

Trump Insults Rattle Rivals, Please Fans

Barbs aimed at fellow GOP candidates startle even those used to rough political discourse

BY JANET HOOK
AND REID J. EPSTEIN

Donald Trump is turning the schoolyard taunt into a political art form.

He has scoffed that former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush is a "very low-energy" person, derided ex-Hewlett-Packard Co. CEO Carly Fiorina as "headache"-inducing, called Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker's leadership a "disaster," and razed Sen. Lindsey Graham over his low standing in a poll of his home state of South Carolina.

"You just got 4 points in your home state of SC—far better than zero nationally," Mr. Trump sneered on Twitter. "You're only 26 pts behind me."

These aren't gaffes or off-script asides. They are part of a strategy, people close to Mr. Trump say, of knocking his Republican presidential rivals off their game. That, at least for now, is getting him the attention and poll ratings he wants among voters looking for an antidote to the artifice of U.S. politics.

But the intensely personal nature of Mr. Trump's insults, sometimes mocking his rivals by mimicking them, is startling even to those who have grown accustomed to the sometimes low levels of civility in politics today. Roger Ailes, head of the often combative Fox News Network, complained this week that Mr. Trump went too far in his feud with anchor Megyn Kelly over her questioning at the GOP debate in Cleveland this month.

"Bully isn't a word I would use for him because I know him, but I can see how he would be perceived that way," said Kate

of authenticity," she said. "People in the U.S. are hungry for authenticity. That allows him to be a little bit of a bad boy."

His success has baffled his critics, but it makes sense to people who have studied the psychological power of bullying.

"You get popular by dominating and controlling your peers," said David Schwartz, a psychologist at the University of Southern California. "Lots of kids who are popular are not especially well liked, because they mostly got to the top of the hierarchy through aggression."

Mr. Trump, in an Iowa news conference on Tuesday, explained his approach this way: "When people treat me unfairly, I don't let them forget it."

Mr. Trump declined to be interviewed for this article.

So while other candidates are polishing their stump speeches, talking points and answers to earnest town-hall questions, Mr. Trump is honing his barbs. To his fans and associates, Mr. Trump's zingers are the political equivalent of a killer backhand.

"To a political professional, it looks like one of the most uncoordinated tennis players hitting line shots every time, every single time. These guys can't return them," said Michael Caputo, a political consultant who worked with Mr. Trump when he was weighing past political runs

Mr. Caputo said Mr. Trump regularly hears from advisers that he should dial back his insults, but rarely does. His experience in reality TV, Mr. Caputo said, has shown Mr. Trump how to fine-tune his barbs so they land with maximum effect. "Even though it sounds like they're off the cuff, it's calculated," said Mr. Caputo, who isn't working with the 2016 Trump campaign.

So far, Mr. Trump seems to be paying no political price, so there is little incentive to ease



Donald Trump has taken advantage of a large social-media following to bl

clear weapons," said Peter Wehner, a senior White House adviser to George W. Bush. "Yet for his supporters, the more crude and insulting Trump is, the more dispensation he's granted."

A veteran who took part in a focus group of Trump supporters organized by GOP pollster Frank

the past 40 years."

Mr. Trump takes full advantage of his social-media following—3.3 million on Facebook and 3.8 million on Twitter—to blast opponents. On Twitter he offers a biting stream of commentary and insults. Some, during the day, are dictated to aides who