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THE TRUMP PARADOX

It's hard to argue against Donald Trump being amoral. He lies habitually and shamelessly. He is a supreme narcissist. Vindictive and often vicious by nature, he demands complete loyalty from subordinates, but is only loyal to himself. And then there are those cringe-worthy misogynistic statements (grabbing you-know-what), disrespect for war heroes like John McCain, disdain for science and scientists, reluctance to speak out against racism and white supremacy, and so on. Peter Wehner, a former aide to Presidents Reagan and Bush, put it well: "Asking Trump to understand morality is like asking a person born blind to understand color."

And so, the Trump paradox is this: *How can so many people support a person who lacks the key moral qualities - honesty, modesty, integrity and compassion - that we normally associate with good people?* This is not a trivial issue because Trump's amorality during his presidency has had major consequences. Consider two examples: his mishandling of the COVID pandemic, and his attempts to subvert the presidential election.

The pandemic began with Trump lying about the seriousness of Covid-19 even as he was fully aware of it himself (he admitted as much to Bob Woodward), followed by his refusal to don a mask and disparaging the practice in others. Feeding his need for mass adulation by holding giant pre-election rallies, often in areas where contagion was rampant, he created mass-spreader events that led to the illness and death of an unknown number of the mask-less attendees. Herman Cain,

a former presidential candidate who died after attending an indoor Trump rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma was the most prominent victim. These actions attest to Trump's politization of the greatest tragedy to strike our country in the last century and utter lack of consideration, even for his own followers. Although he does deserve credit for the warp-speed development of vaccines, his attitude and behavior during the last year of his presidency has contributed to the death of tens of thousands of our fellow Americans who followed his messaging in good faith.

A second, more lingering example of the extent to which Trump is amoral is his brazen lying about the outcome of the presidential election. To attempt to subvert the very core of our democratic system in a desperate, last-ditch grab at staying in power may well be the most selfish and unpatriotic act of any American President. Now, more than a year later, Trump still unashamedly trumpets the Big Lie. So much for America first.

Yet, his followers could care less. After being impeached twice and losing the Presidency and the Senate, he has managed to keep the Republican party and his evangelical base under his spell. Remarkably, something like two thirds of House Republicans will still not acknowledge the fact that Joe Biden fairly won the election. This is in spite of dozens of failed lawsuits and multiple vote recounts in four swing states that didn't change a thing. This brings us back to the question of how can this morally untrustworthy individual maintain such a sizeable and devoted following in a free and democratic society?

To better understand this paradox, I turned to several of my Republican friends who support Trump. Some said that they recognize Trump's character flaws but support him because of his

conservative positions. A few took heart in his being a businessman - good for the economy - and praised his no-nonsense foreign policy.

Most often, a pro-Trump friend would counter that, however serious, Trump's shortcomings pale next to the collective subversiveness and hypocrisy of the Left. They maintained that the Left is guilty of deep moral sins such as being anti-family, anti-decency, anti-Christian, and anti-American, and that its incremental efforts to impose a radical agenda on our society present an existential threat to our normal way of life. The fact that the Left's relatively-modern beliefs run counter to the traditional teachings of the great monotheistic religions and to long-standing Judeo-Christian culture is summarily brushed aside. By invoking secular humanism and using historical injustices as a battering ram with which to beat down alternative views, the Left has appointed itself as the moral arbiter of our society. This includes cancel-culture, the coining of terms such as 'woke' (which implies that someone who is not in step with liberal views is asleep), and firm adherence to political correctness. I recently saw a T-shirt in Arizona that summed up this cultural disconnect: deceptively emblazoned with a Biden/Harris logo, the fine print beneath read: *No more borders, no more walls, no more genders, girls with balls.*

By focusing on hot-button sociocultural issues and presenting a counter-narrative to the Left, Trump has managed to secure and harden his Republican base. His tacit support of white supremacists and anti-immigration policies appeal to those that feel that America is becoming a welfare state and furthers a sense of tribalism. He may be a bully, at least he is *our* bully, or so the reasoning goes. He speaks his mind. If one believes that liberalism will lead to socialism and loss of individual freedom, repeal of the second amendment, and the death of the nuclear family, the moral flaws of one individual, - even if he is the President - hardly matter.

Notably, Trump is not a dyed-in-the-wool conservative, an evangelical, or even a traditional Republican. He seldom attends church, preferring a Sunday round of golf, has changed his political affiliation six times since 1987, and has been abandoned by a number of prominent and respected conservatives such as George Will and David Brooks because of his coarsening our social discourse and antipathy to such traditional Republican/conservative positions as globalization and free trade.

Of course, the truth is that while the Democratic party has drifted left for decades, at least on sociocultural issues, the Republican party has similarly drifted right in their tendency to favor big business and wealth, indiscriminate support of gun rights, attempts to abridge women's rights, and to alter state election laws to limit minority participation. Consequently, the fulcrum by which political balance is normally maintained – the moderate center - has gone missing. Without that middle ground, you are either on one side or the other. Politics have become highly personal and close to the heart. Sadly, discussions of political differences – even among friends and family – have become emotionally treacherous.

We can't blame Trump alone for this sorry state of affairs, since the antecedents of social polarization and the culture wars (particularly over LGBTQ issues) precede his tenure by decades. But because he does not shy away from, even revels in conflict, Trump has managed to effectively channel and amplify the pent-up anger of his constituency. That the left can no longer be tolerated and must be stopped (or they will destroy our country as we know it) was the driving force behind the stop-the-steal lies, and the rationalization that catalyzed the unprecedented events of January 6th.

In addition to the above, I would suggest that there are four personal qualities that have contributed to Trump's success in 2016, and to his lingering popularity with the Republican base.

The first two, best considered together, are *leadership* and *charisma*. Like most narcissists, Trump brims with self-confidence. He really likes himself, so why wouldn't we? But most of all, it's his charismatic personality that people attach to. His brashness, swagger and the I-say-it-as-I-see-it manner appeal to the politically disenfranchised. He acts impulsively and impudently. He never apologizes or retracts. He is decisive. Unlike Obama, who was prone to paralysis-by-analysis, there is nothing cerebral or introspective about Trump. Trump's combination of utter certainty and boldness of action, combined with his ability to stay in the spotlight gets and keeps people's attention. It also leads - at least in people thus susceptible - to adulation. In contrast to the stereotype of a professional politician, Trump says what he thinks and, whether you like him or not, you have to admit that he's got balls. And although he may not behave presidentially by Washington standards, Trump always *appears* presidential (the dark suit, white shirt and red tie are *de rigueur*) and takes pains over his personal appearance by dying and coiffing his hair, spending time in a tanning booth, always walking tall and proud and so on. He is nothing if not iconic.

The third personal quality is the tonality of his *communication*, which is both simple and wily. He professed a hatred and distrust of the mainstream media, but managed to be the headline most every day of his presidency. Nuanced phrases, complex ideas, or even questions never enter his speech, which the writer Phillip Roth derisively (but aptly) called *jerkish*, Trump talks like your union-rep uncle from Queens: simple, declarative, repetitive. Trump also doesn't like other people speaking for him, which is why press conferences became passé during his Administration. Instead, he chose to tweet (or used to) many times a day, *mano-a-mano*, right into the ear of 90

million people. *We won the election by a LOT! Crazy Nancy is a LOSER!* and so on. Hearing directly from the President (now, ex-President) is much more engaging than reading about him in some newspaper. His tweets, often containing misspelled words and written in an 8th grade vocabulary, came across as being spontaneous and genuine.

This combination of charisma, leadership and ability to communicate directly to his base gives Trump a lot of personal appeal, especially to white people who tend to have traditional, working class, salt-of-the-earth backgrounds. His simple (but unoriginal) messaging of *make America great again (MAGA)* and *America First* and oft-iterated support for our military and police fan individual patriotism, at least the *rah-rah* kind, and his us-vs.-them attitude tinged with urgency has stoked a fierce nationalism, an existential sense of there being a need to act, and to act forcefully, for otherwise dark days lie ahead. And, as he told us at the 2016 RNC, only He can set things right.

These tactics have had a measurable effect. if anything, Trump's loyal base has expanded during his Presidency, since 11 million more people voted for him in 2020 vs. 2016. This is a remarkable statistic for what it says about us. His electoral dishonesty, politization of the pandemic, and egotistical and unethical behavior clearly did not detract from his popularity with like-minded voters. It's just that, likely fueled by indignation, seven million *more* people came out to vote for Joe Biden, who is diametrically opposite to Donald Trump in both character and temperament.

The real irony is that if Donald Trump *were* a more decent person, if he had tried to expand rather than harden his base, he would likely have won the election handily, since his loss was primarily due to a large voter turnout on the side of the Democrats driven by the gut reaction of decent people to his malignant personality. Thus, his chronic dishonesty and long trail of

unapologetically tipped apple carts – especially with regard to the pandemic - did finally catch up with him in terms of electoral consequence. And, to be fair, the covid pandemic – unforeseen, unprecedented – and his fumbled reaction to it deserve some credit as well.

Thus, despite having the grandest stage of all on which to act and the loudest bullhorn, it was Trump's inability to grow into the Presidency because of his personal hubris that led to his political downfall. This is stuff worthy of a Greek tragedy.

Only time will tell, however, whether the events of January 6th were the climax of the play or merely the second act. Although there are some signs of slippage in his popularity, Trump was again overwhelmingly chosen as the Republican front-runner at this year's CPAC meeting. He says that he intends to run, and recently launched his *Truth Social* media app to spread the word.

Sadly, The Trump Paradox is alive and well, and our real reckoning may still lie ahead.

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