

Mean Bastards as Culture Heroes

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All day long, and on into a second day, here in New York, the media have been full of George Steinbrenner. He's always been a Mean Bastard — even in the Seinfeld version — and that's how he is memorialized: a Mean Bastard and a Winner. Sometimes he's represented as a Mean-Bastard-with-a Heart-of-Gold-who-Gave-Money-to-Good-Causes. It would seem paradoxical to be deep in grief over a man universally acknowledged to be a Mean Bastard. But, it's no paradox: the culture is in such depraved condition that MBs are adored, even by many of those on whose faces they tread.

Consider the following media figures, bound together in a complex that delights in meanness and brutality:

Steinbrenner, "The Boss," was known for firing people. So is Donald Trump ("The Apprentice"), who fires people with his trade-mark "You're Fired!" Despite a catastrophic employment situation, he is widely admired for this.

Simon Cowell was the abusive judge on "American Idol," where his central role was to be as insulting as he could in dismissing the candidates who performed before him.

Like the others, Judge Judy deals in explosive insult. And consider the brutality of "The Bachelor" and "The Bachelorette" — more versions of "You're Fired!" If these things get you down, watch Dr. Phil berate people in the name of tough love.

If you haven't seen these horrors, you ought to acquaint yourself with them. They give strength to the environment in which Sarah Palin and the rest operate, as well as the more sophisticated versions seen in David Brooks et. al. Indeed, this cultural phenomenon may be in some ways more important than the politics that surfs along on the wave that these people help to create.

We need to present and get out there in new ways an alternate set of values, just, humane and non-competitive. The left won't make a better world so long as we dismiss such concerns as "soft," and leave the presentation of alternate values to the right, or to Oprah.