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— THE MONITOR'S VIEW —

Friendship across political lines

Ellen DeGeneres and George W. Bush socializing sets an example for keeping doors open for those on the opposite side of issues.

By the Monitor's Editorial Board

At an early October Dallas Cowboys game, cameras turned to an audience box and showed two unlikely neighbors laughing together: former President George W. Bush and comedian Ellen DeGeneres. The image went viral, and reactions were febrile.

Two camps quickly emerged. One thought the warm pairing of a gay, liberal comedian with a conservative, Republican president represented a moment of much-needed civility. The other side thought it amounted to a betrayal. President Bush, the latter argued, initiated endless wars, responded slowly to Hurricane Katrina, even advocated restricting LGBTQ rights, which would have affected Ms. DeGeneres directly. Two people so at odds politically, they said, should also be at odds socially.

For Ms. DeGeneres on this occasion, those differences didn't matter. Echoing the golden rule on her talk show two days later, she argued against being kind to only those like-minded in political views. "Just because I don't agree with someone on everything," she said, "doesn't mean that I'm not going to be friends with them." Mr. Bush, she said, was her friend.

Many called Ms. DeGeneres' monologue reductive, flip, and pharisaical. Saying Mr. Bush was a friend meant accepting his actions. There are some people, they argued, with whom we shouldn't be friends.

The debate over Ms. DeGeneres and the former president embodies a larger question in American culture: How do we live with people whose opinions and actions are so different from ours? In a time when differences sometimes feel threatening, do we even interact at all?

Polls show much of the public thinks not, with many saying they've stopped talking to someone over political differences (50% for Democrats, 38% for Republicans,

and 35% for independents). Activist groups, especially on college campuses, often argue over who even deserves a voice – sometimes turning to violence to suppress others.

A recent experiment suggests this intolerance can end. Organized by academics and consultants, a project called America in One Room gathered a representative sample of 523 voters in Dallas and staged a weekend of lectures and discussions. Participants of both parties, exposed to different viewpoints, abandoned their more extreme positions – Republicans on immigration and Democrats on the economy. At the end, all but 5% agreed they “learned a lot about people very different from me – about what they and their lives are like.”

The cure to division, it turned out, was exposure.

There are elements of privilege involved in Ms. DeGeneres’ bonhomie with Mr. Bush, but that shouldn’t distract from research, like that of America in One Room, that shows spending time with people unlike you can create an overall good. Many have argued that the former president hasn’t apologized for what they see as past transgressions. But saying people are too far gone for our company suggests we don’t expect them to change in the first place.

Perhaps compassion and empathy, rather than ostracism, are better ways to change a mind. Maybe they can change what it means to be a “friend.”

At the start of World War II, Mahatma Gandhi wrote to Adolf Hitler, imploring him to end the fighting. At no point did he condone Hitler’s actions, calling them “monstrous and unbecoming of human dignity.” But that didn’t stop Gandhi from writing, separating evil acts from the person committing them. The letter never made it to Hitler, but if it had, he would have seen it addressed at the top: “Dear Friend.”