



The Gilder Lehrman Institute Present & Annenberg Public Policy Center:  
**The Civic Mission of Nation**

## On Civil Dialogue

by Keidrick Roy, PhD

The idea of “civil dialogue” can lead to heated debates. What does it mean to be “civil”? What counts as “dialogue”? Who gets to decide? To address these questions, I propose a definition of civil dialogue that remains attentive to (1) the public need for a non-violent mode of communication to express ideas, especially about contentious issues, and (2) the structures of power that have historically failed to recognize particular groups of people as “civil” and thus as unable to participate in productive “dialogue.”

With these considerations in mind, we might think of civil dialogue as a non-violent form of expression that establishes the conditions for further debate or deliberation. However—and crucially—to achieve civil dialogue, a community’s social, political, and legal environment must allow for open discussion to emerge from diverse viewpoints, even views that dissent from the community’s prevailing norms, values, and laws. Civil dialogue loses its meaning without these parameters in place: any critiques of the existing social order from non-majority voices could be promptly dismissed as “uncivil,” thus limiting the possibilities for authentic democratic engagement.

“Uncivil dialogue,” then, should not merely be thought of as expressing a contrary viewpoint. Instead, uncivil dialogue concerns words, actions, and policies that hinder the possibilities for further discussion, usually by recourse to violence, coercion, or other methods of intimidation aimed at suppressing dissenting views, particularly those held by less powerful groups. Between 1837 and 1843, for example, the US House of Representatives adopted a series of “Gag Rule” resolutions that prevented House members from discussing petitions to end slavery. Such a policy made engaging in productive debates about abolitionism virtually impossible.

Finally, civil dialogue does not depend on notions of politeness, because the concept of politeness is relative: it can mean different things to different people or cultural groups. Furthermore, standards of politeness change over time. For these reasons, civil dialogue has little to do with a society’s prevailing beliefs and principles. Instead, civil dialogue—broadly speaking—is concerned with the constructive process of advancing public discussion.

What, then, might civil dialogue look like? I want to provide three examples from three categories of civil dialogue in my field of African American history. (1) Written expression: In 1776, a Black Revolutionary War veteran and former indentured servant named Lemuel Haynes authored a public response to the founders' Declaration of Independence, criticizing its failure to extend liberty to all people and calling for the remediation of its limitations. (2) Oral expression: In 1852, Frederick Douglass invited deliberation through his provocative "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" speech, which insisted that listeners consider the holiday celebrating America's founding from the perspective of enslaved people. (3) Embodied expression: In 1955, Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks were arrested for refusing to vacate their seats for White passengers on segregated buses. This last example shows that all expressions of civil dialogue need not involve words: a performative demonstration or protest can also stimulate transformative public discussions. Indeed, as Frederick Douglass put it, "Power concedes nothing without a demand."

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