

The Opinion Pages | **CAMPAIGN STOPS**

## Burning Down the House

Timothy Egan    OCT. 14, 2016

A wounded bear is a dangerous thing. Detested and defeated, Donald Trump is now in a tear-the-country-down rage. Day after day, he rips at the last remaining threads of decency holding this nation together. His opponent is the devil, he says — *hate her with all your heart*. Forget about the rule of law. *Lock her up!*

He's made America vile. He's got angel-voiced children yelling "bitch" and flipping the bird at rallies. He's got young athletes chanting "build a wall" at Latino kids on the other side. He's made it O.K. to bully and fat-shame. He's normalized perversion, bragging about how an aging man with his sense of entitlement can walk in on naked women.

Here's his lesson for young minds: If you're rich and boorish enough, you can get away with anything. Get away with sexual assault. Get away with not paying taxes. Get away with never telling the truth. Get away with flirting with treason. Get away with stiffing people who work for you, while you take yours. Get away with mocking the disabled, veterans and families of war heroes.

You know this by now — all the sordid details. For much of the last year, the Republican presidential nominee has been a freak show, an oh-my-God spectacle. He opens his mouth, our cellphones blow up. But now, in the final days of a horrid campaign, an unshackled Trump is more national threat than punch line. He's determined to cause lasting

damage.

Is there one sector of society he has yet to maul? Until this week, it was the denial wing of his own party, those “leaders” who looked the other way while their leader walked all over the Constitution.

But those who take pleasure in watching Trump destroy the Republican Party are missing the bigger picture. He’s trying to destroy the country, as well. Civility, always a tenuous thing, cannot be quickly restored in a society that has learned to hate in public, at full throttle.

Trump has made compassion suspect. Don’t reach out to starving refugees — they’re killers in disguise. Don’t give to a charity that won’t reward you in some way. Don’t pay taxes that build roads and offer relief to those washed away in a hurricane. That’s a sucker’s game. We’re not all in this together. Taxes are for stupid people.

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Every sexual predator now has a defender at the top of the Republican ticket. The most remarkable thing about last Sunday’s debate was Anderson Cooper having to school a 70-year-old man on workplace taboos that most of us learn on our first job.

“You described kissing women without consent, grabbing their genitals,” said Cooper. “That is sexual assault. You bragged that you have sexually assaulted women. Do you

understand that?”

What you heard was the lecture the human resources director gives just before saying, “You’re fired.” Trump could not get hired at the drive-through window at a Jack in the Box. Knowing about his history would make any employer liable. It took decades to get the workplace to that point where Trumpian predators are shunned. Given the biggest pulpit in the world, Trump is trying to bring that consensus down.

He calls it locker room talk. The locker room has pushed back, resoundingly. Let’s call it what it is — the workplace. And as Trump told Howard Stern in 2005, when he bragged about his voyeur intrusions into backstage beauty pageants, “I sort of get away with things like that.” He made a similar comment — the blueprint for his actions — in the 2005 television tape that has blown up in his face. If he can do it, any creep outside of the celebrity bubble should be able to get away with the same thing.

He’s destroyed whatever moral standing leading Christian conservatives had — starting with Mike Pence. Their selective piety is not teachable. Take solace in one of the small acts of courage breaking out in recent days: a group of students at Liberty University telling their Trump-supporting president, Jerry Falwell Jr., to practice what the school preaches.

Trump is “actively promoting the very things that we Christians ought to oppose,” the students wrote. These young people, at least, are smart enough to see what Trump is doing to their world.

It will take many people like those students, and like the first lady, Michelle Obama, a model of decency and class, to repair the awful damage Trump has done.

In a powerful speech Thursday, the nation’s most respected public figure scorned the “hurtful, hateful language” of Trump and its effect on children: “The shameful comments about our bodies. The disrespect of our ambitions and intellect. The belief that you can do anything to a woman. It’s cruel. It’s frightening.”

So it has come to this: The core lessons that bind a civilized society are in play in the last days of this election. We long for family dinners where Trump no longer intrudes, for tailgate parties where football is all that matters, for normalcy. Remember those days? They may be gone forever.

I invite you to follow me on Twitter (@nytegan).

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