“Why is “Compromise” a Dirty Word?”

By: Deborah Tannen (2011)

When did the word “compromise” get compromised?

When did the negative connotations of “He was caught in a compromising position” or “She compromised her ethics” replace the positive connotations of “They reached a compromise”?

House Speaker John Boehner said it outright on “60 Minutes” last year. When talking about “compromise,” Boehner said, “I reject the word.”

“When you say the word ‘compromise,’” he explained, “… a lot of Americans look up and go, ‘Uh-oh, they’re gonna sell me out.’” His position is common right now.

In the same spirit, [Tony Perkins](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-06-11/opinion/perkins.social.conservatives_1_frc-action-social-conservatives-values-voter-summit?_s=PM:OPINION) wrote in a recent CNN.com op-ed piece, “When it comes to conservative principles, compromise is the companion of losers.”

The political right is particularly vehement when it comes to compromise. Conservatives are now strongly swayed by the tea party movement, whose clarion call is a refusal to compromise, regardless of the practical consequences.

But the [rejection of compromise](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/01/usa-debt-dealmakers-idUSN318477420110601) is more widespread than that. The left regularly savages President Barack Obama for compromising too soon, too much or on the wrong issues. Many who fervently sought universal health coverage, for example, could not celebrate its near accomplishment because the president gave up the public option.

The death of compromise has become a threat to our nation as we confront crucial issues such as the debt ceiling and that most basic of legislative responsibilities: a federal budget. At stake is the very meaning of what had once seemed unshakable: “the full faith and credit” of the U.S. government.

Back when the powerful 19th-century senator [Henry Clay](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/Henry_Clay_by_Brady%2C_1849.jpg%20%E2%80%93) was called “the great compromiser,” achieving a compromise really was considered great. On three occasions, the Kentucky statesman helped the Senate preserve the Union by crafting compromises between the deadlocked slave-holding South and the Northern free states. In 1820, his Missouri Compromise stemmed the spread of slavery. In 1833, when the South was poised to defy federal tariff laws favored by the North and the federal government was about to authorize military action, Clay found a last-minute compromise. And his

Compromise of 1850 averted civil war for at least a decade.

It was during an 1850 Senate debate that Clay stated his conviction: “I go for honorable compromise whenever it can be made.” Something else he said then holds a key to how the dwindling respect for compromise is related to larger and more dangerous developments in our nation today.

“All legislation, all government, all society,” Clay said, “is formed upon the principle of mutual concession, politeness, comity, courtesy; upon these, everything is based.”

Concession, politeness, comity, courtesy — none of these words could be uttered now with the assurance of listeners’ approval. The word “comity” is rarely heard; “concession” sounds weak; “politeness” and “courtesy” sound quaint —much like the contemporary equivalent, “civility.”

That Clay lauded both compromise and civil discourse in the same speech reveals the link between, on the one hand, the word “compromise” falling into disrepute, and, on the other, the glorification of aggression that I wrote about in my book, “The Argument Culture: Stopping America’s War of Words.”

Today we have an increasing tendency to approach every task — and each other — in an ever more adversarial spirit. Nowhere is this more evident, or more [destructive](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/10/opinion/10krugman.html), than in the Senate.

Though the two-party system is oppositional by nature, there is plenty of evidence that a certain (yes) comity has been replaced by [growing enmity](http://sites.allegheny.edu/civility/). We don’t have to look as far back as Clay for evidence. In 1996, for example, an unprecedented 14 incumbent senators announced that they would not seek reelection. And many, in farewell essays, described an increase in vituperation and partisanship that made it impossible to do the work of the Senate.

“The bipartisanship that is so crucial to the operation of Congress,” Howell Heflin of Alabama wrote, “especially the Senate, has been abandoned.” J. James Exon of Nebraska described an “ever-increasing vicious polarization of the electorate” that had “all but swept aside the former preponderance of reasonable discussion.”

But this is not happening only in the Senate. There is a rising adversarial spirit among the people and the press. It isn’t only the obvious invective on TV and radio. A

newspaper story that criticizes its subject is praised as “tough”; one that refrains from criticism is scorned as a “puff piece.”

The notion of “balance” today often leads to a search for the most extreme opposing views — so they can be presented as “both sides,” leaving no forum for subtlety, multiple perspectives or the middle ground, where most people stand. Framing issues in this polarizing way reinforces the impression that Boehner voiced: that compromising is selling out.

Being surrounded by vituperation and seeing opponents as enemies is corrosive to the human spirit. It’s also [dangerous to our democracy](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/14/opinion/14brooks.html?_r=1&src=ISMR_HP_LO_MST_FB). The great anthropologist Margaret Mead explained this in a 1962 speech.

“We are essentially a society which must be more committed to a two-party system than to either party,” Mead said. “The only way you can have a two-party system is to belong to a party formally and to fight to the death … ” not for your party to win but “for the right of the other party to be there too.”

Today, this sounds almost as quaint as “comity” in political discourse.

Mead traced our two-party system to our unique revolution: “We didn’t kill a king and we didn’t execute a large number of our people, and we came into our own without the stained hands that have been associated with most revolutions.”

With this noble heritage, Mead said, comes “the obligation to keep the kind of government we set up” — where members of each party may “disagree mightily” but still “trust in each other and trust in our political opponents.”

Losing that trust, Mead concluded, undermines the foundation of our democracy. That trust is exactly what is threatened when the very notion of compromise is rejected.

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