When Trump Trashes McCain, This Is Why We Can't Look Away

By Richard Cherwitz

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In July 2015, candidate Donald Trump told an audience at the Family Leadership Summit in Iowa that John McCain "is not a war hero. He was a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren't captured."

Trump and McCain, who died last August, had carried on a years-long feud, which the President — usually inexplicably — revives periodically. Last weekend he
tweeted derisively about the late senator. And on Tuesday Trump declared, by way of explanation: "I was never a fan of John McCain and I never will be."

One day later the President continued his diatribe against the late senator, who served as a naval aviator in Vietnam and was tortured during his five years as a prisoner of war. Trump said: "I endorsed him at his request, and I gave him the kind of funeral that he wanted, which as President I had to approve. I don't care about this. I didn't get thank you. That's OK. We sent him on the way. But I wasn't a fan of John McCain."

Shortly after these reprehensible comments, McCain's widow, Cindy McCain, received this disgusting tweet from a stranger, which she shared widely: "Your husband was a traitorous piece of warmongering s--- and I'm glad he is dead. Hope your Mrs. Piggy looking daughter chokes to death on the next burger she stuffs down her fat neck, too, c---"

It's time to stop dismissing these kinds of incidents as coincidence — or merely nonsense to be ignored, and not amplified.

As a scholar of political communication who has studied messaging for over 40 years, I believe we too often normalize what Trump says, failing to take seriously the potential impact of his language and its potentially dangerous behavioral consequences.

While it may be impossible to prove that Trump is the direct cause of the tweet received by Cindy McCain about her husband -- or others directed at their daughter Meghan McCain -- how can we ignore the fact that the President's discourse empowers and emboldens despicable people like this to come out of the shadows?

It is more than a cliché to say that hateful language begets hateful language -- and that it ultimately increases the likelihood that people enraged with hate will act. The English philosopher Francis Bacon understood this. "The duty and office of rhetoric is to apply reason to imagination for the better moving of the will," he wrote.

While Trump's hateful discourse may not always -- or ever -- apply cogent reasoning, Bacon's rhetorical principle remains: Words are ultimately about
arousing imagination (or emotion) as a mechanism for influencing behavior ("the will"), whether by intent or effect.

Sadly, only two Republicans in Congress -- Sens. Johnny Isakson of Georgia and Mitt Romney of Utah -- thus far have directly rebuked the President. McCain's longtime friend, Sen. Lindsey Graham, told reporters in South Carolina: "I think the President's comments about Sen. McCain hurt him more than they hurt the legacy of Sen. McCain." But he added "I'm going to try to continue to help the President."

If more elected leaders don't force Trump to stop preaching hate, by refusing to do business with him, approving an official censure or helping to vote him out, we can expect more of these cases of abuse -- not to mention the continued potential for violence. Those who do not stand up and speak out on this matter can only be pegged as enablers and themselves be seen as complicit.

It is fair to ask of me: Is sharing this crude and appalling tweet received by Cindy McCain unacceptable and in bad taste, and does it only keep the Trump message alive, making it potentially more influential?

To that I say, absolutely not!

We all need to see or be reminded about what our President is doing to the country. Looking the other way is not the answer and actually could perpetuate and intensify the problem. Reality is not always pretty, but hiding it makes no sense. Revealing reality, as the ancient Greek term aletheia (from a-lethès, "not hidden") makes clear, is the best antidote to hate. To stay silent is tantamount to giving permission.