

Political Correction or Good Manners?

Donald Trump's candidacy to be the Republican standard bearer in the next Presidential election seems all about a protest against political correctness. What exactly is "political correctness"? The term is one of those amorphous concepts that moves about like an amoeba. The amoeba does not have any legs or hands, but just oozes from place to place. "Political correctness" seems to depend upon who is defining it. A lot of people these days are angry about various groups asserting their purported rights. The Confederate flag is equated with the lynching of African-Americans in the south. Is taking down the flag in a state capitol political correctness or modern civility? Donald Trump's response to Megyn Kelly when she asked the gambling and real estate developer about his tweets concerning women was another good example of the battle between political correctness versus plain old decency.

There ought to be a place in the world for treating other people with respect. "Civility," as my parents would have said, is a national virtue to be encouraged. There was a time when it mattered how we spoke to one another. Today, it is not shocking to hear a high school student use the "F word" to a teacher.

We seem to have difficulty in our society creating a bright line between simple manners as opposed to vibrant and even defiant political discourse. When Donald Trump says terribly nasty things about women and is called out on it, that is not about the overzealous political correctness police. Rather, Americans have a right to expect their important political figures to treat others with respect, dignity and decorum. What exactly is wrong with that?

The new left is now dumping all over Chuck Schumer for opposing the Iran "protocols". He is not being a politically correct leftist and has been threatened with his leadership. He has become the object of all kinds of virulently anti-Semitic tweets. Where is the recognition for the fact that we can disagree in political discourse while being decent to one another? My father use to quote Voltaire who said; "I do not agree with what you have to say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it." That attitude seems to exist no more in the political spectrum.

Recently, there was an article in the newspaper that Democrats are canceling their Jefferson-Jackson Day dinners. It is no longer politically correct to extol those figures. Jefferson had babies with an African-American slave, while suggesting that slaves should be sent back to Africa. Jackson was primary in slaughtering Native Americans. By today's standards, Jefferson and Jackson were hypocrites. It is quite clear that Jefferson was guilty of treason in the XYZ affair, while the Federalists held Presidential office. Is it politically correct to rename the Democratic dinners, or is it merely recognition of reality?

Not too long ago a man confessed to me that he was a “loudmouth” and “abrasive.” That admission is fine, of course, but the real question is what is he going to do about it? Is it permissible in orderly society to say anything we want to say just because we have the feelings? I read recently advice given to a young man by a psychologist. The young man was told to show his feelings and not to hold things in. Really? Perhaps people should not share with the world their every thought on Facebook, Twitter, social media, the press, or even their friends. There are some thoughts that are better left unsaid.

It is not a great idea to go back to the era when people were merely silent bigots, racists and anti-Semites. There is no suggestion that a superior way of life is to hold one’s negative attitude inside, while leading an external phony life. On the other hand, we should do some deep thinking in our society about how we present ourselves to others. Respect for someone’s gender, race, color, creed, and all their other distinctive qualities is not a bad thing.

No one, whether political police or otherwise, should tell a person how to think, feel or believe. That principle should not be inconsistent with demonstratively recognizing the value in not behaving badly just because it permits the venting of one’s own individual pressure valve.

A calmer, quieter world, accompanied by a little bit of articulated integrity, would go a long way towards making this planet a better place to live.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,
Waters & Dohrmann
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

Cliff Rieders, who practices law in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.