

Reject Name Calling, but not Naming and Calling Out

It escalated over three years ago, in the Republican primary race for President – name-calling found a prominent place in our public life. You-know-who was the chief practitioner. His nicknames for his primary opponents were verbally abusive. Whatever grain of truth some of them may have had, they were mean mis-characterizations of their intended victims that would have been more truthful if applied to the one who spoke them.

Such name-calling degraded the political process and evoked revulsion, but it also incited others to follow suit. As a people we have been trying to come to terms with this name-calling ever since. Should it be reported? Should it be repeated? How should we speak of those in public life whose words, behavior, and official actions are considered objectionable if not downright pathological?

I think an important distinction is in order, one that it took most mainstream media too long to figure out, and one that remains difficult to keep clearly in mind. That distinction is between what is a form of character assassination, and is thus essentially abusive speech, and what is a serious attempt to denote and define the nature of the person whose character is found to be objectionable precisely on account of his or her words and actions.

An obvious case in point was the mainstream media's long reluctance to call Donald Trump a liar and a racist. Many might still think that doing so is name-calling. But if it is done as part of an argument to clarify and define who he is, what he stands for, and what actions he can be held accountable for, then Trump is clearly both. A person who lies constantly is a liar. He may even be a pathological liar – there's certainly abundant evidence for that. A person who speaks and acts in ways that seriously denigrate, abuse, and disadvantage persons whose racial identity differs from his or her own is a racist. This is information that people need to know and understand in order to make informed judgments about what is going on.

Some time ago I came to the conclusion that Trump is a sociopath. Sociopaths lack empathy and conscience, and there's ample evidence that is true of him. He does not admit mistakes. Whatever he does he claims is great. And, need I add, his actions consistently fit a pattern of self-aggrandizement and self-enrichment.

The man also fits other unflattering descriptions: narcissist, demagogue, misogynist, bully, huckster, to name a few. To call him these things is not name-calling. It's just calling it like it is, providing descriptive terms to help make sense of the sort of person he has shown himself to be.

For the health of our democratic process, we must elevate the conversation to the point that we reject name-calling as a political weapon. But that doesn't mean description of a person's character is off limits. There's an old saw that if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck. So it is with Trump. No need to call him names. Just call him what he has revealed about himself to all who are paying attention.

There's another saying that goes like this: Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me. It's well past time for all Americans to stop being fooled, and to stop fooling themselves. We have as our highest elected official a man who is entirely unfit for his office or any position of public service. It's time for him to be effectively rendered impotent.

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