

COLUMNLEFT

## Restoring Civility to Our Debates

The American people want and expect their elected officials to act like mature adults and treat each other with civility and respect while they work together to tackle the issues of the day. A great step toward this goal was achieved late last month when San Diego Congressman Duke Cunningham was forced to resign after pleading guilty to at least \$2.4 million in bribes. Cunningham was known for outbursts such as saying that the Democratic leadership in the House should be "lined up and shot" and equating a medical procedure he had for prostate cancer to Representative Barney Frank's sexual orientation.

Unfortunately, Cunningham's behavior, as outrageous as it was, was just the tip of the iceberg. The Republicans in D.C. have been acting like bullies when dealing with their Democratic counterparts. Last June, House Judiciary Committee Chair James Sensenbrenner shut off the microphones, literally in mid-sentence, while Democrats were speaking during a hearing on the Patriot Act. This goes far beyond incivility. This is a threat to our democracy.

During a debate on the floor of the House regarding troop withdrawal from Iraq, the newest member of the House, Jean Schmidt, called one of the most decorated war heroes serving in the House, John Murtha, "a coward." That name-calling almost caused the eruption of fist fights, as tensions were already high because the Republicans did not allow Murtha's resolution to be debated. Instead, the debate was on a resolution by Duncan Hunter, which was presented as equivalent

to Murtha's resolution even though significant portions of Murtha's resolution were dropped. Hunter did not present his alternate resolution because he thought it was better (he voted against it). Hunter introduced it in order to bully Murtha and his Democratic colleagues.

On the Senate side, things are not much better. Over a year has gone by since that infamous exchange between Vice President Dick Cheney and the senior senator from Vermont, Patrick Leahy, in which the former told the latter "go f\*\*\* yourself", and the wounds have yet to heal. The administration had excellent opportunities this year to reach out to Senate Democrats and consult with them on potential Supreme Court nominees. Democrats would have been more than willing to work with Bush, as demonstrated by the fact

that they approved 195 out of 205 judicial nominees Bush sent to the Senate. Rather than threaten Democrats with figurative nuclear bombs unless they go along with the nominees being shoved by the White House, wouldn't it be better to work together on mutually acceptable nominees? That is what Clinton did in the "Ginsburg Precedent" back in 1993.

With such poor examples provided us by our elected officials, no wonder we lack civility in our debates. It was very disappointing to see a woman who lost her son in Iraq being called a "fool" in a letter published in the pages of this paper. While it is legitimate to disagree over substance, name-calling is out of line. We need to restore civility to our debates.



BY ALON BARLEVY, PHD,  
PRESIDENT,  
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## **Text of Column**

Restoring Civility to Our Debates  
Alon Barlevy, PhD  
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Unfortunately, Cunningham’s behavior, as outrageous as it was, was just the tip of the iceberg. The Republicans in D.C. have been acting like bullies when dealing with their Democratic counterparts. Last June, House Judiciary Committee Chair, James Sensenbrenner, shut off the microphones, literally in mid sentence, while Democrats were speaking during a hearing on the Patriot Act. This goes far beyond incivility. This is a threat to our Democracy.

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