

August 26, 2008

The Honorable Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr.
Republican Candidate for Governor
47 S. Meridian Street, 2nd Floor
Indianapolis, IN 46204

The Honorable Jill Long Thompson
Democratic Candidate for Governor
804 N. Delaware Street
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Dear Governor Daniels / Dear Ms. Thompson:

Your Charge With Politics

John F. Kennedy once implored, “Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer.” That’s good advice for those given the responsibility to govern.

The election year is in full swing. You and your opponent are engaged in a distinctly partisan exercise, a contest between two competing leaders and agendas. Dozens of other candidates for other offices are similarly engaged. Most are Republicans or Democrats, with a few Libertarians or third-party independents in the mix.

At some level, the differences between the major political parties are helpful to voters thinking about and deciding what governing philosophy and set of priorities they support. This is healthy political debate and a useful form of partisanship.

However, an unhealthy form of partisanship all too often drives our political process, one where winning the next election by any means is more important than being able to govern effectively once the contest concludes. This form of partisanship turns off voters and makes it very difficult to solve problems and achieve real progress. It foolishly mistakes the means (winning a campaign for public office) with the ends (serving the public once in office). It elevates party above progress.

A December 2007 poll by WTHR Channel 13 in Indianapolis showed a divided Hoosier public: Statewide approval of the Indiana General Assembly was just 37 percent, with 36 percent disapproving and nearly one-quarter of all Hoosiers undecided. Approval of the U.S. Congress is now at all-time lows.

Strident partisanship breeds mistrust of government, turning “politician” and “politics” into dirty words. Conversely, when bipartisanship has been followed in policy making, good things have happened for our nation and for our state.

Throughout the Cold War, Democrats and Republicans routinely placed the national interest above party interest and made such world-changing programs as the Marshall Plan possible. Post-World War II, the United States’ bipartisan foreign policy of containment helped to triumph

over communism and totalitarianism, shaping our world today and securing liberty for tens of millions.

University of Oklahoma President David Boren has observed, “Imagine how easily the Republicans in Congress could have scuttled the Marshall Plan... If today’s partisanship had been present in the late 1940s, the Republican opposition would have been running ads saying, ‘The Democrats want to tax you to help the very people who killed and wounded our fathers and sons, who threatened our security and brought us economic hardship.’ It doesn’t take much imagination to predict what the result would have been. Instead, great bipartisan leaders such as Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, Republican leader of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, joined Democrats in supporting the Marshall Plan and the policy of containment.”

In Indiana, bipartisan consensus can seem elusive, but was present at critical times for important reforms.

In 1999, Indiana moved to the forefront of K-12 education standards and accountability measures. A key driver was the General Assembly working in a bipartisan fashion to create Indiana’s Education Roundtable. This group of education and business community leaders was able to come together (leaving politics at the door) to monitor and refine standards that remain highly regarded by national experts. It took additional bipartisan legislative support to make these initiatives a reality.

In 2002, the governor teamed with legislative leaders of both parties to help craft comprehensive tax reform that provided property tax relief and made Indiana much more competitive as a business location through (among other substantial changes) the elimination of the inventory tax. That started a series of legislative sessions that featured cooperation across the aisles and passage of important economic development initiatives such as telecommunications and further tax reforms. The results have been substantial new investment and thousands of new jobs.

These are just a few examples of what can be achieved when Hoosiers work together. Please keep President Kennedy’s plea in mind as you campaign this fall and govern once in office. The voters will reward practical, common-sense leadership without labels.

Sincerely,

The 125 members of the Board of Directors of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce, representing 4,800-plus member companies employing 800,000 Hoosier workers.