

SUNDAY INTERVIEW WITH CAL THOMAS AND BOB BECKEL BY KEN WESTERN

Common ground, not demonizing others, vital to policy

Cal Thomas and Bob Beckel are the odd couple of punditry: a conservative and a liberal who look for common ground on divisive issues. The two are co-authors of the book Common Ground, inspired by their weekly column for USA Today.

Thomas, whose syndicated column appears in The Arizona Republic, is a former vice president of the Moral Majority. Beckel is a political consultant who ran Walter Mondale's 1984 presidential campaign. Before speaking at Valley Forward Association's recent annual luncheon in Phoenix, Thomas and Beckel sat down to talk about bridging the partisan divide.

On finding common ground:

Cal Thomas: Nobody is for worse schools, a terrible environment, a weaker nation. If we acknowledge that in the other person, then say, "OK, how do we get to better schools without violating our principles?"... We say, "With goodwill and a belief that the country matters, we can solve things." But you've got to talk to each other first and sit down with a certain amount of goodwill.

Bob Beckel: Look, you couldn't have common ground without partisanship. You couldn't have democracy without partisanship. The question is: Is it partisanship for the sake of partisanship and the perpetuation of a party or a person? Or is it partisanship that lays out a set of issues that you care about and principles that somehow we're go-



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Cal Thomas (left) and Bob Beckel disagree on many things, but one thing they do agree on is that demonizing people who disagree with you is counterproductive.

ing to figure a way to work it out?

On the public's response:

Thomas: People are hungry for this. I think that's what Obama picked up on. You live next door to somebody of a different party, persuasion or faith, you don't throw open the window in the morning and say, "Hey, what are you doing to ruin America today?" That's the stuff of fundraising, cable TV, talk radio. It's meant to divide us; it's about the fundraisers making money, not about actually advancing policy. This is not a monochromatic nation, racially, ethnically, religiously or politically.

On politicians' response:

Beckel: Common ground is going to be good politics very shortly, if it isn't already. Obama's blazed a trail on this. Polarization politics is going to cost you votes. Why do you think health-care reform is going to get done this time? Because the demand is so enormous from the public to get it done.

On polarizing politics:

Beckel: We've written the (fundraising) letters, we've done the stirring. We know how to play the game and, behind it all (talk radio, especially), most of these guys are a bunch of schoolyard

bullies. They're punks and, like the Wizard of Oz, if you pull the curtain back on them, they're not much. We expect to pull the curtain back on them. That doesn't mean we can't have a healthy debate about Obama, but there is a difference between having a debate and me calling (Thomas) names or questioning where he is coming from. And that's really the problem.

On arriving at a shared position:

Beckel: We don't agree on everything. I have never bought into (Thomas') Iraq war position. I thought it was the most absurd, ridiculous war to get into. I don't think it has anything to do with the war on terror. He thinks it is the holy grail of wars on terror.

Thomas: That's what Osama says ...

Beckel: What we do agree on Iraq is this: It is time for the Iraqis to start paying their own way. They've got \$200 billion put away from oil revenues. There's no reason the United States should foot the bill. You can argue about whether we are going to get out, but we found common ground.

On moving forward:

Thomas: We've had some people come up and say we're going to start a common-ground chapter right in our town. As Bob says, go out for lunch, a cup of coffee, just listen to them. The more you listen, the more you realize they're not trying to ruin the country. They actually think that their ideas will work. ... Let's have a debate, but let's not demonize the other person.