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Civil discourse in uncivil times

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By JOHN MARSHALL

“You will be our president when you read this note. I wish you well. I wish your family well. Your success now is our country’s success. I am rooting hard for you. Good luck, George.”

So read a 1993 personal note from outgoing President George H.W. Bush left on the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office for incoming President Bill Clinton.

Civility in American politics, and more broadly in our culture, perhaps feels like it’s a little on the ropes. Like we have seen more polite days. Inarguably it’s true that our countrymen and civic leaders have been more kind to one another in decades past than today. In fact, it may appear to many of us that our politics are inching closer to the days of the deadly Burr-Hamilton duel than the soft sentiments of the handwritten Bush (41) note. Is it simply inevitable that our political leaders embrace a no-holds-barred political donnybrook?

Recall after the horrific 2004 tsunami in Indonesia, which killed approximately a quarter-million human beings, Messrs. Clinton and Bush (41) led an American delegation to bring humanitarian relief to the devastated region. Shortly thereafter, the former foes again teamed up closer to home to support the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Along the way, an authentic affection grew between the two.

The heartwarming and genuine relationship between these presidents developed well after their time in office, but it was certainly not a foregone conclusion. After all, the partisan rivals fought a bitter national campaign in 1992 in which the long and storied political career of incumbent President Bush was ended by the charismatic young upstart governor from Arkansas. Not exactly a warm greeting. Yet, the two statesmen put aside their differences to serve others in a time of need and along the way developed a respect and warmth for each other — in short, they became true friends.

In retrospect, that 1992 contest seems positively romantic compared to the ugliness and acrimony of the current campaign season. Can we stem this cultural tide? Can we return to a more civil discourse, a more respectful national dialogue and broadly turn down the temperature of our politics without giving way to apathy or cynicism?

At Colorado Mesa University this fall, we are attempting to do just that. Thanks to the leadership of students and faculty committed to an engaged but civil election season, CMU has been hosting weekly civic engagement opportunities for our campus to model a better approach. From nonpartisan-led efforts for voter registration, to bipartisan debate watch parties hosted by students, to welcoming Republicans and Democrats alike to campus for Civic Forum events throughout the fall, our university is attempting to play our small part in living out values of humility, curiosity and extending dignity to one another (most especially to those with whom we disagree!).

The target of this effort is not simply those on our campus. We invite our community friends and neighbors to join us in this work. And there are two upcoming opportunities to do just that. The first is an Oct. 8 screening and panel discussion featuring the film “XCLD: The Story of Cancel Culture” with the filmmaker Ferne Perlstein. The second event is “An Evening with Governors” featuring a bipartisan statesmen panel discussion with former Colorado governors Bill Ritter and Bill Owens on Oct. 15. Both events are ticketed but free to the public at our new Asteria Theatre.

Presidents Bush and Clinton started out as political enemies, but their unexpected story ended in an unlikely friendship. Let’s make room for each other in this election season and extend a more respectful, more civil tone as we learn about the candidates, discuss and debate the issues, and ultimately vote our conscience. And when this election is over, let’s wish each other well; let’s wish each other’s families well; and let’s root hard for our country’s success.