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Saturday, October 30, 2004

### How to douse the fuse when the political talk heats up

By KRISTIN DIZON AND PAUL NYHAN  
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTERS

Monica and Dan O'Neill have a happy family life, with one notable exception: politics.

For the past couple of years, they've argued about the Iraq war, which he supports and she opposes.

A few months ago, to preserve domestic tranquility, they made a new family rule -- no more foreign policy discussions.

"I really wanted to pound him and argue," said Monica, 35, a stay-at-home mother who backs John Kerry for president. "I just thought: 'If I say the right thing, I'm going to change his mind.' "

And, they knew it might affect their two young children. "They're not going to understand that Mommy and Daddy are having a friendly argument about politics. They just see you talking heatedly," she added.

This presidential election seems especially charged, with candidates neck and neck and voters particularly passionate and polarized, even within families and at the office.

So what do you do when you're faced with political views that make you want to cringe, shout or bang your head on the nearest table?

Whether at PTA meetings, playgrounds or in their own homes, you should take the advice from professionals and proceed with care, and, at work, perhaps don't proceed at all.

#### All in the family

The O'Neills, political independents who keep informed on current events, have largely disagreed about the choice for president.

Their circle of friends is mostly in her camp, supporting Kerry. "My husband gets beat up quite a bit," Monica O'Neill said. "We live in a little liberal Seattle bubble."

Dan O'Neill, a network engineer at aQuantive Inc., is used to being the political minority in social situations. People tell him he's foolish or naïve for believing that democracy in the Middle East is the best defense against terrorism. "I fight that battle all the time," he said. "It kind of made me want to say, 'Screw you, I'm going to think what I want to think.' "

But he's likely just emerged from the doghouse in his own house.

"I actually convinced my husband to vote for Kerry by offering him a night of kinky sex," Monica O'Neill said.

"If I had voted for Bush, there might have been hell to pay," Dan O'Neill, 34, says, before admitting that he was leaning toward Kerry anyway, after becoming concerned with the Bush administration's handling of the war and the growing budget deficit.

John Hoover, a former marriage counselor and author of "How to Live With an Idiot: Clueless

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Creatures and the People Who Love Them," says he has seen familial political squabbles end up in counseling. "People want to be right and want to prove the other person wrong," he said.

"I suggest they find humor, because that seems to be the most healing, least harming and de-escalating potion that I've found," he said. "Certainly you're going to be with your spouse, your partner, your children for a lot longer than the next four years that a candidate is in office."

But it's not surprising that people get so worked up. "In this election cycle, we're being mobilized by both sides on an emotional level," Hoover said. "And when that happens, you're getting further away from logic and reason. Left and right brain are being pried apart."

Clare, a 38-year-old entrepreneur who asked that her last name be withheld, is a centrist Democrat who once voted for Ronald Reagan. Her father is a conservative Republican and George W. Bush supporter.

"I felt like when I turned into a Democrat in the early '90s, in a way, I was coming out to my family. Because my family was a super Republican family, and I was a bit of a black sheep for a while," said Clare, who shocked her family further by dressing as a "mudslinging Republican" for Halloween in 1992.

They're able to joke about most of their political disagreements. Clare's father mowed her lawn recently and made a crack about her Kerry/Edwards yard sign. "He said, 'I saw that a crazy person put this sign in your yard. I know you wouldn't do that,' " she recalled. "I laughed and I joked back that if I'd known he was coming, I wouldn't have put it up yet."

Like many others, they've decided that it's easier to avoid some subjects than clash over them. They don't talk about abortion, a hot button for both. "He knows how I feel, and I know how he feels," she said. "You just have to love and respect the person and accept that they feel differently."

Adam Simon, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Washington, said political feuding in the nuclear family doesn't happen that often. "Most people's partisanship is highly correlated with their parents', and most people are going to have similar views to their spouse."

Plus, he points to a local tendency to avoid confrontation. "People tend not to associate with people who disagree with them. You cannot understate this," Simon said. "People just don't want to waste their energy arguing or be seen as an argumentative person in general."

But Simon, author of "The Winning Message: Candidate Behavior, Campaign Discourse and Democracy," believes that democracy would work better if more people with diverse opinions engaged in dialogue.

Julie, a 38-year-old Seattleite who also wishes to keep her last name out of print, said she and her sisters disagree with the politics of their Republican father. "We've got three factions in the family. Poor mom, who's sort of on the fence, gets bombarded by those of us who are on one side or the other," she said.

"This election in particular, because feelings and emotions have been running so high, we've tried to stay away from deep political conversations, because they don't go well," she said, although the occasional barb still flies.

Dealing with her husband's family in the Midwest has taught Julie to tread cautiously. At a large reunion dinner once, a calm discussion about gun control quickly turned heated as a family member swore at the couple before walking out.

Now, Julie said, "I err on the side of staying away from the topic, unless I know who I'm dealing with."

### On the job

The workplace is riddled with opportunity for the politically opinionated -- photocopiers to reproduce fliers, e-mail systems to send political jokes and a largely captive audience.

People who bring politics to the office, though, risk alienating co-workers, dampening productivity and, potentially, legal action.

"I think it is very, very risky to get involved in political affiliation discussions in the workplace," said Michael Reilly, a lawyer who specializes in labor and employment matters at Lane Powell Spears Lubersky LLP. "It is not bad to focus on work when you are at work."

Kevin LeRoy learned that lesson the hard way. LeRoy considers himself a polite Republican, but he recently endured one too many liberal diatribes from a friend and colleague in the mortgage business. The debate degenerated, and they wound up yelling at each other.

"You're right!! I did mistake you for someone who actually knows what the hell they're talking about," LeRoy said in an e-mail recalling the exchange. "Why don't you just shut up!" she responded.

LeRoy says he quickly realized his mistake, offered an apology and didn't seek one in return. The two remain good friends, he said, who just don't discuss politics.

Many workers have apparently reached the same conclusion.

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"We more or less dropped politics by general consent to avoid the considerable ill will it generated between us. It was the only way to preserve friendships such as they were," one local employee said.

In fact, roughly half of surveyed workers said they would rather "listen silently" than discuss politics in the office, according to a recent report by staffing concern Ajilon Finance.

"Most people avoid" it, said Joseph Grenny, co-author of "Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior." They "will assume it will go badly."

Some people, though, can't help themselves. So experts urge managers to help their political junkies by creating clear policies about talking politics at the office. For example, some companies ban the use of e-mail or company electronic boards for political discourse.

E-mailing political jokes "is an absolute mistake," said Lane Powell's Reilly. "You can never control where that e-mail" goes.

Within Seattle city limits, employers are actually barred from indicating a preference for employees with a certain ideology, Reilly said.

Some offices have devised lighter ways to defuse tension.

When Sharon Hendricks or one of her colleagues is overcome with the desire to express a political opinion, they just head to the refrigerator, which is divided into a "left side" and a "right side."

An employee can post an article or a joke on the appropriate side, Hendricks says, "without having to 'get into it' with another co-worker."

Companies, however, can't always rely on the ingenuity or restraint of their employees to keep the peace at work.

At The Boeing Co., for example, employees can't use the company's name or resources to campaign for political causes, according company spokesman Doug Kennett.

And the First Amendment may generally guarantee the right to free speech, but that right is limited for private-sector workers, Reilly said.

"At work, it is not a free-speech area," Boeing employee Erin Redwing concurred.

At Nike, executives encourage workers to cast ballots, but that's it.

"Nike doesn't vote. You do," the company recently told employees.

## **GETTING ALONG POLITICALLY**

### **Mixing politics with**

#### **family and friends:**

1. Avoid equating political affiliation with intelligence. Try to remember that we all have stupid or inarticulate moments.
2. Value all points of view. If you can't do that, find something to compliment, such as the person's zeal in their beliefs.
3. Try humor to defuse the situation. There's a lot to laugh at on both sides. Sample sentence: "I won't call your candidate a bold-faced liar if you'll agree he's having a truth malfunction."
4. Have a comeback at the ready to defend your point of view. If you feel run over, resentment will build up.
5. Take the long view. Realize that a defeat of your candidate is not the end of the world, and politics will go back and forth.
6. If your candidate wins, don't gloat.

#### **Tips for office debating**

1. Just don't do it.
2. If you cannot resist the topic, find common ground and ignore outrageous commentary. It's often just baiting. Stick to facts, not judgments.
3. Don't debate too long in the smoking area or around the water cooler.
4. Don't use office resources, such as e-mail, as political forums.
5. Publish a policy, distribute it and send out a casual reminder.
6. Let people talk, although it's OK to eventually say, "Let's get back to work."

Sources: Dr. John Hoover, Peter Handal of Dale Carnegie Training, Joseph Grenny, Richard

Brenner of Chaco Canyon Consulting, Lane Powell Spears Lubersky, Harris, Rothenberg International LLC and Hatch Magazine

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