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**Even Bayh's departure, and some historical context for just how "broken" things really are**  
**By Lawrence J. Haas**

Senator Evan Bayh's surprise announcement that he won't seek re-election has generated another bout of Washington's current ailment – whining about a broken Senate, a paralyzed political system and huge unaddressed problems.

“We've got a lot of good people in Congress, but they're trapped in a dysfunctional system,” Bayh, the Indiana Democrat, said in explaining his decision and inciting the whine-fest of the last day. “We need some real reform here... the public's business is just not getting done, and at a time of desperate need for our country.”

Yes, federal policy-making isn't working as it should. The players on and off Capitol Hill are too partisan, the process of enacting legislation too byzantine, the private money and special interests too influential, cable TV and talk radio too angry, and average Americans too frustrated and confused.

But let's not lose perspective here. In the challenges we face, the partisanship from which we suffer, and the ills that plague our policymaking process, we've had it much worse on many occasions over our long history.

We have emerged stronger each time, and we can do so again – unless we wallow in the growing conventional wisdom that our problems have never been so complex and our system never so unable to respond.

Yes, in terms of challenges, we face a fragile economy that could take years to fully recover from the recession, huge budget deficits that could eventually bankrupt us, a long-term struggle with radical Islam, an Iran marching toward nuclear weapons and a China determined to challenge us for world supremacy.

Fine. But does that compare to the 1930s when the United States suffered a true economic collapse that left 25 percent of Americans jobless, Germany and Japan began their quest for global supremacy, and President Roosevelt struggled to solve the first problem while preparing the nation to face the second?

Do our problems compare to those of the mid- to late 1940s, when the United States needed to launch the United Nations, replace Great Britain on the world stage, create a new global economic order, settle on the national security architecture to “contain” Soviet ambitions and rescue Berlin with a dramatic airlift?

Yes, in terms of partisanship, we live in highly charged times, when Republicans and Democrats oppose one another in Congress and elsewhere for the sheer purpose of doing so, when each

party sings off an old song sheet of tired bromides that, even if adopted in policy, would not solve the problems before us.

Fine. But does such partisanship compare to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when even the nation's most exalted founders questioned one another's motives and moral character in the most personal terms?

Does it compare to the mid-19th Century, when Senator Preston Brooks took umbrage at a speech by Senator Charles Sumner and pummeled him almost to death with a cane, Lincoln's election prompted a Southern secession, and North and South fought one another in bloody civil war for four years?

Does it compare to the post-World War I period, when an obstinate President Wilson refused to compromise with Republicans over the proposed League of Nations, leaving the new world body largely toothless when the GOP-controlled Senate refused Wilson's request for the United States to join?

Yes, in terms of our policy making, the system seems broken, particularly in the Senate, where the minority routinely abuses the rules and forces the majority to garner 60 votes rather than 50 to do almost anything.

Fine. But does that compare to the Civil War era of nullification and secession, the constitutional crisis of 1876 when the new president emerged from back-room dealing after a disputed election, or the Watergate affair of a century later when a president covered up crimes to save his presidency?

To be sure, our problems are sizable. But, for too many inside the Beltway and around the country, they seem larger than they really are for a simple reason: We lack historical perspective. We believe that what's challenging us today is far bigger, far more complex, than whatever came before.

A day after FDR's death elevated him to the presidency, Harry Truman told reporters, "Boys, if you ever pray, pray for me now. I don't know if you fellows ever had a load of hay fall on you, but when they told me yesterday what had happened, I felt like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen on me."

Truman rose to the occasion, as have many presidents and lawmakers both before and after when faced with challenge.

For today's policymakers, no challenge is larger, no outbreak of partisanship more intense, and no problem with our political system more imposing than what has come many times before. Pretending otherwise will only make the task of addressing our challenges seem larger than it really is.