

When does a fighter become a bully?

I've given this topic of the transition from fighter to bully considerable thought and no matter how much I push my brain cells to come to a conclusion I still can't come up with a definitive answer. Maybe you can help me. Let me start by saying that most of us have encountered a bully in our lives. For me it was Jimmy Schultz who guarded his parents' property against any incursion by younger boys like me who simply wanted to cut across the far reaches of it to get to the creek where we were building a raft and a fort.

My friends and I tried everything to get into Jimmy's good graces, but nothing worked. So, one day we decided to camp out across the street from him and vowed to 'stare him down' until he relented. Hours passed. Finally, he stormed across the street and tore into us, first with angry words, next with threats and finally tossed over the table we had been sitting at in a fit of rage.

I'm willing to concede, in hindsight, that we might have been wrong to expect him to give us an easy shortcut through his folks' property, but I'm also sure that HE was wrong to lose his temper and 'draw his guns' over our simple protest. If it had all stopped there I could have just chalked it up to a one-time outburst, but Jimmy was on a tear. He then started channeling his inner bully and began harassing us when we rode our bikes down the street by purposely putting big rocks on the path we usually took in an effort to upend us.

In school, there was also a 'Jimmy' who assumed that because he was bigger than the rest of us that he was born to be the Genghis Kahn of our playground. He did everything in his power to destroy the peacefulness of our recess period. Because I was a scrappy fellow and imbued with a keen sense of right and wrong, I reached my boiling point one day and told him off. As with all bullies (and bulls) this was a red flag. Bullies cannot abide by challenges to their authority and we got into a fist fight. All objective observers would give the fight to him on points, but I did get in a good punch or two which helped increase my stock in the eyes of my friends.

You have probably also encountered a bully or two along your life's journey and maybe have gotten pummeled, as well. Back in my day, fighting was something my folks preferred to leave to soldiers and not grade-schoolers. It was also something frowned on by the sisters who did their best to make model citizens out of young Catholic boys like myself. But, fighting was something we boys grew up with. We respected our fathers' service in WWII and Korea. We swarmed to war films with Audie Murphy and John Wayne and prized the Army war surplus cartridge belts and helmet liners that we wore as we waged our own pretend wars in the neighborhood.

Thanks to our screen idols and our parents and teachers, we knew the difference between fighting for something and just fighting for fighting's sake. This was drummed into us early on. Boys, especially, had to grow a second, tougher skin that would protect us when it was our turn to defend our country or our family and friends OR an ideal. Being prepared to fight in a provoked conflict was natural to us; being the aggressor was different. We had to remember the admonition of our TV hero Davy Crockett when he said, "Be sure you're right and then go ahead."

In other words, the difference in taking up arms depended on the circumstances and the value of what we would be fighting for. It could have been our sovereignty, an ideal or the protection of the underdog. As we grew up, we continued fighting in more subtle ways, and because we could tell the difference between fighters and bullies we were better able to plot our strategies. This knowledge enabled us to devise ways to defeat them that were acceptable to society, but it still couldn't explain the transition from fighter to bully and how one becomes the other.

The conventional wisdom would have you believe that bullies only come in one size...big... and one form...rough. The fact is that bullies come in all sizes and shapes. They can be the leaders of political movements, organizations, labor unions, religious zealots, heads of corporations AND they can even be presidents.

Anytime someone who thinks he's (or she's) always right and deserves to be respected or followed simply because of that belief could be a bully in the making, and when they grab control or get it handed to them we all have a problem. It's one thing to fight for an idea whose implementation will benefit everyone equally; it's quite another to fight for it because it will accrue more benefit to the fighter, himself or herself. Indeed, it's admirable to see people fight FOR the rights of other people. Those are the fights we all ought to have, but when bullies amass too much power they put us all at risk AND they put a target on their own backs as we have seen with the assassinations of dictators throughout history.

Bullies in government are especially dangerous as they wield enormous power and because they've mastered the art of 'stealth bullying' which is practiced in a gentlemanly, civilized way by horse-trading away our individual rights on the floor of the House or Senate, for example.

Crises always bring out the best and worst in all of us, and they fuel the rise of new bullies who see opportunities to seize the moment and take more power for themselves. The Coronavirus is presenting us with a dilemma. How do we tell the difference between a leader (national or local) that is acting on our behalf and one that is using the crisis as a springboard to gain more leverage? It's not a question that can be answered, easily, because it goes to the central question of how much authority is enough...or too much? When does the need to protect society at large become the right of the few to decide what's best for the many? Should a president be able to make decisions over the states when they appear unwilling or unable to do so? Should governors or even mayors have the right to suspend public gatherings like church services, for example, or close down whole sectors of their economy at will?

I'm no Constitutional scholar, but I do know a few things about fighting for one's family and one's country. What I don't know is where to draw the line on how much power should be in the hands of the Executive Branch of the Federal government or the Congress or how much should be divested to or shared with the states. I suspect that the answers to those questions are best answered by more people rather than fewer, at least that's what I think Davy Crockett would have said. When this crisis has passed, THAT is a conversation we had better have before the next one hits.

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