

## SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

Alert. Relaxed. Collegial.



### Recap of 6/16/21 conversation with Grace Cummings



“Make those human connections to politicians and tell the human story.”

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

It was a pleasure to talk with our friend Grace Cummings [[bio](#)], who began her opening remarks about the game of 3D chess that’s played with the pieces of Policy, Personnel, and Politics with the provocative statement, “I was them.” Here are my notes from the conversation. **Q.** denotes a question and **C.** denotes a comment from a participant. Any errors in the below are mine alone.

#### **Evolutionary Forces for Change**

Although the 3 P’s above are a good mnemonic device, for some it may be easier to think in terms of *interests* rather than politics.

Grace focused on three developments that have changed the game since she worked on the Hill: The rise of social media, polarization driven by gerrymandering, and changes in campaign finance laws.

### ***The rise of social media***

Obama was the first person to use it in a campaign. By 2010, there was a fragmentation in news; all of us were able to get it from a siloed place. Congress wasn't ready and is still catching up. We no longer have to hear diverse viewpoints. Policy matters, but right now, narrative matters. "If I keep repeating something, I can make you believe it."

### ***Polarization driven by gerrymandering***

A Pew study a year ago indicates it's the worst it has been since the Civil War. How has Congress changed in the last 10 years? The use of gerrymandering has become more precise. Of the 435 districts, only about 50 are truly competitive, whereas about 200 districts used to be. This applies to left *and* right – movement is much further left or right because I have to protect my flank. "I don't have to compromise." This is the subject of [The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-minded America is Tearing Us Apart](#) (2009). There's no incentive to talk across lines at this point. That leads to identity-based politics and grievance politics. Discourse is much more polarized and caustic.

**Q.** Will moves during the Pandemic change that?

May be too soon to tell. Lots of people Grace knew in the S.F. Bay Area growing up are moving to Montana. A participant mentioned that friends who moved to Florida encountered pods or clusters of people with the same political views.

Bottom line, "we're in gridlock right now."

### ***Changes in campaign finance laws***

The 2010 Citizens United decision allowed people to spend unlimited amounts of money on Presidential, House, and Senate races through Super PACs or nonprofits. This can be dark money, meaning no one will know who's donating.

**Q.** How do we return to normalcy?

"My bosses used to talk to everybody." The tone began to change in 1994; an example Grace mentioned was Newt Gingrich – The only way I can win is to kill (defeat) you. A notable exception was Bob Michel, Illinois Republican leader skilled at compromise.

**C.** An electrifying comment from a dedicated federal executive in attendance followed: "We are in daily fear of our lives. They want to go back to before Jim Crow." The group paused in solidarity with our esteemed colleague.

We need Millennials and GenX to say, "This is not working" and to enter the House and Senate in greater numbers. It's time for some people to retire. Grace gave us the current stats:

	House Membership	Senate Membership
Greatest Generation (1928-1945)	6%	11%
Boomers (1946-1964)	53%	68%
Generation X (1965-1980)	33%	20%
Millennial (1981-1996)	7%	1%

There are positive signs; Grace suggested we keep an eye on Adam Kinzinger (R-Illinois).

**C.** There's great risk in talking across the aisle right now.

Grace: It's easy to demonize someone you don't know. Make those human connections to politicians and tell the human story. There's work getting done at the staff level: SES and GS-15s are talking with Hill staffers connected with committees that work with your issues.

**C.** And make diverse human connections.

**Numerous Qs and Cs:**

Any chance the video Hill Visits will continue?

One participant has been building relationships by video (Kudos!).

There's an awareness that's been awakened – my agency held a town hall meeting and 600 employees showed up.

Where are the role models?

Grace ended by urging us to keep building relationships, knowing that some will come from unexpected directions. Here's what this generous developer of public leaders, through the Federal Executive Institute and elsewhere, said the next day:

"Thanks for an enjoyable and interesting conversation last night. I really appreciated the chance to network with a group of leaders from a variety of venues and getting your opinions about our current state of affairs and possible ways to move our cities, states and nation forward in a positive fashion."

## **Participant affiliations**

Ascent Leadership Networks, LLC  
ASPA Founder's Fellow 2021  
ASPA National Capital Area Chapter  
City of Providence, RI  
Department of Health and Human Services  
Department of Education  
Frederick National Laboratory for Cancer Research  
NEBDAC | New England Hemophilia Association  
Securities and Exchange Commission  
WWC – Working With Congress

Participants joined from Annapolis MD, Providence RI, Middlesex County MA, Colorado Springs CO, and the DC Metro Area and surrounding counties.

There were interesting overlaps in participant knowledge and experience. Each time, we discover commonalities and warm up the space by beginning with a round of introductions. Please consider joining us in the future.

Sincerely,  
Kitty Wooley

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