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Geneva conventions for the culture war

By Orrin G. Hatch | Friday, July 27, 2018

An angry mob recently cornered Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen in a Washington restaurant, jeering and chanting until she left. That same week, a Virginia restaurant refused service to White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. Days later, a group of angry men came within inches of Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao's face, screaming and posturing in an attempt to physically intimidate her.

America's culture war has reached a tipping point. While our politics have always been divisive, an underlying commitment to civility has usually held citizens on both sides together. As the partisan divide deepens, it becomes clear that we need to take meaningful steps toward de-escalation. Something must change before anger succumbs to violence.

To be clear, I am not calling for an end to the culture war. Indeed, it can and must be fought. Intense disputes over social issues are a feature, not a flaw, of a functioning democracy.

I am, however, calling for a dramatic reassessment of tactics. We need a *détente* in partisan hostilities, an easing of tensions that can be realized when both sides adopt certain rules of engagement—norms to rein in the worst excesses of the culture wars.

Foremost among these norms should be a commitment to preventing communal spaces from becoming politicized. Even in our most divided times, there have been places we could go to escape the partisan clamor—places where we could leave politics at the door and come together as one, including restaurants, theaters, sports arenas and houses of worship.

Insulating such spaces from politicization is a matter of urgent necessity. A concerted effort is under way to transform these neutral zones into partisan battlegrounds. Consider the calls from progressive groups to boycott Chick-fil-A or even ban it from certain cities; the controversy surrounding the National Football League's national anthem policy; or the wholly unoriginal acceptance speech-cum-political jeremiad of every Hollywood awards show.

The assault on communal spaces is a subset of the politicization of everything—the culture war equivalent of a scorched-earth policy. It is an attempt to burn away the last vestiges of civility

and common cause along the march to political domination. Everything—from chicken sandwiches to prom dresses and even cartoon frogs—can be weaponized for political purposes. In this world, there is no neutral territory: Every place is a battlefield, everything is a weapon, and everyone is a soldier in the great culture war.

Activists on both sides of the political spectrum can turn back the tide of war by adopting certain conventions for cultural combat.

As an analogy, consider the norms regulating armed conflict. The Geneva Conventions have been enormously effective in restraining the terrors of modern warfare. Among other things, these treaties ban the use of certain weapons and accord special protections to civilians, prisoners of war and the infirm. They stipulate which actions are and are not appropriate in wartime, instituting an infrastructure of norms that has saved millions of lives.

In similar fashion, our society could benefit from adopting certain conventions to limit the scope and severity of the culture wars—a general set of guidelines clarifying acceptable tactics in political warfare. By necessity, such norms would in substantial part be socially, not legally, enforced. Their purpose would be to limit the damage the culture wars do to our civic health.

First, we must agree on the need to shield communal spaces from politicization—just as schools, hospitals and places of worship are protected from military strikes in times of armed conflict.

Second, we must work together to resist the politicization of everything. Just as the rules of war prohibit military attacks that inflict undue burdens on civilian life, we should condemn culture-war tactics that cause unnecessary damage to civil society. Denouncing those who politicize things that should not be politicized—even when we agree with their political cause—is the only way to ensure proportionality in the culture wars.

Third, we must discourage harassment of public figures and incursions into their private lives. Just as combatants and POWs are accorded certain rights in wartime, government officials and others who participate in politics deserve privacy and respect, no matter how intense the culture wars become. I applaud Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer for upholding this principle last month, when he roundly condemned harassment of Trump administration personnel. Reinforcing this norm, as Mr. Schumer did, is essential to creating a safe environment that continues to attract good people to public service.

Fourth, liberals and conservatives alike should commit themselves to rhetorical disarmament. During the Cold War, the U.S. and Soviet Union signed treaties to reduce the proliferation of nuclear weapons. In a culture war, in which words are weapons, both sides need to ease their inflammatory language.

Leaders from both parties play a critical role in setting appropriate boundaries for political speech. The effect of incendiary statements is especially harmful when they come from political leaders—be they members of Congress or the president himself.

That's why, even as a strong supporter of President Trump, I have repeatedly encouraged him to use [Twitter](#) as a tool for good rather than as a cudgel for division. I have likewise discouraged him from calling the press "the enemy of the people." Even with its flaws, the media is indispensable to our democracy. Insofar as reporters are committed to objective journalism and not political advocacy, they should be treated as noncombatants in the culture wars.

To restore decency and balance to public dialogue, both left and right should embrace a laying down of rhetorical arms. Tough political speech has its place, but mainly on the campaign trail.

All Americans, regardless of partisan affiliation, have a stake in containing the fallout from the culture wars. By working together to instill these norms, we can revive civic life and set our nation on a path to health and healing.

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