

*Incredibly powerful people still love to claim they've been bullied. What does it mean for the rest of us if even a **'bully'** can be pushed around? By Heather Havrilesky*

Picked On

Last month, Bruce Springsteen canceled a concert in Greensboro, N.C., to protest a new state law that, among other things, requires people to use the bathrooms of the biological sex reflected on their birth certificates. Springsteen released a statement saying he wanted to “show solidarity” with those waging a “fight against prejudice and bigotry” against trans people. In response, United States Representative Mark Walker, a Republican who supports the bill, told *The Hollywood Reporter* that Springsteen’s boycott was “a bully tactic,” thereby joining a growing chorus of people who seem to have mixed up their Davids and Goliaths. ¶ A few days later, a (white) North Charleston, S.C., police chief refused to attend a community meeting on the one-year anniversary of the death of Walter Scott because of what he called the “bullying tactics” of its (black) members at previous meetings. Last September, Kylie Jenner, a reality star worth millions, claimed that she was being cyberbullied by commenters on social media. In 2009, the blogger Heather Armstrong tweeted that no one should buy a Maytag washer because of what she called the

company's inadequate response to her broken appliance, and onlookers on Twitter accused her of bullying Whirlpool, the company's \$19 billion parent corporation.

In the old days, bullies were tough guys who picked on wimpy guys, a predictable, archetypal clash that inevitably led to a heroic outcome. Picture the brute kicking sand in the face of the scrawny wimp in the Charles Atlas comic-book ads, inspiring our hero to pump up his muscles and seek revenge. Picture Bluto, Popeye's hulking nemesis, imperiling Olive Oyl time and again so our favorite sailor man could eat his spinach and save the day. For decades, Western culture treated bullying as an expected rite of passage that tested a man's mettle, an unpleasant but surmountable obstacle on the path to glory.

As a result, bullying has long been a rich source of comedy, with even its insults and injuries mined for laughs, all the better to set up that final, triumphant scene in which the bully gets his comeuppance. The 1989 cult hit "Heathers" took this final act of vengeance to an extreme: A merciless group of high-school girls harasses their peers until the characters played by Winona Ryder and Christian Slater murder them one by one, then blow up the entire school.

That dark scene foreshadowed the radical transformation of our view of bullying that came 11 years later, when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, two seniors at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., armed with pipe bombs and a small arsenal of firearms, killed 13 people and then themselves. The media painted a dramatic portrait of bullying culture gone wild at the high school, with an imagined "trench coat mafia" of angry, alienated geeks seeking their revenge against popular jocks who'd tormented them for years. But in the 2009 book "Columbine," Dave Cullen, who reported from the scene that day and studied the event for the next 10 years, asserted that the trench-coat mafia was marginal, and Harris and Klebold had nothing to do with it. According to Cullen, Harris, the lead perpetrator, had many friends, was popular with girls and was rarely bullied. He was just a psychopath.

A fundamental misunderstanding of the event remains in place 17 years later, but this misreading nonetheless helped to incite a seismic — but necessary — shift in the common wisdom on bullying. It



came to be acknowledged as a serious threat to the emotional and physical health of its victims. And then, with the advent of social media came the rise of "cyberbullying," harassment that felt at once private and public, ephemeral yet deeply personal.

The roots of the word "bully" never foretold such a gloomy outcome. In the 16th century, "bully" was originally a term of endearment, arising from the Dutch word *boel*, or "lover," and *broeder*, or "brother." The word evolved into a greeting for a male friend, and from there into a term meaning "worthy" or "jolly." This positive connotation lived on into 19th-century congratulatory slang — "Bully for you!" — but back in the mid-17th century, an alternate usage, meaning "harasser of the weak," had already caught on.

Today this meaning is utterly dominant, and antibullying slogans, campaigns and organizations make up a fundamental piece of education culture.

This new order has a way of making us feel more powerful than ever and more powerless than ever in rapid succession.

My 9-year-old daughter is currently serving as an antibullying "ambassador" at her school, one of a gaggle of fourth-graders charged with (gently) confronting their peers on any and all bullying behavior. According to my daughter, such offenses range from "being mean" and "hurting someone's feelings" to "teasing." The linguistic creep evident here has often struck me as troubling, especially as a relatively laughable bully archetype has been supplanted by the specter of mass murder and suicide.

But as the word spreads beyond its original childhood boundaries, it also loses much of its power. Increasingly, "feeling bullied" is used broadly by the powerful and the powerless alike to describe feeling insulted (by a peer), feeling unfairly criticized (by a professional critic), feeling diminished (by commenters) or merely feeling exposed to potential profit losses, ego injuries or points of view that run counter to your own.

This frequent misapplication of the term reflects a larger sea change in the way we view our social positions on an emotional level. These days we tend to see power less as the rightful inheritance of the world's winners (us!) and more as the end product of a disgraceful cycle of opportunists oppressing their way to the top of the human heap.

Even history's traditional bullies are feeling bullied these days. The presidential campaign has evolved into an all-against-all dog pile, in which bullies claim that they are powerless to represent themselves against this new bullying mob that bullies bullies. Everyone from Jeb Bush to Ted Cruz to Hillary Clinton has called Donald Trump a bully; Time magazine put the word next to Trump's face on its cover. Trump, who in "The Art of the Deal" boasts about giving his second-grade music teacher a black eye, memorably jeered at Bush in true bully style in a December debate: "Oh, you're a tough guy, Jeb, I know. Real tough." Yet Trump now casts himself as the victim of the R.N.C.'s "corrupt" nominating rules, and threatens to disrupt the July convention if he doesn't win the nomination. But isn't that the nature of bullies, to see bullying wherever they turn? The only person who ever called me a bully was an ex-boyfriend who was bigger and stronger than I was and lost his temper when things didn't go his way. In couples therapy, he described a recurring sense that, if he allowed me to speak, he would be destroyed forever.

This twisted perspective has a certain logic in a digital world where, thanks to the distribution of technologies across the populace, everyone has power that they didn't have just a few years ago. This new order has a way of making us feel more powerful than ever and more powerless than ever in rapid succession. Likewise, our antagonists seem to toggle between invincible, superpowered bullies who could easily crush us and laughably archaic relics of the past. Locating the real bully means deciding who has more power: Banks or government? Celebrities or their huge fandoms? Corporations or customers? Teachers or parents? Sovereign nations or terrorist organizations? A staff blogger or a public figure she covers? With so many voices crying out, no wonder so many of us can't seem to tell if we're the bullied or the bullies. ♦

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Photographed by Kathy Ryan at The New York Times on April 14, 2016, at 5:47 p.m.

Andrew Ross Sorkin *“The Obama Recovery,”*
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Andrew Ross Sorkin is a financial columnist for The New York Times, founder and editor at large of DealBook and co-anchor of CNBC’s “Squawk Box.” In his reporting for this week’s cover article on President Obama’s economy, Sorkin said he was drawn to the topic in hopes of “putting the state of the economy and Obama’s role in it in context” and wanting to “better understand how Obama himself thinks about it.” As the author of the book “Too Big to Fail,” Sorkin chronicled the financial crisis of 2008. “People forget about those dark days,” he said. “Everyone has an opinion about today’s economy, but it has to be measured against where it used to be.”

Heather Havrilesky *First Words,*
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Heather Havrilesky is a columnist for New York magazine and the author of “How to Be a Person in the World,” which will be published in July.

Charles Homans *“The End of the American Daydream,”*
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Charles Homans is the politics editor for the magazine.

Annie Lowrey *“Where Did the Government Jobs Go?”*
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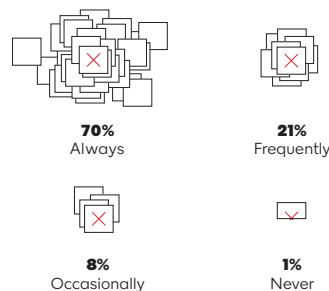
Annie Lowrey is a contributing editor at New York magazine and a former business reporter for The New York Times.

Mark O’Connell *Letter of Recommendation,*
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Mark O’Connell lives in Dublin. His book “To Be a Machine” will be published in March 2017. His last article was about Vicks nasal spray.

Dear Reader: Do You Vote on Hometown Matters?

Every week the magazine publishes the results of a study conducted online in July and August by The New York Times’s research-and-analytics department, reflecting the opinions of 2,987 subscribers who chose to participate. This week’s question: *Do you vote in local elections?*



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