

Let's rise above the partisanship

By Rick Maier

"Bush is an idiot."

"Who do you think would be a better president?"

"Clinton."

"Which one – Zipper or his narcissistic wife?"

Is this how your political discussions have been going lately? Such sophisticated dialogues are sure to go far in solving the world's problems and building friendships. Name calling, generalizations, sarcasm, exaggeration - it's enough to make you seek the comfort of like-minded people and avoid any kind of diverse discourse altogether.

Politics in America have always been loud and controversial, but the intensity of emotion today threatens to squelch debate just when we need people to be more politically engaged. Tensions will only increase as we approach next year's elections, and if California is any barometer, the number of elections may increase as well.

Few people, even those of us who stay informed, have an inside track on the facts. Chances are you haven't been to Baghdad recently and don't really know why the economy rises and falls. We process what we hear from public sources through individual partisan filters that we adopt from our parents and fine tune throughout our lives.

I am a political conservative, and I feel lucky to have friends who are liberal. I respect them as bright and successful; some served in the military. But over the past few months we can't seem to discuss subjects as humdrum as how to treat termites without breaking into a heated battle over WMD's.

It reminds me of Bulldog fans rooting for anyone Tech plays, when logically they should favor schools within the state or region. It's pure partisanship –except that in the case of sports, it's all in fun.

The darker, political kind of partisanship is harder to define. It's partiality gone too far, emotion over merits, enthusiasm crossing over into obsession.

One reason everyone is wound so tight these days is the over-abundance of information. We turned on the news on September 11, 2001 and haven't stopped watching since. Views are now more frequently expressed as news.

September 11th hurled us into new territory. We're angry and worried, and the proper response is anything but clear. Conservatives got feistier and liberals dug in. The fence is no longer a safe place to perch.

I love all the new sources of news – especially cable, talk radio and email messages - but my daily efforts to stay informed are now largely spent reconciling wildly different perspectives. I get whiplash from reading the Telegraph – comparing the liberal-leaning wire services and staff with conservative columnists such as Bill O'Reilly, Mona Charen and Walter Williams in the editorial section.

The difference in perspective between CBS news and talk radio or Fox News is dramatic. Has the war in Iraq been a disaster or an overwhelming success? Are Americans one step away from the soup line or living large? Is it true that some people welcome bad news when it helps their political cause?

To encourage more political dialogue, I offer these rules of engagement, things I try to keep in mind when talking to colleagues:

- No name calling...they bounce off me and stick to you.
- Don't go negative. Remember that any jackass can kick down a barn.
- Take no offense where none is intended.
- Begin each sentence with "I" instead of "you."
- Take a breath. If the conversation is going nowhere, switch to local issues, sports or the weather.

Sometimes I wonder how we ever survived the 1970's - Vietnam, Watergate, deep recessions, racial strife, energy crises, the Cold War. In many respects the world is much better off today, but sometimes it just doesn't feel that way.