

**Red, White, and Latina:
Our American Identity**

By

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Prologue: Bullies and Ballots

“True patriotism springs from a belief in the dignity of the individual, freedom and equality not only for Americans but for all people on earth, universal brotherhood and good will, and a constant and earnest striving toward the principles and ideals on which this country was founded.” - Eleanor Roosevelt

As I sit down to write this book, it is the summer of 2016 in America. The atmosphere hanging over our nation is thick: heavy with anger, violence, distrust, and divisiveness. As a nation, it seems that we are in fear of what’s coming next. The election for our 45th president is only four months away, and the party conventions at the epicenter are being shown on all media, in Cleveland and Philadelphia. In the summer of 1968, the streets outside the conventions were on fire. Now, in 2016, the virtual neighborhoods of social media burn with intense emotion.

The threads, spinning down like spiderwebs from each politically oriented status update, are laced with poisonous language and verbal daggers. The words are hostile, emotional, vehement, and frankly disrespectful. I’m not fooled for a minute. No high-minded moral or philosophical battles are being won or lost on this field. This is personal, and the worst kind of personal too. Some people seem to be out for blood. The subtext of each polarized argument is essentially: “I’m right, so you’re wrong.” Case closed. No further questions.

I wonder why we are making it so personal. Are personal attacks simply the path of least intellectual resistance, allowing us to avoid asking ourselves challenging questions? When we resist challenging our own ideas, we remove the opposing side of an issue and avoid the huge, embarrassing risk of being proven wrong (and ending up with a bruised ego). Have you seen the lengths a person will go to protect his or her ego?

There is a percentage of the online population, at this very moment, which is shouting people into submission: bullying and shaming others into agreeing with their beliefs. Bullies naturally get attention through force. People are afraid to challenge them—or else they assume the bullies must know what they're talking about because they're so loud. Social media has spawned a particularly fearless type of loudmouth: the anonymous bully, who becomes braver by the day because of the low probability of ever facing any consequences of his or her words and actions. The audacity of these bullies' actions, quite frankly, is epic.

Political pundits in the media have created job security based upon this aspect of human nature: whoever yells the loudest seems to drown out the opposition and win the debate. Now, the bullies on social media have followed in the pundits' footsteps; unfortunately, their tactic is working just as well in that environment. The louder the social media bullies yell, the harder it is to hear the other side—and after a while, many people will shrug their shoulders, give up, and decide to agree with the bullies rather than working out informed opinions of their own. This can be comforting: the knowledge that we've picked a side, settled on a point of view, and carried on with life. In a way, it's easier to hide behind these bullies and their bullhorns than to express one's own voice.

But once we've picked a side, why stop and listen to the other point of view—when it's so much easier to swim in the calm, comforting waters of what we think we know? We've stopped listening to anything we don't want to hear, anything that is in opposition to our own point of view, or anything that challenges us. We've decided to reject conflicting opinions, seeing them as threats. In order to protect this sense of mental security and moral superiority, we go to battle not only with anonymous strangers, but also with our friends, co-workers, even family members. There are no victors, only victims: all fighting to be heard, but in the worst possible ways.

Language matters, and some of the terms I'm seeing callously tossed back and forth across the web are downright vile. I am horrified and ashamed, as an American citizen, watching the disrespect shown toward our police, military, lawmakers, powers-that-be, and even all the way to the highest office in the land: the President of the United States.

This is not okay. While the right to free speech gives us the privilege to say these things, it is not a free moral pass that makes it *right* to do so.

When did it become acceptable to hurl the deepest, most personal and heinous insults at our president? From the tone of the conversation between recent presidents and congress, politicians and the media, citizens and police officers, all the way down to how kids speak to their teachers and even their parents—it seems like disrespect is permeating the fabric of American life.

Our children are being affected by the tone of this national conversation. They listen to the words we say and watch the examples we set, absorbing everything and

integrating it into their personal identities and future moral compasses. If we parents believe otherwise for one second, we are in complete denial of reality.

Beyond our household walls and national borders, we are also showing the rest of the world what we think of America. While it's true (and this is something I also teach my daughter) that we shouldn't allow the opinions of others to shape who we are, there comes a point when we must consider the consequences of our conversations.

Make no mistake: With the language around this election and other significant national events, we are establishing a new standard of acceptable behavior for future generations of American citizens. Do we want this national conversation to continue on its current path? Where are we going with this?

By the time you read this book, the election will be over and in the history books—and this is *exactly* why we need to continue to have this conversation. If we don't address the problem, if we ignore the fiery division of the 2016 election and the wounds it left behind, they will only continue to fester, and worsen in the years to come. At some point, as a nation, the wounds may become too deep to fully heal. As a proud citizen of this country, that is the fear in my heart. That is why I am writing this book.

I write this for my daughter Sofia, who, with her peers, will grow up in the wake of what we leave behind.

I write for my immigrant parents, who sacrificed everything to move their family here and capture their American Dream, so that theirs and millions of other stories like theirs will not have unfolded in vain.

I write for all the brave soldiers who have died to defend our flag.

I write this book for YOU—for all of us.

I write for the love we all have, no matter how we show it sometimes, of our young but incredibly resilient country.

I write because I am one American voice in a sea of many: an author, an entertainment personality, a daughter of immigrants, a woman, a proud Latina, a wife, and a mother.

My goal is to pose challenging questions that make you reflect on your American identity as an individual, and our identity together as a country. May the questions and answers we all discover together work to redirect our passionate patriotism; may they repair the rift, rebuild the trust, and release the anger that divides us. I hope to see us move forward again toward a bolder, stronger, and more unified future that honors where we came from and celebrates where we are going. Because above all, America stands for an unwavering belief in each citizen's potential: the "what if" that we each have the right to rise up and claim.

It's time to start a common sense, heart-based conversation, one that will help to rebuild our American identity. It begins with a sense of pride in who we are as individuals, where we come from, and the dream we each have for our country.

Epilogue: Going Nuclear

"We cannot change the past, but we can change our attitude toward it. Uproot guilt and plant forgiveness. Tear out arrogance and seed humility. Exchange love for hate—thereby, making the present comfortable and the future promising." - Maya Angelou

When I began writing this book, it was the summer of 2016, right after the national political conventions where the two major parties officially selected their candidates. The election year was already on fire by then, with friends, co-workers, families, neighbors, and total strangers fighting each other online and in person. It was disgusting, disrespectful, and downright embarrassing to watch. I didn't think it could get worse. I was wrong.

Next week, we vote for our next president. Summer has turned to fall, and while temperatures have cooled, the national political conversation has not. What began as a political debate—albeit a nasty one—has given way to something far more personal and (in my opinion) well beyond “normal” political character assassinations.

The election has turned into a publicly embarrassing competition to see who can shout the biggest lies the loudest. The audacity of the bully has been collectively accepted by America. Voters are being bombarded with sensationalistic “facts” about the candidates, along with fear mongering; each side insists that the other must be “stopped” or we're all doomed. According to a survey by the American Psychological Association, almost half of Americans have reported symptoms of severe anxiety as a result of

election stress. Many people have reported simply unplugging to keep their sanity—turning off the television, going offline, and getting as far away from the political battles as they possibly can.

I don't blame those people as I sit watching the election coverage—watching both sides go for blood, without any apparent concern about the language being used to make their points. Where did all the hate come from? During the time I've written this book, that language has gone from nasty to downright nuclear.

I first used the phrase “going nuclear” in my second book (*It's All About the Woman Who Wears It: 10 Laws for Being Smart, Successful and Sexy Too*) while offering up various bits of life advice, particularly regarding relationships. One of my “marriage laws” warned couples against “going nuclear” when arguing—firing at each other with intensely personal, stinging words of war meant to wound. There are some things vicious enough that, once they are said, they cannot be taken back.

Similarly, I believe that some of the bitter and vile language we're being exposed to is not language we will be able to magically “take back” after the election is over. How can we expect such a deep, ugly, festering gash, ripping through our identity as a country, to instantly heal just because we've chosen a new president? What about the people on the other side? Do we believe that, after this personal, contentious battle that has stretched for over a year, they'll simply shrug their shoulders, forget everything that has happened, and move on? I find that highly unlikely.

This election has been far too personal and divisive precisely because we've forgotten how to disagree with one another, to debate the issues intelligently without going nuclear. We've thrown out the notion that you can “win” a political discussion

without personally destroying your opponent in the process. We've gone directly to the nuclear option in American politics, without considering the consequences of that decision. Now, I wonder if there's any turning back to a time when elections were battle of ideas, not sensationalism. Now that we've hit the red button on our emotions and out-of-control behavior during an election year, have we set a new precedent for how we handle political debate and elections?

I'm already looking ahead four years to the next presidential election, and I'm concerned. Are we planning to go through all this again? Or, next time, will we resist the call to divisiveness? For that to happen, we need to start the healing now. We need to re-learn how to talk with each other, how to debate the issues intelligently, and how to avoid going nuclear every time we disagree with each other. Our vicious infighting is slowly tearing down the edifice our founding fathers built. The spirit of patriotism and working together toward a common goal is a flame that is flickering out, and as it fades, so does our unity. We need to set a better example, if only because of what's at stake here: our country, our image, and our reputation.

The world is watching. They are waiting to see if we can learn from this, or if we will keep repeating the same cycle of political embarrassment, over and over, ripping open the bloody scar time and time again until we've injured ourselves beyond the ability to heal. Much of the world still sees America as a superpower, a role model of democracy, humanity, and strength that they want to look up to and emulate. We cannot elevate the world, though, if our own house is in chaos. If we are divided as a country, we cannot help unite other countries behind ideas, causes, movements, and actions aimed at changing the world for the better.

November 9, 2016

The 45th President of the United States was elected last night. Many Americans woke up to what the media dubbed a “stunning upset.” As is the case with most elections, some voters are celebrating while others are grieving; this is the inevitable nature of politics, especially in a country as large and diverse as America.

But why did this election feel so different? I believe it’s because it was a defining moment for all of us as Americans. It tested who we are, our identity as a people, and our tolerance for one another. That’s why I believe people are having such an emotional reaction to it.

But even in the midst of this volatile election story of extreme emotions and dramatically different perspectives as a country, we must find a way to keep our stories as individuals intact. No matter what is happening in Washington D.C., life still goes on and we all share one common value - our love for this country. That must always be kept in perspective.

For those of us who are parents, this idea of keeping a healthy perspective is even more amplified, because our children are looking to us to see how to react in the midst of heartfelt challenges. I will confess that I was one of the stunned and upset ones this morning. But I had to push my emotions aside. As a parent, my feelings had to be secondary to those of my child. I wanted to make sure to communicate the right message to Sofia about what she is now observing. This is what I wrote to her this morning.

Sofia, history has been made. And you are unique in that you have personally witnessed and felt it yourself. Cherish the memory and remember that the most important lesson we have learned from this election is to always respect someone else's point of view, even when it is opposite to yours. This has also reminded us that America is the greatest country in the world to allow all of its people to speak their minds in such a democratic way. But for us, we must continue to prove we are good women—intelligent, hard working, strong, proud of who and what we are—American Latina—and respectful. That's how we change the world one day at a time. I love you. So, be happy and proud, and when someone shares their excitement or sadness about this 2016 election, you smile and say, "I'm so happy to be an American."

Now, as you're reading this book, the 2016 election is in the history books. Fall gave way to winter and we are now entering the spring of 2017. Our country's newest presidency is in its infancy. None of us have any idea what the future holds, but if you take away just one thought from the book, I hope it will be this: We each hold the power to restore our American identity. Even as one single American, you are standing on the shoulders of greatness—of immigrants, of presidents, of soldiers who died for you, of civil rights leaders, of founding fathers and mothers, of inventors, of entrepreneurs, and of so many others.

The power we each hold extends so much further than a single vote cast every four years in a presidential election. Through our individual words and actions, and the examples we set as Americans every day in our lives and in our communities, we can help heal our collective wound. We can help our country come together again. We can

help cure the cancer of racism; dispel the myths about newcomers; make people around us proud to call themselves American; and so much more. Together, we are Red, White, and Latina—Latino American, African American, Caucasian American, Asian American, European American, Hispanic American, Native American, Indian American, Arab American . . . We are collectively and equally Red, White, and Blue.

What would happen if we defied all expectations, came together as one country, and changed the conversation about one, unified American identity? Let's not wait four more years to do it. The clock starts now!

“Real change never occurs from the top on down, [but] always from the bottom on up.” - Senator Bernie Sanders