
“They Beat the Hell Out of Each Other Up There”: Civility in Minnesota (and National) Politics

A Symposium

In October, Mitch Pearlstein asked a number of friends and colleagues in Minnesota and across the country to discuss the state of political civility in this and other states. Forty-four writers from a variety of partisan and other backgrounds accepted the invitation, responding to the following description of the matter and several questions.

Politics, and public life more broadly, have never been for the squeamish at heart. With passion and stakes both high, how could they be anything but tough? And despite Minnesota’s reputation for being unusually *nice*, such combativeness has always been the case in this state in ways similar to those across our nation. One out-of-towner who has understood this harsh truth about us is veteran journalist Jack Germond. During one of his regular

appearances on TV’s *McLaughlin Group* upward of fifteen years ago, another panelist said something about how politics were comparatively polite in Minnesota. To which Germond responded, in an avuncular sneer, “Are you kidding? They beat the hell out of each other up there.”

Nevertheless, political life in Minnesota and elsewhere in the United States may well have gotten even rougher (many would use the word

“uglier”) since then. Examples of rhetorical and other excesses, both real and imagined, are well known.

- Many liberals, for instance, don't just dislike George W. Bush and his policies, but *hate* them both, making no attempt to hide either their contempt or their belief in the illegitimacy of everything about the current White House.
- Then, again, many conservatives were not always statesmanlike in their arguments with Bill Clinton.
- Liberals have been known to write books calling conservatives liars.
- Then, again, conservatives have been known to write books calling liberals traitors.
- Republican colleagues of the late Sen. Paul Wellstone got booed by some liberals while paying their respects to his memory at a memorial service turned rally.
- Then, again, supporters of the fallen Democrat have been told to “get over it,” to quit honoring their champion, by some conservatives who simply fail to respect, period.
- Californians have been stuck in a rut of ceaselessly electing governors, with each campaign growing nastier than the last.
- Then, again, some players seem intent on keeping gubernatorial politics in Minnesota stuck in a ceaseless rut of campaign-style street fighting, never mind that our chief executive was elected only a year ago and won't stand for reelection for another three years.

Why are so many otherwise good people at the throats of so many other, fundamentally decent people (beyond the fact that candidates for major office who don't “go negative” tend to lose)?

One explanation was offered by journalist Michael Barone at an American Experiment forum in 1998, when he argued that “politics more often splits Americans on cultural than on economic lines.” As a prime example, he pointed to abortion. Moral issues of this sort, he went on to say, “engage and mobilize people and keep them fighting.” This, in turn, “has led to a politics in which people defend their niches fiercely against people whom they know little. . . . In the process, we get fierce attacks on politicians. People feel justified because they believe the moral stakes are high.”

More recently, it's hard to imagine how tempers and decorum wouldn't be ragged given a presidential election that was settled by the Supreme Court; terrorist attacks in which thousands of citizens were killed; a subsequent war about which millions disagree; all in the context of an economy that, despite its underlying strengths, has done a better job of frightening than reassuring many people. None of this is to make excuses for boorish behavior; only to note that boorish behavior is less surprising in such rancorous light

[A] strong case can be made that an abundance of civility is not necessarily a good thing either. The late Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said of U.S. foreign policy elites: Their “common denominator, apart from an incapacity to deal with ideas, is fear of making a

scene, a form of good manners that is a kind of substitute for ideas.” Focusing on domestic issues, Clarence Thomas said not dissimilar things in a celebrated speech a few years ago. Or, as I would put it, it’s impossible to imagine any successful movement—be it on behalf of conservatism, civil rights, feminism, environmentalism, or take your pick—that doesn’t concertedly bump up and anger large numbers of people.

All of which leads to questions like these. Please address them (or, more feasibly, some portion of them) in any way you see fit.

Do you find the current political climate, particularly in Minnesota, distasteful? Would you go so far to describe it as offensive?

If you do, in fact, find the political climate unacceptable, why do you say so? If you do **not** find the climate foul or destructive, why don’t you?

What bearing, if any, does any of this have on the “good life” in Minnesota? What about on American democracy and prosperity themselves?

Recognizing that Minnesota and the nation are big places in which millions of people passionately disagree with one another for heartfelt and honorable reasons, what can be done to improve the atmospherics of public life?

Civilizing Politics: A Role for the University

J. Brian Atwood

There is no question that politics in the United States today is too often uncivil, and Minnesota is no exception. Too many candidates and political commentators do not show “a decent respect” for the views of others. This style of public discourse is corroding the nation and Minnesota’s good life.

The political climate today may not be rougher than it was when Joe McCarthy destroyed dozens of distinguished Americans’ lives. What is important today is that responsible leaders hold the modern-day perpetrators of rude political attacks accountable for their actions and for their words.

Politicians and commentators should continue to debate and aggressively sharpen their differences. There is a clear line between debate and invective, however. It is worth noting, too, that we can find plenty of models of fair-minded discourse.

One alarming consequence of shock-and-insult politics is a proportional disgust with politics among voters. In a measure of the most minimal political participation—voting—the United States has been stuck since the 1970s at a rate of roughly 50 percent in presidential elections, when turnout is highest. Low turnout is unhealthy in a democracy. There are a number of causes for the drop in political participation, but surveyed voters consistently place negativism in politics near the top.

Political apathy and alienation sap our democracy's essential strength—voters' involvement in their governance. Our political health, in turn, underlies our society's progress—what we call “the good life” in Minnesota. For this reason, we must find every means to challenge and reverse the resurgence in abusive attacks in politics.

Clearly, the media, decent candidates, and political professionals, and, most of all, the voters ought to hold political operatives, candidates, and commentators accountable for their words. Public chastisement of transgressors would be one good tonic.

I would like to focus on the role that a robust educational system can and must play. Civility in the body politic goes hand-in-hand with appreciation for the political system. John Adams said it first when he drafted the constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (Chapter II, Section 6):

...it shall be the duty of legislators and magistrates in all future periods...to cherish the interests of literatures and the sciences, and all the seminaries of them..., to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence..., good humor, and all social affections, and generous sentiments among the people.

In Adams's formulation, the university carries an obligation crucial to the success of democratic government in the United States. The modern university provides education and research to the entire community in a variety of ways. It also can furnish a forum and play a convening role to bring leaders together.

As the public-policy arm of the University of Minnesota, the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs has set twin goals for itself in this regard: (1) to help elevate the notion and practice of politics and, in so doing, (2) to cause our students and community collaborators to understand and act on the vital role of politics in their lives. Students who comprehend the powerful potential of politics to improve their own lives and the life of their society will choose to actively participate in our democracy. Some will become public leaders. Others will work within the political system as administrators and professionals in the public sector. Still others will remain involved as citizen-activists of all political stripes.

In early 2004 the Humphrey Institute will launch the Center for the Study of Politics. The center will offer research and commentary on politics and hold public programs designed to illuminate politics and policies for the entire community. One of the center's abiding goals will be to find ways to help raise the level of political discourse and restore a sense of politics as a noble calling. The center will work closely with the media, candidates, political professionals, academics, think-tank experts, and others to accomplish these goals.

The Humphrey Institute will do its part to elevate political rhetoric. We will welcome your help.

J. Brian Atwood is dean of the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.

When Politics is Abandoned to the Ideologues

Dean Barkley

The health of American politics has steadily worsened over the past several decades. This can be clearly proven by the decreasing number of voters who show up at the polls and the minuscule number of people who bother to attend Minnesota political party caucuses every two years. To most Americans and Minnesotans, politics has become a necessary evil that too often they choose to ignore.

The decline in our political health has come about for two reasons. The first reason is that most Americans are now far too busy trying to make ends meet to participate in politics. Most families now have both parents working and simply do not have the time or energy to devote to politics. The second but more serious reason for the decline in political participation is the polarization of the Democratic and Republican parties.

Politics belong to those who show up. Since the vast majority of voters are now too busy to show up, they have left our political institutions to the political ideologues—from the left and the right—who take the time to participate because of their passion for their issues. The “silent moderate majority” has checked out.

The Democratic Party is now a collection of special interests that care deeply about social justice, the environment, education, and labor issues. The Republicans care about abortion, bashing gays, big business, and lower

taxes. Both parties have been successfully taken over by those who have the passion over these issues to take the time to organize and be politically active. They may be a minority of the population, but they have successfully hijacked our political institutions.

We have moderate voices in these parties in groups such as the Democratic Leadership Council, GOP Feminist Caucus, and the Republican Organizing Council, but all of these groups are a small minority and no longer control the agenda and nominating processes of their parties.

This successful takeover by the left and the right have given moderate voters even less of a reason to participate in politics or to even care to vote. Every once in a while, a politician taps into this moderate sea of discontent and shakes the political establishment. Jesse Ventura did it, John McCain almost did it, and recently, Arnold Schwarzenegger did it in California. These people gave the disgruntled middle a reason to participate in politics.

Is it any wonder that our politics has become so contentious and negative when our two major political parties have become so polarized and opposite? The people who now control these parties simply have nothing in common with each other and dislike each other. They truly believe that they represent good and the other side represents evil.

As a moderate, I am frustrated with the current state of politics in this country. Election after election I am forced to pick between the lesser of two evils. Don't take me wrong, I applaud

the left and the right for their passion and successful takeover of their respective parties. They won their power fair and square.

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 politics continuing to decline and become more negative and combative.

I continue to try to build a political home for the moderate voters called the Independence Party. This is not an easy task, but there seems little hope that moderates will be able to take back either of the two other major political parties. This negative, combative style of politics is not the fault of the left and right since they are just doing what comes naturally given the circumstances. It is the fault of the middle that does not care enough about our republic and our political institutions to put the left and the right back into the political margins where they belong.

Dean Barkley, an independent, was appointed to fill the expiring U.S. Senate term of Paul Wellstone in November 2002 and was director of Minnesota Planning under Gov. Jesse Ventura.

It's a Baby-Boom Thing

Michael Barone

Republicans have taken to complaining that Democrats are attacking George W. Bush with a harshness and vitriol seldom seen in presidential races. Bush is a “miserable failure,” says Dick Gephardt; he is treating Iraq like “a toy he has

won,” says John Edwards—and these are two of the more moderate Democratic candidates. Democrats reply, with some justice, that Republicans attacked Bill Clinton with a harshness and vitriol seldom seen in presidential politics. The level of Bush hatred and Clinton hatred makes many of us uncomfortable, even some of us who have harsh feelings toward one of them.

Why this increased harshness? My explanation: it is a baby boom thing. What we are seeing is a civil war between the two halves of the baby boom, the liberal half that basked in national publicity in the late 1960s and the conservative half that smoldered in resentment for many years until its more recent rise to prominence. The first example of such harshness in national politics came in October 1992 in the vice presidential debate between Dan Quayle and Al Gore, the first two baby boomers to run against each other. This was a rock 'em, sock 'em debate—a sharp contrast with the careful, deferential tone that baby boomer Bill Clinton employed toward GI-generation George H.W. Bush.

Class of '64. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush were both born in 1946, the year generally taken as the beginning of the baby boom. They both graduated from high school in 1964, graduates of the class that recorded the peak SAT scores in history; Hillary Rodham Clinton, Gore, and Quayle graduated a year later. When they were in college, these young people were widely hailed as the most talented young people in history. In 1969 *Life* magazine gave rapturous coverage

of Hillary Rodham Clinton's commencement speech at Wellesley. The liberal boomers thought it was time they took things over; they played key roles in the Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern campaigns in 1972 and the Richard Nixon impeachment process in 1974.

Bill Clinton in 1992 and George W. Bush in 2000 both conducted consensus-minded campaigns, but both soon came to be hated by large numbers of voters. Character played a part. Both men have personal traits that the other half of the baby-boom generation loathes: Clinton's smooth articulateness and ethical slipperiness, Bush's mangled syntax and moral certainty. The hatred was ratcheted up in the 2000 Florida controversy, in which both sides for tactical reasons made arguments congruent with their own half of the baby boom's deeply held moral attitudes. The Gore campaign argued, the rules are unfair; change the rules. The Bush campaign argued, it's unfair to change the rules in the middle of the game; enforce the rules. It was inevitable that whichever side lost would deeply resent the result—and hate the winner.

Boomer liberals are liberation-minded on cultural issues and conciliation-minded on foreign policy. Just as they favored propitiating campus rioters by granting many of their demands in the 1960s, so they favor mollifying terrorists by conceding some of theirs, as Bill Clinton tried to do in Northern Ireland and Israel. Boomer conservatives are tradition-minded on cultural

issues and confrontation-minded on foreign policy. They smoldered when campus rioters extracted demands from college presidents, and today they favor confronting terrorists militarily, asserting the fight is between good and evil.

Of course, not all Americans are baby boomers; there are fewer of them every day. But the large majority of voters, in nearly equal numbers, support with nearly religious fervor the two parties led by members of the high school class of 1964. Holding the balance may be a new generation of voters that eschews both cultural traditionalism and the liberal pieties of politically correct campuses and has believed since 9/11 that we are under attack and must respond. In a recent Harvard Institute of Politics survey, 61 percent of college students rated Bush positively, and a new Pew Center poll found more generation Xers are Republicans than Democrats. In the 1990s, the winner in the baby boomers' civil war seemed to be Bill Clinton. Now the winner seems to be George W. Bush.

Michael Barone is a senior writer for U.S. News & World Report. This essay appeared in U.S. News & World Report and is copyrighted by U.S. News & World Report. It is reprinted here with permission.

The Land of Free Speech and No Respect

Joshua Borenstein

If our Founding Fathers surveyed today's political landscape, one wonders if they would rewrite the Constitution regarding free speech. After all,

what benefit is there to free speech if no one is listening? Today's political-party deafness to and demonizing of all other views has so spoiled the greatest benefit the First Amendment offers us that the cost is monumental.

True debates of political ideologies have given way to constant silencing of opposing views through attack campaigns. It's not that political figures are afraid of debate; it's that they find debate unnecessary. They are so certain their opinions are right and so focused on their own egos that the pursuit of truth has been cast aside. Apparently, there is nothing more for them to learn, and they are content to push their feelings of what they think "the truth" should be for everyone else.

The Talmud relates a story about the great sage Rabbi Yochanan. His daily Talmud sparring partner was his brother-in-law, Rabbi Lakish. After Rabbi Lakish's death, the academy sent its best and brightest prospect, Rabbi Elazar, to be his study partner. This recruit was dismissed by Rabbi Yochanan with this powerful explanation: "This man is indeed a scholar. In fact, he's so brilliant that he can come up with twenty-four ways to prove that what I'm saying is correct. But when I studied with Rabbi Lakish, he brought me twenty-four proofs that what I was saying was wrong. And that's what I miss! The goal of study is not to just have someone agree with me. I want him to criticize, question, and prove to me that I'm wrong."

So how have we drifted so far from Rabbi Yochanan's intellectual honesty in the pursuit of truth? In discussing the

declining understanding and knowledge of G-d and religion, Rabbi S. R. Hirsch wrote in the mid-nineteenth century: "Indeed, sharply honed intellects brought to the fore a human facet, emotion, that was inaccessible to scientific calculation and in no need of adequate rational explanation. By adhering to a religion based on pure emotion, one gradually, without realizing it, replaces belief in G-d with belief in one's own inner being." That explains how political figures can trust their beliefs with such conviction. If the center point is emotion, then if they feel their view is right, it must be right.

So why take the time to explain and teach and debate "truth" in the public arena? Why aren't our political sound bites full of inspirational thoughts instead of vicious, sarcastic attacks? The answer is time. Rabbi Hirsch also said: "Reason reaches its goal slowly; sarcasm gains victory quickly and summarily. Reason can be resisted a long time, but no one, least of all the younger generation, wants to appear ridiculous." Politicians have polls to win today. Additionally, as George Will mentioned at Center of the American Experiment's Fall Briefing, the average sound bite during the last election was seven-seconds long. We have no time for convincing, just time for mocking.

Beyond today's intellectual isolation and sarcasm, the prevailing attitude toward one's opponent is this: "They aren't just wrong, they are truly EVIL for their opinion!" To quote Thomas Sowell in *The Vision of the Anointed*: "Those who disagree with

the prevailing vision are seen as not merely in error, but in sin.” He continues, “People are never more sincere than when they assume their own moral superiority.” It seems that many political figures have replaced religion with political ideology. Worshiping their political ideology as the “light side of the force” and portraying their adversaries’ views as the “dark side of the force,” they have made their feelings of truth to be the only truth.

The Torah views the truth as the required building block for life. If our elected officials value truth over power and politics, then we will continue to have a healthy political system.

Rabbi Joshua Borenstein is executive director of Torah Academy in St. Louis Park.

How Ideologues Undermine Political Discourse

Emmett D. Carson

Political life in Minnesota, like politics across the nation, has gotten uglier. There are at least two factors that help explain why the quality of political debate has substantially declined: the growing political influence of ideologues and their willingness to use falsehoods to undermine a politician’s reputation.

A sad development in American politics is that ideologues of both major parties have a disproportionate influence in selecting their party’s candidates. Ideologues are committed to their special interest and stay to the bitter end of various local political

conventions long after everyone else has gone home. They see compromise as synonymous with failure. They are less interested in putting forward a candidate who is acceptable to a broad range of interests in nominating a candidate who will steadfastly adhere to their singular viewpoint.

Candidates who are nominated through this process are required to express their unwavering support for more extreme views. As a result, they no longer have the necessary flexibility to make reasonable compromises in the give-and-take of the political process. The result is legislative gridlock—nothing gets accomplished. A vicious cycle is completed when ideologues then use the gridlock as a case for raising additional funds and recruiting more ideologues to their cause, thereby ensuring the nomination of candidates who are even more adamant about political compromise.

Elected officials are honor bound to try to fulfill their campaign promises; however, they should also recognize that they have an even greater responsibility to champion what is in the best interests of all of the people. Few Minnesotans believe that the recently enacted concealed-carry handgun law (which neither requires the gun to be concealed nor that it be a handgun) will make Minnesotans or law enforcement officers safer. While such a law does not serve the public interest, it does satisfy the interests of an ideologically driven constituency.

The second reason political debate has become uglier is that it has become acceptable for ideologues to attack a

politician's reputation without providing any factual evidence to support the accusations. Yes, questions of character do matter. Unfortunately, we have developed a political climate in which questions about character can take center stage without any discussion of a candidate's substantive policy positions.

Making matters worse, ideologues are without shame in their hypocrisy in focusing on a politician's character flaws when it suits them and ignoring them when it does not. For example, conservative ideologues appear comfortable in defining the Clinton presidency by Bill Clinton's indiscretions (sexual relationships with consenting adults other than his wife) while ignoring the more troubling indiscretions of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (unwanted sexual advances with nonconsenting adults other than his wife). Similarly, liberal ideologues ignore Clinton's character flaws while delighting in the accusations against Schwarzenegger.

The result of all this is a political process that fails to attract the best people, where politicians' reputations are unjustly maligned and legislative gridlock is viewed as success rather than failure. In this climate, we should all feel a sense of outrage that rational public policy and the greater public good are being compromised because of the narrow-minded interests of political ideologues.

Emmett D. Carson is president and CEO of the Minneapolis Foundation.

Once the Election is Over...

Norm Coleman

Public service is a wonderful thing. Having served ten months in the United States Senate, I am more impressed than I would have imagined by the commitment to serve demonstrated by my colleagues on both sides of the aisle. With rare exception, their primary motive is helping make America a safer, better place to live and raise a family.

The public sees another side of "politicians." They see a side that focuses on partisan bickering and a sense that all policy is dictated by self-interest—a perception fueled by the partisanship and the finger-pointing that accompany it.

For sure, politics is not a business for the thin-skinned. The American political arena can be a hard-hitting battlefield of ideas and ideologies. In some ways, that's not such a bad thing, nor is it a new phenomenon. Our Founders, realizing democracy depends on the free flow of ideas, intended for there to be passion in our politics. And American leaders have been duking it out since the birth of the republic. Adams and Jefferson's correspondence is no course in civility. And the Lincoln-Douglas debates, contrary to popular opinion, could get pretty nasty. There is no question that America's strength stems from the ability of her citizens to engage in meaningful, spirited debate.

Sharp rhetoric is as much a part of American democracy as the Bill of Rights is to our liberty. It is an essential

ingredient in the national debate of ideas. What has disappointed me the most since arriving in Washington, however, is the fact that some in this town seem to have forgotten that Election Day has passed. Once elected, it is the duty of legislators and leaders to leave the campaigning behind and work together to craft meaningful policy for the good of the country. Of course, that doesn't mean we have to agree. Quite the contrary; our bicameral, three-branch system of government is designed to ensure that the formation of national policy depends on a diversity of viewpoints. Nevertheless, in the end, the goal should be the same: to get something done.

Inside the Beltway, however, some have put this objective on the back burner, choosing instead to use the legislative process to score political points at the expense of getting things done. Rather than seeking reasonable compromise, more and more in Washington have opted to adopt an obstructionist attitude. I may be new to this town, but this is a tactic I don't understand and hope I never do.

Part of the bitterness is fueled by what I would label ideological self-righteousness—a belief that someone who doesn't agree with you on an issue is a “bad person.” Hot-button issues can often cause this personalization of politics. We need to do a better job of agreeing to disagree and then seek common ground. The recent sixty-four to thirty-four vote in favor of banning partial-birth abortion is an example of finding common ground on an issue as divisive as abortion.

A second cause is presidential politics—where the stakes are so high, and an anything-goes attitude often prevails. Howard Dean has bolted to the head of the Democratic pack by his sharp, uncompromising rebukes of the president's policies. The result has shifted the tone of the debate to the point where folks like Joseph Lieberman, John Kerry, John Edwards, and Richard Gephardt have had to ratchet up the angry rhetoric against President Bush. This may appeal to caucus attendees and primary voters, but it adds to the angry divisiveness that infects politics today.

There is much work to be done to rebuild our economy, ensure that all our children are educated, meet our nation's health care needs, and provide for a safe and secure America. We in Washington have far too many opportunities to do good to justify wasting time on meaningless political games and nasty partisan exchanges. I believe this capital of ours can be a place of vigorous but respectful debate, of principled but productive policy-making. That is a transformation I hope to see soon and one I plan to be a part of.

Norm Coleman, a Republican, is a U.S. Senator from Minnesota.

First, Stop Distorting Our History

Kimberly Crockett

“America is the most racist, sexist, repressive regime in the world. The religious right is brainwashing women so they can take away their rights.” Why

do we often read or hear such statements? How do we respond to these kinds of assertions in a civil fashion?

Our elite cultural institutions are dominated by a leftist philosophy that is inherently hostile to democratic capitalism, a government of limited powers, and traditional religious and moral values. The cultural pressure to adopt a liberal orthodoxy is enormous. To be regarded as “intelligent” or “moral,” one has to toe the liberal line; to depart from the orthodoxy, is to be shunned.

Libertarians and conservatives are fighting to take back our culture and its institutions. We are the rebels in this cultural war. And in cultural wars, angry exchanges mark our conversations because the stakes are high indeed.

Americans have struggled through divisive periods many times since our founding, facing choices that divided families, institutions, and ultimately our nation. Are you a patriot or do you support the crown? Do you support slavery or freedom for all people? What are you willing to die for? Good things have come from these difficult periods and good things will come from this one, as well. In the meantime, things will be a bit uncivil.

Our diverse and divided nation would be less polarized if citizens shared a traditional education. It is hard to bully and mislead a well-informed person with ill-considered theories and wildly false claims—be they from the left, from the right, or from a mediocre middle.

The marketplace of ideas should be a more competitive and vibrant place

than it is today. Ideological dominance, by any school of thought, will not produce an informed citizenry prepared for the demands of a free society. How do we get there?

First, we should teach a traditional, core curriculum that acknowledges but does not dwell on our nation’s faults. Our educational system, from K-12 through college, should highlight the great achievements of the United States and western civilization (unparalleled freedom, creativity, and prosperity). Currently, the United States is denigrated and compared unfavorably to other cultures. No wonder so many Americans are ill-informed. This distortion of history must stop. We must insist that academia practice real diversity—the diversity of ideas.

Second, we should abandon the journalistic pretense of “balance” or “non-partisanship” by all media outlets. Let them openly declare their point of view and compete for the hearts and minds of Minnesotans. Moreover, conservatives have to stop whining and fuming about media bias and start their own newspaper. The *Star Tribune* of Minneapolis does not represent most Minnesotans, and no amount of complaining will change that fact.

Cable, talk radio, and the Internet have got the “old media” on the run. Fox News has created competition for ideas by identifying itself as aggressively “conservative.” Other TV cable channels now offer conservative commentators because it brings in viewers. Let’s encourage Hubbard Broadcasting to duplicate its talk-radio success by

following Fox's lead with its local news station, KSTP-TV.

Third, support for think tanks and other non-profit educational organizations is crucial. The published symposia and speaker events offered by Center of the American Experiment and other organizations have an important impact on policy in Minnesota. The Federalist Society, which I run in Minnesota, offers legal policy debates that are very civilized. Our guest speakers are treated with the utmost honor and respect.

Which brings me to my final point—how we treat one each another. The front lines of this cultural war are not for the faint hearted. But we must wage this war with honor. As St. Paul admonished us in Romans,

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge, I will repay," says the Lord....Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."

Kimberly Crockett is executive director of the Minnesota Lawyers Chapter of the Federalist Society and member of the Deephaven City Council.

Consider the Alternative

Dick Day

People who know me would be surprised to hear that I, who live and breathe politics, don't look forward to the evening news these days. I've had my fill of the angry rhetoric of so many

of our fellow Americans who can't find a single thing right with our country and of the insults and lies of the Democratic candidates for president. It's my guess that most voters are tuning out the brazen, persistent, and shameless disrespect that is showered on George Bush.

I also think I would have the decency, if ten Republicans were running against a Democratic president, to be embarrassed by these tactics and rhetoric. That being said, however, I do understand that this level of coarseness in the present climate makes perfect sense and is even vital to our national debates.

The Fox Network ran a clip recently of the senior George Bush explaining that we're in the middle of a contest to be the most outrageous. In order to capture the attention of an electorate that is on information overload, Democrats and others who want to be heard must make evermore bizarre, shocking claims to break through the noise. Critical remarks by Ted Kennedy and Madeline Albright about the war in Iraq and decidedly uncharitable remarks about Rush Limbaugh's difficulties are an unfortunate reflection of the way we are forced to do business these days. Candidates and what we now call "stakeholders" are desperate to find new ways to separate themselves from the other models in the showroom.

It really isn't so different from many other times in our history when the stakes were high; a presidential election simply exacerbates the problem. It's sad but true that good manners and

humility rarely win higher office, and, most certainly, mediocrity won't win a presidency.

Democrats have always run on personal attacks and nasty, underhanded tactics, rather than on issues. For one, here's an infuriating trick Democrats use that's right out of Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*: ridicule. How often have you watched a political talk show during which a Democrat smirked and laughed out loud while the Republican spoke? It's effective because it disarms and distracts the speaker, and that's what it's all about.

Incivility in politics may be the sign of a strong, healthy democracy; it's the acceptable way we compete for power and control. We are doing what we can, within our brilliantly crafted system, to achieve our goals. Consider the alternative: filling up an ambulance with explosives and driving into a Red Cross center.

Dick Day, a Republican from Owatonna, is minority leader of the Minnesota Senate.

Hoping for the Best, Preparing to Believe the Worst

Mark Dayton

The terms of political engagement in this country have seldom appealed to the fair-minded or faint-hearted. President George Washington chose retirement over a third term, partly to stifle increasing cries of "dictator," accompanied by "blasphemer" and "horse beater!" He was further distraught that a detractor had published "British war

documents"—later proven forgeries—which purported to reveal his scheme to betray the country during the Revolutionary War, until preempted by Benedict Arnold.

Feeling overpressured and underappreciated, he lamented, "No government can be well administered without powers . . . yet the instant these are delegated, although those entrusted with administration are no more than the creatures of the people, they are from the moment they receive it, set down as tyrants."

Over two hundred years later, that dichotomy remains prominent in the American political psyche. Voters elect their fellow citizens—presumably the candidates they most like and trust—to public positions that they (or their predecessors) created for their own benefits; but they instinctively and immediately dislike and distrust the people in those positions. People may hope for the best from their elected officials, but they are more prepared to believe the worst.

That predisposition is often exploited by political opponents and personal enemies, whose intentions are to discredit, disable, defeat, or destroy their opponents. Those operatives and their organizations have become sophisticated, experienced, and deadly. Their favorite tactics are to publicly attack, denounce, or discredit their targets. With sufficient funds, they can fill the gaps in the political calendar with their own public spectacles. Their mood is generally angry and ugly; their tone often harsh and shrill; and their content is usually derogatory and debasing.

So the results of their public forays contribute mostly to the negative side of the political ledger.

Their diatribes often resonate with voters, because they reflect how many people feel. They are more frustrated, cynical, and distrustful now, than I have seen before. They are dissatisfied with their lives and worried about their futures. They have little faith in government's ability to make their circumstances better and much greater concern that it will make conditions worse or increase their taxes.

With an electorate in somber moods during dark and uncertain times, and receiving information designed to make them feel worse, the result is an ominous political atmosphere. At best, it will be difficult to gather public support for anything proactive and positive. At worst, it will become meaner, uglier, and destructive.

It reaches its nadir when truths are overrun by lies. Criticisms and attacks can be extremely hard hitting; yet they retain their integrity if they are truthful. If they are not, the political arena soon becomes a cesspool. The contestants are covered with raw sewage and contaminated by its poisons. Most people watching are revolted by the sights and smells, and they leave. A few sordid souls remain and seem quite at home.

I am disgusted at all the lying I encounter in my work. Like a plague, lies have multiplied so rapidly that truths are becoming the endangered species. I see too many people who have become such skillful liars that they are perfect fools.

The Minnesota Legislature has tried before to establish standards for political discourse, particularly during campaigns, and effective means of enforcement. Minnesota's county attorneys recently reported that those procedures are being abused by the very people the law is supposed to restrain. I defer to the legislators and county attorneys on the specific changes needed. But the law should be perfectly clear and absolutely inviolable. Liars will lose. Imperfect as our politics are (especially our politicians), we are blessed with the best system of self-governance ever created anywhere on this planet. We take it for granted, but it is priceless. If we misuse and break it, what will we tell our children?

Mark Dayton, a Democrat, is a U.S. Senator from Minnesota.

Entertainment, Celebrity, and Worldview

Bryan Dowd

For the most part, I do not find the tone of current political discourse in Minnesota distasteful or lacking in civility. The discourse occasionally is sharp and personal, and I believe there are three reasons for that. Two are regrettable, and one is not.

First, Americans seem to place a high value on entertainment in political contests, and we find personal attacks more entertaining than white papers on important policy topics. That's unfortunate, but it's probably unlikely to change.

Second, when campaigns are based on the candidates' celebrity status rather than their policy positions, the response of their opponents is likely to be personal. The same applies to campaigns that focus on who the candidate is not. The California recall election and the race for the Democratic presidential nomination provide good examples. That's also unfortunate, but it seems to be the status quo.

Third, the structure of our government makes the candidates' personalities particularly important. In parliamentary systems, political parties that win elections generally are given power sufficient to carry out their campaign promises and party discipline is strongly enforced. In the U.S. political system, campaign platforms largely are symbolic, party discipline is relatively weak, and politicians who break ranks often are praised for their courage. The resulting political impotence, in conjunction with the usual uncertainties of life, makes it difficult for the electorate to predict what issues will make it to the front burner during the candidate's time in office. So, instead of detailed discussions of specific policies, the electorate seeks a sense of the candidate's general disposition toward issues—their "worldview." And worldviews are intensely personal because they embody the fundamental, axiomatic beliefs that shape a person's opinions about everything else.

Worldviews are characterized by answers to questions such as, "Is the material world all there is? Was the creation of the universe and life on our planet purposeless or purposeful? Are

we, including our most powerful leaders, accountable to a higher authority? Is there objective, transcendent truth, or just personal opinion? Are any moral standards universal, or are they merely cultural constructions or expressions of power? Do human beings derive their worth solely from the groups to which they belong, or is there an unassailable source of value for every human life? Is there evil in the world, and if so, what is its nature and source and how should we respond to it? Are human beings inherently limited in their intellectual and moral capacities, or can leaders with superior intellectual and moral capacities be identified or trained, and then given unconstrained power over their fellow citizens?"

The answers to these questions also are of utmost political importance. The Nazis' answers killed 6 million Jews. The answers provided by Communist regimes worldwide killed 100 million of their own citizens in fifty years. The answers provided by Americans of my generation have killed 40 million of their offspring in thirty years.

These horrific events are not accidents, but the logical, rational application of specific, personal worldviews that are represented enthusiastically and without apology or regret in today's policy debates. Proponents of opposing worldviews who realize what's at stake are not inclined toward congenial chats or the assumption of good intentions on the part of their opponents, and given recent history, there is some justification for that. For that reason, I don't expect the tone of political discourse to change in the near term,

barring some unusual event. The unusual event most likely to produce change would be a national catastrophe that united the American people, perhaps in opposition to a common enemy. There were vestiges of that unity after 9/11, but one would be hard pressed to find evidence of it today. Of course, national catastrophes of that magnitude are pretty risky events. Given the reaction to the Iraq war by most of the mass media, just imagine what would happen if we had to mount a war against radical Islam on the scale of World War II that lasted years and claimed hundreds of thousands of American lives. The tone of our local political discourse might change, but whether it did would be the least of our worries.

Bryan Dowd is professor and director of graduate studies in the Division of Health Services Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota.

Political Debate Isn't Uglier, It's More Balanced

Ron Eibensteiner

Editorial pages across the state have been gnashing their teeth lately over the state of political discourse in Minnesota. The way they tell it, "Minnesota nice" is about to give way to New York style in-your-face, rough-and-tumble politics.

Minnesotans, however, can breathe easy. Newspaper editors are engaging in the kind of Chicken Little hyperbole that helps them sell papers. Contrary to all their teeth gnashing, the

political debate in Minnesota has not become uglier, it has simply become more balanced.

Through much of the last century, the DFL, led by the likes of Humphrey, Wellstone, and Mondale, dominated Minnesota politics. Now that domination has waned and Minnesotans have entrusted the reins of state government and much of their representation in Washington to Republicans.

As recently as 1992, the Minnesota House of Representatives was dominated by the DFL, which had eighty-seven members to the GOP's forty-seven. In 2002, those numbers flip-flopped, with eighty-one GOP members and fifty-three DFLers. In 1992, only 37.5 percent of Minnesotans voted for the Republican presidential candidate. In the 2000 election, that number shot up to nearly 46 percent. Republicans also dominate the ranks of Minnesota constitutional officers and enjoy an even split of the Minnesota congressional delegation.

The new political reality has fed the perception that the debate is "uglier" by increasing the volume of that debate and by agitating a DFL Party that is not used to having its political dominance challenged.

While Republicans enjoyed some political success over the last forty years, the state's political culture has remained predominantly Democrat. If the state faced a budget shortfall in the past, the debate was never over whether to raise taxes, but rather over how much to raise taxes.

Recently, however, starting with the "give it back" rallies of the '90s and

culminating this year with Gov. Tim Pawlenty's commitment to fiscal accountability, the debate shifted from how much to raise taxes to whether taxes should be raised at all. Suddenly Minnesota has two viable and impassioned parties debating the issue from diametrically opposed positions, which has increased the volume of the political debate.

Republicans are impassioned in our belief that free markets, limited government, and strong private institutions are key to unleashing human potential, thereby strengthening our state and nation. My friends in the DFL just as passionately hold the opposite view—that government is the best solution to most of our challenges.

While some view the discourse surrounding our sincere differences to be “ugly” or “mean-spirited,” I view it as a function of the first rigorous and spirited debate about meaningful issues that impact the lives of average Minnesotans and future generations.

The new balance in the political debate has also ended the DFL's dominance. And like a wild animal that has had its dominance challenged, its instinct has been to attack.

After Minnesotans resoundingly rejected their candidates in 2002 and their budget to increase taxes in 2003, DFL officials began attacking the character of Republican elected officials. Democrat leaders held news conferences calling for investigations into “wrongdoings,” when none had taken place. The low point came when, with no evidence whatsoever, DFL Attorney General Mike Hatch insinuated

that the governor cheated on his taxes.

Yet before too long, DFL officials again found themselves in new territory. Republicans did not back down. Instead, we fought back and defended our elected officials and pointed out the hypocrisy of the DFL officials making these irresponsible and outrageous charges. We did not fight back out of malice. We fought back because we will not allow the DFL's petty attacks to distract voters away from the message and agenda that we believe will improve the lives of all Minnesotans.

While this may sound a bit conventional, the fact of the matter is that politics is by definition confrontational—especially when the debate is balanced and the stakes are high.

If members of the media are still concerned about the “ugly” tone that the debate has taken, they can take solace in the fact that political discourse is actually more civilized than it has been in the past. After all, I cannot imagine that Gov. Tim Pawlenty will challenge Mike Hatch to a public duel or that Sen. John Hottinger will be beating Speaker Steve Sviggum over the head with a cane on the floor of the house anytime soon.

Ron Eibensteiner is state chair of the Republican Party of Minnesota.

Looking for the New Consensus

Kent E. Eklund

History will decide whether the current level of civility in public discourse

is unique to this age, or part of a cycle. Ted Halstead of the New America Foundation makes a compelling case that the United States is in its fourth social transformation. The foundations of the New Deal—domestic programs—and the Cold War—international dominance—are gone. What is not clear is what the new social order or social contract will become. In such times, everything appears in a great state of flux and confusion. Competing models for the future are vigorously presented with no consensus emerging. So, a first interesting question is whether this current state of public discourse is merely a reflection of confusing times that will pass as we sort out a new vision for the American social contract. One could make a parallel argument in Minnesota: the social contract built around the Minnesota Miracle has run its thirty-year course and a new consensus has not emerged.

Even with this historical footnote, two further factors contribute to the reduction in political civility. The first is the proliferation of media outlets. New communications technologies have led to multiple vehicles, often split along very narrow political agendas. 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. The result is that the political discourse rises to new levels of

intensity pursued by zealots with increasingly narrow agendas.

These multiple media outlets create the second issue: the rise in the intensity of political discourse. Democracy always has difficulty dealing with intensity. In the 1980s, the term the “silent majority” was coined and political scientists developed models around decisions based on coalitions of intense minorities who were willing to expend considerable political capital at the expense of more quiescent majorities. The intense minorities of any political agenda can exercise their political power precisely because their agendas are small and focused. Their ability to mobilize their bases of support depends on intense political rhetoric that cares little for civility.

This combination of social transformation, the absence of a unifying vision or social compact, the availability of narrow media outlets, and the presence of narrow interests filling small policy niches leads to a rhetoric that can be dominated by a lack of civility. Civility is to no one’s advantage in such a world.

Minnesota has a classic example of the application of these principles in its current party system. Political parties have traditionally attempted to smooth the edges of the zealots by forging coalitions more in the middle. Our two parties have been co-opted by a process that rewards intensity—the precinct caucus system. Moderates are by definition less intense. Caucuses occur so early in the election cycle that

the left in the DFL and the right in the GOP more easily mobilize their more intense and zealous cohorts than the less intense middle. By the end of the caucus evening, the die is cast for both parties to proceed through the convention rewarding their true believers. The middle either attaches late in the process (at primaries), or finds a middle alternative (the election of the Independence Party's candidate for governor in 1998), or ceases to participate. As both parties represent the left or right of the political spectrum, their discourse becomes more intense and less civil. This discourse further alienates the broad middle. Efforts to change the system are routinely defeated. No one gives up political power voluntarily.

So, is political discourse less civil? Yes. Is this a momentary phenomenon fed by the confusion of a broader social transformation and the uncertainty that entails? I hope so. Can short-term fixes in the caucus system or media changes improve the rhetoric? Probably not. The reintroduction of civility depends on the emergence of a new consensus on the social paradigm and the vision for this country and state that will provide the bounds for political discourse. And this new paradigm is likely to emerge from the current more high-pitched debate when the broad middle has had enough and develops a new social contract.

Kent E. Eklund is president of the Fairview Foundation.

Vicious Cycles of Action and Revenge

Amitai Etzioni

The problem we face is familiar to all of us who study conflict. All conflicts—even wars—are limited by some rules. But participants can get short-term advantage by stretching the rules, interpreting them in ways that are favorable to their side. This leads others to do the same, weakening the rules and resulting in loss for all concerned. In the best of all worlds, participants in conflicts lean backward and do not even go close to the line, out of respect for the rules.

We find ourselves in a situation in which parties are stretching the rules and retaliating. In each case, one side sees the merits of its moves and decries those of the other. We saw it when Richard Nixon was hounded from the presidency and when Bill Clinton was impeached. We see it each time a presidential appointment—a judge, an ambassador, a cabinet member—is blocked. We saw it when Trent Lott resigned as U.S. House speaker. We saw it when Gray Davis was recalled from the California governorship. The recent redistricting in Texas came just two years after the last one, even though some interpretations say a ten-year waiting period is called for.

The challenge is to find ways to stop the vicious cycles of action and revenge. The best way would be an informal understanding between both parties to refrain from stretching the rules from here on. Such an understanding could be reached and enforced

only through a public groundswell (energized by the media) demanding such a return to civility. Unfortunately, this is very unlikely to happen because the public is rarely aroused by procedural issues and when it is, it tends to quickly move on to other issues.

The second approach is to tighten the rules themselves. The U.S. Senate could make it harder to block a presidential nominee. Courts could set a very high bar for removing an elected official from office. Many more such changes can be imagined. All require at least some kind of groundswell by the electorate and the media, because such changes would initially disadvantage one side, although in the long run they would benefit all in public office and the people.

Amitai Etzioni, a sociologist, has taught at Columbia, George Washington, and Harvard universities.

Whatever Happened to Minnesota Nice Politics?

Lew Freeman

We have lost our “Minnesota nice,” at least in the body politic.

Today’s political climate could best be described as “politico-tainment”—a merger of politics and entertainment. For some time I have lamented the ominous trend in American society of turning every aspect and institution of our society into entertainment. The “news” has become “info-tainment.” The courts have become another source of entertainment—witness

“Court TV.” And of course there is “televangelism,” which in many instances turns our churches and religion into mere entertainment. So it is with today’s politics.

In Minnesota, the electoral value of this phenomenon has been recognized and exploited by both our major political parties. They understand that the media thrives on conflict and that conflict has both entertainment and political value. Over the past few years we’ve witnessed meretricious charges and countercharges of legal and ethical lapses hurled between the parties. The state attorney general’s office regularly accuses the governor’s office of improprieties. In some instance, legal charges have been filed and indictments handed down. These charges and countercharges have by design created conflict and grabbed the headlines. They’ve obfuscated and obscured any discussion or discourse on real policy issues and differences. They also have the effect of reducing the voters’ choice to one of “good guys” and “bad guys.”

Framing the voters’ choice as good guys versus bad guys invariably leads to distortions and negative campaigns dominated by vicious attack ads. The ultimate goal is to energize “the base” or polarize the electorate, and to convince enough of the remainder of the electorate that the political opponent is a really bad person and not fit to hold public office, which is rarely the case. We are hit with a barrage of attack ads that attempt to entertain us and to reinforce these invented negative images of the political opponent.

Candidates create “photo ops” that entertain us and reinforce their positive image, while assiduously avoiding any serious debate on policy issues.

This lack of discussion of substantive policy issues is destructive. Determining the commonweal requires a meaningful debate and making a collective decision among competing ideas and policy approaches. Campaigns and even legislative sessions are far more like shouting matches between kids than a contest of ideas between serious adults.

In order to be healthy and to thrive, the body politic requires serious people offering themselves as candidates and their ideas for public scrutiny and debate. In Minnesota, where the politics of personal destruction prevails and is practiced with malice aforethought, many serious and capable people will not participate. Quality of life issues, such as the social safety net, the environment, and access to affordable health care, receive little attention if they're discussed at all.

If democracy is to thrive and if we're to maintain the “good life” in Minnesota, this political climate must change. This change will begin when those who have been driven from the political process recognize an old political adage: all power lies in the hands of the people. They need to get involved in the process—attend precinct caucuses; require all candidates to state their positions on the issues important to them; support and vote for candidates who are willing to take principled positions on the issues—even those with whom they

may disagree; vote in primary and general elections; and refuse to vote for candidates who run (whose supporters run) negative campaigns or attack ads.

Ultimately Minnesota will have the kind of government and kind of political climate that a majority of Minnesotans is willing to stand up for and demand. It's an open question whether we will need to experience further neglect of quality-of-life issues and the resulting diminishment of the good life in Minnesota before such a citizens' uprising will occur.

Lew Freeman is host of a Sunday morning talk show on KSTP-AM.

The Roots of Political Incivility

Patrick Garry

Politics is a fairly accurate barometer of society. When John F. Kennedy, with his young, vibrant wife beside him, promised to lead America to a New Frontier, he connected to an emerging mood in the country. When Ronald Reagan stood tall and promised to make America proud, he expressed a deep, national yearning. And when Bill Clinton played his saxophone and appeared on MTV, he reflected a new direction popular culture had taken. So when we speak of civility in American politics, what we really need to look at is civility in American culture.

Ever since the 1960s, American culture has been drifting in a more adversarial and confrontational direction. When the New Left of the '60s condemned anything connected with

“the establishment,” when as part of its anti-war crusade it declared war on America’s leaders and institutions, when it boasted that it would never trust anyone over thirty, it permanently changed the course of American culture. Consequently, there is now little trust of anyone—over thirty or under thirty.

Popular culture has reflected this adversarial, confrontational mood. Rap music is raw in its anger and hate. Movies are increasingly violent. The recent craze of reality programming on television incorporates a combative, “in your face” attitude. Even the political programs on television are set in a kind of dual-to-the-death scenario: *Hardball*, *McLaughlin Group*, and *At Large with Geraldo Rivera*. And not surprisingly, politics has followed suit.

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 late 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. Citizenship and patriotism have been attacked not only as a farce, but as a means of oppressing minorities.

The message on the left is: if you are a person of color, of non-male gender, of non-Western culture, of unusual tastes or inclinations, of less than wealthy means, then America is out to exploit you. On the left, there is no greater danger to the world than a strong and activist America.

The lack of civility in politics is shown not just by the slurs and slanders that are thrown at political opponents, but by the continual warfare that seems to prevail in the political arena. At one time, the country’s engagement in foreign military conflict brought a corresponding political peace treaty at home. But not now. Even as American troops were fighting Saddam’s regime in Iraq, Democrats were calling for a regime change at home. Even as America is fighting a war on terror, Democrats are fighting their own war, trying to bloody President Bush with accusations that someone in the White House may have leaked to the press the name of a CIA operative. Indeed, many on the left seem to hate Attorney General John Ashcroft more than they hate Osama bin Laden.

Perhaps politics in America has become so virulent because it is the only code of belief remaining for many people. After decades of liberal attacks on any sense of shared customs or morals or religious beliefs, the only defining code of values or ideological identity is politics. In a sense, politics and political agendas have become the left’s civil religion. But in its cultural war on religion and traditional morality, the left has struck a blow at what

many conservatives feel is a sacred sphere, immune from political assault; and this blow has not surprisingly prompted an intense reaction from those seeking to defend their religious values. The battle between pro-choice and pro-life, for instance, has always been about more than abortion—it has been a struggle over the very presence of religious and moral values in America, a struggle that is certainly bound to bring a certain incivility to politics.

Politics does not exist in isolation. It cannot be made civil if society is going in the opposite direction. But no change is irreversible; and the divisiveness will begin to fade away when voters start asking, “What unites us?” rather than, “What divides us?”

Patrick Garry is a professor of law at the University of South Dakota Law School.

Judaism and Civil Discourse

Jonathan Ginsburg

As a rabbi, the best thing that I can offer is some ideas from Jewish tradition about the importance of civility while disagreeing.

One of the common Jewish beliefs can be in essence viewed through the very first chapter of the Bible, which teaches us that God created one person to start with. Our sages have taught us that this means no one can feel or claim to be better than another. The most critical verse says we’re all made “in God’s image”—every human being. We have to treat our political opponents with the respect to which

they’re entitled because they’re made in God’s image.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great rabbinic scholars and religious figures of the twentieth century, wrote a prayer that is germane to our discussion. Substitute the phrase “political party” for “religion,” we have a good Jewish response to the question at hand. The prayer would read, in part,

No political party is an island. There is no monopoly in holiness. . . . No political party is an island. We share the kinship of humanity—the capacity for compassion . . . the creation of one Adam promotes peace. No one can claim my ancestry is nobler than yours. There is no monopoly in holiness. There is no truth without humility. We are diverse in our devotion and commitment. We must unite in working now for the sovereignty in God. There can be disagreement without disrespect. Should we hope for each other’s failure, or should we pray for each other’s welfare? Let mutual concern replace remnants of mutual contempt as we share the precarious position of being human.

Our Oral Law, from the seminal work of the Talmud from 2,000 years ago, has great wisdom for this question. The most important teaching is the following: “A controversy for heaven’s sake will have lasting value, but a controversy not for heaven’s sake will not endure.”

What is an example of a controversy that is “for heaven’s sake”? Those between Hillel and Shemai, (great Talmudic sages who debated the merits of the application of God’s will, but

viewed each other with respect because they understood that each was earnestly attempting to do his best to help the world). A controversy not for heaven's sake would be the rebellion of Korach (in the Book of Numbers in the Bible) who protested Moses's leadership only for personal gain.) Every page of the Talmud has controversies and disagreements among our ancient sages as to how best apply God's will. Controversy and disagreement are not bad, as long as the goal of both parties is to advance the welfare of the society, and not personal gain.

Consider this Talmudic guidance:

- When you assess people, tip the balance in their favor.
- Those who serve on behalf of the community should do so for heaven's sake.
- Be not sure of yourself till the day of your death.
- Pray for the welfare of the government for if people were not in awe that they would swallow each other alive.
- It is wise to learn from everyone.
- Who is honored? One who honors all people.
- The dignity of your students should be as precious to you as your own. The dignity of your colleagues should be as precious to you as your reverence for your teacher. Your reverence for your teacher should be as great as your reverence for God.

I'm not sure that the explanation that because people are fighting over moral issues, the stakes are higher, justifies the nastiness that's going on. The main thing that distinguishes us from beasts

is our rational mind. It's critical to assume that the people with whom one disagrees are of goodwill, and want to serve the public interest, unless one discovers that one's opponent is actually a contemptible person or the goal is not to advance righteousness, justice, or holiness.

Debate is considered healthy in the Jewish tradition, but respectful debate. People simply need to discipline themselves to recognize the humanity in their political opponents and treat them with the respect they deserve. Many of the issues being debated are deeply felt and critically important. The critical aspect of this is not to demonize those with whom we disagree, but disagree without being disagreeable. Even when an opponent's position is dangerous or immoral, rational discourse and logical argument are the best choice, as hard as it is sometimes.

Rabbi Jonathan Ginsburg is senior rabbi of Temple of Aaron in St. Paul.

The Human Factor

Anders Gyllenhaal

The other day, an early morning caller upset over some development in the news left a long, anonymous voice-mail message, brimming with anger to the point of profanity. When he called back later to add, I suspect, a few more expletives, I was back at the desk and picked up the phone. His whole demeanor changed. He chose his words with some care, made a thoughtful

argument, and even threw in a few pleasantries before we hung up.

One of the advantages of this job is that it comes with a pipeline of opinions, reactions, and arguments from a cross section of Minnesotans that flow into the office in phone calls, e-mail, letters, and faxes. From where I sit, there can be no question the level of civility has diminished in recent years.

A long list of forces probably contributes to the trend. They include the sharply divided political landscape, the culture wars that have broken out over so many topics, the tit-for-tat impact of all this shrill talk, the advantages some leaders in government, the arts, and the media see in their negativity.

For the sake of this discussion, though, I'd focus on one factor that doesn't get enough recognition: The changes in technology, from the anonymity of the Internet to the arms-length nature of voice mail, that seem to encourage the worst in many of us.

When people don't have to stand behind their comments or arguments, the tone of voice changes, the volume goes up and civility tends to go out the window. You can see it every day in chat rooms, with e-mail, on talk radio, in voice mails. More than coincidence is at work in the fact that civility has diminished at the same time as these advances have spread to homes and offices.

This isn't to blame the technology as much as to wonder about how we use it. I can't count the number of times that office feuds have erupted because people used messages to com-

municate rather than walk across the room to talk face to face. And like that caller whose tone changes when confronted with an actual person, some of the nastiest folks calm down quickly when you begin to talk things out.

These are themes that can apply to the media in general. The more people have to attach their names and faces to what they have to say, the more they tend to think things through, choose words more carefully and build arguments that might persuade rather than infuriate.

In the end, the true victim of all this loose and bitter talk is the opportunity to reach an understanding, to be persuasive and to be persuaded. Our society is based on the notion that people with a broad mix of opinions can come together and reach mutual decisions.

At a time when many parts of the country, including Minnesota, have a greater balance of political opinions than ever before, this is a good time to promote exchange. Some of the forces that work against civility may seem beyond our control. But this is one place where we all could do our part.

Anders Gyllenhaal is editor of the Minneapolis-based Star Tribune.

A House Divided

John Hottinger

Lincoln said, "A house divided cannot stand." This country is sharply divided. We need leaders who can close the divides without compromising the passionate conflict of ideas that strengthens us.

The marketplace of ideas is a hallmark of democracy. Clashes of visions crystallize policy and provide options for voters. Ideas, rigorously debated in the public forum, lead to innovation in problem-solving. Therein should lie the debate, in the worthiness and application of ideas.

But, too often, the debate lies elsewhere. Policy opponents are characterized as personal enemies who not only disagree, but do so from evil motive. Supporters of the “other side” are not only incorrect, but valueless, devoid of insight and intelligence, with destructive intentions.

In Minnesota, the culture of reasoned debate has recently been altered to reflect a winner-take-all competition for supremacy at all costs. It’s apparent in legislative campaigns that sink to degrading personal attacks and in the ascendancy of special interests that rely on acrid misrepresentations of differing perspectives. It’s seen in a hostile environment of procedural abuse and uncompromising attitudes at the State Capitol where rigid votes trump reasoned judgment.

This lack of civility has a discouraging effect. When political candidates reserve their strongest initiatives for negative volleys, the clearest message to the public is that all politicians are untrustworthy. As a result, too many citizens withdraw from voting and turn governance over to the rabid advocates of single interests who would capsize the ship of state rather than accept something short of absolute victory.

So, what to do? Most elected officials have a sense of duty and civic

engagement. They need to use the human interaction skills that got them elected and reach the standard of public reflection their constituents deserve.

A short platform for renewed civil civic engagement would include:

- Building respect for the institutions and obligations of governing. Campaigning and governing are different functions. Once elected, an official has a responsibility to respect our democratic institutions. There is a reason for the civility expected in public debate and a connection between process and substance. Victories obtained through abuse of our structures result in long-term disintegration of our values. To victors may the spoils go, but also the responsibilities of fulfilling promises, pursuing the public interest, and honoring our democratic principles.
- Redefining “victory” by respecting compromise. On issues of singularly conflicting values, compromise may be unacceptable. But on most of the issues involved in governance, a consensus building process is necessary and appropriate. The most effective governance is often based on bringing together diverse views into a commonly accepted outcome.
- Resisting the forces of negativism. A colleague told me that his frustration with special interests that “helped” in his campaign through negative advertising was that he lost the ability to frame his own issues and his own personality.

Candidates need to take control of their own legacy by expressing disdain of negative “support” publicly. Candidates who think they are insulated from negative actions on their behalf are wrong. They become part of the negative public perception of politicians.

- Getting to know each other. Years ago the governance function was one of pitched battle during the day and social camaraderie at night. Elected officials and other captives of the Capitol mingled and got to know each other. 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. We need to reopen opportunities to see the human sides of our policy adversaries. The current gift-ban law, initiated to stop the flow of special-interest favors, needs to be changed to permit the receptions open to all legislators in order to meet their constituents and each other. Some have suggested group legislative get-togethers to share a meal and a program of fun (as opposed to legislative) entertainment. These opportunities to interact need to be reclaimed if we are to restore civility.

Civility is the prerequisite for representative government because it is the tone that encourages responsible public

engagement. Elected officials serve their constituents well when we recognize that our final success is tied to our recognition of that reality.

John Hottinger, a DFLer, is a Minnesota state senator from St. Peter.

In Search of Gracious Losers

Sarah Janecek

The increasing lack of civility in our political dialogue directly corresponds to the increasing number of sore losers. What’s wrong with our politics is that we’re having elections that—for many in the losing party—aren’t considered final.

Don’t like the outcome? Dispute the result. Paint the winner as illegitimate. Perpetuate that sense of illegitimacy every time you want to pick a public policy fight with the winner.

The illegitimacy assault was launched on two fronts in the 2000 presidential election. The first was the fact that George Bush became the third person to become president by losing the popular vote while winning in the Electoral College. Yet, before the Florida fiasco in 2000, nary a Democrat was publicly questioning the legitimacy of our Electoral College system. The rules of the game were only questioned afterward. The second was what happened in Florida. Under every scheme concocted by the Al Gore campaign to recount the Florida vote, Bush won the simple popular vote, putting Florida’s twenty-five electoral votes in the Bush camp. Yet, after all that squinting at hanging chads, the

hand-recounting of minivans full of paper ballots, and the arguing between teams of the nation's super lawyers, the Democrats were able to exploit the notion that the Florida vote was never concretely decided. That sentiment is brilliantly captured in the new bumper sticker, "Redefeat George Bush."

In 2002, Minnesota lost its incumbent and nationally recognized liberal Sen. Paul Wellstone in a tragic plane crash thirteen days before he was to face Republican Norm Coleman in perhaps the hottest U.S. Senate race in the country. In his book *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them*, left-leaning comedian and author Al Franken paints the Republicans as the only ones who immediately started figuring out what to do next. Franken, who doesn't live in Minnesota, completely ignores the fact that Democrats were doing the same thing. The day after Wellstone died, anybody who read a newspaper in Minnesota knew the fix was in for former Vice President Walter Mondale to be the replacement candidate. Mondale was endorsed the day after the infamous Wellstone "memorial- turned-rally."

In that thirteen days between Wellstone's death and the general election, not a single Democrat suggested the idea that the election should be postponed. Only after Coleman won did Democrats cry foul. In an attempt to paint Coleman as some accidental senator, Democrats still argue that Wellstone would have won if he had lived. Worse, other Minnesota Democrats who lost in 2002 in Minnesota attribute their losses to what happened

in the U.S. Senate race. Their losses somehow weren't real; their opponents somehow didn't win.

Finally, in 2003, the successful recall election in California furthers the notion that established general elections aren't final outcomes. Officeholders across the country are being challenged in recount efforts by losing parties.

There used to be a time when Democrats and Republicans would fight like hell during the campaign, but on election night, losers gave gracious concession speeches. "Aftermath" meetings were held to figure out how to win the next election. Now our politics has devolved to perpetual sour grapes and attempts to smear the legitimacy of the winners.

All this leaves the winners with enormous public relations problems in trying to govern. And, that makes for bad government for all of us.

Sarah Janecek is co-editor of the newsletter Politics in Minnesota and publishes a legislative directory.

Don't Abuse the Gift of Public Service

Ember Reichgott Junge

I'm glad not to be in the Minnesota Legislature anymore. While I miss the people, I don't miss the partisan games. I don't miss the shift from legislative problem-solving to legislative "winning" at all costs. This gradual shift over the last five years has been detrimental to the institution and demeaning to the public.

“Winner take all” philosophies score points with special-interest groups, but they lose trust of the general public. Blatant power grabs like Texas Republicans redrawing the court-approved redistricting map, Florida legislators debating the fate of a woman’s life without a committee fact-finding hearing, or passage of major gun policy legislation in Minnesota without opportunity to amend a word—lock the public and legislators who represent them out of the process.

With a culture of extremism in state and federal policy-making, the political “win” trumps reasonable, practical policy. The middle, centrist ground is ignored. Republican conservatives of twenty years ago now look moderate. Democrats have forgotten the successful lessons from President Clinton’s centrism.

I was struck by the mix of attendees for Republican Gov. Al Quie’s recent eightieth birthday party. The people in the room may not all have shared the governor’s views, but they actually liked each other. In those days they could sit around a table at the state capitol and respectfully work toward policy solutions that all could uphold. DFL Gov. Rudy Perpich and Republican Gov. Arne Carlson also brought legislators together, particularly on education and health care reforms. After the political rhetoric, people got down to business, and the common good was a prevailing goal.

Those days are gone. Negative, divisive interest-group pressure puts legislators in policy straitjackets before

they get to the Capitol. Well-intended changes tightening legislative reception and “gift” laws mean few opportunities for legislators to know each other as human rather than partisan beings. Gov. Jesse Ventura’s election win by running against government was not lost on the public.

How do we bring back civility? Here are observations of just one DFLer who served in Minnesota Senate leadership over a decade.

- Look for the next right answer. Policy-making is not about my right answer or your wrong answer. It is about bringing people together to find the next right answer. That search unlocks creativity and frees us from fear of political fallout for merely generating ideas. Governor Ventura’s us-versus-them approach did significant damage to relations at the Capitol. His golden opportunity to bring people together with innovative, centrist solutions was lost. Instead, policy became all about winning and losing and who takes credit. Making political points was more important than finding the next right answer.
- Move toward the center, not away from it. The us-versus-them battles during Ventura’s tenure have evolved into a winner-take-all mentality where compromise is seen as a sign of weakness. Extreme interest groups allied with both Democrat and Republican parties are unwilling to allow legislators flexibility to explore creative solutions. How can you find good solutions

when you can't even talk compromise? Until legislators abandon the requisite campaign "pledges," extreme politics by the party in power will prevail. When was the last time legislators were asked to sign a pledge to use their good judgment in policy-making based on objective information and research?

- Know my fellow legislator. Nothing replaces relationships in legislative policy-making. Legislators talk in their legislative caucuses, but they have few open and politically safe forums. Could this be a role for the Citizens League or Center of the American Experiment?
- Play by the rules. Knowledge of legislative rules is a powerful tool. The most skilled legislators know when and how to use them, and how to abuse them. Rules are being manipulated like never before to push through ideological legislation. When rules are ignored, civility is forgotten. A first step to turning things around is to live by the rules that have served Minnesota legislative institutions well over many years.

Public service is a gift. To the extent that political extremism trumps good public policy, we abuse that privilege. Bright and creative people won't make the sacrifices to serve. And Minnesotans will lose.

Former DFL Senate assistant majority leader Ember Reichgott Junge is a lawyer, writer, radio host, and KSTP political analyst.

It's Not That Bad, But It Could Be Better

Mary Kiffmeyer

Every election cycle since I've been involved in politics, there have been claims that the tone of politics is becoming less civil. I think it's not that bad, but it could be better.

I don't think the tone of politics actually has changed all that much over the years, but the focus on the tone definitely has increased. A couple of fundamental changes probably have led to this.

First, our system of campaign finance restrictions channels candidates into low-key paid campaign activities and high-impact earned media stunts. Controversy and a rancorous tone reign in this environment. The restrictions are so tight in legislative races and in most statewide races that there is little opportunity to use the biggest media outlet, television. Even for campaigns that can afford television advertising, the amount of time a candidate is able to purchase allows discussion of only a few issues and at a shallow level.

Because it is so difficult to have an advertising impact with so little money, candidates can focus a great deal on policy issues and speak in a civil tone, but hardly anyone hears about it. Political campaign staffers try mightily, and often to no avail, to get positive coverage for their candidates. At the same time, a single media stunt or wild claim against one's opponent

can garner free media attention and overpower all paid media in a campaign, making it look like the principal tactic of a campaign.

Second, we now live in a media environment where titillating sound bites are more prevalent than policy statements. In this environment, it is easier to get media attention for lobbing a barb at one's opponent than for putting forth a concise policy position.

Invariably the media play up the most controversial aspects of every story. It means that even the smallest disagreements are magnified into battle-like descriptions in the news. In reality, there's typically great cooperation among public officials and a lot of solid policy issues are discussed and resolved. Yet the headlines typically don't reflect it.

Finally, the very topic of "tone" makes for an easy media story. It is easy for the media to cover the "horse race" aspects of an election or the "tone" of a legislative session rather than policy matters. Yet just because we hear more about the horse race and the tone doesn't mean that politics has really changed all that much from years ago.

In short, I think the media portrayal of campaigns and politics bears little resemblance to the reality. Of course, some would say that from the public's perspective, the media portrayal is reality.

To the extent that this is true, I think the media need to do a better job. I am concerned that some people may be dissuaded from becoming involved in politics, and I have a couple of suggestions to make the situation better.

When I worked as a small-town newspaper reporter, people told me they just want the facts about happenings in the public policy realm, without commentary and without distractions. It is my heartfelt conviction that this is what people deserve from the media—I feel like this is what we public officials deserve, too. The media should refrain from reporting about the irrelevant distractions and focus on the issues.

Study after study has shown that voters want simple, easy-to-digest information. This suggests that in debates, for example, there should be more questions requiring "yes" and "no" and one-word answers, similar to many special-interest groups' voter guides. Yet media debate organizers invariably create formats that allow candidates to make long, boring, unspecific statements that are wholly unsatisfying for voters. The media have a responsibility in an environment of tight campaign finance restrictions to offer the kind and format of information that voters seek.

Finally, campaigns and politicians could help by conducting themselves with mutual respect for everyone involved and by seeking innovative ways to communicate relevant information in our modern, fast-paced media environment.

It's not that bad, but it could be better.

Mary Kiffmeyer, a Republican, is Minnesota's twentieth secretary of state and president of the National Association of Secretaries of State.

It's Becoming Downright Dangerous

John Kline

Minnesotans are nice—except maybe when it comes to politics. Our universally accepted identity seems to be accompanied by this unspoken caveat. The contentious nature that defines our political climate is nothing new, but its consequences are increasingly dire: more than simply diminishing the “good life,” our current debates threaten to become downright dangerous.

The lack of civility we sometimes find in Minnesota politics is—not surprisingly—in line with the national political climate: ours is a battleground state in a nation perhaps more evenly divided than at any moment in history. It would stand to reason that in a state where the political participation of citizens far exceeds the national average, our differences of opinion are all the more deeply entrenched. In the 2000 election 69.4 percent of Minnesotans participated. With so many individuals involved we are likely to see and hear expression of a full spectrum of strongly held beliefs. The differences between those beliefs are likely to increase the intensity of debate.

Vigorous political involvement in Minnesota and across the nation is neither surprising nor new. Debate has long been an integral part of our national dialogue. Our forefathers engaged in lively and spirited discussion as they established the fundamental principles upon which our nation would be built. These pointed and intense debates were essential to

advancing dialogue and reaching consensus—an essential means to an end.

Unfortunately, we find ourselves today focusing on the debates, themselves, rather than the larger goals such debates could and should help us reach. The arguments among our Founders were vigorous, but these great individuals knew when to focus their energies on disagreements amongst themselves, and when to come together to focus their energies on a common danger or threat. We would be well-served to learn from their example and acknowledge the global context in which today's political fights take place. Debate over the hows and whys of our military engagement in Iraq, for example, served a purpose before the fact, but now is the time to take a step back from these arguments and recognize that all Americans—no matter their earlier position on the matter—face a collective threat in the War on Terror.

Debates surrounding the origins of the war will be analyzed by future historians, but serve no purpose while lives remain in danger. By using this matter as a political grenade to throw at our opponents, we sacrifice the power of our collective action against a very dangerous—and very real enemy. The immediate consequence of such shortsightedness is to put in greater danger the troops who are risking their lives to defend our security and promote the very freedoms that enable us to express our differences. The long-term consequences are unthinkable.

We cannot afford to forget the important lesson that partisanship ends at the shores. With our troops

engaged overseas, we have a responsibility to demonstrate our united support. The only worthwhile debate that remains is how best to accomplish our collective goals of winning the War on Terror and bringing our troops home safely. Now is the time to put partisanship aside and unite to accomplish these important goals.

John Kline, a Republican, represents Minnesota's second congressional district in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The Last Lost Cause of American Politics

D. J. Leary

For more than forty years, I have been an active student and chronicler of politics. I have never had any particularly negative feelings about the pejorative term "special interests." The politics of this state and of the nation in general have, in most instances, been driven by special interests. While most Minnesotans might disagree, the fact is that many people have become active in this state's politics driven by a strong inner-feeling about some particular cause. Abortion is but one example. Few issues in modern times have brought more people into politics in the past thirty years than the twin opposite special interests of abortion and reproductive choice. Others found their political awakening in other big issues of our time: the wars in Vietnam and Iraq; the rampant increase of violence in this society; gun control; women's rights, gay rights, and animal rights.

While these special interests have worked to bring people into politics, there is one issue that is doing the opposite. It is the disappearance of common decency and civility in the personal political dealings between people of differing political opinions or parties. This abandonment of civility appears to be driving more and more people away from partisan political activism.

When I run into someone I have known from a DFL or Republican campaign, I am less and less surprised that they no longer are active in party politics. They say it 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."

One place this junkyard-dog philosophy of attack and attack and attack has really taken a toll has been on the reservoir of people willing to serve in elected or appointed office. It is getting almost impossible to find people willing to put forth their good names and reputations to help improve politics and government. The destructive kind of very intimate personal attack that has become part and parcel of electoral politics and other public service has repelled untold thousands of individuals who do not want to subject themselves, their families, or their colleagues to this undeserved level of abuse.

Today, the strongest efforts in the politics of destruction are concentrated on attacking virtually any idea, proposal, or person of the opposing political party or philosophy. 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.

In its present form, politics has lost its humanity. I can recall earlier this fall when the monthly unemployment figures were released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. After seven consecutive months of increasing numbers of people who lost their jobs, a report showed that 57,000 people had found work in the previous month. I was applauding this when I was confronted by a fellow DFLer, a longtime elected official, with this admonition: "You shouldn't be cheering these new numbers. We need this joblessness to continue if we're going to have any chance of beating George Bush next year."

Political neophyte would be the last appellation anybody would ever use to describe me. Good and bad, I've been through it all when it comes to politics. But hearing something like this from a political figure wearing the philosophical robes that are supposed to denote the care and concern about fellow human beings was shocking.

In politics, especially presidential politics, the numbers are what the numbers are. The Democrat's presidential nominee will most assuredly see that the record of the Bush administration will be fully parsed and attacked. Based on how they feel about that record, people will make up their minds and vote next November. Hoping that people can't find jobs in 2003 is just another sad example of the naked mean-spirited attitude that has come to define politics here in the threshold years of this new century.

D. J. Leary is the CEO of a public affairs consulting firm and is a co-editor of the newsletter Politics In Minnesota.

The Uncivil War

David Lebedoff

There is a remarkable retreat from civility just now, and it's the result of a new kind of class war. It's not the traditional battle of rich versus poor.

It involves a new class that has emerged over the past half century, a class based not on wealth but on test scores. I call it the New Elite, but the word SATocracy will do as well. It's a class of those whose self-identity is largely dependent on their academic test scores.

The idea of a meritocracy is good, but a meritocracy based only on academic scores often may actually bypass merit by defining it too narrowly.

The members of the new class don't see that, though. They think that for the first time in history we know scientifically who the "smartest" people are.

The political corollary is that there is no longer any need for majority rule. If we know who the best and the brightest are, why solicit the views or the votes of anyone else? The new class war has cut the wires of majority rule—replacing elections with experts.

What does all this have to do with civility? Everything. The new class conflict is an uncivil war. It's not about ideas, but rather power. It's not about how to govern, but only about who should govern. It's very, very personal. And as any divorce lawyer will tell you, it's the personal fights that are the most uncivil. In fact, "uncivil" is too civil a word. The right word, alas, is "hate." Our political discourse now is filled with hate.

A recent issue of *The New Republic* (September 29, 2003) featured on its cover and in its pages a vitriolic essay by Jonathan Chait subtitled "The Case for Bush Hatred." And what is that case? Not Iraq, not the economy, not taxes, nor any issue. It's not Bush's policies. It's who he is. And who is he? He is "an affront to the values of the liberal meritocracy . . . every aspect of Bush's personal history points to the ways in which American life continues to fall short of the meritocratic ideal . . . Bush is just not a terribly bright man."

This is what it's all about nowadays. Some people feel that they should not be governed by anyone whose SAT scores are lower than their own, and when that happens they go crazy, they pout, they shout, they pound the table and go into tantrums. (Actually, George Bush's SAT scores were slightly higher than Al Gore's, but in the new

class war perception trumps reality and lifestyle fuels perception.)

Civil behavior is central to victory in the new class war. In the 2002 edition of the *Almanac of American Politics*, Michael Barone writes that Bush and Gore values represent "two nations of different faiths. One is observant, tradition-minded, moralistic; the other is unobservant, liberation-minded, relativist."

This is why civility helps determine elections. It may be the most important weight on the scale.

Because civility is the key to which side of the fence one is on. If one is an "unobservant liberation-minded, relativist," then the only restraint on one's behavior is law. If one is "observant, tradition-minded, moralistic," then one is bound primarily by rules. Unlike laws, civility is a rule and rules are self-enforced. This distinction now divides the nation. The most obvious example is the Wellstone memorial service last year. The public reaction to public incivility determined the result of the election.

The political winner of the "uncivil war" probably will continue to be whichever side is more civil. This is not necessarily, however, either the Red or the Blue. It is not inevitable that Republicans will trump Democrats in this regard.

Because the New Elite is not alone in the abandonment of civility. Right-wing talk show hosts are very often savage, intemperate, and unsparingly personal in their attacks. There is a sort of Gresham's law in political discourse today in which bad behavior has dri-

ven out the good—at least at the extremes. And in the debased and polarized politics that are a New Elite legacy there often seems to be nothing but extremes. Is there anything more contemptible in our national culture now than the televised “talk shows” of screaming heads, supposedly educated people shouting at one another, interrupting each interruption until no sentence is completed, angry bombast, infantile behavior, sub-human behavior, pre-human behavior, like the simians at the water hole in *2001: A Space Odyssey*?

No matter which side behaves worse, the public rightly hates this noise. And will reward civility, because it's rooted in respect for rules of moral conduct.

David Lebedoff is a Minneapolis attorney and author. This piece was adapted from his book The Uncivil War: How a New Elite is Destroying Our Democracy, to be published this spring by Taylor Trade Publishing.

We've Been Springerized

William A. LeMire

John Adams recognized that uncivil political discourse was a threat to our nascent American democracy. In 1776 he wrote: “We may please ourselves with the prospect of free and popular governments, God grant us the way. But I fear that in every assembly members will obtain an influence by noise rather than sense, by meanness rather than greatness, by ignorance rather than learning, and by contracted hearts rather than large souls.” Adams further wrote that: “there must be decency and

respect and veneration introduced for persons of every rank, or we are undone. In a popular government, this is our only way.”

Sadly, our current political discourse has lost its way. Our political discourse is seething with personal attacks, demagoguery that demonizes “the other side,” and a bitter partisanship that immediately assumes the worst motivations in its political opponents. How did our political discourse lose its way? Can our political discourse find its way again?

As to the first question, a “win-at-all-costs” mentality, television culture, and a lack of intellectual and spiritual depth in our candidates have combined to coarsen our political discourse. Modern candidates and partisan commentators have achieved victory by “going negative.” Personal attacks and cheap demagoguery that seek to demonize “the other side” have won elections. Politics is about power. Political power is gained by winning elections. Candidates and parties are therefore obsessed with pursuing campaign strategies that win. They “go negative” with full regard for its proven success as a winning strategy but no regard for its coarsening effect on political discourse.

Television contributes to this coarsening effect. TV ratings are driven by entertainment and sensationalism. The “sensational” or “entertaining” quality of personal attacks and yelling/screaming mesh perfectly with our TV culture. Our TV culture seems to crave yelling and screaming and personal

attack sound bites. Our political discourse has, tragically, been Jerry Springerized.

Next, a lack of spiritual and intellectual depth in our candidates and commentators indirectly coarsens our political discourse. A candidate learned in literature, the classics, philosophy, or theology is, at best, passé and, at worst, ridiculed. George Will is fond of saying that the late U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan “wrote more books than most United States senators have ever read.” A political candidate or commentator with intellectual and spiritual depth is more inclined to recognize the dishonor and inhumanity of engaging in personal attacks. That person recognizes that personal attacks contribute nothing to the merits of political debate, that personal attacks are the last refuge of simple minds, that honor and decency abhor incivility.

The question then, is: how can our political discourse find its way again? Television and campaigns must aspire to higher standards in political discourse. Television and campaigns must stop their positive reinforcement of each other’s behavior. Candidates should never engage in personal attacks despite a perception that it represents a “winning” strategy. TV should not freely broadcast incivility despite a perceived appetite for it in TV culture.

As an electorate, we must meaningfully recognize that uncivil discourse cheapens and shames our democracy. As an electorate, we must recognize that those who engage in incivility reveal something about themselves

which that has no place in an honorable democracy. As an electorate, we must vote against candidates and parties or television commentators who insist on embarrassing a democracy that men and women have given their lives to preserve. As viewers we must turn off the commentators who televise the offending behavior.

To a certain extent then, we are responsible for civility in political discourse. We are entitled to expect a higher standard of political discourse from our candidates, commentators, and parties; but we must insist on a higher standard from ourselves when we read, watch, and vote.

William A. LeMire is a partner in the Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi law firm in Minneapolis.

A Full Policy Debate is Missing

Becky Lourey

If civility of discourse is the measure, the political climate has seen both better times and worse times. Democracy is not threatened yet, but effective government certainly is at risk. Also at risk is the continuing economic prosperity—prosperity for all segments of society—that in the past effective government fostered and oversaw. The consensus in favor of good government embraced by those of most political persuasions gradually has been co-opted by those who believe in less government at any cost.

It seems that in good economic times the radical right prevails with

moral issues, and in bad economic times the radical left dominates with economic issues. The more reasoned, less radical positions capable of accommodating compromise seem to ascend only when the country is passing from one extreme to another.

Two good examples arise within Republican administrations featuring moderate policy strains. During the Nixon years, good public policy in human services was established because extreme ideologues were not making the decisions. Eisenhower built the whole network of freeways across our country; he also warned us against the military industrial complex. He believed in the good that an effective government can do.

The right now predominates, but when the next economic down cycle is widely perceived and voters fear for their economic security, what then?

Those of us on the left apparently lack an agenda to support our ideals. We have been so busy trying to out-centrist the middle, that we have lost opportunity after opportunity for our voice to be heard. When the debate is only between the middle and the right, it is not a full, vibrant discourse.

In its long struggle to reach the top, the right created an agenda for action that enabled the movement to take full and immediate advantage of its newly established influence. Naturally, this successful demonstration of political clout to expand the conservative base and pass legislation has caused much consternation on the left.

The resulting rhetoric on both sides is unnecessarily harsh. Too little emphasis is placed on good government, and too much on less government. We hear too much vitriol, and too little use of humor.

I was so lucky to grow up during a time when the public looked to government for fulfilling national goals such as civil rights and women's rights, and the elimination of hunger. We heard Kennedy say, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." And we hoped, we addressed the government, and we made changes. We didn't bash government; we saw it as our tool.

If we don't have an effective government to protect the public from exploitation by the powerful, what tool will be available to protect the public?

Some of the fundamental shift in public opinion can be attributed to technological changes and the quickened pace of society. The shift from print to television coverage has greatly diminished the value of meaningful debate in favor of one-liners and catch phrases. Clearly, the right-wing has taken far greater advantage of this change, and our collective capacity for critical thinking has suffered.

In conclusion, the public is well served by a full discussion. Actually, I don't even mind if it is sharp-edged, as long it is inclusive. In these days, anyone daring to be an unpopular liberal broadens the debate.

Becky Lourey, a DFLer, is a Minnesota state senator from Kerrick.

Too Much of the Marquis, Not Enough of His Rules

Roger Magnuson

Oh, where is the Marquis of Queensbury when we need him?

Addressing the disgraceful state of pugilism in his day, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Marquis constructed a delicate balance with a new set of rules. Conceding the violent purpose of the sport itself—to knock the other chap senseless—he nonetheless created some sensible rules that had a civilizing influence on the sport. Dispatch your opponent, knock him cold, but do so with an exquisite civility.

Sir John laid it down that you should not beat the opponent when he is down, nor after you have already won. He even had the foresight to rule out the practice, *pace* Mike Tyson, of biting off an opponent's ear. The widespread acceptance of these rules may not have helped HBO's ratings in its presentation of an endless parade of mildly talented palookas, but it has doubtless saved some body parts along the way.

The problem of political and public policy discourse in Minnesota today is not that it is robust, brutal, and violent—in an intellectual sense it is and should be—but that there are no civilizing rules and conventions that disqualify the kidney punches and south-of-the-border shots that now characterize ideological battles here and throughout the nation, not least the recent spate of charges and countercharges of personal wrongdoing by political opponents culminating in the

indictment by a local county attorney of the chair of the Republican Party on patently ridiculous charges.

We all should agree on the basics. Ideas advanced on political questions should be open to any intellectually honest assault, including withering assaults, Menckenesque assaults, assaults that make one look like Floyd Patterson after his first encounter with Sonny Liston. I was about to lecture to a ***Business Week*** CEO seminar in Palm Springs. Before me, John Silber was debating Joe Fernandez, superintendent of schools in New York City at the time, on the subject of school choice. Joe was on the defensive. Are you or are you not, he was pressed, in favor of choice for students in your city? Joe hemmed and hawed and said, "Well, I'm in favor of choice within the system."

The response came like a Joe Frazier left hook, up from the floor. "When I visited East Berlin years ago and saw that shameful wall, I said to myself, 'how bad must this society be to need to have a wall to keep its citizens locked in?' And Joe, when I heard you say you are in favor of choice only within your system, I asked myself, 'how bad must public schools in your city be to have to have a wall to lock your students in?'" The bout, already a mismatch, was over. Looking at Joe's bovine daze, one could only conclude that it was over violently.

It is quite another thing to address the threatening ideas of the adversary by trying to destroy him or her personally. When I have suggested that adding sexual behaviors to anti-discrimination

laws is a bad idea, on both legal and public policy grounds, the response whether in academic settings or programs like *Nightline* is predictable. It never addresses the legal arguments, or the statistics, or the other data. The gist is that one who makes such arguments is a bad person, homophobic and, perhaps, mentally ill.

When I was appearing endlessly before committees of the Florida Legislature during the Bush versus Gore controversy of two years ago, the minority members of the committee, we learned, had decided they were getting nowhere questioning me on my positions on Article II of the Constitution, so they agreed not to ask me any questions in the televised hearings and put out instead an anonymous “hit sheet” attacking me personally, which they circulated to the media. Alas, I had apparently lived a somewhat boring life since the best they could do was point out that I had started a distance learning law school not approved by the American Bar Association. The fact that its graduates have every year had at least a 20-percentage point edge over ABA graduates on the California Bar got lost in the shuffle.

Such ad hominem nonsense has its impact on the willingness of talented people to enter public life. Does a successful lawyer want to accept an invitation to be a federal judge, knowing the gauntlet that must be run? The special interest groups mobilize and prepare a wide assortment of mud balls, none relating to his ideas on original intent or federalism, as they accept uncritically and throw lustily any allegation of

unpaid nanny taxes or college indiscretions at the flak catcher sitting in the committee room.

Does a business person want to enter the mud wrestling pit, the ante room to public service these days?

Why not adopt a convention employed by Daniel Webster—no, not that Daniel Webster. I mean the Daniel Webster who became the first Republican speaker of the Florida House, who has never lost an election, who for most of his elections has not had an opponent while running in a historically Democratic district, and who now is running for the U.S. Senate. He decided before his first campaign to make it a rule that he would never say anything bad about his opponent or good about himself, or allow others to do so. He has no such rule about Democratic public policy ideas.

The Marquis would, I think, approve.

On the other hand, Sir John was known to be not so fastidious in his personal observance of the rules he created. A somewhat violent Scot, he was known in his personal life to abuse his family and, in one famous episode, sucker-punched his son in public. And, of course, what he is best known for is his decision to destroy the lover of his son, Lord Alfred Douglas. He succeeded, of course, in the Oscar Wilde trial.

Perhaps we have too much of the marquis in Minnesota politics, after all. Just not enough of his rules.

Roger J. Magnuson is a partner in the Dorsey & Whitney law firm in Minneapolis.

Civility, Ideologues, and Listening

C. Peter Magrath

I find it difficult to comment on the topic of civility in America's politics and public life without being (or at least sounding) platitudinous. Of course, we cite clichés and platitudes precisely because they often convey truth and wisdom. While there are undoubtedly those who regard the Ten Commandments as irrelevant platitudes, they are part of our discourse precisely because, to many of us, they convey some eternal truths.

My Minnesota years are in the rearview mirror but the state remains an important part of my psyche and interest and, after all, it is an important part of these United States. Although most of us are not especially perceptive when describing ourselves, before proceeding further let me briefly describe myself in terms of political or philosophical views. I have strong opinions on many things; have no deep partisan commitments; am willing to be labeled (to use hackneyed terms that we all despise but use) as left of center on certain matters and right of center on others; like to believe that my views are moderate both in substance and style—and would happily be described as a person whose opinions are reasonably unpredictable, because I do not like to be slotted into holes that house pigeons.

But my opinions probably diverge from those held by most readers of these pages on various matters. For example, I believe the affirmative

action in our nation's colleges and universities has done incomparably more good than bad and applaud the substance and spirit of the decisions in the University of Michigan cases; that despite some admittedly disturbing excesses and inappropriate political biases within college and university faculties, that, by a very decided margin, American higher education is an open and essential bastion of inquiry, discovery, and learning invaluable to our economy and society; that the American Episcopal church is not in bed with Satan because of the decisions reached at the Minneapolis convention last summer; and, to cite just one more issue, supported the Bush administration's war in Iraq even as I doubted that our policy-makers, particularly those at the level of the vice president and Department of Defense, really understood what we were getting into, the costs, and the consequences of too hastily dismissing the interests and views of our longtime allies. (On Iraq, if I may put it simply, I am a public cousin of that astute St. Louis Park native, Tom Friedman.)

Philosophically, I am congenitally uncomfortable with those whom I describe as ideologues—by which I mean, not individuals who have philosophical positions and public views, but those whose positions are almost always predictable because they flow from a rigid and limited view governed by two or three set principles. We find these individuals both on the so-called left and right. They are in the op-ed pages of newspapers and what are euphemistically described as radio and television

talk shows, which in reality are shouting and screaming shows, which neither elucidate nor educate. Do we not all too often read a columnist on a topic knowing precisely what the end conclusions will be, long before we have gotten to the final paragraph? But it needs to be said that persons whom I choose to describe as ideologues under a great constitutional system with its priceless First Amendment have the right and freedom to be ideologues. Sharp and contentious argument has its purposes in raising issues, troubling us, and making us think. Even tart-tongued, extreme ideologues can be (not all are) civil in their personal demeanor and when dueling with adversaries. In other words, civility and the common courtesies that flow from it are not incompatible with being an ideologue.

The serious underlying issues in our United States go beyond civility. It seems to me, observing the national scene here in Congress and other trends in our society, that we have lost the capacity to truly listen to each other and to try to understand and learn. We are too polarized. And ideological polarization leads, not to understandable disagreements about policies and programs, but to hating and demonizing and therefore devaluing the humanity of one's opponents. Take the current Rush Limbaugh saga: surely Mr. Limbaugh made money and gained celebrity by saying, I believe, mean and spiteful things about, for instance, drug abusers. Now the proverbial table has turned; he is caught up in an ugly human situation exposing his fallibility—and his opponents across the ideo-

logical spectrum are gleeful and joyful in exposing and labeling him as a hypocrite. Both sides in this kind of circumstance profoundly bother me.

We need political discourse, debate, and strong disagreement. And we need much more than merely to tolerate each other, which is pleasant but not good enough. We need to try—and this is so hard if we are truly honest about it—to listen to each other. We need to think through what those with whom we disagree are saying and why they say so. 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. At times, though not always, our views and positions need to be adjusted or modified or compromised. We are too polarized, too quick to label others as buffoons, liars, and hypocrites; that may be entertaining public and political theater, but it does not advance the common good. To the contrary, it harms it.

The common good would be advanced if we could discipline ourselves to be quiet, to listen to others, to respond thoughtfully and deliberately, perhaps appreciating that wisdom on difficult public and political issues is no one's monopoly. Maybe, just maybe, we need a Ten Commandments for Political Discourse in twenty-first century America.

C. Peter Magrath, president of the University of Minnesota from 1974 to 1984, is president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

A Clear and Present Danger

Carol Molnau

The erosion of civility in politics presents a clear and present danger to democracy. Mudslinging has always existed, and probably always will. But lately personal charges, attacks on candidates and their families, and half-truths reported by the media as fact are threatening the health of public discourse.

To begin with, people today know that once they decide to run for office, they and their families will be dragged through the mud. Most of this is a result of your opponent's political campaign issuing press release after press release attacking you on a personal level, rather than addressing your stand on the issues. Unfortunately, some of these baseless charges are picked up and reported by the press. The result is damaging to a candidate's well-being and makes life difficult for a candidate's spouse and children. Many good people choose not to put their families through that, and as a result many of our best and brightest citizens choose not to run for office.

Reporters today seem more interested in sensationalism than in fact-finding. It's almost as though they have made up their mind about what they want a story to say, and then they go out and try to find evidence to support their theories. Instead of doing true investigative work, they rely on rumors and only get one side of a story before reporting it as fact.

The media loves to throw misstatements and half-truths out and watch for reaction. For example, the media

reported that I owned right-of-way in the new Highway 212 corridor, even though I didn't. Our farm had been in our family for over 100 years, and Highway 212 has been planned since the 1960s. Even though none of our land was needed for the new highway, the media insinuated that I was using my position for personal gain.

Rather than argue over matters of policy, politicians and the media attempt to discredit public-policy makers on a personal level. Instead of arguing over the merits of an idea, we are reduced to issuing baseless charges. The result is that the public gets turned off by politics, good people choose not to run for office, and politicians have to spend time responding to charges that could be better spent making good public policy.

Elected officials ought to be held to the highest standard. But it's important for people to remember that we're human, too, and that we do make mistakes from time to time.

What can be done to make the situation better? Organizations like Center of the American Experiment are helping. By staying focused on issues instead of personalities, we could go a long way toward restoring civility in politics. People can take passionate stands on issues and still be civil.

It is important for politicians to put policy before politics—at least once in a while. Some people are drawn to politics for the love of the game. However, when we spend all our time arguing just for the sake of arguing, we lose sight of what is really important. In order for some sense of civility to be

restored to the public arena, politicians and the media should stay focused on issues as much as possible. While that won't solve the problem overnight, it would be a good first step.

Lieutenant Governor Carol Molnau, a Republican, serves as Minnesota's commissioner of transportation.

It's All in the Eye of the Beholder

Thomas M. Neville

In 1990, I was involved in a very competitive open-seat election. Six candidates applied for the job. The politicking was intense, but when the election was over, everyone described the campaign as the most civil and respectful campaign they had seen in years.

In 1992, during a candidate debate, I asked my opponent if there were any votes that I had taken which, in her opinion, did not represent the interests of my district. She responded by saying that she would not answer the question because she didn't wish to engage in negative attacks. This surprised me, because I thought that a person's voting record was always fair game for debate.

In my 2002 election campaign, my integrity was questioned publicly, and my opponent sent me hateful letters in private. To this day, my former opponent will hardly speak to me when I meet him, and I do not know why. Things certainly have changed.

I have always described politics as a "contact sport of ideas." I am not afraid to challenge the status quo. I relish vig-

orous debate and differences of opinion. To me, that is what politics is all about.

But why do we have to be so mean in the process? In my experience as a lawyer, it is unusual to see incivility in a court room. Lawyers fight for their clients just as hard as political candidates fight for their parties and ideas. However, impolite decorum would be immediately sanctioned, if attempted in court. Unfortunately, the immediate check and balance does not exist in the political court of public opinion.

While we deal with many volatile issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, racial profiling, and other cultural issues, our country and state have always had hot-button issues of the day. What is different today?

One commentator describes our current situation as Xtreme politics. In our culture of extreme sports and reality TV, politics has become another sporting event in which the voter is just a spectator. Political campaigns are not just intellectual debates, but death struggles. Candidates tell voters that they will "fight" for them. Working hard is not enough. In this environment, it is no wonder that elected officials are looked at cynically and with distrust.

There are two primary reasons for this environment. The first is the expanded influence of the media—which itself is distrusted. Never has there been so much commentary on talk radio, cable television, Internet weblogs. Some people argue that the expansion of media opportunities has provided more fairness and balance.

Perhaps so, but it also has immersed the body politic with “instant analysis” and hyperactive second-guessing of every move our elected officials make. This is how citizens get their news and information. In our fast-paced society, fewer people take the time to truly understand an issue. Very few people attend candidate debates anymore. Sound bites rule!

The second factor is the overreaching of our judicial system. Over the past thirty years, courts have rendered decisions that dramatically affect our public culture. In doing so, the courts have denied citizen opportunity to self-govern through the legislative branch. Court decisions protecting abortion, declaring the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional, and creating a right for same-sex marriage, have begun culture wars, for which there is no current solution in the legislative arena. The courts have, in effect, told citizens to shut up and accept this massive cultural change being imposed upon them. Legislators or candidates choose sides in these cultural battles and eventually become good guys or bad guys or, depending on the issue, an extremist, racist, homophobe, socialist, or wacko. The labels often stick, even when the issue is more benign. This is why the judicial confirmation process in the U. S. Senate has become so angry. People sense that they have lost control of their own government. When the stakes are this high, debate takes the nature of a religious war.

Political civility will return when two things happen. First, courts must exercise greater restraint in making

decisions that influence on our country’s cultural issues, and return that debate to the political branch of government, which is controlled by voters.

Second, citizens must reject the **Xtreme** politics of instant media and trite sound bites. This requires political education, time, and self-restraint. It is not as much fun—but then, perhaps civility is only in the eye of the beholder.

Thomas M. Neville, a Republican, is Minnesota state senator from Northfield.

Neutering Barnyard Animals

Grover Norquist

America is in for a period of “incivility” or “partisan bickering” at the state and national level. This is good.

Bipartisanship has brought us a massive increase in foreign aid, huge jumps in federal education spending, dramatic increases in domestic law enforcement’s ability to penetrate American privacy, and shortly, a \$400 billion-plus addition to the already unfunded and soon-to-be bankrupt Medicare entitlement.

By contrast, there have been several unpleasant bouts of “nasty partisan bickering” that resulted in the tax cuts of 2001, 2002, and 2003.

Why have politics gotten “uglier” in the past several years?

Three reasons: First, the national governing majority cobbled together by Franklin Delano Roosevelt that has dominated American politics at the national level and in most states since the Great Depression is being supplanted by a natural governing conservative

majority. Led by the Republican Party, the succession was brought into power by leaders such as Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, and George W. Bush. But power does not yield without a fight. People are killed every week in America for twenty bucks in a wallet. How hard and furiously would you expect a dominant party to fight to avoid losing control of a \$2 trillion annual budget? Anything short of snipers on the Capitol's rooftop was an under-reaction by the Democrats on their way out.

Second, the two parties are still near parity. Yes, the 2002 House, Senate, and gubernatorial elections showed a nation more fifty-one/forty-six than forty-nine/forty-nine, but those margins are close enough to convince Democrats that they might yet reverse their recent decline. A college friend who worked in the Clinton administration asked me in the late '90s what it would take to get to a more civil political discourse. I assured him the rhetoric and hard feelings would settle down as soon as the Democrats got used to being a minority party and quit struggling. The model is the peace that reigned in Washington when the Republicans were led by the likes of Bob Michel and Howard Baker who were very comfortable in the minority, playing golf with their political masters, and putting on a good show of opposing the majority party without discomfiting the governing coalition.

The best way to create a more civil political discourse will be to elect another five Republican senators and

wait for those former Democrat committee chairmen who remember wielding power to die or retire and be replaced by tame and domesticated comfortable members of the permanent minority.

The third reason for all the political shouting is that over the past twenty years, the two parties have sorted themselves into largely ideologically coherent political coalitions. Gone are almost all Northern liberal Republicans and Southern conservative Democrats—remnants of those whose party affiliation was driven, not by ideas, but by the memory of who was on what side of Sherman's march through Georgia. Now a Republican Congress means something very different from a Democrat Congress. Further Republican victories mean political death and financial ruin for billionaire tort lawyers. Do you really expect them to fade away with kind words and polite goodbyes? Labor union bosses rake in \$8 billion in compulsory union dues. Further Republican victories at the state and federal level will bring more right-to-work states and erode the monopoly powers now granted to unions. How did these folks react when Jimmy Hoffa threatened their gravy train in just one union? How is Jock Yablonski doing?

Differences of opinion can remain civil as long as nothing real is at stake. Every day, Americans argue about whose football team is best. Lots of noise. No hard feelings. It doesn't really matter. The debate over the national death tax—whether the federal

government will steal half the gold out of your teeth when you die—is a somewhat more important and, hence, contentious issue.

Republicans and conservatives can best advance the cause of civility by working hard to finish off the hopes of the Democrats for any return to power. It is like neutering barnyard animals: they are much calmer, less likely to cause damage, and easier to control. As the vet says, “They will be happier; this is good for them.”

This is compassionate conservatism.

Grover Norquist is president of Americans for Tax Reform.

Why Hatred Surrounding Presidential Elections Grows

Marvin Olasky

“Likable.” I once told Texas journalism students that they should never use so subjective an adjective. I asked, “Can you name a single person who is likable to everyone?”

One student in 1998 replied, “George W. Bush.” And that year he was close to being right. Not only did Governor Bush win reelection with 70 percent of the vote, but most of the three out of ten who voted Democratic had nice things to say about him. He got along so well with the Democratic-majority Texas legislature that its leading power broker, the late Bob Bullock, backed Bush’s run for the presidency in 2000.

When Team Bush moved to Washington in 2001, crooning about bipartisanship, it hoped to continue dancing the Texas two-step. But the D.C. cyn-

ics who muttered about romantic illusions proved to be right: the center did not hold, and the rest is hysteria.

Look at what liberals are now saying about the man who broke my ban on “likable.” Jonathan Chait, senior editor of *The New Republic*, wrote recently, “I hate President George W. Bush ... I hate the way he talks—blustery self-assurance masked by a pseudo-populist twang. I even hate the things that everybody seems to like about him.”

Chait, insisting that “There seem to be quite a few of us Bush haters,” cited one pollster’s report that Bush hatred is “as strong as anything I’ve experienced in twenty-five years now of polling.” Conservative columnist Robert Novak agreed that we are now seeing “hatred . . . that I have never seen in forty-four years of campaign watching.”

We could talk about the specific reasons for Bush hatred, and about the years of Clinton hatred, Reagan hatred, Nixon hatred, and Johnson hatred, but I’d rather draw our attention to two underlying causes.

First, we have built a national political system with stakes so high that those wrapped up in it hate the thought of losing. In this country we used to have many kinds of government affecting our lives. We were governed not only by politicians but by leaders in business, education, philanthropy, and other spheres of interest. They could make their decisions largely free from governmental control.

The first twentieth-century president to inspire big-time hatred was Franklin Roosevelt, who began our national movement to a winner-take-

all system. Now, many see their future happiness as dependent on who's in charge in Washington. A man with many female friends is unlikely to become despondent if one of them marries someone else. A man who believes that his happiness depends on marrying one particular woman may hate a successful rival suitor.

Now, presidents often appoint judges who twist the Constitution. Presidents issue executive orders that turn previous legislation upside down. Presidents effectively overrule actions of governors and mayors. Overarching power generates not just dislike but hatred. To improve the atmospherics of public life, we need to decentralize, returning authority whenever possible to localities and private citizens.

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 would not have liked it had Al Gore won in 2000, but had that happened I would have stilled my disappointment (as I did following Bill Clinton's successes) with the thought that God still has the whole world in His hands. Without that faith, and with the concentration of power in Washington, every election may look like Armageddon, and every winner

may look, to the disappointed losers, like Satan enthroned.

Marvin Olasky is editor-in-chief of World.

Why Go Negative? Because It Works

Tim Penny

In the 2000 election cycle, Education Minnesota made multiple mailings on behalf of a legislative candidate in my city. The literature extolled the candidate's credentials and asserted his support for Minnesota schools. Despite their expensive campaign on his behalf, the candidate lost what was considered to be a winnable race. By 2002, Education Minnesota had learned its lesson: if you want your candidate to win, attack the opponent.

Similarly, last year a Sierra Club leader described to my Metro State students how his organization once sent positive mailings on behalf of pro-environment candidates, but saw little success. Accordingly, they changed strategy. The result? In the 2000 and 2002 election cycles, the Sierra Club's "Dirty Dozen" mailings helped to defeat several incumbents.

These attack ads are almost by definition lies. Invariably, they distort a candidate's record. At best, they assert a half-truth. For example, a Democratic attack ad in 1998 insisted that Republicans had voted to "cut" Medicare by \$280 billion. In a response ad, Republicans claimed they were increasing Medicare by 7 percent per year. Given a projected 11-percent annual increase in Medicare's costs,

both advertisements were half-truths. Neither side shared the whole truth. Attack-style politics leaves voters misinformed about important policy issues. And, thus undermines our democracy.

I cannot assert that the negative tone of campaigns is worse now than in years past. Any student of history knows that there were scurrilous campaign attacks leveled against some of our most beloved presidents—among them Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. But given our modern broadcast media, today's attacks are more pervasive. And given the seeming limitless sums that are spent on today's campaigns, the negativity is relentless. No wonder voters are disgusted. No wonder so many campaigns result in voters feeling that they have voted for the lesser of evils.

Many will argue that attempts to limit campaign spending or advertising content is an infringement on free speech. I grant the validity of their case. In fact, the much-touted McCain-Feingold campaign reform legislation will almost certainly run into trouble in the Supreme Court for its restrictions on political advertising.

So, if we cannot easily limit the amount of money in politics or the veracity of campaign attacks, what are we to do? At the very least, we should insist upon accountability. Political candidates are required to report their contributions and expenditures periodically. However, the infrequency of these reports allows huge sums of money to flow undetected through a campaign budget in the late stages of a campaign. With the magic of modern

technology, these reports should be filed at least weekly (if not daily) so that expenditures for last-minute campaign tactics are brought to light before—not after—the polls close.

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.

We might not be able to stop attack-style politics, but we have a right to know who is behind it.

Tim Penny is a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute and co-director of its Policy Forum. He represented southeastern Minnesota in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1982 through 1994.

The Thin Line of Civility

Sally C. Pipes

“Triumph of the Swill.”

That was how Paul Maslin, pollster for ousted California Gov. Gray Davis, described the landslide victory of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the recent recall election. The reference is part of a larger problem destructive of civility, the *reductio ad Hitlerium*.

Comparing one's political foes to Nazis was once the last resort of those who ran out of arguments. Now it is

often the first resort of those who seem incapable of recognizing election results and lack the concept of a loyal opposition. The Hitler smear is particularly loathsome in its application to Schwarzenegger, attacked not for his own affiliations but those of his father, long before Arnold was born. This is as low as it gets, and thoughtful liberals reject it.

The *New Republic* recently editorialized against the reductio ad Hitlerium in reference to the Bush Administration. This is a point nobody in America should have to make, but it shows how bad things are. There are larger reasons for the loss of civility beyond an observable decline in manners, respect, and tolerance.

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.

This creed talks about “diversity” but divides the populace into “people of color” and those who apparently have no color, nor a legitimate claim on humanity. Politically correct orthodoxy also divides society into a debtor class and a creditor class, a victim class and an oppressor class. One side is presumed to be venal racists while the

other believes that “minorities cannot be racists” and that the only authentic minorities are alienated, angry, and even violent. The others are sellouts and Uncle Toms.

A civil debate in a civil society, obviously, requires that all participants stand on an equal footing. That cannot be the case when the opinions of one group are paired with others’ “phobias” and syndromes, with no basis in fact and simply code words for what the politically correct dislike. Class analysis and dated labeling also play a role.

In American political rhetoric, “the rich” now means practically anyone not a member of the United Farm Workers union who owns a house and automobile. As such “the rich” invite abuse, especially when presumed to have stolen their wealth from “the poor,” as Bill Moyers believes.

“Right wing” is another whipping boy. If someone were advocating a monarchy, an authoritarian national church, or both, that would indeed be right wing. The tag ill suits those who simply want smaller, more efficient government, that people take responsibility for their own actions, and that the state should allow us to keep more of what we earn. Inaccurate labeling is not calculated to promote civility, and some ideas preclude the concept entirely.

One cannot, for example, conduct a civil debate with those who believe that California is really Aztlan, stolen from Mexico by rapacious “anglo” squatters, (“anglo,” by the way, includes people with names such as Horowitz, Washington, and Lee), who

like “the rich” and “right-wingers” can be defamed with impunity. Laziness and ignorance are also a problem.

State Sen. Sheila Kuehl said that the senate would have to save California from the “ignorance” of the new governor. This from a woman, a former television actress, who could not explain to a reporter the details of her own health-care bill.

Whatever the party affiliation, those with a distaste for facts, and for whom politics is everything, are more likely to smear and demonize. They will find a ready enabler in political correctness but ultimately there is no excuse.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Nobel laureate not on many college reading lists, discovered that the dividing line between good and evil passes not between nations, political parties, or social classes but straight down the middle of every human heart. We won't have a civil society in Minnesota, America, or anywhere, until more people recognize that reality and act on it.

Sally C. Pipes is president & CEO of the California-based Pacific Research Institute.

Weathering the Storm, Reducing the Stakes

Tom Prichard

What's the state of political discourse in Minnesota and the nation? I would say it's heating up. Why? Because the stakes are so high. Those wielding the political power steer the agenda that controls government purse strings and sets poli-

cy. And with government's influence, size, and scope growing, that's a lot of power. Financially, it means billions—if not trillions—of dollars nationwide directed by those in power.

Because of these ever-higher political stakes, elections take on more significance each time around. Over the past several election cycles, there has been a noticeable conservative shift among voters. The political hegemony of social and fiscal liberalism is being broken. This was demonstrated by the dramatic gains made by conservative Republicans in the last election. I've been told that Republicans made more gains in Minnesota than anywhere else in the country. Nationally, the GOP took control of the three main branches of government for the first time in generations. This shift has led to a heightened imperative on the part of those losing power to fight harder to keep it and those seeing the potential to gain power finally within their grasp to fight harder to gain it.

Add to this political conflict a growing cultural chasm that is dividing Minnesotans (and Americans) on a wide array of social and economic issues, and you've got an atmosphere primed for heated political discourse.

Conservative columnist Robert Novak noted that we are now witnessing in the public arena a level of hatred “I have never seen in forty-four years of campaign watching.” In Minnesota, things are certainly heating up as well. Charges, even criminal charges, and personal attacks seem more prevalent than ever.

Of course, the danger is that all this volatility will sour good people on public service. Fewer qualified people will want to run for political office because of the great cost—to their families and their reputations. Top judicial candidates won't consider nomination to federal judgeships because of the potential harm to the careers and lives they've taken years to build. The impact on public discourse will be significant as fewer and fewer competent individuals will be willing to serve and citizens will further shy away from public engagement.

What can be done to improve the atmosphere? There are no easy solutions. In the long run, we need to reduce the stakes. Government is too overweening and all encompassing. Limiting the size and scope of government must be the long-term goal. If more decisions are made at local levels, people won't view politics as the be-all and end-all.

Public debate must focus on key issues rather than becoming a platform for personal attacks. There is a world of difference between challenging a person's positions and viciously attacking the person. Opportunities for more personal, informal engagement of the participants, both politicians and interest groups, will help mitigate some of the personal attacks. (You're less likely to personally attack someone you personally know.)

In the meantime, we will probably have to simply weather the current political storms.

Tom Prichard is president of the Minnesota Family Council.

Turning Voters Away in Disgust

Mark Rotenberg

Few can deny that our political culture in Minnesota and the nation is rife with incivility, intolerance, and childish insults to our collective intelligence. From our past governor's threats to beat up other governors, to the "lies on a stick" served up at our State Fair, politics appears to be a game that makes the players look petty and foolish. Of course, like other social maladies—violence, addiction, greed—political mudslinging has existed as long as humans have lived in political communities. But that is no reason to excuse it or ignore its woeful impact on our democratic institutions. Politics is, after all, not just entertainment. It is the means by which we allocate and regulate wealth, natural resources, coercive force, justice, and our relations with other nations. Indeed, it is the process by which we determine the most essential features of our communal existence.

On one level, offensiveness in politics simply is an extension of an increasingly coarse mass culture. Popular entertainment is drenched in bloody violence, degradation of women, and crude insults dished out by radio shock-jocks and Jerry Springer-type TV "hosts" whose targets include crime victims, business owners, single mothers, and jilted lovers. Virtually anyone wandering into our public domain today—deliberately or inadvertently—is fair game for cheap shots and public ridicule. Pleas that such

people do not give up their rights to fair treatment, privacy, and some respect for their views, give way to cynical explanations about free press and free markets. If it's open season on such folks, is it any wonder that public officials who have placed themselves in the public domain voluntarily are easy targets for gratuitous slander?

On a more basic level, what we do with, to, and for each other on a daily basis and in our popular culture instills attitudes that carry over directly into politics. One doesn't need a scientific study to know that even the simplest courtesies—what were once called manners—increasingly are absent from our daily interactions. Indeed, common courtesy is increasingly absent as a priority to instill even in our children.

Other sources of political intolerance have their roots in the process by which Americans obtain political information and perspectives. The explosion of information outlets on TV and the Internet permits people to tune in and hear only those views and get only those facts that support their existing mindset. Our natural instinct to hear and accept what we already believe is strongly reinforced by this ever-thinner segmentation of informational perspectives. Those who listen only to themselves gradually develop an intolerance of listening to others.

Simultaneously, the explosion of available "news" sources abets simplistic and extreme political rhetoric in order to grab attention. Reporters, politicians and political spinmeisters who appear twenty-four/seven in our homes are far more likely to make spec-

tacular claims and outrageous statements than engage in nuanced arguments on difficult public policy questions. Democrats and Republicans, pro-choice and pro-life activists alike, often try to delegitimize not only the position of their opponents, but their sincerity, their dignity, and even their humanity.

During election season these trends are aggravated by the twin imperatives of candidate differentiation and demonization. This fall the only way for any one of the Democratic presidential candidates to make real news on their multi-debate road shows was to make hyperbolic claims about their opponents and express their differences in the sharpest, simplest possible terms.

Does any of this make a difference? Absolutely. Common experience has taught most Americans that the real world does not correspond to simplistic political claims and hyperbolic charges. They instinctively know that most such rhetoric is distorted and misleading, and so they come to distrust the speakers. Eventually, they come to distrust the process that produces such political dialogue, and have largely tuned it out. Like garbage in the street, ugliness in politics turns voters away in disgust.

The ultimate concern, however, isn't simply that voters have become cynical about politicians and their claims. It is that Americans have come to dislike politics so much that they cease being politically active. And when Americans cease being politically involved, they cease being full citizens, allowing the levers of power to be controlled by others. When that happens,

our democracy could be in real trouble. Maybe it already is.

Mark Rotenberg is general counsel of the University of Minnesota and president of Minnesotans Against Terrorism. The views expressed here are solely his own.

In Search of Trickle-Up Civility

Lynn Scarlett

Every couple years the American electorate wrings its hands and laments the sorry state of politicking in the nation. This hand-wringing electorate points to campaign ads that strive to sully reputations. Or the electorate points to advocacy organizations that distribute direct mail screeds to vilify purveyors of policies deemed wrongheaded and even wicked.

These are not new lamentations. Nor are high-pitched political barbs and mean-spirited verbal volleys confined to recent history. A mere glance at history books confirms that combativeness and rhetorical fervor in politics have a long pedigree.

Commonplace as such vicious discourse may be, civic virtue it is not. The American public is surely better served where civility and the art of conversation manage to dampen the din of vitriol.

But achieving civility—while still warding off a tendency toward what the late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan called “good manners that is a kind of substitute for ideas”—is not easy.

The Department of the Interior, as manager of one in every five acres of

the United States, lies—inevitably—at the heart of disputes over land and water management. Should snowmobiles operate in Yellowstone? Which lands designated by Congress for multiple use should host oil and gas exploration? How much wilderness is enough? How can silvery minnows or chubs get the water they need for survival while still ensuring water for farming and communities?

Federal land managers, tasked by Congress to provide recreation opportunities, access to natural resources, conservation of the nation’s premier historic, cultural, and natural places, and to fulfill trust responsibilities to Native Americans, make decisions at the confluence of people, land and water. With that confluence come conflicting goals and priorities—often centering on deeply held values and traditions and touching people’s livelihoods.

Within this context, angry rhetoric flourishes. It captures headlines but undermines the arduous task of finding common ground in complex contexts. Selective removal of brush and small trees to open up forests to traditional ecosystem patterns and reduce risks of catastrophic fire become labeled, wrongly, as ventures in logging of old-growth trees. Management plans that provide some public recreation opportunities in mechanized vehicles signal, through rhetorical flourishes, the end of preservation.

Such rhetoric will not vanish, because it is convenient—convenient in a world of politics in which success often demands delineating distinctions.

Drawing stark contrasts through vitriol surfaces as a sort of shorthand—a quick way to signal contrasts. But it is not a good way to govern.

At the Interior Department, Secretary Gale Norton has articulated a vision of cooperative conservation. It is a vision that builds upon what Moynihan referred to as “good manners”—creating conversations to supplant standoffs. But it also builds upon a clear set of ideas.

First among these ideas is that our decisions must—if possible—seek out those land management options that simultaneously achieve healthy lands, thriving communities, and dynamic economies. Second is the idea that place-based decisions involving those affected directly by our decisions can reduce conflict and better ensure workable options. Third is the importance of respecting the land ownership of others—whether lands are private, tribal, state, corporate, or under other title.

Away from news headlines and soapboxes, where stark statements dominate, most Americans engage most of the time in civil conversation and give expression to their public interests by rolling up their sleeves to participate in civic actions—whether by working together to build affordable housing, or devoting time to cleaning up beaches, planting trees, or building community centers.

Within this context of civic action, cooperative conservation is alive and well. At Buffalo Creek in Pennsylvania, dozens of farmers have joined university professors, public officials, and conservation groups to restore vegeta-

tion on stream banks. Along the Duck Trap River in Maine, over two dozen organizations work together to achieve conservation goals across fragmented land ownerships while ensuring that recreation and farming continue. At Tomales Bay in California, farmers, scientists, local officials, and others jointly work to restore wetlands and improve water quality.

The challenge for those wishing to communicate these tales, of course, is that good news is often not news at all. The challenge, too, is that politicking often thrives not on highlighting dispersed community actions but on etching deep divides over grand themes and programs.

Still, real opportunities for civic conversation exist—they exist in communities, towns, and neighborhoods where folks focus on solving important problems of personal concern. That is where those who yearn for civility should turn their energies. Who knows? There may be a trickle-up effect.

Lynn Scarlett is the assistant secretary for Policy, Management and Budget in the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Even the High Road Gets Muddy

Denny Schulstad

Every candidate begins a campaign with the goal of educating the public and winning a decisive victory. Attacking the opponent is usually distasteful and not part of the plan, but when the result of the election is at stake, the gloves come off and mud flies. This is

unfortunate and most candidates would prefer to take the high road, but if the choice is winning or losing the election, the decision to attack and drag down the opponent is fairly easy.

Of course, when you attack me, it is dirty politics and unfair; when I attack you, I am merely informing the voters of facts they have a right to know.

Negative advertising is used because it works. The voter who complains about “dirty campaigning” is often the same one who votes against a candidate rather than for one. When I was on the Boschwitz Kitchen Cabinet in his 1984 campaign for re-election to the U.S. Senate, he was being bombarded by Joan Grove about not releasing his financial records. Rudy’s strategy was to absolutely ignore Grove and not respond to her charges and to not launch a counterattack. We watched his poll numbers fall from a 20-percent lead to a dead heat. Then, faced with the possibility of defeat, Rudy reluctantly took a few shots at his opponent and the lead climbed back to a safe 20 percent and the election was easily won. Again, in a competitive race, negative ads (if not perceived as being mean) are effective and are used because they work.

The trend that most concerns me is not negative campaigning by candidates, but rather vicious attacks by political parties. It seems party leadership is often more interested in embarrassing and destroying the opposing party and their office-holders than cooperatively passing good legislation

and having to share some of the credit with the “enemy.”

I observed this, firsthand, when serving in the Air Force. A top priority for the Department of Defense after the Cold War was to close unneeded bases. Anticipating strong political opposition to any reductions in “my district,” a commission was established to make recommendations for the president and Congress to accept or reject the entire list without changes. When President Clinton pulled a couple of California bases from the list for what was perceived as political gain, enough Republican senators vowed to get even by blocking any further base closing attempts during that administration. Even though the Republican senators knew closing bases would save hundreds of millions of dollars and was in the best interests of national defense, they weren’t going to allow any advantage to the Democrats. We see numerous examples in the state Legislature where good legislation is blocked to prevent the other party from winning any credit.

I often hear—and observe—that “politics is getting meaner and nastier” every year. I find this to be generally true in the day-to-day workings of government. While it is proper and expected that there will be passionate differences of opinion on the floor (even among people of the same party), it seems more elected officials take every issue personally and expect to win each and every time. Possibly (probably) it is a result of the astronomical ego

levels in elective office and that too many don't consider the fact that there may be other valid opinions. Every issue turns into a battle to the death with the opposition not only being wrong, but being bad people. The level of respect between office holders declines, as does public opinion.

As with any generalities, there are obvious and notable exceptions. My own former representatives in Congress for many years, Don Fraser and Martin Sabo, are in many respects miles different from me philosophically, yet most would agree that they are the epitome of civility in politics. Since my move to Edina, I'm proud to call Jim Ramstad my friend and representative. Do we always agree? Usually, but not always. Does he do what he thinks is best for our district and nation even if it is in cooperation with some Democrats and even if they will claim part of the credit? Absolutely. Some might argue that it is easy for people like Fraser, Sabo, and Ramstad to take the high road since they are virtually unbeatable in their districts. While that may be true, I contend that they are decent, hardworking, public servants in the best sense of the term. While I opposed much of what Paul Wellstone proposed and we consistently worked to defeat each other; he was the one who left the Senate floor to sincerely congratulate me when I won my brigadier general star from the Air Force. Yes, much about public life is distasteful and I can spend hours discussing the problems and the lack of respect and civility. Fortunately, we have countless people of honor, intelli-

gence, and integrity (on both sides of the aisle) who keep plodding along trying to improve the system and make a positive difference for our society.

Denny Schulstad is a retired Air Force brigadier general. He served on the Minneapolis City Council for twenty-two years—the final fourteen as the only endorsed Republican.

Looking for 'Gentleman Jim'

Joe Selvaggio

It's tough to be civil when someone attacks the values you hold dearly. It's as natural to lash out as a cat lashing out at a dog threatening her security. But while attacking in defense of something we love is understandable, we also know from experience that violence begets violence, insults beget insults, and most of the time it's just better to avoid the attacking person in the first place, whether the attack is physical or verbal.

But knowing it intellectually and following it in our daily lives are two different things. I've often thought that if people haven't learned to be civil by the time they are ten years old, they probably will never pick up the habit. It's like learning typing, skiing, or playing the violin. It takes discipline and practice—and it's never easy.

The late Jim Shannon was approached once by his irate niece who was angry at being unjustly treated by her boss at General Mills. Jim responded with something like, "While you certainly have the right to be irritated, I've usually found that a kind word or gentle response serves me well."

“Gentleman Jim,” as his friends called him, must have learned civility as a child. I have no doubt the world would be a better place if more us would respond as Jim counseled.

It’s my opinion that the world would be better off:

- If Jews and their Christian and secular friends around the world had mounted a sophisticated non-violent pacifist (not passivist) war against the Nazis. If that had happened, we would have ended up with a more civil world, less prone to use violence than the path we took.
- If Palestinians and their friends would respond to Ariel Sharon with Gandhi-like non-violence.
- If opponents of Rush Limbaugh would approach him and his station manager with civility.

I once heard Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton hold a very civil debate on education, taxes, military responses, and other issues to which progressives and conservatives advocate different approaches. I had a great deal of hope that compromises would emerge and progress would be made. Then the commentators asked, “Who won? Who backed down?” They forced the polite discussion of two good-willed intelligent men into the context of a traditional battle. My hope turned quickly to despair. We’ve somehow got ourselves into a strident, war-like mode of discourse that can only bring about more anger. And somehow we continue to use the same strategies over and

over, expecting to get different results. This is the best definition of craziness.

I’m not for unilateral disarmament when someone is attacking. I think there is a place for the Al Franken’s of the world to respond in kind when people like Rush Limbaugh and Bill O’Reilly go into attack mode and won’t let up. But if enough of us tuned out the Limbaughs and O’Reillys, or reacted civilly, perhaps there would be no need for an Al Franken to escalate the bad feelings.

I can’t prove my tactics would produce a better world. But then again, my opponents can’t prove me wrong, either.

It’s also my opinion that, as Ted Turner says, “If we keep going as we are, there’s a fifty-fifty chance the human race won’t be here within fifty years—or it will exist in a very reduced state.”

Maybe we can improve our chances to sixty-forty if we start being civil.

Joe Selvaggio, founder of Project Pride for Living, is the subject of a recent Great American History Theatre production.

Toward a Civic Covenant

Chuck Slocum

Politics ought to be all about issues and making good things happen for people. It’s not about manners or everybody getting along, notwithstanding the “Minnesota Nice” inclinations many of us value.

Politics and politicking has changed a great deal since I first became involved at age nine, pushing bumper stickers in Madelia, Minnesota. In the

nearly five decades since that 1956 election, I have served in just about every campaign capacity, sometimes even paid ones.

To my way of reckoning, the political discourse started becoming markedly more inhospitable in the 1988 presidential campaign as Vice President George H.W. Bush took on Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis. Bush, initially behind in his race to follow Ronald Reagan to the White House, relied heavily on negative TV ads defining Dukakis as weak and foolish.

The use of “push-polling” was widely used in which voters were asked questions like “If you knew that Michael Dukakis supported the weekend release of convicted rapists from prisons, would you be (1) less inclined or (2) more inclined to vote for him? Remember the Willie Horton ad? Dukakis had nothing to do with his release, but Bush won going away.

The conclusion that voters were more inclined to vote against a candidate than for that candidate has changed the political culture. If you can define your opponent in your own terms and the voters buy it—it is now commonly believed—you can beat anybody. And winning has become the only thing that matters.

It has not improved since 1988, either, as candidates Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and California’s Gray Davis, among others, became successful in part by manipulating the campaigns of same-party primary election opponents.

Campaigns used to be funded by lots average people giving smaller contribu-

tions with as many as 1 in 10 Minnesota voters actually donating a dollar or more. That percentage has been dropping for decades while the amount of money spent on campaigns has skyrocketed. About 90 percent of all campaign donations are used for TV ads.

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 the funds. These funds are not easily earmarked to a specific giver, despite disclosure requirements. This practice is both legal and protected as a form of “free speech.” 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.

There still are still wonderful people seeking and serving in public office. But the tone of campaigns has changed from respectfully competitive to downright mean-spirited. The disrespectful nature of campaigning has discouraged many otherwise responsible citizens from becoming a part of it.

Civility in politics can best be addressed in by adopting three goals, perhaps as a civic covenant:

- Candidates should become more positive in selling their own views and less enamored with defining their opponents.
- Campaign need to “go retail” with more personal voter contact and less campaign cash manipulating the messages from afar.

- Political parties need to do what they were intended to do by defining the issues, recruiting the best candidates available, managing ethical campaigns, getting their vote out and raising the necessary funds to pay for it all from lots of people.

Be assured, voters know it ought to be different. When “old school” politician Al Quie, Minnesota’s governor from 1979 to 1983, turned eighty recently, 1,100 people of wide-ranging political views convened to salute him. Quie had spent better than two decades out of the political limelight, selflessly serving others. Personal integrity, fair-mindedness, and goodwill still count to most Minnesotans.

Chuck Slocum is president of The Williston Group, a management consulting organization. He formerly served as chair of the Independent-Republicans of Minnesota.

Saying and Doing Anything

Steve Sviggum

The political dialogue in Minnesota over the past year has gotten much more personal, and I would say, offensive.

Democrats are attacking every action and inaction by Republicans. Their negative message includes no alternatives or choices—only loud, negative, sometimes even mean-spirited, voices of division.

What we’re seeing is a Democrat Party that is getting more and more liberal, struggling to realize that the elec-

torate is getting more conservative.

As they are in Washington, Democrats in Minnesota are out of power, and they’ll literally say or do anything to get it back. The solution to their party’s troubles is not better aligning themselves with the mainstream views of most Americans, but pandering to the anger of their liberal base.

Recently I read an article in the *Fargo Forum* in which—to loud cheers from the party faithful—Democrat Congressman Dick Gephardt said the following about President Bush, “I’ve served under five presidents, and he’s the worst. The one idea in his head—if he has one—is tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans.”

I’ve heard a lot of political rhetoric in my days, but I can’t ever recall a top-tier presidential candidate—of any party—use such words to describe our country’s commander-in-chief.

It’s not enough to disagree with and criticize Republican policies anymore. To make it in Democrat politics today, you’ve got to believe that Republicans are just flat-out bad people.

A Minnesota example of this way of thinking occurred during the 2003 legislative session.

After the spokesman for the Minnesota House DFL Caucus likened my Republican colleagues and me to the Ku Klux Klan, I was shocked to read letters to the editor in the *Star Tribune* praising this spokesman for “finally telling the truth about Republicans.”

Praise and encouragement from party activists means we’ve only just begun to read and hear this kind of rhetoric from the Democrats.

So what bearing does this kind of political discourse have on our “good life” here in Minnesota?

Steve Sviggum, a Republican, is speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives

Turn off the Noise

Mark Stenglein

The tenor of public discourse in Minnesota has reached a new and noticeably lower level. Increased levels of partisanship, changes in use of technology, fewer truly competitive political races, and an endless stream of news cycles in a variety of media have helped to lower the bar of enlightened public debate.

Political operatives on both sides of the aisle have adopted a rabid partisanship that does not allow them to conceive it possible that the opposing party may actually have a good idea; because to do so could potentially weaken their own positions and therefore the likelihood of re-election. This partisanship eliminates the possibility of adopting common ground. Politicians who put on their partisan blinders are unable to see that adopting “good policy” is actually a good policy. Citizens are rewarded when policy makers adopt sound policy. The current climate places greater emphasis on winning the short-term political battle rather than adopting good policy.

The use of technology has also helped change the political climate. Once upon a time it was nearly impossible to record and catalog all the

quotes, votes, and sound bites of a politician. Information is now at the virtual fingertips of anyone with a modem. Today, a simple Google search can yield any number of sources of information that can be twisted out of context and used to damage a political opponent. Rather than use technology to unite citizens with accurate information, people have chosen instead to use technology to divide the citizenry.

Technological innovation has also changed the next culprit of negative politics, the one-party domination of a political district.

Geographic mapping, census data coordination, and party identification has made the process of redistricting and reapportionment a game of political chess. Sophisticated technicians are able to discern the demographics in a district to such a degree that it is known how many “independent, union-households, over age fifty-five live on Main Street.” This specificity means that districts can be drawn to maximize the likelihood of one-party rule. While not a new phenomenon, “gerrymandering” cheapens the political process. Representatives from that district have no need to listen to the other side of the political aisle. Rather than listen, debate, and reach a compromise, the representative can continue fighting partisan battles knowing full well that constituents back home will offer support.

Lastly, the neverending news cycle means everything is newsworthy. Where editors and producers once made decisions based on content, there

is now a need to fill space. We are inundated with TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, and Internet stories on the latest breaking news, highlighting what is more often than not, an insignificant story. Talking heads also come in an endless supply. What's worse is that each party has its own favored outlet (liberals like MPR while conservatives like KSTP-AM 1500) that offers lots of heat, but little light.

What to do? Number one: think bigger. A temporary political victory is meaningless compared to the implementation of a successful policy initiative. Two: results matter. The public knows success because they can see the results. Three: don't let things you can't control, control you. Attempting to manipulate the configuration of voting districts, "spinning" old stories to make an opponent look bad and other attempts to control the environment around you doesn't make much sense - don't do it. Four: turn off the noise. We'd all do well if we gave more thought to what we're reading, hearing, and seeing; and just because people appear on radio or TV doesn't mean we should automatically listen to them. Last: understand that we're more similar than we are different.

We share neighborhoods, friends, families, likes, and dislikes. We all care about making our lives a little bit better. If we can begin to accept that, well, then we're on our way to a better Minnesota.

Mark Stenglein, an independent, is a member of the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners.

Minnesota is Still Nice— Unless the Dead Start Voting

Terry Thompson

When I moved with my wife to Minneapolis from Chicago twenty years ago, I was disappointed by what passed for Minnesota politics, the uniformity, and starchy politeness. I had left a place where politics and the power it secured were chaotic, fascinating, and changeable. It was markedly uncivil.

The Chicago stories about election fraud, canvassing cemeteries as a form of voter registration, for example, were part of a culture fashioned almost single-handedly by the first Richard Daley. Politics was a blood sport fueled by the same passion that Chicagoans exhibit when cheering or berating the Cubs or the Bears.

In Chicago, politics was the premier public amusement, rowdy and cynical. In Minnesota, it was the subdued and high-principled activity of men like Hubert Humphrey, with his sunny politics of joy. As for effectiveness, Minnesota hoisted a noble standard, but Chicago, the city that works, got the job done in a way that galvanized people and, more times than not, put the interests of citizens first. From time to time, a crooked alderman would get caught with his fingers in the till, but that hardly affected the relationship of voter to city hall.

Just the same, are we now learning the bad habits of others? Has civility left our state with the birth of a new, virulent kind of partisan politics? And are we becoming just like everyone

else, sniping and catcalling in an attempt to gain power at any cost?

Negativists notwithstanding, I don't think the evidence supports that view. Minnesota's DFL and Republican leaders spar more frequently, but they have a long way to go before measuring up to Chicago or most other places. In response to all the issues that are challenging or morally confounding, most Minnesotans have an evolved point of view. They tell the pollster they are tired of political bickering and scandal, yet that hints of putting on your good citizenship hat for show. It's pretending you really like your politics as colorless as lutefisk, while the truth lies elsewhere. Ask the people who cover the news.

Everyone knows that Minnesota is changing, but it is our placid political history that makes change seem so dramatic. It's no longer a society of privileged white businessmen and the rest of us. It's not even a state dominated by DFL precepts and traditions. Minnesota is becoming more raucous because it is less easy to define, and with that comes rhetoric that is occasionally hotter and more partisan.

My limited experience with political volleys and aftershocks comes from working briefly in the administration of Gov. Jesse Ventura, directly supporting a commissioner friend. Notoriously thin-skinned, Ventura was especially riled when his moonlighting raised suspicions, and when the media revealed that his son partied at the governor's mansion, sometimes sanctimoniously referred to as the "people's house."

But even this governor whined more than he eviscerated, and the media in turn were generally more interested in antics than actions. Ventura's language, unprecedented in Minnesota politics, was more tongue in cheek, a brand of "gotcha" humor that relied clumsily on hyperbole and insult. The experience was novel, but it was not a turning point in civility. It was a mostly harmless aberration. Although partisan response to Ventura's sarcasm was pitched, it wasn't hateful in the extreme, as one might have expected. As for our brave political writers, their most impassioned commentary came after Ventura had left office, which is a window for cheap shots and grandiose post-mortems.

Minnesota nowadays is more interesting and tough-minded in its political debate, but don't confuse us with what is going down elsewhere. Our voices are becoming a little more like the voices of the rest of the country, which speaks to changing demographics and an interest in being part of the whole.

But unless 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.

Terry Thompson is a writer, teacher, and former communication officer for General Mills and Pillsbury.

Fingerprints of the Boomers

D.J. Tice

One day in the late 1930s, Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Gov. Elmer Benson, a humorless politician with socialist leanings, gave a typically scalding speech boiling over with excoriations of loathsome industrialists. The story goes that a businessman in the audience was moved to wax nostalgic for Floyd B. Olson, the recently deceased Farmer-Labor icon. Olson had tormented and outmaneuvered Minnesota capitalists for years, largely because he possessed in abundance the light touch and effortless charm Benson conspicuously lacked.

"Floyd Olson used to say these things," the businessman observed. "But this son-of-a-bitch believes them."

This anecdote is a useful reminder of several things. First, heated, even hateful political rhetoric is assuredly nothing new, in Minnesota or anywhere else. Second, clumsy ill temper in politics is often as ineffective as it is unpleasant. It is the mild-mannered extremist who bears watching.

I harbor a suspicion that today's political bitterness is, in part at least, another disagreeable artifact of my '60s generation. It bears our fingerprints. We were always given to exaggeration and a self-important vision of ourselves as warriors in some last decisive battle between darkness and enlightenment.

What's more, the cultural revolt of the Vietnam era produced a broad repudiation by the "new left" of traditional attitudes about bedrock matters like

family, sex, the legitimacy of religion, and the meaning of America. Disagreements about such things do not lend themselves to calm and courteous intellectual debate, or to negotiated compromises between clashing vested interests. These are the sorts of irreconcilable conflicts of belief that produce tribalist, almost sectarian feuds, whose passions are always bewilderingly intense to those outside the struggle.

There's not much doubt that the great successes in recent decades of conservative think tanks and conservative media and, indeed, conservative politicians have inspired the increasingly angry backlash from liberal voices. The modern conservative movement has often employed a free-swinging style, in rhetoric and in tactics, and it is slightly disingenuous for some conservatives to claim they can't understand what has liberals so steamed.

Still, indispensable social, political, and moral traditions really are at stake in today's culture war, and preserving a civilization we have asked many die for is surely worth a few bruised feelings. MacArthur may have been wrong that in war there can be "no substitute for victory"; tolerable stalemate between nations is sometimes possible. But in politics the costs of meekness are steep, and the rewards few.

It is unclear, at least to me, whether the current overheated atmosphere is actually reducing opportunities for substantive debate of issues. It may simply be more obvious in a period of political brawling how many minds are unalterably closed — how many, in fact, have not suffered the invasion of a really

new idea in an entire adult life. But the thinking minority is still there, and can still be reached with sensible arguments.

Historically, old-school conservatives have often been at a political disadvantage precisely because they are philosophically devoted to prudence, compromise, and moderation and fearful of “extremism,” even if it is their own. But if uneasiness with the current era of bad feeling comes naturally to conservatives, they should exercise some moderation in their fretting.

D.J. Tice is state political editor at the Minneapolis-based Star Tribune. ■