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The trick isn't to fight fire with fire. Instead, you ought to fight clever with cleverer.



INSIDE VIEW

Is Civility Possible Again?

The hits keep coming from Donald Trump: "Governor Justin Trudeau of the Great State of Canada." To Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky: "I don't think you'd be a tough guy without the United States." "CLINKERS." "Ratings Challenged NBC and MSNBC."

On cue, there are calls from the media for civility. Now? We have a long history to overcome. Mark Twain, a 29-year-old San Franciscobased opinion columnist for a Nevada newspaper in 1865, was spewing venom, saying of the police, "Wax figures, besides being far more economical, would be about as useful." Pianist and comedian Oscar Levant in 1940 said of his morning routine, "First I brush my teeth and then I sharpen my tongue." Same. *

Incivility became a favored tactic for activists. In 1971 Saul Alinsky wrote "Rules for Radicals," which became the bible for the Obama and Biden administrations. Rule 5: "Ridicule is man's most potent weapon." Rule 13: "Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it." Rude, but effective.

I doubt Mr. Trump read the book, but he was selftaught on "The Apprentice" and has gotten sharper at it.

It's infectious. Comically, by the early 2000s, many Americans got their "news" from Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show" on, yes, Comedy Central.

I'm OK with divisions and disagreements. They're healthy, and it's where great ideas emerge from. But civility is often lacking. Why? NBC producer Don Ohlmeyer, when asked about the problems with sports, replied, "The answer to all your questions is money." Now it seems, the answer to all your questions about the loss of civility (which we probably never had) is social media.

Not so fast. The crumbling mainstream media is no shining light on the hill, having lost a lot of credibility over the past five years. Think Russian collusion, Covid lockdowns and identity-politics cheerleading. Throw in loss of civility. Last month CNN's Anderson Cooper told former New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu "Don't be a d—." Mr. Cooper later apologized.

In 2017 the Washington Post cited Godwin's Law: "As an online discussion continues, the probability of a reference or comparison to Hitler or Nazis approaches 1." In 2016 the Post's website ran this headline: "Don't compare Donald Trump to Adolf Hitler. It belittles Hitler."

It's getting worse. A case in point is ABC's "The View," which as far as I can tell is a gaggle of Greek mythology's human-tormenting screeching harpies with a TV show—yes, that's very uncivil of me to say. Last October, co-host Joy Behar said of Mr. Trump's comments on immigrants, "It's the same language that Hitler used." On Mr. Trump, she followed up with, "If people still follow this fascist pig, then I don't know what else to say." If only.

Television is a shallow medium. The running joke is that TV is 75 inches wide and barely an inch deep. Many podcasts, if you have

time to sit through hours of babbling, are much the same. I'm convinced that writers have a secret superpower over live formats: We have a backspace key. (You'll never see the first draft of what I really think about "The View.") Like sports, opinions are

increasingly a meritocracy and democratized across many platforms. X. Substack. TikTok. New voices emerge. Some ruder than others, but they are still being heard. Get used to it.

As for social networks, I've labeled X a cesspool of snark many times, which is why I enjoy it. It's a meritocracy for clever folks with too much time on their hands. I've also been on the receiving end of hate—it comes with the territory, I suppose. A column against wealth taxes brought hundreds of guillotine tweets. When I write about the homeless, I often get physical threats. And I can't even repeat the vile responses received when I wrote about diversity demands or anything involving identity politics. Neither side, it seems, can abide by civil discourse.

To push back against online bombast, don't fight fire with fire, like complaining about tweeters in pajamas living in their parents' basement. Instead fight clever with cleverer. If Mr. Trump says you're "as dumb as a rock," hit back with a "Breaking Bad" reference, "They're minerals!" I think you'd gain his respect.

Is it over? Is society so depraved that life will never be civil again? In January, this paper quoted Jacob Mchangama, founder of Justitia, blaming cancel culture on "our species' hardwired tendencies toward tribalistic behavior and the selfrighteous urge to punish outgroups who transgress taboos."

Your taboo is my ballyhoo. Tribalism and self-righteousness are hard to combat, but not impossible. It has to start early and locally, in our education system and within our families and communities, to instill a sense of civility. Maybe someday.

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