

Sticks and Stones: Words Matter
Posted On: December 31, 1969

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me." This saying was aimed at children, to arm them against verbal bullies. It is also linked to our First Amendment, freedom of speech, even when people say things that we hate, but protect their right to say them.

Such freedom, however, ends with speech that can endanger life: falsely crying "fire" in a crowded theater, or urging riot in the public square. "Let's go kill the aristocrats" during the French Revolution, pogroms against Jews, lynching of Blacks and Chinese, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," all part of the history of France, Russia, Germany, and the United States. In American law, there is no protection for such words.

Words do matter, and in particular, the words of leaders, who set examples, matter a great deal. We are living with a president who has a relationship with words that challenges every institution that we thought the norm. The mainstream press has wrestled with the use of words since Donald Trump ran for office and won the seat. Those reporting the news have had to face word-use that is unusual, to say the least. The following is the guide book to Trump-talk:

Lies. Reporters had a dilemma: how to characterize statements made by Trump and his entourage that were glaringly false. When the presidential candidate claims that the then President Obama was not born in Hawaii, but was somehow born in Kenya (a false "birther" conspiracy he adopted), how is this reported? When Trump with a straight face confides that "nobody Obama went to college with knew him; we need to see his transcripts," how does one report this when it is on the record that Obama was editor of the Harvard Law Review (an honor given to the best of the best)?

The lying has become a daily exercise of both the President and his supporters. His first Press Secretary was forced to confirm Trump's lie about the "greatest crowd ever" attending his inaugural, despite press photos comparing crowd sizes of Obama's and Trump's Inaugural ceremonies. We watch the President making things up every time he talks, without shame when caught. One of his defenders, Kellyanne Conley even invented a term to cover lies: "alternate facts," rich fodder for late-night comics but horror for reporters trying to get the news right.

Highly respected. Other Trumpisms: people he nominates for office are always "highly respected." It is apparent that an oil and coal lobbyist to head the Environmental Protection Agency is not "highly respected," except by oil and coal interests. Trump's horrific statements about immigrants (rapists and criminals), Black people (coming from shit-hole countries), neo-Nazis marching in Charlottesville attacking demonstrators ("fine people on both sides") are justified in his use of words because "many people agree." We are never told who these "many people" are, but can see them at Trump's rallies, and from White extremist spokesmen, who, of course, agree.

Racist and Racism. This term, now describing the President's words, is a real problem for the press. Who is a racist? Theoretically a racist is a person who believes human variations in skin color, facial features (noses, lips, or eyes) are also imbued with traits of character and behavior. The idea is that variations are significant enough to render groups of people "inferior" or "superior." White Supremacists enthusiastically support Trump, who has publicly acknowledged his bias for Norwegian immigrants, not the dark ones he is trying to cut off. The trouble is Norwegians, unlike the others, are not fleeing persecution. His rallies never shout "send them back" about Norwegians.

The Press has finally caught up with reality. Editorial pages across the country are now using such terms as "lies," "racist Tweets," and "bigotry," which they have avoided for more than a century. "Sexism" is another term now used when Trump shows open scorn for women, particularly women of color (two biases in one). He demeans anybody who cross him.

Replace "sticks and stones" with "call a spade a spade." Our values depend on it.

678 words

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