
Prologue

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About a year ago, in anticipation of a forgotten American Experiment milestone, I decided to write a piece about civility in public life, particularly in Minnesota. I figured the subject was apt insofar as my colleagues and I have been determined since the very first days of the center to treat all participants and guests at our programs with respect, regardless of where they crouched along some ideological line of scrimmage, and regardless of the passion and emotion saturating any issue, no matter how tough. As for difficult issues, it's been our purpose, again from day one, to treat them seriously. Zingers and sound bites—including those with extra bite—have their place, even with us, but they're no substitute for the real work of this organization.

It was in this measured spirit, for example, that we published a symposium in *AEQ* on “heart and soul” and “aim and tone” in American conservatism on the tenth anniversary of the center in 2000. Though, quite frankly, provoking my interest in writing about civility last year, more viscerally than anything else, was what instantaneously came to be known as the “Wellstone Rally”—the advertised memorial ser-

vice in honor of Sen. Paul Wellstone, his wife, their daughter, and five other good people. That event, held just before Election Day 2002, morphed into the most offensive political display I've ever seen in my three decades in this state.

With that sad and angering evening as backdrop, I steamed to write about civility, if not with self-righteousness, then with certain airs beneath my wings. But then, as if on humbling cue, I wound up sticking my own clumsy foot in my own misspoken mouth at a forum I moderated. It was far from the dumbest or worst barb I ever bandied, but it offended some people needlessly and made others feel uncomfortable for no useful reason. I apologized within moments of blurting, but the deed had been done, and I wound up kicking myself for weeks.

I tell this story not to self-flagellate (what I said wasn't really all that bad), but to suggest that a little humility is always in order when talking about faceted things like civility and respect, especially the degree to which inadequate amounts of them are allegedly practiced by others. I also tell the tale because soon afterward I concluded

that it made much more gracious sense not to hog the topic, but to ask a lot of smart people to write about it, too. As things happily turned out, forty-four men and women from an expanse of perspectives accepted the invitation and did exactly that. Actually, I don't know if I've ever seen a Minnesota symposium with so many authors; at this stage of American political life, obviously, questions and worries about civility clang more than a few chords.

You will find, on p. 14, the setup and questions I sent to writers for "They Beat the Hell Out of Each Other Up There': Civility in Minnesota (and National) Politics." For starters, here's a sampling of views from several conservative quarters.

Sally Pipes. Politics has become all-pervasive, especially the notion that all problems have political solutions. For many, politics has become a religion, the very core of life. In these conditions, opponents cease to be simply partisans of another opinion with a different set of policies to be debated. Rather, opponents become evil enemies of the people to be denounced and destroyed. This cannot promote civility in Minnesota, America, or anywhere else, and neither can political correctness, pervasive in the media and the academy.

Patrick Garry. Politics in America has always been combative, but there has also been a strain of consensus. In the 1950s, a foreign policy consensus allowed Democrats and Republicans to work together to help shape the post-war world and to support democracy in the face of totalitarian threats.

But gradually, since the 1960s, consensus has become a despised word. In their multicultural creed, liberals have ridiculed and undermined any sense of unity that binds Americans together. Under this creed, America is just a collection of competing, combative interest groups; and American society is just a fragmented culture of disjointed victims' rights.

According to Ron Eibensteiner, "political debate in Minnesota has not become uglier, it has simply become more balanced," given the rising fortunes of the Republican Party.

Interestingly, men and women contributing to the symposium from liberal precincts often seem to be more critical of their own teams and less denominationally gruff than their counterparts on the right. Suffice it to say, this admirable tack has not been embraced by Democratic candidates trying to claw President Bush back to Crawford, or earlier, by Wellstone mourners who tried to boo Trent Lott back to Pascagoula.

Here's a perfect and appreciated example of a higher, local road taken by D. J. Leary:

When I run into some individual I have known from DFL or Republican campaign participation, I am less and less surprised that they're no longer active in party politics. They say it in different ways, but it all means the same thing: "It just isn't fun anymore." "There's no room for friendly disagreement in politics, even within one's own party anymore." "They play by different rules today that are totally negative and seem based solely on

the importance of the personal attack.” Some simply say: “I don’t like what politics has become.”

My old friend D. J. continues:

I assure you that the mere submission of this essay to a publication of an organization deemed a conservative think tank is guaranteed to bring a deluge of criticism from people I have campaigned with, and supporters of causes I have marched for, over the past half-century. To many it will be an act of treason. Their vacuous responses will be one more aspect of the gospel of attack that these acolytes of destruction believe passes for serious political thought and action.

Then there are cries like these from the middle of the road.

Dean Barkley. Until the moderate, compromising, common-sense people of this country wake up and decide to care enough about our political institutions to participate, I see the state of our politics continuing to decline and become more negative and combative.

And this, from my old boss at the University of Minnesota:

C. Peter Magrath. We need first principles that include humanity and humility and the recognition that while there are certain eternal moral truths, there are few political verities on difficult issues.

Another group of writers focuses on problems caused by surplus dollars, segmented media, and scowling parties and interest groups.

Chuck Slocum. We now have sophisticated ways in which unregulated “soft” money contributed in large amounts from special-interest groups can find its way into just about any campaign going, regardless of the source of funds. . . . The political parties at their best were once the guardians of integrity in the process; they now are the full partners in the dollar chase.

Kent Eklund. Some media experts have stated that in an era of 150 cable channels, a “mass market” is 3 percent of the listening audience. These narrow bands of listeners enable persons with explicit, and often narrow perspectives, the freedom to vent to a small group of true believers.

Tim Penny. Frankly, candidates who run negative ads do often find themselves under criticism from voters. In that sense, they are being held accountable for their conduct. But increasingly, it is political parties and special-interest groups who employ the most harshly negative tactics. They, too, need to be accountable—as do the individuals who bankroll their campaign activity. That is why it is important that political parties and special-interest groups open their books to the public on the same terms as the candidates.

Then there are those who are less agitated by all the agitation.

Terry Thompson. Minnesota nowadays is more interesting and tough-minded in its political debate, but don’t confuse us with what is going down elsewhere. . . . [U]nless and until we start counting gravestones to boost a stadium referendum, or clamor for the recall of a sitting governor,

Minnesota politics, supported by sensational voter turnouts and relatively scandal-free government, is likely to remain civil. That doesn't mean civil as in twenty years ago, but definitely manageable and perhaps more compelling than before.

An observation and recommendation by John Hottinger warrant particular attention.

Demonizing those you have policy disagreements with is much easier if you don't see their faces, shake their hands, or share a meal. That socialization has been lost. Other than on the field of combat, few legislators get to know each other across party and institutional lines. . . . The current gift-ban law, initiated to stop the flow of special-interest favors, needs to be changed to permit receptions open to all legislators in order to meet their constituents and each other.

Senator Hottinger is entirely correct and courageous here, as is former Sen. Ember Reichgott Junge, who makes a similar point in her essay. *American Experiment*, in fact, pushed for precisely this commonsensical change about five years ago, but to no avail, as absolutist and politically correct notions of "good government" prevailed in legislative committee. Minnesota's "gift ban" is a classic example of how well-intentioned, albeit naïve attempts to purify government and politics tend to muck them up instead. It's past time to reform the "reform."

Finally, for an amen explanation and cure for what ails us, consider this lesson from the past:

Marvin Olasky. [Another] reason for the growth in political hatred is our decreased willingness to see God's providence in election outcomes. Nineteenth-century political campaigns tended to be hard-fought, but when they ended, the disappointed losers often waxed theological about the results: "God's will be done." When feelings ran so high that such reconciliation did not occur, the results could be dire: the Civil War is Exhibit A.

I'm enormously thankful to all forty-four writers for contributing to this important, illuminating, and perhaps even pivotal project.

The Winter 2003–04 issue of *American Experiment Quarterly* continues with two major and thematically related pieces about affordable housing and metropolitan governance.

In "Affordable Housing: How 'Smart Growth' Dashes Minnesota Dream Homes," Kristin J. Robbins writes:

The term "smart growth" is a marketing tool developed by advocates of growth restrictions to sell their development philosophy to the public.

Rather than accurately describing the nature of the policies advocated (restricting or regulating growth and development) or the impact of those policies (higher densities, more traffic congestion, higher cost of homes), the spin engendered by the term is that growth is being allowed, but at a thoughtful, deliberate pace that "they" decide is best for everyone concerned. More accurate terms might be "restricted growth" or "regulated development," but they smack of government dictates and would never

garner support among the public.

I know of no free-market analysis of affordable housing in the Twin Cities metropolitan area more copious and valuable than Ms. Robbins's.

The same salute applies to the recently released report by American Experiment's Task Force on Metropolitan Governance; it will be debated and drawn on by a wide range of players, both in and out of government, for quite a while.

Although it has taken five years, this inquiry follows directly from the 1999 *Minnesota Policy Blueprint*, American Experiment's mammoth 400-page study—led by nineteen task forces involving about 150 volunteers—that put virtually all of the executive branch of state government to conservative and free-market tests. I noted back in early 1999 how those analyses and recommendations (we wound up with about 250 of the latter) had been informed by confidence in the “effectiveness and efficiency of markets” and, obversely, by a recognition that “government is almost always a poor micromanager.” I argued that the project's goal was to be “self-consciously provocative but always grounded. Or, from another angle, the

Blueprint was to be “pictured as vigorously pushing scores of envelopes, stopping well short each time of ungluing anything essential.”

By every one of these measures, this new report on metropolitan governance is an exceptional successor to that exceptionally useful venture. My large thanks to everyone involved with the task force, starting with chairman Dean Riesen, project director Annette Meeks, and research director Jonathan Papik, for a contribution large enough to stretch over thousands of square miles of local hills and all manner of dales.

Most of the report is reproduced here. For the full text, go to the center's main website at www.amexp.org.

This biggest issue of *AEQ* ever concludes, as usual, with brilliant columns on American education by Chester E. Finn Jr. Checker's topics this time around include international educational comparisons, the possibility of religious charter schools, and teacher unions.

With that, I invite your comments and letters to the editor, and wish you smooth sledding into spring. ■