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He revels in the game of dominance and defeat. It's what made him—and could do him in.



Donald Trump rises after being shot in Butler, Pa., July 13, 2024. EVAN VUCCI/ ASSOCIATED PRESS



Trump Never Says 'No' to a Fight, Fight, Fight

DECLARATIONS

By Peggy Noonan

I have been thinking about the assassination attempt on then-presidential candidate Donald Trump in Butler, Pa., last year.

A strange aspect of that day, at least for me and as seen through screens, was the disquieting matter-of-factness with which so many in the crowd accepted the fact of the shooting, and the sight of so many holding up their phones and taking videos as events unfolded.

But I think Butler may loom larger in people's thoughts about Mr. Trump than they realize, in part because of the iconic photos taken that day.

Photographers are, famously, the insufficiently sung soldiers of journalism. They always have to be ready for mayhem and equal to it when it comes. That sure-to-be-boring afternoon rally in western Pennsylvania produced a masterpiece cluster.

Evan Vucci of the Associated Press took the most famous image of the day—Mr. Trump triumphant, blood on his face and fist raised,

surrounded by Secret Service agents positioned to take a bullet if it came. Doug Mills of the New York Times had the almost-miraculous shot of the bullet streaking past Mr. Trump's head, and won the Pulitzer for breaking news photography.

Another little masterpiece came from Anna Moneymaker of Getty Images, who captured Mr. Trump under the podium, in profile, his head pointed down at the stage floor, three rivulets of blood streaming down his face. It's arresting

because it seems to be from an impossible angle, and captures Mr. Trump realizing what was happening, and apparently absorbing it, and thinking. A great photo came too from Brendan McDermid of Reuters, who captured a look of absolute fury on Mr. Trump's face as the agents led him from the stage.

It's the last two photographs I think of.

When Mr. Trump was helped to his feet, steadied himself, and was being trundled off, he called to the crowd. He didn't say, "It's okay, I'm alright," or "Get down, it may not be over." He didn't keep a silence, as one might during trauma, or throw a thumb's up. He didn't say, "They won't stop us!" He famously said one word to the crowd, and said it over and over: "Fight, fight, fight!"

I had watched it live, then over and over. Early that evening a friend called from California. He'd been watching it too. He had been very close with Mr. Trump once, and was no longer. He asked my thoughts and I said wow, that was some kind of moment. He said that wasn't a spirit, it's rage. I quote from memory: "He said 'fight fight fight' because he wants everyone fighting, because the game of dominance and defeat is everything to him." That is him, my friend said, and the fight isn't *for* something, it's just what he likes.

This stayed with me, not only because he knew Mr. Trump intimately and was an astute observer, but because I too had been surprised by the fight chant. Most of us on barely escaping death wouldn't think of that word, or give that directive. No one can review anyone else's response to trauma but with time you can reflect on it, and I've come to think my friend's insight is shaping Mr. Trump's second term.

It is one of Mr. Trump's gifts to journalists that when you try to think of examples to illustrate a point that is critical of him, you almost never have to go back in time, but can say, "Why, in just the past week . . ."

In just the past week Mr. Trump accused one of his predecessors, Barack Obama, of treason. Not of a dereliction or mistake but actual treason—betraying his country and giving aid and comfort to its enemies. He told reporters in the Oval Office on Tuesday that, in National Intelligence Director Tulsi Gabbard's recent report on Mr. Obama's actions regarding Russia-gate, "It's there, he's guilty. This was treason." "Obama was trying to lead a coup . . . This is the biggest scandal in the history of our country."

You can say, "He's just trying to distract from his Jeffrey Epstein problem" and yes, of course he is. But it's also fight for the fight's sake, and unthinkingly destructive. Is it good for young people, for instance, to hear one president accuse another of an act so wicked the penalty of conviction is death? It is not good for them.

Before the Journal last week broke the story of the Jeffrey Epstein bawdy birthday book with its letter bearing Mr. Trump's signature, Mr. Trump threatened "I'm gonna sue the Wall Street Journal just like I sued everyone else." He filed suit last Friday against the Journal and reporters Khadeeja Safdar and Joe Palazzolo.

An ardent Trump supporter might say, "Good, never let up." Maybe Mr. Trump says that to himself. But it's no good for the country for its president to attempt to muscle the press in this way, and it's no good even for him. If and when the suit goes forward Mr. Trump will be forced to testify under oath on his history with Epstein. There is no way on earth that will be a net positive for him. Which surely he knows. He fights even when he will hurt himself, because the fight is all.

You see it in his inability to let his accomplishments, and he has had them, rack up. For the first time in most adult lifetimes in the U.S. the southern border is basically closed; in a divided Capitol he got a huge budget bill through. In politics you use success as a base from which to push forward into new territory. He is like a strange general who can't quietly establish camp or dig new fortifications. He shoots his cannon for no reason, just for the sound. It's part of what keeps his best appointees and staffers so nervous every day. The cliché is that his first term was populated by grown-ups who lost every battle, and his second by true believers, nuts and hacks. That's not true. There were good people in the first administration, but many of his appointees spent their time warring, leaking and acting unprofessionally. Someone summed it up as, "Team of Rivals only for morons." The current administration has many solid appointees (as everyone always says: Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Kevin Hassett of the national economic council) and a staff that appears to be more professional than that of his first administration. (Here we do an Elon Musk carve-out, though he appears to have taken much of his drama with him.)

7
And surely those appointees know the price of Mr. Trump, the very special Trump Tax they pay every day. It involves the constant asking of *What did he do? What did he say?* And the constant wondering if what got him to power (the wild aggression, fearlessness, meanness) is the thing that may undo him, and them, on any given day.

What we've seen the past six months is what we'll see in the future. It will be fight, fight, fight, not only or primarily for a movement, program or platform, but because fighting is good and the natural state.

Of all his weaknesses that is one of his greatest, that he'd rather hurt himself than not fight. He'd rather hurt the country than not fight. The fight is all.

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