

The Groundswell for Increased Civility
By **RICHARD C. MORAIS**



My wish for 2012: more civility.

Even to my own ears it sounds Pollyannaish and makes me cringe, but I have warmed to the notion that an increased level of civility will lead to a more productive America. It's not about being "nice." It's about getting some long overdue work done.

My road-to-Damascus moment came last summer when our divided Congress decided sinking America's AAA rating to score ideological points was preferable to doing anything resembling serious work. In that moment, sitting slack-jawed before the TV, I realized America had resurrected in a virtual, 21st century way the Civil War buried deep in our DNA. (See "[Uncivil War](#)").

Rage and insults on both sides were so all consuming, a scorched earth had become preferable to anything that involved genuine discussion and an equitable distribution of pain to solve our collective problems. We had finally achieved in America Thomas Hobbes's nightmarish vision of "war against all".

Seriously, we all need to lighten up and turn down the heat, even as the election fires up. I for one am joining the groundswell trying to practice a more civilized discourse, which, however much it sounds like a class for extra-curricular credit at Miss Porter's, is currently gaining steam with a swath of thought leaders across the country.

Consider the **Common Ground Committee**, an organization co-founded by Judy Kudlow, the activist spouse of the CNBC primetime anchor, Larry Kudlow. The group's mission: "To pursue initiatives that will reveal common ground for finding truth, clarity, understanding, and progress on issues of importance in a civil manner that does not require compromise of fundamental principles." Also in the group: Bruce Bond, group vice president of research at Gartner, and Cherie Burton, chairman of her family's land and minerals holding company, JM Longyear LLC.

Here's an example of what the Common Ground Committee does: On February 12th it is hosting at the 92 Street Y in New York a debate called "[Re-thinking Taxes](#)". Jared Bernstein, economic advisor to Joe Biden, and Arthur Laffer of Laffer Curve fame, will be on stage debating the role of taxes at this point in American history, with Christian Science Monitor journalists adding depth to the discourse. Common Ground's tag line – "Bringing Light Not Heat To Public Discourse" – has me cheering them on.

Some real muscle behind this civility-bandwagon. Robert L. Dilenschneider, the public relations heavyweight who runs [The Dilenschneider Group](#), hosted a series of thought-provoking lectures in 2011 at the [Carnegie Council For Ethics in International Affairs](#), before producing [Civility In America](#), a slim and immensely readable volume of essays from Henry Kaufman, Steve Forbes, Charles Osgood, Philip K. Howard, John Brademas, and Mickey Edwards.

The essay by Covington and Burling LLP vice-chairman, Philip K. Howard, in particular is worth a few minutes of your time. Howard makes the point (borrowed from the English judge, Fletcher Moulton) that between the law, where we are told what we can and cannot do, and freedom of choice, where we can do what we want, stands the "world of manners." Keeping unofficial order between these two poles pulling in opposite directions is the "realm which recognizes the sway of duty, fairness, sympathy, taste, and all the other things that make life beautiful and society possible."

Howard's thesis: modern laws have systematically taken away our freedom to make judgments as to what is "decent" behavior, and in so doing has made for an ever less civilized society. In short, the more we sideline with reams of prescriptive laws the unwritten world of manners and our ability to judge "bad behavior", the more we erode functioning, civil society. His example of how a teacher in America was forced to call in cops to handcuff and lead away a wall-bouncing seven year-old (as happened in Queens), simply because the teacher's authority to discipline had been so neutered by modern laws, is enough to make even the most hard-hearted weep for America. The last person served in this out of control adult world is the child.

But the essays in *Civility in America* also point out the weaknesses of this growing movement. The media has played a large role in this collapse of civility, and now we suffer our own blow-back with comments left at the bottom of our blogs that seem to endorse the Hobbesian worldview that life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Charles Osgood's essay missed, I thought, a valuable opportunity to tackle the media head-on, and instead chucked a softball about listening better and getting dressed with a tie-and-jacket at Carnegie Hall. It is Osgood's type of elderly wistfulness, if-only-we-all-dressed-properly-the-world-order-would-be-restored, that will gut this movement before it gets started.

My wife, for example, like spouse Larry Kudlow [apparently](#), is skeptical of this admittedly idealistic movement, arguing that hankering after civility is "facile" and misses the point. She handed me an essay titled, "The Second Layer: Anger, Hatred, Outrage", in the poetry anthology, [Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart](#), edited by Robert Bly, James Hillman, and Michael Meade.

This essay makes the convincing point that anger and strife is the second layer of human interaction that exists between the first-layer falsehoods of civility ("How are you?") that keep society functioning, and the third-layer of "oneness", where spirituality, justice and peaceful co-existence reside. Society needs all three: anger has to first break through the falsehoods of good manners before we can reach genuine "common ground."

Fair enough. But right now we are fighting each other like terrorists. Wouldn't it be a good thing to reestablish some ground rules for our hot wars – the verbal equivalents of not starving POWs or deliberately targeting women and children – that were once, however unevenly applied, the "rules of engagement" during public discourse? Wouldn't that help make our society more productive and able to resolve the great issues of our day?