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And in this corner, weighing 30 insults is Ö

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From *Where I Stand*

Brace yourself. It's election season. If you're hoping to get the kind of information you need to make an informed decision in a polling booth, forget it. Judging from the level of talk-show fare we're seeing these days, things are only about to get worse.

Listening to U.S. television talk shows is, with few exceptions, an exercise in frustration. The truth is that most of them aren't talk shows at all. They're shouting matches that do neither the questions nor the show much honor.

At the same time, they commonly purport to raise important issues: Should we have invaded Iraq? Should abortion be outlawed entirely? Is the Congress of the United States operating in the national interest? Are political offices bought and sold these days? Have we lost the voice of the middle class? Is the nature of sexuality a settled subject? Are women, commonly missing even from serious talk shows, being listened to in either church or state?

Those issues, and all the concerns and data surrounding them, require thought and deserve respect. But they're getting little enough of both, at least on the shouting matches passing as television talk shows.

So what can be done about it?

We have two choices: First, we can go on confusing discussion with debate and continue to create programs more on the model of demolition derbies than seminars. Or, we can elevate the nature of discussion in this country so that all of us have more to think about when they're over than simply a new

enemy to label.

In the first instance, history is clear: Suppressing subjects such as these does no one a service. What's more it can't be done. It's simply not possible to be at the kind of historical crossroads these times signify and not feel the very intellectual pillars of the world shake. Great new questions demand great new answers and to repress an issue does not resolve it.

Only dictators try that and it has never been successful. The outcome of such efforts, whatever the institution in question, is always revolution. Taxes on tea or sale of relics, integration or segregation, preemptive war or the Tridentine Mass -- the situation is the same. Like grass growing through concrete, they will erupt over and over again until some synthesis of those for whom the answer is either an implacable yes or a resounding no is finally achieved.

Only the second approach then -- open, civil discussion -- is really an option. What is a question must be treated as a question until its answer is clear to everyone. Mere force, overwhelming power, authoritarian decrees, sarcasm, insults, belittlement will not do it.

But we live in a period where not much of anything, it seems, is ever absolutely finished.

One new article of information, one new piece of technology introduces new questions daily. One new point of scientific information changes the way the world functions, changes the way we live from one day to the next.

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One day pregnancy is a game of Russian roulette. The day after the release of the birth control pill, family planning becomes a matter of theological dispute.

One day everything is local. We live in the same place, go to the same schools, live in the same towns together all our lives. The next day, thanks to air travel, families live in five different states or five different countries.

Thanks to television, we watch wars a continent away from the comfort of the overstuffed chair in our living rooms.

Then the things we have always taken for granted about family, patriotism, morality begin to be a matter of debate.

One day the federal government is above the law, is the law. The next day computers record the corruptions of business and government for all to see.

One day churches are above the law, outside the law, without blame. The next day the Internet carries the list of dioceses gone bankrupt, the court cases lost, the number of bishops sued, the television evangelists jailed, the priests and ministers accused of crimes against children.

And the credibility of both government and church -- the anchor institutions to which we had turned over our consciences for so long -- begin to fracture, to rupture, to erode.

As fast as science and technology change, the world around us changes.

But with the changes come the questions, the need to understand, the desire for information. Indeed, we have never needed conversation more.

Unfortunately, all the while we talk about the value of public conversation, of dialogue, of the democratizing of speech on the Internet, we see more shouting matches, hear more sound bites than serious reflection, suffer more interruptions, more sarcasm, and more TV hosts who goad and act like bullies themselves.

The negative tone has come to infect every level of communication in the country from the rhetoric of our major politicians to the attack ads that now pose as political discourse, from the television shows that model the brawling to the interactive columns and blogs they spawn. Instead, they actually avoid ideas for the sake of damaging the reputation of the opposition.

Ridicule has become a substitute for conversation, moralization for the kind of reflection that enables all of us to realize again what it means to be moral in our own day and age.

It's time for us to begin to talk to one another. But that means that the style of conversation that now clogs the airwaves of this country will have to change, both left and right.

We need facilitators of the public discussion who will see that every question we're concerned about is asked and every respondent gets time to answer it.

We need talk show hosts who will monitor the tone as well as the language of a conversation, who will talk an issue through rather than simply record a series of opposing positions.

We need to hear from people who are as intent on listening as they are on speaking.

We have begun to sound like a nation of playground roughnecks in striped suits and high heels playing King of the Hill. And this at a time when we have never needed a civil tone to our conversation more if we are ever to come to a consensus on national values again.

It's not difficult to understand why we're a polarized nation, a divided church. We're not listening to one another, we're not asking questions, we're not honoring one another's questions. We're shouting at one another, belittling one another, failing to recognize the value of one another's concerns -- so how can any of us learn anything new in a time of nothing but newness? Most of all, how can we honor the honest concerns of those around us?

From where I stand, we need a better model of talk shows, of national talk, than we are getting from the maestros of talk. Or we may soon talk ourselves right out of "this more perfect union."

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