

Opinion **Life & Arts**

Audacity trumps truth for the Talented Mr Santos

The congressman-elect's controversial campaign tells us something important about US politics

JOSHUA CHAFFIN

Joshua Chaffin YESTERDAY



George Santos stands outside the House chamber in Washington, DC on January 3 © Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

When George Santos set about concocting his campaign biography, he did so with all the fidelity of a Russian internet troll creating an online dating profile.

Seeking election as a congressman in Long Island, the Catholic, Brazil-born Santos said he was “a proud American Jew” and claimed that his maternal grandparents had escaped Nazi persecution in Belgium. Later, after *The Forward* found that these grandparents had been born in Brazil, Santos described himself to another newspaper as “Jew-ish” instead.

Nor had the 34-year-old Republican worked at Goldman Sachs or Citigroup, as he stated on a bio, or graduated from New York University or Baruch College. Or any college, for that matter. The list goes on.

And it worked. In November, Santos claimed the previously Democratic district in one of the Republican party’s biggest triumphs of the midterm elections.

New York’s Gatsby-esque, fake-it-till-you-make-it ethos too easily crosses from chutzpah into outright deceit

Even in a Congress that boasts its share of loonies and liars and election deniers, Santos seems to set a new standard for deceit. He is now under investigation for fraud in New York and his native Brazil. Writing in the New York Times, Tom Suozzi, his Democrat predecessor, expressed sadness “to be succeeded by a conman”.

And yet . . . I must confess a certain perverse admiration. To lie in the way that Santos has requires reserves of audacity, creativity and nerve that most people can scarcely imagine. And where but New York could someone lie about being Jewish to gain political advantage?

It turns out that an age in which most things can be discovered with just a few keystrokes is, paradoxically, a fine time for fabulists. Around the time Santos’s lies were unravelling, Sam Bankman-Fried, the boyish crypto whizz, was being hauled into a Bahamian jail cell and portrayed by New York prosecutors as a millennial Bernie Madoff who pilfered hundreds of millions of dollars in investor funds. He denies this.

Plenty of politicians from both parties have fibbed about their records and accomplishments, including President Biden. But for the uber-liars, the path was lit by the US’s former commander-in-chief, a chronically bankrupt property developer who managed to convince his marks that he was a brilliant businessman and then sold them on “the big lie” that the 2020 election was rigged.

Like Trump, the great liars have great charisma. Often their lies are about things we wish to be true. I suspect, for example, that the Ukrainian conwoman who successfully passed herself off as a Rothschild at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago golf club succeeded, in part, because its nouveau-riche members were only too eager to imagine they were mingling with old-world money.

Also like Trump, great liars are unyielding. I recall a former classmate recounting the wisdom passed down from his Texas oilman father: “They catch you in one lie, son, just keep going. Jump right into another lie. Don’t stop.” True to form, Santos did not budge much when confronted. What seemed like wholesale falsehoods to critics were, he insisted, merely “résumé embellishments”.

In New York City, it is said you are never more than a few feet from a rat. Or a liar, I

would add. The city's Gatsby-esque, take-it-till-you-make-it ethos too easily crosses from chutzpah into outright deceit — about one's background, accomplishments, bank account, charitable endeavours, and so on. Lies cover shame. They can also be useful when trying to unload bundles of toxic securities.

If only the Talented Mr Santos had gone into private equity. But he is in Washington, where his florid goofiness makes it hard to judge just how consequential his dishonesty will be. How will it compare, for example, to that of the conservative Supreme Court justices who assured lawmakers during confirmation hearings that a woman's constitutional right to an abortion was settled law — only to overturn it?

In the meantime, the blame game has begun about what allowed for his farcical rise. Fingers are being variously pointed at a negligent New York Democratic party, the decay of the local news outlets that would have scrutinised such candidates in the past (although at least one publication did), and the moral rot at the heart of the Trump Republican party. Many of Santos's suburban voters probably care less about his integrity than his promises to deliver lower taxes and less crime.

I suspect in this hyper-partisan era there is less public appetite for hard truth than narrative and tribal identity. George Santos, whoever he actually is, may yet give his supporters just what they want.

Email Joshua at joshua.chaffin@ft.com

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