

During NOLA Book Fest at Tulane University, Sen. John Kennedy and Walter Isaacson explore disagreement without division

March 20, 2026 9:00 AM Pam Radtke
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U.S. Sen. John Kennedy (left) sat down with Walter Isaacson (right) at the New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University to find common ground and discuss ways in which collaboration, despite disagreements, can bring about meaningful change. (Photo by Kenny Lass)

U.S. Sen. John Kennedy came to the [New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University](#) on Saturday with a special message: disagreement doesn't have to mean animosity.

Kennedy sat down with Walter Isaacson, Leonard Lauder Professor of American History and Values in the School of Liberal Arts and festival co-chair, for a

conversation that moved between personal reflection and national policy. Isaacson started the conversation asking about Kennedy's experience growing up in Zachary, Louisiana, and then attending Vanderbilt University, the University of Virginia and Oxford.

Kennedy said moving from a small town to elite academic settings shaped how he understands communication and presentation.

"Politics ... is all about communication," Kennedy said, explaining his approach to interviews and public appearances. He described taking a few minutes beforehand to organize his thoughts and deliver them directly, even knowing that audiences may disagree.

As the discussion turned to the state of political discourse, Isaacson asked whether the country has become more combative and divided. Kennedy said that although public debate can seem increasingly divisive, his experience in the Senate is often more measured. Most lawmakers, he said, understand that disagreement is inherent to the process.

"We just disagree sometimes," Kennedy said, noting that he maintains working relationships, and in some cases friendships, with colleagues across the aisle. He offered specific examples, including what he said was an ongoing effort to take Sen. Chuck Schumer, a Democrat, duck hunting. He also named Democratic Sens. John Fetterman, Peter Welch and Elizabeth Warren among his friends in the chamber.

That latter relationship has produced legislation. Kennedy and Warren recently co-sponsored a housing bill that would use Community Development Block Grant funding as both a carrot and a stick to encourage local governments to increase the housing supply. Kennedy said he remains hopeful the bill can advance, though he acknowledged its path forward is uncertain.

Isaacson also questioned Kennedy on areas where policy and principle intersect, including immigration enforcement. Kennedy defended enforcing immigration laws but emphasized that it must be done in accordance with due process and with respect for the dignity of every individual, a line that drew cheers from the overflowing audience. He also said his positions do not always align fully with the Trump administration's and that he has said so directly when they diverge.

The conversation also touched on the broader cycle of political escalation. Isaacson raised concerns about increasing retaliation in politics, and Kennedy agreed the pattern is dangerous, cautioning that responding in kind risks deepening already sharp divisions.

Near the close, Isaacson turned the focus back home, suggesting that Louisiana — New Orleans in particular — might offer a model for a different kind of political culture, one where people with deep differences still share spaces, relationships and a sense of community.