

The Case Against Trump

by Lee Gruenfeld*

Like all presidents, Donald J. Trump is a mixture of good and bad. But all of the good things are reduced to ripples in the larger river of destruction the president has unleashed that is eroding the bedrock of American values and its tradition of enlightenment.

The catalog of Trump's transgressions and warped world views is difficult to organize coherently; too many of them transcend categorization because of their scope. But let's give it a try. The following purposely avoids opinions on specific policies, because those are always a matter of personal preference. Instead, the focus is on aspects of this president's character and behaviors that ought to be considered regardless of where on the political spectrum one's sympathies lie.

Lying

The party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command.

—George Orwell, 1984

What you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening.

—Donald Trump, 2018

The *Washington Post's* Fact Checker reported that, last July, Trump made 62 false or misleading statements that put his total since inauguration at over 20,000 such statements, or an average of over 15 per day since he took office. A close examination of this list will tell you that the compilers took a lot of liberties in deciding what constitutes "false or misleading." Many of the items in the list were harmless puffery, questionable as to whether they were actually false, or so vague as to render indeterminate whether they were falsehoods.

As an example, when Trump first told the nation that every patient who needed a ventilator was getting one, there were patients in several major New York City hospitals who were sharing them. This is dangerous, and is only done in emergency situations when there aren't enough machines available. But, if you analyze the sentence, it's technically defensible that "every

patient who needs a ventilator is getting one.” It’s extremely misleading, for sure, but it’s a semantic ambiguity, like the old riddle about how it’s possible for someone to have two coins adding up to fifteen cents when one of them is not a nickel. (*One* of them is not a nickel, but the *other one* is.) So does Trump’s statement count as a lie? We have to give him the benefit of the doubt, even though we know full well what he meant.

However, even if we throw out 75% of the reported list, that still leaves us with 5,000 bald-faced and incontrovertible falsehoods. In prior administrations, it only took one or two misstatements to trigger a major scandal that followed a president for days, weeks or forever, e.g., Barack Obama’s assertion that you could keep your current coverage under the new ACA; G.W. Bush’s lying about weapons of mass destruction and a nuclear weapons program to justify the war in Iraq; Bill Clinton’s denial of an extramarital affair; G.H.W. Bush’s “No new taxes” pledge.

Trump has gotten us so used to his lying that we barely give it a thought, even when those lies are of significant consequence. People might not care that he lied about having sex with porn actresses while his wife was home caring for their five-month-old special needs son, then paying off the women to keep them quiet. They might not care that he altered an official NOAA map with a Sharpie to try to cover up the fact that he misquoted officials about the track of a hurricane, or lied about the size of the crowd at his inaugural even though the truth was plain to see in hundreds of photographs, or claimed that his tax cut was the biggest in history, when in fact it was number eight on that list, or said that he signed more legislation than any other president in his first year, when he’d actually signed less than any president since World War II.

But surely it matters when he tells us, to bolster his stance against immigrants, that 52,687 people in the DACA program are “hardened criminals” when the actual number is more like zero. It matters when he tweeted several hundred times that the Mueller report completely exonerated him of obstruction when it did just the opposite, citing a dozen specific instances that the Mueller team recommended investigating. It matters when he tells us, on the same day that over 1,400 Americans died from the coronavirus, that the pandemic is “under control” and we should re-open the country as quickly as possible. He tells us there were 3,000,000 fraudulently-cast ballots in the 2016 presidential election (there were 34; not 34 thousand or 34 million, just 34), that he was personally responsible for the Veterans Choice law (it was crafted by John McCain and Bernie Sanders and signed by Obama in 2014), that our Covid numbers are the best in the world (they’re the worst), that he imposed a travel ban on China in the early days of the pandemic (40,000 people flew to the U.S. from China *after* the so-called ban) and on and on, by the thousands.

On Sept. 12 he lied four times in a single sentence, when he tweeted, “Was Andy McCabe ever forced to pay back the \$700,000 illegally given to him and his wife, for his wife’s political campaign, by Crooked Hillary Clinton while Hillary was under FBI investigation, and McCabe was the head of the FBI???” The facts are that 1) The donations were not to Andy McCabe; 2) They

were 100% legal; 3) None of it came from Hillary Clinton; 4) McCabe was not head of the FBI at the time.

It matters when he tells us that there was no quid pro quo in his conversation with Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Zelensky even though anyone not in a coma could clearly see from reading the transcript of the call that there was. And it matters when he tells us that Obama bugged his campaign offices, and Trump gets Judge Andrew Napolitano to join in on the accusations, and none of it was true.

Except in matters of national security, and even then only in the most dire of circumstances, it is not right for the president to lie to the people. It is not right for him to make up numbers and situations when it suits his purpose. It is not right for him to tell people that “what you’re reading and what you’re seeing is not what’s really happening” when the truth is right there for them to see. Aside from it being morally and ethically wrong, it also makes it impossible to believe, on its own face, anything the president says.

All of this is obvious and, even among his most ardent supporters, rarely contested. That we have gotten used to it is deeply disturbing, but there is a far more distressing aspect to it than the simple act of chronic lying: What if the president doesn’t know he’s lying?

Politicians have always lied, albeit not usually with Trump’s Olympic-caliber gusto, but it’s fairly evident that their dissembling is purposeful. With Trump, there might be basis to suspect that, in many cases, he believes he’s telling the truth. If that’s the case, we’re dealing with a level of psychopathology unprecedented in the history of the U.S. presidency.

Divisiveness

One would be hard pressed to name another national leader other than Jefferson Davis who has driven a bigger wedge through the middle of the ideological spectrum than Trump. Even close-knit families have been forced to declare strict "No Trump" policies at dinners and holiday gatherings in order to prevent heated and sometimes violent arguments.

No other president could have turned what should have been a unified fight against a deadly virus into a partisan blood bath of biblical proportions. What we have now is a perilous situation in which millions of Trump supporters believe that not taking simple precautions against the virus is a sign of being a true, nobody-pushes-me-around American in the great tradition of our revolutionary founders. Only this president would publicly ridicule a reporter for wearing a mask, and refuse to wear one himself except for two brief photo-ops, despite the insistence of his own experts that doing so saves lives.

In July 2019 Trump tweeted that "Democrats are the true enemy of America." (It was a retweet from a woman who also claimed that Bill and Hillary Clinton harvested glands from the skulls of children to make a sleep medication, but that's another problem entirely.) This tendency to

demonize legitimate opposition as the enemy is the hallmark of every despot in history and has made it virtually impossible to conduct reasoned debate. Combined with the president's lying at the grandmaster level, it has led to statements like this, on Sept. 17 (edited for brevity but the substance remains): "Joe Biden [will] impose a \$4 trillion dollar tax hike, ban American Energy [sic], confiscate your guns, shutdown [sic] the economy, destroy the suburbs, erase your borders, and indoctrinate your children with poisonous anti-American lies."

There is a well-known figure of speech called an *ad hominem*, which occurs when someone who is unable to logically counter an argument instead attacks the arguer. *Ad hominem*s are failures of reason, an attempt to deflect the truth of a proposition by casting personal aspersions instead, focusing on appearance, character, manner of speaking or anything else of a personal nature unrelated to the topic at hand. *You are a bad person; therefore, nothing you say is valid.*

Trump has raised the *ad hominem* to a high art. Nothing the *New York Times* or *The Atlantic* or *CNN* asserts about him can be correct because they're all failing (which is untrue, by the way). These kinds of attacks are authoritarian at heart and have the purpose of delegitimizing opposing opinions so the president doesn't have to mount a reasoned defense. Pointed questions from reporters are often met with retorts like, "You're fake news, and you're a horrible reporter."

Trump has hurled a nonstop barrage of vicious comments at people who have the temerity to assert even the mildest disagreement. He has called them jerks, morons, crazy, demented, traitors, pencil-necked, imbeciles, and much worse, often without accompanying those epithets with a substantive response to the proffered critique. The lowest point by far came when Trump, in front of a large crowd at one of his rallies, did an imitation of New York Times reporter Serge Kovalski, who has a congenital neurological condition called arthrogyrosis that causes his joints to contract. It was the kind of unspeakably cruel and heartless thing that would get a middle-schooler suspended for a week.

That this is all evidence of the temperamental maturity of a petulant child is fairly well-recognized; that it's a deliberate deflection of accountability is more subtle. Either way, the impact on national division is inescapable. A recent president said that he would like to "see the day when we get back to talking about who is right and who is wrong, not who is good and who is bad." Each of this president's *ad hominem* broadsides intensifies the morphing of opponents into enemies and pushes that day further into an unlikely future.

Science Denial

*Every disaster movie starts with
the government ignoring a scientist.*

–Anon

Twenty years ago a scientist named Andrew Wakefield published research showing a link between the childhood MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine and autism. It sparked a worldwide movement to ban such vaccines, as well as many others. When it was revealed in 2004 that Wakefield had falsified his data for financial reasons and no such link actually existed, you would have thought that would be the end of it. But, as per a fascinating phenomenon first described in the classic 1956 book *When Prophecy Fails*, the conviction of the “anti-vaxxers” only grew stronger.

Ten years later, Donald Trump stated that, if he were president, he wouldn’t allow combination shots like MMR because they cause autism. In the six years since, he has never retracted that statement. (Thankfully, the movement lost some steam when it was discovered that its U.S. leader had had her own children vaccinated. But it’s still going strong.)

The evidence for the reality of human-caused global warming is overwhelming. While there is some debate about the precise nature and rate of this change, virtually no serious scientist anywhere in the world harbors doubt about the reality of climate change. Prior to his election, Trump claimed that climate change was a hoax invented by the Chinese to undermine American manufacturing. He later claimed that he was only joking, but maintained the position that efforts to mitigate those changes were being done for the benefit of the Chinese. He also put former Oklahoma attorney general Scott Pruitt in charge of the Environmental Protection Agency. Pruitt is a climate change denier and a close friend of the fossil-fuel industry who built his career on lawsuits against the agency he was being asked to lead, and who sued the Obama administration in 2015 to overturn a rule reducing the amount of pollution flowing into water sources. (Pruitt resigned amid a tidal wave of ethics violations. He was replaced by Andrew Wheeler, a former coal lobbyist.)

Trump eventually began admitting that global warming was probably real, but didn’t believe that it was human-caused, and that scientists who said otherwise were politically motivated. When the federal government’s long-awaited report on climate change was finished in November, 2018, Trump told reporters that he didn’t believe it and ordered it released on the Friday after Thanksgiving so it would die in obscurity.

A year later, a nonpartisan task force of former government officials warned that the treatment of science by the Trump administration had hit a “crisis point.” Representatives of special interest groups were being allowed to influence the conduct of research, findings were altered

to better reflect administration policy, and scientists whose work didn't toe the party line were being harassed. The National Task Force on Rule of Law and Democracy noted at the same time that protocols intended to ensure objectivity and transparency had been eroding through several administrations but had reached their lowest point under Trump.

The list of science-adverse actions by the Trump administration is long, but at the very top are those done during the coronavirus pandemic. More about this later, but for now: The FDA lost its authority to stop the use of inaccurate virus tests. The White House ordered that a report on the predicted pandemic-induced economic downturn not be released. The CDC was ordered to rewrite its guidelines for school re-openings for political reasons. Trump ordered hospitalization data to no longer be reported to the CDC but sent to a third party, and instructed the CDC to delete sections of a COVID-19 guidance document related to religious communities.

Trump has consistently undermined his own administration's scientists, and in some cases has replaced them with truly bizarre choices. When Dr. Anthony Fauci, America's leading expert on infectious diseases, began speaking scientific truth about the pandemic and fervently urged the use of masks, Trump shunned him and turned to an obscure physician named Stella Immanuel to make the case that masks don't work and a cure was available. What the president neglected to add was that Dr. Immanuel claimed that doctors were making medicine using DNA from extra-terrestrials and working on a vaccine to make Americans immune to becoming religious. When asked about this, he responded that "she said that she's had tremendous success with hundreds of different patients. And I thought her voice was an important voice, but I know nothing about her."

It's all too human to latch on to suppositions and theories that support our individual world views, and not to look too closely if there is question as to their validity. Oftentimes, dubious beliefs are benign enough that buying into them has little practical downside. If you believe that pomegranate juice will prevent heart disease or acai berries will help you lose weight or that there's something that will cure your cold, all you'll do is waste some money but probably not hurt yourself.

Sometimes, though, seemingly harmless beliefs can have enormous consequences. If you elect to subject yourself to groundless "alternative medicine" to treat your cancer in lieu of proven therapies, you might die, as did Steve Jobs and Steve McQueen.

Fortunately, we have a tool readily at hand to help us make good decisions. It's called the scientific method, and the process is really simple: You start with a hypothesis, then do experiments or research to confirm or refute it.

Sometimes the results are unambiguous: Water freezes at zero degrees Celsius, nine times five is forty-five, two cannonballs of differing weight will fall at the same rate, and so forth.

Sometimes it's not so clear. For years it was assumed that the physical universe is made up of atoms. Then it was discovered that only 5% of it is. The rest, we now speculate, is composed of

dark matter and dark energy, and while there is evidence to support that, we don't know for sure yet. We also don't know how life began, or if we're alone in the universe, or what's at the bottom of a black hole, even though we have many theories about all of these.

The good news about science, however, is that it gets smarter over time, not stupider. It also knows when it doesn't know something. It doesn't adhere slavishly to unproven conjectures, although the more extraordinary a new conjecture is, the more extraordinary the proof needs to be before it's accepted. But if the proof happens, so does the acceptance.

Science doesn't always apply. It isn't likely to prove one way or the other if you should have faith in the spiritual guidance of your priest or rabbi. It won't tell you whether getting a job right now is better than going on to grad school, or if you're bringing up your kids right.

But when the scientific method does apply, it's the single most powerful and important tool we have to help us make good decisions. It isn't always right, and seemingly radical alternative theories occasionally turn out to be the correct ones (as demonstrated by the scientific method), but it is never the case that ungrounded beliefs, especially blatantly self-interested ones, ought to supplant the best hard evidence available at the time.

We ignore hard evidence at our peril, and anyone in a position of power or influence who denies applicable scientific evidence in favor of baseless beliefs and conspiracy theories is a menace.

Hypocrisy

This shouldn't be too surprising. Anyone who is willing to glibly invent evidence and situations out of thin air is not likely to shy away from unashamed self-contradiction.

Trump severely criticized Obama on dozens of occasions for playing too much golf while president. Two months before the 2016 election he declared at a rally, "I'm going to be working for you. I'm not going to have time to play golf." But Trump has played more golf in his first three years than Obama did in his entire eight-year presidency, at a cost to the taxpayers well in excess of \$150 million. Trump also criticized Obama for taking excessive vacations on the taxpayers' dime, and vowed that he "would not be a president who took vacations." Yet every one of his frequent trips to Mar-a-Lago costs the taxpayers approximately \$3 million, including the use of Air Force One and extra Secret Service protection. That the revenue from housing and feeding his entourage goes to this own resort is another matter. (The president says that he provides those services "at cost" but has never disclosed the details.)

More substantively, Trump also criticized Obama's use of executive orders, calling them "power grabs." During the campaign he said, "Obama goes around signing all these executive orders. It's a basic disaster. You can't do it." Yet in his first twelve days in office he signed twelve

executive orders. Over the same number of months in which Obama issued 108 of them, Trump signed 134.

Last August 13 Trump admitted openly that he was withholding funding of the U.S. Postal Service to make it harder for people to vote by mail. Then he requested a mail-in ballot from the state of Florida. (It's worth noting that everything about Trump's tirades against mail-in voting is the result of his fear that, the more people who vote, the worse his chances are of getting re-elected. One doesn't even begin to know where to comment...)

At an airport rally in Cleveland last August, Trump accused Joe Biden of being against God. ("No religion, no anything. Hurt the Bible, hurt God. He's against God...") This from a man for which no record exists of him entering a house of worship other than for weddings and funerals until he started campaigning, and who had priests and peaceful protestors pepper-sprayed away from a church he wanted use for a photo op but never actually entered.

And then there's the big one. Trump joined the chorus of Republicans who decried Obama's nomination of Merrick Garland to the Supreme Court, saying it was fundamentally unfair for a president in the last year of his term to have that privilege. Obama had ten months left. As of this writing, Trump has fewer than 33 *days* and hasn't even bothered to defend his nominating a replacement for Justice Ginsburg.

Trump said that Obama was a "disaster at foreign policy," that he treated enemies with "tender love and care" and "picked fights with our oldest friends." Now, his BFF on the international scene is Vladimir Putin, leader of America's longest-standing and most consistently hostile enemy. (After Bill O'Reilly asked him how he could support a "killer" like ex-KGB thug Putin, Trump responded, "There are a lot of killers. What, do you think our country's so innocent?") He's also taken out after two of our closest allies, Mexico and Australia. And just weeks after tearing into Obama for not supporting the U.N. resolution against Israeli settlements, saying Obama's abstention "puts Israel in a very poor negotiating position and is extremely unfair to all Israelis," he pleaded with Israel not to expand settlements because it "may not be helpful" for peace in the region.

In 2012 Trump stated that "The electoral college is a disaster for a democracy." Several days after he won the 2016 electoral college but lost the popular election by three million votes, he said "The Electoral College is actually genius."

Hypocrisy is not just an annoying personality trait. It's a signal that the hypocrite can't be trusted. When presidents make open declarations about their beliefs or policy directions, citizens have a right to assume that such avowals are reliable indicators of what they can expect. When those expectations are confounded, debilitating chaos and confusion are the inevitable result, and faith in the president—and the presidency—declines.

Business Skills

Trump's nakedly self-aggrandizing tome *The Art of the Deal* was a bestseller when it was published in 1987, bolstering his carefully cultivated image as a master businessman and deal maker. Only when the real writer, Tony Schwartz, felt compelled to violate the prime directive of ghostwriting and reveal that much of what was in the book was nonsense did cracks begin to appear in the Trump façade. After that, it poured out.

Because of Trump's continuing refusal to release his tax returns based on a fake excuse ("They're under audit"), it's been difficult to get exact numbers. But researchers a while ago came to the conclusion that Trump lost some \$700 million since he inherited his father's businesses, and examination of his subpoenaed tax records backs that up. His father pumped \$400 million back in early on to keep him afloat, and he racked up debt for \$300 million, which is how he handled the full \$700 million loss. So why isn't he dead broke? Because of his involvement in one profitable enterprise, the reality TV show *The Apprentice*, and the licensing of his name to at least 50 projects, mostly real estate-related, in which he has no involvement and no liability. In New York City alone, his name is on Trump International Hotel, Trump Palace, Trump Place, Trump Park Avenue, Trump Parc and Trump Parc East 100, Trump Soho, Trump World Tower and Trump Plaza. He doesn't own any of them but just sold the use of his name. Many of the owners of the residential buildings have sued, successfully, to have his name removed from their buildings. And then there are such products as Trump Vodka, Trump Steaks and Trump Menswear, most of which went out of business.

Trump bankrupted six major companies in his career. One of them was the Trump Plaza Hotel (formerly The Plaza) in New York City, which was well over half a billion dollars in debt when he finally surrendered his 49% stake to investors. Another was the Taj Mahal Casino Resort in Atlantic City. Trump spent \$1.2 billion of other people's money building it, and took it into bankruptcy the following year. He had to give up half his stake as well as his yacht and airline. He bankrupted two Atlantic City casinos in the same year: The Plaza Casino and the Castle Hotel & Casino.

In addition to running six companies into the ground, Trump has been accused of failing to pay vendors for goods and service. He has been involved in an astounding 3,500 lawsuits, including many filed by small, family-owned businesses, some of whom took out loans to pay for materials they needed for Trump projects and which they couldn't repay because Trump stiffed them. Trump prevailed in many of those suits, in which he claimed that work was incomplete or shoddy. But no matter how many of those suits were settled for or against him, the inevitable conclusion is that he's both a deadbeat who doesn't pay his bills and a terrible judge of whom to hire. He was even sued by his own lawyers in some of those cases, and he's been cited by state officials on several dozen occasions for violating labor laws. And then there's Trump University, a scam that cost him \$25 million to settle out of.

That lack of sound judgment eventually showed up in staff selection for his presidential administration. The number of high-level officials he hired and ended up firing beggars belief. Trump lost more key decision makers in his first 32 months in office than any of his five predecessors in their entire first terms. It started with National Security Advisor Michael Flynn just three weeks after the inauguration, and by the end of Trump's first year he'd lost 21 key staffers. Through April of 2020, there has been an 85% turnover rate in the ranks of high-level administration officials. Trump also broke records for Cabinet turnover and has had *four* chiefs of staff since 2017.

There is always some turnover in presidential administrations, but nothing of this magnitude. It's reasonable to conclude that Trump is either badly mismanaging his people or has poor judgment in selecting them. Reviewing some of his statements about them sheds little light on which was which. When Trump chose Rex Tillerson as his first Secretary of State, he said that the former head of ExxonMobil was a "world class player and dealmaker...one of the truly great business leaders of the world." Tillerson lasted about a year, Trump saying he was "lazy as hell" and "dumb as a rock."

A week after firing Tillerson, and just over two years into his presidency, Trump also fired his second national security advisor. The third was former ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton, whom Trump praised right until he fired him, after which he called Bolton a liar whom everyone in the White House hated, "a dope...a jerk...a wacko...a sick puppy...a disgruntled, boring fool" and "a moron who never had a clue."

Before Michael Cohen left the Trump organization, he was "a fine person with a wonderful family." Afterwards, he was "weak...not very smart...a bad lawyer" and "a fraudster." Anthony Scaramucci started out as "a person I have great respect for, and he will be an important addition to this administration." Eleven days later he was "totally incapable" and "a highly unstable nut job." Jeff Sessions went from Attorney General to a "mentally retarded...dumb southerner...Mr. Magoo."

And on and on. As of September 2019, 51 of the top 65 positions in the Executive Office of the President turned over. Sixteen of those positions have turned over *twice* or more. It prompted at least one high-level government official to ask, "Should the guy who hired these idiots be fired himself?"

Whether all this was the result of poor management skills or abysmal judgment of character in picking these people in the first place is hard to say. More than likely, it was a combination of the two, but there's no interpretation that makes it any less appalling.

Personality Disorders

The Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) is the gold standard tool for assessing a person's psychopathic or antisocial tendencies. It consists of twenty personality traits that are scored 0, 1, or 2, depending on how strongly the subject's behavior matches the trait.

Here are fifteen of those criteria:

1. glib and superficial charm
2. grandiose (exaggeratedly high) estimation of self
3. need for stimulation
4. pathological lying
5. cunning and manipulativeness
6. lack of remorse or guilt
7. shallow affect (superficial emotional responsiveness)
8. callousness and lack of empathy
9. parasitic lifestyle
10. poor behavioral controls
11. sexual promiscuity
12. impulsivity
13. irresponsibility
14. failure to accept responsibility for own actions
15. many short-term marital relationships

The evaluation of President Trump with respect to these fifteen items is left to the reader's own judgment. As a reference point, consider that people with no criminal background generally score around 5.

Contrary to popular belief inspired by movies and works of literary fiction, a psychopath is not necessarily a raving axe-murderer but may be highly functional. Recent data from a widely publicized study indicates that one in five corporate CEOs displays psychopathic tendencies, primarily in the form of narcissism. When that narcissism is extreme, or "malignant," it's indicative of high but fragile self-esteem that manifests as an insatiable craving for validation and adulation. Their self-centeredness is so deep-seated that they have little true interest in others and are so lacking in empathy that they rarely express concern for anyone other than themselves.

An example of this occurred when Trump was asked just before a rally whether he was worried about coronavirus contagion because he wasn't wearing a mask. He responded that he felt no anxiety because he was far from "those people down there," i.e., the people in attendance. "I'll be fine," he said, with not one word about the safety of "those people," none of whom was wearing a mask as a result of the president's denigration of those people who do as "politically correct." He similarly criticized Joe Biden in the first presidential debate.

Trump's particularly virulent strain of narcissism makes it impossible for him to ignore even the softest criticism or most harmless kidding. When he inadvertently referred to Tim Cook as "Tim Apple" in an unimportant throwaway line, he could have said, "Sorry...slip of the tongue" and it wouldn't have been even a five-second story. But he insisted that he had said "Tim Cook of Apple" while speaking rapidly, and challenged reporters to listen to a recording to verify it. When that turned out not to work, he changed his story and said he meant, "Tim [comma] Apple," but hadn't slowed down enough to make the pause clear.

That he misspoke or not is inconsequential; his pathological inability to own up to a mistake, however trivial, is. The same thing happened when he walked awkwardly down a shallow ramp at West Point and spent over ten minutes during a rally a week later explaining why it wasn't his fault. When he tried to correct a misstatement about the path of a hurricane by altering a map, the correction was far more disturbing, and revelatory, than the original error.

And it's probably not a good idea to get too deeply into a presidential candidate asserting during a national television broadcast that there was nothing wrong with the size of his genitals. "I guarantee you there's no problem," he assured an anxious citizenry. "I guarantee."

One of the oldest and most eagerly-anticipated events in Washington is the annual White House Correspondents dinner, during which the incumbent president willingly gets roasted to a cinder by gleeful comedians, friends and colleagues. It started in 1921 and fifteen sitting presidents have attended, including Obama, Clinton, Ford and G.W. Bush. Trump, who cannot stand even a joking criticism, has never attended as president, and in 2019 ordered an administration-wide boycott of the event. Interestingly, his burning hatred of Obama likely started at the 2011 dinner when Obama made reference to Trump's leadership of the ludicrous conspiracy theory that Obama hadn't been born in America. Obama said that he was glad the matter had been put to rest so that Trump could focus on what was truly important: finding out what really happened in Roswell, New Mexico, the holy site of UFO fringers. Trump was in the audience and, as everyone howled at Obama's zinger, Trump glared at the president as though hoping he'd explode on the spot. From that point on, Trump has never missed an opportunity to boast of his superiority to his immediate predecessor or to viciously criticize him.

Add to this set of personality disorders raging paranoia. While it's true that even paranoids have real enemies, and that "fake news" may rightfully be considered "enemies of the people," the list of those whom Trump claim relentlessly persecute him and are "fake news" is worth examining. Considering only media outlets for a moment, "enemies of the people" include ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, CNN, Fox News (!), the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, Time Magazine and all "mainstream media" in general. In other words, every major outlet in the country. (The lone exception is a far-right cable channel called OANN that openly advertises itself as one of the "greatest supporters" of Donald Trump and specializes in making up stories and propagating conspiracy theories.) Add to that list purveyors

of fake news to the media and you can throw in the FBI and the CIA, along with the rest of the U.S. intelligence community.

A rational human being, when presented with a tsunami of criticism from every major media outlet in the country, might be persuaded to take a few moments to consider if, just maybe, he might be doing some things wrong. There is little to suggest that Donald Trump has undertaken such a self-examination.

Worldliness

After recent damaging revelations about Trump in Bob Woodward's latest book, *Rage*, people shook their heads in wonder at why the president would agree to be so candid during 18 recorded live interviews with the man who brought down Richard Nixon. One possible answer, which isn't at all farfetched, is that Trump didn't actually know who Woodward was. He knew he was a reporter and author specializing in national politics, but it's likely he didn't realize he was being grilled by the man who brought about the only presidential resignation in American history.

It's probably not surprising that someone staggering under the weight of crippling self-absorption would be less than worldly in matters of history, culture and the general body of knowledge one expects from an educated first-world inhabitant. Trump is rarely interested in books, magazines, newspapers and conversations that don't revolve around him. The CIA officers who present the President's Daily Brief have reported that, if Trump is not the topic, his eyes wander around the room as though seeking escape. (The PDB is a top-secret summary containing the latest critical intelligence and analysis from the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency (NSA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other members of the U.S. Intelligence Community. Its importance to national security cannot be overestimated.) When one of Trump's campaign staffers tried to brief him on the U.S. Constitution (you read that right), he got as far as the Fourth Amendment before, as the staffer reported, "his finger is pulling down on his lip and his eyes are rolling back in his head."

Last Spring, Trump told a group of scientists at the CDC that "People are really surprised I understand this stuff. Every one of these doctors said: 'How do you know so much about this?' Maybe I have a natural ability. Maybe I should have done that instead of running for president." He cited as the likely source of that "natural ability" his "super-genius" uncle who taught at MIT. (That part was true: John Trump was a brilliant electrical engineering professor who was awarded the National Medal of Science by President Ronald Reagan.)

Later, he recommended bleach injections and somehow getting ultraviolet light inside patient's bodies as fruitful avenues of medical research. He asked Bill Gates—twice—if HIV and HPV were the same thing. He bragged that the F-35 Lightning stealth fighter was literally invisible, that

you couldn't see it if you were standing next to it. He said "new environment friendly lightbulbs can cause cancer. Be careful – the idiots who came up with this stuff don't care." He said he believes in global warming but doesn't believe it's human-caused. ("I mean, you have scientists on both sides of it." No, you don't. There is no debate within the scientific community on this.)

Trump has asserted that there are "many cases" of children who become autistic after receiving vaccinations. As it happens, just about every child who ever developed autism had received vaccinations. They also drank milk, learned to walk, and were potty-trained. None of those things, including vaccines, *caused* autism.

Trump was recently asked about QAnon, which sits at the very top of any list of the most ridiculous conspiracy theories on the planet. Its far-right adherents believe that Satan-worshipping pedophiles led by Hillary Clinton are running a global child sex-trafficking ring out of the basement of a pizza parlor in Washington and are plotting against President Trump. When asked about QAnon recently, Trump responded that he wasn't sure who they were, "but I know they like me."

Trump's lack of substantive engagement with the larger world extends to the arts. Just about every president has made the White House a center of cultural celebration. Aretha Franklin, B. B. King and Linda Ronstadt performed at the Clinton White House. George W. Bush, had a long list of musicians perform, including Destiny's Child and Itzhak Perlman. John Kennedy had Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Geraldine Page and legendary ballet choreographer George Balanchine to the White House in just one night, at a state dinner with the French minister of cultural affairs André Malraux. Ronald Reagan was one of the greatest supporters of the arts in presidential history. In just the fall of 1981 he hosted Lionel Hampton, the Statler Brothers, Ella Fitzgerald, Benny Goodman, Beverly Sills and Rudolf Serkin, among others.

A president is not compelled to support the arts and make an effort to bring culture to a wide swath of Americans, but every other president has done it, going all the way back to George Washington, whose step-granddaughter entertained on the harpsichord. Yet Trump's White House is a cultural graveyard. As far as anyone can tell, the only musical group to have performed there is the United States Marine Band. Consistent with a shallow personality, he seems to have no interest in music, painting, dance or any other form of art. Why that's so is anyone's guess, but probably has to do with the fact that there are few song, plays, paintings or operas about him. His primary engagement with the world of culture is his attempts, four year in a row, to put the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting on the chopping block. He has also slammed "failing" Saturday Night Live and threatened to "look into it" after he was the subject of several scathing sketches, and criticized "Hamilton" after its cast openly expressed displeasure with him. ("...which I hear is highly overrated," he threw in, by way of comment on one of the most successful musicals in Broadway history and that's booked solid for about the next hundred years.)

Trump seems devoid of curiosity about the world outside his ego-driven bubble. Curiosity is a character trait that shares much in common, or might be at the root of, other traits we generally treat as meritorious, like selflessness and empathy. Curiosity is also at the heart of our desire to learn more about the world, and the more we learn, the more apt we are to respond to the world in constructive ways. Lack of curiosity might explain why Trump rarely listens to others in meetings but prefers to do all the talking, constantly interrupting and overriding experts who have come to advise him. (The other reason is that he sees asking questions as a sign of weakness, preferring to intimate that he already knows more than the experts do. Trump is a textbook example of the Dunning-Kruger Effect, a wild overestimation of one's knowledge or ability. It's symptomatic of a lack of self-awareness so severe that it prevents one from accurately gauging his own skills.) Thus, when contradicted by CDC chief Robert Redfield on the matter of masks and vaccines, Trump replied that his top public health official was "mistaken...probably confused" or "hadn't understood the question."

Presidents don't need to be geniuses. But they ought to know the difference between HIV and HPV, that disinfectants used to clear surfaces of microbes are not candidates for injection, that stealth aircraft are not literally invisible, that energy in the human body is not finite and will not be used up by exercising, that the World Trade Centers would not have survived had asbestos been used in their construction, that asbestos wasn't banned by pressure from mobs who owned asbestos companies, that windmills don't cause cancer or kill millions of birds, that the coronavirus is not "just like" the flu, that Ted Cruz's grandfather was not involved in the Kennedy assassination, that Fox News is not owned by a Saudi billionaire, that Joe Scarborough did not kill one of his interns, that you can't stop hurricanes with thermonuclear weapons, that American revolutionaries didn't take over airports in the 18th century, that the "rockets' red glare" at Fort McHenry was from the War of 1812 and not the Revolutionary War, that it was the British who burned down the White House in 1812 and not the Canadians, that his wasn't "the biggest electoral college win since Ronald Reagan" (both of Obama's were bigger) and to at least know what a Gold Star family is if you're going to attack one.

The president should know, before threatening to prevent Russia from invading Ukraine, that it had already done so *two years* before. He should know, before slamming Hillary Clinton for voting in favor of the Iraq war, that Mike Pence had done the same thing. A suddenly God-fearing president should not assume that claiming he is only the second (after Mary) sinless human being since Creation is going to play well in public. (Trump: "Why do I have to repent? Why do I have to ask for forgiveness if I'm not making mistakes?") A president should have enough cultural awareness to know that saying, "She has a nice figure. If Ivanka weren't my daughter, perhaps I'd be dating her," is not likely to convey the impression of a healthy father-daughter relationship.

Authoritarianism

“...once in power, a leader with an Antisocial Personality Disorder thrives on continuing conflict and never seeks peace.”

–Daedalus Trust, 2016

Even a cursory examination of the vast amount of research on authoritarianism reveals a number of personality traits common to tyrants regardless of geographical location or time in history. See if any of these sound familiar (all of which were drawn from sources that pre-date Trump’s candidacy):

- Intimidation of the press while encouraging supportive outlets
- Desire to imprison or otherwise punish opponents
- Subverting law enforcement and intelligence services
- Breaking promises and commitments with no remorse or apology
- High levels of turnover in key positions
- Little respect for existing norms, rules and traditions
- Repeated lying with no fear of the consequences
- Claiming that free elections are likely to be rigged
- Extreme narcissism and deep fear of humiliation
- Admiration for other powerful dictators
- Placing blame for the country’s ills on immigrants and minorities
- Never admitting mistakes or accepting responsibility for poor outcomes
- Using or encouraging violence against perceived internal troublemakers
- Demonizing opponents and treating them as enemies of the state
- An obsession with “winning” and good press, even from media one despises
- Erosion of public transparency and accountability
- Surrounding oneself with sycophants
- No tolerance for external or internal criticism
- Belief that one has more expertise than trained and respected professionals
- Overblown perception of one’s intelligence and skills
- Appointment of unqualified but loyal personnel to key positions
- Intimidation of government agencies to fall in line
- Rampant fearmongering, especially with respect to opposing candidates

Pandemic Response

While Trump undertook some steps to secure equipment to treat Covid-19 sufferers, he failed, disastrously and catastrophically, in the area of prevention. It wasn't just an error of judgment; it was a callous, selfish and self-serving set of actions that resulted directly in the unnecessary loss of tens of thousands of American lives. There is little need to belabor this issue, except to pinpoint the motivation for obvious dereliction of duty.

At base, Trump has only one real advantage going into the 2020 elections: He has millions of voters convinced that he is responsible for the booming economy we enjoyed during his first three years in office. This is a debatable point, the alternative view being that, while he can rightfully claim credit for a sharp rise in business optimism, he is riding an economic wave set in motion by his predecessors. Whichever argument is more correct is not important. What's important is that a lot of people believe Trump is responsible for all of it.

The pandemic plunged America into an alarmingly precipitous financial tailspin. It wasn't Trump's fault, at least in the beginning, but it threatened to undermine his reliance on a strong economy as the basis for his re-election. The right thing to do would have been to keep the country in lockdown for a little longer, and then re-open while maintaining strict protocols for preventing a recurrence until a vaccine or cure was developed. But the thought of the economy still in chaos, and along with it his chances for a second term, led this president to undermine the guidance of the country's top public health professionals and re-open the country prematurely and recklessly, despite those professionals practically guaranteeing a lethal resurgence of the virus.

Three days after endorsing and presenting the re-opening plan carefully devised by the coronavirus panel he himself appointed, he sided with protesters against it. He ridiculed the wearing of masks, browbeat governors into re-opening their states, exhorted education administrators to open all the schools as quickly as possible, cited phony or misleading statistics to demonstrate how well we were doing, and then, as the case and mortality numbers skyrocketed as predicted, proceeded to essentially pretend that the pandemic wasn't there at all.

Just when those numbers were at their lowest and still trending downward, this president effectively said, *Looks like the parachute is slowing us down, so let's cut the strings.* On the day he first used the phrase "We're turning the corner," over 1,400 Americans died. As of mid-September, an average of 850 of our citizens were still dying every day.

It didn't need to be this way.

Conclusion

I don't for a second believe that anyone's mind is going to be changed by this essay.

On January 23, 2016, at a campaign rally in Sioux Center, Iowa, Trump said, "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters." They were the most important words spoken during all of the Trump era, and they were accurate.

The president's handling of the pandemic wasn't about doing the right thing for the country. It was about getting-re-elected. After slavery, it's perhaps the worst atrocity committed by a U.S. president against his own people. And about 30 million of those people think he did the right thing.

So I'm not going to change anyone's mind, and that's not the purpose here. The purpose is to urge those of you who agree that this president is unfit to lead to vote. Fortunately, there's an excellent candidate to vote for. Joe Biden is competent, experienced, savvy and a truly decent and caring man. He might not inspire the kind of enthusiasm that a Roosevelt or Kennedy did, but by almost any measure of the qualities we need in a national leader, Biden outscores Trump by an order of magnitude.

He needs an overwhelming victory. Just after Trump was elected, demonstrations against him were held in Portland. 112 of those protestors were arrested, and subsequent investigation by KGW-TV revealed that 69 of them either hadn't voted or weren't even registered. Similar stories emerged from other cities. One is hard pressed to even find the words for this towering absurdity.

The American people did not want Trump to be president. His 2016 opponent received *three million* more votes than he did, but he (legally) gamed the system and won in the electoral college. For that not to recur, Americans opposing his re-election need to turn out *en masse* for Biden, especially in the swing states of Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin.

When I worked on the long-shot campaign of complete unknown Allard Lowenstein in the fifth congressional district of New York, we were the laughingstock of state politics. On election day, we recruited thousands of like-minded citizens to swarm the district and urge people to vote. We drove them to the polls, baby-sat for their kids, phoned doctors and dentists to reschedule appointments, provided umbrellas in the areas that were experiencing rain, and picked up their older kids from school. Lowenstein won, and there was no doubt that it was because we activated more voters than his opponent could.

So vote, urge your friends to vote, email acquaintances and colleagues all over the country to vote, especially in the swing states. Don't let your exasperation keep you from casting a ballot, and don't throw your vote away on a third-party candidate. If Biden wins and the election is close, Trump is going to create trouble that will be felt for years. The victory needs to be an absolute, no-doubt-about-it landslide.

During every election, people inevitably say that it's the most important election they'll ever vote in. This time, it's true. So don't be one of those people left weeping and gnashing your teeth if Trump is re-elected and you didn't exert at least a little bit of effort to prevent it.

Thanks. And good luck to us all.

September 30, 2020

Feel free to pass this along, but kindly don't forward my email address.

Thoughtful, reasoned comments, and especially corrections to errors of fact, are welcome, but only if you include your name and are willing to have it published along with your response.

Send to comments-djt@legruenfeld.com