

UP front

"We need to have a (national) conversation..." Have you heard this phrase? Sure you have; because it's as ubiquitous as it is annoying and absurd.

What's the origin of this directive? I Googled it. Which is an unscientific, borderline-lazy, approach, yielding an inconclusive but brilliantly ironic result.

In 2008, Barack Obama, then a freshman U.S. senator, began to regularly reference the concept of a national conversation, specifically dealing with race. His calls for such discourse followed the widespread exposure of his pastor-friend Jeremiah Wright's incendiary and racially divisive library of public comments. Obama, running against a white woman, Hillary Clinton, for the Democratic presidential nomination, seemed to be suggesting that we keep race front-of-mind and tip-of-tongue. But what to do about "race?" He didn't get too deeply into specifics. Conversation was both the means and the ends, effectively. Keep talking; something's bound to happen, aside from the collective noise.

In 2013, now president, Obama reprised his call-to-mouths, as moderator-in-chief. He implored us to metaphorically man millions of microphones and let 'er rip. We must have national conversations, he said, again and again. He told us to talk about topics as wide-ranging as gun violence, data-collection, cyber security, fatherhood and...of course... race. The notion of a national conversation seemed omnipotent to the president. Omnipotent might be the wrong word. Expedient is likely more apt. In 2016, Obama participated in "A National Conversation: The President and the People," which aired – no joke – on the Disney family of networks, and utilized, for social media purposes, "#nationalconversation" to draw the hipper among us in.

Interglot is a widely used online translation source. It offers two insightful and amusing substitutes for our phrase-of-the-millennium. "To have a conversation" is "to rattle" or "to blab."

When I moved to the South (thank God), I heard somebody say a thing that has stuck with me so that I think of it every day. "...gettin' ready to get ready," the

man said, in a deep and unmasked drawl. I'm guilty of it: Planning without its essential companion: execution. The art of eloquently getting nothing done.

Talk is the enemy of action. Talk is cheap.

Here's my contribution to the national conversation on gun violence: "Don't shoot anybody unless it's in unavoidable self-defense. And if you do shoot somebody unjustifiably, you're screwed. Legal retribution should be swift and severe."

On cyber security: "There's only one way to guarantee your secrets will always remain so. Never tell them to a single soul. Oh, and if you steal stuff, digital or analog, you're screwed (see excerpt from national conversation on gun violence directly above)."

On immigration: "It's awesome that we live in a place that inspires people to come to it. So please, come... respecting laws that govern the process. If the laws don't reflect majority opinion, change them...but they're not optional, subject to individual whim."

On race: "Treat every person you encounter the way you expect to be treated yourself. Don't pretend you don't see race; but don't let it define your thinking. Give everyone a chance to demonstrate what's in his soul, under his skin. If you harm someone, regardless of his or your hue, you're screwed (as you are if you kill or steal, which we have already addressed)."

"We need to have a conversation." The mantra of men known more for what they say than what they do. Me? I'm just over here trying to ensure we make payroll. We can talk when we both finish our work.

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Scott A. Lauriat

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