The current state of civility and democracy in the United States of America makes analyzing and assessing its nature a challenging enterprise. The experience of democracy around the globe provides daily reminder that this experiment.

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Can Democracy Survive Democracy?

in governance is under enormous stress. The militar-
ies in Egypt and Myanmar declare that they have
saved democracy, while the dethroned Islamists in
Algeria and Egypt argue that they are the true saviors.
Coalitions totter in Italy, while the citizens of deeply
polarized Ukraine and Thailand fill the streets. In
the United States, elected representatives have displayed
a remarkable flair for pairing vituperative language
that demonstrates incapacity to legislate. Whereas
Francis Fukuyama in 1992 declared a liberal democ-
tratic victory heralding the end of history, Joshua
Kurlantzick published Democracy in Retreat in March
2013, stating, “Absent radical and unlikely changes in
the international system, the combination of anti-
democratic factors will have serious staying power”
(Kurlantzick 2013, 29). Democracy seems on the
ropes. Certainly there is a pervasive air of vicious-
ness in the public square of democracies. One could
empathize with the American revolutionary Samuel
Adams, who exclaimed, “There never was a democracy
that did not commit suicide.”

Civil and Democracy in America: A Reasonable
Understanding, edited by Cornell W. Clayton and
Richard Elgar, is a compilation of papers delivered at
a conference of the same name held at Washington
State University in March 2011. With a wide-ranging
and eclectic collection of topics ranging from history
and religion to architecture, philosophy, and media,
the conference offered analyses and mea culpas for
the political and societal failures to foster constructive
civic engagement. The conference’s mission was to
provide context for the present political state of affairs,
to give some sense of where American democracy is
moving.

Like many of us, these presenters wonder whether
we are correctly reading the evidence before us or are
missing the larger picture entirely. Is this moment
in U.S. democracy a breakdown of the fundamen-
tal covenant that “this Nation, so conceived and so
dedicated, can long endure”? We cannot ignore the
analytic caution that we live in an age of such rapid
change that the only dependable thing is change
itself. Few anticipated the collapse of the Soviet
Union, its satellites, and empire. Ditto the Arab
Spring, whatever its faults and disappointments, and
the impact of social media to galvanize forces and
overthrow democratically elected as well as authori-
tarian governments. Kony 2012, an online attempt
to focus the world on terror in Africa, had more
than 100 million hits in six days. Who among us is
prepared to predict the trajectory of democracy, in
the United States or elsewhere, when we are daily
witness to the unexpected? There are no independ-
ent guides to tell us what or how to see the world.
Rather, we have access to a wide array of information
and self-filtered evidence available 24 hours a day to
confirm the passionate beliefs we already hold dear.

Events seem well beyond our analytic or any other
control.

The reflex is to offer solace with historical prec-
edent, as Clayton does when he tells us in the book’s
introduction that “history is replete with periods that
rival or surpass the bitterness and incivility of today’s
debates” (1). But is this narrative predictive of harm-
less harsh words that do not mutate into violence and
institutional collapse, or is the increasing rancor and
inability to address the most significant issues facing
the country a prelude to what today is unimagina-
ble—civil war or the breakup of the Union? Is it pos-
sible that governmental paralysis, failed international
endeavors in an encroaching globalized world, an
inability to overcome economic dysfunction, and an
electorate hostilely divided over deeply held religious
beliefs foretell a radically different story in the twenty-
first century than in centuries past? In that case,
today’s lack of civility in the United States would then
be a symptom of a much more malignant disease.

The presenters in the book universally come to the
conclusion that, looking at the United States’ history,
we have no reason for undue alarm: the country has
oftentimes withstood similar levels of vitriol in its
democratic discourse, and they see no reason to think
this time is any different. The past is replete with
vituperative conflict. A retrospective of U.S. politics
gives us epic battles between Jefferson and Adams,
Calhoun and Webster, Sumner, Butler, and Douglas,
or FDR, who welcomed the hatred spewed at him.
Beyond words is violence. Early in the republic, Burr
kills Hamilton, to be followed by multiple traumatic
attempted and successful assassinations. Democracy
and violence in the United States may be the natural
state, democracy and civility the oxymoron. Other
than the Civil War, violent language and even behav-
ior have not posed an existential threat to the fiber of
the republic. We are hopeful. History tells us, in spite
of the rhetorical violence, that the United States will
emerge whole.

But perhaps their initial premise belies such con-

dience. The ability to overcome in the past may
not be predictive of the future. And to use the past
as a resource means we must also recognize that
Americans did engage in a civil war that resulted in
the greatest loss of American lives in its history. That
memory remains alive. Present-day polarization could
be the manifestation once again of unresolved and
cumulative conflict at the very foundation of the
republic.

The level of violent rhetoric today, as in the past,
may arise from the very faith claims that estab-
lished the United States as a nation. The American
story is grounded in the conception of America
as the new Israel, a covenanted people. Amanda
Porterfield reminds us in her chapter, "Religion's Role in Contestations over American Civility," which is focused on religious foundations, that the very nature of American politics derives, at least in theory, from our faith in Providence and American exceptionalism. Whatever the disagreements about the nature of the Bible and Christianity, participants in the construction of American government all agreed that civility ultimately derived and depended on a preexisting purpose for the world" (40). That mutated as the nineteenth century progressed and polarizing social and political issues divided the country. Rather than the source of civility, religion was at the forefront of epic battles. While Southern preachers cited the Bible to support slavery and the servitude of Africans descended from Ham, Northerners marched south singing, "As He died to make men holy let us die to make men free as God goes marching on." No surprises here. From Cotton Mather to John Brown to Martin Luther King Jr. and Pat Robertson, religious voices have repeatedly called on America to repent or else it will be destroyed.

Paul Boyer, in his cautionary chapter on the role of religion in civil discourse, "Civility, Religion, and American Democracy: Some Cautionary Reflections," describes evangelical Christians who believe in the chasm dividing humanity between those who have found Jesus and those damned souls who will suffer for eternity: "This cosmic bifurcation . . . transcends race, ethnicity, social class and political ideology which traditionally divided us" (52). But it is unfair to see religious fervor played out only from the extremes. There would have been no Prohibition as there would have been no Klan cross burnings by mainline Christians, no civil rights movement, anti-abortion, or antiwar campaigns without the unequivocal voices of clergy and people of faith who sat in, broke in, and invaded public spaces in the name of God.

Unlike most other democracies, American democracy is inextricably entangled with prophetic faith and battles over the role of religion in civil discourse. So the court rulings that have sought to raise firm and high the wall of separation have, of course, proved ineffectual in removing the religious voice from the many public squares of schools and government, policy decisions, and elections. A solid majority of Americans believe that religion can answer all or most of today's problems (Newport 2013). For most Americans, the United States in its exceptionalism is, at its core, a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. This may well explain the unresolved righteous anger of political discourse today. In another chapter, "Religious Pluralism and Civility," Wade Clark Roof correctly explains that "we are living in a time when the very core of our national identity as expressed through civil religious rhetoric is hotly debated" (64). The heat of that debate can be scorching, as Boyer reminds us that any discussion of civil discourse must take into account the many millions of Americans “who bring to the public square an unwavering allegiance to religious dogma that trump all other considerations” (57). The inevitable clash of faith and a corrupt democracy, as predicted in the myriad end-of-days Armageddon books that fill the homes of so many Americans, will be the fitting finale to a republic unable and unwilling to fulfill its obligations to God.

Perhaps not. Democracy is a messy business, and, in spite of our anxieties, there is substance to the recognition of democracy as the best of poor alternatives to governance. Religion in America is not only a source of violent conflict. It also has been a force for constructive change. In two of the chapters that focus on historical precedent, we receive guidance as to why we may misunderstand the lack of civil discourse against which so many rail, an alternative narrative that validates our present polarized state. Michel Kazin and Thomas J. Sugrue walk us through the periods of great social upheaval with a particular focus on the civil rights movement. They both echo Malvina Reynolds's theme song of that era that challenged the complacency of the post–World War II period:

It isn't nice to block the doorway. It isn't nice to go to jail.
There are nicer ways to do it, but the nice ways always fail.
It isn't nice, it isn't nice, you told us once, you told us twice.
But if that is Freedom's price, we don't mind.

And they pose a question as to whether America was a better country when, in the last century, silence enveloped the Palmer Raids in 1920 and indifference allowed the incarceration of Nisei Americans in the 1940s. The votes on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution dramatically expanding the war in Vietnam and support for the invasion of Iraq on false pretenses are reminders that civility in a democracy could well endanger rather than be a sign of health. While Joseph McCarthy's ugly example of civil discourse gone awry was brought down with the words "At long last, have you left no sense of decency," it is not clear that the complacencies of decency in the 1950s and early 1960s fortified democracy and meaningful civic engagement. Fredrik Logevall's chapter "The Paradox of Civility" articulates this unexpected assault on a gentler political environment: "A healthy political discourse depends on honest and forthright contention. Real civility can be disruptive, can question the claims and motives of leaders, can be skeptical. A healthy and robust democracy depends on such questioning and risks grievous damage without it" (8).

Democracy is not a path to stasis. The vitality of democracy is in its capacity to reject precedent,
recognize the urgency of the moment, and to reorient the republic. That is why alternative competitive narratives are always at the core of conflict—who we are and what we must become. The evidence we choose, the frame through which we see the evidence, and the tools we choose to analyze are all dictated by the story we are telling. In his classic article “Nomos and Narrative,” Robert Cover wrote,

In this normative world, law and narrative are inseparably related. Every prescription is insistent in its demand to be located in discourse—to be supplied with history and destiny, beginning and end explanation and purpose. And every narrative is insistent in its demand for its prescriptive point, its moral. (1983, 97)

When we consider the most radical changes that have taken place over the past 200 years, the expansion of enfranchisement, civil liberties, and privilege, the story becomes the tool that unlocks expanded freedom. The authors of Civility and Democracy in America are hopeful in the stories they tell about America. If the original republic enfranchised white Christian and landed men, there were new narratives that empowered those without land, those other than Christians (lastly in Maryland in 1828), later African American men, and, finally, women. A story had to be told that undermined the existing narrative—a competition in which the best story won and became normative.

No doubt in our day the dramatic move from the image of homosexuality as the furtive illicit behavior of immoral men and women to that of two married men or women sitting on the front stoop with their two kids and dog is the most vivid example of such a narrative shift in the United States. And to effect such changes was not nice, landing people in jail, sometimes beaten and sometimes doing the beating, but freedom’s price meant that those advocating change did not care. Civic engagement is not for the weak of heart; civil discourse may be raucous, vicious, and willing to use any means to undermine the complacencies of those dedicated to the status quo. And the religious folk that make up the overwhelming majority have, more often than not, been on the side of expanding civil and human rights with their voices and their bodies because, in America, these battles are of biblical proportions. It may explain why, deep in its third century, violent rhetoric and lack of civility are prominent features of the ways Americans engage the seminal issues of the day, issues that often feel as if they are truly life and death determinants of America’s future. History tells us this keeps American democracy vital and nimble. We hope history is telling the truth.

Note

References