

DANGEROUS



CROOKED



SCOUNDRELS

INSULTING THE PRESIDENT,
FROM WASHINGTON TO TRUMP

By *EDWIN L. BATTISTELLA*

Dangerous Crooked Scoundrels

Dangerous Crooked Scoundrels

*Insulting the President, from
Washington to Trump*

EDWIN L. BATTISTELLA

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress
ISBN 978-0-19-005090-0

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

Contents

ONE	Insults and Politics	1
TWO	Founders, 1788–1824	17
	Old Muttonhead	
	(George Washington, 1789–1797)	19
	His Rotundity (John Adams, 1797–1801)	23
	Bad Ware (Thomas Jefferson, 1801–1809)	25
	Little Jemmy (James Madison, 1809–1817)	30
	A Tool of the French	
	(James Monroe, 1817–1825)	33
THREE	The Rise of the Common Man, 1824–1860	39
	The Corrupt Bargainer	
	(John Quincy Adams, 1825–1829)	39
	A Man of Violent Temper	
	(Andrew Jackson, 1829–1837)	42
	The Little Magician	
	(Martin Van Buren, 1837–1841)	45
	A Clodhopper (William Henry Harrison, 1841)	47
	His Accidency (John Tyler, 1841–1845)	50
	The Dark Horse (James K. Polk, 1845–1849)	52
	Old Rough and Ready	
	(Zachary Taylor, 1849–1850)	55

	The American Louis Philippe (Millard Fillmore, 1850–1853)	57
	The Hero of Many a Well-Fought Bottle (Franklin Pierce, 1853–1857)	59
	Old Buck (James Buchanan, 1857–1861)	62
FOUR	A Nation Remade, 1860–1900	67
	A Slang-Whanging Stump Speaker (Abraham Lincoln, 1861–1865)	67
	Judas Johnson (Andrew Johnson, 1865–1869)	72
	Useless Grant (Ulysses S. Grant, 1869–1877)	75
	His Fraudulency (Rutherford B. Hayes, 1877–1881)	78
	The Chief of the Conspirators (James A. Garfield, 1881)	80
	The Gentleman Boss (Chester A. Arthur, 1881–1885)	83
	The Stuffed Prophet (Grover Cleveland, 1885–1889 and 1893–1897)	86
	The Human Iceberg (Benjamin Harrison, 1889–1893)	89
	A Sad Jellyfish (William McKinley, 1897–1901)	91
FIVE	The Modern Presidency, 1900–1945	95
	That Damned Cowboy (Theodore Roosevelt, 1901–1909)	95
	Smiling Bill (William Howard Taft, 1909–1913)	98
	A Trained Elocutionist (Woodrow Wilson, 1913–1921)	100
	A Man of Limited Talents from a Small Town (Warren G. Harding, 1921–1923)	104
	Silent Cal (Calvin Coolidge, 1923–1929)	107

Wonder Boy (Herbert Hoover, 1929–1933)	109
A Kind of Amiable Boy Scout (Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933–1945)	112
SIX A World Power, 1945–1980	119
A Vulgar Little Babbitt (Harry S. Truman, 1945–1953)	119
A Dime-store New Dealer (Dwight Eisenhower, 1953–1961)	122
A Little Scrawny Fellow with Rickets (John F. Kennedy, 1961–1963)	126
The B Is for . . . (Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–1969)	128
Tricky Dick (Richard Nixon, 1969–1974)	131
A Ford, Not a Lincoln (Gerald Ford, 1974–1977)	134
Mr. Peanut (Jimmy Carter, 1977–1981)	137
SEVEN Culture Wars, 1980–2018	141
The Grinning Gallant (Ronald Reagan, 1981–1989)	142
The Wimp Factor (George H. W. Bush, 1989–1993)	144
Slick Willy (Bill Clinton, 1993–2001)	148
Shrub (George W. Bush, 2001–2009)	151
Barack Who? (Barack Obama, 2009–2017)	153
Reality Show (Donald Trump, 2017–)	156
<i>A Catalog of Presidential Insults</i>	163
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	175
<i>Sources and Bibliography</i>	177
<i>Index</i>	213



Insults and Politics

When I was growing up, trading insults was part of making your way through middle school: “If they put your brain on the edge of a razor blade, it would look like a BB rolling down a four-lane highway.” “His parents had to put a pork chop around his neck to get the dog to play with him.” “If you could teach him to stand still, you could use him for a doorstep.” It was word-play, imagery, and linguistic sparring—a show for an adolescent audience.

Later, I learned about Shakespearean insults (“Thy tongue outvenoms all the worms of Nile”), along with those of Winston Churchill (said to have described his Labour Party rival Clement Atlee as “a modest man, who has much to be modest about”). I also learned about Oscar Wilde (who said of Henry James that he “writes fiction as if it were a painful duty”) and Dorothy Parker (who described the novice actress Katharine Hepburn, appearing in *The Lake*, as running “the gamut of emotions from A to B”).

I learned about the Celtic and Germanic traditions of flyting, which involve ritualized insult. In the Norse *Lokasenna* (*Loki's Wrangling*), the god of mischief trades insults with the other gods one by one. Loki tells Bragi, the god of poetry, “In thy seat art thou

bold, not so are thy deeds, Bragi, adorning of benches!” Flying was a stylized battle of wits, what we might think of as a medieval rap battle. Contemporary hip-hop treats us to similar lyrics, such as Lupe Fiasco’s “I’m flying on Pegasus, you flying on a pheasant,” and many more.

Wit and aesthetics can be part of an insult, but that is not always the case. An insult is ultimately an attack. The word itself, by way of French, is related to the Latin verb *insultāre*, meaning “to leap upon.” In its earliest English occurrences in the sixteenth century, *insult* meant scornful boasting—what today we might call trash talking. By the early seventeenth century, the word was used in the modern sense: to assail another with contempt.

As the seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth and the thirteen North American colonies became the new United States of America, political rivals employed insults with abandon. The practice has never ceased, and this book surveys more than five hundred presidential insults from the span of US history, painting a picture of the ways in which our chief executives have been verbally attacked in their times, how they have responded, and what we can learn from it all. Today’s political scene may seem to be an age of unfettered hostility, with insults regularly flying at—and most recently from—the occupant of the White House. We live in a time when presidents are called morons (a term applied to George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump) and much worse. But politics has been a rough game for a long time; our earliest presidents were attacked as “pusillanimous,” “dastardly,” and “contemptible.”

The prototypical insult is speech or action that expresses contempt or derision. It can be a gesture: the middle finger or the cuckold sign (formed by extending the index and little fingers).

It can be a drawing, such as Garry Trudeau's depictions of Bill Clinton as a waffle and George W. Bush as an asterisk under an empty cowboy hat. It can be a single phrase or even just a word (usually a noun such as *buffoon*, *fascist*, *dotard*, or *cretin*). It can be an assertion (such as Salmon P. Chase's observation that "Grant is a man of vile habits, and of no ideas"), a harsh description (Joseph P. Kennedy's characterization of Franklin Roosevelt as a "crippled son-of-a-bitch"), or something more oblique (Lyndon Johnson's observation that Gerald Ford "played too much football with his helmet off").

First, however, I include some comments about how insults—political insults specifically—work as a genre of verbal behavior.

Disrespect Is in the Eye of the Beholder

An insult is different from a criticism. You might be critical of a public figure—of anyone really—without insulting that person. When Tennessee senator Bob Corker said, "The president has not yet been able to demonstrate the stability, nor some of the competence that he needs to demonstrate in order to be successful," he was critiquing Donald Trump, not insulting him. Trump may have been offended by Corker's remarks, but being offended is different from being insulted. The intention to disrespect or demean is key to insulting someone.

Of course, intentions are often in the eye of the beholder, so the distinction between being insulted and feeling insulted tends to get blurry and to blur the distinction between critique and insult. But not always; a few months later, when Corker referred to the White House as an "adult day-care center," the intention to insult was clear.

Setting, tone, and harshness of language often separate an insult from a criticism or disagreement. A political adversary may dispute a claim in any number of ways, but the person who shouts “You lie!” in the middle of a speech is delivering an insult. That’s what South Carolina representative Joe Wilson did when Barack Obama was giving his 2009 State of the Union Address. Wilson’s breach of decorum—in effect calling the president a liar—was condemned by members of both parties, and he apologized for his “lack of civility.” Wilson was denouncing the president by interrupting with a public condemnation. Not every rebuke or condemnation counts as an insult, but Wilson’s shouting, interrupting, and disrespectful language made the comment an insult, not simply an expression of disagreement. The vehemence and tone of Wilson’s “You lie!” established an intent and turned the rebuke into an insult.

Intent also allows neutral terms to be perceived as insults, especially when there is an audience prepared to take them that way. We see this with the repositioning of words such as *liberal*, *feminist*, *evangelical*, and *corporate* as terms of abuse. This is the case also with so-called racial and ethnic dog whistles, coded characterizations that play to prejudices. When former senator Bob Kerrey referred to candidate “Barack Hussein Obama” and said that he liked the fact that “his father was a Muslim and that his paternal grandmother is a Muslim,” he was ostensibly making a neutral or even positive observation. But in the context of rumors that Obama was a secret Muslim planning to bring jihad to the United States, the comment was a dog whistle. Kerrey later wrote to Obama, explaining, “I answered a question about your qualifications to be president in a way that has been interpreted as a backhanded insult of you.”

Sometimes just a well-placed adverb can be enough to craft an insult. You may recall the exchange between Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama at a 2008 New Hampshire debate. When the moderator asked Clinton why people found Obama more likable, she responded with a joke. “Well, that hurts my feelings,” she said. “He’s very likable. I agree with that. I don’t think I’m that bad.” Candidate Obama interjected, “You’re likable enough, Hillary.” The word “enough,” coupled with Obama’s deadpan delivery, turned the comment into a jibe.

Even a simple party label can be turned around. In the 1960 presidential election, after Richard Nixon had called John F. Kennedy an “economic ignoramus” and a “Pied Piper,” Kennedy quipped, “I just confine myself to calling him a Republican, but he says that is getting low.”

Intent can also turn an apparent insult into something less. Nixon once described Dwight Eisenhower as “more complex and devious than most people realized.” He said he meant it as a compliment. And Douglas MacArthur referred to Harry Truman as a “little bastard.” In context, though, MacArthur’s comment was part insult and part compliment: “You know, he is a man of raw courage and guts—the little bastard honestly believes he is a patriot.”

A Slap in the Face or a Knife in the Back

Insults are often calculated to mock, shame, and anger a target, but also to create a memorable impression for an audience. Attention to parallelism, imagery, rhythm, and sound can make an audience chuckle and the person insulted squirm; examples are “a cheese-paring of a man,” “a chameleon on plaid,” “a blighted burr,” “wish-washy, namby-pamby,” and “a flip-flopper.”

As public language, political insults create or reinforce negative perceptions (or misperceptions), such as when John Quincy Adams was called a “pimp” or Franklin Roosevelt “a Communist.” Since insults seek to harm, shame, and provoke without evoking sympathy, excessively harsh insults can be seen as unfair, such as calling someone a traitor, invoking a comparison to Hitler, or referring to someone as “dyslexic to the point of near-illiteracy,” as Christopher Hitchens once described George W. Bush.

Insults may also serve as a means of establishing social or rhetorical dominance, as in the case of flyting, battle rap, or middle school wordplay. The person making an insult challenges the self-worth of the target and symbolically asserts the right to judge. And sometimes insults serve a therapeutic function, expressing anger or frustration and letting another person know just how you feel at a particular moment. When Senator Bob Dole called George H. W. Bush a “fucking Nazi” after being excluded from a 1980 debate, his angry comment combined an insult—the characterizing of his fellow war veteran as a Nazi—with an expression of rage—the adjective *fucking*.

Part of the context of an insult is the way in which it is delivered. Insults can be made in person, for example on a debate stage. But more often political insults occur as public statements in the media, at rallies, or at conventions. They may be intended as a slap in the face, such as when Thomas Paine wrote an open letter to President George Washington calling him “treacherous” and much more. Insults may be intended to whip up the crowd, such as Donald Trump’s reference to “Crooked Hillary” at rallies during the 2016 campaign. Some insults are intended as zingers: laugh lines not intended to be taken seriously but designed to be repeated by the media, for example, Patrick Buchanan’s 1992

comment that “Bill Clinton’s foreign policy experience is pretty much confined to having had breakfast once at the International House of Pancakes.” Some insults require a trip to the dictionary. When Teddy Roosevelt called Woodrow Wilson “a Byzantine logothete,” journalists had to look up the word to find out that the logothetes of Byzantium were auditors of accounts—literally, accountants.

While many insults appear in speeches, editorials, endorsements, and campaign literature, still others may be public-private communications: quiet, cutting remarks to a confidant intended to make their way into the history books. A few insults are private remarks inadvertently made public, as was the case with Thomas Jefferson’s 1795 letter to his friend Philip Mazzei in which he spoke poorly of Washington and Adams. Mazzei shared the letter with others, and it ended up in newspapers, much to Jefferson’s embarrassment.

Recurring Themes

The method of conveying presidential insults has changed over the centuries, from using party-funded newspapers to partisan cable news and radio, from private letters to emails, from pamphlets and tavern talk to posts and tweets. Through it all, presidential insults show recurring themes, including too little intellect or too much, inconsistency or obstinacy, worthlessness, weakness, dishonesty, personality flaws, sexual impropriety, and appearance. The semantic categories called out in insults suggest what is hurtful culturally, and insults reveal society’s changing prejudices and enduring ones as well. How we insult presidents tells us about the presidents, but it also tells us about the American nation’s anxieties and aspirations.

From the characterizations of John Adams as “hermaphroditic” and Martin Van Buren as “womanish” to George H. W. Bush as a “wimp” and Barack Obama as “a pussy,” homophobic insults about gender seem to be pervasive. Race and origin are recurring themes. References to lying and hypocrisy are common, sometimes citing character flaws and sometimes political expediency. We find fakes, fakers, and fakirs; the Janus-faced; confidence men; phonies; pettifoggers; mountebanks; charlatans; quacks; and chameleons.

Along with being called liars, presidents have been characterized as weak-willed nonentities. There have been cyphers, tools, dupes, errand boys, frontmen, stooges, and a marionette show’s worth of puppets. One was called “a human smudge.” Another was referred to as “a flubdub with a streak of the second-rate and the common in him,” and still another as “a triumph of lowest-common-denominator politics.” Many presidents have been called traitors to their principles and some have been called traitors to their country as well. There have been bullies and clowns, despots, demagogues, and usurpers, radicals and racists, drunkards and cowards. The animal world too is a rich source of characterizations, with a veritable menagerie of hyenas, fat old bulls and stalled oxes, sad jellyfish and angleworms, crows, curs, lapdogs, reptiles, gorillas, baboons, and monkeys. Such uncomplimentary animal metaphors dehumanize presidents while simultaneously caricaturing them.

Linguistic Types and Rhetorical Functions

Insults come in a range of linguistic types and rhetorical functions. Some involve just a word, such as National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft’s characterization of Richard Nixon as a “shit.” The lone expletive does all the work.

Often, however, an insult is intensified by modifiers. It can be a matter of simple repetition, as in publisher William Loeb's characterization of candidate Eugene McCarthy as "a skunk's skunk's skunk." However, intensification is most often implemented with descriptive adjectives before the noun. Calling someone a "dictator" or a "tyrant" can be taken as an insult, but referring to a "lawless dictator" or a "besotted tyrant" makes the intention more specific and has more impact. The more adjectives, it seems, the more intensification: Republican Barry Goldwater referred to Richard Nixon as a "two-fisted, four-square liar." To simply call Nixon a liar would be one thing, but the "two-fisted" and "four-square" provide a verbal (and arithmetical) intensification. Harry Truman called Nixon a liar too, but he shifted the characterization to the adjective position, calling Nixon "a no good lying bastard," packing three separate insults into just a few words.

Multiple adjectives can be used to reinforce an impression, piling on related negatives, such as the description of Benjamin Harrison as "a cold-blooded, narrow-minded, prejudiced, obstinate, timid old psalm-singing Indianapolis politician." At other times, the adjectives go every which way, creating a verbal flurry, such as when candidate Bill Clinton was dubbed "a draft-dodging, pro-gay greenhorn, married to a radical feminist."

Such complex phrasings allow insults to be linked together, casting a wide net. Generalities may be tied to specifics, facts to interpretation: calling George H. W. Bush "a Pekingese curled around the ankles of China's tyrants" links his previous ambassadorship and internationalism (specifics) with the image of an approval-seeking pet (a general, dismissive characterization). The naming of the species Pekingese provides additional reinforcement and a touch of snark. Parallelism too can play a role

in intensification: Hunter S. Thompson's reference to Richard Nixon as "a swine of a man and a jabbering dupe of a president" differentiates the person ("a swine") and the job performance ("a dupe"). Thompson is able to double up the invective and double down on the insult.

Insults are often intensified using comparisons. Whig congressman Davy Crockett ("the King of the Wild Frontier") called Martin Van Buren "secret, sly, selfish, cold, calculating, distrustful, [and] treacherous," but he finished off that particular insult with the comparison that Van Buren was "as different from Jackson as dung from diamonds."

Comparisons draw on linguistic frames, such as "X is no more than a _____," "X has no more backbone [brains, etc.] than a _____," "X is worse than _____," and "If X was a _____, he would be _____." Framing can be implied as well and can allow a speaker to deliver an insult as a mini-story; Lyndon Johnson's speechwriter, Harry McPherson, described John F. Kennedy as "the enviably attractive nephew who sings an Irish ballad for the company, and then winsomely disappears before the table-clearing and dishwashing begin." The story lets the listener enjoy a moment of discovery when the insult becomes apparent.

Comparisons need not be that complex; they may simply invoke a known reference point, such as Ronald Reagan being called "Herbert Hoover with a smile." Such minimally framed comparisons again allow listeners to infer the insults and unravel the puzzle.

Double meaning and irony have roles as well. Lincoln was called a "presidential pigmy," which had a different impact than the same characterization of diminutive James Madison. Dwight Eisenhower referred to John F. Kennedy as the "young genius,"

suggesting that perhaps he was not the latter. Serendipity and rhyme are factors: the J of Johnson allowed both Lyndon and Andrew to become “Judas Johnson.” We find the evocative Martin Van Ruin, Fainting Frank Pierce, Dishonest Abe Lincoln, Useless Grant, Rutherford Hayes, Tricky Dick Nixon, and Slick Willy Clinton. Other insulting names are less memorable: General Mum, Grandfather’s Hat, President Caligula.

Freshness is helpful as well. An insult can be memorable when a vivid metaphor or image is created, such as when Herbert Hoover was called a “spineless cactus.” The phrase is a semi-oxymoron, invoking both feckless prickliness and the ineptness of a cactus without needles. Theodore Roosevelt relied on parallelism of meaning when he referred to Benjamin Harrison as “the little gray man in the White House.” The white of White House provides a contrast that makes poor, gray Harrison seem even dingier. Insults can be mean-spirited, crude, and simple, but in many cases they exhibit the characteristics of poetry: freshness, metaphor, rhyme, and imagery. And like poetry, insults can be a joy to observe and to create, a form of crafted wordplay evoking emotion, appreciation, and insight.

Our Freedom to Insult

It is a common, and very human, response to be stung by insults. Yet presidents and politicians recognize that being insulted is part of their profession. Almost all presidents brood in private about the insults aimed at them. George Washington complained about press “outrages on common decency.” Richard Nixon kept an enemies list. Grover Cleveland responded to one satirical article with the comment: “I don’t think that there ever was a time when newspaper lying was so general and so mean as at present.”

All presidents may share Cleveland's view, but many bear insults gracefully and stoically, and a few even respond with wit and humor. John Tyler reacted to the Whig Manifesto kicking him out of that party with a note to its author, a novelist, telling him that he should stick to writing "romances." Gerald Ford tried to co-opt *Saturday Night Live* by allowing his press secretary to host the show and even had himself taped saying the opening catchphrase, "Live from New York . . . It's *Saturday Night*."

Some presidents can't resist returning insults with invective of their own. When a friendly Southern crowd shouted that Andrew Johnson's critics should be hanged, he responded, "Why not hang them?" Johnson's comments were entered as evidence in his impeachment trial.

Not all presidents suggest the gallows, but many strike back verbally: Henry Adams was called a "little emasculated mass of inanities," Westbrook Pegler was a "rat" and a "guttersnipe," and Joseph Alsop was "the lowest form of animal life on the planet." Some presidents have even responded to insults with legal action. Teddy Roosevelt had William Randolph Hearst's to Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* prosecuted for libel. Roosevelt lost. More than a century earlier, critics of John Adams were jailed under the short-lived Alien and Sedition Acts, and Thomas Jefferson's allies indicted the publisher of the *New York Wasp* for libel. Today, Donald Trump characterizes reporting he does not like as "fake news" and has called the mainstream press "enemies of the people."

Part of the genius of American democracy—both in our legal system and in our politics—is that citizens can openly insult the president. We enjoy protections of freedom of speech and freedom

of the press that other nations do not, and our freedoms allow us to direct invective at the president with legal impunity.

Our Changing Language

Insults tell us about our presidents. They tell us about our values and our history. And they tell us about our language. While the semantic categories of presidential invective are more stable than not, vocabulary evolves, and terms of abuse come and go. New to the twentieth century were *moron*, *jerk*, *asshole*, and *flip-flopper*. Mostly gone were *apostate*, *mountebank*, *flathead*, *doughface*, *do-tard*, and *hermaphrodite*. Some insults, such as *puzzlewit*, seem to have never caught on. Others, such as *gink*, quickly came and went; Warren Harding called Herbert Hoover “the smartest gink I know,” using a slang term that could, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), simply mean a fellow but might also refer to someone who is “unworldly or socially inept.”

And then there are terms that seem quaint today but were more pointed in their time. On learning that Andrew Jackson hoped that the “old lying scamp” John Quincy Adams would be paralyzed by a stroke, I was puzzled. “Scamp,” to me, had the nuance of an unruly neighbor kid. But in Jackson’s time, I learned, a scamp was “a good-for-nothing, worthless person, a ne’er-do-well, ‘waster.’” Jackson did not see Adams as a modern-day imp, but as a scoundrel.

Words such as *scamp*, together with the iconography of the American Revolution and our reverence for the founders and other historical figures, may mislead us. To many, today’s political climate appears to be uniquely toxic and hate-filled, and we may idealize the past as a more genteel and civil era of classical rhetoric and high-minded debate. Such an idealization would be a grave

error, as we will presently see. Personal insults and political invective go back a long way.

What Is an Insult?

Insults are symbolic expressions—remarks or actions—that treat someone with scornful abuse or contempt.

Insults occur in a wide range of linguistic and extralinguistic types, from single words to narratives and from artful to crude.

Insults are ad hominem attacks, different from mere criticism in that they are directed at someone's character, intelligence, or person.

The language of an insult does not need to be inherently abusive. Its message relies on context, tone, and audience.

Insults occur in a wide range of contexts, from direct personal insults to public attacks to private comments.

