



Making Fun of Paul Pelosi's Injuries Doesn't Bode Well for Self-Government

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No sooner had the hammer of a strange attacker struck the head of Nancy Pelosi's husband than the misinformation started flying.

As the saying goes, a lie will travel all the way around the world while the truth is still pulling on its boots. In this case, it was the San Francisco police who seemed to be tugging at their laces, going to lengths to explain there was no evidence Paul Pelosi knew his attacker or that he had identified him as a friend during a 911 call.

That was too late for many and irrelevant to others who don't care what official sources say.

Social media can, at times, seem like an endlessly long junior high school hallway between classes. It would be a funny place if so many didn't take it seriously, and if it wasn't jeopardizing the long experiment of self-government.

Not long after the attack, conservative commentator and author Dinesh D'Souza began tweeting a claim that the attacker was wearing only underwear and including a false claim about a relationship.

Elon Musk, Twitter's new owner, shared a link to a site that falsely alleged Pelosi was drunk and fighting with a male prostitute, The New York Times reported. Musk later deleted the tweet. The site he linked to was the same one that repeated a false report in 2016 that Hillary Clinton had died and that a body double showed up to debate Donald Trump. You get the idea.

And then Kari Lake, who is running for governor of Arizona as a Republican, turned the attack into a joke, noting at an event that Nancy Pelosi, as speaker of the house, had plenty of security in Washington, but "apparently her house doesn't have a lot of protection." People laughed.

Did I mention Paul Pelosi is 82 and he had to undergo surgery to repair a broken skull?

All of the above is troubling evidence that the state of decency and civility in this country is in free fall, especially when it comes to political discourse.

No wonder a recent national poll conducted by the Cato Institute found that 61% of Americans say they hold political opinions they are afraid to share because they might offend someone. The price for offense seems to be rising faster than the inflation rate.

For the record, every member of Utah's congressional delegation — Republicans, all — decried the attack on Paul Pelosi and expressed sympathy to the House speaker.

As for those who would use tragedy for gain? Republican strategist and pollster Whit Ayres didn't offer a lot of hope when she told Time magazine, "Our political discourse continues to spiral down below what acceptable political discourse has been in the past. We will see if there is any bottom. There doesn't appear to be."

Many Americans have already cast ballots in this year's midterm election. Many more will do so by the end of Nov. 8. Each ballot cast is an act of faith in the United States, whether or not the voter is conscious of it.

Each ballot also is, consciously or not, an affirmation of one's responsibility as a citizen. We have no poll taxes, land ownership or income requirements for the franchise; just the unstated implication that our vote is informed and seriously considered.

Laughing at political violence or making up stories about injured octogenarians doesn't bode well for the concept of self-governance, which is why we don't let junior high students vote.

To be sure, politics always has been a rough sport. But there is a difference between passively consuming political ads and personally interacting with politics on social media. [Writing for the Scientific American](#), Emily Willingham said social media motivates many people to "prove commitment to identities, causes and political parties." But at what price?

San Francisco Police Chief William Scott told CNN, sounding exasperated after explaining again, that there is no evidence Paul Pelosi knew his attacker.

"People are running with this stuff, and whether they believe it or not, these theories can influence the way people think about everything that's happening here," he said.

Officials can try to teach people to be more skeptical about information they see or hear. They can try to lace up quicker and outrun lies with the truth.

A better solution would be for regular folks to recognize that politics is a battle for ideas and concepts. We don't need to check our humanity, empathy and goodness in order to engage in it. That may be the only way to keep self-government from spiraling out of control.