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Rules of Civility. (book reviews) *Ted Kreiter.*



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Review Grade: B

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"Petty morals and large morals are linked; there are no great spirits who do not pay attention to both; these little courtesies reflect, as in a pocket mirror, the social and the moral order."

Rules of Civility by Richard Broothiser 90 Pages, The Free Press, A Division of Simon & Schuster, \$16.00

How does one become a great man (or woman)? In the case of perhaps the greatest American of all, George Washington, historian Richard Brookhiser says it all started with a set of rules that Washington copied down as a teenager.

Before the days of Miss Manners, Ann Landers, or even Dr. Laura, about the best source of "do's" and "don'ts" available was a little book compiled by French Jesuits in 1595 entitled *Bienseance de la Conversation entre les Hommes*. In English: *Decency of Conversation Among Men*.

This compact book of maxims detailed the sundry aspects of gentlemanly behavior as practiced 400 years ago:

"Spit not into the fire, nor
stoop low before it; neither put
your hands into the flames to
warm them, nor set your feet
upon the fire, especially if there
be meat before it."

"When in company put not

your hands to any part of the

body not usually discovered."

"Keep your nails clean and

short, also your hands and teeth

clean, without showing any

great concern for them."

How did such rules help make Washington great? Author Brookhiser takes up the question in the introduction to his recent book, *Rules of Civility: The 110 Precepts That Guided Our First President In War and Peace*.



The precepts Washington copied down are mostly rules of etiquette--and outdated etiquette at that. Take, for example, Rule #36:

"Artificers & persons of low degree ought not to use many ceremonies to lords or others of high degree, but respect and highly honor them, and those of high degree ought to treat them with affability and courtesy, without arrogance."

The author has done readers a great favor by commenting on many of the rules, adding insight, clarification, and (often) humor. In a telling little story, he manages to explain not only how Washington may have applied the.. above rule, but also how this archaic maxim might still apply today:

"Years after the Revolutionary War, an old veteran remembered that Washington rode up to his to unit to inspect the landscape with a field glass. The young soldier asked if he could have a look, and the Commander in Chief without comment, handed him the glass. Obviously, if Washington was busy, he would not have done it, and if the youth had asked rudely, Washington would have handed him more than a field glass. But high-spirited teenage privates did not disconcert him."

Obviously there is something more to these archaically worded rules than one sees at first blush, and Brookhiser puts his finger on it. These rules, he writes, "seek to form the inner man (or boy) by shaping the outer. They start with hats and posture and table manners, and work inward. The key is set in rule #1:

"'Every action done in company ought to be done with some sign of respect to those that are present.' The effect of all the rules taken together is to remind you that you should not just do whatever feels right, or the first thing that comes into your head; rather, you should always be mindful of other people, and remember that they have sensibilities, and feelings of self-respect, that deserve your respect."

Other men of his time did not always share Washington's notion of civility or civil society, Brookhiser notes.

"Aaron Burr (who served under Washington in the war) once told Alexander

Hamilton (who served on Washington's staff, and later in his administration) that 'great spirits care little for petty morals.' Burr, who later killed Hamilton in a duel and was prosecuted for treason, did not care about large morals either. The large ones depend on practicing, and understanding, the petty ones."

Because politeness is the first form of politics. Brookhiser writes. Washington "was fortunate that, by the time he had assumed his greatest responsibilities, civility had become second nature to him." His manner inspired one foreign diplomat's wife to observe that he had "perfect good breeding, and a correct knowledge of even the etiquette of a court," though "heaven knows" how he acquired it.

Civility and etiquette would seem to be universally outmoded in today's world. But if civility is no longer taken seriously, "There is a special reason why," Brookhiser believes, "and that is the withering of the ambition to be great, and of the belief that greatness is possible.... Twentieth-century Americans believe they can be rich, or powerful, or famous.... But greatness has vanished from the map of our minds."

So why publish the rules of civility now? The author has his reasons: "Maybe they can work on us in the 1990s as the Jesuits intended them to work in the 1590s," he reasons, "--indirectly--by putting us in a more ambitious frame of mind." Americans can still profit from Washington's example.

RELATED ARTICLE: Selected Precepts from the "Rules of Civility"

49 Use no reproachful language against any one, neither curse nor revile.

50 Be not hasty to believe flying reports to the disparagement of any.

56 Associate yourself with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation; for 'tis better to be alone than in bad company.

58 Let your conversation be without malice or envy, for 'tis a sign of tractable and commendable nature, and in all causes of passion permit reason to govern.

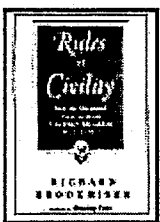
65 Speak not injurious words neither in jest nor earnest; scoff at none although they give occasion.

73 Think before you speak, pronounce not imperfectly, nor bring out your words too hastily, but orderly, distinctly.

74 When another speaks be attentive yourself, and disturb not the audience. If any hesitate in his words, help him not nor prompt him without [being] desired. Interrupt him not, nor answer him till his speech be ended.

81 Be not curious to know the affairs of others, neither approach those that speak in private.

86 In disputes, be not so desirous to overcome as not to give liberty to each one to deliver his opinion and submit to the judgment of the major part, specially if they



are judges of the dispute.

87 Let your carriage be such as becomes a man grave, settled, and attentive to that which is spoken. Contradict not at every turn what others say.

88 Be not tedious in discourse, make not many digressions, nor repeat often the same manner of discourse.

89 Speak not evil of the absent for it is unjust.

97 Put not another bit into your mouth till the former be swallowed. Let not your morsels be too big for the jowls.

98 Drink not nor talk with your mouth full, neither gaze about you while you are dining.

105 Be not angry at table whatever happens & if you have reason to be so, show it not but [put] on a cheerful countenance especially if there be stranger, for good humor makes one dish of meat a feast.

108 When you speak of God or 10 His attributes, let it be seriously & with reverence. Honor obey your natural parents though they be poor.

109 Let your recreations be manful not sinful.

100 Labour to keep alive in your breast that ruffle spark of celestial fire called conscience.

(Author's Note:) Let a speaker complete his own thoughts, even if he is having trouble. If he is having extreme trouble, one might follow the example of the Speaker of the Virginia House of Burgesses when the young Washington, a famous but awkward war hero, found himself unable to talk on his first day as a legislator. "Sit down, Mr. Washington," the Speaker said. "Your modesty equals your valor, and that surpasses the power of any language that I possess."

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Top of
Article



Previous
Article



Next
Article