

TRUMPISM – THE ENIGMA

There are three aspects to the challenge posed to us by the Trump phenomenon. They are interwoven. *First is interpreting and explaining the psychopathology of the man and his minions.* In intellectual terms, this is the easiest challenge. Trump is a textbook malignant narcissist at the core - a trait that underlies every thought and act. It is laced with a strong sadistic streak along with predatory impulses - now aggravated by clear signs of dementia. Once we recognize the basic type, everything else becomes understandable. That is not to claim them to be predictable. That's because the demands of maintaining the grandiosity, yet vulnerable sense of self leads to erratic conduct as tactical needs and circumstances dictate. No restriction from ideology, obligation or institutionally imposed control exists to attenuate that condition. Nor does humane instinct.

Second is the requirements to counteract the baneful effects of his destructive actions. That is the political dimension. The feasibility of any prescription must take into account the motives and character of Trump's accomplices. They include his sycophants, donors, fellow aberrant types and those who see him as an instrument for achieving drastic alterations in the politico-economic-social character of the American republic. In the last category we find the financial predators, the Silicon Valley powerhouses, the would-be successors, and the Millenarian Christian Right. Scoundrels all.

Third is the devolution and perversions of the United States' political culture and behavioral norms that are the critical permissive element in the equation. As of this writing 35% of surveyed Americans still view with favor the performance of this manifestly psychotic neo-Fascist who 6 years ago incited a violent assault on the Capitol itself. To top it off, a vulgar buffoon reminiscent of old-timers on the down-market vaudeville circuit. They, plus an additional 15 of voters, twice have elected him to serve as custodian of the nation's welfare - and nearly did a third time. Therein lies the heart of the mystery.

Let's put this in historical perspective. Donald Trump is warring against the American Constitutional order – on all fronts, relentlessly. He is not a democrat; his obsessions are power, control and fame. For him the law is a speed bump on the road to autocracy. He is a very sick man who corrupts, debases and destroys everything that he touches. No previous President comes close to having been a similar threat to the very essence of the country. Trump literally is off-the-charts – unique in his malevolence. Yet, the man retains the support of a very large slice of the public. He totally dominates American life – setting the agenda, the tone, and what is permissible to say. Moreover, he serves as model for the aspiring autocrats who these days pervade nearly all of our institutions – private as well as public.

The normalization of Trump, and Trumpism, is the most telling element in our national tragedy. For it reveals the degeneration in our political culture that facilitates, encourages and perpetuates it. Other Presidents, whose perceived failings were incomparably minor, registered drops in public favor much greater than Trump's. Something fundamental has happened in terms of our awareness, critical faculties,

and ability to face realities – a transformation that is proving deadly for American democracy.

Here is some evidence:

1. Harry TRUMAN Lowest Rating 22%

The Korea embarrassment – although General Douglas MacArthur deserved the blame

2. Dwight EISENHOWER 48%

IKE was IKE

3. John KENNEDY 56%

4. Lydon JOHNSON 38%

Vietnam was LBJ's undoing. Not because the war itself lacked the support of most Americans. Quite the opposite – a substantial majority backed it. At least until the Tet Offensive in early 1968 revealed the futility of the American efforts. Rather, it was LBJ's manner of coping with the turmoil it created. We now know that JFK had reached the decision to begin disengagement from the war when assassinated in November 1963. Johnson shared that inclination. However, he was intimidated by McGeorge Bundy and Robert MacNamara who threatened to denounce him before the 1964 election were he to abandon the war. He could be intimidated as JFK could not. Thereby, Johnson sealed his political fate – as Vietnam eclipsed historic domestic accomplishments: *inter alia* MEDICARE, the War on Poverty, civil rights.

5. Richard NIXON 25%

The two most notable features of his tenure were Watergate and his inability to square the circle in seeking a tenable outcome to Vietnam at a domestically acceptable cost. Most people cite Watergate as the ultimate example of a malfeasance by a sitting President. Yet, all of his misdeeds look like juvenile pranks compared to Trump's sustained criminality and denial of Constitutional stipulations. As to Vietnam, let's bear in mind that Nixon won a landslide victory in 1972 over George McGovern who made opposition to Vietnam the central plank in his platform. Also to his credit was the brilliantly executed opening to China.

[Nixon's near-impeachment experience concluded with what amounted to an indictment by the House Judiciary Committee - 7 of whose 17 Republican members voted for the resolution. Nowadays, you couldn't get 6 Republicans from the House contingent of 221 to vote 'NO' on any Trump proposal - even if it called for erection of a double life-size statue of Melania in the nude sitting on Abe Lincoln's lap at his Memorial.]

6. Jimmy CARTER 24%

The most damaging causes of Carter's decline were the Iran rescue fiasco and his inability to cope with the twin effects of the stagflation stemming from the sequential oil crises of the 1970s. Otherwise, there was no obvious negative development to cut so deeply into his popularity, torpedo his campaign and trigger the stark loss to Ronald Reagan. Notably, Carter's perceived personal

image – the likability factor – sunk him; form over substantial. So, too, the feckless primary challenge from Ted Kennedy.

7. Ronald REAGAN

37%

The ‘gipper’ has achieved legendary status in the minds of the nation’s political class. Reagen ushered in the conservative (reactionary) turn in American political culture – a hero to Republicans and an impregnable bastion for the abject Democratic leadership to surmount. Still, his all-time low rating occurred for a reason no more dramatic than the mild recession in the early 980s. Americans at that time were judgmental.

8. George H. W. BUSH 28% (high favorable 89%)

Bush led the United States to decisive victory in Gulf War I. He skillfully managed the intricate diplomacy associated with the Cold War’s end on American terms, and took the tension out of the nuclear confrontation by driving through arms control accords initiated by Reagan. The disparity between Bush’s high and his low score is unmatched – a differential of 60 points. That clearly is inconceivable these days marked by conformity and stasis.

9. Bill CLINTON

37%

The most notable thing that can be said about the two Clinton administrations is that he fathered the Great Financial Crisis of 2008-2009 by liberating Wall Street from government regulation and restraint. His famed “Third Way” philosophy was a cover for perpetuating a more palatable anti-government Reaganism which empowered the Democratic Party’s rich donors while abandoning traditional ties with its natural constituencies. (*“The days of big government are over”*) None of this was recognized at the time; therefore, not the cause of his low-point in the ratings game. Monica Lewinsky? As the Clintons’ celebrity buddies like to say, *“There is no such thing as good publicity or bad publicity; there is just publicity.”* The numbers indicate a low correlation in time between that sordid affair and his low poll scores. The Lewinsky ‘happening’ foreshadowed the Trump scandals – not coincidentally since the two men were pals of Jeffrey Epstein and his consort Ghiselle Maxwell (now occupying the royal suite at the country club federal lock-up in New Mexico).

10. George W. BUSH

25%

On the plus side in terms of ratings: riding the post-9/11 patriotic upsurge, Keynesian-style military spending to spur the economy, cultivating key components of the Reagan coalition and adding the burgeoning Christian Right, the compromised Democrats’ political ineptitude. On the minus side: the Iraq fiasco, the Hurricane Katrina fiasco, the financial collapse. Like Reagan, the asset of being a ‘nice guy’ did not immunize him from critical scrutiny.

11. Barack OBAMA

38%

Obama's lack of convictions, dedication to the vacuous politics of Bipartisan "common ground," and the masking of a realpolitik foreign policy with noble rhetoric, extended the void in the nation's public discourse that helped prepare the ground for the forces promoting Trump. Tepid ratings in tepid times. He was at heart an establishmentarian. Obama believes that the country's entrenched institutions are the pillars of the Republic that ensure stability and order. Hence, his first official act as President was a visit to Langley where he extended blanket absolution for the CIA's crimes from Iraq to Afghanistan, to Guantanamo. Obama greatly expanded the surveillance state and pioneered drone killings as his contributions to the War On Terror.

Too, he appointed that arch hard-liner Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense – embodiment of the military Establishment. That step anticipated a foreign policy that produced a big increase in troop deployments to Afghanistan (where they remained for the next 8 years until the Pentagon staged a reenactment of Saigon 1975), the Maidan coup against a democratically elected president in Ukraine, joining the Saudi crimes in a brutal war in Yemen that left a few hundred thousand civilian casualties, and taking the ritual Presidential pledge of allegiance to Bibi Netanyahu's Israel.

Domestically, at the height of the financial crisis, he placed in charge of the response the very men who were its causal agents: Robert Rubin and Larry

Summers (embodiments of the financial Establishment). They – along with Ben Bernanke at the Fed – authored the strategy of funneling trillions into the hands of banks and corporations with no direction as to how it should be used. The frustration and anger thereby engendered were diverted from the culpable to feed the Tea Party *cum*/MAGA mania – creating the conditions for the rise of Donald Trump.

Barack Obama fit the tenor of the times – a Messiah without Mission or Message. His legacy was to bequeath a country ripe for the pretend Saviour who now occupies the Oval Office – another native species who, too, is well-suited to the 21st Century American eco-system.

Obama's one notable achievement that is seen widely as his legacy was Obamacare. That Rube Goldberg-esque creation did partially fill the gaps in American healthcare, albeit at the expense of a true overhaul both less costly and more comprehensive. That's the predictable outcome, though, when the design's principal requirement was that it be "market-friendly." The issue's bearing on swings in Presidential ratings is obscure.

11. Joe BIDEN 36%

Biden was an inertial, infirmed President who allowed the momentum behind the accelerating decline of the democratic ethos that provides the critical software lubricating the system's institutional workings to strengthen. Abroad, he enthusiastically made the United an accomplice to genocide in Palestine,

fanned virulent anti-Russian sentiment and god-fathered the historic Sino-Russian alliance. None seemed to cut much ice with an electorate and media whose fixation remained on Trump. Ratings expressed mood, pick-and-choose issue concerns and, above all, attitudes toward Trump. All federal elections since 2017 in effect have been referenda on Trump.

Juxtaposing the pattern of Trump's support over time to that of other Presidents is revealing of two peculiar features that help explain the Trump phenomenon. First is its exceptional stability. Over the 21 months of his second term, ratings have moved with a remarkably narrow range: 34/49, just 15 percentage points. Only within the past few months, coincident with a wave of bad economic news, has the spread widened. A similar consistency marked his ratings in the first term. (54/39)

Second, such gradual change as has occurred seem largely unrelated to outstanding events over the period, e.g. the Gaza genocide, the Iran war, the tariff caper. This constancy, along with imperviousness to Trump's kaleidoscopic actions and their nefarious consequences, suggests the dynamic of a cult. Not reasoned reactions to observed reality, but rather total absorption into a movement energized by fierce emotions rather than any semblance of thought. The cultist is mesmerized by the charismatic leader and swept up in the excitement of ritualized mass passions. (S)he is less the *True Believer* than the *True Emoter*.

The oddity of Trump's ratings trajectory points to another noteworthy feature. The numbers' stickiness suggests that the fraction of his supporters that is constituted by gung-ho MAGA loyalists appears to be increasing steadily relative to legacy Republicans or single issue (immigration/abortion) voters. Let's also bear in mind that Trump received 15 million more votes in 2024 (post-1/6) than he did in 2016 – lending validity to the hypothesis.

[American voters' tolerance for incompetent/dangerous leaders is unique among Western democracies. Macron in France has a favorability rating of 12%; Friedrich Merz in Germany 17% in just 18 months – his predecessor Olaf Schulz also hovered in the teens; Keir Starmer managed to reach 21% in 2 years before being unceremoniously canned in favor of the new boy – Andy Burnham; Canada saw the decline and sudden fall of Justin Trudeau. (The Brits have run 7 of these people through 10 Downing Street over the past decade as if they were auditioning for *Britain Got Talent*.) Evidently, those foreigners have a nose for losers that we - steeped in 250 years of democratic experience - now lack. The common reason for those ignominious rejections is unabashed disdain for the interests and welfare of the majority of their citizens that they swore to secure. So, does 35% make Trump a 'winner' by comparison – or just lucky that Americans are so easily duped?]

Today's United States has lost its capacity for critical thinking. Detachment from public life, a culture of studied ignorance, and a pervasive nihilism that blurs actuality and virtual realities are the causes. Together, they have dulled discernment and erased common standards of belief and behavior. Whatever

critical faculties remain are neutered by the lack of courage in expressing the conclusions they produce. *We have become a country of cowards*. A muted pseudo-opposition party, a fully regimented Republican Party, scared and intimidated elites easily extorted: famed law firms who pay Donald Trump protection money, the resonant silence of civic society – the Bar Associations, the AMA, the American Psychiatric Association, the collaborators at the American Psychological Association, the abstaining church denominations, and the complicit universities. The performance of academia is most despairing – redolent of all that ails our institutions. Abuse of authority, craven acceptance of demands put on them by Jonathon Miller’s White House racist enforcers, billionaire Zionist donors and their local agitators – the hallmarks of present-day university “leaders” whose sense of rectitude has evaporated. In their obsequious confessions of non-existent anti-Semitism, they remind us of the Moscow purge trials of the 1930s. There, life-long Bolsheviks (Bukharin, Zinoviev *et al*) admitted under torture to be in the pay of fictitious foreign agents. Our contemporaries in the groves of academe readily bend to pressure of far milder sorts.

Then, there is the fabled 5th Estate – the media. A pale shadow of formidable presence whose mission to find the truth and hold the powers-that-be accountable and faithful to their Constitutional oath has given way to the blandishments of serving as a kept press.

The United States today is a society within fully a third of the citizenry thinks that it’s OK for the President to incite violent assaults on the Capitol, to deny

the legitimacy of elections whose outcome displease him, to defy court orders, to create a corps of masked thugs who terrorize American cities. That is a country ripe for Fascism.

Cheers

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