

America the boorish?

THREE OUTBURSTS – by a politician, entertainer, and athlete – leave many clucking over rise of rudeness.

BY STEPHANIE HANES / CORRESPONDENT

America would not have done well at the Protocol School of Washington these past few weeks.

Pamela Eyring, the etiquette institution's president, is too well mannered to say the country would have out-and-out flunked. But even she calls the recent spate of public interrupting and microphone grabbing, of tennis-ball threatening and profanity-laced tweeting, of shouting and swearing and half-heartedly apologizing, "totally ridiculous."

"Have we lost our civility?" she asks.

In the fast-paced, 24-hour-news-cycle world, three of anything is a trend – and the recent bad behavior trifecta of Rep. Joe "You Lie" Wilson, R&B star Kanye "Yo Taylor" West, and tennis champ Serena "What I'll Do With This Ball" Williams was enough to prompt some serious national soul-searching.

Are we, we pondered, tweeted, and Facebooked, truly a nation of boors?

Self-reflection spun into more news and more commentary. Some observers rallied to the sides of the disgraced (Wilson has collected at least \$1 million in political donations since his outburst); others made news with their derision (Pink, Kelly Clarkson, and even President Obama used profanity to describe West). Meanwhile, the analysts analyzed it all.

The avalanche of attention goes right to the heart of the problem, says manners expert Thomas Farley.

"The chatter out there has become so thick, with Facebook and Twitter and everything, that it's really difficult to be heard anymore," says Mr. Farley, who writes the blog *What Manners Most*. "Now, if you're not doing outrageous things all the time, you're not getting noticed.... I wouldn't go as far to say that we've all descended into this horrible hell of disrespecting one another, but it gets caught on camera, and then the media goes with it, and it becomes this awful, vicious cycle of people pointing fingers."

Does that suggest that America is entering some new age of incivility?

Ms. Eyring thinks so. So does Jill Kryston, founder of Pennsylvania's

Defining Manners – A School of Contemporary Protocol.

"People act as if life is a great big reality show," Ms. Kryston says. "Everybody wants their 15 minutes of fame. And we've lost respect."

These are hardly new concerns, notes Fordham University Prof. Mark Caldwell, who wrote "A Short History of Rudeness: Manners, Morals and Misbehavior in Modern America."

"Americans always say that manners are getting worse. Nobody ever says that we're getting better," he says. Every six months or so, he says, there will be a public outcry after some unmannered incident. "And it just happens that recently there were three, in three different cultural areas."



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A recap:

On Sept. 9, Representative Wilson, a Republican from South Carolina, interrupted the president's televised speech to Congress by shouting "You lie!" after Mr. Obama said healthcare legislation would not provide taxpayer-funded coverage for illegal immigrants.

On Sept. 12, Williams, in the process of losing at the US Open to Kim Clijsters, swore at a line judge who called her on a foot fault. Thanks to court-side microphones, fans could hear Williams's profanity-laced threats.

At the MTV Video Music Awards the next night, singer West jumped on stage and grabbed the microphone from Taylor Swift, who was a few sentences into an acceptance speech. Telling the stunned country star that she could continue in a moment, West extolled the virtues of runner-up Beyoncé, who watched from the audience, with dropped jaw.

Each offender sped through the

standard pop-culture routine of public apology. Ever since, the outbursts have been bundled together as a sort of rudeness three-fer – something Toby Miller, professor of media and culture studies at the University of California, Riverside, says is probably misguided.

The three incidents are very different, he says. Athletes have long expressed their displeasure with of-



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SHOCKING: Within six recent days, public figures in three realms disrupted events. Clockwise from top: Rep. Joe Wilson let fly with his 'You lie' during President Obama's healthcare address; Serena Williams screamed at a US Open line judge; and Kanye West interrupted MTV award-winner Taylor Swift with praise for a competitor, Beyoncé.

ficials – think John McEnroe throwing his racquet, or Roberto Alomar spitting on an umpire. In the celebrity world, bad behavior is almost an art form – there are public-relations specialists working full time to turn public gaffes (Paris Hilton sex tape, anyone?) into gold.

But Wilson's outburst, he says, was, in fact, extraordinary.

"This kind of behavior is unheard of in recent memory," Miller says.

Overall, he says, he sees the political right embracing the politics of the spectacle – disrupting healthcare town meetings, for instance, with similar tactics to those used by Act Up protesters during the AIDS crisis. But a member of Congress interrupt-

ing a presidential speech, he says, is unprecedented – and may show other forces at work. Former President Jimmy Carter, for one, has charged that racism underlies much of the political bad behavior.

Not that Washington has a great tradition of manners. History buffs might recall the story of another South Carolina politician – Preston Brooks – badly beating Sen. Charles Sumner in 1856 for criticizing slavery. Yale history Prof. Joanne Freeman says this sort of attack was common then: In her research on congressio-

nal violence, she has found records of thrown tables, duels, fired guns, brawls, as well as journalists beaten for writing about the mayhem.

"We get a feeling that now it's so horrible and then, back in the day, it was so civilized," she says. "Sometimes it was, but sometimes it wasn't, and those guys were armed."

Even in the bad old days, though, Wilson's words would have had impact, she says. Calling someone a "liar," she says, would not just be rude, but an attack – and probably would prompt a duel.

"It was interesting for me to witness the national gasp the other week," she says. "There would have been the same reaction in 1840." ■