

Leader to Leader

ELEVATING OUR STANDARDS FOR CIVILITY LEADERSHIP

by Robert L. Dilenschneider

When he was a young student in Virginia, George Washington copied down a list of 110 “Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation,” which has remained in print for 265 years. Even though they have often been attributed to him, they were actually based on rules compiled by French Jesuits in 1595 and reprinted in English in 1640.

However, they had such a profound influence on Washington at age 14 that they shaped America’s first president and guided many of his decisions and actions throughout his life and presidency, according to historian Richard Brookhiser.

There are those who believe the maxims about respect, etiquette, and good conduct are still applicable today—more now than ever before in our modern era when incivility, indeed rage and anger, are crippling our country’s political system, media, interpersonal relations, and business.

Consider a few of the Jesuit directives to young people:

- Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present.
- Sleep not when others speak, sit not when others stand, speak not when you should hold your peace, walk not on when others stop.
- Show not yourself glad at the misfortune of another though he were your enemy.
- Use no reproachful language against any one, neither curse nor revile.
- Speak not injurious words neither in jest nor earnest; scoff at none although they give occasion.

- When another speak, be attentive yourself and disturb not the audience.
- When you speak of God or His attributes, let it be seriously and with reverence.
- Honor and obey your natural parents although they be poor.

Even these few directives are startling evidence of how much traditional values have deteriorated in our country, in our habits, and in our ability to respect one another and relate to one another with civility.

The fact is, all readers know these rules; the irony, not everyone feels up to following them.

Our nation is at a crossroads, and the path we take will be determined by a deliberate and civil dialogue that advances all elements of opportunities and publics so the options we eventually select and pursue will be good for the majority.

The ability to hear and to contemplate many different views without having to fight through invective and emotional charges is key.

That is not happening today.

Two of the more egregious manifestations of our fall from grace involve commentators who have large followings, on either side of the political spectrum.

Radio host Rush Limbaugh attacked Sandra Fluke, a Georgetown University law student, whom he called a “slut” and a “prostitute” after she testified before a congressional committee about the Health and Human Services regulations requiring Catholic institutions to provide contraceptive coverage in their insurance policies.

And then, in a surrealistic twist of incivility, liberal Bill Maher insisted that his using a sexist expletive to describe former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin was not as bad as what Limbaugh did because Ms. Fluke was a civilian and Ms. Palin was “fair game” as a public figure.

A path determined by a deliberate and civil dialogue...

Both men have since apologized.

This sort of distorted and twisted reasoning is only further evidence of how far America has fallen. In a similar debasement, author Larry Doyle wrote a piece in the Huffington Post titled “The Jesus-Eating Cult of Rick Santorum,” which attacked Catholics as pedophiles and mocked a central belief of their faith. Doyle’s response to the outcry: “Lighten up, it’s satire.”

What is happening out there?

Religious beliefs, regardless of the faith, were once considered sacrosanct; however, in an age of rampant incivility, some denominations, most notably Roman Catholics and Mormons, come under fire with impunity.

Religion has become the new breeding ground for incivility. Consider that during a rally of some 20,000 atheists, billed as “The Reason Rally” in Washington, D.C., British evolutionary biologist and militant atheist Richard Dawkins encouraged his followers to launch an all-out assault on believers: “Mock them, ridicule them in public!” So much for civility, so much for “reasonable” behavior.

These are a few of the more notorious examples of how far we have devolved as a society, and it leads me to wonder: Would George Washington recognize America today?

This corrosive lack of civility is evident in every segment of society, from politics to academia, from the media to the blogosphere, from talk radio to the pulpit, and it represents a crippling epidemic that threatens

the future of our country, because not only does it threaten our interpersonal relations on many levels, it threatens politics and legislative discussion in a very damaging way. Americans can no longer debate, can no longer disagree, without rage or attempts to demonize their adversary.

Compromise is no longer an option, and veteran politicians say that the legislator who is willing to work both sides of the aisle in search of cooperation is, indeed, a marked legislator when reelection time rolls around.

But hasn't America seen comparable ideological adversity throughout its history? Consider, for example, the tumult we endured during the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War protests, the sexual revolution, the upending of our universities, the Democratic Convention in Chicago, and the assassinations of three great Americans—John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy.

Was that era similar? In a recent reminiscence of that period in our history, the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, president emeritus of Notre Dame, who served on several national commissions, including the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, to which he was appointed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, wrote: “Civility was treasured and valued, although it was frequently tested during the tumultuous period of our nation’s history of the 1960s and 1970s, when the Vietnam War pitted sons against fathers, citizens against politicians and students against established society. These were

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contentious times, and very often Americans confronted one another philosophically and violently on issues such as civil rights, feminism, peace and justice.”

Americans survived that test, but now, Father Hesburgh said, incivility has become socially acceptable and commonplace at the start of the 21st century, largely because of the Internet and virtually instantaneous and widespread communications such as Twitter and e-mail. Ideologically, we have become polarized as a country, and Americans are separated by their differences rather than joined by their similarities.

We are at war with one another, and that war is inspired by special interests with single-minded purposes that permit no compromise. The recent brouhaha over religious liberty, following President Obama’s ruling that Catholic institutions must pay for contraceptive coverage of their employees, was suddenly transformed from a debate about Constitutional issues into an all-out ideological conflagration over women’s rights.

The president attempted a compromise that has been rejected by the Catholic hierarchy, and to his credit Cardinal Timothy Dolan of the Archdiocese of New York vowed to continue the fight—without demonizing President Obama, which has become a common practice in other circles. The cardinal clearly understood the importance of his Christian Catholic faith and what it means to treat every person with dignity—even persons who are threatening your beliefs and religious freedom.

Possibly, the cardinal is familiar with another precept, Number 45, in George Washington’s compendium: “Being to advise or reprehend anyone, consider whether it ought to be in public or in private, and presently or at some other time; in what terms to do it; and in reproving show no signs of choler but do it with all sweetness and mildness.”

Civility and Politics

Perhaps the most obvious and destructive demonstration of incivility in America today is found in the often brutish arena of politics. Political incivility, especially lately, has not just been confined to isolated cases of

A long, hard road back to the way things should be...

corruption or abuse of public office. One does not need to look to the recent sentencing of former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich or reminisce about the Watergate era to be reminded of the displays of uncivil behavior at the hands of our nation's politicians.

Rather, it can be observed dozens of times a day—on the floor of the House of Representatives, during press briefings, and at campaign events—in the form of abrasive and callous discourse.

Speaking at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs last year as part of a series on Civility in America, John Brademas, who represented Indiana's 3rd District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1959 to 1981, reflected on the past era in American politics and looked unflinchingly at the challenges our elected officials confronted during one of the most unsettled periods in modern history.

“During this era of civil rights, Vietnam and Watergate, I was privileged to serve with some of the finest public servants—Birch Bayh, William Fulbright, Jacob Javits, Ted Kennedy, Tip O’Neill,” he said. “In times of terrible divisiveness in the country and in Congress, we worked together, Republicans and Democrats, to create enduring programs and institutions, from Medicare to the National Endowment for the Arts, from the Peace Corps to the Apollo space program My point is that while there may be no golden age of civility in politics, perhaps we can still learn some lessons from how, even during periods of tragedy, division and conflict in American society and politics, leaders could still find common ground and identity and work together on important issues.”

Evidence suggests that Americans have taken notice of the decline of civil political discussion—and they are fed up. A recent poll showed that 80 percent of Americans believe political campaigns are uncivil, up from just 59 percent four years ago and from 66 percent during the 2010 mid-term elections. And not only are Americans noticing rampant incivility in the context of politics or political campaigns, but they are prepared to act on their dissatisfaction with the state of our political discourse. Nearly 90 percent of Americans say that a candidate's tone or civility will play a role in the way they cast their vote in November.

A probable culprit of the perceived downward slide of political civility is where Americans turn to hear about their elected representatives. According to a Pew Research Survey, 38 percent of Americans identified cable news as their top source for political campaign news, up significantly from the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaign seasons.

As opposed to print journalism and network news programs, which frame the context, cable news often lends itself to incivility, indeed, encourages it for the sake of ratings. In the world of the 24-hour cable news cycle, snarkiness and abusive punditry have become the norm. During short interview segments aired throughout the day, elected representatives often have little more than a few minutes to broadcast their talking points and belittle the opposition. A substantive conversation rarely takes place under those circumstances. It provides great theater—at the cost of a healthy discussion.

Civility and Social Media

There is no doubt that the recent emergence of social media has transformed the way we communicate and interact with one another. Never before has it been so effortless to spread information to an unlimited number of people or correspond and reconnect with friends. But just as the 24-hour news cycle can be conducive to outbursts of uncivil dialogue, the very same phenomenon is amplified in the world of social media.

Civility is never out of fashion.

Social media platforms allow us to say whatever we feel just as soon as we feel it. But unlike the sentiments we express in everyday conversation, when we broadcast a message using social media, be it a tweet, status update, or wall posting, that information is permanently received by a vast network of people. An off-the-cuff, off-color, or potentially offensive comment posted through social media has an incredibly more powerful and lasting influence than if it were to be said in an ordinary conversation.

In many respects, social media platforms encourage and reward us when we spew our bile to the broader network of users. Social networks such as Facebook constantly ask their users to share more and more personal information, and to publish whatever is on their minds. The social media site Twitter is precisely a forum to post whatever comes to mind, as long as it fits into 140 characters.

The limited amount of space allowed by the medium often leads to postings filled with mindless wisecracks, flippant one-liners, and general snarkiness-whatever can capture the most attention and the greatest amount of “likes.”

Recent polls indicate that Americans believe the social networking tool Twitter is less civil than the mainstream media, cable news, and Congressional Republicans and Democrats.

Social media has come to define the means of interaction most abundantly embraced by the Millennial Generation. For the younger segment of this generation, this has complicated traditional norms of interaction at a precarious time in a child’s life. Communication can take place behind closed doors,

in the privacy of their own homes, and after school hours. Bullying and other uncivil behavior, common to this age demographic, can go unmonitored and thrive beyond the reach of teachers and parents.

According to another Pew Survey, 88 percent of students have witnessed meanness or cruelty during exchanges on social media. One in five admitted to joining in on the cruelty. One third of teenage girls who use social media say that people their age are mostly unkind to one another during their exchanges. And 8 percent of students say they have experienced some form of online bullying, including via social media sites.

Returning to Civility

What can be done to save the Millennial Generation from these self-perpetuating cyber-attacks? What can be done to return a measure of civility to American society? Or are we trundling evermore downward as a citizenry with no hope of redemption? Has technology popularized acrimony? Can a generation that wasn’t reared in the rules of politeness change its behavior?

The road back to the way things should be is a long, hard one. It will be like swimming upstream against strong currents that are hindering us as a civilized people at the outset of the 21st century.

A key component of any strategy that seeks to return civility to America is leadership, which, sad to say, is another area where our country is sorely lacking. A public figure of national stature, a person of integrity and compassion, a woman or man of high moral fiber, is necessary to begin the long trek back to where we should be.

Such people exist. Consider, for example, the lessons of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, one of the world’s foremost spiritual leaders, who has said, “Living in society, we must share the suffering of our fellow citizens and practice compassion and tolerance toward our enemies as well as our loved ones.” Does that simple exhortation not capture the essence of what must be done? Mutual respect, tolerance, compassion.

Of course, while it is essential to have a national leader committed to such a cause, it is also necessary to have

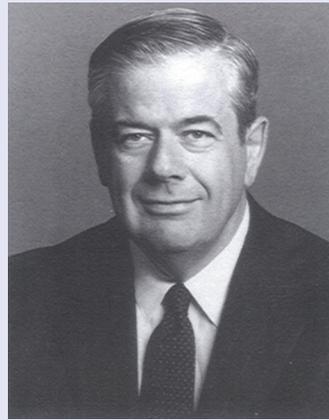
women and men who are not afraid to lead by example in the workplace, in the classroom, in houses of worship, and on the playing field. It is they who must demonstrate to others the importance of civil behavior. At the same time, they must make a forceful case to our nation's young people so they can develop the same appreciation for civility that George Washington had 265 years ago. Civility is never out of fashion.

Civility, it is safe to say, cannot be legislated, but it can be taught-and it can be learned. And what is not learned in the home must be learned in the classroom. Our educators in public and private schools must be dedicated to this cause, because changing the values of a generation requires effort and a rigorous commitment to producing the best young people possible of integrity and virtue.

I would also propose a national award for civil behavior, to be given to an individual or organization that best exemplifies the traditional values America represents. There is nothing greater than the power of example to make a lasting impression and lead the rest of us to where we should be.

The time to start is now, in our interpersonal relations and in our business dealings, in all areas of life. George Washington recognized the importance of civil behavior at an early age, and those formative years had a strong influence on the decisions he made throughout his career as a military leader and as the first president of the United States.

They produced the man who years later would exhort his countrymen, "Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair; the rest is in the hands of God."



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Prior to forming his own firm 21 years ago, Dilenschneider served as president and chief executive officer of Hill and Knowlton from 1986 to 1991. He was with that company for nearly 25 years. He started in public relations in 1967 in New York, shortly after receiving an MA in journalism from Ohio State University and a BA from the University of Notre Dame.

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The Dilenschneider Group has made a commitment to improve civility in America by sponsoring lecture series, forums, and essays from the nation's thought leaders.

This essay is part of that ongoing series.