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Republicans Have the Best Bullies



By Marty Kaplan



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It's too soon to know how badly Donald Trump damaged himself by belittling John McCain's war record in Iowa on July 18. After all, George W. Bush wasn't hurt in the 2000 South Carolina primary when his operatives rumored that McCain had an illegitimate black child, nor was W hurt in the 2004 election when his Swift Boat surrogates defamed John Kerry's war record, nor was McCain's campaign for the 2008 Republican nomination derailed by his own reputation as a bully and hothead.

Trump himself has until now been helped, not harmed, by insulting his GOP rivals as losers, clowns, dummies and lightweights. But his McCain slam gives other candidates an opening to mime indignation. For them, it can't come a moment too soon, because Trump was on the verge of owning the machismo brand.

My fantasy: Trump's rise must have infuriated Chris Christie, who thought he had a lock on schoolyard bullying. It must have pissed off Ted Cruz, who'd been planning to step on Rick Perry's glasses. Until Trump announced, Scott Walker was spoiling to steal Jeb Bush's milk money, the way Antonin Scalia dunked Anthony Kennedy's head in the toilet for siding with the liberal kids on gay marriage. Rand Paul was ready to rip Marco Rubio a new one; Mike Huckabee was fixing to send Lindsey Graham to the fainting couch; Rick Santorum, Bobby Jindal and Ben Carson were jostling to pull Hillary Clinton's pigtales.

But then along came The Donald — the king of contempt, the tower of testosterone — surging in the polls, sucking the media oxygen from the room and making the rest of the pack eat his exhaust. Gang way, Gingrich and Giuliani, look who's the meanest dog in the junkyard now. Move over, Dick Cheney, the billionaire is the one who carries the biggest stick. Don't believe me? Go ahead — measure my money.

Why don't Democrats do mean? Barack Obama does more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger. (So, wisely, did McCain on MSNBC's *Morning Joe* on July 20.) Bill Clinton does sly country lawyer. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren do a righteous don't-tread-on-me, but they're too brainy to credibly simulate know-nothing rage. New York governor Andrew Cuomo may today be as close as his party gets to a bad boy, but he's more of a blind-quote backstabber than a proudly public pit bull.

The bully gap extends to the commentariat, too. Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, Joe Scarborough and Bill Kristol are world-class taunters. Laura Ingraham, Ann Coulter, Sarah Palin and Rush Limbaugh can bluster with the best of them. But who on the left gives a really wicked wedgie? James Carville is pretty much out there on his own.

To be sure, Trump has been trolled for years by MSNBC host Lawrence O'Donnell. (Disclosure: I like O'Donnell.) No way, O'Donnell kept insisting, was Trump making the megabucks he claimed NBC was paying him for "The Apprentice." But last week, Trump called his bluff, betting O'Donnell a year's wages that he really did have a huge, massive, bulging, really big salary. O'Donnell folded. "I like him," he said. Real bullies don't do contrition; they double down.

But now that Trump is widely believed to have gone too far, maybe the whole bully shtick is at risk. Trump's rivals' piling on means they acknowledge that a line called "too far" actually exists, and Donald Trump crossed it. Things could get interesting if the notion gets around that there's a norm for civil discourse, and that it's good for us.

I wonder: When ads sliming Walker's competitors fill primary state airwaves, as they inevitably will, will the candidates who called foul on Trump call foul on the Koch brothers, whose money will have paid for them? When Graham's rivals whisper that he's a closet case, will any of the chicken hawks who sprang to McCain's defense last weekend have the cojones to denounce homophobia?

Democrats and Republicans have been called the "Mommy Party" and "Daddy Party" since the early 1990s. The Mommy Party's problem is that to win elections, it usually has to appeal to Daddy voters, too. What keeps them loyal to Daddy? He's strong. Mommy voters want to be loved, but they also want Daddy to protect them. Bullying is deployed and understood as a proxy for Daddy's strength.

But I can't hear "Daddy Party" without thinking of Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy":

*Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.*

Fascist may be going too far for what I'm talking about. But the upside of bullying — the boot in the face, which is the default choice of Daddy Party discourse — is that it's a winning tactic for brutes. They say they're just telling it like it is, but what they're really doing is trash-talking each other's junk.

The media love this; every camera adores a war. Calls for cooler rhetoric — Reince Priebus on line 2, Mr. Trump — have been haplessly ineffectual. Today, the other candidates are saying that Trump crossed a line, but they'll all be back on the demagoguery trail before you can say Ted Nugent.

Our political commons has become a middle school playground and a place to put on freak shows. Much of public discourse is dispiritingly putrid. How does that strengthen America? Maybe it's not so bad if bullies on the Mommy Party's bench are scarce.

Right now, 4.67 billion miles from Iowa, the New Horizons spacecraft is sending us pictures of Pluto. It took 15 years to fund, design, construct, launch and get it there. The collective genius required for that to happen, not to mention for enabling most people on the planet to hold a photo of Pluto in their hands, is a miracle. We are capable of achingly beautiful things. So why do we tolerate — why do we *reward* — a politics that fouls the nest our Founders gave us?

This is a cross-post of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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