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Political Civility: Dialogue not Diatribe

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

June 14, 2018

I love talking with a wide range of folks about history and philosophy, government and law, politics and policy. I'm a Democrat, but many of my best discussion-mates are Republican friends who are willing to reasonably, rationally and civilly advance their political thoughts to me as I advance mine to them.

I don't consider that unusual. A ritual of my youth was watching my Dad, in his small restaurant, talking - even arguing - politics with a local rancher. Dad was an ardent progressive Democrat; his friend a stalwart conservative Republican, but there was no animus there. In fact, those discussions were friendly, productive and informative as both men knew their stuff and advanced their ideas backed by philosophies, facts and information. They loved the discussions, liked each other and relished this daily bit of civic engagement. I listened and learned the substance of issues of the day and also how to civilly articulate one's cause to an opponent.

Turns out I was observing an iconic American experience -- a political "coffee klatch" where intellectual jousting occurs among friends of different persuasions. With or without coffee, the idea of testing, with civility, one's ideas against a range of other ideas is as American as apple pie -- sometimes done in a union hall or maybe on the floor of the Montana Legislature; sometimes at a City Council meeting or on the floor of the US Senate - "the greatest deliberative body in the world." Yes, it is as American as apple pie - or at least it was.

But today, discussing and working together civilly is not the norm. In fact, it's seen as abnormal. So abnormal, so notorious, that last year, our daily newspaper ran a ["political odd couple" front page story](#) about my "Eisenhower Republican" friend Mick Ringsak and me discussing politics and working together on projects - respecting and liking each other in spite of coming at everything from completely different political perspectives. Recently another of my Republican cohorts, [Ron Ueland, suddenly and unexpectedly passed away](#). Ron and I also differed politically, but that didn't interfere with our mutual respect, friendship and ability to work side-by-side to benefit our community. We each enjoyed poking fun at the other's political positions without acrimony.

Ron's death got me thinking about what's gone so wrong in recent years in terms of political dialogue. Every time I turn on the television, I see absolutism, tribalism and a "win at any cost" approach to issues and politics. Dialogue has almost disappeared, replaced by diatribe. Nowadays, people can select news sources that reinforce their biases, finding comfort in "being right" by selective listening or watching. No need to consider other sides of the argument when one can bathe in the comfort of commonality.

Where in the real world is the respectful argumentation that is taught in debate classes, where you had to learn to advance or defend all sides of a proposition? Where is the

1960s and 1970s US Senate of Montana's Mike Mansfield, Senate Majority Leader longer than any person in US History? To quote Mike, [the way the Senate got things done](#) then was "by accommodation, by respect for one another, by mutual restraint and, as necessary, adjustments..." Mike, as a leader, personally helped things along by doing his "...best to be courteous, decent, and understanding of others."

Mansfield's respectfulness reflected a day-to-day, real world application of G.W.F. Hegel's philosophical "dialectic" as it relates to advancing governmental action needed to unify differences and diversity in the body politic. "The unifying aspects of his [Hegel's] philosophy [are that] [disagreements are solved by rational communication.](#)" Built into Hegel's dialectic is the belief in the inherent legitimacy of counter arguments, political positions and reasoning. They all deserve respect.

So, today, we Americans have a challenge. We've moved from a nation of dialogue to one of diatribe. Once we acknowledge the problem, we need to find a path back to civility, rationality, respect and dialogue. This is so challenging it almost feels like trying to turn around an oil tanker. However, each and every one of us, through our daily actions, can contribute to the turnaround. Stay tuned to see if we can get there.

Evan Barrett, who lives in historic Uptown Butte, retired in 2017 after 48 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history films who continues to write columns and occasionally teaches Montana history and contributes to community and economic development projects.

(700 words in the body)