

TOXIC MASCULINITY

Ken Olson

In a tribe of baboons, male dominance is everything; there can be only one Alpha, and bloody fights decide. In America, we are supposed to be beyond that, since we are all “created equal.” Apparently not. Trump sees himself as top dog, the first and foremost strutter, and he has throngs of supporters in that. His glowering two-fisted image is hanging on huge banners on the supposedly independent Justice Building, and that image will be on a US coin and his signature on currency. All of this is so Stalinesque and KGB-like as to be laughable, were it not actually happening, but it is.

Jesus said blessed are the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the humble. Where is that spirit of human decency in this administration? Instead, it is this idea of male dominance symbolized by the iron fist: “We’re tough, so sit down and shut up.” In fact, Trump said just that to a reporter who simply asked a question: “Shut up, Piggy.” He’s not even sure that domestic violence should be considered a crime.

The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, ruling from 161-180 AD, was a Stoic philosopher who thought a great deal about human nature. He writes in his Meditations: “What is my relation to others? That we are made for one another. Or, in a different view, that I was made to be set over them, as a ram over a flock or a bull over a herd?” He personified the first view. Trump, small-minded and over-compensating weak man that he is, has chosen the second and says, “I run the world” and “Sometimes you need a dictator.” (Yes, he said that.)

Trump’s favorite president is Andrew Jackson, whose image is on our \$20 bill, often posing with that portrait in the background. Jackson cultivated his own domineering image, having challenged 101 men to duels and killed one. He is remembered mostly for forcing Native American tribes in the SE states in the 1830s to walk to western reservations on “The Trail of Tears” that killed nearly 20,000. Is this why DJT considers him a strongman pal from another age?

Again, what is on display is an adoration of power and strength --toxic masculinity. Far right politics, MAGA and so-called Christian nationalism (often the same thing), are saturated with the idea that male kindness is weakness and brute power is patriotism. But strength and courage by themselves are meaningless (WWII fascists fought to the death to enslave the entire world). It is the cause that determines what is or is not noble. Now, we have Hegseth, a Rambo-like the Secretary, not of Defense but of War, with his Crusader body-tattoos from the Middle Ages and dogmatism that would have been at home in the Spanish Inquisition –or in Hitler’s Germany. During WWII, The Fuhrer’s master architect Albert Speer was busy redesigning Berlin, wherein nothing would be about beauty but everything about brute strength. In addition to gigantic swastikas and eagles, there would be also statues of exaggerated and emotionless men bearing a close resemblance to

Arnold Schwarzenegger's character in *The Terminator*. Hegseth's vaunted image of the military as ruthless killing machines is not original, and it is unamerican.

For those of you who didn't see it: our president recently threatened to destroy "an entire civilization," saying, "Tuesday will be Power Plant Day, and Bridge Day, all wrapped up in one, in Iran. There will be nothing like it!!! Open the F***** Strait, you crazy b*****s, or you'll be living in Hell - JUST WATCH! Praise be to Allah ...Time is running out—48 hours before all Hell will reign down on them. Glory be to GOD! President DONALD J. TRUMP." -- Sounding like another Ayatollah or Kim Jung Un turning our cities into "lakes of fire." Giving glory to God for mass death? This is rubber-room stuff. Top military leaders must have cringed, and even some of Trump's most groveling enablers, like Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson, spoke out ...finally. And religious leaders must.

In all this, the degradation of the English language itself is playing a part, as masses of people seem incapable of reasoned discourse, substituting instead what is euphemistically called "strong language." We think in words: we are not thinking when mindlessly parroting slogans or obscenities. In today's movie scripts, most of the hard work of expressing the wide range of human emotions has been replaced—often in every second sentence-- by simply plugging in the F-word to mean "whatever." But the image of violent rape clings to such terms. Why do we tolerate that? (And why are women, also, increasingly infected with potty-mouth?) Today, a baby's first words might be not ma-ma or da-da but F-U. I doubt that what we once meant by culture, or even society, can continue in this heartless, vulgar vein, because it is antithetical even to rationality.

There are thousands of examples of authentic strength and courage. John Glenn, rocketing into first earth-orbit. Alexei Navalny, the Russian who was poisoned and then killed in prison for opposing Putin. Marie Curie discovered the eerily glowing element radium and continued to work with it until it destroyed her. Robert Louis Stevenson, seriously ill for much of his life, refused to let the medicine cabinet define him and kept on writing *Treasure Island* and other tales. And those who worked tirelessly to get women the right to vote. All sorts of such strong people.

In his famous NPR radio shows, Garrison Keillor told funny but ironic stories about Lake Wobegon, the small town in Minnesota, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good lookin,' and all the children are above average." Right now, in this time of toxic masculinity, how many could even get the point?

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