



Does America Need a “Civility Institute”?

Fox News host Greta Van Susteren will sit on this new board. She believes the institute can calm partisanship, and observed on her blog: "I jumped at the chance. I was flattered to be asked and eager to do whatever I can to help and serve. Count me in!" Former Presidents George H. Bush and Bill Clinton will serve as co-hosts of the institute, presumably to enhance the non-partisan nature of its activities. Brint Milward, who will be director of the Civility Institute, informed the *New York Times* that it would focus on political disagreements "from the grass roots all the way to the top."



Will this work? Should it work? Samuel Huntington, in his book *The Promise of Disharmony*, has noted some inherent problems with such an idea. America, he observed, is "individualistic, democratic, egalitarian, and hence basically anti-government and anti-authority.... The distinctive aspect of the American Creed is its anti-government character. Opposition to power and suspicion of government as the most dangerous embodiment of power are the central themes of American political thought."

Anyone familiar with electoral rhetoric in American history knows how seldom and how superficial "civility" has been in political campaigns. [Abraham Lincoln](#) was described by his own generals, notably McClellan, in vivid and ugly terms. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams each voiced "uncivil" descriptions of the other. As just one example, Thomas Jefferson hired James Callender to attack John Adams as a "hideous hermaphroditical character, which has neither the force of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman." Even George Washington, revered by many of his countrymen, faced harsh personal assessments by some while in the public arena.

There have been very few periods in this country during which politicians were unstintingly "polite," but the Era of Good Feelings, as one example, was noteworthy because historians point to those eight years in which James Monroe was President as a time without much partisan rancor. This short hiatus from normal American political life ended abruptly with the particularly bitter election of 1824, which no one would have described as a time of "good feelings." John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, and Andrew Jackson all engaged in some fairly intense accusations and declamations during that period.

Anyone deemed on the "Far Right," such as the late Senator Joseph McCarthy, has been the target savage incivility — relentless, unfair, and dishonest. McCarthy, who volunteered to serve in a combat role when he could have avoided service altogether, who campaigned for black votes in Wisconsin when other politicians shunned these constituents, and whose factual errors (as is now known) were only in underestimating the depth of Communist infiltration in the U.S. government, is still vilified, half a century after being hounded to his death. (Perhaps a united effort to rehabilitate the reputation of this good American would be a worthy test case for the new "civility.")

Governor Scott Walker, another Wisconsin politician, is being compared by the Left to Hitler for trying to limit the bargaining power of public employee unions. Perhaps his reaction is the best answer to the



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Civility Institute. He is ignoring the silly and hateful propaganda and, instead, allowing his political opponents who truly go over the line to reveal themselves as mean and foolish. Ad hominem attacks, when phony, often backfire.

But would "civility" require ignoring Bill Clinton's ill treatment of women including, according to [Juanita Broaddrick](#), violent rape? Would it impose softness in describing how Ted Kennedy committed an act that, for ordinary Americans, would have been manslaughter? Is it "uncivil" to observe Barack Obama's attendance at Jeremiah Wright's church or his private mockery of American religious values? Is a scrupulous reporting of the facts, if those facts are damning, somehow "uncivil"?

Perhaps the problem is not in the hearts, minds, and mouths of Americans, who by and large are good-natured and honorable, but instead can be found in the ever-intrusive growth of government. In people's private lives, they know that "incivility" carries heavy costs. A salesman who is rude will soon be out of work. A young man or woman who is obnoxious may find it very hard to get dates. Although Obama may have found Jeremiah Wright "civil," the vast majority of Americans would have gotten up and walked out of his church when he began spewing hatred toward America. Along with a proper upbringing of boys by parents at home, the [Boy Scout Law](#), which explicitly enjoins Scouts to be "courteous" and "kind," has proven masterfully effective for decades in producing civility in boys and men in American culture.

When government runs and allocates medical care, however, that invites anger and bitter words. If some bureaucrat tells an American citizen that his mother or father or wife does not fall within the government parameters of official need, and so must die, he will raise a stir. When environmental policing leads to farmers losing their livelihood, and perhaps even their liberty, for innocently interfering with surreal Wetlands mandates, Americans will say what is on their minds. When their children learn in public schools a bogus history of the nation, along with myriad other oddities of pseudo-education, then they will vent their sadness and anger.

The marketplace of commerce, of friendships, of ideas — left free and unchained by government — operates as a magnificent and natural regulator of manners, decency, and honor. People know that from their church picnics, their daughter's first effort to sell Girl Scout cookies to the neighbors, and the nervous adolescent phone call from a hopeful boy to a pretty girl. Americans don't need government or foundations to teach them courtesy. They need government to leave them alone.



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