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### Healthy democracy needed

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By Robert Watson

Politics has sunk to a new low. So much so that the old advice about avoiding the topic at business lunches and on first dates has never been truer.

Yet, nastiness in politics is not new. There is a long and sordid history of less-than-honorable behavior by politicians, the press, and the public, even the Founding Fathers. Thomas Jefferson once used a hack reporter named James Calendar to smear Alexander Hamilton for, among other things, womanizing. Ironically, Jefferson was then smeared by the same reporter for, among other things, womanizing. Shortly thereafter, Calendar was found drunk and dead in a river and Hamilton died in a duel with Jefferson's former vice president, Aaron Burr.



Four years before the Civil War, Massachusetts senator and abolitionist Charles Sumner was nearly caned to death on the Senate floor by a pro-slavery congressman. Throughout our history, whether it was the fight for abolition, universal suffrage, civil rights, or conservation, both the advocates for reform and justice and, more often, their opponents have not always acted in accordance with the principle of civility.

While framing the Constitution, the Founders kept their eye on the prize despite their disagreements and the lofty charge before them. They embraced politics as a passionate endeavor but wisely realized that civil discourse was essential for democracy to succeed. The flip side of each right afforded us as citizens, they reasoned, was the need to act in a responsible and civil manner. But, that was then.

It is difficult to put a finger on just one culprit behind today's collapse of civil discourse.

Whether it is a noisy cell phone conversation in public, the blare of car horns and flashing of middle fingers on the freeway, or baggy pants and profane rap lyrics, we have been witnessing a decline in civility throughout society.

What is new about the decline in civility is the sheer pervasiveness of negativity throughout society and the body politic. We have entered what I refer to as the "zero-sum society," where I must always win and you must always lose, and where for me to be right you must be wrong.

This problem is exacerbated by political coverage on 24-hour cable news, the Internet, and satellite radio, all of which have abandoned the high hope associated with their advent in favor of mob rule and our most primal urges. With the public craving conflict and controversy, news outlets pedal sensationalism and scandal. The "cross-fire" format might sell well, but this is not how democracies function, and free speech is not well served by popping off from behind the faceless anonymity of a computer screen. Nor is it serious policy debate to label anyone who disagrees as being unpatriotic, but it is a heckuva lot easier than explaining a complex issue in a 15-second sound-bite.

Leaders such as Hillary Clinton, and President Bush are both source and symptom of the decline of civility. By opting for the low road and exhibiting little interest in finding common ground, politicians feed this culture of conflict.

The loss of civility will continue to exact a terrible toll, as the 2008 presidential campaign will likely be one of the ugliest in history. The televangelist Jerry Falwell quipped before his death that if Sen. Clinton was the Democratic nominee, she would do more to energize his flock of evangelicals than the devil himself. Although his prediction does not sound very moral, it does point to the fact that the inspiration behind the current campaign is neither the candidates nor their ideas, but the

negative image politicians evoke among their opponents. Tragically, 2008 is about whether Democrats hate President Bush more than Republicans hate Sen. Clinton.

One of our foremost duties as citizens is to voice our opinions, even in — or especially in — disagreement, but to do so in a civil manner. Likewise, one of our leaders' foremost duties is to respect our right to be heard. As the campaign season heats up, let us remember that there is no room in a healthy democracy for fear-mongering in place of truth-telling, and for shouting in place of civil discourse.

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