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# White America's Age-Old, Misguided Obsession With Civility

By Thomas J. Sugrue

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Image



In 1963 the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led a mass demonstration in Birmingham, Ala., to pressure the Kennedy administration to actively defend the civil rights of black citizens. Credit Bob Adelman Estate

Recent disruptive protests — from diners at Mexican restaurants in the capital calling the White House adviser Stephen Miller a fascist to protesters in Pittsburgh [blocking rush-hour traffic](#) after a police shooting of an unarmed teen — have provoked bipartisan alarm. CNN

commentator David Gergen, adviser to every president from Nixon through Clinton, [compared the anti-Trump resistance unfavorably to 1960s protests](#), saying, “The antiwar movement in Vietnam, the civil rights movement in the ’60s and early ’70s, both of those were more civil in tone — even the antiwar movement was more civil in tone, but certainly the civil rights movement, among the people who were protesting.”

But those who say that the civil rights movement prevailed because of civil dialogue misunderstand protest and political change.

Image



As a candidate in 2016, Donald Trump used his own lack of civility to win the election. Credit Damon Winter/The New York Times

This misunderstanding is widespread. Democratic leaders have lashed out at an epidemic of uncivil behavior in their own ranks. [In a tweet](#), the House minority leader, Nancy Pelosi, denounced both “Trump’s daily lack of civility” and angry liberal responses “that are predictable but unacceptable.” [Senator Charles Schumer](#) described the “harassment of political opponents” as “not American.” His alternative: polite debate. “If you disagree with someone or something, stand up, make your voice heard, explain why you think they’re wrong, and why you’re right.”

Democrat Cory A. Booker [joined the chorus](#). “We’ve got to get to a point in our country where we can talk to each other, where we are all seeking a more beloved community. And some of those tactics that people are advocating for, to me, don’t reflect that spirit.”

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The theme: We need a little more love, a little more King, a dollop of Gandhi. Be polite, be civil, present arguments thoughtfully and reasonably. Appeal to people’s better angels. Take the moral high ground above Trump and his supporters’ low road. Above all, don’t disrupt.

This sugarcoating of protest has a long history. During the last major skirmish in the civility wars two decades ago, when President Bill Clinton held a national conversation about race to dampen tempers about welfare reform, affirmative action, and a controversial crime bill, the Yale law professor Stephen Carter argued that civil rights protesters were “loving” and “civil in their dissent against a system willing and ready to destroy them.” King, argued Carter, “understood that uncivil dialogue serves no democratic function.”

But in fact, civil rights leaders, while they did believe in the power of nonviolence, knew that their success depended on disruption and coercion as much — sometimes more — than on dialogue and persuasion. They knew that the vast majority of whites who were indifferent or openly hostile to the demands of civil rights would not be moved by appeals to the American creed or to bromides about liberty and justice for all. Polite words would not change their behavior.

For King and his allies, the key moment was spring 1963, a contentious season when polite discourse gave way to what many called the “Negro Revolt.” That year, the threat of disruption loomed large. King led a mass demonstration in Birmingham, Ala., deliberately planned to provoke police violence. After the infamous police commissioner Bull Connor sicced police dogs on schoolchildren and arrested hundreds, including King, angry black protesters looted Birmingham’s downtown shopping district. Protesters against workplace discrimination in Philadelphia and New York deployed increasingly disruptive tactics, including blockading construction sites, chaining themselves to cranes, and clashing with law

enforcement officials. Police forces around the United States began girding for what they feared was an impending race war.

Whites both North and South, moderate and conservative, continued to denounce advocates of civil rights as “un-American” and destructive throughout the 1960s. Agonized moderates argued that mass protest was counterproductive. It would alienate potential white allies and set the goal of racial equality back years, if not decades. Conservatives more harshly criticized the movement. [National Review](#) charged “King and his associates” with “deliberately undermining the foundations of internal order in this country. With their rabble-rousing demagoguery, they have been cracking the ‘cake of custom’ that holds us together.” By 1966, [more than two-thirds of Americans disapproved](#) of King.

King aimed [some of his harshest words](#) toward advocates of civility, whose concerns aligned with the hand-wringing of many of today’s politicians and pundits. From his Birmingham jail cell, King wrote: “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’.” King knew that whites’ [insistence on civility usually stymied civil rights](#).

Those methods of direct action — disruptive and threatening — spurred the Kennedy administration to move decisively. On June 11, [the president addressed the nation](#) on the “fires of frustration and discord that are burning in every city, North and South, where legal remedies are not at hand.” Kennedy, like today’s advocates of civility, was skeptical of “passionate movements.” He criticized “demonstrations, parades and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives,” and argued, “it is better to settle these matters in the courts than on the streets.” But he also had to put out those fires. He tasked his staff with drafting what could eventually become the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. Dialogue was necessary but far from sufficient for passage of civil rights laws. Disruption catalyzed change.

That history is a reminder that civility is in the eye of the beholder. And when the beholder wants to maintain an unequal status quo, it's easy to accuse picketers, protesters, and preachers alike of incivility, as much because of their message as their methods. For those upset by disruptive protests, the history of civil rights offers an unsettling reminder that the path to change is seldom polite.

***Correction: June 29, 2018***

*A previous version of this piece misstated Bull Connor's title. He was a police commissioner, not the police chief.*

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