

STOP MAGNIFYING THE FORMER PRESIDENT'S INCITEMENT

After far too many mass shootings, commentators in the US have started to learn that when you immediately circulate the manifestos of mass shooters, you are making further mass shootings more likely. You are according the death wishes and death wish of that mass shooter value. You are often disseminating his (mass shooters are usually men) ideology to others who might be searching for some cobble of beliefs to make their own lives meaningful. And you are contributing to the spectacle of the mass killing, ensuring the focus will be on the horror of the act rather than the tragedy of the lives lost, much less the policies we could pursue to stop the epidemic of mass killing.

We have gotten so well-practiced with mass shootings in the US, we know well enough not to participate in the mass shooter's actions by magnifying his manifesto.

But we don't follow that rule about terrorism-in-process, at least not in the form of the former President's own tweets.

With each new level of outrageousness – most recently in a Tweet inciting violence against the Senate Minority Leader and racism against his spouse – people who applauded Twitter's decision to deplatform the realty TV show host and other forms of violent speech circulate that very same violent speech, often with little more than an expression of outrage to mediate it.



Not only does circulating the former President's speech with no mediation magnify it, just like circulating the manifesto of a mass killer. But it accepts – willfully participates in! – the reality TV show host's structure of power.

Every time one of his tweets goes viral, especially on a platform that has told him his incendiary speech violates the rules of the platform, he says – the actions of those who participate in it say – that the rules don't apply to him. That he remains the center of attention. He remains the center of attention *because* the rules don't apply to him. And that we all remain in the very same positions we did for the four years of his presidency: He commands by commanding attention, including the attention of those for whom our very scolding reinforces his value, because we are the "elite" a demagogue derives his power by opposing.

And because this economy works so well for him, because it is a way to retain his power long after voters acted to take it away, because it's the only trick he's got, he's willing to ratchet up the outrageousness of his speech if that's what he needs to do to remain the center of attention.

This is the same impulse that leads the networks to cover every single rally the former President stages (complicitly hiding the empty seats in the back), while ignoring historical speeches of the man who is, at least on paper, the most powerful man in the world, Joe Biden. If you hate it when the networks make such decisions stop making the equivalent decision yourself.

The former President continues to exercise power not via a rational calculus, not by an argument that he's fit to govern. He failed to deliver on every single one of his campaign promises, and codified racism is the only promise that he consistently pursued. (Mitch McConnell and his White House Counsels, of course, never stopped their relentless efforts to stack the courts.)

The way to neutralize that power is not to

observe, for the 1000th time, “my gosh he has said something outrageous” or even, “my gosh he’s going to get someone killed.”

Besides, he already did that.

If you choose to make the former President’s incitement the center of attention – and many Twitter commentariat are voting with their attention to do just that every day – you choose to make spectacle, emotion, and fear the currency of politics.

So long as he dictates the political agenda through his expert deployment of spectacle, we will never have a rational conversation about politics. We will never get voters to listen when we describe how Rick Scott plans to cut their social security. We will never successfully point out the Republicans who are running on spending they voted against. We barely get voters (older, male voters at least) to listen to what the Sam Alito Court did to women’s autonomy. There is no “better argument” when politics is dominated by spectacle.

The way to neutralize spectacle is not to magnify it. The way to neutralize spectacle is to expose it as such, to help people see the theatricality of it all (and to point out the flimsiness of it along the way).

It’s not a perfect solution, but that’s why I use X-es anytime I screencap a tweet from the former President anymore. It makes it more work to read them, emphasizes that these tweets are stage-managed things, and interrupts the process of an immediate emotional reaction.

Better yet, don’t screen cap him: if you need to refer to something he has done – if he has actually *done something* that has any effect beyond ratcheting up emotion – then describe it without even using his name. Describe *why* he’s attempting to gin up emotion again – in this case, because Mitch McConnell has moved on to doing his job trying to help run the country without the guy who lost. If the country starts functioning quasi-normally again, then people

might realize that the former President benefitted from and therefore encouraged dysfunction, which in turn fed the cycle of distrust in government. McConnell has taken baby steps towards helping the Senate to function normally again, and the former President needs to halt that process before the benefits of a quasi-functioning government become apparent.

The former President may be hoping that he'll lead the Minority Leader to hesitate as he starts acting like a powerful Republican in his own right again, to worry about some crazed MAGA with an arsenal. And yes, the former President might genuinely hope that happens, to show his threats are real. He's undoubtedly hoping his own followers will continue to hate, in this case, Americans of Chinese descent. His power necessitates that Americans hate other Americans, because without that conflict, hate, and fear, their loyalty to him can't be stoked.

The point is, the former President is ratcheting up threats because he can sense his own power, at least over Mitch, melting away.

Don't help him renew that power.