The Death—and Rebirth?—of Civility
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In April, the Club held a public conversation between former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and me, in Palo Alto. Channel 5, KPIX TV, filmed the conversation, and quickly posted a clip from it on YouTube. I looked at the video clip and the comments posted about it on YouTube. The very first comment, from a user whose icon is Teletubbies with a swastika, was "Why would anyone wanna listen to this senile [racial expletive used against people of Jewish descent]?"

In the environment in which our White House publicly insults dying war hero John McCain, it is obvious that America has reached new lows of civility. The present tone of communication affects us at every level—in the workplace, at school and in our public policy discourse.

The Commonwealth Club was built on four principles, for which it continues to stand today. They are: an attitude of positive regard for an opponent despite policy differences; the concept that there is a common good; regarding compromise as essential for successful public policy, and believing that good, objective, validated information should be the basis for decisions. All our programs and projects reflect these principles.

With these values, the Club is of course concerned about the trend toward incivility. So we decided to look for others who are similarly concerned and to find out what various groups and organizations are doing to combat the trend.

First, we looked to see if leaders are concerned about incivility and found that a growing number of political, media and other leaders from across the political spectrum are worried. These include CNN commentators Van Jones and Sally Kohn, former U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich, USC and UC Berkeley professor Dan Schnur, former congresswoman Ellen Tauscher, conservative commentator Ben Shapiro, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, *Atlantic* Senior Editor David Frum, Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics Director Kirk Hanson, and former Bay Area congressman Tom Campbell.

The Club queried these individuals, some in private interviews and some through questions posed at public Club programs, for their thoughts about the state of public dialogue. Universally, they are disturbed by the trend toward hyper-partisanship and extreme expression. Two of the individuals, Tom Campbell and Dan Schnur, have left their party to become registered independents.

They see many causes of rising extremism and incivility, including the advent of social media that compresses thoughts into short and often extreme bites, media that thrives on arguments and polar views and the political process that micro-targets opinion groups through political electronic media advertising buys and pushes candidates and officeholders to the extremes of right and left.

And they see damage done by this extreme polarization, including the inability to find good solutions to societal problems, which often lie in the middle of the political spectrum, rather than at one end. As Van Jones memorably said in his interview, we don't want solely individuals like him making public policy. Fiscal conservatives, he noted, think about where the money will come from for social programs, where he pays little attention to those concerns and just wants to "feed the babies!" If he were in charge, he said, our society would be broke.

Many examples were cited about what the great collaborators of the past were able to get done: House Republican Minority Leader Robert Michel, Senators Nunn and Lugar, Abraham Lincoln's "Team of Rivals," Senators McCain and Feingold.

Then we looked for people and organizations working to improve civility and political collaboration in our society. As disturbing as the trends toward incivility are, the number of organizations working to bring back civility is very exciting.

I've written previously about Generation Citizen, which engages middle and high school students in active civics education through projects for positive change in the society around them.

The Institute for Civil Dialogue practices and trains others in a method for bringing people of differing views together for productive discussions. The Bipartisan Policy Center educates about the value and accomplishments of bipartisanship throughout US history. Spaceship Media uses journalism to create dialogue between conflicting groups in the community.

The Commonwealth Club upholds the principle of respectful dialogue every day and offers our model to society. As one individual we interviewed said, the Club is countercultural to the norm today, and we need to build on and promote our approach as the norm. We are thinking at the Club about ways we can better create dialogue through our programming, and we will continue to improve our service to the community as we all work to restore civility and promote cooperation. ⓒⓦ