

CIVILITY IS OVERRATED

The gravest danger to American democracy isn't an excess of vitriol—it's the false promise of civility.

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The Atlantic

[DECEMBER 2019 ISSUE](#)

JOE BIDEN HAS fond memories of negotiating with James Eastland, the senator from Mississippi who once declared, "I am of the opinion that we should have segregation in all the States of the United States by law. What the people of this country must realize is that the white race is a superior race, and the Negro race is an inferior race."

Recalling in June his debates with segregationists like Eastland, Biden lamented, "At least there was some civility," compared with today. "We got things done. We didn't agree on much of anything. We got things done. We got it finished. But today, you look at the other side and you're the enemy. Not the opposition; the enemy. We don't talk to each other anymore."

Biden later apologized for his wistfulness. But yearning for an ostensibly more genteel era of American politics wasn't a gaffe. Such nostalgia is central to Biden's appeal as an antidote to the vitriol that has marked the presidency of Donald Trump.

Nor is Biden alone in selling the idea that rancor threatens the American republic. This September, Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch, who owes his seat to Senate Republicans depriving a Democratic president of his authority to fill a vacancy on the high court, published a book that argued, "In a very real way, self-governance turns on our treating each other as equals—as persons, with the courtesy and respect each person deserves—even when we vigorously disagree."

Trump himself, a man whose rallies regularly descend into ritual denunciations of his enemies, declared in October 2018, as Americans were preparing to vote in the midterm elections, that "everyone will benefit if we can end the politics of personal destruction." The president helpfully explained exactly what he meant: "Constant unfair coverage, deep hostility, and negative attacks ... only serve to drive people apart and to undermine healthy debate." Civility, in other words, is treating Trump how Trump wants to be treated, while he treats you however he pleases. It was a more honest description of how the concept of civility is applied today than either Biden or Gorsuch offered.

There are two definitions of civility. The first is not being an asshole. The second is "I can do what I want and you can shut up." The latter definition currently dominates American political discourse.

The country is indeed divided today, and there is nothing wrong with wishing that Americans could all get along. But while nonviolence is essential to democracy, civility is optional, and today's preoccupation with politesse both exaggerates the country's divisions and papers over the fundamental issues that are causing the divisions in the first place. The idea that we're currently experiencing something like the nadir of American civility ignores the turmoil that has traditionally characterized the nation's politics, and the comparatively low level of political violence today despite the animosity of the moment.

Americans should not fear tension. They should fear its absence

Paeans to a more civil past also ignore the price of that civility. It's not an unfortunate coincidence that the men Joe Biden worked with so amicably were segregationists. The civility he longs for was *the result of* excluding historically marginalized groups from the polity, which allowed men like James Eastland to wield tremendous power in Congress without regard for the rights or dignity of their disenfranchised constituents.

The true cause of American political discord is the lingering resistance of those who have traditionally held power to sharing it with those who until recently have only experienced its serrated edge. And the resistance does linger. Just this fall, a current Democratic senator from Delaware, Chris Coons, told a panel at the University of Notre Dame Law School that he hoped "a more diverse Senate that includes women's voices, and voices of people of color, and voices of people who were not professionals but, you know, who grew up working-class" would not produce "irreconcilable discord."

In his "Letter From Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. famously lamented the "white moderate" who "prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice." He also acknowledged the importance of tension to achieving justice. "I have earnestly opposed violent tension," King wrote, "but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth." Americans should not fear that form of tension. They should fear its absence.

AT THEIR MOST FRENZIED, calls for civility stoke the fear that the United States might be on the precipice of armed conflict. Once confined to right-wing fever swamps, where radicals wrote fan fiction about taking up arms in response to "liberal tyranny," the notion has gained currency in conservative media in the Trump era. In response to calls for gun-buyback programs, Tucker Carlson

said on Fox News, "What you are calling for is civil war." The president himself has warned that removing him from office, through the constitutionally provided-for mechanism of impeachment, might lead to civil war.

Civil war is not an imminent prospect. The impulse to conjure its specter overlooks how bitter and fierce American politics has often been. In the early days of the republic, as Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace wrote in their 1970 book, *American Violence*, the country witnessed Election Day riots, in which "one faction often tried violently to prevent another from voting." In the 1850s, the nativist Know-Nothings fielded gangs to intimidate immigrant voters. Abolitionists urged defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act, and lived by their words, running slave catchers out of town and breaking captured black people out of custody. Frederick Douglass said that the best way to make the act a "dead letter" was "to make half a dozen or more dead kidnapers."

During the Gilded Age, state militias turned guns on striking workers. From 1882 to 1968, nearly 5,000 people, mostly black Americans, were lynched nationwide. From January 1969 to April 1970, more than 4,000 bombings occurred across the country, according to a Senate investigation. As Hofstadter wrote, "Violence has been used repeatedly in our past, often quite purposefully, and a full reckoning with the fact is a necessary ingredient in any realistic national self-image."

The absence of this realistic national self-image has contributed to the sense of despair that characterizes American politics today. The reality, however, is that political violence is less common in the present than it has been at many points in American history, despite the ancient plague of white supremacy, the lingering scourge of jihadism, and the influence of a president who revels in winking justifications of violence against his political opponents and immigrants. Many Americans can't stand one another right now. But apart from a few deranged fanatics, they do not want to slaughter one another en masse.

THE MORE PERTINENT historical analogue is not the fractious antebellum period right-wing partisans seem so eager to relive but the tragic failures of Reconstruction, when the comforts of comity were privileged over the difficult work of building a multiracial democracy. The danger of our own political moment is not that Americans will again descend into a bloody conflagration. It is that the fundamental rights of marginalized people will again become bargaining chips political leaders trade for an empty reconciliation.

The Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution should have settled once and for all the question of whether America was a white man's country or a nation for all its citizens. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment established that anyone could be a citizen regardless

of race, and the Fifteenth Amendment barred racial discrimination in voting. But by 1876, Republicans had paid a high political price for their advocacy of rights for black people, losing control of the House and nearly losing the presidency to the party associated with a violent rebellion in defense of slavery. Democrats agreed to hand Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency in exchange for the withdrawal of federal troops in the South, effectively ending the region's brief experiment in multiracial governance. Witnessing the first stirrings of reunion, Douglass, the great abolitionist, wondered aloud, "In what position will this stupendous reconciliation leave the colored people?" He was right to worry.

One state government after another fell to campaigns of murder and terror carried out by Democratic paramilitaries. With its black constituency in the South disempowered, the Republican Party grew reliant on its corporate patrons, and adjusted its approach to maximize support from white voters. As for those emancipated after a devastating war, the party of abolition abandoned them to the despotism of their former masters. Writing in 1902, the political scientist and white supremacist John W. Burgess observed, "The white men of the South need now have no further fear that the Republican party, or Republican Administrations, will ever again give themselves over to the vain imagination of the political equality of man."

The capitulation of Republicans restored civility between the major parties, but the political truce masked a horrendous spike in violence against freedmen. "While the parties clearly move back from confrontation with each other, you have the unleashing of massive white-supremacist violence in the South against African Americans and a systematic campaign to disenfranchise, a systematic campaign of racial terror in the South," Manisha Sinha, a history professor at the University of Connecticut and the author of *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*, told me. "This is an era when white supremacy becomes virtually a national ideology."

This was the fruit of prizing reconciliation over justice, order over equality, civility over truth. Republicans' acquiescence laid the foundation for the reimposition of forced labor on the emancipated, the establishment of the Jim Crow system, and the state and extrajudicial terror that preserved white supremacy in the South for another century.

THE DAY WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT was inaugurated, in March 1909, was frigid—a storm dropped more than half a foot of snow on Washington, D.C. But Taft's inaugural address was filled with warm feeling, particularly about the reconciliation of North and South, and the full and just resolution of what was then known as the "Negro problem."

"I look forward," the party of Lincoln's latest president said, "to an increased feeling on the part of all the people in the South that this Government is their Government, and that its officers in their states are their officers." He assured Americans, "I have not the slightest race prejudice or feeling, and recognition of its existence only awakens in my heart a deeper sympathy for those who have to bear it or suffer from it, and I question the wisdom of a policy which is likely to increase it."

To that end, he explained, black people should abandon their ambitions toward enfranchisement. In fact, Taft praised the various measures white Southerners had devised to exclude poor white and black Americans—"an ignorant, irresponsible element"—from the polity.

Writing in *The Crisis* two years later, W. E. B. Du Bois bitterly described Taft's betrayal of black Americans. "In the face of a record of murder, lynching and burning in this country which has appalled the civilized world and loosened the tongue of many a man long since dumb on the race problem, in spite of this, Mr. Taft has blandly informed a deputation of colored men that any action on his part is quite outside his power, if not his interest."

The first volume of David Levering Lewis's biography of Du Bois shows him in particular anguish over what he called the "Taft Doctrine" of acquiescence to Jim Crow, which, in Lewis's words, "had virtually nullified what remained of Republican Party interest in civil rights." Taft's Republican successors generally followed suit, culminating in Herbert Hoover, who in 1928 "accelerated the policy of whitening the GOP below the Mason-Dixon Line in order to bring about a major political realignment," as Lewis put it in the second volume of his Du Bois biography. Taft, who was now the chief justice of the Supreme Court, described the strategy as an attempt "to break up the solid South and to drive the Negroes out of Republican politics."

Taft couldn't have predicted exactly how this realignment would take place, but he was right about the result. Despite the best efforts of Southern Democrats to segregate the benefits of the New Deal, the policies devised by Franklin D. Roosevelt to lift America out of the Great Depression alleviated black poverty, reinvigorating black participation in politics and helping transform the Democratic Party. "Government became immediate, its impact tangible, its activities relevant," wrote the historian Nancy Weiss Malkiel in her 1983 book, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*. "As a result, blacks, like other Americans, found themselves drawn into the political process."

The New Deal's modest, albeit inadvertent, erosion of racial apartheid turned Southern Democrats against it. Thus began a period of ideological heterodoxy within the parties born of the unresolved race question. Whatever their other

differences, significant factions in both parties could agree on the imperative to further marginalize black Americans.

Some of the worst violence in American history occurred during the period of low partisan polarization stretching from the late Progressive era to the late 1970s—the moment for which Joe Biden waxed nostalgic. In Ivy League debate rooms and the Senate cloakroom, white men could discuss the most divisive issues of the day with all the politeness befitting what was for them a low-stakes conflict. Outside, the people whose rights were actually at stake were fighting and dying to have those rights recognized.

In 1955, the lynching of Emmett Till—and the sight of his mutilated body in his casket—helped spark the modern civil-rights movement. Lionized today for their disciplined, nonviolent protest, civil-rights demonstrators were seen by American political elites as unruly and impolite. In April 1965, about a month after police attacked civil-rights marchers in Selma, Alabama, with billy clubs and tear gas, *National Review* published a cover story opposing the Voting Rights Act. Titled “Must We Repeal the Constitution to Give the Negro the Vote?,” the article, written by James Jackson Kilpatrick, began by lamenting the uncompromising meanness of the law’s supporters. Opposing the enfranchisement of black people, Kilpatrick complained, meant being dismissed as “a bigot, a racist, a violator of the rights of man, a mute accomplice to the murder of a mother-of-five.”

The fact that *National Review’s* founder, William F. Buckley Jr., had editorialized that “the White community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in areas in which it does not predominate numerically” went unmentioned by Kilpatrick. Both civility and democracy were marred by the inclusion of black people in politics because in the view of Kilpatrick, Buckley, and many of their contemporaries, black people had no business participating in the first place.

SINCE THE 1970s, American politics has grown more polarized, as the realignment Taft foresaw moved toward its conclusion and the parties became more ideologically distinct. In recent years, the differences between Republicans and Democrats have come to be defined as much by identity as by ideology. If you are white and Christian, you are very likely to be a Republican; if you are not, you are more likely to be a Democrat. At the same time, Americans have now sorted themselves geographically and socially such that they rarely encounter people who hold opposing views.

It’s a recipe for acrimony. As the parties become more homogeneous and more alien to each other, “we are more capable of dehumanizing the other side or distancing ourselves from them on a moral basis,” Lilliana Mason, a political scientist and the author of *Uncivil Agreement*, told me. “So it

becomes easier for us to say things like 'People on the other side are not just wrong; they're evil' or 'People on the other side, they should be treated like animals.'"

Ideological and demographic uniformity has not been realized equally in both parties, however. The Democratic Party remains a heterogeneous entity, full of believers and atheists, nurses and college professors, black people and white people. This has made the party more hospitable to multiracial democracy.

The end of polarization in America matters less than the terms on which it ends.

The Republican Party, by contrast, has grown more racially and religiously homogeneous, and its politics more dependent on manufacturing threats to the status of white Christians. This is why Trump frequently and falsely implies that Americans were afraid to say "Merry Christmas" before he was elected, and why Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham warn Fox News viewers that nonwhite immigrants are stealing America. For both the Republican Party and conservative media, wielding power and influence depends on making white Americans feel threatened by the growing political influence of those who are different from them.

In stoking such fears, anger is a powerful weapon. In his book *Anger and Racial Politics*, the University of Maryland professor Antoine J. Banks argues that "anger is the dominant emotional underpinning of contemporary racism." Anger and racism are so linked, in fact, that politicians need not use overtly racist language to provoke racial resentment. Anger alone, Banks writes, can activate prejudiced views, even when a given issue would seem to have little to do with race: "Anger operates as a switch that amplifies (or turns on) racist thinking—exacerbating America's racial problem. It pushes prejudiced whites to oppose policies and candidates perceived as alleviating racial inequality." This is true for politicians on both sides of the political divide—but the right has far more to gain from sowing discord than from mending fences.

Trumpists lamenting civility's decline do not fear fractiousness; on the contrary, they happily practice it to their own ends. What they really fear is the cultural, political, and economic shifts that occur when historically marginalized groups begin to exert power in a system that was once defined by their exclusion. Social mores that had been acceptable become offensive; attitudes that had been widely held are condemned.

Whether the American political system today can endure without fracturing further may depend on the choices of the center-right, Yoni Appelbaum writes.

Societies are constantly renegotiating the boundaries of respect and decency. This process can be disorienting; to the once dominant group, it can even feel like oppression. (It is not.) Many of the same people who extol the sanctity of civility when their prerogatives are questioned are prone to convulsions over the possibility of respecting those they consider beneath them, a form of civility they deride as “political correctness.”

In a different political system, the tide would pull the Republican Party toward the center. But the GOP’s structural advantage in the Electoral College and the Senate, and its success in gerrymandering congressional and state legislative districts all over the country, allow it to wield power while continuing to appeal solely to a diminishing conservative minority encouraged to regard its fellow Americans as an existential threat.

The Trump administration’s attempt to use the census to enhance the power of white voters was foiled by a single vote on the Supreme Court on the basis of a technicality; it will not be the last time this incarnation of the Republican Party seeks to rig democracy to its advantage on racial terms. Even before Trump, the party was focused not only on maximizing the influence of white voters but on disenfranchising minority voters, barely bothering to update its rationale since Taft praised Jim Crow-era voting restrictions for banishing the “ignorant” from the polity.

The end of polarization in America matters less than the terms on which it ends. It is possible that, in the aftermath of a Trump defeat in 2020, Republicans will move to the political center. But it is also possible that Trump will win a second term, and the devastation of the defeat will lead the Democrats to court conservative white people, whose geographic distribution grants them a disproportionate influence over American politics. Like the Republicans during Reconstruction, the Democrats may bargain away the rights of their other constituencies in the process.

The true threat to America is not an excess of vitriol, but that elites will come together in a consensus that cripples democracy and acquiesces to the dictatorship of a shrinking number of Americans who treat this nation as their exclusive birthright because of their race and religion. This is the false peace of dominance, not the true peace of justice. Until Americans’ current dispute over the nature of our republic is settled in favor of the latter, the dispute must continue.

In the aftermath of a terrible war, Americans once purchased an illusion of reconciliation, peace, and civility through a restoration of white rule. They should never again make such a bargain.