

THE UNCIVIL WAR

By Fred Hobbs

“Use not reproachful language against anyone, neither curse nor revile.”

“Be not hasty to believe ‘flying’ reports (meaning rumors) to the disparaging of any.” Those are two statements reportedly taken from a list of 110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior embraced by a not-quite 16-year old named George Washington.

Now, George also was supposed to have never told a lie, even admitting he chopped down a big hunk of his dad’s cherry tree. So, you’d assume that when the father of our country urges you to be civil, you’d better buy into the concept because Father Knows Best. But over the centuries that quaint notion has steadily diminished, indeed virtually evaporated. First, in this article, it is wise to be careful not to confuse this use of the word “civil” with the word as it pertains to the terrible, bloody conflict that threatened this nation’s very existence, the citizen- against-citizen American Civil War. What does seem appropriate, however, is to refer to the current level of public and interpersonal discourse as at least one battle in “The Uncivil War”.

Using one of the many definitions of the word “civil”, in this context, “respectful” seems appropriate. Comedian Rodney Dangerfield first said it several years ago, “I don’t get no respect.” Goodness knows, politicians don’t get any and give precious little either. Readers, viewers and listeners to the media coverage of the current presidential and congressional campaigns don’t hear very many respectful messages. Local politicians, including Colorado’s own legislators, are not much more respectful to their opponents than is the crowd in Washington.

Respect seems to be only a “sometimes thing” in the world of commerce, especially retail business. All too many “live” sales representatives in major stores fail to thank you for your business. Some even look the other way when you are waiting to be served or after you’ve forked over the cash or the credit card. And, of course, a large share of retail business is conducted without the aid of a real, live person, let alone a respectful one. On-line purchases, self-serve gas pumping, computerized, automated, scanned grocery check-outs are not programmed to be civil. The recorded voice may say “thank you” or that sentiment may be printed on your machine-activated receipt, but how do you know if the merchant really cares?

For that matter, who cares if anybody really cares about respect? Can this Uncivil War be won? Well, that’s a possibility. Maybe a compromise between a fast-paced, technology-driven society and the leadership of the many intelligent, fine and caring people who still inhabit the planet. It’s comforting that thoughtful and wise counsel remains from among our leaders past and present. And as some outstanding youthful examples clearly show, some measure of civility is bound to extend to the future.

Maybe the most interesting and provocative words to sum up a dissertation on civility come from two celebrated Americans representing distinctly different eras in the nation’s history and widely divergent career paths. American founding father, philosopher and inventor Benjamin Franklin advised: “Be civil to all, sociable to many, familiar with few, friend to one and enemy of none.” And this from the 20th century’s much loved and admired former singing waiter, comedian and actor, Jimmy Durante: “Be nice to people on the way up because you might meet ‘em on the way down.”