

# New Poetry from Barbara Tramonte: “Tailored To Fit In”



I WAS GATHERED / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Somebody sewed me with a string

On the bias

I was gathered

And about to pop

This has been a pattern all my life

They hemmed me in with notions

Each stitch bringing me

To a false whole

(I longed to slit my wrist)

I jolted with a shock of recognition

To see that I had drifted to the wrong side

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# New Nonfiction from Andria Williams: Reading Joan Didion in August 2019

In the summer of 1968, while starting several of the essays that would comprise her collection *The White Album*, Joan Didion began to suffer from a series of unexplained physical

and emotional ailments. After an attack of “vertigo and nausea,” she underwent a battery of tests at the outpatient psychiatric clinic at St. John’s Hospital in Santa Monica, CA. In *The White Album*’s title essay, she shares some of the professionals’ feedback:

*Patient’s [results]... emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitable to conflict and failure...*

A month later, Didion was named a *Los Angeles Times* “Woman of the Year.” It did not seem to matter to her much. Instead, what she remembers of that year:

*I watched Robert Kennedy’s funeral on a verandah at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and also the first reports from My Lai [in which more than 500 Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, were murdered by American soldiers]. I reread all of George Orwell...[and also] the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, a 26-year-old woman with faded blond hair who put her five-year-old daughter out to die on the center divider of Interstate 5 some miles south of the last Bakersfield exit. The child...[rescued twelve hours later] reported that she had run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for “a long time.” Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew.*

She adds, a few pages later: “By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968.”

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Julian Wasser/Netflix

Hyper-awareness has always been both Joan Didion's secret weapon and her *hamartia*. Circa 1968, being seemingly everywhere at once, observing and recording at an unforgiving pace, there is no way the world could not have felt kaleidoscopic, splintered. In *THE WHITE ALBUM*, she attends The Doors' recording sessions (but not for long), visits Huey Newton in jail and Eldridge Cleaver under house arrest. She analyzes the California Governor's mansion, and the Getty Museum (which she sees as an artistic flub, "a palpable contract between the very rich and the people who distrust them least"); she rhapsodizes about water. The Manson murders, happening just down the street to people like her and the subject of her rumination in the title essay, seem a symptom of this summer of dread.

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That summer, Didion also, improbably, starts watching biker films, a habit she continues over the next two years. "A successful bike movie," she declares, "is a perfect Rorschach of its audience."

*I saw nine of them recently, saw the first one almost by accident and the rest of them with a notebook. I saw Hell's Angels on Wheels and Hell's Angels '69. I saw Run Angel Run and The Glory Stompers and The Losers. I saw The Wild Angels, I saw Violent Angels, I saw The Savage Seven and I saw The Cycle Savages. I was not even sure why I kept going.*

But she does know why she keeps going, and despite the humor of this absurd list and the thought of Joan Didion investing the time to consume it all (did she ever remove her sunglasses?), she begins to wonder what these storylines are giving their audience. "The senseless insouciance of all the characters in a world of routine stompings and casual death

takes on a logic better left unplumbed," she muses.

But then, of course, she plumbs it, and what she observes, given the current political climate, feels almost prescient.

*I suppose I kept going to these movies because there on the screen was some news I was not getting from the New York Times. I began to think I was seeing ideograms of the future...to apprehend the extent to which the toleration of small irritations is no longer a trait much admired in America, the extent to which a nonexistent frustration threshold is not seen as psychopathic but a 'right.'*

I begin to imagine if the heroes of these bike movies had had Twitter. I decide to stop imagining that. They are people, Didion writes in closing, "whose whole lives are an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made. [These people] are, increasingly, everywhere, and their style is that of an entire generation."

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Throughout all these mental roving runs Didion's usual vein of skepticism and aloofness. Danger, for her, is personal, never institutional. It's the threatening man on the street or the hippie at the door with a knife. She's not a revolutionary, not exactly a liberal (though she was one of the first to, in a 17,000-word essay for the *New York Review of Books*, advocate for the innocence of the falsely-accused Central Park Five). Visiting Huey Newton in jail, she mentions that "the small room was hot and the fluorescent light hurt my eyes." A reader can't help but think, at least for an instant, Suck it up, Joan! But mere pages later she's on the campus of San Francisco State, which has been temporarily shut down by race riots, and her shrewd eye sees the truth: "Here at San Francisco State only the black militants could be construed as serious...Meanwhile the white radicals could see themselves, on an investment of virtually nothing, as urban guerrillas."

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Here in the summer of 2019, I can, in at least some minor ways, relate to the dread Joan Didion felt in the summer of '68. Today, it is August 10<sup>th</sup>. On the third of this month, 20 people were killed and 26 others injured by a gunman who walked into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas at ten-thirty in the morning and began firing with a semi-automatic Kalashnikov-style rifle, aiming at anyone he suspected to be Hispanic. Hours later, nine more people were killed and 27 injured in a mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio. The Proud Boys are marching in Portland and the President of the United States has denounced only those who've come out to oppose them. (It should be noted that these are grown men who call themselves "boys," and that is the least alarming thing about them.) A little over a week ago I watched Private First Class Glendon Oakley, a US soldier who had saved several children during the El Paso shooting and wept openly about not having been able to save more, stand at parade rest while the President pointed at him on live television and said, "The whole world knows who you are now, right? So you'll be a movie star, the way you look. That'll be next, right?"

Oakley looked stricken. "Yes, sir," he said.

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Now it's August 13<sup>th</sup> and there is a rally at the police station in downtown Colorado Springs. Ten days prior—the same day as El Paso—nineteen-year-old De'Von Bailey was shot seven times in the back while fleeing Colorado Springs police. I watch the unbearable video, circulating on the local news outlets, taken from an apartment security camera across the street. De'Von Bailey, young, short-haired, skinny as my son, runs across a sweep of pavement just like any you'd see in any suburban town. He doesn't pull a weapon or even turn back to look over his shoulder. Two armed cops enter the frame not far behind

him. Then, he falls, skidding in a seated position, staying briefly upright. For a moment, from this distance, in a still image, he could be merely relaxing, sitting with one arm propped behind him. Then he crumples forward and the police close in, cuffing his hands behind his back before rendering aid. In the hospital, De'Von Bailey dies.

Today, the attorneys for De'Von Bailey's parents are holding a press conference outside the police station downtown. The Pike's Peak Justice and Peace Committee has put out a call for citizens to show their support for the Baileys and their demand for an unbiased investigation. I like the Justice and Peace Committee, a group of tenacious old-timers who sometimes, at unpredictable intervals, convene to hold a giant sign in front of the Air Force Academy that reads, "WHAT ABOUT THE PEACE ACADEMY?" They mostly get yelled at from car windows. They have used the same sign for years; the phone number at the bottom has been whited over and repainted several times; it is canvas, more than five feet tall and probably ten feet long, printed with perfect spacing and propped by two wooden posts, so as to be quickly unrolled and then rolled back together for a quick exit as necessary. I joined them in a protest once, this past April, when Donald Trump spoke at the Air Force Academy commencement. I held one end of their sign. I was the only military spouse there, though there were a couple of long-haired Vietnam-era veterans. A man offered me eight hundred dollars to help pay our rent if my husband would divest from the military. "Just until he can find other work," he said. He said he was helping another service member get out now, a chaplain. This man was incredibly earnest, thin, gray-haired, in jeans and a flannel shirt, with no pains taken over shaving or hygiene; I believed him. I thanked him, knowing full well my husband, an officer, is comfortable in his job and does not want to leave, knowing this man would be disappointed in what that says about us; and he shook my hand and said to call him, the church would help get us out when we were ready. I did not know what church he

meant, but I am sure its people are good.

So if the Justice and Peace Committee wants me to show up for De'Von Bailey's family, I will. I scrawl a hasty sign on a piece of foam core I bought at King Soopers: "NO POLICE BRUTALITY." On an investment of virtually nothing, I drive downtown to the corner of Nevada and Rio Grande to see the street blocked off with traffic cones and police cars, a crowd visible already in front of the brick police station. Parking on a side street, I take my sign and head there on foot, along sidewalks with cracked concrete and sun-bleached grass growing up between the paving. I try to face the words on the sign away from scrutinizing traffic. I pass the bail bonds shop from which Dustin and Justin Brooks, 33-year-old twins, set forth a week prior, wearing bulletproof vests and brandishing their handguns, to confront these same protestors. (Dustin and Justin Brooks are what Joan Didion might call men with an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made.) That was three days after De'Von Bailey's murder. The brothers intimidated the predominantly black gathering until finally being arrested, shouting "All lives matter!" as their hands were pulled behind their backs. Seventeen riot police were dispatched in the skirmish, standing behind plexiglass shields. Hopefully the irony was not lost on anyone that a black boy had been killed for running from police unarmed and two white men could walk around waving handguns and shouting in a crowded area and simply be arrested, off to live another day. If the Dustin-Justin brothers hadn't been shouting, they may not even have been arrested. Colorado is an open-carry state. Who feels safe in an open-carry state varies widely depending upon circumstance. On November 27, 2015, shortly after we moved here, an armed, agitated older white man was seen pacing around outside the CO Springs Planned Parenthood building at 11:30 a.m. Concerned employees and passers-by called the police, but were told there was nothing they could do. "It's an open-carry state," police said. Eight minutes later, the man, 57-year-old Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., burst into

the building, shooting three people dead and wounding nine others. One of the employees killed was a Filipina-born Navy wife, who had enjoyed her new job in the Springs, her husband's duty station. The Planned Parenthood location here has been changed at least three times, and the address is not advertised on their web site.

All this crosses my mind as I walk toward the police station. I do not feel at all in danger, and I know that statistically, I am very safe – far safer in virtually any situation than the other protestors, mostly people of color, gathered on the sloping space of lawn. Still, because of men like Dustin and Justin Brooks and Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., I have left my children at home.

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The rally is peaceful, and sad. Greg Bailey and Delisha Searcy speak about the loss of their son. Their lawyers reiterate a demand for an independent investigation. Young boys hold signs: "Please Let Me Live Past 19." "Hands Up Don't Shoot." Several signs say, "Imagine If It Were Your Son." The black families console one another, embracing. Three black reverends are there. Their mood is markedly sadder than that of the "allies" like myself who have shown up and for whom the event, though attended with the best of intentions, could be described as almost recreational.



Rally for De'Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

A prominent local Unitarian clergywoman – lean, energetic – is there in street clothes and her rainbow stole, wearing sunglasses, her short gray hair spiked. If not for the stole she might be some fitness celebrity, or a badass chef. There's a contingent from Colorado College. A tall, thin young white man holds a sign that says, "JAIL ALL KILLER POLICE." The

Justice and Peace Committee is scattered around (I don't see my military-liberator friend from back in April), but they have (appropriately) left their "Peace Academy" sign at home.

After half an hour or so, as the press conference seems to be wrapping up, the crowd is less quiet, some people whispering to one another. I strain to hear the voice of an obviously distraught black woman who's questioning the Baileys' white attorneys. "How do we know," the woman is asking, "that any investigation will be impartial? How can it possibly be fair?"

(Next to me, three of the "Moms Demand" moms ask a bystander to take their picture. They turn, their blond ponytails swinging, to beam at the camera with the crowd behind them. I feel, almost desperately, that this is not the right time.)



Rally for De'Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

"How will we know it's fair," the woman calls over the crowd, "if the committee is made up of all white men?..." Suddenly her voice catches, and a pause hangs in the air for just an instant. "...White women?"

She sounds so hopeless, so angry, so deservedly frustrated and hurt. I can feel the sharp point of tears gathering in my throat. I report this not so anyone will feel sorry for me but because it happened. I can't hear what response the woman is given. People begin to drift away. It was the last question.

For the rest of the afternoon, I cannot get that moment out of my mind, the way the woman's voice caught, her split second of hesitation before she said "women." Before she said "white women." What was it that gave her pause; was it some vestige of sisterhood-loyalty that she realized no longer applied?

I'd been hoping to briefly throw white men under the bus, let them take the fall. I wanted to huddle in my sense of at-

least-some-shared-experience. It would have eased my discomfort. My discomfort does not need easing. My discomfort is no one else's problem to solve. Anywhere from 47 to 53 percent of white women, depending on whose poll you believe, voted for the current president. 95% of black women did not. When she let the word "women" out, when she let the words "white women" out, it was the tiny slap-in-the-face of realizing the intersectionality you champion may not want you back. I am glad she said it. And for a moment— and I think it's okay to say things we are ashamed of — I'd been hoping, so badly, that she wouldn't.

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That night I chat with my husband about Joan Didion and the late sixties and ask him if he thinks the upheaval we're feeling now is anything like what people must have felt in 1968, when it must have seemed in some ways that the world was ending. He was a history major in college, so he tends to have a good perspective.

"No, not at all," he says almost immediately. "Because think about 1968. Think about the instability. I think it was much worse then. The draft was still going strong. You could basically be called up from your own house and have to go fight a war with no choice at all."

I recall Didion's essay "In the Islands," which I've recently finished, one section of which she spends watching the funeral of a young soldier at the military cemetery in Oahu, in the dip of an extinct volcano crater called Puowaina. He was the 101<sup>st</sup> American killed in Vietnam that week. 1,078 in the first twelve weeks of that year. That essay, however, was written in 1970. Maybe 1968 felt somehow quaint by then. Maybe, by then, people were wishing they could go back.

"And you had Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death, RFK's," my husband is saying.

“And the Civil Rights Act had only been signed four years before,” I add. I have always liked brainstorming.

“Sure. Now I think it’s the onslaught of information, all this instantaneous, inflammatory news, that makes us feel that things are really unstable.”

I think he’s right. This is no summer of 1968. I start to believe that Joan Didion, less threatened by the events of the time than many, but more observant than most, held up pretty well, considering. And over time at least a few of the problems she was experiencing, some attributed to a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and treated with lifelong prescriptions, waned. Others didn’t. She’s not a calm person by nature; she’s anxious; I imagine she cannot turn off her brain. She’s 84 now. She’s survived the loss of her husband and her daughter. I’m not sure how. I do know that ten years after the events she describes in the title essay of *The White Album*, finally completed in 1978, she ends with the admission, “writing has not helped me to see what it means.”

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Even later that night, as she has all summer, my youngest daughter wakes me at exactly three a.m. She appears by my bed in pajama pants and a short-sleeved shirt, clutching her stuffed animal. The animals change nightly. Tonight it is Joey, a seafoam-green sheep. She whispers, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

She does have to go to the bathroom. But more than that, this is her new ritual, exciting for her, a very mildly transgressive foray into the dark of night, in which I stumble groggily behind her and she switches on every light in the house as she goes, Joey under her arm, chatting up a storm. It’s as if the hours of sleep she’s had already have bottled up a torrent of potential communication, and she wants to tell me everything. She had a dream where she was drawing faces on

paper plates. She had a dream that we all got ice cream. She talks and talks, all shaggy red hair and freckles like tiny seeds scattered across her sleep-pinked cheeks; expressive, energetic eyebrows. Her mood is tremendously good. She washes her hands, dripping water even though I say dry them all the way, please, and I switch off lights as I go to tuck her back in. She is perfectly happy to go back to sleep; this was all she needed, this little check-in under the pretense of a bodily function; and so I have made no move to curb this new habit, and in fact almost look forward to it, sometimes waking up just moments before she comes into my room.

As I start to shut her bedroom door she calls out, "I'm excited for tomorrow!"

I turn around, laughing. "Why?!"

She laughs, too. "I don't know!"

I quietly close her door and wander into the kitchen, where there's only one light still on, above the sink. I stand and look at the few dishes and mugs there, then out at the dark, flat yard. There is no way I can go back to sleep, and it does not, now, seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 2019.

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## **Hierarchy and Americans, A Long Love Affair**

We have leaders, in the USA, it's always been that way. I don't believe in some magical, fairyland communal or egalitarian America that was free from hierarchy. The settlers who occupied the land through Siberia and Asia did so in

tribal societies some of which were patriarchies, and some of which were matriarchies. The invading Europeans all arrived from their own feudal or quasi-democratic traditions—they were not free from the assumptions or rules of their parents or grandparents, though they may have loathed them.

The original American settlers – whether the Native Americans or the Europeans – were all people who called someone master, and elevated that person above the rest, for a variety of reasons. They had to, in order to survive.

Even so, after several generations of European immigrants arrived in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and following certain intellectual innovations in political and moral thought in Europe, a choice was made. Many of the colonists decided to create a new system of government, based on the idea that white, male humans all had some inherent dignity apart from their financial responsibilities. While that dignity has often been couched in financial terms, the original statement of human rights—*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*—is idealistic and totally (by luck or design) abstract.

Those white men revolted against their political masters, the kingdom of Great Britain. They fought British soldiers, German mercenaries, and neighbors who disagreed with them. With the help of France, the pro-humanism white supremacist European colonists won, and the United States of America was born.

Since then, people have extrapolated a great many things from that original idea about human dignity—that it should apply to non-white people, and also that it should apply to

women. These notions seem self-evident to most today, but were not at the time. Every one of those social revelations (black humans are entitled to these rights, female humans are entitled to these rights, etc.) depends on a single, overwhelming and revolutionary idea: that government owes something to the people it serves, because it *is* the people it serves.

In the US, we have yet to reach even an approximation of that ideal. One reason behind this inability to think or view government as belonging to the people is that in word and thought, we consistently place ourselves below elected political representatives.

This problem comes down to an infatuation with hierarchy. No single factor—not the electoral college, not gerrymandering, not money in politics—is more dangerous or damaging to democracy than the tolerance for giving titles and honorifics to people who serve as elected or appointed officials in whatever it is we call the American democratic experiment. “Secretary Clinton,” “President Trump,” “Senator Cotton,” “The Honorable Clarence Thomas.” Our use of titles—our enthusiastic desire to label and categorize damns us as authoritarian collaborators, as servile scum to be used and abused at any and every opportunity.

And abuse by the authorities is precisely what happens in America, routinely. Our elected leadership and their political appointees use and harm us. Who can blame them? We tell them that they’re powerful, and that exploitation is okay. Not just okay: good.

If we want to reform our system, the first thing to do is to strip every politician of their title. Him, her, they – the titles must go. In their place, we should mandate that they be addressed using insulting and offensive nicknames, the more humiliating the better, to be used whenever and wherever possible. The potential criticism that this is what Trump did to be elected might be countered by pointing out that now that he has become elected, he would be subjected to precisely the same obligatory disrespect he has encouraged, which seems like something he doesn't like.

More precisely, elected and appointed citizens with political power, for their part – members of Congress, judges, the President, members of the Presidential cabinet—should address every U.S. citizen as “sir” or “ma’am.” They must also say, upon greeting an American citizen: “you’re stronger, smarter, and more beautiful/handsome than I am. Because I am weak and stupid and look like shit, like actual dogshit.” If they fail to say this, it should be legal and necessary to kick them—not too hard, but not soft, either. In the ass—like they are a dog, that has annoyed you. When doing so, you (the citizen) must say something like “I’m kicking you with my foot instead of slapping you because one uses one's foot to kick a dog or some other unclean thing. I don’t want to get my hand filthy by touching you.” Elected representatives should address felons convicted of brutal and appalling crimes as “brother” or “sister.” Nonviolent felons should be addressed as “sir” or “ma’am.”

Elected representatives should be on a similar social plane as felons. If you don’t agree with me, you’re a coward, a fool, a slave, and you’re destroying our democracy.

Why do our elected representatives need titles? What does it do for them? Is it necessary to remind them that they have power, or responsibility? No, that's a silly argument, obviously they have power and responsibility. They know that. What they don't know is that the power and responsibility is totally, completely contingent on their service to citizens. They forget this in the way that they speak to us, in the way that they live, in the influence they wield. They forget this, living in a democratic society, by insisting (institutionally, officially, or personally) that they be addressed by some form of title. That they believe honor or respect is their *due* as a Senator or Cabinet Member.

Absurd, untrue, obscene.

People in the military understand that they serve the country—they swear oaths to the same. They address civilians as “sir” and “ma’am” in part because doing so preserves the essential hierarchy of violence in America—citizens are above soldiers, politically and socially, and should be. In turn, soldiers are given some tangible benefits, while (in most practical terms) being treated like dogs, made to wear silly uniforms, and subjected to the real prospect of a quick death. We can do the same for elected and appointed representatives, but as the consequences are so much greater for the politicians who can do things like declare war or authorize military intervention, those politicians should be treated with accordingly less respect than soldiers.

I say “soldiers” because the proliferation of titles for different types of soldiers—“marines,” “sailors,” airmen” “SEALs” and so forth is more of this servile and appalling, totally inappropriate impulse to set apart and above. If

you're in the military, you're a soldier. People who believe otherwise are willing idiots at best, and dangerous radicals at best, attempting to subvert and destroy democracy. Stop using any word other than "soldier," immediately.

Furthermore, as much as Americans secretly despise soldiers—they do, unarguably, despise them, passionately and secretly, as all great passions are secret passions—soldiers are still offered a measure of public respect. Soldiers offer to die, which is pretty generous of them, considering, so they get monuments and speeches. Politicians never offer to die for their country, although we'd all be better off if most of them did—not offer, die, I mean—so we should give none of the tongue-in-cheek, superficial and almost entirely bogus support we say we give to "the troops" to politicians.

"Shitheel" or "Shit-for-brains" would be a good title for people serving in Congress. "Hey Shit-for-brains Cotton. You really have Shit-for-brains." Whether you agree with Tom Cotton's politics or not (I don't, but that's beside the point), you see the benefit. He remembers that in spite of his representing a constituency, it's everyone's duty to tell him what a total, complete, utter disgrace he is for being in politics. If you don't like my example of Tom Cotton, don't worry, it applies equally to Tammy Duckworth, someone for whom I have a great deal of respect, whose politics are 100% diametrically opposed to Cotton's. Basically, pick someone in Congress today—anyone. It works.

Now, I don't want to peg the title to a specific phrase—"Shit-for-brains" is insulting now, but give it a couple years and people would be trying to make it into a mark of honor or distinction. Really, people in Congress should just be called

whatever you call a drunken, stupid, lying, criminal sack of decrepitude. Today it's "shit-for-brains," but tomorrow it could be something totally different.

The president would have a worse title, because the president has more power than any single congressperson. When addressing Congress, however, the president would obviously say "brothers" or "comrades" or "collectively, my equal."

People who work for Congressmen and Congresswomen, as well as those working for a president's cabinet or the President should not be addressed under any circumstances. They should be ignored, and if anyone hears them speaking, they should be kicked and called a dog, and otherwise belittled. If any of these people acquire prominence simply by working with or for a powerful person—Clinton's aide Huma Abedin comes to mind as an excellent example of this, as do all of Trump's children and Obama's former Chief of Staff, Rahm Emmanuel—they can be kicked on sight. What happens later in their career does not matter, so that Rahm Emmanuel's becoming Mayor of Chicago does not mean he's suddenly immune to being kicked, or having voting-age citizens scream "you shit, you fucking worthless piece of shit, I own you" while kicking him, so close to Emmanuel that spit flies off their mouth and onto his face—no, that just means now he's Mayor of Chicago, but also these earlier bad things are still happening to him.

Caveat: as a politician you can't hit back or say anything while being kicked or screamed at except "I'm sorry, you're right citizen, I'm sorry." And it better fucking sound sincere.

# Some Bullshit Counterarguments, Easily Dismissed

Here are some counterarguments against my wise scheme. Firstly, there could be concern that people elected or appointed to leadership positions would get depressed by getting called bad names or kicked, and do a worse job—especially without any positive reinforcement. I would point out that in the military, especially during training, I and every other soldier in training were subjected to every horrible name one can imagine and worse, and made to know both that we had no right to expect anything, but also that what we were doing was very important. What I saw in training and at the unit level, on a tactical level, was that the very best people did not care about what they were called, and worked very hard to earn the respect of their peers. Only when you got away from that small, personal level, only when you left “the tribe” did things begin to break down, did rank and tabs or awards become more important than actions. In any case, I did not see verbal abuse as dissuading good people from working hard—in fact, it seemed like a stimulant.

Another counterargument could be that using vile language to describe American leadership would encourage citizens to do actual violence to them, or to murder them. This is an excellent point, but not, I think, a counterargument. On the contrary, I believe that if a clever human like Hillary Clinton had been called “Shit-for-brains” or “garbage-taint-scumheart” or whatever else people wanted instead of “Madam Secretary,” it could have helped guide her political evolution in a more productive direction than the trashcan of history, where she and her philosophy have ended up. Ditto Donald Trump, obviously.

In other words, the violence of words would signal in plain language to officials that, in fact, they were, at all times, very close to their end, and that, [like the character of Nick the Greek in Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels](#), they'd have to work very, very hard to avoid that actual (rather than threatened) end.

Another criticism could be that this practice or habit would lead to an increase in violence in society overall, and a desire to use harmful language in general. I don't think this is a valid criticism, because people tend not to enjoy using violence under any circumstances—violence is profoundly unsettling. People who love hierarchy want us to believe that the alternative to hierarchy is violence, but of course that assertion is as hypothetical as the assertion that communism is practical. The requirement to describe elected leadership and their political representatives as “Shit-for-brains” or “Shit-soul” or “Stupid-Fascist-Fuckup-Fucker” would not suddenly result in many people cursing in public all the time. Rather, it would serve as a kind of caution to everyone living in the society: but for the grace of god and hubris, there go I. Furthermore, human decency would protect those elected leaders who truly worked for the people from the worst outrages. Politicians would see that working for the *good* rather than for each other or themselves would result in ameliorated negative interactions. Rather than curse at them in public or in private, citizens would just try to ignore interacting with them in general, so as not to hurt their feelings or stop the good work they were doing. This would only happen with the best of them, though. The sign of a great leader would be that people only grudgingly (rather than enthusiastically) made remarks that in other circumstances would be slanderous about their person and personal lives. Good leaders would be allowed to do their good work.

A final counterargument would be that this situation would dissuade people from getting into politics. I disagree—I think it would dissuade all but the most sturdy people from getting into politics, people who do not depend on titles and honorifics to describe their authority as do our cousins in Europe or Asia or Africa. If you don't mind getting called every horrible, insulting phrase under the sun—if you don't mind hearing your mother and father and sister and brother and wife and children abused in the most horrifying, borderline criminal, graphic detail imaginable, politics shouldn't be for you. If you want someone to address you as "Ambassador such-and-such" or "Secretary so-and-so" or "Mr./Mrs. President," there are many other countries in the world that will accommodate this type of (to my American thinking) nauseating pander: this should not be how we do things in America. Bowing and scraping and elevating the most servile and precious, the most proud among us to positions of leadership—it is below us, individually and collectively.

Let's choose instead to call our elected leadership and their political appointees what they are: shit-for-brains, asshole-grease. Down with hierarchy, up with democracy!