Tennessee, modestly suggested that his wife was, indeed, the perfect person to write such a book. He is perhaps just as qualified, however, as his legacy in the Senate is that of the great conciliator.

It is that legacy, and Baker's long commitment to public service, that led officials at the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics to award him the fourth Dole Leadership Prize. Previous leadership honorees include former Polish President Lech Walesa, Republican presidential candidate and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and former Democratic presidential nominee and Sen. George McGovern.

As one of its goals, the Dole Institute aims to promote politics as an honorable profession and encourage and restore civility in politics and governance. That civility, many argue, has been lost in the partisanship that emanates from Washington, D.C.

"I think it's still there," Baker said at a reception held in his honor before the question-and-answer session at the Lied Center. "But it's a very controversial time. It'll settle down."

While Baker, like Dole, is a staunch Republican, more than once he picked up a cause championed by a Democrat, often to the dismay of his fellow senators. Among the most controversial plans he championed was approval of the Panama Canal Treaty of 1977, in which the U.S. agreed to relinquish control.

"It was the right thing to do," Baker said. "I'm proud of trying to inject a bipartisan note into Senate negotiations."

Kassebaum Baker, who Howard Baker insisted is more popular in Kansas than anything but wheat (and he says she's giving wheat a run for its money), said that she, too, is certain civility will soon return to Washington politics.

"This is a time of transition," she said. "We need to feel we can reach across parties. It doesn't mean you don't need to be partisan, but it does mean you shouldn't be afraid to reach across party lines. And be respectful of differences."

Kassebaum Baker said that her husband and Dole, who have long had a close relationship, can help foster that civil discussion by serving as an inspiration to current legislators.

U.S. Rep. Nancy Boyda, a Democrat whose district includes part of Lawrence, was among several current elected leaders who came to the Dole Institute to see Baker receive his prize. She said she thinks we are in a time where people are tired of the confrontation.

"People are ready for that to end. We can't dismiss the importance of the time we live in," Boyda said. "If you've had a long conflict, look for opportunities to find common ground."

Rep. Jerry Moran, a Republican who represents most of western Kansas, said it was important for those currently serving in Washington to remember that sometimes it's more important to move the nation forward than it is to make the opposing party look bad.

"The American people have to demand a different kind of leadership from our elected officials," Moran said. "We need to do good, instead of score points."

Baker said he talks to Dole on a regular basis, including just before he came on stage Sunday night. Dole Institute Director Bill Lacy said that Dole was delighted that Baker was receiving this year's leadership prize.

"Throughout his life, Senator Baker has answered the nation's call to public service," Lacy said. "Senator Dole is delighted that you accepted this prize."

Baker, who in addition to being a senator also was White House chief of staff under President Reagan, Senate majority and minority leader, and U.S. ambassador to Japan, was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1984. Dole received the same medal in 1996. It is the nation's highest civilian decoration.

"I've always had a special friendship with Bob Dole and with Elizabeth," Baker said. "It's a pleasure to be here. A pleasure to be here with you. And a pleasure take part in the program."