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The Power of Compromise

To end the gridlock of partisan politics, Brad McMillan '84 calls for a renewed era of civility in public service.

Story by **KATE ARTHUR**

Photos by **MARC FEATHERLY**



McMillan in the Senate chamber of the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield.

Democrats reflects the kind of bipartisanship most Americans agree is sorely lacking in our current crop of elected officials.

Five years ago, followers of Illinois politics would not have been surprised if McMillan had announced his own plans to run for office. As district chief of staff for Ray LaHood, who served seven terms in Washington representing Illinois' 18th congressional district, McMillan was considered a Republican rising star.

McMillan had something different in mind. He pictured a Midwestern think tank that would promote a return to statesmanship, developing ethical, bipartisan public servants who would work together to help solve our most pressing problems. It would also engage college students, planting the seed for a lifetime of civic involvement.

The idea came as LaHood was considering a challenge to former Gov. Rod Blagojevich's reelection bid in 2006, leaving McMillan to ponder his next career move. He'd always held a strong interest in leadership training and was a board member of the nonpartisan, nonprofit Dirksen Congressional Center in Pekin, Ill. He put his thoughts on paper, proposing the Dirksen

Two posters, propped side by side, stand in Brad McMillan's office. One shows Illinois Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon, a Democrat. The other depicts Illinois Congressman Aaron Shock, a Republican.

When asked his impressions of the two, McMillan describes Simon as an outstanding public servant who's as honest as you can get. He praises Shock for his common sense and tireless work ethic.

McMillan's ability to speak in positives — and negatives — of both Republicans and

Center and Peoria-based Bradley University jointly develop a leadership institute. Board members enthusiastically approved the idea.

In January 2007 the Institute for Principled Leadership in Public Service was launched at Bradley with McMillan as its executive director.

The institute's motto, "Changing America Through Bipartisan Leadership," only partly describes its ambitions. Recent public-policy symposiums have brought national government and business leaders to central Illinois to discuss the future of transportation, health care and public education. With Bradley University, the institute has also created several new courses for training "ethical, bipartisan and collaborative leaders" in public service, and it sponsors an array of community outreach programs.

The irony of trying to promote ethical public leadership in a state that has a recent history of sending governors to prison isn't lost on McMillan. "I just tell people we've got a lot of work to do," he says with a smile.

Following Blagojevich's recent federal trials and convictions, McMillan joked with an Associated Press reporter that Illinois has "bipartisan corruption," since both Democratic and Republican governors will likely be serving jail terms at the same time (Blagojevich is awaiting sentencing on his case). Still, it saddens him.

"It's really disappointing," he says. "It's just another very sad chapter in Illinois politics and government. I try to remind people we're also the state of Abraham Lincoln, U.S. Senator Paul Simon, U.S. Representative Bob Michel — true statesmen who did their jobs with complete integrity. We need to turn back to that kind of principled leadership in Illinois."

An early start

McMillan likes to pull stories from history to show how bipartisanship works. President and Democrat Lyndon Johnson relied on Senate Majority Leader and Illinois Republican Everett Dirksen to get the votes needed to pass the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act. He notes that legislators from opposite sides of the aisles used to speak in very positive terms about each other from the Senate and House floors.

“You compare that to what’s going on today and it’s night and day,” McMillan says. “But you can teach civility and bipartisanship. I have seen firsthand lights go off in students’ heads that there might be a better approach if they listen to the other side before making a judgment. We can return to civility. I really believe that. But there are so many cultural influences fighting against it. You have to be very intentional.”

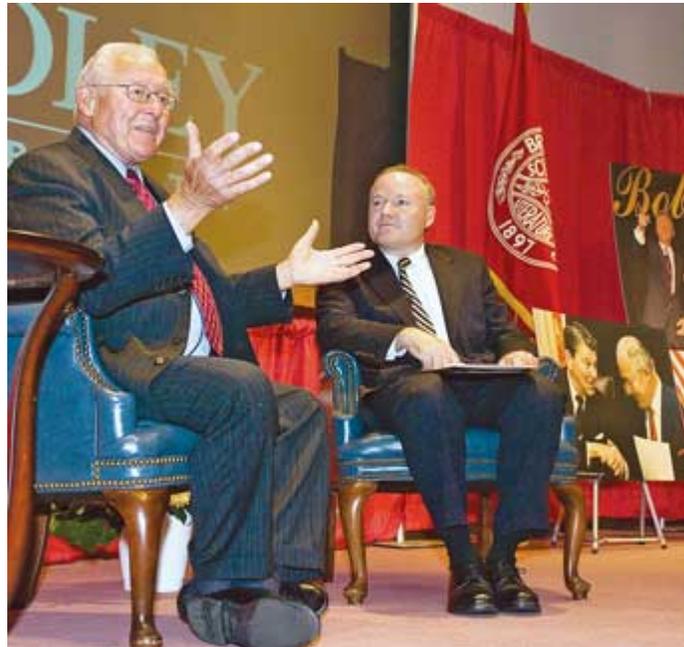
The 49-year-old father of four remembers civil political conversations with his own father, who was active in local politics in Peoria, and credits him with his interest in leadership. One of the reasons he chose Illinois Wesleyan was because he saw opportunities to get involved.

“One of the great things about Wesleyan is you can assume leadership responsibilities pretty quickly and really feel like you’re part of the University,” McMillan says.

And he did. As a political science major with an interest in journalism and pre-law, McMillan became an editor of the *Argus* and vice president of Student Senate. But it was a Washington, D.C., senior internship that turned him toward a political career — an experience he credits to Professor John Wenum, former chair of the Political Science Department.

McMillan interned for Michel, former Republican minority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, who was known for his bipartisanship. After graduating, McMillan returned to work for him before attending law school at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. He practiced for 10 years, serving as a senior staff attorney for the Illinois Supreme Court and Illinois Appellate Court before opening his own law firm in Peoria.

When Michel retired, LaHood succeeded him and McMillan was asked to serve as district chief of staff. LaHood’s reputation for fairness appealed to him. The congressman led bipartisan “civility retreats,” bringing leaders and their families together. He also chaired some of the most



McMillan, right, listens to Bob Michel at an IPL public forum held at Bradley University. As an IWU student, McMillan interned for Michel when he was Republican leader of the U.S. House.(Photo courtesy of IPL)

contentious debates in the U.S. House, including President Bill Clinton's impeachment proceedings.

"I've never seen anybody more talented at bringing people together around the table, whether it was local, regional, state or national issues, and getting them to work together," McMillan says of LaHood.

LaHood was equally impressed with his staffer, a young lawyer involved in local party politics, someone he called a "shining star."

"He was in it for the right reasons," LaHood says. "He cared a lot about good government and he cared a lot about making sure the right people were elected to office and he had very strong values."

When he was searching for a chief of staff, the first person he thought of was McMillan, with his reputation for hard work, honesty and integrity along with a bipartisan approach to problem-solving and an interest in mentoring. LaHood was also impressed that McMillan was willing to close his law practice to join his office.

"He was willing to leave his profession to get knee-deep into public service," LaHood says, seeing that same drive in McMillan's quest to create the Institute for Principled Leadership. "It is our responsibility to mentor people ... and do it in a way that reflects the idea that we're not going to have these jobs forever. Part of our responsibility is to make sure we have good people to follow, and Brad is certainly one of those good people."

LaHood's own reputation for bipartisanship secured him a place in President Barack Obama's administration as the U.S. secretary of transportation.

"I was not at all surprised he chose Ray LaHood," McMillan says, pointing to a photo of Obama straightening LaHood's tie. It's signed by Obama, "Ray, you're no longer in the House. Straighten your tie!"

Putting country before politics

Bringing good government back is the bottom line for McMillan, who says voter apathy is the number-one obstacle. "I know a great number of people have been so disillusioned with what they've seen in our national and state politics that they've turned away from being involved and that's simply not the answer."

A college campus is the perfect birthplace for engagement, he says, suggesting a university should be a lighthouse for civic involvement. IWU Political Science Professor Tari Renner agrees. Wesleyan requires civic involvement for political science majors and offers opportunities for all students to get involved through the Action Research Center, which coordinates research projects with community needs.

Renner has a personal commitment to public service. He was elected to three terms as a member of the McLean County Board, was a Democratic nominee for the U.S. House in 2004 and lost a Bloomington mayoral bid in 2009 by only 15 votes. For those who think today's politics are as ugly as they can get, he disagrees.

"The founding fathers couldn't agree that the sky was blue," Renner says. "They were pretty nasty and vicious to each other and people don't realize that. George Washington pretty much refused to talk to Thomas Jefferson."



McMillan talks policy with Kyle Ham, chief of staff to State Treasurer Dan Rutherford.

As for today's decline in political civility, both Renner and McMillan partially blame cable TV and radio shows where guests aren't chosen for their balanced, thoughtful views but rather for how loud they can shout over one another.

"They want people who will yell and scream at each other," McMillan says. "They're just so biased in the way they present things and many times they're very mean-spirited. It doesn't allow for people to come together to actually solve problems."

comparable to 2008.

As for the 2012 presidential election, both McMillan and Renner believe there will be heightened passion from the parties, possibly

"It's going to be ugly," McMillan says. "But we can do a whole lot better."

He believes that with the right presidential and congressional leadership, the tone of national politics can be significantly improved. He went back to his 1984 experience in Washington when Congressman Michel would return from a long day on the House floor and invite staffers to go to Bullfeathers, a favorite Capitol Hill hangout. He'd invite liberal Democrat and House Speaker "Tip" O'Neill and his staff.

"Here I was a 21-year-old guy walking into Bullfeathers with the Republican leader and the Democratic leader of Congress. They would have a meal, share a few drinks and there was a genuine friendship that was a part of the way they approached things. Did they agree philosophically on every single issue? No, but they found a way to work together."

The tone changed when Newt Gingrich became speaker of the House, he says.

"He chose to lead with a much harsher tone and heated rhetoric, throwing hand grenades at the other side. When he eventually lost power and Nancy Pelosi became speaker, it was payback time. I'm critical of both political parties in the leadership they've chosen in recent years. They

could choose leaders who put the best interests of the country first before partisan politics, and we haven't seen that for the last 15 or 20 years.”

Party politics is evident in the state legislature as well. McMillan, a governor appointee to the Illinois Reform Commission, took on redistricting reform. Districts are drawn by whichever party is in power, using voting history to create a political advantage. When an attempt to work on a legislative constitutional amendment to change the “horribly flawed” redistricting process failed, reform groups launched a citizens’ initiative and McMillan chaired what became known as the Illinois Fair Map Amendment. They fell short of the 282,000 signatures needed to get it on the ballot but the effort may be launched again for 2012. Cleaning up the redistricting process is essential to changing Illinois politics, he believes.

“We’re not going to get better government and better politics in Illinois until we change the redistricting process. It’s purely political and it does not serve the best interests of the people.”

When asked if he ever loses faith in the prospect of a major change for the better in American politics, McMillan admits, “There are times when you get very discouraged.” But he adds that over the past 20 years, he’s learned to be patient.

“I’ve learned that any significant change takes time. The most important consideration is: Is it the right cause to invest time and energy into? Once you determine that it’s the right cause, you just chip away at it and try and keep moving the ball forward until eventually the change that you’re hoping for takes place.”