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City Creek Canyon
Photography
by John Snyder

Civility :

A Necessity,
Not a Luxury,
in the American
Political System

In recent years American society has undergone a marked deterioration in civility, especially as it relates to political discourse. *Ad hominem* arguments, which seek to demonize those with opposing views, have become all too common in today's political debates. This is a disturbing trend, because civil discourse is a "precondition of a democratic society," as Jesuit theologian James L. Connor has observed. • John Adams, notes Connor, recognized the threat of uncivil discourse to the emerging American democracy in a letter he penned in the spring of 1776. "We may please ourselves with the prospect of

free and popular governments, God grant us the way," Adams wrote. "But I fear that in every assembly members will obtain an influence by noise rather than sense, by meanness rather than greatness, and by ignorance and not learning, by contracted hearts and not large souls."

• This "influence by noise rather than sense" is particularly evident today in the negative political commercials and shallow news coverage we see on television, which places a premium on catchy, often inflammatory "sound bites." This sound-bite superficiality encourages incivility in our society because, as Elaine Chao, distinguished fellow at the Heritage Foundation,



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points out, "It encourages people to jump to conclusions, and to speak without thinking, and to say bombastic things in order to capture attention."

I became acutely aware of how much noise we have in our lives after spending 15 days in relative solitude going down the Grand Canyon in a wooden dory. After that trip I was amazed at the amount of sound we impose on ourselves each day through televisions, radios, and CD players. In such a noisy environment, it is perhaps not surprising that some have concluded that the way to win an argument is to shout louder, rather than reason better, than one's opponents.

But civil discourse does not mean inhibited or boring debate. Thomas Mann, director of the governmental studies program at the Brookings Institution, perceptively notes: "It's incivility that frustrates the democratic ambition of fully airing honest differences." Incivility inhibits hon-

est, vigorous public debate, because many people who would like to engage in such discussions don't do so because they are (rightly) concerned that they will be subjected to character assassination.

"Too often in today's politics, battles are waged as a choice between truth and falsehood, not between competing truths," Mann observes. This type of argumentation creates an "us vs. them" mentality, which has been evident in antigovernment rhetoric and acts of antigovernment violence—the most horrible of which was the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

The "us vs. them" mentality manifests itself in a variety of public policy matters, including public land issues involving the Bureau of Land Management. Frequently the issue at hand has to do with whether certain natural resources on the public lands should be developed or conserved, with commodity interests

supporting development and environmentalists favoring conservation. Unless each side engages the other in a civil manner, an “us vs. them” mentality can set in, with the opponents framing the particular issue in black-or-white, “development vs. conservation” terms.

Moving beyond this “us vs. them” mentality requires adversaries in a democracy to recognize that they are generally offering “competing truths” rather than truth or falsehood. When it comes to public land issues, the “competing truths” of commodity interests and environmentalists reflect the fact that the BLM’s land-management mission involves the “competing truths” of development and conservation.

The BLM’s mission, as Congress set forth in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976, is to manage the public lands for multiple uses. FLPMA defines multiple-use management as “the management of the public lands and their various resource values so that

was essential for survival. One of Brigham Young’s first actions after arriving in Utah was declaring City Creek Canyon off-limits to logging, mining, or any other activity that could pollute the creek next to growing Salt Lake City. The passage of time vindicated Young’s decision, showing how seeming opposites—conservation and development—can actually complement each other.

While not every public land issue (or every public policy issue) lends itself to a recognition of competing truths, it is possible for ideological opponents—even in debates over highly volatile subjects—to treat each other with respect. This approach to argumentation is not merely civil but more effective than *ad hominem* attacks. This is recognized by elected officials who practice civility. For example, Rep. James E. Clyburn (D-s.c.) has cited numerous legislative successes resulting from what he calls his “kinder, gentler” approach “to life in

vants and their public discourses but equally to members of the press, with their important First Amendment duties. This latter group, in our day and age of technological revolution, have an obligation to each of us, as well as to their families, to “print the news fit to print” and not slip down the slippery slope of smut and mire.

Promoting civility in public life, of course, “has to mean something more than mere politeness,” note Guy and Heidi Burgess, codirectors of the Conflict Resolution Consortium at the University of Colorado. “The movement will have accomplished little if all it does is get people to say, ‘Excuse me please,’ while they (figuratively) stab you in the back. Civility also cannot mean ‘roll over and play dead.’ People need to be able to raise tough questions and present their cases when they feel their vital interests are being threatened.” The key, the Burgesses write, is to identify and carry out constructive advocacy strategies that, wherever possible,

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they are utilized in the combination that will best meet the present and future needs of the American people.” By defining multiple-use management so broadly, Congress gave the BLM a complex “both/and” mission—that of promoting *both* development *and* conservation.

From an “either/or” or a “truth/falsehood” point of view, the BLM’s mission consists of two conflicting tasks rolled into one. But from a “both/and” or a “competing truth” perspective, the BLM’s mission contains two complementary components: that of facilitating the development of public land resources *and* that of preserving the public lands for the use and enjoyment of future generations.

My Western heritage is, no doubt, one of the reasons why I see no contradiction between conservation and development. My mother’s family were Mormon pioneers, and the pioneers who settled in the Salt Lake Valley knew that conservation

general and politics in particular.” “Other approaches may make more headlines,” Clyburn writes, “but I question if they will make much headway.”

Besides inhibiting many people from participating in public debate, the decline of civility has undoubtedly deterred many good men and women from running for public office. This deterrence is completely understandable, as office seekers enter an arena where abusive detractors can make one question whether running for office is really worth the effort. If America is to thrive as a democracy in the 21st century, we must restore civility to political debate so that we can attract good people to run for public office and stop driving out good individuals who already hold office.

With recent revelations and reveling in Washington, DC, the ability to attract good and vigorous people to public service will be a significant challenge. The concept of civility must apply not just to public ser-

allow adversaries “to reframe the conflict in ways which transform win-lose confrontations into win-win opportunities.”

As director of the BLM, I am committed to civility—meaning constructive advocacy and debate—in connection with public land issues, as well as all other public policy matters. In a democracy, whose hallmark is nonviolent dispute resolution, this civility is a necessity, not a luxury. As John Adams put it in 1776: “There is one thing . . . that must be attempted and most sacredly observed, or we are all undone. 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.”

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