



## Stop arguing and start communicating about politics

By Meryl Runion, CSP

*Have you had enough? Don't get angry, get strategic!*

### **Introduction: Driving in the political dark**

#### **Waking to a nightmare**

Watching the news, reading the blogs politicians talk, it all reminds me of a and I bet you've had too.

You're in danger, but there's nothing hit the brakes but the car goes faster. a road, but all you see is darkness. Is



I've seen this before...

and listening to nightmare I've had

you can do. You You know there's anyone steering?

Not that you can see! People in the back are oblivious. They're watching a DVD of Britney Spears making a fool of herself. They don't even look up, they call you crazy and they tell you to shut the <bleep> up.

Have you ever had one of those dreams?

#### **Pinch yourself – you're not just dreaming**

What if we actually are driving in the dark? What if we are racing forward with our headlights turned off? What if you and I unknowingly add to the fog and ignore the very people we need to listen to?

I'm going to tell you something you already know.

Our national political dialogue is insane, ineffective and destructive.

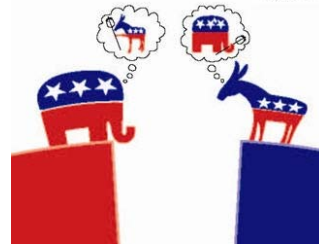
But that doesn't mean yours has to be. In fact, that's all the more reason why you and I need to (take a breath) listen to each other, dialogue instead of debate and sift through the spin together. You know, stop arguing and start communicating about politics.

Okay, I hear your yeah-buts. Let's start with "yeah but" number one.

### Yeah, but #1...the other side is crazy, evil or both

Stop right there. Divide and conquer is a great way for politicians to win elections, and a lousy way for us to relate. Take that halo off your head and forget the horns you put on theirs. Be a *Truth Sleuth* and consider what they're telling you. Understand what they really say before you dismiss it.

You just might discover you have more in common than you knew.



*Truth Sleuth*  
Understand

common than

### Yeah, but #2...who do you believe?

Who do you believe? If you listen to two different people describe what's going on in Iraq, you think you're going crazy. The contrast is like you stepped into alternative universes on the Twilight Zone. It leaves you dazed and confused. Guess what – that's the point – and why they call it spin.



Thanks for the advice!

I say listen to everyone...as a *Deception Detective*.

Listen with a trained, critical ear. Assess what you hear.

Separate spin from substance. Be a *Fallacy Finder*, and uncover logic that isn't so logical like personal attacks that

avoid the issues. Be a *Fact Fanatic*, and unearth

assertions that aren't based in reality. And (take another

deep breath) encourage them to be a *Deception*

*Detective* with your words. You might learn something.

### Yeah, but #3 ...it wont change anything anyway

Do you think it's hopeless? Is it too big? Are the cards stacked against you? Have you become cynical?

Despair is not an option. You overcome despair by taking action. It's not your job to undo all the evils of the world. But how about some simple actions to become part of the solution instead of the problem? You could start by being an Accuracy Advocate.

You know the emails that contain propaganda and lies that people repeat so much that most people assume they're true? Start with them. Run them through a *Deception Inspection*. Don't repeat claims that a third-grader who had a few hours of training in reason and logic could bust.



Let's check this out.

Maybe you don't pass nonsense on to thirty of your closest friends. I applaud you if that's true. But that's not enough. Misinformation wouldn't

thrive if people who know better spread accurate information with the same enthusiasm as the propaganda propagators do. How about really being an *Accuracy Advocate* and sending corrections out to thirty of your closest friends?

### **Yeah, but #4...it's not MY problem**

Do you think the nation's dysfunctional political dialogue is not your problem?

You're in the car, aren't you?

Your family and friends are in the car, too aren't they?

Shouldn't we at least try to leave this planet better than we found it?

Saying you don't care about politics is like saying you don't care about how you're allowed to live, what you're taxed on and how your taxes are spent. Here's an idea. Why don't you write a blank check and let someone else decide who gets to spend it?

You can't afford not to care.

Stop being a *Complicit Citizen* who stands back and lets the most aggressive run the show. The expression has become trite, but I'm going to use it anyway, because it says it all. Be a *Concerned Citizen* and engage. Democracy isn't a spectator sport.

### **Yeah, but...#5 it's a mud fest**

There's a saying, never wrestle with a pig. You both get all dirty and the pig loves it.



It's a mudfest out there. That's why we need to clean it up. We can't let the people who tell you who you should hate and why, who speak in doublespeak, who counter legitimate questions with personal assaults – drown out the people who ...make sense.

**Never wrestle with a pig.  
You both get all dirty  
and the pig loves it.**

So what do you do?

How about being the *Voice of Reason*? Someone's gotta be. Jon Stewart tried and was somewhat successful.

### **A reasonably reasonable appeal for reason**

Comedian Jon Stewart made an appeal for civilized in 2004 on the now defunct show [Crossfire](#). He the show hosts Carlson and Begala to stop fighting, to stop interviewing knee-jerk reactionary guests who argued unrepresentative



dialogue  
asked

extreme

**Blood and violence.  
Now there's a way to  
reach agreement!**

positions, stop allowing emotional provocation to pass for dialogue, stop trying to win by overpowering, and mainly to stop being part of politicians' divisive strategies. He asked for honest arguments that hold politician's feet to the fire in civilized discourse. <sup>i</sup>

Clearly neither Begala nor Carlson had a clue what Stewart wanted. They kept trying to figure out whether Stewart's was asking them to be harder or easier on the people they interviewed. They seemed to think the only alternative to "beating up on someone" is "sucking up." Neither host had a clue of what it might mean to be tough without being abusive.

Before you get the idea I'm putting a halo on Stewart, let me say that, ironically, Stewart didn't appear to grasp the difference either. Stewart called Carlson a "dick." Not a word that's usually in my vocabulary. I hope you will practice what you preach when you make your appeals.

While Begala and Carlson didn't understand what Jon Stewart objected to, the head of CNN President Jonathan Klein did. He said, "I guess I come down more firmly in the Jon Stewart camp" and would prefer a substantive discussion of current events and controversies.

"I doubt that when the president sits down with his advisers they scream at him to bring him up to date on all of the issues," Klein said. "I don't know why we don't treat the audience with the same respect."

Canceling *Crossfire* was a start. Jon Stewart's appeal got the conversation started. This book takes it from there. It will teach you what a reasonable dialogue is and how to have one. That way, you won't be following in the dubious footsteps of our national media.

### A conversational quagmire

Even with *Crossfire* cancelled, the national media isn't the place to go to get you cues on how to conduct a reasonable political dialogue. It's still crazy.

But just because our national political insane, doesn't mean yours should be.

Just because our national dialogue still diatribe, dogma and debate doesn't mean

Sure, politicians, pundits and political developed the fine art of divide and our families, neighbors and coworkers and treat political conversations like wars most Americans can't remember the last time they had a productive, informative, substantive political dialogue with someone who didn't already agree with them.



Perhaps if I ignore them, they'll go away.

conversation is

degenerates into yours should.

operatives have conquer. Sure, follow their lead to be won. Sure,

Sure, it's a conversational quagmire. But I say reasonable political dialogue is possible. I don't say it's easy, but I do say it's possible.

Possible – and urgent.

### A visceral reaction

I hope we don't need a tragic collision to wake us up, but it will take a powerful influence. If political dialogue was a completely rational process, we could change directions with simple calculations. The slumber, numbness, hostility and helplessness run much deeper than that. Simple logic and cognitive considerations won't open our eyes. The great political divide has its foundation on a primal, visceral level. The very mention of politics creates a visceral reaction in us – like it did for Dee Riggs.

Dee is a liberal who listens to progressive talk radio. While traveling through a new city, she scanned the stations on her car radio in search of the familiar voices she wanted to hear. She was dismayed to discover the only available talk radio was conservative. Dee decided to listen, telling herself; "Okay, let's put my own feelings aside and let's listen to see what they're actually saying."

Conservative talk radio was painful for Dee to listen proclaimed, "If the right wing has the same visceral listening to the left that I did to listening to the right, need to get together and have somebody to



to. She later reaction to we really mediate."

How's your political dialogue working for you? Have triggered a visceral reaction, simply for sharing your held opinion?

**They're too stupid to listen to me tell them how stupid they are.**

you ever sincerely

If you only talk to people who agree with you, you may be able to mention politics without being fired, sleeping on the couch or starting a bar fight. Or you may not. Sometimes people who are politically aligned end up arguing about politics and not knowing why.

Dee is right: we need...mediation? How about a major intervention?

### Rare realizations

Dee's thoughtfulness and observations are remarkable by virtue of how rare they are. People are incited by political diatribe daily, but few stand back to observe and acknowledge their reactions. Fewer wonder if they themselves incite their counterparts. Fewer still suggest the two sides find a way to collaborate.

Instead, most insist that mediation is not possible because the other side is so unreasonable. It's more common for us to judge, excoriate and dismiss views that incite

us. It's more common for us to magnify the great political divide than to even consider navigating it.

### Treacherous terrain

It's one thing for pundits and politicians to condemn one another for their views. At least there's something in it for them. It's another thing when we censure each other in our conference rooms, at our dinner tables, and throughout our neighborhoods and social organizations. Something is terribly wrong when even the edges of the political landscape can be treacherous terrain. Something is terribly wrong when families and friends turn on each other for daring to disagree, or feign agreement to avoid conflict.

If it's true that we are as healthy as the things we can talk about, we need triage.

### All dialogue is local

As painful as it is to witness the callous unkindness of our public political debate, it's more painful to witness it in our interpersonal interactions. As valuable as it would be to fix our national conversation at the top, in these pages, we navigate the personal political divide, not the public one.

We'll talk about how individual democrats and republicans, liberals and conservatives, the right and the left can (and must) **stop reacting** to each other.

We'll talk about how individual democrats and republicans, liberals and conservatives, the right and the left can (and must) **start listening** to each other.

We'll talk about how individual democrats and republicans, liberals and conservatives, the right and the left can (and must) **start talking** to each other in a way that "insights," not incites the other.

I won't expound on how Bill O'Reilly and Keith Olbermann say what they say, (as much as I'd like to change their rhetoric.) I won't talk about how either one of the Bushes and either one of the Clintons say what they say, as much as I would like to clean up their speechifying. I won't even talk about your local city council, although I'm sure it can use some help too.



**My opinions  
have changed,  
but the fact that  
I'm right hasn't.**

Instead, I'll address how your cousin Sally and Uncle Joe and your neighbor and your coworker say what they say. Most of all, I'll talk about how **you** say what you say when you dialogue about what's happening in your community, country and world.

It may well be that all politics really are local, and if we use diplomacy in our down-home interpersonal political discussions, the national dialogue will take care of itself.

## Unite and concur

This book came about unexpectedly. Progressive radio station Air America had a competition for free advertising spots on their evening show, *Clout*. I threw an ad together, and with a little help from my friends, I won. The host Richard Greene interviewed me on his show, and we discussed how frustrated many of us are by the unsatisfying choices the culture of silence or combat surrounding political topics offers. Listeners shared the desire to have informative, principled, thought-provoking, and reasoned political dialogue.

The interview struck a chord. Emails poured in during and after the half hour discussion. It was clear to me that people do want to hear what I have to say about political conversations.

I decided to use my ten free spots on Air America Radio well to provide something of value for that audience. So I started writing an eBook to help progressives discuss politics without putting targets on their backs. As my writing developed, the message became universal. I wasn't just writing for progressives. I was writing to both sides of the great political divide.

The result is this book – that will not only be eye-opening regardless of your political persuasion, it will be immensely practical. My goal is for you to be able to stop arguing and start communicating and to unite and concur with all sides of the great political divide.

Nothing succeeds like success, so please share what works for you on your journey.

Thanks, *Meryl*

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<sup>i</sup> Three months later the show *Crossfire* was cancelled, which was a step away from divisiveness, but still did not provide us with a role model for civilized discourse