

Civility and the Common Good

BY JIM LEACH

Few subjects seem duller than concern for manners, especially public manners. But few are more important because they affect how individuals inter-relate in community and how societies make decisions that can affect life on the planet.

In this sobering context, it is difficult not to be concerned about the discordant rhetoric of our politics. Words reflect emotion as well as meaning. They clarify—or cloud—thought and energize action, sometimes bringing out the better angels in our nature, sometimes lesser instincts.

Recent comments on the House floor have gathered much attention, but vastly more rancorous, socially divisive assertions are being made across the land, and few are thinking through the meaning or consequences of the words being used. Public officials are labeled “fascist” and “communist.” And more bizarrely, significant public figures have toyed with hints of history-blind radicalism—the notion of “secession.”

One might ask what problem is there with a bit of hyperbole. The logic, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan’s observation about the media, is the message. If we lost 400,000 soldiers to defeat fascism, spent a fortune and lost thousands to hold communism at bay, and fought a civil war to preserve the union, isn’t it a citizen’s obligation to apply perspective to words that contain warring implications? There is, after all, a difference between holding a particular tax or spending or healthcare view and asserting that an American who supports another approach or is a member of a different political party is an advocate of an “ism” of hate that encompasses gulags and concentration camps. One framework of thought defines rival ideas; the other, enemies.

The poet Walt Whitman once described America as an “athletic democracy.” What he meant was that our politics in the 19th century was rugged and vigorous and spirited. Nativism, anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic sentiment and, of course, toleration for human degrada-

tion implicit in slavery and indentured servitude “hallmarked” more than a little of 19th century American thought and many of our social structures.

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Indeed, violence was part of 19th century political manners. A Vice President shot dead our greatest Treasury Secretary for suggesting he was “despicable” in a duel in which the pistols were filed to a “hair” trigger, causing Alexander Hamilton, who may in effect have been duped, to fire prematurely skyward. Moments later, Aaron Burr vindicated Hamilton’s

assessment of his character by mercilessly gunning him down.

So, uncivil behavior is nothing new. What is new are transformative changes in communications technology in American politics, and the issues people face.

In teaching at Harvard and Princeton upon leaving Congress, I developed a series of what I call two-minute courses in American governance. Let me cite several:

1. *Political Science 101* begins with the observation that, with episodic swings, the country over the past



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generation has been approximately one-third Democratic, one-third Republican, and one-third independent. Grade school math tells us that one-half of one-third is one-sixth. So 16 ²/₃% of the voters nominally control candidate selection in each party, but because only one in four (often a fraction of this figure) participate in primaries, it is $\frac{1}{4} \times \frac{1}{6}$, that is $\frac{1}{24}$ of the electorate that controls the candidate selection process of each of the parties. This 4% is socially quite conservative on the Republican side and vigorously liberal on the Democratic. As a consequence, legislative bodies intended to represent a cross-section of the American public hardly have a place for the vast majoritarian center.

2. *Political Science 102* is that in primaries for president, Republican candidates lean right and then if nominated, scoot to the center in the general election; Democrats, vice-versa. But in Congress the scoot is seldom evident. Approximately 380 of 435 House seats are designed or gerrymandered in such a way as to be safe for one party. About half of these safe seats are held by Republicans and half by Democrats. With few exceptions, safe-seat members must lean to the philosophical edges to prevail in primaries and, if nominated and elected, have every incentive to remain firmly positioned far from the center because the only serious challenge to their career choice is likely to come from within their party's attentive, uncompromising base. Institutional polarization is the inevitable result.

3. *Psychology 101* relates to the fact that an increasing number of issues in Congress are perceived to be of a moral as contrasted with a judgmental nature. Advocates of one perspective or the other assume that an individual on the other side of a moral issue is by implication advocating immorality. While some value-based issues cannot for individual members be

compromised, most issues should be subject to reasoned give-and-take if there is mutual respect, what is uniquely labeled legislative comity. Unfortunately, neighborly attitudes of typical American communities are not reflected in legislative chambers, where partisanship governs.

4. *Journalism 101*: In the 19th century, towns and cities often had at least two newspapers, one controlled by each major national party. They were overtly partisan, sometimes vituperatively. But the public understood the biases and factored these into their judgments. With the consolidation of newspapers and advent of radio and TV in the 20th century, mass audiences appeared at first to require greater balance. While the 1930s produced a few radio demagogues like Father Coughlin, the new mass media generally recognized that large audiences required accuracy and balance. In

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TV's formative years, the three major networks competed to be regarded as the most fair and balanced. Walter Cronkite and syndicated columnists Walter Lippmann, Marquis Childs and David Broder were revered, and editorial pages of great newspapers combined conservatives and liberals such as Bill Buckley and I.F. Stone. As competition for audiences and advertising increased with the rise of cable and the Internet, media owners found it commercially advantageous or ideologically compelling to project a point of view, coming full circle to the 19th century model of partisan reporting. While a wide variety of expression is important, should facile opinion-mongering—the idea that news, like clothes, must appeal to a market segment—crowd out fairness and balance?

5. *Philosophy 101* is the absence of abstraction. Legislation is increasingly driven by partisan concerns rather than consideration for philosophical notions like the public interest or the greatest good of the greatest number. Idealism has given way to a legislative dynamic in which dominant considerations are how to respond to issues vibrant in a party's base constituencies and how to balance the influence of various moneyed interest groups.

6. *Philosophy 102*: There is something about the human condition that wants to be allowed to make governing decisions at socially cohesive levels where citizens may have impact. There is a lot written today about globalism, but this century is also about localism. To adapt to a fast changing world, one must understand both phenomena—the fact, as Tip O'Neill repeatedly noted, that all politics is local and a corollary that all local decisions are affected by international events.

7. *Sports 101*: There are profound analogies between politics and sports. A journalist, Grantland Rice, famously got it right three-quarters of a century ago when he observed that winning and losing are less important than how the game is played. Likewise in politics. The temper and integrity of the political dialogue are more important for the cohesiveness of society than the outcome of any election. The problem in politics is that there are so few rules and no referees. The public must be on perpetual guard and prepared to throw flags when politicians overstep the bounds of fairness and decency. Just as football players, wrestlers or tennis team members compete to win, they also learn to respect their opponents. Is it asking too much for candidates and their supporters to do the same in politics?

8. *Literature 101* involves a set of four books called *The Alexandria Quartet*

by British author Lawrence Durrell. Set in Egypt between the first and second World Wars in the ancient city of Alexandria, the first book spins a story from the eyes of one of the participants. Then Durrell proceeds to describe the same events in subsequent books, each narrative from the perspective of other participants. One wonders: why read about the same events more than once? The reason is that each story is profoundly different. The moral is that to get a sense of reality it is necessary to see things from more than one pair of eyes. This may apply to interactions in community, in a court room, or internationally—where what America does may seem reasonable from our perspective but look very different from the perspective of a European or African, a Middle Easterner or Asian.

9. *Reality 101*: In the most profound political science observation of the 20th century, Albert Einstein suggested that splitting the atom had changed everything except our way of thinking. Human nature may be one of the few constants in history, but 9/11 has taught that thinking must change, not simply because of the destructive power of the big bomb but because of the implosive nature of small acts. Violence and social division are rooted in hate. Since such thought begins in the hearts and minds of individuals, it is in each of our hearts and minds that hate must be checked and our way of thinking changed.

10. *Reality 102*: In Western civilization's most prophetic poem, *The Second Coming*, William Butler Yeats suggests that the center cannot hold "when the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity." Apocalypse may not be a field of study, but it would seem that the chaos of modernity has produced a crisis of perspective as well as values. Citizens of various philosophical persuasions reflect increased disrespect for fellow citizens and thus for modern-day democratic governance. Much of the problem may flow from the fast-

changing nature of our society, which has so many destabilizing elements. But part falls at the feet of politicians and their supporters who use inflammatory rhetoric to divide the country. Candidates may prevail in elections by tearing down rather than uplifting, but if elected, they cannot then unite an angered citizenry. Negativity raises the temperature level of legislatures just as it dispirits the soul of society.

Past Congresses have often been feisty, but what is so confounding about today's politics is the break with a central aspect of American political tradition. Histori-

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cally, legislative decision-making has been based on what might be described as a Hegelian give-and-take between the parties—the thesis being one party's perspective, the antithesis, the other's, and the synthesis being legislation that accommodates concerns of each.

Over the last several decades, however, a trend has developed or, more precisely, become accentuated, where legislative compromises are being made almost exclusively within whichever party controls Congress rather than between the parties. As the majority party increasingly views itself as the exclusive vehicle of legislative governance, the minority sees itself more in the European parliamentary tradition as the opposition; and vice-versa.

Far better it would be for all legislators to consider themselves responsible for governing and for both sides to recognize that the other has something to say and contribute. In a society as complicated as ours, it is irrational to think that Republicans cannot find some Democratic initiatives helpful to society and that Democrats cannot from time to time vote with Republicans.

Unlike natural physics, where Sir Isaac Newton pointed out that action equals reaction, in social chemistry reaction can be greater than action. Name-calling in the kindergarten of life can lead to hardening of attitudes and sometimes physical responses. Hence, civil discourse is about more than good man-

ners. To label someone a "communist" may spark unspeakable acts; to call a country "evil" may cause a surprisingly dangerous counter-reaction.

How we lead or fail to lead in an interdependent world will be directly related to how we comprehend our own history, values and diversity of experiences, and how deeply we come to understand and respect other peoples and societies. Citizenship is hard. It takes willingness to listen, watch, read and think in ways that allow the imagination to put one person in the shoes of another.

Civilization requires civility. Words matter. Just as coarseness in public manners and polarizing rhetoric can jeopardize social cohesion and even public safety, healing approaches such as Lincoln's call for a new direction "with malice toward none" can uplift and help bring society and the world closer together.

Little is more important for the world's leading democracy in this change-intensive century than establishing an ethos of thoughtfulness and decency of expression in the public square.

If we don't try to understand and respect others, how can we expect them to respect us, our values, and our way of life?

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