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Cooperation, Understanding and Civility

By Michael A. Pavia, Mayor
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Last year, more than 400 mayors throughout the nation got together in Washington to create what became known as "The Civility Accord."

This accord is symbolic of the strong recognition among our cities and our nation that it is critical to maintain and restore cooperation, understanding and civility in government and in our society. We are reminded that these principles of civility must be practiced as the order of the day when facing the problems and challenges we encounter.

We believe that because mayors are the elected officials closest to the people, promoting better understanding and civility *must* begin with us. We know civility is a crucial component when facing and resolving problems for the better public good.

I, as one of the 400 plus mayors who signed onto this accord, have pledged my commitment to the following principles of civility:

1. Respect the right of all citizens to hold different opinions
2. Strive to better understand differing perspectives
3. Avoid rhetoric intended to humiliate, de-legitimize, or question the value of those whose opinions are different from ours
4. Choose words carefully
5. Speak truthfully without accusation and avoid distortion
6. Speak out against prejudice, hate, incivility and disrespect

I further pledged, along with the other mayors, to encourage personal qualities that are emblematic of a civil society -- humility, gratitude, openness, passion to serve, propriety, caring, faith, a sense of duty and the commitment to do what is right.

Every day we are faced with issues and problems in Stamford - and across the nation - that require the employment of resources and compel us to embrace the very qualities I have listed. Doing so maximizes our chances of coming to the right decision, the right resolution, in the most meaningful and timely manner. The public trust compels this, and we as public officials are obligated to maintain and protect the safety and well-being of those we represent.

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Good leaders must often come together to discuss problems and resolve issues. Challenges must be faced immediately. During times of crisis, locally and nationally, we must bring all we have to bear cooperatively and with civility and understanding to face the challenges that await us.

This requires us to put our particular politics and preferences aside in the interest of the public good. There are examples in our history of what I am talking about. We have been awakened to the fact that our future as a nation -- and life as we know it -- has been attacked.
We saw that happen 70 years ago on December 7, 1941 when the military forces of Imperial Japan attacked us at Pearl Harbor. We saw it again 10 years ago when Islamic extremists attacked Washington, D.C. and New York on September 11th.

During these times, we all joined with our leaders and swapped *discord* and *contention* for *unity* and *determination*. Civility prevailed among our leaders and our representatives and between political parties despite our diverse opinions and attitudes. Without this, we would never have survived as a nation.

During the times following these attacks, we galvanized, performed civilly and united as any great country would do. After all, we were one nation, and the threats we faced affected us all. We responded with one clear voice. People of good-will came together civilly.

How quickly we forget. I do not believe that at any time in over a century there has been the level of contentiousness and dissension that we are experiencing throughout our country today. This is occurring in the face of a major crisis equally as destructive as the enemies who came to attack us with bombs ... our economy.

We currently face a crisis of major proportions that threatens our style of living and national security. It exposes the economic security and well-being of America.

Let us take a look at what we are facing:

1. Our highest debt ever. $15.2 trillion which relates to $48,500 for every man woman and child in the U.S.
2. Unemployment has been so deep and prolonged, and there are jobs that will never come back and millions of people who will not return to the work force.
3. Our credit rating is being challenged, internally and externally.
4. Consumer confidence is at its lowest since Great Depression.

What is missing is the same level of unity and civility we have seen in other great times of crisis. It is absent. In its place is a dysfunctional and destructive tone in the political rhetoric in Washington that the entire world is aware of.

The acrimony and partisanship *must stop*. It must be replaced with an *urgent sense of cooperation, civility and understanding*. The country needs to stand together and face the most daunting and serious problem since 9/11.

It seems the tenets of civility have been countered with a new popularization of the "Rules for Radicals", written by the late activist Saul Alinsky. We have seen these "rules" adopted in the campaigns of protest movements through politics and blogs, and they are directly opposed to the principles of civil discourse. Consider how they are diametrically opposite:

1. Respect the right of all citizens to hold different opinions.
   "Pick your target, freeze it, personalize it and polarize it."

2. Strive to better understand differing perspectives.
   "Never go outside the expertise of your people."

3. Avoid rhetoric intended to humiliate, de-legitimize, or question the value of those whose opinions are different from ours.
   "Ridicule is man's most potent weapon. There is no defense; it's irrational and infuriating."

4. Choose words carefully.
   "Whenever, go outside the expertise of the enemy."

5. Speak truthfully without accusation and avoid distortion.
   "If you push a negative hard enough, it becomes a positive."

6. Speak out against prejudice, hate, incivility and disrespect.
   "Keep the pressure on, never let up, and keep your opposition off balance."

These "rules" are intended to create dissention and dissatisfaction and are the very opposite
of what is needed to address and overcome our problems and challenges.

The Mayors of America have pledged to enhance civility in our communities and in our conduct.

We must all work together and in collaboration to return America to its tradition of Cooperation, Understanding and Civil Discourse. By doing so, we will continue to perform as the great nation we are.

The above speech was written by Mayor Michael Pavia and first delivered on January 16, 2012 at a public ceremony recognizing the anniversary of the attempted assassination of Congresswoman, Gabriela Giffords and shootings in Tucson, Arizona. The event, held at the Stamford Old Town Hall, was sponsored by Congressman Jim Himes.