

Isaac Dodson
1st Place Essay
Lincoln Essay Competition 2013

“Civility costs nothing, and buys everything.” - Mary Wortley Montagu. This quote suggests that by being civil, we can solve issues that plague a civil society. Although civil discourse may not be the only solution to some conflicts, it is still needed to resolve problems. As small children, siblings fight about pointless things because they do not know how to engage in civil discourse. Eventually, nurturing parents teach them to discuss their differences and they learn to compromise. Similarly, civil discourse is needed in a civil society in order to hear people’s opinions. Even seemingly uncivil actions such as protests are attempts to provoke a civil exchange of ideas.

Many circumstances throughout our history that have been considered uncivil have been beneficial and necessary in civil society. For example, it was uncivil in the late 1880s for women, such as Susan B. Anthony, to express their political views and to protest. However, these women were trying to bring important changes to our society. It was the only way to bring change to our society for women. Sometimes in a civil society, planned, nonviolent protests bring attention to unjust situations and offer opportunities for discussion. These actions are protected by the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and yet by society’s definition, they are not civil.

Most people assume that by being kind in their conversations, they are engaging in civil discourse. The opposite may be true. While trying to be polite, people may avoid addressing the real conflict or injustice. Civil discourse requires more than politeness. It requires honesty, engagement and respect. During the civil rights era, many African-American people were attempting to start a civil discourse, but their efforts were in vain because they weren’t respected. Martin Luther King Jr. attempted to spark a civil discourse by writing a letter from his Birmingham jail cell. He was addressing a group of clergymen who asked the civil rights demonstrators to stop protesting. Dr. King’s letter gave him a chance to address the general public about this issue. He believed that our legal system was unjust. By explaining the injustice of segregation, he was able to start a civil discourse with the people in power. African-Americans turned to protests, marches and boycotts to have their voices heard. By using non-violent protests and

intellectual reasoning based on humanist thinking, Martin Luther King Jr. started discussions about civil rights for African-Americans. This demonstrates how civil discourse can achieve compromise.

In conclusion, we need civil discourse to have a functional civil society. Non-violent protests have been used as methods to initiate a civil discourse by the women's rights and also the civil rights movement. Perhaps we should redefine our society's definition of uncivil because even today actions that may be considered uncivil may be good for our society. For positive change to take place, we must engage in civil discourse. It is the only way for a civil society to move forward.

Sarah Mangiacotti
2nd Place Essay
Lincoln Essay Competition 2013

“The rules are simple: respect your opponent’s argument, state your position in a logical way that counters the other side, and leave your audience thinking about why this matters.” As we prepared to debate Christopher Columbus’s role in wiping out a majority of the native population, my teacher’s words reminded me of the importance of presenting my position with honor, intelligence, and passion. Abraham Lincoln used these same principles to persuade others to do the right thing and eventually, to end slavery. If we as students can follow Lincoln’s example, then political leaders and their supporters should do the same and simply address the issues without throwing insults and making accusations. For our nation to remain a civil society that upholds liberty and justice for all, civil discourse is necessary.

During a speech in Peoria, Illinois, in 1854, Abraham Lincoln stated, “I have no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what we would be in their situation.” Lincoln understood the consequences for southerners if slavery was abolished because he was able to put himself in their place. In America today, not everyone attempts to listen to both sides of an issue and only thinks of what is best for his or her interests. For example, after the recent Newtown massacre, talk of stronger gun control laws has brought up intense feelings among advocates and opponents, with one state even talking about seceding. The two groups must be open to hearing the opposing positions. If we want to find common ground that protects our citizens, it is critical that we honor all sides of an argument.

Civil discourse also requires both parties to state their positions in a logical way that makes others think. When Lincoln declared that “no man is good enough to govern another man, without that other’s consent,” he pointed out that “this is the leading principle ... of American republicanism.” This statement could not be denied. Our nation was built on the idea of freedom; slavery dishonored that belief. In today’s society, politicians often use put-downs instead of logic to argue their position. Rational and intelligent thinking is much more productive than yelling and using harsh language that is meant to degrade another person.

Perhaps the most important part of a civil society is a citizen’s commitment to

improve the community. Civil discourse helped President Lincoln protect the rights of all people and make a lasting contribution to our world. We, too, can use our words to inspire others to work for a more peaceful world. By talking calmly about issues like gun control, we can start to work with others to find solutions.

Just as I learned in history class to confront my opponents with grace, dignity, and well-reasoned justification, our leaders must do the same. Civil discourse matters because it reinforces our democratic principles. This country depends on people listening, compromising, and uniting in order to promote the general welfare. Civil discourse in America is, therefore, essential.

James Reilly
3rd Place Essay (Tie)
Lincoln Essay Competition 2013

In order to determine whether civil discourse is necessary for a civil society, we must first consider that a civil society is one where people work together to advance the common good. The Founding Fathers established a nation that protects life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all citizens. However, people have different opinions as to what these words mean. Some say that liberty gives them the right to own a gun, and others disagree. Some believe that in the pursuit of happiness, they are entitled to marry another person of the same gender, while others say that is not true. Some feel that life begins at conception, yet others believe it begins later. When these conflicts arise, civil discourse is vital to move forward and maintain our civil society.

Aristotle's three means of persuasion - credibility, emotional appeal, and logic - are important components of civil discourse. Abraham Lincoln was a master at persuasion because he used Aristotle's model to convince the majority to elect him and ultimately eradicate slavery, keeping our country true to its creed. To get someone to listen and think is the first step in bridging any divide. When people debate, it is to be expected that emotions will get heated; however, it is important to maintain respect for one's opponent rather than insult them with derogatory words. Civil discourse is necessary for a civil society because without it, citizens will no longer share their opinions for fear of being persecuted.

Abraham Lincoln used his strong emotional intelligence to understand his opponent's point of view and make a compelling argument against it. If he became angry, he calmed himself down in order to be heard. Our political leaders are not making the progress that citizens expect and deserve, largely due to a lack of civil discourse. Both parties refuse to engage in deferential debate, causing a gridlock in Washington. As a result, our society suffers. Without the ability to respectfully hash out an issue, our nation becomes deadlocked, which just recently landed us on a fiscal cliff that threatened our nation's economy.

The issues that face Americans today, like the issues that have been faced by all civil societies throughout history, can only be solved through civil discourse. Abraham

Lincoln did not blame the South for the Civil War. He put the blame on both sides because he knew that it was the only way to keep the country together. Lincoln conceded that the South was “just what [the North] would be in their situation.” He used his incredible ability to see both perspectives to keep the United States together.

Many lose sight of what is best for the future of our country and think just of their own interests. Abraham Lincoln sets the standard for selfless duty to his country. His eloquence as a speaker and his natural use of civil discourse to attain his goals should be a model and inspiration for future generations.

Rebecca Berlind
3rd Place Essay (Tie)
Lincoln Essay Competition 2013

Abraham Lincoln relied on the words from the Declaration of Independence when he wrote in the Gettysburg Address that our nation should be “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Lincoln’s views on race were forward-thinking, and he believed that all people were entitled to equal rights under the constitution. While Lincoln believed this in theory, in practice he understood this was something which we needed to work on. When he said, “I don’t like that man, I must get to know him better,” Lincoln was admitting that he too was guilty of prejudice, and it was up to him to do something about it. He was able to engage in successful civil discourse because he was willing to admit his faults. I believe that through civil discourse we can get to know one another better, and that civil discourse is a crucial component of a civil society.

Racial tensions have always existed because we have learned prejudice and are unable to accept others who look different as equal to ourselves. Racism has been an ongoing problem at Burlington High School (BHS). Last year some students, who in the past were afraid to speak out, gathered in protest, sharing their experiences of being ostracized because of their race. The students questioned whether they were being given the same opportunities as other students to excel and receive an equal education. Speaking out about their experiences and finding their voices was a huge step for these students, many of whom come from countries where citizens are not free to speak their minds.

Starting this year, Burlington school officials are using methods of civil discourse to help shape BHS so that it works better as a diverse community. Both teachers and students are attending workshops about tolerance and having opportunities to talk about their beliefs and opinions in a safe environment. Ninth graders are learning about race and diversity as part of their curriculum, engaging in classroom discussions, and taking field trips to the Echo Center to see its exhibit on race. When students are able to share stories about their cultural heritage and have

others listen to them, bridges are formed. When we actively engage in civil discourse, understanding and empathy are the natural results.

As I look to high school, I believe it is necessary to continue promoting more respectful ways to share our viewpoints. Students need to engage in civil debate and understand that listening is just as important as expressing their own views. When students listen and learn from each other it will have a more lasting effect. Like Lincoln, it is my belief that our personal prejudices can be overcome. Lincoln was able to recognize prejudice in himself and do something about it. That's how he was able to influence and understand people. Throughout his lifetime, Lincoln embodied everything that civil discourse is about. Practicing civil discourse allows us to create a better world for our generation and those to come.