

# Is Donald Trump a bully or bold protector? That depends on whom you ask | Arlie Hochschild

It's said that to every man with a hammer, the world looks like a nail. So it is, too, that to every bully, a conflict looks like a brawl, a debate looks like a shouting match and even a pandemic an occasion to "bully" the truth. And so it has proved with the president of the United States.

As children, I would guess that *both* [Donald Trump](#) and Joe Biden were bullied, Trump by his demanding father and Biden by schoolmates for his stutter. If so, the two have dealt with their shared challenge in nearly opposite ways, with great consequences for the people each has become and for the nation faced with a choice between them.

Most polls suggest that Biden will win the election, although none has really probed the effect of bullying in the recent TV debate – Trump's doing it or Biden's inadequate handling of it; nor the effect of Trump's bluster since. But with the citizenry so stressed – by Covid-19, job losses, fires, floods, urban unrest and more – it's important to ask what voters are looking for in a leader. Do some Americans actually *want* a bully?

Many studies have shown that Republicans yearn for a "strong leader", a "fighter", and this may make them hesitant to condemn bullying. I came to know Sharon Galicia, a lively single mum and medical insurance saleswoman from Louisiana, while researching my 2016 book about the American right, *Strangers in Their Own Land*. "The man liberals see as an arrogant bully," she told me, "conservatives see as Rocky Balboa."

Many good-hearted blue-collar voters with American flag decals on their

pickups tune into Trump on a frequency that secular liberals cannot hear. Where most liberals hear bullying, Trump supporters hear: "I'm your guy. I do all I do for you and I deliver." Where liberals hear an interrupter, many conservatives hear, when Trump speaks: "My enemies – the deep state, whistleblowers, impeachment-seekers, the mainstream media, the Democrats, Covid-19 critics – bully me. I suffer for you. Stand by me as I bully back."

To bully someone is to seek to harm, intimidate or coerce another who's perceived as vulnerable. As the National Center Against Bullying elaborates, there are many types of bullying. Reviewing them, we, especially liberals, can recall times when Trump has exemplified nearly all of them. There is physical bullying – tripping, kicking, hitting; remember his calls in 2016 to oust Black Lives Matter demonstrators in the "old-fashioned way" (with a show of fist in palm). There is verbal bullying – name-calling (Sleepy Joe, Crooked Hillary, Little Mario). There is mockery by imitation. Recall his laughing imitation of a disabled reporter, palsied arms and hands shaking. Then there is social bullying – showing contempt for someone's social reputation (think of the Gold Star parents, Khizr and Ghazala Khan, ridiculed for the silence of the grieving mother).

The wider consequences of this approach are huge. The way Trump works is to promote violence and then pose as the law-and-order answer to that violence. In the near absence of any other ways of managing social unrest arising from the death of George Floyd, and a steady refusal to disavow armed white supremacists, he has been "fanning the flames of hate", in Biden's words, and "recklessly encouraging violence" in Oregon and Michigan (where extremists plotted to kidnap the governor). "Stand back and stand by," [Trump told the Proud Boys](#), a militant far-right group, a phrase it soon emblazoned on its logo. Trump thus helps bring on the storm, then hands out Trump-branded umbrellas.

When he ominously declares that the only fair election is one in which he himself wins, many fear that he plans to bully his way into a second term even while talking freely of a third. So, many now ask where the bullying stops and what it might take to stop it.

With Biden, where do we look for evidence of strength to combat the president? As a child, he recalls when his father lost his job, money got tight and he was sent to live with grandparents. When his first wife and 13-month-old daughter died in a car accident, and, much later, his grown son Beau died of brain cancer, a steely but not-unfeeling resilience showed through again. Now that America is enduring a series of hits to its health, economy and soul, it may be just such resilience we need.

But beyond resilience, a good leader also needs to be able to face and admit the existence of a national threat, as Biden has done. Although early in declaring himself a commander in the war on Covid-19, Trump did not fully face or tell his troops when or how the "enemy" was arriving. He said it might disappear "like magic". He spoke before maskless crowds, routinely refused to wear one himself and, in one of his 128 debate interruptions, mocked Biden for the size of his mask. He encouraged citizens to flout their (Democratic) governors' orders about precautions, as if there were no enemy at hand and as if it were a sissy thing to imagine that one existed. He issued too few boots and guns and, indeed, aimed his own fire at medical advisers.

In short, and to continue with the martial imagery, Trump told troops to leave the battlefield while missiles whistled through the air. And some have recently hit home. Twenty lawmakers and 120 Capitol Hill workers, including 40 members of the US Capitol police, have been diagnosed with Covid-19. One staff member for a Republican congressman has died of Covid. But as if bullying did the trick, Trump stands by his statement to the American people:

"Don't be afraid of Covid."

As the nation faces the enormous challenges ahead – jobs, climate change, automation, racial justice, drug addiction, Covid-19 – the truth is that the bully's hammer causes many more problems than it solves. Bullies do not solve such problems. Leaders do.

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