

# Opinion: Anti-immigrant protests in Iowa City lack dignity

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I would like to make a few brief comments regarding the recent activity around Iowa City, including the posters encouraging people to call ICE, and the recent display of a “Build the Wall” banner by students on the University of Iowa campus. In particular, I would like to address the organizers behind the banner, who have implied that their actions were intended to start a public debate.

Currently, I am a resident of League of United Latin American Citizens, Council 308 - the nation’s oldest Hispanic civil rights organization. As such, I understand the importance of the First Amendment, and the need to critically engage in a dialogue around pressing issues. Immigration regulation and enforcement is one such important issue.

First, contrary to popular belief, even under the First Amendment, words alone have been recognized to cause harm. The Supreme Court has recognized that words may “by their very utterance inflict injury.” The First Amendment does not shield utterances that form “no essential part of any exposition of ideas, and are of such slight social value as a step to truth that any benefit that may be derived from them is clearly outweighed by the social interest in order and morality.” *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 568, 572 (1942).

Second, the First Amendment does not absolve us of our civic commitment to respect one another; a respect demanded by the inherent human dignity of the individual. From the beginning of our Republic, individual human dignity has been invoked in American jurisprudence. See *Chisholm v. Georgia*, 2 U.S. 419, 455 (1793). Although dignity is not an explicit right, it is an important constitutional value that courts have continued to use when interpreting constitutional rights. See, e.g. *Rice v. Cayetano*, 528 U.S. 495, 517 (2000) (“One of the principal reasons race is treated as a forbidden classification is that it demeans the dignity and worth of a person to be judged by ancestry instead of by his or her own merit and essential qualities.”).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines dignity as “[t]he quality of being worthy or honorable; worthiness, worth, nobleness, excellence.” In order to engage in rational debate, it only makes sense to treat others with dignity, and to respect their viewpoints and the inherent worth which such viewpoints derive from. This is a principle that, in fact, is endorsed by conservatives and libertarians. For example, David Boaz, executive director of the libertarian think-tank The Cato Institute, has noted that “In a free society we have our natural rights and our general obligation to respect the rights of other individuals.”

In short, it should be a neutral and non-contentious position that rational debate requires some baseline respect for the other, respect rooted in human dignity. The recent events in Iowa City evidence a lack of recognition of the dignity of the other. Or, at the very least, an inability to accurately convey a recognition of such dignity. To use an analogy, it would be both useless and

injurious to use the “N-word” to engage in a discussion of foreign policy with African countries. Certain terms and images take on loaded social and cultural connotations, and speakers should consider this before engaging in a debate.

I would like to end this discussion with the words of former Republican President George W. Bush:

*America needs to conduct this debate on immigration in a reasoned and respectful tone. Feelings run deep on this issue and as we work it out, all of us need to keep some things in mind. We cannot build a unified country by inciting people to anger, or playing on anyone's fears, or exploiting the issue of immigration for political gain. We must always remember that real lives will be affected by our debates and decisions, and that every human being has dignity and value no matter what their citizenship papers say.*