

How Did Trump Make So Many Republican Men His Bitches?

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“We can never again underestimate the political appeal of toxic masculinity. It inspires loyalty like nothing else.” — Kate Manne on Twitter, November 4, 2020

In Trump’s domination and humiliation of his morally gutless male sycophants, we have witnessed a gendered spectacle on the national stage that has broken the country and very nearly destroyed democracy. The swaggering bully who boasted that he could grab women by the pussy with impunity has in fact been grabbing Republican cojones. And he’s been getting away with it because he knows just how to trigger and exploit other men’s fears of being wussy.



Illustration by Erkan Atay

The sexual-political dynamics that have attached Trump's white male toadies to him need to be named for what they are: An epic display of the gender-identity panic that is built into the very social structure of manhood.

The common wisdom among political pundits is that elected Republican lackeys suck up to Trump because they are afraid of alienating his "base" and being primaried out of office. But that's not the whole story. The reason that base exists in the first place is that Trump has played on the racial and gender identity panic of an aggrieved electorate that cannot abide how Black and Brown the country is becoming and that seeks in male supremacy a protectorate for white supremacy. Trump correctly intuited how in America white and male supremacy are conjoined, and his every racist dog whistle and his every belligerent norm-busting have inflamed a cult for whom he embodies untameable great white alpha male. The white men he has mobilized want that conscienceless confidence for themselves. They absorb it from him vicariously, viscerally. He is the apotheosis of who they themselves want to be: an un-PC prick. The white women Trump has mobilized have already cast their lot with such men in self-denigrating denial of those men's misogyny, so they were perfectly primed to tag along.

That's the core psychographic of the constituents that the elected Republicans who obey Trump's bidding do not wish to piss off. It is a base for whom Trump can do no wrong. His reckless irresponsibility, his shameless grift, his bottomless amorality — these are not character flaws, they are features. That is what alpha manhood is and does. Not even Trump's lethal failure to be presidential during a pandemic has shaken the trust of his true believers. And that's because, as Trump has figured out, his cult is fundamentally about aspirational racial and gender identity.

It is an identity that can only exist in derogation, disparagement, derision, and debasement of an *other*. And Trump is a master at it. It's why he spends so much time in his rallies mocking people, putting down opponents with school-yard taunts, riling up the crowd to chant personal invective.

Trump's appeal was never about policies or plans or prosperity. It was about an identity politics of white and male dominance that has been simmering in America for a long, long time and he has brought to a perilous boil.

The elected Republican officials who kowtow to Trump's whims are likely smart enough to realize that there has always been something not right about Trump's pandering to the ultra-right. They may have passed it off as incidental to the vital work they were doing making the rich richer and keeping courts conducive to their capitalism. Or they may not have noticed how far out of hand Trump's identity-driven demagoguery had gotten. But they knew Trump's base would be vindictive if they did not bow to him, and that was largely because he had given racism and the far right a political home.

Still, the craven self-interest in Republican men's cowardice to stand up to Trump cannot be fully explained by their fear of retaliation by Trump's base. What must be called out is Republican men's personal self-interest in not having their manhood humiliated by Trump himself.

It takes a lot of trauma to turn a boy child into a man. He has to be taunted and teased into a feeling of unworthiness if he does not measure up. He has to be upbraided for his insufficient masculinity if he cries or throws like a girl. He has to be taught at every turn that other men's judgment on his manhood shall be the lifetime barometer of his sense of self-worth. So it is that he will harbor painfully buried memories of all the times in his youth he was humiliated into performing manhood. So it is that he will carve out a personal and public life such that his masculinity will always pass muster and withstand any intimidating bluster. So it is that he will do everything in his power not to be put down as a gender fail by a man who's more dominant.

Trump, who had a childhood ridden by such manhood-inculcating abuse, grew up with a compulsion to put down others as losers so as not to be one himself. He learned from his own trauma exactly

how to push other men's gender-panic buttons. He did it unto others so that it could never be done unto him. He bonded with other bullies. He kept his party in tow by periodically hanging hangers-on out to dry and publicly shaming them. He knew exactly how that would restimulate inside his remaining enablers what it felt like in childhood to be traumatized into enacting manhood.

The title of this essay uses a word that can be a derogatory word both for a woman and for a subordinate, weak, or cowardly man. In urban slang, it also connotes menial servility. The misogyny embedded in the term is why it's an insult and why manhood-proving men like to use it so much.

When Republican enablers incur Trump's wrath, he does not literally call them his bitches. But that's the quiet part out loud. They know that's what they are to him unless they swear fealty to him. And this male- and white-supremacist sexual-political dynamic has brought this nation to the brink of unthinkable ruin.

John Stoltenberg, a long-time activist against sexual violence and a radical-feminist philosopher of gender, is the author of [*Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice*](#) and [*The End of Manhood: Parables of Sex and Selfhood*](#) as well many articles and essays. With trans feminist Cristan Williams he contributes regularly to [The Conversations Project](#) about radically inclusive radical feminism. He is also a novelist ([GONERZ](#)), playwright, communications consultant, and theater reviewer in Washington, D.C.