



The Founding Fathers, Political Civility, and Journalism

“In the American imagination,” author Ron Chernow wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* June 28, “the founding era shimmers as the golden age of political discourse, a time when philosopher-kings strode the public stage, dispensing wisdom with gentle civility.” But in this case, the imagination is a lie.



Chernow explained to the contrary that “the founders were fiery men who expressed their beliefs with unusual vehemence.”

But this “imagination” is a key to the whole concept of how most Americans now believe political campaigns and journalism should be run: Politicians should avoid “negative ads” and insults on their opponents and journalists should avoid ever giving their opinions, reserving themselves to simply restating the facts. Such an idea is a mid-20th-century creation, not one of the Founding Fathers. As Chernow [explained](#) in his *Wall Street Journal* column, the Founders even insulted each other. “[Thomas] Paine even wondered aloud whether Washington was ‘an apostate or an imposter; whether you have abandoned good principles, or whether you ever had any.’” Chernow explained, “Such highly charged language shouldn’t surprise us. People who spearhead revolutions tend to be outspoken and courageous, spurred on by a keen taste for combat.”

Samuel Adams’ [“Vindex” letters](#), anonymously written to Boston newspapers before independence, stand out for their complete lack of civility. In large part, it was Adams’ agitations in print that created the American revolution. Moreover, even after independence, political discourse took regular hard knocks. Thomas Jefferson had pardoned pamphleteer Joseph Callender after he had been arrested and imprisoned under the Sedition Act during the administration of John Adams. But that didn’t stop Callender from [attacking Jefferson](#) as a tool of the French revolution and alleging that he had fathered a child out of wedlock with his slave Sally Hemings. Yes, even back in the Founding era, Americans loved to write about sex scandals of the powerful.

What’s different about today is that Americans like to pretend to be friendlier in politics and less



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on June 29, 2010

opinionated in print, though with the advent of the Internet the latter category is dying a slow death with the print newspaper medium. Case in point is the *Washington Post* cashiering of [blogger David Weigel](#).

Hired to cover the conservative movement as one of its own, Weigel spent much of his tenure as a *Washington Post* blogger attacking conservatives [to the delight of liberals](#). When he suggested in a private Washington-area chat list called the "JournoList" that "This would be a vastly better world to live in if Matt Drudge decided to handle his emotional problems more responsibly, and set himself on fire," that was deemed too much for the genteel Washington sensibilities of the *Washington Post*, which accepted Weigel's resignation.

Weigel's demise at the *Post* was a result of the prevalent view among newspapers that reporting should be "unbiased," a metaphysical impossibility, or at least even-handed. But like the dying newspaper medium, this 20th-century phenomenon of requiring journalists to never admit to a bias in public (or even in private, as the Weigel case demonstrated), is dying as well. Newspapers were openly aligned with political parties throughout most of American history, and nevertheless still relayed important news. Blogs, which break as many stories as newspapers these days, follow that older American tradition of admitting their biases up front.

Only government and newspapers continue to show intolerance for name-calling and negative news coverage, as revealed in the recent change of command in Afghanistan. The fact that Gen. Stanley McChrystal resigned for remarks he made in an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine can be seen as another example of this lack of tolerance for vigorous criticism. In the [interview](#), McChrystal criticized President Obama as "unprepared" for their first meeting, which he described as a "10-minute photo op." For that, and insults to Vice President Biden, McChrystal was cashiered.

While Americans have for several generations now clung to the notion that political discourse should be civil, it is better to have the unfettered truth with a few insults than to have only part of the truth. And with that full truth usually comes a lot of passion and insults. That's why the Founders chose to allow insults in political discourse.

Image of Samuel Adams: AP Images



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