

Words matter, especially when you're the president



Your Turn

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Guest Columnist

I suspect Donald Trump has never been to Haiti. Or he wouldn't have demeaned himself and a complex and beautiful country and people. The first black republic in the world.

Words, Mr. Trump. Words can inspire, offer insight, remind us of who we are — or be used as blunt, ignorant weapons.

When I was about 12, I took a 50 mile hike. Why? Because my president told me to. President Kennedy challenged us to walk 50 miles because, "Physical fitness is not only one of the most important keys to a healthy body, it is the basis of dynamic and creative intellectual activity."

His words inspired 300 people, in a radio promotion, to begin a trek from Bayfront Park and follow a 50 mile route through the streets of Miami. Only 27 made it back to the park after the overnight walk. I was one and proud. I met my president's challenge.

For generations, kids have aspired to be the president, encouraged by parents inspired presidential rhetoric: A wartime president who said, "Yours is not the task of making your way in the world, but the task of remaking the world which you will find before you" and "Whoever seeks to set one religion against another seeks to destroy all religion."

And the decorated World War II pilot: "We are a nation of communities... a brilliant diversity spread like stars, like a thousand points of light in a broad and peaceful sky." And the rough hewn Southerner: "Until justice is blind to color, until education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unconcerned with the color of men's skins, emancipation will be a proclamation but not a fact."

Did you ever consider, Mr Trump, what your comments about Haiti, and so many other things — along with your action — say to boys and girls who would someday be president?

Lie and deny as often as you can. Facts don't matter.

Be divisive, arrogant, crude and a bully. Call people names and demean them. Let them know, you are a genius, they are dumb.

There are good people on both sides. But Muslims are all terrorists — and Mexicans are criminals and rapists. Keep foreigners out with a ban and a wall. Except the white ones from Norway.

National parks or monuments are a waste of land. We need more room for my friends to drill and mine.

Remember, books are written by liars, just like the news — which is all fake.

Girls, go along, to get along, And boys? Just be boys, talking locker room talk. Do whatever you want. Caught? Just deny it.

Back to Haiti.

I suspect you don't know, Mr. Trump, being history and all, that we occupied Haiti for nearly 20 years, then tacitly supported the Duvalier dictators, the mur-



A Haitian mother and her baby at a rural health clinic. DONATO (DANNY) PIETRODANGELO

derous father and his buffoon of a son. No need to read — talk to some of Florida's Haitian scholars.

So defame the country as you will, just remember we were party to the dysfunction Haiti has suffered over the past 100 years.

But most importantly, Commander-in-Chief, find the photograph of the teary eyed, graduating West Point Cadet who explained, "things came to mind and led to those tears. The first is where I started. I am from Haiti and never did I imagine that such honor would be one day bestowed on me. The second is where I am. Men and women who have preserved the very essence of the human condition stood in that position and took the same oath."

Words that matter. Words that remind us of the best of who we are. Words, that you should read, with profound shame.

Donato (Danny) Pietrodangelo first traveled to Haiti with a team of health and human services professionals sent by then Gov. Bob Graham to see conditions that resulted in the influx of more than 35,000 Haitian refugees in the early '80s when the country was preoccupied by Cuban refugees from Mariel. He later produced a documentary on Haitian art and history, and another on Tallahassee doctors and nurses volunteering in a clinic in the rural mountain village of Laschobas. He has written internationally published articles on health care in Haiti and Haitian art. Reach him at pietrol@pipeline.com.