

Down With the Clapback

At a recent CNN town hall, Senator Elizabeth Warren was asked by the chairman of a gay rights group what she would do if she were approached by a supporter who said marriage should be between one man and one woman. Warren responded: “I’m going to assume it’s a guy who said that. And I’m going to say, then just marry one woman. I’m cool with that.” After the crowd laughed and applauded, she added, “Assuming you can find one.”

Goodness. Even accounting for Warren’s probable giddiness ahead of [Indigenous People’s Day](#), that’s a sharp barb. Warren is a talented communicator with the demeanor of a small-town PTA chair and the rhetoric of a rabble-rouser standing atop an upturned wheelbarrow. She has, in other words, a little of the conservative and a little of the radical about her, real potential to appeal across ideological and demographic lines. And here was a plum opportunity. “I don’t agree with those who support the so-called traditional definition of marriage, but they have the right to their opinions, and I would only hope they’re kind to their gay brothers and sisters” – that’s all she needed to say.

Instead she chose to demean their prowess with the opposite sex. This is not only statistically untrue – Republicans are [having far more children](#) than Democrats – it’s a cheap and evasive way of skirting the reality that [nearly a third of Americans](#) still oppose gay marriage and it might be in the interest of a political campaign not to write off every single one of them. But this is how we communicate now. Warren’s answer is an example of a clapback, a term that’s become such a fixture of our discourse that we’ve somehow allowed it to enter the dictionary. According to Merriam-Webster (“since 1828”), to “clapback” means “to respond quickly and sharply to criticism.”

But it’s so much more than that. The word originated in a song

by that latter-day Samuel Johnson, *Ja Rule*, where its definition was something more along the lines of “to murder someone with a handgun.” The Internet, in its cloying need to equate banal verbal putdowns with spectacular acts of violence (“she eviscerated him!”), then culturally appropriated it to mean a scathing diss. Today it’s used constantly – clapping back on Twitter is an easy way to elicit GIFs of people applauding, which is how you know you’re a good person. BuzzFeed [observes](#) that clapping back is “a skill that, when employed properly, can banish someone attempting to throw shade back to the Dark Ages,” which is where our discourse is headed, and that it’s practiced by such celebrated wits as Amber Rose.

Clapbacks tend to be both short (though not pithy) and *ad hominem*, little hit-and-runs that eschew substance in favor of cheeky personal attacks. That should sound familiar: it’s exactly how Twitter operates. Over on everyone’s favorite free speech psychomanteum chamber, the character limit makes punchy insults more effective than actual argument. That clapbacks are now being heard off a presidential stage should be evidence enough that real life is aping Twitter rather than the other way around. And sure enough, there was Warren’s quip, liked and retweeted and GIFed endlessly by people who probably can’t list a single other thing she said during that town hall.

The problem isn’t that politicians are suddenly getting sassy with each other: Ronald Reagan’s “youth and inexperience” line against Walter Mondale is all anyone remembers from that 1984 debate. And even the gold standard of political argument, Lincoln-Douglas, once saw the former call one of the latter’s arguments “as thin as the homeopathic soup that was made by boiling the shadow of a pigeon that had been starved to death.” The problem is that we’ve now confused clapbacks with the meat and potatoes of political discourse. Rather than leave insults and punchy remarks where they belong, nestled

within larger arguments, we've seized on them, torn them out of context, and treated them as arguments themselves. Warren's remark is hardly the worst example of this. Many people seem to think Kamala Harris is qualified to command the largest military in the world solely on the basis of her ability to clap back against President Trump.

Why has this happened? Because we're all exhausted. Deluged with endless opinions in this Misinformation Age, we seek shortcuts through it all, and snappy lines that allow us to dismiss opposing points of view without actually engaging them work perfectly. Both sides of our politics are guilty of this – Donald Trump's Twitter vitriol can be viewed as an even less artful form of the clapback – but there's no question the left has the advantage when it comes to clapback culture. This is because it also has the advantage when it comes to the culture in general. Left-wing nostrums are so hegemonic, so taken for granted, that countervailing points can be made to look ridiculous simply by holding them up against the common backdrop. That makes clapping back easy, almost effortless, because so many others begin from the same assumptions that you do.

For a particularly annoying example of this, look no further than Senator Rand Paul's appearance on *The View* last week. Paul went in to defend his new book on socialism, and, Lord knows, the man tried. Instead he found himself trapped in a crossfire of pea shooters, as all five hosts pelted him with sound and fury, signifying nothing. Towards the end of the segment, Paul made the point that Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro was a socialist, which Ana Navarro, one of the ostensible Republicans on the dais, tried to contradict by calling Maduro a "corrupt, murderous thug." When Paul objected, Navarro exclaimed, "Don't do this to me! Don't mansplain!" Ooooooh. Get out the burn cream. Navarro's boring remark was then treated by the Internet like Socrates had just bested Thrasymachus: "Rand Paul Goes Down in Flames on *The View*," the Daily Beast

proclaimed.

And that's the point: clapbacks don't even have to be clever anymore. All they need to do is invoke the trendy left-wing wisdom of the moment, especially if it can be encapsulated in a single term: "mansplain," "gaslight," "toxic masculinity" – "you mad, bro?" Everything you need is there, except, of course, a point. Call it the *Daily Show* method of discourse, and indeed, when it comes to clapback culture, Jon Stewart may be a more primordial forbear even than Twitter. Once upon a time, his smackdowns of suspiciously edited Fox News clips were considered entertainment; today his method of grab, sass, and discard is widespread and serves more as cultural enforcement. The purpose of the clapback is to signal that debate ends here, that one needs think no further. Is it possible that Maduro might be *both* a socialist *and* a murderous thug, that one might even enable the other? That doesn't matter. Rand Paul has been "destroyed" and this meeting is adjourned.

Is it any wonder that Joe Rogan has become a minor celebrity? The comedian and YouTube host is a lefty of a sort, but he also prizes probing conversation over brusque dismissals, and on today's Internet, that feels like a novelty. As for Elizabeth Warren, I don't mean to pick on her. She really is one of the deeper Democratic candidates, even if she can't seem to figure out how she's going to pay for any of her proposals. Still, there lingers the problem of that stubborn third of the country that refuses to embrace same-sex marriage. And Senator, not to mansplain, but you never answered the question. How *do* you respond to those who say that the definition of marriage is set and must remain between one man and one woman?

–

This [article](#) was republished with permission from the *American Conservative*.

[Image Credit: flickr-Gage Skidmore, [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)]