

OUR TURN MATT LEHRMAN AND JOHN LITTLE

We must cure the incivility that's a plague among us



"You lie" was a watershed moment for American incivility.



It was 2009 and in the midst of a presidential address to a joint session of Congress, Rep. Joe Wilson set a new low standard for disrespectful behavior in a public meeting. Not merely a disruption, it was an unequivocal insult and an all-out sign of disrespect that was, rightfully and forcefully, condemned by political leaders of both parties.

But the damage was done.

Today, such disruptive and counterproductive behavior is being mimicked in community meetings of all sorts, including homeowners associations, school boards, city councils, town halls and candidate forums.

Obstruction a virtue?

Obstruction has become, to some, a virtue. Unhappy with a given policy, small groups of people are hijacking public processes, distracting attention and causing proceedings to slow to a crawl. It's not productive — but then there's nothing "productive" about the goal of obstruction.

To be productive is to offer a thoughtful counterpoint to a policy initiative or to deepen understanding of a complex issue and a willingness to engage in ongoing dialogue. To disrupt or derail the process itself is to be counterproductive, not just to the issue at hand but to the vi-

tility of the community.

To be a community is to be willing to hear, learn, consider and make group decisions, recognizing and respecting a vast array of options, opinions, aspirations and choices where even delay or inaction carries repercussions that can be long-lasting and consequential.

Obstruction isn't the only challenge to a vibrant community. The public process itself must be welcoming, inclusive and productive.

To frustrate or marginalize those who want to engage is as dangerous as obstructing the processes of public policy consideration.

Setting a bad example

Too often, that's a failure of government. For example, requiring citizens to sit through insufferable hours of a city council meeting for the chance to make a late-night three-minute statement on an issue of community importance is, itself, disrespectful and discourteous.

At every level of American community life, we can do better. We must do better.

It's not just that American government needs to be more civil, but that American communities at every level must aspire to be the world's model for democratic process.

Freedom of speech is a basic American right, but it doesn't exist without a concurrent commitment to honesty, respect, patience, education and inclusivity.

We need to restore to health this great democracy for the well-being of future generations.

Matt Lehrman and John Little, the founders of Social Prosperity Partners, are committed to improving the way people, organizations and communities address complex community challenges.