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A Call for Civility

by Rushworth M. Kidder

While the U.S. presidential election raised deep disagreements, it left pundits in consensus on one thing: It was among the most negative, nasty, and divisive elections this country has ever seen.

As I've said before, both candidates spoke the vituperative language of contemptuous dismissal with great force and conviction. In doing so, they effectively gave permission to others to talk that way. Result: increasingly vehement anti-American talk abroad, and a decline of comity at home.

Is healing possible? Former U.S. ambassadors David Abshire and Max Kampelman think so. These two longtime, bipartisan Washington institution-builders have put forward an intriguing proposal. Three days after the election, they issued a well-written "Declaration on Civility and Inclusive Leadership to Unite a Divided America." Their immediate goal is to get 101 of the nation's top political and educational leaders to sign on, as a start at reversing the bitterness and rancor in public life.

Dr. Abshire, who heads the Center for the Study of the Presidency, makes a persuasive historical case that the nation has prospered when unity has been strongest. Citing Abraham Lincoln's Biblical reminder that "a house divided against itself cannot stand," he also argues that the nation is weakest in periods of disunity, like those preceding the Civil War and during the Vietnam War. Hence the call for civility.

But what does "civil" mean? Derived from the Latin word for *citizen,* it originally described the relations of citizens to each other or the body politic. From there it came to mean something shared by citizens (a civil society) or marked by group activity. It developed into a term for a stable and well-organized community no longer primitive, or an educated and cultured society no longer rustic. Finally, it morphed into an adequate sense of politeness, courtesy, and social convention (a civil tongue), or, as my Webster's puts it, "a sufficient but not noteworthy consideration for others."

That word "sufficient" is key. Civility doesn't require a wholesale embrace of opinions foreign to one's own. Yet it's more than mere etiquette. In the language of the proposed "Declaration on Civility," the term "blends passion, commitment, and tolerance" and "requires respect for others [and] listening and dialogue in dealing with those who hold differing opinions." But it "does not require citizens to give up cherished beliefs or water down convictions." As Dr. Abshire explained it to me, "It doesn't mean that the red-shirt guys put on blue shirts" or that "you give up your position," but simply that "you deal with those differences."

The Abshire-Kampelman proposal shouldn't raise hackles under shirts of either color. In his inaugural address in 2001, President George W. Bush observed that "civility is not a tactic or a sentiment. It is the determined choice of trust over cynicism, of community over chaos." Sen. John F. Kerry, in his comments following the election, called on his followers to "join in common effort, without remorse or recrimination, without anger or rancor," noting that "America is in need of unity and longing for a larger measure of compassion."

On a theoretical level, then, this is clearly a winning idea. But can theory translate into practice? Only if the signers of this Declaration are willing to stand strong against the headwinds of a growing absolutism that, convinced of its rightness, brands everything unlike itself as wholly wrong. The battle won't be against other personalities. It will be against an attitude of infallibility that oversimplifies issues, overlooks nuance, and shuns complexity. The signers of this Declaration will demonstrate true civility when they find the moral courage not to lash back when taunted, not to stop respecting those who show little respect, and not to surrender depth as they seek clarity.

But why stop with these signers? The United States is filled with people ready to take a stand for civility. They're fed up with the politics of invective. They long for the courtesy and consensus they remember in elder generations. Committed and passionate, they won't give up their opinions, but they've had it with rudeness and personal attack. If the essence of this "Declaration on Civility" could be put before them -- on a single page -- it could well launch a grassroots, trickle-up movement that would take even the drafters of this Declaration by surprise. If you agree, let me know -- and watch this space for further news on this development.