

# Civility strikeout

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The [Civility Project](#) was a bipartisan endeavor, aimed at creating mutual respect among politicians and other Americans, as well as inspiring them to treat each other kindly. But founder Mark DeMoss shut down the effort Jan. 3, after only three members of Congress signed on.

DeMoss launched the Civility Project a couple of years ago with political consultant Lanny Davis. Their venture spanned the political divide. DeMoss is a Republican, whose PR firm represents some of the nation's most prominent evangelical leaders. He's a former aide to the late Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell and adviser to 2008 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. Davis is a Democrat, a former special counsel to President Bill Clinton and former Democratic National Committee member.

## Civility pledge

In January 2009, they mailed 585 letters, asking every governor and member of Congress to sign the Civility Pledge. It stated:

- I will be civil in my public 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.

But in two years, they received just three pledges. Only Sen. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn.; Rep. Sue Myrick, R-N.C.; and Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., signed on to be civil.

## Stumbling at a low bar

In a recent letter to those lawmakers, DeMoss wrote, "I must admit to

scratching my head as to why only three members of Congress, and no governors, would agree to what I believe is a rather low bar.”

As a bona fide conservative himself, DeMoss [told](#) the *New York Times*, he particularly was surprised by hostility to the pledge expressed by fellow conservatives. “The worst e-mails I received about the Civility Project were from conservatives with just unbelievable language about communists, and some words I wouldn’t use in this phone call,” he said to a *Times* reporter. “This political divide has become so sharp that everything is black and white, and too many conservatives can see no redeeming value in any liberal or Democrat. That would probably be true about some liberals going the other direction, but I didn’t hear from them.”

Perhaps DeMoss received such harsh treatment from conservatives because he's one of their own, and they viewed his action as treason to their cause. Perhaps he received such harsh treatment because that's the standard form of expression on political broadcasts and blogs, and they didn't even consider it harsh.

And perhaps he did not receive similar treatment from liberals simply because he was off their radar. Anyone who pays close and unbiased attention to political rhetoric will acknowledge venom and vitriol are not exclusive to either party or to any segment of the social landscape. Liberals who disagree with DeMoss are capable of harangue, if only they know and/or care.

## **Transcending Tucson**

Civility has received scrutiny since Jan. 8, when a gunman massacred six people and injured 14 others in Tucson. But keep in mind DeMoss pulled the plug on the Civility Project five days *before* the Arizona rampage. His decision has nothing to do with whether politicians inspired Jared Loughner to carry a semi-automatic pistol to a strip mall.

No, DeMoss is dealing with a larger, ongoing context. It's about Americans' disturbing disinclination to be decent.

And it's not simply about whether people yell on TV and radio programs and write angry comments on blogs and news sites. It's not even about whether we're nice to each other.

It's about whether we're going to be the kind of nation our founders envisioned and every generation up to now aspired to be: A free and open and cooperative nation, where we may disagree, but we do so agreeably. A nation where we seek the welfare of all residents, particularly the most vulnerable. A nation where we achieve consensus for the good of the whole.

It's also about how we will go about being that kind of nation, particularly as we seek to solve the problems that loom all around us. Serious issues—from the economy, to education, to health care, to defense, to international relations, to immigration and much more—demand our best, most cooperative efforts. We cannot exert those efforts if our primary goal is to achieve political advantage. Improving America requires decent, civil, constructive conversation and fair-minded decision-making.

Unfortunately, the Civility Project got turned down, 582-3. That's not encouraging.

The writer of Proverbs advised: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." That is good advice for America today.