

Finding Common Ground

An Interview with
Patricia Duff, Founder, The Common Good

EDITORS' NOTE *Duff founded The Common Good in New York in 2007. Immediately after graduating from college, Duff worked with the House Select Committee on Assassinations as Special Assistant to the Chief Counsel, Senior Researcher, and Public Information Officer. She then worked with former Presidential speech writer, John McLaughlin, to produce his live political talk radio show. She left to work for the re-election campaign of President Jimmy*



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Carter at the Democratic National Committee and with presidential pollster Pat Caddell. Following her work on that campaign, she became a Vice President of Caddell's firm and worked on many political statewide campaigns and corporate marketing campaigns until she was hired by Bob Squier to join the Squier-Eskew consulting firm as Vice President. Duff moved to Los Angeles in 1984 to work with the Gary Hart Presidential campaign. In the late 1980s, she started an entertainment industry-related non-partisan political organization called Show Coalition, which became an important element in the nexus between Washington politics and Hollywood, and the precursor to The Common Good.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *The Common Good (commongood.net; TCG) is a nonprofit, non-partisan organization that strives to inspire broad participation in democracy through the free exchange of ideas and civil dialogue, and seeks to find ways to bridge the growing divisions that threaten the nation. They are dedicated to finding common ground and, through forums and initiatives, encourage the civic engagement essential for a thriving democracy.*

What are the key areas of focus and initiatives for The Common Good?

One of our core initiatives is to bring smart, accomplished people together with leaders across disciplines and party lines to discuss the hottest topics in public policy. It's a way to be better informed, to meet some of our important leaders, and to be inspired to get more involved. It also reminds our leaders of the expectations of some of the nation's citizens to have leaders who answer tough questions and remain accountable.

Hard, settled thinking or extreme views have caused enormous trouble throughout time. In a rapidly changing world, we need to be open to new ideas, and learn and adapt constantly – so smart thinking and reasoned debate are part of TCG's DNA.

How do you evaluate the success of your efforts and are you able to put metrics in place that track impact?

Our political system has changed dramatically over the years, and not for the better, and we try to push back

against that. Government, particularly Congress, isn't functioning, and we can't expect to continue to lead the world for long if our democracy doesn't work. We cannot use political capital for short-term political advantage and continue to obstruct or refuse to work across the aisle to get the nation's work done. We are a congressional system, not a parliamentarian one. This means factions and parties must be willing and prepared to work together. This is one of the big messages we carry to the leaders we meet with and to our audience.

Even a cursory look at how the U.S. compares to other nations on education, healthcare, infrastructure, etc, would show how U.S. leadership in these areas has slipped dramatically. Yet, most Americans still think we are superior in most regards. We really need to open our eyes.

What needs to be done to ensure that the best and brightest are attracted to public service?

A few things might help. For one, we could stop vilifying government and those who choose public service. We're a democracy – government of and by the people. We need government. The government is a reflection of us. But we also need to make it better and more effective, and shake it up every once in a while.

On another note, we could look at how we have driven too much talent out of politics with "gotcha" tactics that may have wreaked more havoc than helped. Yes, the public may at times need to know about personal shortcomings like adultery, but should we effectively cripple governance by endless forays into personal lives and of the private lives of our leaders' spouses and children? Our vetting system for appointees to government is ridiculously hobbled. Surely there are incredible leaders in business and other areas who would never put

themselves or their families through the relentless examination by the press and public. This is our loss. With all of the challenges ahead, we need all of the talent we can muster.

In terms of the gridlock in Washington, what can be done to change the landscape?

We have to speak out loudly, and often against the rigid and extreme idea that "compromise" is a dirty word. Politics is often the art of the possible. In a sharply divided nation, with no strong mandate for a particular approach, finding a solid block of support for one side or the other may be impossible, but there is often plenty of room for a principled approach and being pragmatic enough to move forward, albeit imperfectly, if we can compromise.

Even with the toughest-to-tackle policies, with a bit more of a give-and-take approach, solutions to these big issues can be found.

The contrast between our crumbling infrastructure and that of other countries is striking. Are we going to wait until we're really behind to make normal and needed investments? While we certainly need to watch for waste, the inability to move forward on some of these critical building projects errs to the other extreme. It's gotten to the point that even debate and discussion of these things has been squelched.

The opportunities for women to lead in politics and business have grown substantially, but don't they need to be accelerated?

I started working just when women were beginning to pour into the workforce. My skirts were long, I wore a little conservative blouse and twisted my hair up in a bun. But I watched happily as many of the barriers that I grew up with came down. There were so many amazing women who somehow managed to break through the proverbial glass ceiling to prove women can do it all – CEOs of major corporations, top lawmakers, athletes, entrepreneurs, scientists, and doctors.

Yet, women still have a long way to go. I am struck by how Europe has been ahead of the U.S. with women as heads of state. After World War II, American women were encouraged to leave the factories, go home, and have families. European women stayed in the workforce because of the loss of so many of their men. Their workplaces better accommodated families, and recognized the reality and importance of the family. Perhaps we should examine their experience in these areas to make it more attractive to women to go into and stay in the workforce. ●