

Remarks of Ambassador Lyndon Olson
Upon Accepting the Texas Legacy Award
From the Center for Public Policy Priorities
At the Eighth Annual Texas Legacy Luncheon
November 12, 2009, Austin, Texas

Thank you very much for this honor. I appreciate the kind remarks of my friend Congressman Edwards. I also appreciate the opportunity today to talk to this distinguished group about a concern of mine.

I want to talk with you about civility, both in society in general and in our politics in particular.

I encourage you to think back...for some of us way back...to those report cards we got in first grade. Most everyone had different type cards and categories, but they were pretty much variations on the same basic theme. I'm not talking about your arithmetic or reading or penmanship grades. I'm talking about the comportment column, with things such as *Exercises self-control ... respects the rights of others ... shows kindness and consideration for others ... indicates willingness to cooperate ... uses handkerchief* (important even before the H1N1 virus) ... and, my favorite was usually right up at the top of that 6-week report card and it's of particular significance to our discussion ... "*Plays well with others.*"

We were being taught about and graded on one of the most fundamental skills of our civilization: how to get along with others. There is a reason that *plays well with others* was one of the first things we were taught and evaluated

on. And folks, I don't think we're getting a very good grade on *plays well with others* these days. Many of us don't even *want* to play with someone we don't like or agree with.

Where did all of this come from? In the majority of my life this hasn't been the case. Those of us in this room over 40 or 50 didn't grow up in anything like this environment. We didn't live like this. Not in our communities ... not in our politics. We lived in a political world with strong feelings and positions, yes. And we took swings at each other politically. But it didn't come down to the moral equivalent of street brawls and knife fights. Politics has always been a contact sport, but the conflict didn't permeate every aspect of our society and rise to today's level of social and verbal hostility. It is very unhealthy. And I'm not sure what to do about it. But I know it when I see it and hear it. And I know it is time we focus as much attention on our civil behavior as we do on achieving our personal and partisan agendas. How we do that, I don't know. But I want to raise the issue, ask the questions, and encourage you all to give it your consideration as well.

We live in an era of rudeness, in society in general, in the popular culture, and in our political life. Our culture today, in fact, rewards incivility, crudeness, and cynicism. You can get on TV, get your own talk show or reality series if you out-shout and offend the other guy. Everyone screams, no one listens. We produce a lot of heat but little light. The proclivity is to demonize

our opponent. People don't just disagree ... the challenge to the other is a battle to the death. Character assassination, verbal abuse, obnoxious behavior, and an overbearing attention on scandal and titillation – all that isn't just reserved to day-time TV anymore—it's the currency of prime-time, of late night, of cable news, of the Internet, and of society in general.

What happened to us? Should this be a sign of alarm? Is the problem selfishness—we won't be denied, we must be immediately gratified? We want everything we've ever seen in the movies? How do we live and get along like our parents and their generation? They had to sacrifice. They didn't get what they wanted when they wanted it. Is today's need for instant gratification a problem?

We are more inclusive today...and that is a good thing—but has that good made for increased tensions?

Is it the 24-hour news cycle? The 24-hour news cycle demands instantaneous news, which feeds off of controversy, scandal, and easy answers to difficult questions. There is scant time for reflection or reasoned analysis. Market forces demand instantaneous information and jarring entertainment values, not sober analysis or wisdom. The news media are more prone to focus on the loudest, the most outrageous, and the most partisan actors. And given the rise of the political consultant class, candidates and campaigns are louder, more outrageous, and meta-partisan. Political consultants have helped create a

permanent campaign where politics takes precedence over governance. The political consultants egg on all this for profit, creating controversy where little or none exists so the message, the theme of the day, is played out on TV and the media. They're paid handsomely to cause strife and create conflict in order to raise hackles, money, and attention ... fomenting issues to suit their agenda. It's all about the message, not the solution, not the negotiation, the debate, the compromise to move forward. It's about who is controlling the message, who is defining the message, who is creating the message, who is keeping the conflict alive often where none existed before the consultant decided one was needed. Is this what keeps us at each other's throats?

Is it talk radio, attack TV? Is it the talk shows, the shout festivals where absolute hyperbole is the only currency? Mean-spirited hyperbole and hyper-partisanship breeds cynicism. Citizens are increasingly cynical about politics and about their government's ability to work. The damage to the ship of state, to the fabric of the nation begs repair. Whose job is it to change course and effect the necessary repairs? I'm not sure I have the answer to that, but I propose that in a room full of policy makers and politicians, men and women who talk to the media, who work in the public arena, who hire consultants, who set agendas, maybe we have a role to play in making things better.

You know, I can say that there are some people in this room, people I consider dear friends, who understand this problem and I believe share my

concern. To those friends I say, you and I both know that we disagree very fundamentally on some very big issues but the truth is that we could care less about our disagreements and are more concerned about where we can find consensus and reasons to work and live together to construct a better future. I consider this kind of commitment to trust and open dialogue crucial to maintaining a sustainable society.

And indeed, isn't it about building a better future for our community, for our country, for our children? I say that even on the most intractable of issues, there is room for constructive debate, for consensus building, for the search for some common ground.

President Johnson once said to his Democratic colleague, Gov. George Wallace of Alabama, during the crisis of civil rights in the South: "What do you want left behind? You want a great, big marble monument that says, 'George Wallace: He built.' Or do you want a little piece of scrawny pine lying there that says, 'George Wallace: He hated'?"

The people I know in this room are builders. But we are confronting a world today where hate seems to be a predominant factor in the crisis of incivility confronting our politics.

Where are the rules that govern conduct? What happens eventually after this continuous rancor tears the fabric of our society completely asunder? Can we survive with this tenor...taking no prisoners, giving no quarter?

I'm asking these questions because you folks here are blessed with skills, talent, experience and a commitment to a positive public policy. You understand the importance of maintaining and protecting our commonwealth where we strive to serve our clients, our community, our country, and our state. If civil discourse self-destructs, we cannot move on the issues that matter. Think of this as an environmental crisis ... the environment being our civil society and our very ability to live and work and prosper together.

I don't want to sound pious or preachy here, but if we are to prevail as a free, self-governing people, we must work together. We shouldn't try to destroy our opponents just because we disagree. We have to govern our tongues. The Proverbs tells us, chapter 18, verse 12, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." How we choose to use words—for good or for wrong—is clearly our choice. The health of our democracy depends upon a robust public discourse.

Recognize that I am not saying that conflict in our political life is to be avoided. Hardly so. It is not only proper but *necessary* for candidates to vigorously debate the issues of our day and examine their opponents' records. Don't let people confuse civility with goody two-shoes niceness and mere etiquette. Civility is a robust, tough, substantive civic virtue, critical to both civil society and the future of our republic. Civility entails speaking directly, passionately, and responsibly about who we are and what we believe. Divisions

based on principles are healthy for the nation. Vigorous and passionate debate helps us to define issues and to sharpen positions.

Conflict cannot, *should not* be avoided in our public lives any more than we can avoid conflict with the people we love. But just as member of a household, as a family learn ways of settling their differences without inflicting real damage on each other, so we, in our politics, must find constructive ways of resolving disputes and differences.

Our work is here. We build from the base. We will foster change first by our example ... by working together, respecting one another, and negotiating our differences in good faith and with mutual respect. Civility is neither a small nor inconsequential issue. The word comes from the French *civilité* which is often translated as “politeness.” But it means much more. It suggests an approach to life...living in a way that is civilized. The words “civilized,” “*civilité*,” and “city” share a common etymology with a word meaning “member of the household.” To be civilized is to understand that we live in a society as in a household. There are certain rules that allow family members to live peacefully within a household. So, too, are there rules of civility that allow us to live peacefully within a society. As we all learned in 1st grade a long time ago, we owe certain responsibilities to one another. Perhaps we spend a lifetime learning how to play well with others. So be it. It is a crucial goal for a civil society. Thank you.