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COLUMNIST

Politics and the Degradation of the English Language

By Carl Golden | August 24, 2020, 11:36 am | in Columnist (<https://www.insidernj.com/category/columnist/>)



It's been said that politics is war without live ammunition — an apt comparison.

Confrontations have ranged from skirmishes without mass casualties to nuclear missile exchanges. Hand to hand combat is rare and most often left to campaign advisers to spare the candidate the potential public indignity of being knocked senseless.

All metaphorically, of course.

The climate, though, has shifted, not necessarily for the better, and certainly not in favor of the more uplifting.

The nation has entered a political environment more suitable for kindergartners in a sandbox. Juvenile, sophomoric taunting has become the weapon of choice for campaigns intent on highlighting the flaws and shortcomings of the opposition.

It is a tactic raised to an art form by President Trump in the 2016 Republican primary contests when he hung derogatory nicknames on his competitors in his best sticks and stones style.

Remember low energy Jeb (Bush)? Or Lyin' Ted (Cruz)? Or Little Marco (Rubio)? He didn't spare Democrats, either: Crooked Hillary, Mini Mike (Bloomberg), Crazy Nancy (Pelosi), Low IQ Maxine (Waters), Pocahontas (Elizabeth Warren), and Shifty Schiff (Adam).

And, now of course, Sleepy Joe (Biden).

All are meant to ridicule and demean others based on physical characteristics, backgrounds or perceived reputations.

Such rhetoric naturally begets similar responses.

Speaker Pelosi characterized Trump as "morbidly obese," while terms like Nazi, fascist, racist, bigot, traitor etc., have come into common usage when criticizing the president's words and deeds.

It's routine now to swap allegations of mental deficiencies in language more often heard in post-midnight barroom arguments.

There is occasional bite back. Recall Hillary Clinton's characterization of Trump supporters as "a basket of deplorables," an over the line remark which proved costly because it insulted a large segment of Americans rather than directed toward the candidate.

The hosts of cable news talk shows trade bon mots with their pundit guests — journalists, academics, activists, etc. — to bemoan the coarseness of the civic dialogue before quickly diving up to their necks into the mud they purport to find so distressing. Hypocrisy abounds.

The participants in these electronic group grope sessions congratulate one another for their cleverness and eagerly join in in a sort of "can you top this" rivalry. They strive for chuckles and belly laughs at the expense of those with whom they disagree, coming across as wannabe standup comics at open mic night.

Derision and ridicule have muscled aside debate and reflection. In speeches and interviews, the drafters of a candidate's remarks place a premium on sprinkling what passes for witty repartee throughout, hoping to strike paydirt and their scintillating commentary will lead the ensuing news coverage.

Going viral or trending have become ends in themselves. The greater the shock value, the greater the outrage the greater the odds of scoring social media for global consumption.

Policy differences are not subjected to objective or in-depth scrutiny and a vision for the future barely rates a mention. Even the presidential debates are dominated by a competition for the most memorable one line retorts while a complicit media keeps a tally and declares a winner — not which candidate triumphs in a contest over policy issues but who delivered the most cutting zinger.

Both parties gleefully romp through this environment, either out of a conviction that voters will be singularly impressed by their rhetorical agility or because it masks an inability to deal with the more complex tasks of policy and governance.

Who, after all, wants to recite a white paper on climate change when it's simpler and less intellectually taxing to utter a 10-word send up of the opposition.

Even at a time when the nation is in the lethal grip of the deadliest public health crisis in a century, critics cannot resist the temptation to go low in denunciations of those dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak.

Trump has been called the grim reaper blamed for the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans while New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy has been denounced as “King Phil” and “his imperial majesty” for his executive actions to combat the spread of the pandemic.

Largely missing is a serious and sober debate over how best to protect Americans and what can and should be done differently to accomplish that goal.

Sarcasm and mockery, of course, have been embedded in American political discourse since the dawn of the Republic, happily engaged in by both parties and will never vanish entirely.

Much of it, when delivered in the proper context, can actually illustrate a larger and more serious point. In a polarized and deeply divided nation, however, they've often gone beyond acceptable boundaries, overshadowed thoughtful discussion and contributed to a poisonous atmosphere where virtually anything goes.

A thick skin is essential for anyone in public life or contemplating it, but it shouldn't be the only qualification.

It is anticipated — and with good reason — that the presidential campaign this year will set a new high — or low — for viciousness. Social media will become a wasteland of lowbrow personal attacks in unprecedented frequency and each one more devastating and insulting than the last.

At its conclusion, the winner — Trump or Biden — will emerge so bloodied and damaged that unifying government and healing the nation may prove nearly impossible.

At the same time, the American people may be so repelled by what they've seen become of their democracy they may rise up and demand better of their candidates.

When I was in elementary school (admittedly a good many years ago), the most stinging taunt one could fling against another classmate went: “Aww, your mother wears Army boots!”

It was essentially pointless, calculated solely to embarrass and denigrate — however temporarily — the enemy of the moment. It's an eerie thought, indeed, that we haven't progressed much further.

Ideally, we prefer to regard our political establishment, government leaders and opinion makers as adults. They are — at least chronologically — and it's time to leave the schoolyard and start acting like it.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

(Visited 42 times, 42 visits today)