

A LINE ON LIFE

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Expressing Your View *

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Even if we feel strongly about something and have credible evidence to support it, we may be hesitant to express our views. First, there is a risk of being rejected. Second, many of us think that our view *will not matter* – we cannot influence others. Although these are both distinct possibilities, "*speaking up*" can sometimes cause dramatic changes.



Those who watch C-SPAN on television see many speeches given in the United States Congress. These speeches rarely change votes. However, in 1993, there were two notable exceptions.

Senator Diane Feinstein (CA) wanted an amendment to ban automatic assault weapons added to a crime bill. To support her amendment, Feinstein described the 1984 mass killing of 21 people at a McDonald's restaurant by a gunman armed with an Uzi. Another senator countered that the gunman used a shotgun, concluding with a sarcastic remark.

"So, the gentle lady from California needs to become a little bit more familiar with firearms and their deadly characteristics."

In reality, the gunman had used both weapons.

Provoked by the statement, Senator Feinstein responded.

"I am quite familiar with firearms. I became mayor as a product of an assassination. I found my assassinated colleague [San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk] and put a finger through a bullet hole trying to get a pulse. I proposed gun control legislation in San Francisco.... I was trained in the shooting of a firearm when I had terrorist attacks...at my house, when my husband was dying, when I had windows shot out. Senator, I know something about what firearms can do."

Stunned by Feinstein's reply, the Senate passed the amendment – over strong opposition by the gun lobby – by the narrow margin of 51 to 49.

In another situation, Senator Jesse Helms (NC) proposed an amendment renewing a design patent of the Confederate flag for the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Helms characterized this group as "*mostly elderly ladies*" who did "*good works*." However, Senator Carol Moseley Braun (IL) – an African American – objected to government approval for a logo that not only symbolized the Confederacy, but slavery as well.

"The United Daughters of the Confederacy have every right...to choose the Confederate flag as their symbol if they like. However, those of us whose ancestors fought on a different side of the Civil War, or who were held, frankly, as human chattel under the Confederate flag, are duty bound to honor our ancestors by asking whether such a recognition by the U.S. Senate is appropriate...."

"The emblems of the Confederacy have meaning to Americans even 100 years after the end of the Civil War. Everybody knows what the Confederacy stands for. Everybody knows what the insignia means.... The Confederate effort was around preserving the institution of slavery.... The battle was fought to...keep the States from separating themselves over whether or not my ancestors could be held as property, as chattel, as objects of commerce and trade in this country....

"It is an outrage. It is an insult. It is absolutely unacceptable to me and to millions of Americans, black or white, that we would put the imprimatur of the United States Senate on a symbol of this kind of idea....

"Following the Civil War...that particular institution (slavery) was put to rest once and for all.... And the people of this country do not want to see a day in which the flags like that are underwritten, underscored, adopted and approved by the U.S. Senate."

Influenced by Senator Moseley Braun's remarks, 27 senators changed their votes. Although it would have been accepted previously, Senator Helm's amendment was rejected, 75 to 25.

Those who don't speak up for change are implicitly endorsing the status quo.

With strong convictions and credible evidence, these two examples indicate that you can persuade others to change. If you do not complain, people assume that you approve of what is happening.

Of course, stating our views takes effort, and it can be risky. It might not make a difference. However, if you don't speak up, you definitely will not cause a change. On the other hand, if you speak up, change is possible. You can make a difference!

* Adapted from Irwin A. Horowitz and Kenneth S. Bordens, *Social Psychology*, Mayfield Publishing, 1995, pages 270-271.