

Only One Ready to Play Nice

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Only One Ready to Play Nice
By JANIE LORBER

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A group seeking civility in politics has found that among all sitting governors and members of Congress, only one is willing to promise decorum in his political discourse.

Just before the Memorial Day recess, an unlikely pair — Mark DeMoss, a publicist who was an adviser to Mitt Romney's 2008 presidential campaign, and Lanny J. Davis, who served as an aide in the Clinton White House — wrote letters asking the 585 elected officials to sign a civility pledge.

The letters, personalized and sent directly to each of the offices, asked officials to commit to this pledge: "I will be civil in my public discourse and behavior. I will be respectful of others whether or not I agree with them. I will stand against incivility when I see it."

More than a month later, only one lawmaker — Representative Frank R. Wolf, Republican of Virginia — has signed.

Only two others have even acknowledged the request, including one candidate for a House seat in Florida who signed the pledge online. The office of Gov. David A. Paterson of New York responded with a letter saying it would "seriously study the issues."

"It was almost as if I'd written about the plight of turtles in upstate New York," Mr. DeMoss said Monday. "Almost as if they didn't read what I had written. And that's it so far."

Mr. DeMoss and Mr. Davis started CivilityProject.org in January 2009 in an effort to put an end to the kind of personal attacks that have made some recent campaigns so ugly.

Mr. DeMoss, an evangelical Christian, said he was particularly concerned by the criticism of the religious beliefs of Mr. Romney, a Mormon, and President Obama, whom some right-wing activists have falsely accused of being a Muslim.

Now, with Washington perhaps as polarized as ever and another campaign season well under way, Mr. DeMoss said he was dumbfounded by the silence.

"This ought to be a lot easier than signing a something like a no-tax pledge that members are often asked to sign," said Mr. DeMoss, who was invited to the White House to discuss the project with Valerie Jarrett, a senior adviser to Mr. Obama. "My hope was to bring on pressure from constituents."

Each elected official who signs the pledge is identified on the CivilityProject.org Web site.

Mr. DeMoss said that America's founders may have been just as blunt-spoken, but today bloggers and 24-hour news outlets fixate on distasteful behavior, tainting the public perception of politics and elected officials and ultimately deterring political engagement.

A recent poll by the Center for Political Participation at Allegheny College and Zogby International found that the majority of Americans say they are "turned off" when politics become "rude and nasty," and 95 percent say civility in politics is important for a healthy democracy.

Given those numbers, "I thought there would be a near unanimous consent that it's worse than it should be," Mr. DeMoss said.

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