

wp OPINIONS

“Fighting for Common Ground How We Can Fix the Stalemate in Congress” by Olympia Snowe

By Colin Woodard, Published: June 7

In the summer of 2011, political observers in Maine wondered if Sen. Olympia Snowe might opt not to run for reelection. It wasn't that they thought she wouldn't win; the moderate Republican had no serious primary challengers and remained extremely popular with the statewide electorate. Rather they wondered if Snowe would want to return to Capitol Hill now that cross-party consensus builders like herself were grossly outnumbered by tea party firebrands.

But by late February, nobody had any doubts Snowe was running and that she would return to the Senate for a fourth term. She'd hired staff and was fundraising and campaigning hard. Serious Democratic contenders had stayed clear of a race they knew they had no chance of winning. The idea that she'd withdraw on the last day of February — leaving her party with just two weeks to find and collect signatures for a replacement in a potentially critical race — crossed nobody's mind.

Nobody's except Snowe's, as it turned out. According to her new memoir-cum-call-to-action, “Fighting for Common Ground,” she had been secretly contemplating dropping out of the race for months. She claims that, wracked by indecision, she made Feb. 28 “my self-imposed cut-off” and that, “in truth, I really didn't decide . . . until that day.”

Those hoping for new revelations about Snowe's last-minute withdrawal will be disappointed. The senator says now what she said then: She became increasingly convinced that Congress had become “a place of burned bridges and scorched Earth” and so “crippled by dysfunction” and partisan trench warfare that she concluded she could serve the country more effectively from outside it than within.

For a politically moderate champion of consensus-building, Capitol Hill had certainly become a difficult place. “I am a Republican who is prepared to compromise — and contrary to current misconceptions, compromise is not a capitulation of one's principles,” Snowe writes. “Rather it is a recognition that *not* getting all that you want may be the only way to acquire enough votes to achieve *most* of what you

seek.” She laments that today “many in the Republican Party” think moderate is “a synonym for wishy-washy or anodyne” and see bipartisanship as capitulation. She’s furious that both parties have allowed the Senate — “the world’s greatest deliberative body” — to devolve into a place where “outcomes are often preordained, and positions have usually solidified along party lines before a bill even reaches the Senate floor.”

Her party has also become a less comfortable place for moderates. In 2010, tea party candidates — advocating “the more extreme views within our party” and seeking to “purify” the party of those who would negotiate with Democrats — defeated Sen. Bob Bennett (R-Utah), Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), Sen. Dick Lugar (R-Indiana) and Rep. Mike Castle (R-Delaware) in Senate primaries. (Murkowski won the general election as a write-in candidate, but Democrats captured the other seats.) In 2012, control of Maine’s state party convention was captured by Ron Paul supporters, the convention became a circus, and none of the candidates for Snowe’s seat was able to speak. “That’s unheard of, especially given that it’s one of the primary purposes of the event,” she writes, adding that it had the effect of “demoralizing many Republican activists who were embarrassed at the lack of civility.”

Having suffered through the 112th Congress — “almost universally derided as the worst ever” — she joined much of the country in being “embarrassed by its partisan bickering, inactivity, and refusal to address the vital challenges facing America.” The debt-ceiling debacle of 2011 left her in disbelief, particularly when, after an 11-hour vote postponed the crisis, her colleagues jetted off for their August recess, even though they hadn’t adopted a budget or passed appropriations bills. Congress, she writes, had become “divorced from reality.” She was also upset by Democrats’ party-line passage of the Affordable Care Act, and suggests that President Obama might have nurtured bipartisan cooperation if he hadn’t taken on health care when he did.

This all would explain why Snowe withdrew, but not why she did it so late. She acknowledges that by late December 2011 she felt pressure to make a decision “in time for other candidates to collect the necessary signatures to run,” but it’s not clear why she gave herself such a late deadline. Her assertion that her party had “a number of outstanding candidates” waiting to replace her is simply untrue, and she doesn’t mention that she was unwilling to endorse her party’s ultimate nominee, a protege of hers named Charlie Summers, because he’d failed to endorse her candidacy earlier in the cycle. In the end, her seat was easily won by another modera

There's also no mention of the legal cloud that was and still is hanging over Education Management Corporation, the for-profit higher education company once headed by her husband, former Maine congressman and governor John McKernan, who remains chairman. (The firm faces federal lawsuits by former employees and the U.S. Justice Department seeking to recover \$11 billion in federal and state student aid; it denies wrongdoing.)

The book is part-memoir, in the service of explaining why Snowe got into politics and how she practiced it once there. Her descriptions of her childhood and youth are the most compelling in an otherwise guarded work. She was born into a working-class, Greek-American family in Augusta, Maine. Her mother grew sick when Olympia was 6 and died of cancer when she was 9. Snowe was sent to a Greek Orthodox girls' boarding school in Garrison, N.Y., where seven months later a nun informed her that her father had died of a heart attack. "It must have been decided that it would be best if I didn't attend the funeral, so I stayed at school until Christmas," she recalls. She was taken in by her aunt and uncle — she changed night trains alone at Grand Central Station to visit them in Maine during school vacations — but her uncle died when Snowe was in her teens.

She went on to marry two political figures. The first, state legislator Peter Snowe, died in a car wreck when she was 26; she won the special election to succeed him, launching her political career. She was dating McKernan in 1983, when the pair constituted Maine's U.S. House delegation; and by the time they married, he was the state's governor. (Yes, it's a small state.) They were both from what she calls "the more moderate wing of the party . . . practical fiscal conservatives and not the more ideological or social conservatives I encountered in the House." She championed women's issues throughout her career, and observes that "women in Congress have more often than not been more resistant to partisanship than our male colleagues," leading in her case to fruitful collaborations with Democrats like Pat Schroeder and Geraldine Ferraro.

The subtitle promises advice on fixing Congress, and Snowe endorses a wide range of familiar ideas: reversing the *Citizens United* decision; banning leadership PACs; introducing non-partisan redistricting commissions in the states; changing Senate rules to limit filibusters and encourage debate and amendments; and enacting a Balanced Budget Amendment, for which she has long crusaded. Such reforms will happen only if "a relentless citizens' movement" demands it. Existing groups are ready to lead the charge, she posits, but lack "a sufficient number of followers to create the mass necessary to have an

impact on Congress.” Her pitch: back No Labels, the Bipartisan Policy Center, the center-right Main Street Partnership and center-left Third Way, the Campaign to Fix the Debt and other groups.

Curiously, there is only a brief mention of her own PAC, Olympia’s List, which aims to support candidates who believe in consensus-building. Last year, Snowe endowed it with about \$500,000 — roughly a quarter of her campaign war chest — after distributing nearly \$20,000 to Maine Republicans, including the state’s often uncivil governor, Paul LePage, and several tea party-backed legislators.

In her conclusion, Snowe promises to lead the way “to make certain our elected leaders get the signal loud and clear that the American people want them to find common ground.” She says she’s “confident in the truism that there is nothing we can’t accomplish together. Including making our government work again.”

Colin Woodard is the author of four books and is state and national affairs writer at the Portland Press Herald and Maine Sunday Telegram.