

# The Washington Times

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**ANALYSIS/OPINION:**

## **DAVIS: Civility makes strange bedfellows**

**Lanny Davis and Mark DeMoss**

*Note to reader: This column is co-authored with Mark DeMoss, whose Atlanta-based public relations firm primarily serves faith-based, evangelical organizations. As the column explains, it is most appropriate, on the eve of the inauguration of Barack Obama, whose candidacy was based on a new politics of civility, that a new national project initiated by Mr. DeMoss, called the "Civility Project," should be announced in this column regularly titled, "Purple Nation."*

Ours is a most unlikely friendship. In fact, conventional wisdom would not have us speaking to each other, let alone being friends. One of us is Republican, a political conservative who was a staunch supporter of former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney in the primaries, and an evangelical Southern Baptist. The other is a Democrat, a political liberal who worked for President Bill Clinton and was an ardent supporter of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton during the recent presidential primaries, and is of the Jewish faith. The first opposes the right to abortion and believes in the right to life. The second supports the right to choose and thinks the abortion decision should be a private one between a woman and her physician.

It is unlikely our paths would ever have crossed, except for a letter written last summer as Mrs. Clinton was ending her campaign for the Democratic nomination. The conservative wrote to commend the liberal for his civility during numerous television appearances on Mrs. Clinton's behalf, and his respectful treatment of those with whom he disagreed.

Six months later we were having lunch in an increasingly uncivil town, Washington, discussing the launch of a national effort called the Civility Project. As dissimilar as our religious and political beliefs and opinions are, we found ourselves drawn to each other's love for this country and a conviction about the importance to its future of trying to change the polarizing, attack-oriented political culture that has become all too common in recent years and, instead, to bring civility back as the staple of American politics and life.

In addition to our desire to promote a more civil society, we also share disgust for the incivility we see every day in this country, on the radio and TV, and around the world. For

example, while one of us opposed Proposition 8 in California, which legally defined marriage as only between a man and a woman, the other would have supported it.

However, we both condemn the vandalism by some who opposed the proposition directed at those such as Mormon Church members who supported the measure. We also oppose the often blind hatred, violence and discrimination against gay people by certain individuals, who claim they act in the name of religious beliefs while violating other religious tenets.

Though neither of us supported Barack Obama initially (one of us voted for him in the general election), we both think some of the name calling and personal attacks regarding our president-elect are inappropriate and contrary to American values. We also decry the nasty tone and offensive decibel level of strident voices on the left and right that demonize those with whom they disagree. Whatever happened to winning debates on the strength of ideas?

The Civility Project ([www.civilityproject.org](http://www.civilityproject.org)) that has just been launched nationwide is a call to people from all races, walks of life, and religious and political persuasions to graciousness, kindness, common decency and respect - civility - toward all people, and particularly those with whom we disagree.

We think everyone in this country should be able to embrace the three simple commitments found in the project's Civility Pledge: (1) I will be civil in public discourse and behavior; (2) I will be respectful of others, whether or not I agree with them; and (3) I will stand up and call out incivility whenever I see it.

Recognizing this effort will have its critics, on the left and the right, let's be clear about what the Civility Project is not. It is not a call to surrender personal beliefs, convictions or ideology about anything. It is not a call to limit or regulate free speech. It is not a search for a mushy center in which everyone has to love everyone else.

We are not calling for an end to partisan politics, for there is nothing wrong with partisan politics. Indeed, everything is right with partisan politics - if that is defined as vigorous debate between Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, on the issues. Such debate informs and breathes life into our republic. The opposite - personal attack, the politics of hate and sanctimony - not only undermines our ability to solve our problems, but also corrodes the soul of the country as much as cancer destroys the human body.

By helping to launch this nationwide effort, we and others involved in it are not claiming a moral superiority on this idea of civility. Certainly, all of us at one time or another have gotten carried away with our own opinions and convictions and overstepped the boundaries of civil disagreement.

But we are pledging to try to do better, as are the others joining us in the Civility Project.

As we now inaugurate a new president, may we also inaugurate a new era of civility across this land. We hope others will join us in making the Civility Project both an individual and a national success.

*Mark DeMoss is founder of the DeMoss Group, a public relations firm that specializes in work with faith-based organizations. He is the author of "The Little Red Book of Wisdom." Lanny Davis, a Washington lawyer and former special counsel to President Clinton, served as a member of the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board from 2006 to 2007. He is the author of "Scandal: How 'Gotcha' Politics Is Destroying America."*