

Donald Trump, Conservative Populism, & Traditional Fascism

An Assessment of Donald Trump and His Campaign for POTUS (and His Behavior Since He Was Elected POTUS)

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(Slightly revised on Oct. 25, 2016. However, I don't even mention his notorious Access Hollywood tapes in which he talks about being able to grab women he just met by their genitals! I thought that was overkill given all of the other reasons for thinking that Trump is an utterly contemptible human being and that he is utterly unfit to be POTUS – President of the United States. **I think every point I made in September and October 2016 during Trump's presidential campaign has been borne out by his subsequent behavior as POTUS. The remarks in bold blue type are ones I have added as of Aug. 18, 2018.**)

I. Characteristics of Donald Trump

Undoubtedly, Donald Trump is an incredibly charismatic figure who has an unparalleled ability to "read a room" and pander to his supporters. But what other characteristics can we ascribe to him as a person and a political figure?

Summary

My personal assessment of Donald Trump as a political figure (and as a person) is that he is an **unprincipled, narcissistic, egomaniacal, self-aggrandizing, power-hungry, dangerous populist demagogue and a liar of the first and higher order who has clear, if uncomfortable, similarities to fascist leaders such as Benito Mussolini.**

First and foremost, Donald Trump is an **inveterate liar** who will say anything he believes to be to his (at least temporary) advantage.

Second, he is also a **con man** and one of the greatest **bullshit artists** of all time who, unfortunately, has been able to consistently run rings around the media/press and pull the wool over the eyes of 30-40% of the American people (who have unquestionably accepted many of his lies).

Third, he is also **completely unprincipled** in the sense that he has no fundamental principles – other than self-promotion – that he has consistently advocated over the course of his life, or can be expected to stick to in the future.

Fourth, in my opinion he is an **egomaniac** and a **narcissist** or, more precisely, someone who has the clinical condition known as **Narcissistic Personality Disorder**.

Fifth, in connection with his narcissism, he is **easily provoked** and therefore **dangerously unstable** ... especially when it comes to international affairs, including whether to use military force up to and including nuclear weapons, if he should actually become President of the United States (POTUS).

Sixth, he is an **authoritarian** who judges political leaders – including, potentially, himself – by how much power they have rather than by the worthiness of the policies they implement or attempt to implement. His whole campaign is based on claiming that the U.S. and President Barack Obama (and, by extension Hillary Clinton) are weak and not respected by other countries, terrorist groups, etc., while, supposedly, he is strong and will make American great (i.e. strong) again. This is the same "**Strong Man**" and "**Strong Country**" appeal made by many authoritarians from different countries around the world throughout recorded history (especially fascist authoritarians like Hitler and Mussolini in recent times).

Seventh, when it comes to knowledge about domestic, international, and – yes! – even economic issues and policies, Donald Trump is **dangerously ignorant** ... his claims such as that he "knows more about ISIS than the U.S. generals do," notwithstanding.

Eighth, Donald Trump **has been incredibly disrespectful to many** people during his campaign ... both individual people and whole groups of people. **[Trump is an out-and-out racist, as proven from his campaign to get the five young Black men of the "Central Park Five" – who were later vindicated of the rapes they were accused of – convicted and executed to his "Birther" campaign against Barack Obama to his insults of numerous African-Americans (e.g. Maxine Waters, LeBron James, Don Lemon) and other minority people as being "low IQ" to his claim that there were "fine people on both sides" of the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally of August 2017, with one side being composed of out-and-out Klansmen (and other White Supremacists), Neo-Nazis, and fascists! This is why he is the darling of the right-wing talk radio, reactionary websites (such as Breitbart and Infowars), the KKK, Neo-Nazis, and the Alt-Right!]**

Ninth, some of Trump's remarks have the potential of **delegitimizing the entire American political process and system**. **[We can see now – August 2018 – that this is even a greater danger given his intense and persistent campaign to delegitimize the American press and mainstream mass media as "Fake News" and the "Enemy of the People" ... a position he has become more and more adamant about as the investigations into the connections between his 2016 Presidential Campaign and Russia (and his attempts at obstruction of justice) have intensified and, apparently, come closer and closer to his inner circle and himself. It appears that he believes that he will eventually be at least named as an unindicted co-conspirator with regard to these matters. Thus, his campaign to demonize the mainstream press (not counting Fox News, which has essentially become Trump State Media) has gone hand and hand with his attempt to delegitimize and demonize Special Counsel Robert Mueller, the FBI, and the entire U.S. Department of Justice in order to create enough doubt about the fairness of this investigation among his core political base, so that even if (when) he is impeached by the House of Representatives he will be able to put enough political pressure on Republican Senators to not be convicted in the Senate and removed from office.]**

Finally, tenth, Donald Trump **has encouraged and promoted physical violence against his opponents as part of the political process**. **Elaboration:** Going along with his demonization of his opponents and "the establishment" and his claim that the electoral process is unfairly biased towards him, Trump **has encouraged and promoted physical violence against his opponents as part of the political process**. Specifically, he had on numerous occasions encouraged his supporters during his rallies to use physical violence against other people there (namely, demonstrators) and on many of these occasions his supporters have physically assaulted other people, even though the people assaulted had not committed any act of physical violence. Moreover, in recent weeks he has suggested – in an off-hand

remark – that it might be legitimate (or to be expected) that Hilary Clinton be assassinated by "second amendment supporters" if this was necessary to prevent her from appointing liberal Supreme Court justices! (More exactly, he said: "If she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks. Although the second amendment people, maybe there is, I don't know. But I'll tell you what, that will be a horrible day.") As some commentators have pointed out, this is extremely serious since it is quite possible that some of his more militant and/or less psychologically stable supporters may actually attempt to act on this.

In fact, there is a tragic example of just such a thing happening in recent history. In 1995 when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was campaigning for Israel to accept the Oslo Accords, a peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians that he had helped negotiate in Norway, he was portrayed by conservative Israeli politicians (including Likud leader and current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu) as having forsaken Jewish values and even, by some (though not by Netanyahu) of being the equivalent of a Nazi! Perhaps not unsurprisingly an Israeli ultranationalist (named Yigal Amir) not only assassinated Rabin but immediately claimed that he was not insane and that he was completely justified in having done so. (See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination_of_Yitzhak_Rabin)

Along these lines, consider the following news report of Oct. 17, 2016:

A Trump supporter in Cincinnati went so far as to suggest he would take matters into his own hands should Ms Clinton win the race to the White House, hoping for a "coup" or "revolution".

"I feel like Hillary needs to be taken out if she gets in the government," Dan Bowman, 50, told CNN. "I'll do everything in my power to take her out of power – which, if I have to be a patriot, I will."

When asked if he was physically threatening Ms Clinton, he answered: "I don't know, is it?"

In a previous interview with the Boston Globe, the same man said he hoped for a coup to remove Ms Clinton from office.

"If she's in office, I hope we can start a coup. She should be in prison or shot. That's how I feel about it," he said. "We're going to have a revolution and take them out of office if that's what it takes. There's going to be a lot of bloodshed. But that's what it's going to take. ...

"I would do whatever I can for my country."

(Donald Trump supporter threatens to assassinate Hillary Clinton if she wins, Oct. 17, 2016
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-elections/donald-trump-supporter-assassinate-hillary-clinton-video-watch-us-election-2016-a7366301.html>)

Given the violent attitudes that Trump has intentionally stirred up, I think it will be a miracle if Trump supporters do not engage in substantial political violence if Trump loses the election. Tragically, I truly think that at least a relatively small number of people will be killed by Trump supporters if Trump loses the election. Of course, this probably won't include Hilary Clinton, given the general effectiveness of the U.S. Secret Service, but locally well-known Clinton supporters/Trump opponents may not be so lucky if Trump supporters go on violent rampages at the local level. After all, Trump has led a lot of people in the U.S. to believe that the only possible reason that he will lose the election is through outright

electoral fraud so, from the perspective of some of his more militant (gun-toting) supporters it will be their duty as patriots to take violent measures to try to combat the "coup" by Hilary Clinton and the political establishment, if she should officially win the election. And every act of violence that occurs will be squarely on Donald Trump's shoulders in terms of moral responsibility, if not in terms of legal responsibility ... assuming that he isn't stupid enough to actually call for an armed insurrection by his supporters if he loses the election.

[In light of these facts and in light of his consistent claim that the entire investigation into possible Russian assistance to his 2016 Presidential Campaign a complete "hoax" and a "witch hunt," consider what might happen if Trump is indicted or listed as an unindicted co-conspirator or impeached by the House of Representatives (and possibly convicted by the Senate) and still claims that these charges are all fake! If Trump supporters – many of whom own guns and a good number of whom are in right-wing militia groups – really believe Trump when he makes this claim they will conclude that Trump's opponents (including the "deep state," whatever that is supposed to be) are engaged in an illegal coup against a duly elected President of the United States and they will quite probably act accordingly. The only thing that would make this scenario even more frightening is if a significant portion of the armed forces – especially the officer corps – and the U.S. intelligence agencies would be supportive of such an armed reaction. Thankfully, it seems almost certain that they wouldn't be supportive of such an armed response, given the fact that the U.S. generals and admirals seem to think Trump is an ignorant, incompetent buffoon who often acts antithetically to what they perceive to be U.S. security interests, and many in the U.S. intelligence agencies reportedly had concluded as early as January 2017 that he was "a turned Russian asset" ... not to mention Trump's persistent denigration of them.]

For all of these reasons I think that it is not merely a political imperative to try to keep Trump from winning this election, but also a moral imperative. Moreover, I think that history will harshly judge prominent Trump supporters (whether he wins or loses the current election), as well as Trump himself.

II. The Political Appeal of Donald Trump

In light of all of these negative characteristics of Donald Trump, why does so much of the American electorate currently support him?

1. First, it must be said that some of Trump's support comes from people who don't particularly like Trump or his policies but like (or trust) Hilary Clinton and her policies even less. That is, he is viewed as the "lesser of two evils" by many people. My guess is that this might account for about 1/3 of his current support, or about 15% of his current support level of about 45%. Nevertheless, this leaves about 30% of the American electorate as strong or even die-hard supporters of him. What motivates this segment of the American population?
2. Many people support Trump's simply because they are **GOP party loyalists** and/or because they think that **he will support their conservative values**; in particular their opposition to abortion, which for some conservative voters is their primary or even only political concern. However, it should be kept in mind that Trump's current opposition to abortion is quite probably just a matter of political convenience and

that, secretly, he probably has liberal positions on this, as he did before of his (supposed) "conversion" to conservatism about a decade ago.

3. Finally, it is often claimed that Trump's supporters are "disaffected." I think this is obviously true, but people in this category might be disaffected with regard to **(A) the U.S. political process**, or **(B) the U.S. economic system and their own economic opportunities**, or **(C) the rapidly changing U.S. demographics and culture** (or any combination of these three types of disaffection).

A. Political Disaffection

With regard to people's disaffection with U.S. politics, it is certainly true that a lot of people – and even a higher percentage of Trump supporters – are tired of political gridlock in Washington, D.C. and have lessened faith in the effectiveness and fairness of the political system, especially at a national (federal) level. But the virtual hatred that many Trump supporters have towards the federal government and the "liberal media" (and liberal academia) in the U.S. is a relatively new phenomenon, although it has been growing over the past 20-30 years as a result of such conservative media as Fox News and "talk radio" (most of which has a conservative or even right-wing slant). By contrast, those more on the left side of the political spectrum who are politically disaffected – e.g. a great many of Bernie Sanders supporters – see the problem as being primarily a matter of the extreme economic inequalities in U.S. society which transfer into political processes and decisions that disproportionately favor the wealthier sectors of U.S. society.

Moreover, those who are disaffected with democracy in general as being ineffective and/or corrupt tend to be **authoritarians**, who yearn for a **strong man** (such as Trump portrays himself to be) who will make a **strong nation** (or return it to its former glory and strength). Thus, their attraction to Trump's central campaign theme of "Make America Great Again." (In fact, some pollsters have pointed out that one attitude that Trump supporters have to a much higher degree than those who don't support him is precisely a more favorable attitude toward **authoritarianism**.)

B. Economic Disaffection

On the other hand, this disaffection may be primarily the result of people's economic prospects having decreased (either since the 2008 Great Recession, or since the 1980s era of deregulation and globalization, or even since the early 1970s since this was the time at which kicked in the long term trend of real wages going down for most working class and middle class income earners). While there is probably something to this, some pollsters have argued that this kind of economic disaffection has been over-estimated as a basis for Trump's support. Rather, they argue, the disaffection felt by many Trump supporters has more of a cultural or social basis than an economic basis. As explained below, many of Trump supporters don't like recent demographic and cultural changes in U.S. society, changes that make the U.S. less white and less white-dominated.

It might seem puzzling to claim that these emotions among many people in the U.S. are fueled by economic anxiety, given the fact that the U.S. economy has been quite healthy since it recovered from the Great Recession of 2007-2008. The fact is that Trump inherited a healthy economy from the Barak Obama administration, he didn't create a healthy economy in the U.S. However, it is quite likely that the Trump administration's wholesale repeal of commercial and environmental regulations in favor of business and profits have also had a significant positive impact on the economy. (Of course, it is

arguable that this wholesale repeal of these regulations by Trump – by executive order – are actually disadvantageous and even harmful to most Americans over the long run. But this is a different issue.) On the other hand, Trump's current trade policies – namely, starting tariff wars with almost every significant country with whom the U.S. has a trade imbalance – are likely to negatively impact the U.S. economy and perhaps precipitate an economic recession sooner than it would otherwise occur.

But the economic anxiety – which exists to some extent among all poor, working class, and middle class segments of the electorate, not just Republicans – is more general than that. It is an economic anxiety that comes from the fact that most American families have seen their real income either stagnate or actually decrease since the late 1970s. (Real income is income adjusted for inflation.) As a result of this, as opposed to the decades of the 1950s and 1960s when families (or domestic units) could achieve a decent standard of living with only one "bread winner" employed, since the late 1970s it has become more and more the norm that most American families have to have more than one member employed in order to achieve what is considered a decent standard of living. Another manifestation of this trend is that for the first time in many decades – maybe for the entire history of the U.S. – it is no longer assumed that the next generations (our children and grandchildren) will be able to achieve a standard of living that is at least as high as the present generation. The view that each generation will be able to be as well off or better off (economically speaking) than the previous generation had been taken for granted at least since the end of WWII. But this is no longer the case.

The truth is that the post-WWII economic boom in the U.S. from around 1945-1975, which averaged about 5% growth per year, and which the vast majority of Americans came to think of as the norm, was actually an anomaly. In a longer time frame, the average growth rates in the U.S. have been about 3% per year rather than 5%, which is a considerable difference.

C. Cultural Disaffection

Many of Trump's supporters have "**nativist**" or "**traditionalist**" attitudes such that they don't like the fact that the U.S. is becoming progressively more multi-cultural, and progressively less white and white dominated. Such people yearn for the "good old days" when the U.S. was overwhelmingly white and less multi-cultural. Presumably, this is the appeal of Trump's central election image (and supposed proposal) of building a wall on the U.S. border with Mexico ... and getting Mexico to pay for it! Of course, no knowledgeable person believes that anyone could ever get Mexico to pay for building such a wall, and most knowledgeable people even doubt that Congress would allocate the many billions of dollars it would take to build it (and the fact that it would not be much more effective at preventing illegal immigrants from coming across the Mexican border than the present fences, surveillance, etc.). Arguably, the power of this "proposal" to motivate his base – with his crowds going crazy cheering every time he mentions it – is not so much that people believe that the wall will actually be built (and be effective) but the emotional content it has for his base as a symbol for opposing multi-culturalism and cultural change in the U.S., and the related symbolic-emotional content of the U.S. showing its strength by being able to force a weaker country to pay for it.

Moreover, some other sociological studies have shown that a much higher percentage of Trump supporters – as compared to people who don't support him – are white people who have had comparatively little contact with people of other races and ethnicities; in particular people who live in more rural areas where such contact is less likely, at least in some parts of the country.)

And, of course, some of Trump's supporters can be described as **xenophobic** (those who irrationally fear "the other") and even as outright **racists** and **white supremacists**. Thus all the support that Trump's campaign is receiving from the Alt-Right and from self-identified racist and white supremacist individuals, such as ex-Klu-Klux-Klan Grand Dragon David Duke, and groups such as the KKK, whose newspaper – *The Crusader* – recently endorsed Trump!

III. Donald Trump compared to Traditional Fascist Movements

Some theorists and pundits have already classified Donald Trump as a Fascist, although sometimes as a Quasi-Fascist, Neo-Fascist, or Crypto-Fascist. While I am very hesitant to use the label "fascist" I do believe that Trump shares quite a few traits with traditional fascist political leaders and that his campaign shares quite a few traits of traditional fascist movements; in fact, 11 out of 16 primary criteria listed below, on my view. But I also think that it wouldn't be accurate to describe Trump as an actual fascist or his movement as an actual fascist movement ... at least at this point in time. The most important distinction is that Trump has not advocated a mass violent right-wing movement with the explicit purpose of physically confronting and destroying the labor union movement and left-wing political parties and tendencies, which is a key aspect of actual fascist movements. But, as I argue in my essay "An Assessment of Donald Trump and His Campaign for POTUS," I also believe that Trump is **"an unprincipled, narcissistic, egomaniacal, self-aggrandizing, power-hungry, dangerous populist demagogue and a liar of the first and higher order who has clear, if uncomfortable, similarities to fascist leaders such as Benito Mussolini."**

Below I list 16 key characteristics of fascism and fascist movements, and give my opinion as to whether Trump and his campaign/movement have these characteristics or not.

	<u>Traditional Fascist Movements</u>	<u>Donald Trump</u>
Charismatic	yes	yes
Strong Man/Strong Nation Appeal	yes	yes
Cult of Personality	yes	yes
Populist and formally "anti-elitist"	yes	yes
Demands Radical Change	yes	yes
Ultra-Nationalistic/Patriotic (and sometimes Ultra-Racist)	yes	yes
Demonization of the Other	yes	yes
Based on Deep Frustration of Significant Part of Population	yes	yes
Encouraging Violence against the Opposition	yes	yes
The Big Lie (or many small lies told over and over)	yes	yes
Relatively Vague Political Program/Proposals	yes	yes

Occurs in Times of Deep Economic Crises	yes	no?
Anti-Labor, Anti-Leftist Ideology/Appeal	yes	no?
Acts as a Counter Weight to the Labor-Socialist Movement	yes	no?
Organizes Para-military Groups for Street Fighting yet anyway)	yes	no (not
Funded by (Some) Big Capitalists a few so far)	yes	no? (only