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# These are Fighting Words!

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*As political violence escalates in the United States and chaos spreads, democracy itself is under threat. The words of anger, ill-considered and increasingly crude, are accelerant on the American bonfire.*

When President Donald Trump told his top generals and admirals, "It's a war from within...we're under invasion from within," he assumed the role as Provocateur in Chief.

Back in 1942 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that some words like these, by their very utterance, could shatter the peace by inciting violence. That wise guidance has been ignored by President Trump and many of those he declares his enemies. They are forgetting that violence is a contagion.

After the shooting of the MAGA crusader, Charlie Kirk, in Utah last month, the President boasted that he did not forgive his enemies. He hated them. Very rapidly the war of words escalated.

Toying with the idea of invoking the National Emergencies Act of 1976 or more radically the 1807 Insurrection Act, Trump has displayed an eagerness to deploy the military and National Guard to cities run by the Democrats, *Blue* strongholds including New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Memphis, Chicago and Washington DC. He claimed that Portland, Oregon was "burning down" because of domestic terrorists.

As National Guardsmen from the *Red* State of Texas were despatched to a base outside Chicago, the Provocateur in Chief went further. He demanded that his long-time antagonist, billionaire Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker and Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson be jailed for not doing enough to protect ICE agents as they continue to round up Latino immigrants. These Democrat officials have committed no crime. They vigorously oppose Trump because they fear that he is creating a crisis to utilise the National Guard in Democrat strongholds during next year's midterm elections.

It is not a one-sided war of words. California's Governor Gavin Newsom has trolled Trump relentlessly with mocking AI parodies that pick up where the animated *South Park* series left off.

In their Politics War Room podcast, Democrat veterans James Carville and Al Hunt, deride President Trump as demented, a wannabe King and a hopeless liar.

Trump's vanquished rival in the last presidential contest, Kamala Harris, has her own share of incendiary words about her adversaries. At a Los Angeles event this week billed as a "Day of Unreasonable Conversation" she said, "These motherfuckers are crazy!"

The President's most vociferous defenders, especially Vice President J.D. Vance and Deputy Chief of Staff, Stephen Miller, reply with apocalyptic warnings, rhetorical volleys and infantile memes, meant to prove that the "wicked ideology of the radical-left" is to blame for the darkness of this "American nightmare."

"We will defeat the forces of darkness and evil," Stephen Miller said in his astonishing sermon after Charlie Kirk became a MAGA martyr.

These are all surely *fighting words*, not unlike Trump's extraordinary defiance after Thomas Matthew Crooks narrowly missed assassinating the President at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania on July 13, 2024. The raised fist, the angry blood-smearred face and the cry of "fight, fight" echoes loudly still.

While President Trump wants world attention now on his attempts to end the conflict in Gaza, that storied quest for a Nobel Peace Prize, at home in America his words rattle of vengeance.

Is retribution a consequence of Trump's fury over his 34 felony convictions? Is that why he has the former FBI Director James Comey on trial and threatens to go after others in the judiciary and Congress, anyone who defies his belief that he "owns everything"? Put yourself in his shoes for a moment.

Tellingly, the 79-year-old President has experienced at least four foiled assassination attempts. This would make some leaders more cautious about their words and public appearances.

In 2016 a British 20-year-old, Michael Steven Sandford, tried to grab a police officer's gun to shoot Trump at a rally in Las Vegas, Nevada. In 2017 Gregory Lee Leingang stole a forklift in North Dakota with the plan of trying to ram the then-President's armour-plated vehicle known as 'the Beast'. Just two months after Trump's close shave in Pennsylvania last year, Secret Servicemen captured a rifleman, Ryan Wesley Routh, who had planned an ambush on the President's Florida golf course.

The truth is violence stalks American leaders whether or not they incite mobs with deep grievances or provoke a dangerously disturbed individual.

As a foreign correspondent for over a decade in the United States I reported on the attempted assassinations of Presidents Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan. Covering the White House, I was aware that four sitting Presidents had been assassinated. I came to seriously appreciate that the Secret Service has a very tough job in a nation where so many scores are settled viciously.

The United States was born in a bloody revolution and has never healed after its frontier massacres, the bone-deep poison of slavery and a devastating Civil War causing between 600,000 and 800,000 deaths. The addiction to gun carrying, feuding gangs, conspiratorial cults and extreme religious nationalism is such a toxic mix. What we are witnessing, the heightened danger of a political divide as deep and menacing as the San Andreas Fault, has been a long time in the making.

I used to quip to my traveling cameraman, combat veteran David Brill, "Who is making this movie?" When John Lennon was assassinated, the shooter, Mark Chapman, was obsessed with the Beatle's music. Ronald Reagan's would be assassin, John Hinckley, wanted to prove something to the actress, Jodie Foster. Somehow the American Dream becomes a delusion for angry men. The real America that I discovered journeying through all 50 states was more troubled and troubling than anything Hollywood dreamed up.

This is why the current box-office drawcard, *One Battle After Another*, is certainly a timely reflection of the ongoing orgy of American violence. Leonardo Di Caprio's burnt out radical lefty is pitted against Sean Penn's pitiful para-military thug leading ICE raids to round up hapless immigrants. The battle opens in a cage where 'the illegals' are detained. The radical extremes, the violence of left and right, are grotesquely satirised by director, Paul Thomas Anderson. But you will walk out of this dystopian movie and think it is art imitating life. The nightly news is more disturbing than the movie.

While Donald Trump is Provocateur in Chief, he has spent years assembling a team of veritable haters. Who can forget The War Room podcaster, Steve Bannon, saying that the nation's leading infectious diseases expert leading the fight against COVID, Dr Anthony Fauci, should have his head on a pike, alongside the skull of then FBI Director, Christopher Wray?

On the political left, podcasters such as Hasan Piker, have built massive followings and are not shy using hyperbolic violent rhetoric. Piker recently apologised, admitting that he had said things without thinking, including a rash taunt that a Florida Senator should be killed if people there really cared about Medicare fraud.

After the United Health Care CEO, Brian Thompson, was gunned down in New York, social media was flooded with sympathetic comments about the shooter Luigi Mangione. Too often someone carelessly rants that the victim *deserved it*.

Most Americans have probably forgotten how Fox Television's former notorious shock jock, Bill O'Reilly, regularly taunted Dr George Tiller, with "Tiller the baby killer" before this provider of women's health was murdered. Anti-abortion activists have committed at least 11 murders, 42 bombings, 200 acts of violence and 531 assaults, according to the Southern Poverty Law Centre.

In America's war of words, these grimmest facts are still ignored. The US has the highest number of school shootings in the world with at least 53 this year. Each day some 125 Americans are killed with guns.

Yes, Mr President. Your words are locked and loaded. You *would* say that there is a *war within*. Tragically, it's you and your fellow Americans who are inflicting more damage on your democracy and its place in the world than any of your mortal foreign enemies.

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