Former Senator Sam Nunn
Remarks on Receiving the Ivan Allen Jr. Prize for Social Courage
Ivan Allen College Founder’s Day Luncheon
March 15, 2011

Thank you, President Peterson, Dean Royster, Mayor Reed, Ambassador Jim Laney, Bill Todd and other members of the selection committee for this day of excitement for me, for my wife, Colleen and for my family. There is an old saying that nothing is impossible for the man who doesn’t have to do it himself – which brings up Colleen. She has been a full partner and an inspiration in whatever courage or wisdom I have mustered over the years, so she should share fully in this honor – with the possible exception of the monetary portion.

As we celebrate Ivan Allen Jr.’s 100th birthday, let me also recognize a wonderful leader, an alert citizen and close friend who could not be with us today, but who played a lead role in creating the Ivan Allen College – Lessie Smithgall of Gainesville, Georgia. Lessie will celebrate her 100th birthday on April 1st, and you all are invited to the party.

Several months before I was selected as the first recipient of this award, Tom Glenn briefed me on his vision for the Ivan Allen Jr. Social Courage Award, and his hope that this award could inspire others to rise to the Ivan Allen example of courageous leadership. Thank you, Tom, and all associated with the Glenn Foundation for your generosity, your vision and your commitment to improving our community, our state and our nation.

Historians focus on what happened in the past, journalists focus what is happening now and futurists forecast what may happen in the future. Few people explore the disasters that are avoided because of roads not traveled. The violence, riots, and long-lasting hatred that did not happen in Atlanta and Georgia in the 1960s were avoided in large part because of Mayor Ivan Allen Jr. I have to add that Ivan Allen’s wonderful wife, Louise, encouraged and supported him every step of the way. Colleen and I were blessed to spend time with this great lady after I retired from the Senate.

There’s an old saying – he doesn’t have an enemy in the world, but all of his friends are mad with him. For sure, Ivan Allen displayed courage in confronting his adversaries, but he also challenged his peers and was willing to incur their scorn and anger when social justice was at stake. In Atlanta’s time of crisis and danger, Mayor Allen’s display of calm, consistent, principled social courage made all the difference in Atlanta’s road not traveled.

Mayor Allen’s enduring legacy is reflected in the long line of Atlanta leaders in the business, civic and governmental arena who have followed his path and the path of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in keeping Atlanta too busy and forward-leaning to have time for hate or complacency. Mayor Reed, you carry on this legacy today, and I thank you for your leadership and your example.
Social courage by a leader in a time of crisis is not enough unless a leader can inspire others to join. I recently heard a colorful preacher describe it in these words – “If you march off as a leader and you look over your shoulder and ain’t nobody followin’ – man – you’re just takin’ a walk.”

Social courage does not take root in a community of spectators or a nation of spectators. Fundamental change has to be built around alert, engaged citizens who have the willingness to listen to other points of view, the humility to consider the possibility that they may not be 100% right, a basic instinct for fairness and a recognition that the community and the nation must work together – not be torn apart.

Fortunately, in spite of stiff resistance, both the black and white communities of Atlanta in the 1960s ultimately met this fundamental test, so Ivan Allen’s social courage was planted on fertile ground and became a perennial crop. Will America pass this test today?

Though we continue to lead the world in most measurements, our nation must make fundamental changes if we are to continue to prosper and continue to lead.

To name just three of our challenges:

First, our fiscal policy is out of control. Today, it weakens our economy and our global leadership and threatens our economic future.

Second, we have no sustainable, sensible energy policy – nor do we have a carbon policy which makes sense for our security or our environment.

Third, our leading role in math, science and engineering is eroding. Our elementary and secondary schools are critically short of qualified math and science teachers. In 1999, 69 percent of U.S. 8th graders received instruction from a mathematics teacher who did not hold a degree or certificate in mathematics, and the number is 93 percent of students in the physical sciences. The United States now ranks 60th among all nations and 17th among developed nations, in the percentage of college graduates who receive their degrees in science or engineering.

And think about this -- China is already graduating more English-speaking engineers than we are in the U.S. This, at a time when there is clear evidence that our productivity – and therefore our standard of living -- in future years will depend in large part on innovative technologies, discovery and scientific research. Bill Gates recently said, “When I compare our high schools to what I see traveling abroad, I am terrified for our workforce of tomorrow.”

Yesterday morning, we saw a fast moving presentation – *Seven Revolutions* – pointing out the simultaneous global revolutions in population, resources, technology and science, information and knowledge, economic globalization and governance. We also
heard our Supreme Allied Commander–Europe outline security, diplomatic and economic
teaches around the world.

Given these sweeping changes globally, and our challenges here at home, it should be clear that we are in a race between cooperation and catastrophe – both at home and abroad.

Do we have the political and civic will to work together to confront these challenges and build a world of promise? Big question.

Columnist David Brooks recently wrote on the crucial need for civility in our country. He noted that civility comes from a sense of personal modesty, from people who know that their own individual powers are limited and that they are useless without input from others. He used these words, which I believe we should all ponder:

“Of course, you get people who believe they or members of their party possess direct access to the truth. Of course you get people who prefer monologue to dialogue. Of course you get people who detest politics because it frustrates their ability to get 100 percent of what they want. Of course you get people who gravitate toward the like-minded and loathe their political opponents. They feel no need for balance and correction.

“But every sensible person involved in politics and public life knows that their work is laced with failure. Every column, every speech, every piece of legislation and every executive decision has its own humiliating shortcomings. There are always arguments you should have made better, implications you should have anticipated, other points of view you should have taken on board.

“Even if you are at your best, your efforts will still be laced with failure. The truth is fragmentary and it’s impossible to capture all of it. There are competing goals that can never be fully reconciled. The world is more complicated than any human intelligence can comprehend.

“But every sensible person in public life also feels redeemed by others. You may write a mediocre column or make a mediocre speech or propose a mediocre piece of legislation, but others argue with you, correct you and introduce elements you never thought of. Each of these efforts may also be flawed, but together, if the system is working well, they move things gradually forward.”

The key phrase here – “if the system is working well”. For a good portion of American history, our system has worked well. No system has ever been devised with more checks and balances, which compels us to work together. Our founding fathers built in every safeguard they could envision – not to make our system the most efficient – but to protect us from autocracies and even from threats to our freedoms by the majority. I am baffled when I hear elected officials say, “I wasn’t sent here to compromise”. My reading of history indicates that we would have never had a nation without compromise.
We inherited a sound system of government, probably the best ever devised. Will we pass it on? Can we muster the civility required to meet our fundamental challenges as a nation? Will our leaders pass the Ivan Allen social courage test? Will our citizens be mere spectators or will we see a sustained burst of alert citizen social courage?

Bob Schieffer asked me yesterday afternoon in our symposium discussion if I felt the Congress was dysfunctional. Not quite, but I do have a few suggestions:

First, civility does not mean eliminating passion and debate from our public discourse – nor does it mean agreeing on every issue for agreement’s sake. Civility means listening with a genuine desire to understand. It means being open to being persuaded. It means that when you disagree with others, you do so without demonizing them. It means respecting others as patriots who love America and partners in a shared quest for answers that are practical, effective and workable.

Second, we must take seriously our role as voters. Whether you are a Republican, a Democrat or an Independent, I suggest a couple of basic questions:

Does the candidate seek out the facts and let the facts have a bearing on his or her conclusion?

Does the candidate display the willingness to put our state and nation’s interest ahead of political party or even ahead of his or her own election?

Third, when we see politicians playing the current Washington game of brain dead partisanship, we should let them know that we understand the difference between constructive debate and the game of “gotcha”.

Fourth, today our airwaves and public debates are filled with attempts to not just denounce opponents’ logic but to impugn their motives. Demagogues and rabble rousers are not new to American history, but the economics and the technology have changed. A large number of these folks are making millions of dollars by dividing America into segments and yelling “sic ‘em”. They have mastered the art of cursing the darkness rather than lighting a candle. Taking into account the First Amendment, my best advice is – when you feel your I.Q. going down, hit the off button and write the advertisers. I would offer the same advice for programming which goes over the top in sex and violence – eroding our moral culture.

Finally, if you are on the far right or far left and know that you are 100 percent right, you can ignore my advice because your views are already well-represented by today’s activists and in the Congress. But, if like the majority of Americans, you would like to see our leaders work together toward common sense solutions, then take notice when they do. Today, political gravity does not encourage our leaders to let the facts lead to their conclusions. When public officials take a stand that defies either extreme they are immediately threatened with political punishment.
Let me suggest a few action items for citizens in Georgia:

When Governor Nathan Deal says that we should proceed thoughtfully and carefully on immigration, knowing that will anger some of his supporters who demand a simple solution to a complex problem, we should say – Thank you, Governor, we noticed.

When Mayor Kasim Reed tells some of the groups that helped get him elected that public employee pension costs are skyrocketing and must be brought under control, we should say -- Thank you, Mr. Mayor, we noticed.

When Senator Johnny Isakson crosses his party leaders and votes for a new arms control agreement with Russia containing the only verification provisions that exist between the two nuclear superpowers that can destroy God’s universe while we eat lunch, we should say -- Thank you, Senator, we noticed.

When Georgia House Speaker David Ralston meets, listens to and confesses that he even likes the Democratic Mayor of Atlanta, we should say -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, we noticed.

When we see leadership by Republican Alan Simpson and Democrat Erskine Bowles cautioning our nation that we are in grave fiscal peril and courageously advocating controversial spending and tax approaches that would restore sanity and move us back from the edge of the abyss, we should say -- Thank you, Alan and Erskine, and those who supported you at their peril, we noticed.

When Republican Senator Saxby Chambliss meets quietly with Democratic Senator Mark Warner and a few others searching in good faith for a comprehensive approach to our fiscal problems with give and take on all sides, we should say, Thank you, Senator, we noticed. You get the idea – notice political courage when it happens.

That’s enough alert citizen advice for one day. Back to this wonderful award.

There is always the danger that in recognizing one individual for social courage, we give the younger generation the impression that this person is an eagle soaring alone. Not so. Whatever I have achieved in my years of public service and beyond, has been the product of listening and working with others – often a Republican partner.

This was true with the Nunn-Lugar legislation on nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. It was true with the Goldwater-Nichols legislation in reorganizing the U.S. military. It was true with the Cohen-Nunn legislation creating our Special Forces Command. It was true with the Nunn-Warner legislation on Volunteer Force incentives. It was true with the Nunn-Domenici legislation to totally revamp the tax code – which never became law and needs revisiting today. It was also true on the Aspin-Nunn legislation on curbing the growth of entitlement programs in the military – most of which has now been repealed – which also needs revisiting. It remains true today where I am
working daily with George Shultz, Bill Perry and Henry Kissinger to make nuclear weapons less relevant and to reduce nuclear risks.

It would also be a mistake for young people to believe that social courage happens on the spur of the moment – a spontaneous thrust that saves the day.

I believe that Inman, Tricia and Beau Allen and other members of the Allen family – as well as many gathered in this audience who knew Ivan and Louise well – would agree that social courage is not a matter of chance or coincidence. The character and integrity revealed in acts of social courage are not qualities that can be simply switched on when needed. They have to be built and practiced – day by day – week by week – and year by year.

Former President Ronald Reagan said it best after he left office, and I close with his words:

“The character that takes command in moments of crucial choices has already been determined. It has been determined by a thousand other choices made earlier in seemingly unimportant moments. It has been determined by all those ‘little choices’ of years past – by all those times when the voice of conscience was at war with the voice of temptation. It has been determined by all the day-to-day decisions made when life seemed easy and crises seemed far away, the decisions that piece by piece, bit by bit, developed habits of laziness or of discipline; habits of self-indulgence or self-sacrifice; habits of dishonor and shame or habits of duty, honor and integrity.”

Today we live in exhilarating, but daunting, times. We’ve never faced more demanding challenges all at once, but we’ve never had more powerful tools and greater opportunities. To build a world of promise and avoid a world of peril we’re going to have to make fundamental changes. To do that we are going to have to cooperate with each other. This will not happen without increased social courage by our leaders but also by alert citizens. Ivan Allen Jr. showed us the way.

Thank you for this great honor.