In July of 2015, candidate Donald Trump told a national audience: “He [John McCain] is not a war hero. He was a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren’t captured.” On March 19, 2019 President Trump declared: “I was never a fan of John McCain and I never will be.”

Following reprehensible comments by Trump such as these, the late Senator John McCain’s widow, Cindy McCain, received this disgusting Tweet which she shared widely: “Your husband was a traitorous piece of warmongering shit 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, cunt.”

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

For example, Trump’s March 19 rant (and the subsequent message sent to Cindy McCain) is but the most recent example of the hate enabled and incited by his rhetoric. It’s time to stop dismissing these kinds of incidents as merely a coincidence. They are not simply due to chance; while it may be impossible to prove that Trump is the direct cause of the Tweet received by Cindy 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 this ultimately increases the likelihood that people enraged with hate will act. The English philosopher Francis Bacon understood this in his definition of rhetoric as “the application of reason to the imagination for the better moving of the will.” While Trump’s hateful discourse may not always or ever apply cogent reasoning, Bacon’s rhetorical principle remains: words are ultimately about arousing imagination (emotion) as a mechanism for influencing behavior (the will), whether by intent or effect.

Hence, if Republicans don’t force President 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—not to mention the inevitable violence that will follow. 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: 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 and 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.

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