“Kathleen Parker on the Challenge of Civility,”
by Kathleen Parker

Syndicated columnist Kathleen Parker writes on the nostalgia Americans have for civility, in light of activities in Congress and around the country, which reveal people act with incivility toward one another.

Growing concern about incivility is one of America’s more appealing trends. Increasingly, individuals and institutions are seeking ways to burnish the Golden Rule.


Civility even has a Facebook page called “The Civility Initiative,” where Forni and visitors exchange thoughts on the subject.

But recent events and trends—from rowdy town-hall meetings to sideshow rants on television to the outburst of South Carolina Rep. Joe Wilson—have brought vague unease about manners into sharper focus.

In Wilson’s home state, University of South Carolina President Harris Pastides has made civility a focal point of the institution’s goals. And an Atlanta public relations executive, Mark DeMoss, has organized a coalition of conservatives and liberals, religious and secular, in his own Civility Project to promote a grass-roots, voluntary effort toward renewed civility.

His Web site (www.civilityproject.org) urges a voluntary pledge to be civil in discourse and behavior, and to stand against incivility.

President Barack Obama addressed civility directly in his commencement address to Notre Dame earlier this year, and recently said, “[O]ne of the things I’m trying to figure out is, how can we make sure that civility is interesting?”

That’s more than enough evidence to declare a trend. But do Americans really want to be civil?

Our nostalgia for civility, some say, is misplaced or at least exaggerated by wishful thinking. Americans have never been exemplars of manners in politics. Often cited are the anti-federalists,
though the federalists were hardly rearranging the doilies. In one case, when federalist legislators needed a quorum for a key vote, they dragged anti-federalists from their rooms and locked them in the statehouse.

Imagine the fun we'd have if Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi decided to lock their moderate colleagues in the Capitol until they agreed to sign off on health care reform.

During the Andrew Jackson–John Quincy Adams election of 1828, the former general was called a murderer and a cannibal; his wife was accused of being a harlot. Closer to Joe Wilson's stomping grounds, politics has always been a blood sport and most natives are proud of it. In the election of 1832, mobs assaulted candidates. Not very civil, that.

Nonetheless, something has changed—and what has changed is media. I don't mean traditional media, the so-called mainstream media everyone loves to hate these days. In fact, old media have strict standards about civility and appropriate language in the public sphere. Such concerns prevented me recently from publishing the obscenity uttered in The Washington Post newsroom that provoked an editor to punch a writer.

Most crucial in the viral growth of incivility are new media—the Internet, the blogosphere
and all the social applications, from Facebook to Twitter, and whatever else may have developed since I began typing this page.

Whereas in previous eras, an uncivil exchange might be confined to a room, a building or a public square, today’s media technology means that it is captured, amplified, replayed and distributed—perpetually.

There are now Joe Wilson “You Lie” T-shirts and bumper stickers. Meanwhile, a recent USA Today/Gallup poll found that three-quarters of those surveyed were not “outraged” by Wilson’s outburst.

Incivility may be bad form, but it can be good politics. Susan Herbst, a public policy professor at Georgia Tech, is finishing a book on civility in politics in which she argues that civility and incivility are both timeless strategic rhetorical assets. Some people are just more effective at using them.

The real challenge for the civility-minded is that incivility is more exciting. Human beings are drawn to spectacle, as the bookers of Rome’s Colosseum understood. Glenn Beck is proof of the constancy of human nature.

Herbst insists that if we really want civility to prevail, we have to find a way to make it exciting and interesting to young people and urges the teaching of debating skills to high school and college students.

“We will never see the sort of civil, thoughtful, inventive debate that enables good public policy-making until we inspire the young adults in our midst how to pursue it themselves,” she wrote recently for the online publication Inside Higher Ed.

Making debate cool is a challenge, not least because clear thinking is hard work that requires skill and discipline. Perhaps a few Hollywood celebrities might help lead the way? Civility, after all, is nothing but great acting.