Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 12, 2011

Dear Majority Leader Reid, Speaker Boehner, Minority Leaders McConnell and Pelosi:

We, the undersigned members of Congress, believe that partisan seating arrangements at State of the Union addresses serve to symbolize division instead of the common challenges we face in securing a strong future for the United States.

As we all know, the tenor and debate surrounding our politics has grown ever more corrosive – ignoring the fact that while we may take different positions, we all have the same interests. This departure from statesmanship and collegiality is fueled, in part, by contentious campaigns and divisive rhetoric. Political differences will always generate a healthy debate, but over time the dialogue has become more hateful and at times violent. But now the opportunity before us is to bring civility back to politics. It is important to show the nation that the most powerful deliberative bodies in the world can debate our differences with respect, honor and civility. We believe that it is not only possible, but that it is something that nearly all members of Congress truly desire. To that end, we suggest setting a small, but important, new tradition in American politics.

At the State of the Union address, on January 25th, instead of sitting in our usual partisan divide, let us agree to have Democrats and Republicans sitting side by side throughout the chamber. Beyond custom, there is no rule or reason that on this night we should emphasize divided government, separated by party, instead of being seen united as a country. The choreographed standing and clapping of one side of the room – while the other side sits – is unbecoming of a serious institution. And the message that it sends is that even on a night when the President is addressing the entire nation, we in Congress cannot sit as one, but must be divided as two.

On the night of the State of the Union address, we are asking others to join us – House and Senate members from both parties – to cross the aisle and sit together. We hope that as the nation watches, Democrats and Republicans will reflect the interspersed character of America itself. Perhaps by sitting with each other for one night we will begin to rekindle that common spark that brought us here from 50 different states and widely diverging backgrounds to serve the public good.

With respect and admiration,

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