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# A Return to Civility



*During the past few months, I have spoken and written quite a bit about the need for more civility in our political discourse.*

*I must admit that, as a recovering Kentucky politician who has spoken over the years at Fancy Farm, I feel a little odd writing about civility. But outside of St. Jerome's Church, I always tried my best to avoid throwing the red meat.*

That's because, as the state's chief elections official, I thought it was important for me to be viewed as a nonpartisan, as someone who could work across party and other boundaries.

Sure, there are some ideological elements to elections, but most are nonideological, nonpartisan. Just like most city issues.

This approach to politics wasn't enough to get me elected to the U.S. Senate, but it did help me land my relatively new position as the director of Harvard's Institute of Politics (IOP).

When I was named IOP director on January 7, 2011, I sent an e-mail to some friends. That evening, when my wife, Nancy, and I were driving to Birmingham to watch the University of Kentucky play in a bowl game, one friend, whom I had met in 2005 when she was a state senator in Arizona, wrote back. This is an excerpt from the e-mail that my friend, Gabby Giffords, sent me the night before the tragic morning at the Tucson Safeway:

*Dear Trey,*

*Congratulations! Wow! This is a fantastic position and a perfect fit for you. As a State Senator I participated in the 3-week State and Local leader's program and have never forgotten it. Hard to forget Marty Linksky.*

*After you get settled, I would love to talk about what we can do to promote centrism and moderation. I am one of only 12 Dems left in a GOP district (the only woman) and think that we need to figure out how to tone our rhetoric and partisanship down.*

*Mark and I will come visit after you get settled. Again, congratulations. This is truly an incredible opportunity that will lead to wonderful things.*

*Best, G*

I am really looking forward to that visit, because Gabby is absolutely right. We need to tone our rhetoric and partisanship down. Too often, we find ourselves not just disagreeing but also acting disagreeably toward those with whom we do not agree. Whether

it's a Republican congressman calling President Obama a liar during a State of the Union Address or a Democratic congressman saying Republicans want to kill old people, there is enough blame on both sides to go around.

Those who study American history can point to instances throughout history when the tone of the debate was much more uncivil than today. We even had a duel between a Cabinet official and a vice president and a caning on the Senate floor. But most agree that the problem has gotten worse in the past few decades.

It doesn't help that members of Congress almost never get a chance to know members outside of their own party. Why? They face a very packed schedule of votes, committee meetings, caucus meetings, constituent meetings, and lots and lots of fundraising.

There are a few exceptions — the House Gym; Women on Capitol Hill; members from the same state or who serve on the same committee; and, to a certain extent, the Senate. But they are just that — exceptions.

I'm a glass-is-half-full kind of guy. So I do see a few positive signs on the horizon.

1. The bipartisan Bowles-Simpson commission that was tasked by President Obama to come up with a comprehensive plan to reduce our budget deficit. All four senators on the Commission — Tom Coburn (R-Oklahoma), Richard Durbin (D-Illinois), Mike Crapo (R-Idaho) and Kent Conrad (D-North Dakota) — supported its findings, which included a mixture of tax reform (including some tax increases), entitlement reform and very large spending cuts.

They took their task seriously and soberly, and they set aside their partisan differences to find a big solution — a “grand bargain,” if you will — to our nation's debt problems.

Unfortunately, the president cast the group's recommendations aside, even though he appointed them. While this effort at a grand bargain has failed to date, I still take solace in the senators' ability to find common ground.

2. Another promising development is the recently announced National Institute for Civil Discourse, on whose board I serve.

The Institute is to be located at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Its honorary chairs are former President Bill Clinton and former President George H.W. Bush. Their willingness to be involved speaks to the importance of the work that we expect to produce.

The Institute is devoted to the principles that motivate Gabby Giffords — that

people can have very different values and political preferences but can still discuss these differences in a civil manner and, through this process, find ways to hold fast to principle but also compromise where possible.

The Institute's goal is to seek new ways to speak across political divides without sacrificing a deep and abiding commitment to First Amendment principles. The Institute plans to develop programs, curricula and research committed to the vigorous exercise of freedom of speech in a way that respects both the ideas of others and those who hold them.

The Institute, whose executive director is Lexington native Brint Milward, also hopes to serve as a national clearinghouse for related organizations and



Villa Hills Councilmember James Noll with Trey Grayson at the 2011 KLC Conference & Expo. Noll and Grayson attended law school together at the University of Kentucky.



programs nationwide, seeking to improve the quality of public discourse.

Why is this work important?

As a country, we face serious problems. Here are just three of them:

1. A debt that one of my favorite governors, Indiana's Mitch Daniels, calls the New Red Menace
2. A need to improve our educational system to better prepare our citizens to compete in a knowledge-based, world economy
3. A renewed emphasis on improving city life in an era with greater needs and fewer resources

These are big challenges, and they will require leaders who are not afraid to work together to achieve consensus. We have done this in the past. Remember, we came together as a nation during World War II to fight fascism around the world.

And our very own Constitution was the product of a series of compromises between small states and large states, as well as

Southern states and Northern states, giving us a republic that we have so far kept, to paraphrase Benjamin Franklin.

Unfortunately, as we face these serious challenges, the increasingly strident tenor of the nation's public discourse hurts our democracy and threatens our ability to work together as a nation to address America's major challenges.

In other words, to fix America, we must first fix our broken political system. We must all play a role in this effort.

What can city officials do?

First, recognize that you are on the front lines. Times are going to be very tough during the next few years. You are going to be asked to do your jobs better with less financial resources. This is going to put even more stress on you and your citizens.

The National League of Cities has prepared a great publication entitled *Beyond Civility* that contains some solid ideas that may seem simple but are really powerful. Among them:

**In other words, to fix America, we must first fix our broken political system. We must all play a role in this effort.**

### 1. Learn how to better conduct meetings that provide meaningful public input.

Most residents just want to be heard. Sure, they want you to do what they say. But if you listen to them and give them a fair shake before telling them no, or not right now, they will be much more likely to respect you. Don't be afraid to ask for help with this. Running a meeting is not a natural skill.

### 2. Reach out to young people by visiting schools and encouraging more civic education in the classroom.

This is a worthy long-term investment, and it is very rewarding to share what you do with students. Remember, students spend almost no time learning about how cities work.

### 3. Use technology.

Technology can make it easier to inform and involve more of your residents in city governance. You should use social media like Facebook and Twitter and post lots of information on your city's website, such as your online checkbook.

Working together, we can make our cities, our commonwealth and, indeed, our country a more civil place in which to live, work and play.

If we do that, we will continue to be that shining city on the hill to which we all aspire. **KYC**

*Trey Grayson was formerly Kentucky's Secretary of State and was a keynote speaker at the 2011 KLC Conference & Expo.*



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