

Opinion: The word of the summer is 'victoriotic'

By Joe Mathews

It's the word of the summer: Victoriotic.

You won't find it in the Oxford English Dictionary, at least not yet.



Joe Mathews

It began its life as an epithet, hurled at me by my 7-year-old son.

"Don't be victoriotic!"

I was guilty as charged. I had finally broken a long losing streak against him in the board game "Sequence." And I celebrated like a Super Bowl-winning quarterback, wagging my finger, dancing, and sticking out my tongue at the vanquished second-grader.

In other words, I had taken the state of being victorious too far. I had over-celebrated the win. I was so immature, even a 7-year-old noticed.

In my own defense, I'm not the only one being victoriotic these days.

The news media is thoroughly dominated by Patient Zero of the

victoriotic epidemic—Donald Trump. He’s constantly rubbing his primary victories, his wealth, his hot wife in everyone’s faces.

Of course, he’s both a politician and absurdly rich—two major risk factors for victoriotic behavior. It’s now standard political strategy to blow any victory, no matter how small, into D-Day proportions in the name of “winning” the ever-shrinking news cycle.

And the rich? While it may be hard to believe, there once was a time when the wealthy downplayed their good fortune. Now much of America runs on the victoriotic speeches, books, and philanthropy of billionaires, who tell the world how great the rest of us can be if we would only heed their advice on whatever topic they imagine themselves to be experts in: education, science, environmentalism, media, sports, politics, space travel.

California, with more than its share of rich people and politicians, is our victoriotic global capital. And nobody does victoriotic like the Bay Area, with its new money tech giants. Our social media platforms basically exist for victoriotic pronouncements—about professional accomplishments, vacations, volunteerism and winsome children and pets.

Still, Silicon Valley lags Hollywood in victoriotic behavior (if little else), which was long ago institutionalized by a culture where every actor is a star, every film is a hit and everybody is feeling “better than ever.” Just ask them.

California’s public sector is also experiencing a victorioticism bubble.

We are bragging about our job growth and the ever-larger global profile of our economy (and not talking so much about the Census Bureau’s supplementary poverty measure showing that, accounting for the cost of living and public benefits, we have America’s highest incidence of poverty). Our elected

officials constantly tout our leading role in fighting climate change (even as the state's cap-and-trade regime threatens to fall apart). Our public universities are always described as the world's best (even as they charge more, and provide less). We congratulate ourselves on our open-mindedness about immigrants because we offer drivers' licenses for the undocumented and health benefits for undocumented children (even as millions of undocumented Californians live in the shadows).

This summer has brought great anxiety about the popular anger in the state and in the country, about the less fortunate lashing back at the more fortunate. Is the reason for the populist backlash the inequality itself? Or is it the endless victoriotic laps being run by society's winners—on the plethora of media platforms that make the most fortunate among us more in-your-face visible than ever before?

Victoriotic behavior has many motivations. People seek validation, credibility, attention, celebrity, vindication, and even love. Or they may be expressing deep insecurities, as Trump does when he exaggerates his billions. Medical research suggests that human beings exaggerate our victories because of our brain chemistry; victorioticism feels good to us, at least for a while.

But I wonder whether living in a big state makes people feel they need to scream about even the slightest wins just to get noticed. There is so much competition—for jobs, for schools, for mates, for parking spots—that you have to be competing, to be winning, at all times. If you're not victoriotic, you're not trying. You may even be made to feel like you're losing.

One school of thought is that this epidemic, like so many other social maladies, is the product of the ways we're parenting our children now. In the second decade of the 21st century, every major moment of our children's lives can be documented with a phone, and shared, victoriotically, with

friends, family and the whole world.

My son is annoyed by this, quite intensely. He calls out adult behavior for being victoriotic, and is careful not to make victoriotic statements himself.

Maybe you shouldn't do a column about my word, he tells me. It would be victoriotic to brag about your son coining the term, he adds.

Yes, it would, kid. And I just did it anyway.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zocalo Public Square.