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## **What's gotten into us? Theories abound after a spate of high-profile outbursts**

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So maybe it's not swine flu, but the nation seems to have come down with a serious case of impulse control disorder.

Symptoms include (but are not limited to) Kanye West snatching Taylor Swift's moment at MTV's Video Music Awards; Serena Williams threatening, with expletives, to cram her ball down a lineswoman's throat at the U.S. Open; and Rep. Joe Wilson's inability to contain the urge to denigrate President Obama while the president was in the middle of addressing the nation on a topic of critical importance.

Wilson's House colleagues formally chastised the South Carolina Republican on Tuesday.

In the wake of these high-profile outbursts across disciplines -- politics, entertainment and sports -- many Americans have found themselves asking what is going on. To some, it's not a coincidence but rather the manifestation of a deepening social dysfunction.

"It's extremely regrettable, but not shocking," said Pepper Schwartz, a University of Washington sociologist. "And there is a viral element to it. It's like Malcolm Gladwell's book 'The Tipping Point.' You get to a critical mass of something and it spreads like wildfire."

Theories for the behavior abound.

Some say it reflects a general collapse of manners, rooted in the anti-authoritarian strains of the late 1960s. Some offer a psychological explanation: that such outbursts reveal the person beneath the mask of a public persona. Some see an element of racial animus at work.

And one etiquette authority offered an uncomplicated explanation, in particular for West: He just wanted attention.

Schwartz, a political liberal, believes that the flowering of rude behavior -- call it the New Boorishness -- took root in the late 1960s when students began challenging authority "for a very good reason: Authority was leading us into Vietnam."

Over time, she said, "we have shredded respect for every kind of institution, every kind of profession, and have indulged ourselves and our emotions at every level of society, from how kids treat their parents, how students treat their teachers and all the way up the line. So why wouldn't it ultimately get onto the tennis courts and presidential speeches?"

Many have bemoaned the erosion of civility represented by these rants, but cultural critic and writer Joseph Epstein thinks civility was purely a facade to begin with.

The public figures who crossed the line have careers that generally require them to create "false PR personalities," Epstein said. "These were eruptions of true, loathsome feelings after all these years

of suppression and having to pretend to be such sweet characters when they are not. What they all were before is as phony as can be. They all just said, 'I can't take it anymore,' and they all fell apart."

Drew Westen, an Emory University psychologist who has studied the effects of unconscious racism in political contests, said it was no accident that most of these incidents involved blacks and whites. West is black and Swift is white, he noted. And Wilson, who yelled at Obama, is white.

"I think racial tensions on both sides are pretty high right now," Westen said. "It's on a new level now because it's not conscious or overt. It's bubbling underneath. What might have led to a small reaction or a thought to yourself that something is unfair is now popping out of people's mouths."

It is not clear that losing control exacts a price, which is part of the problem.

True, University of Oregon running back LeGarrette Blount was recently suspended for the season after punching a rival team's defensive end in the jaw, essentially ending Blount's college career.

And Williams, who first denied making a threat, did pay a literal price. She was fined \$10,500 and the incident is being investigated by the International Tennis Federation. But the night after her verbal assault, she was onstage at the Video Music Awards joking about her outburst.

Some conservative circles have made a hero of Wilson, who yelled "You lie!" at Obama during the president's speech on healthcare reform last week before a joint session of Congress.

It has been reported that Wilson's campaign has raised nearly \$1 million (though his Democratic opponent has also reportedly received a windfall).

Some praised Obama for remaining above the fray, but Westen, a Democratic consultant, thinks he missed an important opportunity:

"The president had just said in his speech that he is happy to work with people who want solutions, but 'I will call you out' to those who are getting in the way and being uncivil. And then Joe Wilson calls him a liar to his face in front of the whole nation. He should have said, 'Excuse me, I believe someone just called me a liar. Would you like to stand up?' "

That Obama did not do that, said Westen, "was an object lesson in why the right continues to escalate their incivility."

(Obama did, however, weigh in on the West-Swift debacle when, during an off-the-record portion of an interview with CNBC, ABC reporter Terry Moran heard him call West a "jackass" and tweeted that to the world.)

West has been reviled by the show business community and fans, many of whom instantly denounced him on Twitter for snatching the microphone out of Swift's hand Sunday and insisting her award should have gone to Beyonce.

Scheduled to perform the next night on Jay Leno's new prime-time show, West ran into what may be a cure for boorishness: evocations of Mom.

When Leno asked him what his late mother would have said, West fell silent. Chagrined, he said he was ashamed and would take some time off to analyze his behavior.

"That was shameful behavior, but again, it has catapulted him into the press," said etiquette maven Letitia Baldrige, who was First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's social secretary.

That sentiment spanned generations: The singer Pink, more than half a century younger than Baldrige, told NBC's Matt Lauer that West was "getting exactly what he wants right now. People are talking about him." ("Let's stop," suggested Lauer.)

Meanwhile, there are those who are toiling to counter the New Boorishness.

Joe McQuade, a Houston writer, got so tired of hearing people yell at each other on TV shows like "Crossfire" and "Hardball" that he started an online forum, Civil Discourse. Its motto: "No insults, no food fights, no rants or idle chatter."

His 400 members used to be evenly split politically. In the last six months, though, he had to dismiss some of his conservative contributors.

"It was a small clique who would post incendiary stuff and insult people who disagree with them," said McQuade, mindful of the irony. This summer, he suspended them.

Mark DeMoss, a conservative evangelical Christian who owns a public relations firm in Atlanta, has launched **the Civility Project** with Hillary Rodham Clinton ally Lanny Davis. DeMoss, an unpaid advisor to the presidential campaign of Republican Mitt Romney, was distressed by the religion-based attacks against Romney, who is Mormon.

DeMoss reached out to Davis, his political opposite, because he was impressed by Davis' genteel demeanor during the 2008 campaign.

DeMoss, who admitted he has berated the occasional airline ticket counter worker, said he and Davis are encouraging people to take "the civility pledge." (Please repeat: "I will be civil in my public discourse and behavior. I will be respectful of others whether or not I agree with them. I will stand against incivility when I see it.")

DeMoss is troubled by the recent spate of bad behavior.

"I am afraid it is emboldening people to be ruder or to grandstand," he said. "I have three teenagers. How would a high school teacher or principal handle a situation where a student shouted at the teacher and the student's defense is 'My congressman did it to the president'?"

"If this trend continues, it's not a good thing for the country."

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PHOTO: SHOWBIZ: Singer Kanye West grabs the microphone from Taylor Swift at the Video Music Awards on Sunday.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Jason DeCrow Associated Press; PHOTO: POLITICS: Rep. Joe Wilson shouts, "You lie" during a speech by President Obama.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Washington Post; PHOTO: SPORTS: Tennis star Serena Williams argues a call -- profanely -- with a line judge.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Getty Images; PHOTO: OUT OF CONTROL: Oregon running back LeGarrette Blount punches Boise State defensive end Byron Hout.; PHOTOGRAPHER: ESPN.com

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