

In Trump's America, the Conversation Turns Ugly and Angry, Starting at the Top

By Peter Baker and Katie Rogers
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White House Memo



The politics of rage that animated President Trump's political rise now dominate the national conversation. Doug Mills/The New York Times

WASHINGTON — President Trump has railed against undocumented immigrants in recent days, branding many of them [“murderers and thieves”](#) who want to [“infest our country.”](#) Not long ago, he referred to them as [“animals,”](#) although he insisted he meant only those who join a violent gang.

The president's unpresidential language has become the standard for some on his team. This week his former campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, made a mocking noise, [“womp womp,”](#) when a liberal strategist raised the case of a 10-year-old girl with Down syndrome separated from her parents at the border.

Mr. Trump's coarse discourse increasingly seems to inspire opponents to respond with vituperative words of their own. Whether it be Robert De Niro's [four-letter condemnation](#) at the Tony Awards or a congressional intern who [shouted the same word](#) at Mr. Trump when he visited the Capitol this week, the president has

generated so much anger among his foes that some are crossing boundaries that he himself shattered long ago.

The politics of rage that animated Mr. Trump's political rise now dominate the national conversation, as demonstrated repeatedly during the debate over his "zero tolerance" immigration policy that separated children from parents apprehended at the border.

"Unfortunately, we've seen a decline in civility and an uptick in incivility," said Christine Porath, a Georgetown University professor and author of "Mastering Civility," a book on behavior in the workplace. "It seems like people are not only reciprocating, but we tend to stoop lower rather than higher. It's really putting us in an unfortunate place."

Ms. Porath said the current harsh climate was affecting people beyond politics, injecting itself into everyday life at home and work. "We know that incivility is contagious," she said. "It's like a bug or virus. It's not only when people experience incivility, it's when they see or read about it."

Mr. Trump's descriptions of those trying to enter the country illegally have been so sharp that critics say they dehumanize people and lump together millions of migrants with the small minority that are violent. This approach traces back to the day Mr. Trump first announced his campaign for president in 2015, when he labeled many Mexican immigrants as "[rapists](#)," a portrayal that drew furious protests.



Mr. Trump's coarse discourse increasingly seems to inspire opponents to respond with vituperative words of their own, as Robert De Niro did at the Tony Awards this month. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Mr. Trump recalled that controversy just this week and doubled down on it. "Remember I made that speech and I was badly criticized? 'Oh, it's so terrible, what he said,' " he said with derision [during a speech](#) to the National Federation of Independent Business on Tuesday. "Turned out I was 100 percent right. That's why I got elected."

Indeed, the lesson that Mr. Trump took from his nastier-than-thou campaign was that the more outrageous he was, the more incendiary his rhetoric, the more attention he drew and the more votes he received. Any expectation that he would put the harsh language aside to become more of a moral leader as president has proved illusory.

He has made insults the core of his presidential messaging. He has called Canada's prime minister "weak & dishonest." He has called journalists, lawmakers and political opponents "wacky," "crazy," "goofy," "mentally deranged," "psycho," "sleazy" and "corrupt." He has called some of his own appointees and Republican allies "very bad," "VERY weak," "failed" and "lightweight."

Returning incivility with incivility has not always worked out well for his opponents. When Senators Marco Rubio of Florida and Ted Cruz of Texas tried it during the Republican primaries in 2016, it backfired.

"Only Trump can get away with being Trump," said Jennifer Mercieca, an associate professor at Texas A&M University who has studied his language closely over the last three years.

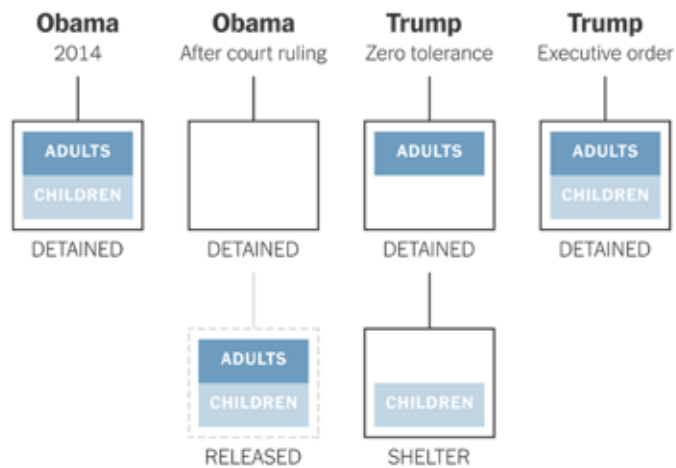
"Any time that other people have tried to use ad hominem attacks or swear or whatever, it rings false," she said. "And other politicians tend to have more shame, so when they're criticized they fold. And as you know, Trump doesn't do that. And so because he refuses to be shamed, he can get away with sort of saying anything."

The emotional exchanges that feel so raw online play out in person too. Outside an arena in Duluth, Minn., where the president was speaking on Wednesday night, protesters waved signs that said "My Grandpa Didn't Fight Nazis for This" and "Liar. Racist. Fascist. Sociopath. Twitter Troll. Idiot."

How Trump's Policy Change Separated Migrant Children From Their Parents

The steps taken once families are apprehended by agents at the United States-Mexico border, and how adults and children are processed differently.

June 20, 2018



Supporters of the president responded with their own messaging. “Hillary Clinton Killed My Friends,” read a man’s T-shirt outside the rally, without explanation.

Gary Payne, who teaches sociology at Central Lakes College in Brainerd, Minn., said that he opposed the president, his policies and also the trading of crude insults on both sides.

“People are looking for the simplest signals to go by,” Mr. Payne said as he stood outside the arena after trying unsuccessfully to attend the rally. “People pay more attention to demeanor than they do to policy.”

Harsh discourse in American politics did not begin with Mr. Trump, of course. Ugly language goes back to the fractious days of John Adams versus Thomas Jefferson through the years before the Civil War and eventually to the McCarthy era and Vietnam. But rarely has the president himself set the tone from the top in the way Mr. Trump does. When President George Bush called his challenger Bill Clinton a “bozo” in 1992, it was seen as unpresidential.

Mr. Trump’s presidency has driven some of those who oppose him to extremes of their own. Kathy Griffin, the comedian, [was fired](#) after posing for a picture in which she seemed to be holding Mr. Trump’s decapitated head. Samantha Bee, another comic, [apologized for using a crude term](#) to describe Ivanka Trump.

“WE SHOULD RIP BARRON TRUMP FROM HIS MOTHER’S ARMS AND PUT HIM IN A CAGE WITH PEDOPHILES AND SEE IF MOTHER WILL WILL STAND UP AGAINST” Mr. Trump, [the actor Peter Fonda wrote on Twitter](#), also using a vulgar term to describe the president. Mr. Fonda later deleted the tweet and apologized: “I went way too far. It was wrong and I should not have done it.”

Such responses do not always go over well. “Donald Trump is a dilemma to his political opponents,” said Whit Ayres, a Republican strategist. “It’s very easy for his political opponents to try to meet him on his level, and that usually backfires on his opponents.”



Corey Lewandowski, Mr. Trump’s former campaign manager, made a mocking noise during a TV appearance when a liberal activist raised the case of a 10-year-old girl with Down syndrome who was separated from her parents at the border. Erin Schaff for The New York Times

Some liberals bristle at the idea that they should hold back in the face of what they consider an inhumane or authoritarian presidency. Jessica Valenti, a columnist for Guardian U.S. and the author of multiple books on feminism, politics and culture, said restraint played into Mr. Trump’s hands.

“Expecting those of us who are scared and angry over what our country is becoming to speak with civility is absurd — civility died the day Trump took office,” [she wrote](#). “It’s like telling a woman to smile as she’s being sexually harassed on the street: We’re not just supposed to put up with injustice, we’re meant to be cheerful through it, as well.”

One of the most sensitive debates generated by Mr. Trump’s family separation policy was the question of when Nazi comparisons are appropriate. When Michael V. Hayden, the former C.I.A. director under President George W. Bush, [posted a picture](#) of a concentration camp and wrote, “Other governments have separated

mothers and children,” it prompted an [exchange on CNN](#) with Wolf Blitzer, who noted that his relatives were murdered in the Holocaust.

“They were killed, so when you make the comparison to Auschwitz, that’s such a powerful image and you understand the criticism you’re getting for that,” he told Mr. Hayden. “As bad as this policy is, it’s certainly not Auschwitz.”

“I fully understand,” Mr. Hayden replied, “and if that offended anyone, they have my deepest and most sincere apology.” He added that the blessings of a free society should not be taken for granted. “I knew it would be controversial, but I felt a warning flare was necessary.”

Two Holocaust survivors, however, posted a [video testimonial](#) this week talking about the impact of being separated from their parents. “Let’s be clear: We are not comparing what is happening today to the Holocaust,” they said in a statement. “But forcibly separating children from their parents is an act of cruelty under all circumstances.”

Jonathan Greenblatt, the chief executive of the Anti-Defamation League, said on Wednesday that everyone “should be extremely careful” with Holocaust comparisons but that “there are disturbing parallels that have touched a nerve.”

“Let’s not spend time drawing comparisons,” he added. “Instead, we should focus all of our energy fighting for a more moral set of policies today.”

Peter Baker reported from Washington, and Katie Rogers from Duluth, Minn. Maggie Haberman contributed reporting from New York.

Follow Peter Baker on Twitter: [@peterbakernyt](#).

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