

Recovering Civility  
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On January 2 I visited my local post office and stood in line for forty minutes waiting to mail a package. It was the day after a holiday and a weekend, so the line stretched out the waiting area and past the front entrance. I chatted a little with the lady in front of me, but otherwise no one in line was talking to each other. By the time some people got to the end of the line, their moods had gone sour. One man got into a lengthy argument with a postal worker over his failure to read the instructions for sending a large package. Another man was upset by the cost. At the counter, I told the postal worker, “Grumpy people today, huh?” She nodded, and then she said, “Yeah, it’s the post-holiday traffic.”

Well, apparently, there wasn’t much holiday cheer in my hometown this year. The morning of that same day not far from where I live, an 18-year old high school senior named Douglas Chanthabouly went to school and shot a classmate, killing him. The reason is still unknown, but police suspect that Douglas Chanthabouly had a disagreement he wanted to settle.

“Can’t we all just get along?” said Rodney King after the Los Angeles riots of 1992 in which he was beaten by police.

Well, history would suggest that human beings don’t tend to get along. As Victor Davis Hanson likes to say, it’s not that war is an interruption of peace. Peace is an interruption of war, because war is the normal state of human affairs.

Compared to much of the world, things are pretty tranquil in this country. In fact, things are considerably more irenic than they can appear on the nightly news. It will get our attention if we hear how kids are taking AK47s to school in their instrument cases. Or how Rosie O’Donnell screamed at Donald Trump, and Donald Trump called Rosie O’Donnell some nasty names. Sensationalism drives ratings, and it also drives distrust, further perpetuating the big problem we face: incivility.

Civility is built on trust. We ought to think the best of our neighbor. But today we have become distrustful of one another. We’re insecure. Older Americans look nostalgically to a time when they didn’t have to lock their doors at night, when neighbors knew one another.

Today, even though we’re closer together in cities and suburbs, we’re further apart when it comes to knowing our neighbors.

Civility, as the word suggests, is the bond of civilization. It is not saving grace or deep inner character, but it is the way in which we relate to one another in civil society, and it is a reflection of spiritual and moral health.

Civility was assumed as a condition of the American founding. The founders believed intensely in “domestic tranquility.” In his Farewell Address, George Washington exhorted Americans to come together in spite of their differences and to unite on the principles of the founding. He

warned against the rise of factions and parties. "Tis substantially true," he said, "that virtue or morality is a spring of popular government."<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, Americans have disagreed about virtue and morality. While consensus remains on enough issues to enable an elementary level of civility, we have largely neglected the spring of popular government. Not only are we less interested in getting to know one another, we are experiencing a widening cultural divorce between religious conservatives and secular liberals.

John Kenneth White writes about *The Values Divide*. James Davison Hunter popularized the term "culture wars" in his 1991 book by that title. And we are, as David Brooks wrote after September 11, "One nation, slightly divisible."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the election charts and political pundits make the probably oversimplified but useful distinction between Red America and Blue America. In many ways, we seem to have lost common ground.

After September 11, Americans appeared to come together to demonstrate national unity; Congress assembled on the capitol steps to sing "God Bless America," and patriotic fever spread the nation. But of course that didn't last long, and we're back to the culture wars. Blue and Red are at each other's throats, over the war, over homosexual marriage, over global warming.

The tensions are evident in our political discourse.

At election season, Americans have grown accustomed to negative campaigning, when all the dirt starts flying. And there's plenty of name-calling. Already, Rush Limbaugh has begun calling prospective 2008 presidential candidate Barack Obama "Barack Hussein Odumbo,"<sup>3</sup> while John Farrell calls President Bush the *Global Village Idiot*.

I'll admit, I like reading Ann Coulter and listening to Michael Savage every so often. It's because they're entertaining. And sometimes they use confrontation where confrontation is needed. But when they go to dehumanizing people on the other side, things have gotten out of hand. Ann Coulter's titles include *How to Talk to a Liberal (If You Must)*, while Michael Savage writes, *Liberalism is a Mental Disorder*.

On the other side, Al Franken's books include *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*, and *Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot*. J.P. Mauro writes back, *Al Franken is a Bucktoothed Moron*. And then there's Michael Moore, who came up with *Stupid White Men*, followed by David Hardy and Jason Clarke with *Michael Moore is a Big Fat Stupid White Man*.

We are politically sick. Perhaps we could call it a national identity crisis.

America is an experiment in self-government, meaning that government is not responsible for most of our functions. And how do we function as human beings? We produce and trade. We

<sup>1</sup> W.B. Allen, ed. *George Washington: A Collection*. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 521

<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, "One nation, slightly divisible," *The Atlantic*, <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/12/brooks.htm>, December 2001

<sup>3</sup> Clarence Page, "Can Obama be Candid When it Counts?" *Toledo Blade*, <http://toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061221/OPINION04/612210313>, 21 Dec. 2006

worship. We love. We serve. In doing these voluntary things we must be protected by force, and so we have laws and government. The United States is the best experiment in government that there ever was, because we can balance a high level of freedom with a high level of public order. But that means that we must have a high level of civility. We must value patience, tolerance, compromise in the public square. It is the only way we can preserve the unchanging, uncompromising principles of the founding.

We must cooperate with one another voluntarily, so that government need not intervene to force us to do it. Civility is like a cushion between our liberties and government. When civility breaks down, self-government breaks down. Instead of taking care of our own families, our own jobs, our own education, government takes an increasing role. And the growth of government creates an opportunity for either side of a divided nation to attempt to press its agenda through government. Rather than going to families, churches, and businesses to solve problems, we look to the government to do it.

But I think the principles of the founding will survive. I think so because leadership is still possible.

The rising generation of American leaders understands the importance of working together, of coming together despite our differences, and of reestablishing civility in the public life of the nation. One of the reasons for this is that we are tired of incivility. We've grown up with divorce and broken families. When we look at divisive politics dominated by egotistic Baby Boomers, we quickly turn away; we aren't interested in a political system that is so fiercely partisan. We want to experience real and fulfilling relationships personally and politically without the divisiveness that has characterized the Baby Boom generation since the days of Vietnam.

Second, the internet breaks down a lot of barriers. It enables us to keep in touch with one another and to have a civil conversation about the issues confronting our nation, and the internet crosses all lines of partisanship. We can share ideas and learn about one other as well through the internet.

Finally, leaders can make a difference. As young Americans who understand the importance of the founding principles move toward places of leadership in politics and the world of ideas, a shift can take place in the national character. By entering the crucial fields of the media, higher education, public policy, and even parenting, leaders can win our generation back to the principles of the founding.

This world will always have disgruntled post office customers, murderers, self-promoters, and cunning publicity artists. There will always be conflicts between human beings. So maybe we can't all just get along, but we can sure do a much better job of it. The founding fathers desired a "more perfect union." If we are a united people in the end, it is because individuals decided to be a little more civil.