

Civility in the Golden Age, 1959-1969

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One can hope that the story headline in Friday's *Wall Street Journal* proves true: "Bipartisan Breezes Waft Through Congress" it read as the reporter described apparent progress on gun control and immigration reform legislation.¹

Grounds for skepticism continue to exist, however.

Two years ago, a group called the Civility Project sent out 585 letters asking every sitting governor and every member of Congress to sign a pledge that said:

I will be civil in my discourse and behavior.
I will be respectful of others whether or not I agree with them.
I will stand against incivility when I see it.

Three members of Congress signed the pledge.² Three. Only three.

As 2012 ended, Democrats and Republicans battled over the country's fiscal challenge. Speaker of the House John Boehner became so agitated with the lack of progress that he used a vulgar expression to curse at Senate Majority Leader [Harry Reid](#). Called upon to explain, this is what Boehner said: "Those days after Christmas, I was in Ohio, and Harry's on the Senate floor calling me a dictator and all kinds of nasty things. You know, I don't lose my temper. I never do. But I was shocked at what Harry was saying about me. I came back to town. Saw Harry at the White House. And that was when I said 'go [blank] yourself.'"

Such is the state of civility in today's Congress. Make no mistake about it, incivility comes at a price. Discourteous behavior in recent Congresses has undermined public confidence in the people's branch. A survey conducted by Public Policy Polling in January this year found that Congress was less popular than root canals, NFL replacement referees, head lice, colonoscopies, traffic jams, cockroaches, Donald Trump, Brussel sprouts, and used-car salesmen. Lest you lose all hope, however, Congress did manage to beat out meth labs and the ebola virus.³

Let me stipulate at the outset that the causes of, and thus the remedies for, discourteous behavior are many. I will resist the temptation to catalog them even though it is possible to do so. Our own Ray LaHood's four civility conferences from 1997 through 2003, for example, identified more than 500 causes ranging from the speed of change in society to the lack of nametags for new members.

Instead, I intend to focus on a single factor—language. Language in the sense that words matter, words carry weight. Many of the factors that give rise to incivility are beyond any individual's capacity to control or to influence. Not so the language they use.

¹ *Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2013.

² "Founder of 'Civility Project' Calls It Quits," *New York Times*, The Caucus, January 12, 2011. Accessed

² "Founder of 'Civility Project' Calls It Quits," *New York Times*, The Caucus, January 12, 2011. Accessed February 13, 2013.

³ Public Policy Polling press release, January 8, 2013.

I will suggest that civility in Congress depends on members respecting one another, respect that is mirrored in the language they use. I will attempt to explore this theme by looking back to what some call the golden age of civility and bipartisanship in the U.S. Senate. This period of our nation's history, 1959-1969, featured some of the lions of our political history: Senate Majority Leader and then President Lyndon Johnson, a Democrat; Senator and then Vice President Hubert Humphrey, a Democrat; Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, a Democrat; and Senate Minority Leader Everett McKinley Dirksen, Republican.

By the way, that decade was not a period of nonpartisanship, which is very different from bipartisanship. To the contrary, the legislative battles over civil rights, Medicare, federal aid to education, labor reform legislation, and the Vietnam war just to name a few were fraught with partisanship, even bitterness. But members of Congress did arrive at bipartisan resolutions to public policy challenges and did so, at the end of the day, in a spirit of mutual respect.

Engendering Respect Through the Use of Language

Everett Dirksen's papers provide a lens through which to view our political leaders' attitudes and behavior during the 1960s. They seem to differ considerably from the climate today.

Dirksen, for example, brought to his position in the Senate a belief about how the chamber should function. In giving tribute to a colleague early in his career, for example, Dirksen spoke these words on the Senate floor:

Oh, what a horrible business this would be, and how quickly the spirit of good fellowship would go out the door, if tempers were asserted too frequently here. It is written in the sacred parchments, 'Let not the sun set upon your wrath.' If wrath or anger ever takes over, the efficacy of this deliberative body will be destroyed. . .⁴

As his career in the Senate lengthened and as Dirksen ascended into the leadership, he continued to believe that personal relationships, and mutual respect, were fundamental.

When asked if he worked in harmony with the Senate Majority Leader, Democrat Lyndon Johnson, Dirksen responded:

With the greatest of harmony, and out of a recognition, I think, that the Senate is a two-way street, and if the leaders do not get along, then very easily, through dilatory motions and otherwise, it could be rendered into a shambles and you wouldn't get anything done. I could take a half a dozen or a dozen people on our side, if we set ourselves to it, and conduct a filibuster and just withhold action on legislation week after week, but every Senator is a patriot, he is devoted to the well-being of his country, and in consequence the Senate program has to move along. You can't afford to have it stalemated at some place. And so the leaders have got to understand each other, even though we did disagree sharply on many things, but in the best of grace.⁵

Dirksen understood implicitly the power of language as part of making the Senate work. In defending President Dwight Eisenhower from vocal attacks by Democratic Senator Wayne Morse, Dirksen made the point plainly that words matter:

⁴ *Congressional Record*, August 20, 1954, 15483.

⁵ CBS Television, "Washington Conversation," March 5, 1961, 15, Remarks and Releases.

I hope we can be a little more circumspect in the way in which we talk about one another. We can speak and still maintain the intensity of our political disagreements. But to do so does not call for personal castigation or reflection upon character. I can only hope, out of a sense of pain and distress, rather than anger, that we can watch our tongues⁶

Contrast that statement with Sen. Chuck Grassley's tweet in April 2012 calling President Obama "stupid" on matters of constitutional law. Or House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi accusing John Boehner of being "immature and irresponsible."⁷

Dirksen labored hard over the years to maintain civility in his formal discourse with colleagues. The following exchange took place after eight weeks of contentious debate and many arduous hours of continuous session preceding eventual passage in the Senate of the Civil Rights Act of 1960. Dirksen led the effort to pass the bill. He was opposed by southern Democrats under the generalship of Georgia's Senator Richard Russell (D-GA):

Mr. Dirksen. Mr. President, before the distinguished senior Senator from Georgia [Mr. Russell] leaves the Chamber, I just wish to salute a great parliamentarian, a great captain, a worthy antagonist, and a man of deep conviction whom I have learned to admire and to revere in 25 years of legislative service. My respect and my admiration for him are greater today than they ever were before.

Mr. Russell: Mr. President, I deeply appreciate the very kind comments of the distinguished Senator from Illinois. I have met him as an adversary time and again over a period of 25 years. He is a tough but a fair fighter. He keeps all his blows above the belt.

I am very grateful to him for the generous sentiments he has expressed, even though he wears the garlands of victory because of the passage of this bill, which I opposed as vigorously as I know how.⁸

Even when Dirksen wanted to criticize a colleague, he did not resort to barnyard epithets. The sternest rebuke I could find occurred when Dirksen tired of a senator's endless declamations on a single topic. The Senate Minority Leader then casually observed that the senator in question had never allowed himself the luxury of an unexpressed thought!

I contend that respect for the power of words, and senators' faithfulness to the tradition of civil discourse, helped to create a productive legislative process.

I'd like to reinforce that point by quoting from the **personal** correspondence in the Dirksen collection between Dirksen and Lyndon Johnson and between Dirksen and Mike Mansfield, who succeeded LBJ as Senate Majority Leader.

Here is an example from a private letter Dirksen penned to Lyndon Johnson in 1959:

⁶ *Congressional Record*, May 22, 1957, 7358; Fred Bauer, *Ev: The Man and His Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Hewitt House, 1969): 83

⁷ "Congressional Name-Calling, Incivility on the Rise," *The Daily Beast*, June 11, 2012.

⁸ *Congressional Record*, April 8, 1960, 7813-14.

COPY

September 12, 1959

The Honorable Lyndon B. Johnson
United States Senate
Washington, D. C.

Dear Lyndon:

The end of the Session is somewhat like the end of an act in a play. It marks but a fragment of time and brings not only reflection on what has transpired but curiosity as to what lies ahead.

We have differed but always with high respect for each other's viewpoint. We have fought -- gently, I hope -- but always with understanding. We have asserted our various party causes, but always in good grace. We have shared a high mutual pride in the Senate and in a common effort to make it and keep it what it is and always has been -- the greatest free, independent, undominated legislative body in the world.

And in the doing our friendship has deepened and become a nourishing force in pursuing our respective duties. For me it has been an enriching experience, and I simply want to say thanks a million for your understanding and your kindness.

I do hope you will enjoy that tranquility and peace which comes with the autumn and have a sustained rest, which you so richly deserve.

With warmest personal regards,

Beverly McKinley Birken

MB:mcg

[Answered 10/20/59]

And Johnson's response:



LYNDON B. JOHNSON
SENATE DEMOCRATIC LEADER

September 14, 1959

Dear Everett:


There are very few things that could have brought me more personal joy than that fine letter. It spoke, in such eloquent words, so many thoughts that are in my own heart and which have done so much to sustain me.

I have served with four Republican Leaders. For all of them, I developed a deep respect and a rich affection. When I was a neophyte in the legislative processes, I was told that no leader can be very useful unless he has friendships on the other side of the aisle. I have discovered that this is a statement of great wisdom.

Of the leaders with whom I have served, there have been none who can wield the partisan stiletto with quite the gusto and the zest that you do. But even though the stiletto cuts deep, it never stings. I have an idea that we will always be friends, even though we will pursue separate paths, and while I wish for you an Autumn of tranquillity and peace -- such as you wish for me -- as Majority Leader I hope it does not give you sufficient rest that you return in the next session with your powers reinvigorated and multiplied to any substantial degree.

But as your friend, personally I wish you well, and I am looking forward to the next time that we meet again. Best personal regards.

Sincerely



Lyndon B. Johnson

The Honorable Everett M. Dirksen

[Autumn 1959, Johnson, C
to Stewart, R, F, J]

The mutual respect between Johnson and Dirksen, and the basis for bipartisanship and civility, extended through Johnson's presidential administration. Even as Dirksen joined with his House counterpart to grill the administration weekly on the famous "Ev and Charlie" and "Ev and Jerry" shows, the two, Dirksen and Johnson, maintained civil tongues.

During the heated negotiations over what would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Dirksen wrote privately to a constituent about his relationship with the Democratic president:

There were times when we differed very sharply on legislation or policy and we expressed ourselves on the Floor of the Senate with vigor and conviction. This, however, is no wise [sic] diminished our long standing friendship nor has it until this good hour. I know of no reason why regardless of our differences of opinion and of the fact that we belong to opposite parties that we shall not continue always as the very best of friends.⁹

Johnson echoed Dirksen as the 89th Congress drew to a close in 1966. The occasion was a luncheon hosted by the Senate for the President. Johnson spent several minutes giving his evaluation of the congressional session and then turned his attention to the Senate Republicans and their leader:

There is nothing that gives me more pride, although I never relish opposition—there is nothing that gives me more pride than to have an opposition that is of the quality and kind of my loyal opposition, led by Senator Dirksen. You've been fair to me, you've been just to me, and you have been good to me. But far more important than being good to me, you have tried to put the interest of your country first and to serve it.¹⁰

Would Senate Republicans today deserve that accolade today? Would President Obama offer it if they did?

Once Lyndon Johnson left the Senate for the vice presidency, the taciturn Mike Mansfield took his place as the Majority Leader. Like Johnson and Dirksen, Mansfield, by word and deed, furthered the tradition of civility and mutual respect.

In working through Dirksen's papers, I was struck by two occasions during which Mansfield, a shy and retiring senator if there ever was one, went out of his way to compliment his counterpart.

As you listen to his words, try to imagine Harry Reid saying the same about Mitch McConnell.

This is Senate Majority Leader Mansfield paying tribute to Dirksen in the Senate chamber:

Mr. President, on this occasion, I wish that I possessed the eloquence of the distinguished Senator from Illinois (Mr. Dirksen). I wish for his wit and wisdom. I wish for his humor and poetry. I wish for his scholarly erudition and his homespun simplicity. I wish for that immense range of language and voice, from the softest serenity to the most turbulent thunder.

⁹ Dirksen (dictated to Glee Gomien) to Okamoto, April 3, 1964, Alpha 1964, Johnson.

¹⁰ *Public Papers of the President*, Lyndon Baines Johnson, October 14, 1966, p. 1183.

Had I these gifts, I would unleash them in orchestrated expression of the great affection, respect, admiration, and esteem in which I hold the distinguished minority leader. I would weave, with words, a magic spell over the Senate as he has done so many times. With words, I would lift the eyes of Senators to the mountain peaks and the stars beyond or I would lead them gently down a rustic road in Illinois. With words, I would lay bare the heart of a flower or pry open the fiery core of the atom that the Senate might appreciate the depth and breadth of the Senator from Illinois.

That is what I would do, Mr. President, had I the eloquent gifts of the minority leader. . . .

So, Mr. President, I shall, in my limited fashion, say to him on this occasion: EVERETT, I am honored and grateful that you sit across the aisle from me. You are a tower of strength as a collaborator in the leadership of this body. For 30 years you have served your party faithfully and brilliantly. But for 30 years you have served our country more.¹¹

Interviewed off the record by a reporter, Mansfield described Dirksen's leadership style in these terms:

You need his cooperation and collaboration, and he has always been willing to give it, sometimes under difficult circumstances. He's understanding of my problems and I try to be understanding of his. In my opinion, I couldn't have a better man as leader on that side of the aisle. We have an understanding that neither of us is caught flatfooted by the other. There's a fair exchange, scrupulously honored. If we can't work together, the Senate can't work.¹²

In other words, their words were their bond.

Civility in Congress extended to legislative battles, too, beyond the kindness and courtesy of speech. The foremost example in this period, of course, is the 1964 civil rights bill.

Following the successful battle to end for the first time a filibuster on a civil rights bill, Mansfield wrote Dirksen:

¹¹ *Congressional Record*, August 22, 1962, Remarks and Releases.

¹² Mansfield to Neil MacNeil, interview, n.d., in Collection 156, MacNeil Papers, Notes, Mansfield.

MIKE MANSFIELD
MONTANA

United States Senate
Office of the Majority Leader
Washington, D.C.

June 22, 1964

Honorable Everett McKinley Dirksen
United States Senate

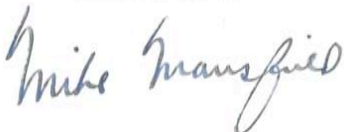
Dear Ev:

We have come through a most trying period in the Senate. In retrospect, the issues were such that they might have opened schisms which would have been years in closing. That did not happen, and I want you to know how grateful I am for the help, the understanding and the cooperation which you gave to me in striving to prevent it.

The character of the Senate's handling of this issue, I believe, will mean a great deal to the nation. I know that it meant a great deal to me personally. Members, regardless of views on the substance of the measure, treated me with the utmost kindness and consideration and I am deeply appreciative.

With best personal wishes I am

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mike Mansfield". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

And Dirksen responded:

COPY

June 24, 1964

The Honorable Mike Mansfield
The Majority Leader
The United States Senate
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mike:

I don't know what we would have done about the civil rights struggle if it had not been for your humility, your understanding, your self-effacement and your appreciation of every problem as it arose.

When all is said and done you are the one who should have had the lion's share of the credit because you are the Majority Leader and because you cooperated so superbly at every step of this tortuous road. You will never know how deep my appreciation is and my admiration and respect for you.

Sincerely,

Everett McKinley Dirksen

EMD:GDC:fa

It is little wonder, given the care with which these two men treated one another, that Mansfield would speak on Dirksen's behalf when the American Good Government Society presented its George Washington Award to Dirksen in April 1964 at the height of the civil rights filibuster.

Let me read the last paragraph of Mansfield's 750-word testimony:

I have known Senator Dirksen . . . beyond personal friendships, legislative kinship and partisan rivalry as a great American. I have known him not only as a man who responds to the needs of his constituency and to the needs of his party. I have known him, as a man who, at the same time, has the wisdom and the integrity, the compassionate humanity, and the courage to look to the needs of the entire nation in this generation and in the generations yet to come.

When the issues transcend party or region, and involve fundamental precepts of the American Constitution—as they do in civil rights—when they touch upon the survival of the nation and its future—and they did in the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty—in short, at the decisive moments, the Senator for Illinois is a tower of national strength. On those occasions, there is no partisanship, no sectionalism in Senator Dirksen. There is only a profound reason and a dedicated patriotism enshrined in a man of deeply human experience.¹³

In closing, permit me to hope for the restoration of the sentiment expressed by John Adams speaking at the Constitutional Convention:

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 not sense, by meanness not greatness, by ignorance not learning, by contracted hearts not large souls* [emphasis added]. There is one thing my dear sir 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.¹⁴

¹³ Remarks of Senator Mike Mansfield, American Good Government Society, April 30, 1964.

¹⁴ Plenary remarks, David McCullough, LaHood, DC Office, Subject Files, Civility Retreats, 1997, Plenary Session.