Partisanship Stops At Water’s Edge — Not!

Less than an hour after President Barack Obama announced the signing of a nuclear deal with Iran, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham denounced it as “a bad deal, the worst possible outcome.”

It is “a possible death sentence for Israel. This is a virtual declaration of war against Sunni Arabs. This is the most dangerous, irresponsible step I have ever seen in the history of the Middle East. Barack Obama and John Kerry have been dangerously naive.”

Graham admitted that he had not read the proposed agreement. Only a speed-reader could have.

No matter. Political partisanship marked the response. Listen to the chorus. Presidential candidate Jeb Bush likened the deal to Neville Chamberlain’s “appeasement” of Hitler in 1938, and House Speaker John Boehner promised House Republicans “will do everything we can to stop it.”

Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton and 46 of his Republican colleagues already had. Back in March, they wrote a letter to Iran’s supreme Ayatollah promising to undermine any deal struck with the current American administration. Read or unread, Cotton labeled the deal reached with Iran, “a terrible, dangerous mistake.”

Obama and Secretary of State Kerry undoubtedly foresaw the vitriol. The maxim that “partisan politics stops at the water’s edge,” enunciated by Michigan Republican Sen. Arthur Vandenberg in 1945, has had a long list of exceptions in the years since.

Yet sometimes it does. Recently, in the first of five annual lectures sponsored by Daniel K. Inouye Institute in conjunction with Library of Congress, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright described one.

She told of her relationship with conservative North Carolina Republican Jesse Helms, then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. “It started when he called and asked me to speak at a women’s college in Raleigh. I said I’d go only if he’d come with me. And he did. We ended up driving all over North Carolina, looking for barbecue. A photographer took a picture of us, and the paper called us the odd couple.

“But he was so gracious on that trip. We became friends. We didn’t agree on everything, but he promised that we’d make history together. And we did.”

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell (also former head of the Joint Chiefs) was also part of the lecture program, and both former secretaries of state acknowledged that the Cold War aided bipartisanship.

“There was structure in that Cold War world,” Powell recalled. “There was a red side of the map and a blue side of the map.”

Powell was President Ronald Reagan’s national security adviser when Mikhail Gorbachev began fashioning a new Soviet Union. He remembered a meeting with Gorbachev in which Powell’s questions evidenced his skepticism about glasnost and perestroika. Gorbachev smiled. “General, General,” he said. “I’m so very sorry. You’ll have to find a new enemy.”

Albright agreed that the world is different now. “Foreign policy has to consider the role of non-state actors,” she said, “the layers of another society and what they are thinking. It’s more complicated than red versus red, white and blue.

“I’m sure that the Iranian negotiators were trying to explain what they had to deal with at home.”

Added Powell, “We lost our enemies; now we only have problems.”

However difficult those problems may prove in the years ahead, Albright warned that the “United States can’t turn to isolationism. We remain the indispensable nation. We must be engaged abroad.”

In the first DKI Institute Distinguished Lecture, Albright and Powell made a convincing case for doing so. It can be viewed at youtube.com or on the institute’s website.