There has been a lot of discussion recently about the level of civility in our society. While the news media and the talking heads of cable news networks have relished arguing over social implications, we in the transportation industry might take some lessons from the current contentious climate.

It would be difficult to address this issue without considering the “You lie!” exclamation of Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., during President Obama’s speech on health care last month. Upon reflection, Wilson’s outburst reminded me in several ways of the freight transportation industry of the late 1970s.

The wire service photograph of Wilson in mid-shout shows him surrounded by several of his colleagues. The group shot has been described as “male, pale and stale.” However different it looks today, our industry looked very much like that 30 years ago. With the advent of globalization, transportation and logistics have become industries requiring their participants to embrace ethnic and cultural diversity.

The very act of Wilson’s outburst reminded me of what “acceptable” industry behavior used to look like. I remember when shouting was not uncommon, even in an office environment. For those seeking to rise through field operational ranks, yelling and bullying were often viewed as desirable traits. Labeling someone a “screamer” was not entirely derisive. Happily, natural selection was occurring with some frequency.

In our industry, there’s always been a great need for real-time information. It is no accident that significant communication advances (telegraph and wireless, for example) came through transportation. In one generation, the landline phone has been replaced, as has its implications. A friend of mine recently noted that his job of night trainmaster consisted of sitting by a phone in case someone called. Mobility was often constrained by the need to remain “at a number.”

The advent of technology has changed the terms of civility, just as it changed the means of managing. E-mail forced people to change from a “telex mentality.” Video conferencing brought an end to physical and facial gestures that were unobserved in the days of conference calls.

Modern business culture also has affected the terms of civility. It is interesting to see how the financial turmoil of the past year has changed the way our industry does business. Perhaps no relationship has been more dramatically transformed than that between shipper and carrier.

In a little less than two years, the supply-demand curve has been inverted. Two years ago, many shippers felt rates and conditions were being forced upon them. Much like partisan politics, where the minority has become the majority, some shippers are engaging in practices that would have been unthinkable in 2007. Bid packages that were once annual are now more frequent as shippers enjoy the carriers’ feeding frenzy of rate cuts.

In such tumultuous times, civility is appearing, and disappearing, in some unusual places. Disputes between labor and management have been conspicuously absent. In fact, cooperation has often prevailed. The Teamsters are trying to save YRC. On the waterfront, labor and management have tried to work through issues of mutual concern. Indeed, on the East Coast, there seems to be more discord between factions of the International Longshoremen’s Association than with the employers group.

Conversely, some leaders are concerned about this outbreak of civility. Someone described the industry to me as a game of “Whack a Mole.” Everyone is so afraid of doing something appearing uncivilized — exposing their head (or job) to being whacked — that they have avoided any subject that might be the least bit controversial. Tough decisions are skirted because frank discussions are considered risky. Nobody wants a career-ending performance.

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For inspiration, perhaps our industry needs to look beyond politics to sports. The last two teams to win three straight World Series were the 1972-1974 Oakland Athletics and 1998-2000 New York Yankees. Both teams were characterized by internal conflict, often uncivil. But teamwork, balance and initiative served as the foundation for high performance. No doubt, the same will prove true for our industry.