



*Public Discourse in America:  
Conversation and Community  
in the Twenty-First Century.*

Edited by Judith Rodin and Stephen P. Steinberg.  
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.  
318 pages.

Reviewed by [Bethany Mills Rigney](#), [University of Southern Mississippi](#)

In a time when reasonable national discussion seems to be at its most ineffective, and political compromise between opposite sides of the ideological line looks to be something of the past, *Public Discourse in America* reminds the audience that incivility is part of a continuous rotation in America's history. While the current phase of public and political unrest has its own set of unique social and economic challenges, the authors suggest that these challenges can also be remedied by reasoned and rational argument and the development of the skills to do so. Edited by Judith Rodin and Stephen P. Steinberg, this book consists of several essays from a group of scholars and prominent figures who offer their perspectives of how citizens of a democratic nation can better discuss our differences in a public form. While providing no groundbreaking ideas to solve the country's current political climate, the compilation gives readers perspective and a history of what has and has not worked in public conversation.

*Public Discourse in America* is a collection that began with the work of the Penn National Commission on Society, Culture, and Community. The book provides discussion on a history of deliberation in the United States, and authors serve as guides to improve the quality of national conversation and debate. Leadership roles are examined from an array of positions, and direction is given to those who may lead in the public forum from unique angles. One of these essays is Richard Lapstick's "Sports and Public Behavior." In addition to discussing race

relations, Lapstick gives athletes the authority and instructional tools to front the conversation on drugs, violence, and gender violence. Other contributors look at an array of past and current fragmented areas of public debate and how these topics have effectively and ineffectively been discussed in the public forum. For example, in his essay, Christopher Edley does not try to defend or reject affirmative action. Instead he gives voice to the range of positions that Americans have on this divisive issue and leads the reader through a systematic method of discussing race without subjugating any position.

Roden and Steinberg link the obstacles of productive discourse results from American democracy itself. While the first amendment guarantees free speech and places public deliberation at utmost priority, it also allows virulent discourse that can cripple civil conversation among a nation of peoples with a vast range of values, ideals, and backgrounds. According to the authors, increased participation in the political arena by ordinary citizens overcomes those barriers, enhances a democratic society, and creates better citizens. For instance, David Ryfe, goes as far to say that participation in any voluntary association, from “political parties to bowling leagues” creates a healthier society. Few would argue against community involvement and the development of more harmonious relationships within communities. However, no research is offered that shows the formation of these community ties to be strong enough to lead to a better national conversation on pressing issues. This is the only flaw in an otherwise, very engaging and comprehensive volume on communication within the American political sphere.

Particularly engaging is Ryfe’s chapter dedicated to the principles and practices of public discourse which is very effective in reminding the reader of the basics of argumentation while providing guidance for specific events. It is important that all citizens, especially communication scholars and professionals, to be reminded of the principles of political communication. Bob McKenzie is quoted saying that most people deliberate quite effectively when making every day decisions, yet “forget” how to talk to one another when we enter the political arena. This revelation has not escaped the observations of those in popular media. At the 2011 White House Correspondence Dinner, Seth Meyers commented on Congress’s decision for Democrats and Republicans to sit next to one another in light of the Tucson shooting. Meyers quips, “we are not impressed... You know what the rest of Americans call an evening spent sitting next to another person with wildly different political views? Thanksgiving.” In a world where people are more connected than ever, Americans are dependent on others in their work, social, and family lives every day. These routine tasks require communicating with several individuals, yet more often than not, these mundane efforts are accomplished without a hitch. Overall, this book attempts to bring the ordinary tools that lead to the success of the ordinary conversation to the political arena.