

Dear Mr. Speaker:

The ability of the House of Representatives to deal successfully with the challenges facing the nation depends on the level of trust and the working relationships that exist among members. We believe there is a real need for a considered and concerted effort to improve the House in this respect.

Writing in June 1996, Congress members Ray LaHood (R-IL) and David Skaggs (D-CO) proposed to Speaker Newt Gingrich and Minority Leader Dick Gephardt to lead a small group of House colleagues in a concerted effort to promote civility in that chamber. For the first and only time in congressional history, these men and women organized a series of four “civility retreats,” from 1996 through 2004, to counter the trend toward discourteous behavior in the House. They eventually gave up, however, having failed at the task.

Drawing upon letters, memoranda, reports, and analyses preserved in the personal papers of LaHood, this paper will (1) identify the obstacles to civility in the House as articulated by the members themselves, (2) describe the remedies proposed by the “civilistas,” and (3) speculate on the causes of the failure.

If the lack of civility in the conduct of business in the U.S. House of Representatives is partly to blame for the polarization of politics, then perhaps there is something to be learned from the House civility initiatives. After all, what is past is prologue.

Academic Biography:

Frank H. Mackaman is on the staff of The Dirksen Congressional Center, Pekin, IL. He received his PhD in American History from the University of Missouri at Columbia. He is a former Director of the Gerald R. Ford Library and Museum and a member of the University of Michigan faculty. Currently, he is an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Bradley University. He edited *Understanding Congressional Leadership* for Congressional Quarterly Press among other publications.