



President Obama's Call for Civility: Do As I Say, Not As I Do

On May 1 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, during his commencement address to the University of Michigan, President Barack Obama made the following suggestion to the assembled graduates, families, and friends:

The second way to keep our democracy healthy is to maintain a basic level of civility in our public debate. These arguments we're having over government and health care and war and taxes are serious arguments. They should arouse people's passions, and it's important for everyone to join in the debate, with all the rigor that a free people require.

But we cannot expect to solve our problems if all we do is tear each other down. You can disagree with a certain policy without demonizing the person who espouses it. You can question someone's views and their judgment without questioning their motives or their patriotism. Throwing around phrases like "socialist" and "Soviet-style takeover;" "fascist" and "right-wing nut" may grab headlines, but it also has the effect of comparing our government, or our political opponents, to authoritarian, and even murderous regimes.

Good advice. Few would argue that. One could and should argue, however, about the President's denomination of America as a "democracy," but that is for another article. Here, we are concerned strictly with the President's sound counsel to ratchet up the decency of discourse in politics and government.

Despite the recommendable aspect of the President's admonition, none of this would be particularly newsworthy if not for the following statement made during a November 30, 2009 interview, also made by President Obama: "[Republicans voting against the stimulus bill] set the tenor for the whole year.... That helped to create the tea-baggers and empowered that whole wing of the Republican Party to where it now controls the agenda for the Republicans."

What happened to the "let's all just get along and not call each other names" advice? It seems that, as with so many other aspects of his public policy, President Barack Obama's guiding principle in private is "do as I say, not as I do." Somewhere along the way, the President forgot his manners and set his foot on the path of hypocrisy.

In fairness, it isn't just the President who's guilty of violating his maxim of gentility. His congressional water-carriers have quite the mouth on them, as well.

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) have both vilified Tea Party activists, calling them "[Nazis](#)," and "[evil-mongers](#)," respectively. If one were to believe



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the spiteful rhetoric spewed by Democratic Party leadership, then they would believe that the only thing separating Tea Party supporters and Timothy McVeigh is a Ryder rental truck.

Despite the President's public plaudits of a kindler and gentler political atmosphere, the name-calling, race baiting, and grossly unfair ad hominem attacks on anyone who disagrees with his precepts or his policies pervades the corridors and counsels of the Potomac. Worse still, the President, the de facto leader of the Democratic Party, has done nothing (other than float a few uplifting platitudes at a college graduation) to discourage this habitual slander.

There are those who accuse the President himself of being the insulter-in-chief. He is seen by many observers to be the most egregious impugner of the motives and principles of his adversaries. "More than any President in memory Mr. Obama has a tendency to vilify his opponents in personal terms and assail their arguments as dishonest, illegitimate or motivated by bad faith," claimed the *Wall Street Journal* in an [editorial](#) published last month online.

The sticky wicket, if you will, is that the President is engaging in behavior for which he chastises those who dare challenge his hegemony. He excoriates out of one side of his mouth, and preaches peace out of the other, like a mocking modern day Janus. As one commentator quipped, President Obama tries "to portray himself as hovering above us mere mortals, exasperated at the childish and petty quality of the political debate, weary of the name-calling. How hard it must be to be the embodiment of Socratic discourse, Solomonic wisdom, and Niebuhrian nuance in this fallen and broken world."

The President comes by it honest in a way, though. He and his West Wing clique are hardened veterans of the so-called "Chicago Way." They are seasoned soldiers in the take no prisoners political tactics practiced on the streets of the wards of the Windy City, whence President Obama comes. They can toss red herrings and construct straw men with the best of them. And, if that passive parry doesn't work, they are quick on the trigger with vicious, venomous thrusts into the character and conduct of enemy combatants.

This distasteful dearth of integrity is forgivable in most. A blind eye is grudgingly turned when a hard-working everyman vents frustration on those he reckons to be his antagonists. In a President, however, this guttural demeanor is shameful and untoward. One is reminded of the rebuke issued by his concerned friends to the King of Egypt after finding him once again acting unseemly:

O King, thou dost not rightly govern thyself in thus letting thyself descent to behavior so trifling. Egyptians would have been assured that they were ruled by a great man, and thou wouldest have had a better report: but as it is, thou are acting by no means in a kingly fashion.

His highly vaunted audacity notwithstanding, Barack Obama is no king, but he is the recognized leader of the world's greatest Republic, and as such he must be held to a higher standard of decency — a standard he himself recommends to others.

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