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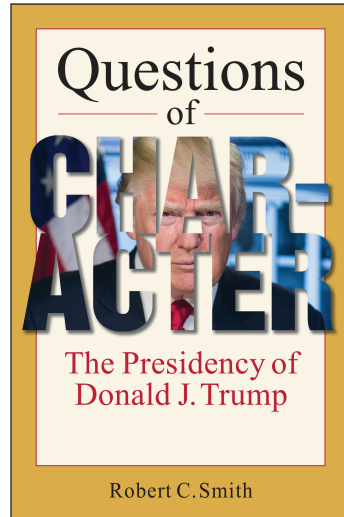
Questions of Character: The Presidency of Donald J. Trump

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1

The Trump Presidency: Examining Coolly in a Hot Time

AT THE END OF PRESIDENT DONALD J. TRUMP'S FIRST year in office, the Presidents and Executive Politics Section of the American Political Science Association—the foremost organization of political science experts on the presidency—conducted one of its periodic Presidential Greatness Surveys, asking respondents to rate or rank each of the forty-four persons who occupied the office.¹ President Trump made his debut on the survey as the worst president in US history. His average rating of 12.34 was nearly three points lower than James Buchanan's, who previously occupied the position of worst president.² The 12.7 percent of respondents who were Republican and the 17.4 percent who identified as conservative were a bit more favorable to Trump, ranking him fortieth instead of forty-fourth (ahead of William Henry Harrison, Franklin Pierce, Buchanan, and Andrew Johnson). Thus, at the end of the first year of the Trump presidency there was a near consensus among scholars the Trump was the worst president in the history of the republic.

Reviewing the early political science literature on the Trump election and presidency, I found, not surprisingly perhaps, that Trump was viewed as a most unusual president. Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken, and Andrew Wroe write that Trump is “a deeply flawed character wholly unsuited for the job of president—mendacious, narcissistic, quickly bored, misogynistic and ethnocentric, thin skinned and easily provoked, stunningly ill-informed and yet utterly convinced of his own brilliance and intelligence.”³ Michael Genovese argues that

Donald Trump represents a distinctly American version of illiberal democracy. We have had demagogues in our past, but none has ever gotten close to becoming president. Donald Trump is thus an American first! His brash, bombastic attack style, his bold promises and manifest lack of knowledge, his rapid-fire insults and misogynistic utterances and racist rants and bullying ways. . . . Trump won the presidency when no one in their right mind thought it possible.⁴

James Pfiffner observes the lies of Donald Trump have “undermined enlightenment epistemology and corroded the premises of liberal democracy.”⁵ E. J. Dionne, Norman Ornstein, and Thomas Mann—after labeling the president a “narcissistic politician,” “demagogue,” “charlatan,” and a “nihilist”—write that “our purpose is to make clear that Trump is not a normal president, that he lacks the self-restraint democracy requires of leaders, and his ethical conduct raises systematic doubts about his capacity to govern in the public interest.”⁶ George Edwards concludes,

Both the tone and substance of Trump’s public utterances are beyond the norms of the presidency. His willingness to demean his opponents, mislead the public about the nature of threats, prevaricate about people, issues, nations, policies, and accomplishments, employ racially charged language, and challenge the rule of law add a unique-disturbing-element to American political life.⁷

In the most widely discussed political science book on the Trump election and presidency, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt write,

When extremist demagogues emerge in ‘healthy democracies,’ the first test is whether political leaders, especially political parties, work to prevent them from gaining power in the first place by keeping them off mainstream party tickets, refusing to endorse them, and when necessary making common cause with rivals in support of democratic candidates. . . . America failed this first test in 2016, when we elected a president with dubious allegiance to democratic norms. Donald Trump’s surprise victory was made possible not only by public disaffection but also by the Republican Party’s failure to keep an extremist demagogue within its own ranks from gaining the nomination.⁸

Finally, Zachary Callen and Philip Rocco, editors of *American Political Development and the Trump Presidency*, write Trump’s “actions in office have sparked credible fears about the future of democracy. . . . Trump is a figure untethered to republican virtues,

who refers to the media as ‘the enemy of the people’ and dehumanizes minorities, immigrants and anyone who opposes him.”⁹

What distinguishes the forty-fifth president from his predecessors—such that this early consensus could exist about his fitness for the office—is character, which is the dominant focus of this study. Given the controversial nature of Trump and the negative assessments of most political scientists, in this work I want to be consciously, scrupulously objective; to perform professional empirical analysis; and to be ever alert to the possibility of bias. The character analysis should discipline data collection, analysis, and interpretation, which I hope allows me, to paraphrase the great presidency scholar Clinton Rossiter, to “examine coolly in a hot time.”¹⁰

The core of the book is a study of the president’s character—personal, presidential, and constitutional. Mainly I use James David Barber’s “much praised and much maligned” theory of the presidential character to explain Trump’s behavior as candidate and president.¹¹ For analysis of his personal character, I rely on James Pfiffner’s studies, and for constitutional character Dennis Thompson’s article “Constitutional Character.”¹²

In terms of character, Trump is *sui generis*. But with respect to ideology, he has been a chameleon for much of his career, changing views on issues and party affiliations multiple times. His extraordinary and unexpected election in 2016 is rooted in the polarization of contemporary American politics that started with the election and presidency of Ronald Reagan and the growth in the Republican electorate of the influence of paleoconservatism, a political philosophy that stresses American nationalism, Christian values, and traditional conservatism. The Reagan polarization, as Richard Seltzer and I show in *Polarization and the Presidency: From FDR to Barack Obama*, has its origins as a reaction to the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, issues of taxes, the welfare state (particularly health insurance), and after 1964, race and racism.¹³ The modern polarized polity is also rooted to some extent in the White nationalist and paleoconservative ideas advanced by Patrick Buchanan in his writings and presidential campaigns.¹⁴ At the end of the Obama administration, the party system was highly polarized (Obama was the most polarizing president prior to Trump) and the Republican Party had already been Trumped. As Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein highlight in 2012, “However awkward it may be for the traditional press and nonpartisan analysts to acknowledge, one of the two major parties, the Republican Party, has become an insurgent

outlier—ideologically extreme, contemptuous of the inherited social and economic regimes; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.”¹⁵

In Chapter 2 I analyze the 2016 election. There are multiple, complementary theories of the nomination and election of Trump. Some view the election as the maturing of trends since the late 1960s toward authoritarianism among Republican voters, accelerated by demographic and economic changes, “which activated authoritarian tendencies, leading many Americans to seek out a strong leader who would preserve the status-quo under threat and impose order on a world they perceive as increasingly alien.”¹⁶ Others view it as a populist revolt by the “heartland” against “coastal elites” by those who believe the system is stacked against them.¹⁷ Trump’s election is viewed by some as rooted in old-fashioned racism or racial resentment,¹⁸ and others view the election of Trump as an expression of emergent White nationalism or White identity politics.¹⁹ As I indicated, the various theories of the Trump election are complementary; I shall emphasize White nationalism, fueled by economic anxieties and racial resentment, as a comprehensive theory of the nomination and election of the president.

A number of political scientists and other students of the Trump campaign and presidency have casually labeled Trump a demagogue. *Demagogue* is a contested concept in social science, but I shall attempt to show that Trump’s rhetoric and behavior fit the definition and many of the indicators of a demagogue. Similarly, *charisma* is a contested concept, but in Chapter 2 I present analysis to show there is a charismatic relationship between Trump and his core constituents.

In Chapter 3 I review the literature on personality and political leadership, starting with Harold Lasswell’s seminal work. I then present in detail Barber’s theory of the presidential character, highlighting both its strengths and weaknesses in explaining presidential leadership behavior as discussed in the extensive literature on his work.

In Chapter 4 I examine the development of Trump’s personality and character using James David Barber’s theory as the organizing framework, focusing on his family, adolescence and first business success, showing, as Barber theorizes, how his style as a business executive anticipates his behavior as president.

In Chapter 5 I study the presidential character of Trump in terms of Barber’s theory, focusing on how he organized the White House staff and his decisionmaking process, the extent to which he did his

“homework,” his personal relations with staff, the cabinet, and leaders of Congress. This chapter also looks at Trump’s prioritization of the rhetorical dimension of the work of the president.

In Chapters 6 and 7 I deal with the domestic and foreign policies of the administration including in the domestic chapter how Trump handled the two major crises of his tenure, the Covid-19 pandemic and the nationwide uprising after the police murder of George Floyd. In both domestic and foreign policy, I am interested in the part played by character in the decisionmaking processes as compared to ideology, party, the political context, or the climate of expectations.

In Chapter 8 I am concerned with Trump’s personal as well as his democratic and constitutional character. For personal character I use Pfiffner’s three indicators: lying, marital fidelity, and keeping campaign promises. Democratic and constitutional character are analyzed in terms of adherence to the norms of democracy, for examples the integrity of the election process, respect for the role of press, the limits of executive power, the separation of powers, and ethnic and religious tolerance.

Consistent with the political science consensus discussed previously, this book that concludes President Trump, beginning with the 2016 campaign and continuing through the last days of his presidency, exhibited multiple character deficits, displayed most egregiously in his refusal to accept the outcome of the 2020 election, which resulted in the violent assault on the Capitol and his impeachment for a second time. In Chapter 9 I ask, how did it happen? How did a person with such manifest character deficits win the presidency and run a competitive race for reelection? First, it is suggested that many in the White majority who voted for Trump likely had reservations about his character, but nevertheless viewed him as an effective tribune to advance their values and interests as an aggrieved shrinking majority. Second, in the 1960s and 1970s, political science advanced the theory that democratic values were secured from the threat of a Trump-like character not by the behavior of the public but by the commitment of elites to democratic norms, which came to be known as the theory of democratic elitism. The fallacy of this theory is another explanation of what happened.

I briefly summarize in Chapter 10 the findings of this study with respect to each character dimension—presidential, personal, democratic, and constitutional—and then explore in detail Trump’s refusal to accept his defeat in the 2020 election and his pattern of behavior that resulted in the most violent transfer of power in the history of the American democracy.

In the concluding chapter I raise questions about the long-term significance of the election and presidency of Trump for the Republican Party, conservatism, and the democracy in the United States.

Notes

1. Brandon Rottingham and Justin Vaughn, “Official Results of the 2018 Presidents and Executive Politics Presidential Greatness Survey” (Washington: American Political Science Association, 2018), <https://www.boisestate.edu/sps-politicalscience/files/2018/02/Greatness.pdf>. The survey was conducted online from December 22, 2017, to January 2018. Over 300 respondents were asked to participate; 170 useable responses were returned for a response rate of 53 percent.

2. Respondents were asked to rate each president on a scale of 0–100, with 0 = failure, 50 = average, and 100 = great. The rating for each president was tallied and then ranked from the highest to the lowest.

3. Jon Herbert, Trevor McCricken, and Andrew Wroe, *The Ordinary Presidency of Donald Trump* (New York: Palgrave, 2019), 2.

4. Michael Genovese, *How Trump Governs: An Assessment and Prognosis* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2017), 245.

5. James Pfiffner, “The Lies of Donald Trump: A Taxonomy,” in Charles Lamb and Jacob Neiheisel, eds., *Presidential Leadership and the Trump Presidency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 18.

6. E. J. Dionne, Norman Ornstein, and Thomas Mann, *One Nation After Trump: A Guide to the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate, and the Not-Yet Departed* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2017), 2, 6.

7. George Edwards, “The Bully in the Pulpit: The Impact of Donald Trump’s Public Discourse,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, September 2019.

8. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway, 2018), 7, 9. Reflecting this unease, the theme of the 2020 meeting of the American Political Science Association—democracy and destabilization—was developed in order to focus the discipline’s attention on the threats authoritarianism and illiberal tendencies pose to democracy, as symbolized in “Trump’s momentous election.” The association devoted a special issue of one of its journals to understanding Trump’s election and presidency (the call for papers received over 100 submissions). The editors noted that Trump was “an unprecedented figure in American politics [whose] lack of concern for how government works, his impatience to accomplish things, and what some regard as his clear disdain for the Constitution’s constraints on executive power, has led many to fear he constitutes a threat to democracy.” See Michael Bernhard and Daniel O’Neil, “Trump: Causes and Consequences,” *Perspectives on Politics* 17 (2019): 317.

9. Zachary Callen and Philip Rocco, eds., *American Political Development and the Trump Presidency* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 1–2.

10. Clinton Rossiter, "The Powers of the Presidency," in Harry Bailey, ed., *Classics of the American Presidency* (Oak Park, IL: Moore, 1980), 71.

11. The quote is from Michael Lyons, "Presidential Character Revisited," *Political Psychology* 18 (1997): 790.

12. James Pfiffner, "Judging Presidential Character," *Public Integrity* 5 (2002): 7–24, and his *The Character Factor: How We Judge America's Presidents* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2004); and Dennis Thompson, "Constitutional Character: Virtues and Vices of Presidential Leadership," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40 (2010): 23–37.

13. Robert C. Smith and Richard Seltzer, *Polarization and the Presidency: From FDR to Barack Obama* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2015).

14. Patrick Buchanan's paleoconservative ideas are best advanced in his *Suicide of a Superpower: Will America Survive to 2025?* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2011). Buchanan's biographer writes that Buchanan views himself as an "intelligent alternative to the racism and white supremacy of David Duke." See Timothy Stanley, *The Crusader: The Life and Tumultuous Times of Pat Buchanan* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2012), 182.

15. Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, *It's Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), xiv.

16. Amanda Taub, "The Rise of American Authoritarianism," *Vox*, March 1, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>. See also Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

17. Ron Fournier, "The Populist Revolt," *The Atlantic*, February 10, 2016; Victor David Hansen, *The Case for Donald Trump* (New York: Basic Books, 2019); Eric Oliver and Wendy Rahn, "The Rise of the Trumpenvolk: Populism in the 2016 Election," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 667 (2016): 189–206; and Stanley Renshon, *The Real Psychology of the Trump Presidency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 80–89.

18. Michael Tesler, "The Return of Old-Fashioned Racism to White Americans' Partisan Preferences in the Early Obama Era," *Journal of Politics* 75 (2013): 110–123; and Alan Abramowitz, *The Great Realignment: Race, Party, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

19. Ronald Walters is the pioneering scholar on the emergence of White nationalism in American politics. See his *White Nationalism, Black Interests: Conservative Public Policy and the Black Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003); and Robert C. Smith, "Understanding White Nationalism in America: The Contribution of Ronald Walters," *National Review of Black Politics* 2 (2021): 53–62. See also "White Racial Consciousness in the U.S.," 2016 ANES Pilot Study Proposal, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, n.d.; Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Alex Altman, "The Billionaire and the Bigots: How Trump's Campaign Brought White Nationalists Out of the Shadows," *Time*, April 25, 2016; and John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).