

IDEAS

## The Cruelty Is the Point

President Trump and his supporters find community by rejoicing in the suffering of those they hate and fear.

By Adam Serwer



Jonathan Ernst / Reuters

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The Museum of African-American History and Culture is in part a catalog of cruelty. Amid all the stories of perseverance, tragedy, and unlikely triumph are the artifacts of inhumanity and barbarism: the child-size slave shackles, the bright red robes of the wizards of the Ku Klux Klan, the recordings of civil-rights protesters being brutalized by police.

The artifacts that persist in my memory, the way a bright flash does when you close your eyes, are the photographs of lynchings. But it's not the burned, mutilated bodies that stick with me. It's the faces of the white men in the crowd. There's the photo of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Indiana in 1930, in which a white man can be seen grinning at the camera as he tenderly holds the hand of his wife or girlfriend. There's the undated photo from Duluth, Minnesota, in which grinning white men stand next to the mutilated, half-naked bodies of two men lashed to a post in the street—one of the white men is straining to get into the picture, his

smile cutting from ear to ear. There's the photo of a crowd of white men huddled behind the smoldering corpse of a man burned to death; one of them is wearing a smart suit, a fedora hat, and a bright smile.

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Their names have mostly been lost to time. But these grinning men were someone's brother, son, husband, father. They were human beings, people who took immense pleasure in the utter cruelty of torturing others to death—and were so proud of doing so that they posed for photographs with their handiwork, jostling to ensure they caught the eye of the lens, so that the world would know they'd been there. Their cruelty made them feel good, it made them feel proud, it made them feel happy. And it made them feel closer to one another.

The Trump era is such a whirlwind of cruelty that it can be hard to keep track. This week alone, the news broke that the Trump administration was seeking to ethnically cleanse more than 193,000 American children of immigrants whose temporary protected status had been revoked by the administration, that the Department of Homeland Security had lied about creating a database of children that would make it possible to unite them with the families the Trump administration had arbitrarily destroyed, that the White House was considering a blanket ban on visas for Chinese students, and that it would deny visas to the same-sex partners of foreign officials. At a rally in Mississippi, a crowd of Trump supporters cheered as the president mocked Christine Blasey Ford, the psychology professor who has said that Brett Kavanaugh, whom Trump has nominated to a lifetime appointment on the Supreme Court, attempted to rape her when she was a teenager. “Lock her up!” they shouted.

Ford testified to the Senate, utilizing her professional expertise to describe the encounter, that one of the parts of the incident she remembered most was Kavanaugh and his friend Mark Judge laughing at her as Kavanaugh fumbled at her clothing. “Indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter,” Ford said, referring to the part of the brain that processes emotion and memory, “the uproarious laughter between the two,

and their having fun at my expense.” And then at Tuesday’s rally, the president made his supporters laugh at her.

Further reading: The most striking thing about Trump’s mockery of Christine Blasey Ford

Even those who believe that Ford fabricated her account, or was mistaken in its details, can see that the president’s mocking of her testimony renders all sexual-assault survivors collateral damage. Anyone afraid of coming forward, afraid that she would not be believed, can now look to the president to see her fears realized. Once malice is embraced as a virtue, it is impossible to contain.

The cruelty of the Trump administration’s policies, and the ritual rhetorical flaying of his targets before his supporters, are intimately connected. As Lili Loofbourow wrote of the Kavanaugh incident in *Slate*, adolescent male cruelty toward women is a bonding mechanism, a vehicle for intimacy through contempt. The white men in the lynching photos are smiling not merely because of what they have done, but because they have done it together.

We can hear the spectacle of cruel laughter throughout the Trump era. There were the border-patrol agents cracking up at the crying immigrant children separated from their families, and the Trump adviser who delighted white supremacists when he mocked a child with Down syndrome who was separated from her mother. There were the police who laughed uproariously when the president encouraged them to abuse suspects, and the Fox News hosts mocking a survivor of the Pulse Nightclub massacre (and in the process inundating him with threats), the survivors of sexual assault protesting to Senator Jeff Flake, the women who said the president had sexually assaulted them, and the teen survivors of the Parkland school shooting. There was the president mocking Puerto Rican accents shortly after thousands were killed and tens of thousands displaced by Hurricane Maria, the black athletes protesting unjustified killings by the police, the women of the #MeToo movement who have come forward with stories of sexual abuse, and the disabled reporter whose crime was reporting on Trump truthfully. It is not just that the perpetrators of this cruelty enjoy it; it is that they enjoy it with one another. Their shared laughter at the suffering of others is an adhesive that binds them to one another, and to Trump.

Read Adam Serwer on why the white nationalists are winning

Taking joy in that suffering is more human than most would like to admit. Somewhere on the wide spectrum between adolescent teasing and the smiling white men in the lynching photographs are the Trump supporters whose community is built by rejoicing in the anguish of those they see as unlike them, who have found in their shared cruelty an answer to the loneliness and atomization of modern life.

The laughter undergirds the daily spectacle of insincerity, as the president and his

aides pledge fealty to bedrock democratic principles they have no intention of respecting. The president who demanded the execution of five black and Latino teenagers for a crime they didn't commit decrying "false accusations," when his Supreme Court nominee stands accused; his supporters who fancy themselves champions of free speech meet references to Hillary Clinton or a woman whose only crime was coming forward to offer her own story of abuse with screams of "Lock her up!" The political movement that elected a president who wanted to ban immigration by adherents of an entire religion, who encourages police to brutalize suspects, and who has destroyed thousands of immigrant families for violations of the law less serious than those of which he and his coterie stand accused, now laments the state of due process.

This isn't incoherent. It reflects a clear principle: Only the president and his allies, his supporters, and their anointed are entitled to the rights and protections of the law, and if necessary, immunity from it. The rest of us are entitled only to cruelty, by their whim. This is how the powerful have ever kept the powerless divided and in their place, and enriched themselves in the process.

Further reading: I know Brett Kavanaugh, but I wouldn't confirm him

A blockbuster *New York Times* investigation on Tuesday reported that President Trump's wealth was largely inherited through fraudulent schemes, that he became a millionaire while still a child, and that his fortune persists in spite of his fumbling entrepreneurship, not because of it. The stories are not unconnected. The president and his advisers have sought to enrich themselves at taxpayer expense; they have attempted to corrupt federal law-enforcement agencies to protect themselves and their cohorts, and they have exploited the nation's darkest impulses in the pursuit of profit. But their ability to get away with this fraud is tied to cruelty.

Trump's only true skill is the con; his only fundamental belief is that the United States is the birthright of straight, white, Christian men, and his only real, authentic pleasure is in cruelty. It is that cruelty, and the delight it brings them, that binds his most ardent supporters to him, in shared scorn for those they hate and fear: immigrants, black voters, feminists, and treasonous white men who empathize with any of those who would steal their birthright. The president's ability to execute that cruelty through word and deed makes them euphoric. It makes them feel good, it makes them feel proud, it makes them feel happy, it makes them feel united. And as long as he makes them feel that way, they will let him get away with anything, no matter what it costs them.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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