

Reading 1: A Controversial Protest Tactic

Protesters disrupt a Mexican Dinner

On June 19, 2018, a group of about 15 activists approached Kirstjen Nielsen, Secretary of Homeland Security, at a Mexican restaurant in Washington, DC, while she and her colleagues were having what her department described as a “work dinner.”

Homeland Security is the agency responsible for border security, and had recently enacted a policy of separating immigrant children from their parents at the Mexico border. Images of crying children in cages and sleeping on concrete floors created a national outcry against President Trump’s “zero tolerance” policy directed at refugees from Central America and Mexico. Hundreds of children, some under one year of age, were separated from their parents and imprisoned, and the public outrage was widespread.

While Nielsen was enjoying her dinner, a group of activists, members of the Metro DC Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) approached Nielsen’s table – though Secret Service officers kept the protesters at some distance. They proceeded to confront Nielsen about the the policy Homeland Security was enforcing. After ten minutes of this, Nielsen left the restaurant.

“If kids don’t eat in peace, you don’t eat in peace,” the protesters shouted, according to [video footage of the encounter that they posted on social media](#).

...And an Italian Dinner

On September 24 another potentially enjoyable dinner was prevented. Senator Ted Cruz and his wife were just about to sit down at an Italian restaurant near the White House, when a group of protesters began to question him about the coming vote to confirm Brett Kavanaugh for the Supreme Court. “I would love to talk to you about Brett Kavanaugh tonight,” one of the protesters, who identified herself as a survivor of sexual abuse, told the couple. Others chanted, “We believe survivors.” Eventually, Cruz and his wife left the restaurant.

Later, one of the protesters said: “We may have disrupted his dinner, but he is disrupting ... our entire lives. I have nothing to be apologetic for, in not letting him have a night of rest until he understands.”

... And a Lunch

In July, Kristin Mink, a mom with her infant daughter, was eating lunch at a Washington, DC, restaurant when she noticed Environmental Protection Agency head Scott Pruitt. Mink went to Pruitt’s table and proceeded to criticize his EPA for failing to act to prevent climate catastrophe, being friendly to corporations, and slashing regulations that protect the environment. She also criticized Pruitt’s own misuse of public funds. (Pruitt later resigned over this charge.)

Kristin Mink later stated: “Maybe having my child there with me gave me a little extra push, because this is the man who is literally undermining my child’s future, the future of all of our children. ... He is

actively sacrificing our clean air, our clean water to line his own pockets and the pockets of his friends. And this was my opportunity to call him out for it.”

Other national figures have also been publicly called out. Stephen Miller, an architect of Trump’s anti-immigrant policies, was confronted at a restaurant. Senator Mitch McConnell was heckled in restaurants twice—in July and in October. Secretary Nielsen’s home was also picketed in June. Attorney General Jeff Sessions was heckled in October as he left his church after mass. And soon after the 2016 election, Vice President Pence was booed while attending a performance of the musical Hamilton.

Reading 2: Reactions, Pro & Con

Responses to the flurry of public shaming incidents have been plentiful from politicians, columnists, pundits, and editorial writers.

Arguments against the tactic

1. Pragmatic argument

Frank Bruni, writing in the [New York Times](#), argues that this tactic of confronting officials in restaurants will backfire, aiding Trump and his allies.

Bruni worries that the brouhaha over restaurant confrontations takes the spotlight away from the very issues—like children in cages—that protesters are protesting about. He also suggests the possibility that the protests might motivate lukewarm Trump supporters to come out and vote in upcoming elections. Bruni argues that President Trump “can’t win on facts, which is why he has no regard for them, or on policy, which is why he’s cavalier about it. But resentment? Fury? That’s the toxic ecosystem in which he thrives. He’d like to turn all the country into a Trump rally. If the noise is loud enough, no signal can be heard.” Bruni fears the confrontations tap into voters’ resentment and anger.

2. Civic and moral arguments

Some critics of the restaurant protesters argue that the personal sphere of politicians—even those whose policies we abhor—should be out of bounds for political protest. Beto O’Rourke, who ran against Ted Cruz for the Texas senate race, tweeted:

Not right that Senator Cruz and his wife Heidi were surrounded and forced to leave a restaurant last night because of protesters. The Cruz family should be treated with respect.

Writing in [USA Today](#), James Robbins put it this way:

Simply having First Amendment rights to hector and insult public figures online or in public doesn’t mean it is a good idea. A return to decorum would be a useful step toward restoring the notion of a personal sphere and promoting a more rational tone in our policy debates. Come on, Democrats, try raising the bar.

From a column in the Kansas City Star:

I'm sick over this administration's lack of humanity, too, but some of the rationalizations for repaying his team in kind are straight from the sandlot: They started it! ...The question, it seems to me, is not whether such behavior is legal, or whether Trump and his aides and supporters deserve opprobrium, but whether we want this to still be America, and to live together as one people, when this moment has passed.

Noah Feldman in Bloomberg is concerned about the long-term harm of diminished civility:

Civility is the basic belief that the other side in the political debate is just as committed to good citizenship in the republic as you are... Civility leads to polite behavior because it starts with the good faith assumption that the other side is well-intentioned, even if its beliefs are wrong... Ultimately, the final breakdown in the norms of civility is civil war — defined as the state in which citizens cease to share a common purpose, and become enemies.. When both sides stop treating each other as citizens, bad things happen. Discourse dies. Reasoned disagreement becomes hatred.

In the Washington Examiner Magazine, Jason Russell quoted the Bible in an argument for civility:

As Proverbs 25:21-22 said, "If your enemies are hungry, give them food to eat. If they are thirsty, give them water to drink. You will heap burning coals of shame on their heads, and the Lord will reward you."

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer added:

"If you disagree with a politician, organize your fellow citizens to action and vote them out of office. But no one should call for the harassment of political opponents. That's not right. That's not American."

Others compared the heckling to "whites only" lunch counters and the brutality of Nazi stormtroopers in order to condemn the restaurant confrontations. Arne Duncan, Education Secretary under President Obama tweeted:

The history in our country of denying people access to restaurants, to water fountains and even bathrooms is too raw, too real. We can't keep dividing.

Arguments for the Tactic

It isn't nice to block the doorway,
It isn't nice to go to jail,
There are nicer ways to do it,
But the nice ways always fail.
It isn't nice, it isn't nice,
You told us once, you told us twice,
But if that is Freedom's price,
We don't mind.

--Song by Malvina Reynolds, 1964

Those supporting the confrontational tactics contend that President Trump has already taken the country far into the realm of incivility and also that the extreme cruelty of Trump's (and the Republicans') racist, anti-democratic, sexist, and class warfare policies warrant more than quiet dissent. Donald Trump's poor behavior has been decried by people of all political stripes ever since he announced his candidacy for president. He has mocked or insulted blacks, women, protesters, Democrats, judges, soldiers, people with disabilities, and others. He has encouraged his followers to attack protesters and demonizes journalists at almost all of his rallies.

Eric Zorn writes in the Chicago Tribune:

But civility has a poor track record in politics, particularly lately — the nastiest, crudest, most dishonest primary candidate won the GOP presidential nomination in 2016 over a host of more qualified, more restrained contenders. He then marched through the rhetorical sewers all the way to the White House.

Those defending the invasion of officials' personal lives cite the exceptional situation the country finds itself in—with the administration's attack on longstanding norms relating to democracy, corruption, honesty, science, and vulnerable populations. They argue that this is a time that requires us to take bold action — not a time to be quiet and polite and follow all the rules.

Representative Maxine Waters created a firestorm when she defended and even encouraged the public shaming of Trump appointees:

Let's make sure we show up, wherever we have to show up. If you see anybody from that cabinet in a restaurant, in a department store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you cause a crowd, and you push back on them, and you tell them they're not welcome. — anymore, anywhere — we've got to get the children connected to their parents, the children are suffering.

Despite the criticism following her remarks (including from within her own party), Waters was firm in stance, while denying that her statement was condoning violence.

In a column in Huffington Post, Michelangelo Signorile put it this way:

Acting up is not about impulsiveness and feeling good (though it does feel good to speak truth to power). It's about saving lives by strategically targeting people for protest. Yes, shaming does work... This is about something much larger than winning elections. It's about standing up against tyranny and abuse, and for what's morally right. We're called to do this only a few times in our lives. Now is one of those times.

Jessica Valenti writes in the Guardian of how extreme Trump's policies are:

But when you're talking about the kind of human rights violations the Trump administration has unabashedly enacted and defended, there is no public/private line worth honoring. When it comes to kids in cages, you're not just accountable for your actions from 9 to 5.

Michelle Goldberg, in an opinion piece for the New York Times titled "We Have a Crisis of Democracy, Not Manners" notes that the Trump presidency illustrates a breakdown of democracy and argues

against the idea that there is an equivalency between the anti-Obama forces and those who oppose Trump's actions.

But unless and until [the anti-Trump majority wins a branch of government], millions and millions of Americans watch helplessly as the president cages children, dehumanizes immigrants, spurns other democracies, guts health care protections, uses his office to enrich himself and turns public life into a deranged phantasmagoria with his incontinent flood of lies. The civility police might point out that many conservatives hated Obama just as much, but that only demonstrates the limits of content-neutral analysis. The right's revulsion against a black president targeted by birther conspiracy theories is not the same as the left's revulsion against a racist president who spread birther conspiracy theories.