



## INCIVILITY IN AMERICA

*How crude, rude and obnoxious behavior has replaced good manners and why that hurts our politics and culture*

By John Marks U.S. NEWS & World Report

**O**n the first warm day of spring in Montgomery, Ala., Michael Walcott takes his guitar down to Loveless Elementary School and wages war on incivility. Speak clearly, he tells the sixth graders of Loveless; do not use profanity or chew gum in class or answer the phone in an unpleasant voice; but do show respect for the aged, say “thank you” and “please” and, most of all, treat others the way you want to be treated. Then Walcott plugs his guitar into a pair of giant amps and sweetens the struggle to save civilization with a little soul music.

*90% of Americans believe that incivility contributes to the increase of violence in the country*

“All the world over, it’s easy to see; /People everywhere need a little courtesy,” he sings in an original composition set to a 1960s pop tune. “Shout it from the mountain so everyone can see, /Courtesy can bring har-mo-ny.”

After finishing the song, Walcott asks the sixth graders, “Would you behave more courteously in school if I promise to come back and play a concert for you?”

“No!” they exclaim in unison.

Walcott’s song is an anthem out of season, a lonely plea for the virtue of respect in a time when schools use metal detectors to keep out guns and knives, when universities insist on speech and behavior codes to stem the tide of hatred and disrespect, when legal cases become shouting matches, when the Internet is littered with raunch and menace, when political campaigns resemble food fights, when trash talk and head butts are the idiom of sports, and when popular culture tops itself from week to week with displays of violence, sex, foul language and puerile confession. At best, it is a bad time to be a zealot for decorum; at worst, anarchy lurks just around the corner.

**Condition critical.** Walcott is not the only citizen alarmed at this prospect. As a new poll conducted in February by U.S. News and Bozell Worldwide reveals, a vast majority of Americans feel their country has reached an ill-mannered watershed. Nine out of 10 Americans think incivility is a serious problem, and nearly half think it is extremely serious. Seventy-eight percent say the problem has worsened in the past 10 years, and their concern goes beyond annoyance at rudeness. Respondents see in incivility evidence of a profound social breakdown. More than 90 percent of those polled believe it contributes to the increase of violence in the country; 85 percent believe it divides the national community, and the same number see it eroding healthy values like respect for others.

Talk to Americans and a picture emerges of a nation addicted to the pleasures of an unruly society—its emphasis on individual expression, its flouting of convention and its free vent of emotions—but shocked at the effects of this unruliness and increasingly willing to take action against it. Americans feel embattled in their personal and professional lives by a rising tide of nastiness. And in an era when ideologies of race, gender, class and religion divide the country, says Martin Marty, a philosopher of religions who has written on the subject, it is a nastiness the country can ill afford, because it amounts to a kind of social deafness.

“You cannot have a complex society in which you do not hear the other party, the antagonist,” explains Marty. “If you’re just doing a monologue, or just hanging out with your crowd, it’s impossible to sustain a society, and if there is to be any justice, it has to come through a conversation of different interests and different wills. Incivility says, ‘I’m right, you have no hearing; I’m going to do the talking; I’m going to shout you down.’”

Ironically, definition presents a first obstacle to solving the problem. The word civility is derived from the Latin *civis*, or citizen, and is also foreshadowed in the word *civitas*, or the art of government. It can mean, among other things, good breeding, politeness, consideration or courtesy but may also refer to a “polite act or utterance,” according to Webster’s. But postmodernism makes hash of such definitions. When few people can agree on a common set of behaviors or values, civility can be seen as both a code word for right-wing Christian values and a stalking horse for left-wing multiculturalism, the former an antiabortion agenda, the latter a pro-diversity platform. But in the best of worlds, as Marty suggests, civility should be nonpartisan. It should be the glue holding dialogue together. “The alternative to civility is first incivility,” he states, “and then war.”

That message is dire, but it seems to be taking root. Convinced that the country’s coarseness has gone far enough, people of different economic backgrounds, ethnicities, sexes and ideological persuasions, along with institutions as varied as schools, state bar associations, churches and businesses, have begun to take the first tentative steps to reverse the trend. They have their work cut out for them.

*85% of Americans believe  
that incivility is dividing our national community  
and eroding our values*

## **SCHOOLS**

From one end of the country to the other, parents and teachers complain of the lack of civility among children and the disrespect they show their elders. The problem cuts across all class and racial lines. In the recent survey of educators by the American Association of School Administrators, the teaching of the golden rule – treat others as you want to be treated—was found to be an urgent necessity.

“No Rules,” reads a decal on the back window of a car parked at Robert E. Lee High School in Montgomery, student population of 1,758, where, a handful of seniors agree, it is far too late to learn respect for one another. At the school’s entrance, a statue of Lee, the Confederate general and quintessential Southern gentleman, presides over a teenage brawl that might be a microcosm of the nation as a whole.

At this racially mixed school in a middle-class neighborhood, getting by means getting mean. Students generally don’t open doors or speak to people they don’t know. In the hallways, it’s shove or be shoved. “If you’re standing in the hallway, and someone’s coming, if they want to come your way, you better move,” explains Cindy Roy, a senior. “Because if you don’t, they’re just going to take you down and keep on going.”

Underlying this attitude toward rudeness, unspoken but universally acknowledged, is a nervousness about violence. Rumor has it that some girls carry knives in their hair and some boys have guns. Recent metal detector tests have not turned up ample evidence of such weapons, says guidance counselor Carole Mackin, but students at Robert E. Lee remain cautious just the same.

Five minutes a day at Robert E. Lee is devoted to character education, a program popular around the country and put into place last year by the Alabama Legislature. As students gather in their homerooms in the morning, someone reads a poem or a story or an edifying thought over the intercom, an effort that has about as much attention-grabbing power as a sermon at a rock concert. Seniors say character education is widely regarded as a joke. By and large, no one listens, and teachers don't have much say in the matter. They get only as much respect as they show to the students, and that is precious little in some classes.

State Rep. Bill Fuller, who helped to push through the legislation, now believes high school is too late to teach values like respect and courtesy. He says the work has to begin much earlier—at home, for instance, or elementary school. And that is where Walcott concentrates the efforts he has launched under the auspices of the American Foundation for Courtesy Inc. The Guyanese native wonders at the breakdown of manners here, and one aspect of his schooling seems particularly lacking in his adopted country now: “The teacher always remained in charge and was always respected,” he remembers. “Even if you didn't have respect for the person, you still had respect for the office. I believe America could learn something from that.”

*78% of Americans  
think incivility has worsened in the past 10 years*

**LAW**

One area in which this kind of respect for institutions has eroded dramatically in recent years is the law. Outside of their profession, lawyers have become symbols of everything crass and dishonorable in American public life; within it, they have become increasingly combative and uncivil toward each other. One survey of lawyers and judges by federal court officials in the upper Midwest found that 41 percent believe the lack of civility is a problem and, of those, a large majority think problems exist when lawyers deal with each other. The respondents blamed economic competition among law firms, the rise of “Rambo” litigators who battle opponents ruthlessly, lying, cheating and threats of malpractice from angry clients for their colleagues' unmannerly behavior. Of course, it is also true that while Americans revile lawyers, they have a hand in this mess because they have turned virtually every kind of unhappiness into a legal claim.

Since the late 1980s, state bar associations around the country have attempted to clean up their acts, asking lawyers to treat clients, judges and each other with “courtesy, candor, cooperation and scrupulous observance,” as the Texas Lawyer's Creed reads. “There were more than a few stories about physical altercations in depositions, between lawyers, sometimes involving clients, more than a few stories about lawyers on the verge of physical altercation in courthouse hallways,” says Texas Supreme Court Justice Nathan Hecht. “We felt like we needed to do something to turn down the fire.”

The value of those codes is now being debated at the national level. Next month, a panel at the American Bar Association Center for Professional Responsibility will look at the impact and value of the codes. There has been nothing but improvement in Texas, says Justice Hecht, but any deep-seated change in behavior will take at least half a generation.

## **POLITICS**

But even good manners can go only so far. Many believe the real issue is to develop a more profound sense of respect to undergird those manners—the kind of respect necessary to make political processes work. For many Americans, government is one of those institutions most lacking in civility—as campaigns are dominated by negative and sometimes misleading ads and a favorite tactic is demonizing opponents.

Historically, Americans have alternated cycles of ugly behavior with those of admirable decorum. George Washington was famous for his manners, displaying them both at the personal level to show respect to individuals and at the political level to demonstrate respect before the law. On at least one occasion, says Richard Brookhiser, author of a recent biography on Washington, he combined both to momentous effect.

*Only 37% of Americans believe  
that today's youth will eventually make  
the country a better place to live <sup>1</sup>*

In 1797, John Adams was inaugurated as second president of the United States, and on the dais next to him were Vice President Thomas Jefferson and retiring president Washington. “When the new president finished and left,” writes Brookhiser, “Washington motioned to Jefferson to go next. The two Virginians had known each other since 1769, when Washington had been 37 years old and Jefferson only 26. From long habit and lingering respect, Jefferson now held back. But Washington gestured again, in a manner not to be ignored. The younger man was now vice president and must go first.”

Vestiges of that decorum still exist and allow the government to get on with its business. Despite its current reputation for divisiveness, says freshman Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., a Democrat known for his good manners, the House of Representatives might even serve as a model for civility in other avenues of American life. “Whether you agree with what Newt Gingrich and his crowd are doing, whether you agree on the Democratic side if our leadership is doing the right thing or not, the decorum of the House keeps it from breaking into an all-out fight,” says Jackson, “and if the same level of civility existed in other levels of society, there would probably be a lot less violence, a lot less hostility. Can you imagine if gangs were saying, ‘Will the gentleman who represents everyone who lives south of 63<sup>rd</sup> Street please give me just a moment to make a point?’ as opposed to saying, ‘Let’s shoot everyone who lives south of 63<sup>rd</sup> Street.’ “

## **POPULAR CULTURE**

Provocative behavior has been big in the entertainment business at least since Elvis Presley shook his pelvis on national television back in the 1950s. But even there, times seem to be changing, as the crudities of Sharon Stone kickbox with the niceties of Jane Austen. For the past decade, since the unexpected box office success of *A Room With a View* in 1986 and culminating last year in the appearance of three widely acclaimed movies based on Austen novels, moviegoers have flocked to see stories set in eras when manners and restraint played a dominant role in society. In terms of both receipts and critical praise, these films have buried more sensational fare like the overhyped striptease extravaganza *Showgirls* and the grotesquely violent *Copycat*, a sign that audiences may be as willing to sit through decorous parlor chat as through nude scenes and mutilation.

But the popularity of civility in the popular culture may have less to do with opposition to violence, sex and bad language, says Bill Maher, host of a popular talk show called “Politically

Incorrect,” than with the indignities of public confession. “There is a daily monument to the breakdown of civilization every day in all these talk shows,” Maher insists. “I call them galk shows. What’s uncivil to me is this idea that the worse thing you could be is not famous.”

On the other hand, Maher himself admits he is the last person in the world to start a manners crusade. While part of his show is dedicated to civil conversations between people with different views of the world—“a sophisticated cocktail party,” as Maher describes it—another essential element is provocation, the attempt, for instance, to get creative obscenities by the censor. “It’s just fun,” explains Maher. “It feels good, so I do it.”

As harmless as they may seem, Maher’s words reveal a central paradox about America’s approach to its own bad behavior. On the one hand, we do not like to see children talking rudely to parents, students disrespecting teachers or politicians dragging each other through the mud. Nevertheless, we tend to applaud rebels, those who speak and behave honestly, if not properly. We like our rough-hewn cowboys who walk into the saloon loaded with integrity but short on cultivation. And we especially enjoy the spectacle of a good fight, as the competitiveness of national sports and politics, the violence in movies and the aggressiveness of pop music from rock-and-roll to rap make clear.

*67% of Americans say others  
are more likely to use rude language  
than in the past decade*

That’s because a certain kind of incivility is key to being American, believes seasoned talk show host Sally Jessy Raphael, whose top-rated program has been a frequent target of criticism and a showcase for all kinds of behavior, from the angelic to the rude to the psychotic. She argues that it is difficult for Americans to make up their minds about what actually constitutes bad behavior. Raphael believes, for instance, that her talk show is a paragon of civil discourse, because it promotes a clear-eyed view of people and the country. “If we reflect any kind of degradation of the moral fiber of the country, it’s a reflection of what is,” she explains in her own defense, “and I think we represent that with honesty and compassion, and when you do that, you’re not lowering the level of civility. You’re presenting what I consider to be the present state of affairs.”

In the end, whether American culture is uncivil or not may be less relevant than how it is received by the rest of us. The U.S. News/Bozell poll suggests that people are worried about the impact of a coarsening culture on others; they seem confident in their own ability to withstand the mean-spirited tide. For instance, one senior at Robert E. Lee, Tamika Crittenden, refuses to hold rap stars, athletes and other celebrities responsible for her behavior. Crittenden grew up among three generations of family: parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. All three passed on their beliefs about manners and good behavior, and those beliefs form the basis of how Crittenden treats other people, she says, not what Charles Barkley, Tupac Shakur and Beavis and Butt-head do. If nothing else, Crittenden has survived high school with those beliefs firmly in place.

## **ETIQUETTE**

If the content of civility is respect, then its form might be manners, say those like Marjabelle Young Stewart, who specializes in trying to improve them. Saying “please” and “thank you,” opening doors for others and allowing an elderly person to have your seat on the bus may seem like little things, but they amount to a physical recognition of the dignity of the other person, says Stewart.

Surprisingly, etiquette seems to be making a comeback, as books like *Executive Etiquette*, *Multicultural Manners*, *Do As I Say* (gay etiquette) and old standards like the *Miss Manners* guide proliferate on shelves. Stewart herself is a popular evangelist. For the first time since the 1960s her schedule is now booked years in advance. One client is Associated Employers, an Illinois-based employers' association representing 196 companies and around 60,000 employees in the Quad Cities region. Five years ago, AE invited Stewart to give a lecture on table manners. The event was so popular that it has become an annual event.

At AT&T offices in New Jersey, after years of more casual dress and behavior inspired by cultural trends of the 1960s and 1970s, manners have become a priority, too. Executives at the company have received training from Stewart in recent years, as have executives at Merrill Lynch. "Manners are the new status accessory," Stewart tells her students, "pricier than a Rolex, more portable than a Day-Timer, and shinier than handmade shoes. Polished graces can get you where you're going faster than a speeding BMW."

*Polished graces can get you where you're going  
faster than a speeding BMW*

There are those, however, who argue that civility can be overrated. As civil-society advocate Amitai Etzioni points out, even if people treat each other with respect across the table, they must still resolve differences that go far beyond civil discourse and behavior. Matters of sexual and racial equality, unemployment, health care, religious belief and hatred may remain intransigent, as they have in the past, no matter how respectful people are to one another.

But back in Montgomery, Walcott believes civility does affect the larger questions. "Incivility makes a bad situation worse," he says. "I believe that two groups who hate one another and may not know why they hate one another, may very well find out that their hatred and suspicion were unfounded when they realize how human each can be to the other."

So, with music, T-shirts, guitars and tokens, Walcott does what he can to spread the word. Still, on a bad day, he says, with a weary glint in his eyes, he feels like Don Quixote tilting at windmills, and most of the time, the windmills do not even say "thank you."

<sup>1</sup> Adults down on today's youth, New York Times, Peter Applebome

# # #