Wake Up, America!

***This isn't a partisan post**. I wish it were—arguing for a clear Democratic or Republican vision to improve overall well-being, grounded in a shared respect for democracy, the Constitution, and the rule of law. But we're past that luxury. This is about the survival of our most basic values. Those framing this as a matter of partisanship are distracting you—blurring your vision to make you believe that everything from one side is wrong, and everything from the other is right. That kind of groupthink is deeply flawed and highly dangerous. Don't fall for it, and don't just go with your gut—you **must think critically**.*

As someone from Germany looking in, it's striking how many Americans fail to see what's happening in the United States. For the most part, it's because many aren't particularly interested in politics and have enough personal issues to deal with. Others support recent government actions—often because they feel that "something is being done," or because of blind trust in anyone they perceive as being on their "team." The final group is aware of the risks but often becomes lethargic or looks away—mainly because they don't feel they can do anything about it. All three positions are flawed, as explained below.

It's not entirely surprising that many Americans struggle to fully grasp what's happening. When you're in the middle of it—surrounded by many competing voices and directly affected by rapid political decisions—it's hard to find the time or mental space to step back and see the bigger picture. This article aims to draw that picture—connecting the dots, revealing what's really going

on, and explaining not only *what* is happening, but *why*. Finally, it outlines what is likely to happen next and explores what can—and should—be done.

One-Man Show

Many people have played a role in bringing the U.S. to where it is today—from the general public, particularly voters, to government officials. However, the most decisive force behind it all is one individual: Donald John Trump. Without him, the world would look very different today. This isn't an exception but rather the rule—history is often made by individuals, whether for worse, as with most dictators, or for better, as with benevolent leaders and pioneering scientists or engineers. Therefore, to truly grasp the current situation, one must begin by deeply understanding Trump.

Let's get to the *heart* of the matter right away: Donald Trump never received much love from his parents. His mother, Mary Anne, was raised in a strict Presbyterian household and was known for being reserved and traditional—more focused on manners, appearances, and obedience than on emotional intimacy. She was also frequently ill, making her presence inconsistent during Donald's formative years. Fred, Donald's father, was a disciplined, business-focused man, often described as emotionally distant, demanding, authoritarian, and obsessed with "winning" and toughness. Affection and feelings were ignored. As Mary Trump, Donald's niece and a clinical psychologist, wrote in her biography, he was "a child who grew up to be afraid that asking for comfort or love would reveal weakness."

As a result, Donald's childhood was marked by intensity and fierce competition among his siblings. Struggling emotionally, he became unruly and was sent to military school at 13. However, the real intention wasn't to correct his behavior but to remove him from the household. As Gwenda Blair put it in her book on the Trump dynasty, "He wasn't sent away to be helped—he was sent away to be someone else's problem." This experience deepened his sense of emotional neglect, leading him to conclude that while he might never receive true love from his parents, he could try to compensate with *recognition*—especially from his father. He adjusted to whatever pleased him. He adopted an aggressive attitude, which his father praised as a sign of strength. He suppressed vulnerability and developed a strong desire for success and admiration—but mainly as a way to earn the approval of the one person he cared about most: his father.

He also took his father's side when it came to Freddy, Donald's eldest brother. Freddy was expected to take over the family real estate business, but his gentle, fun-loving nature didn't align with that path—he wanted to be a pilot. Fred Sr. disapproved, openly shaming him for being "too soft" and lacking the killer instinct he valued. Feeling unsupported and demeaned by his father—and ridiculed by Donald as well—Freddy fell into alcoholism and eventually died at 42 in 1981. The key impact on Donald wasn't grief over losing his brother, but the harsh lesson that weakness and failure to meet their father's expectations were unforgivable. In fact, by scapegoating Freddy and adopting his father's cruel attitude, Donald only strengthened his standing in Fred Sr.'s eyes.

Fred Sr. died in 1999, but Trump still makes decisions today according to the rulebook he internalized long ago. He's still trying to please his father, often asking himself—whether implicitly or explicitly—"What would my father think?" As discussed in *On Rules and Laws*, we tend to keep following the rules we were conditioned to obey, even long after their original purpose has faded. As the saying goes, "Adulthood doesn't replace childhood—it merely rests on top of it."

In Trump's case, childhood experiences play a particularly significant role in shaping his adult behavior, as he was largely insulated from the typical "reality checks" that guide most people toward maturity. He never held a conventional job, never worked under a boss, and never had to follow standard workplace rules—experiences through which many people develop accountability, empathy, and the ability to collaborate. This lack of exposure hindered his emotional development, especially in areas like self-regulation and perspective-taking. Raised in privilege, with strong financial safety nets, Trump was often shielded from the consequences of failure. When his ventures collapsed—including several bankruptcies—his family's wealth and connections often softened the impact, with his father bailing him out. As a result, childlike traits such as impulsiveness, attention-seeking, aversion to criticism, and black-and-white thinking were never seriously challenged. In fact, they were often rewarded. Trump crafted a public persona rooted in fame, bravado, and spectacle—particularly through *The Apprentice*—where being confrontational, grandiose, and even petulant was not only accepted but celebrated. Such a feedback loop can strongly reinforce narcissistic[1] or emotionally immature patterns of behavior.

With emotionally loaded terms like "narcissistic" being discussed, it's important to clarify that this analysis is not meant to condone or condemn Trump's actions—those judgments will come later. Instead, the aim is to illustrate how Trump's worldview logically follows from the circumstances of his upbringing. For now, the focus is solely on explaining and understanding these factors—which may, perhaps surprisingly, even evoke a degree of empathy. Trump isn't a deeply happy or content man. One might imagine a different life he *could* have led: wealthy, respected, philanthropic, surrounded by long-term friendships and a sense of peace. Instead, he seems haunted—compensating for a profound inner emptiness by relentlessly chasing what he sees as "winning" situations. His grandiosity can be seen as defensive, a mechanism to protect himself from feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, and inadequacy. He seems restless, constantly on guard against those who might tarnish his reputation and seek revenge. His actions are likely driven more by inner turmoil, fragility, and an insatiable need to prove himself than by a grounded sense of well-being. He's trapped, but tragically unable to escape it, locked inside a psychological armor he cannot shed.

Trump's fixation on "winning" fundamentally shapes his overall attitude toward life. The term often implies there must also be a loser—mirroring the zero-sum worldview he inherited from his father. Although "winning" doesn't always imply a zero-sum outcome—after all, there are

[1] Many mental health professionals shy away from making a clear statement on whether Donald Trump *clinically* qualifies for narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) due to the Goldwater Rule, which stipulates that a formal diagnosis should not be made without direct evaluation. The DSM-5 criteria for NPD include: grandiosity and an inflated sense of self-importance; preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, or brilliance; belief in being special; a need for excessive admiration; a sense of entitlement; exploitation of others for personal gain; lack of empathy; frequent envy or belief that others are envious; and arrogant or haughty behaviors and attitudes. In this context, perhaps it's wise to follow Trump's own advice and apply some "common sense."

"win-win situations"—there's an expression in English that unambiguously carries this meaning: *to trump*. We can only trump *over* others, and there must always be a loser. Since people often live up to the roles and labels they internalize—and what label is stronger than a name?—it's worth asking: would world history be different if Trump had a different name? Of course, this is pure speculation—but not entirely without basis.

Also speculatory, but worth considering: could the Trump family's deep roots in real estate—starting with Frederick Trump, Donald Trump's grandfather, a German immigrant who founded the empire—have contributed to the zero-sum thinking that emerged in the family? Real estate naturally carries a stronger win-or-lose dynamic than many other industries, given that land is finite and you can build only one house on a given plot—not two. Moreover, if your neighbor erects a taller building, it might block your view, reduce your privacy, or limit your sunlight. You literally need to tower *over* others—and beat them, in a way—to protect your interests. Furthermore, Frederick Trump also had ties to the gambling industry—his establishments, catering to Klondike's gold prospectors, featured gambling facilities—much like his grandson Donald, who owned several casinos in the 1980s and 1990s. The gambling world is inherently zero-sum: the house or a player wins only at another's expense. This zero-sum outlook permeates many of Trump's public statements and writings, particularly in *The Art of the Deal*, where he frames business, negotiation, and politics not as collaborative efforts but as battles with clear winners and losers.

Crucially, because "winning" for Trump is only meaningful in contrast to someone else's loss, his perception of victory depends on comparison. This means he can feel like he's won even when he's objectively worse off, as long as others lose more. A relevant example in this context is *Trump University*, launched in 2005 and marketed as a way for everyday people to learn Trump's "secrets to real estate success." Courses ranged from $1,500 for a seminar to $35,000 for the full "Gold Elite" mentorship. From the start, many suspected it was a scam: Trump didn't handpick instructors as promised (some weren't even real estate experts), the seminars primarily served as upsells for more expensive programs, and the content was often vague information that could have been googled. Despite early red flags, it took years for legal action to catch up. Trump University closed in 2010, but lawsuits dragged on until 2016—just as Trump was elected president—giving him a first taste of how the presidency could be used to escape legal consequences. Ultimately, he agreed to a $25 million settlement and faced headlines accusing him of fraud. Objectively, he lost. But Trump framed it as a win: he avoided a damaging trial, didn't admit guilt, and denied critics the satisfaction of seeing him publicly shamed in court. Plaintiffs didn't get their day in court, the media didn't get a spectacle, and political opponents didn't get a verdict to weaponize. Yes, he lost money and took a reputational hit—but in his calculus, they lost more. Most would see that as damage control; for Trump, it was genuinely winning. This mindset—being fine with getting hit, as long as others get hit more—may foreshadow a much graver risk: a willingness to go down with the ship on a much grander scale, so long as everyone else goes down harder.

Closely related to this, Trump's zero-sum mindset also implies that if someone he perceives as an opponent loses, he must have won—not merely in the sense of placing obstacles to slow them down, but in the belief that he gains precisely as much as they lose. This explains his strong attraction to tariffs: Trump regards all other countries as enemies, so if they lose due to tariffs, he

derives deep satisfaction from the belief that he has gained precisely what they have lost. His actions are crafted purely to evoke that feeling, while the officially stated reasons for his tariffs serve merely as a façade. This is why those reasons are, at the very least, highly questionable—for example, the claim that imposing tariffs immediately creates new jobs, which simply isn't how it works. Since building production facilities takes time, if that were truly his goal, he would announce tariffs set to take effect in 6 to 12 months, allowing companies the necessary time to onshore. Other justifications, such as imposing tariffs on Canada due to fentanyl trafficking, are downright absurd—in 2024, only 43 pounds of fentanyl were seized at the Canadian border, compared to 21,100 pounds at the Mexican border. It's not even about gaining support from his followers, who have bought into his "we got screwed" and "let's hit back" narratives, as he had already won the election and can be confident he has their continued support. Ultimately, it's purely about satisfying his emotions—making others lose, which, in his zero-sum worldview, must mean that he has won.

There are many more benign—yet equally revealing—examples of Trump's mindset that demands domination over others. For instance, at a White House dinner in 2017, Trump was served two scoops of ice cream for dessert, while everyone else received only one. He also got a special salad dressing, extra sauce with his chicken, and a Diet Coke while others were served water. Of course, it's not about the extra services themselves—he's not obsessed with ice cream—but about feeding his ego and constantly reinforcing his sense of winning and superiority.

Another implication of Trump's worldview is his fixation on short-term thinking. To conclude that he's "won," the outcome must be both clear-cut and immediate. Anything long-term—especially ethical values and principles of any kind—even if ultimately beneficial for himself too, feels too vague, lacks black-and-white clarity, and doesn't designate a clear loser. This, combined with his childlike need for instant gratification, makes his behavior deeply transactional, focused on immediate utility rather than long-term consequences.

One example of this transactional mindset is his view of friendships. While it's implied above, it's worth stating explicitly: Trump universe has a population of one. He doesn't have true friends—others are always merely a means to help him "win." While purely exploitative in nature, his lack of traditional values also has a positive side: unlike others who might harbor resentment and refuse future collaboration with those who've wronged them, Trump doesn't feel compelled to hold onto negative feelings. If former enemies become useful, they're welcomed back. The range of invectives unleashed against him—not repeated here to avoid triggering a "You must be 18+ to enter" warning—by those who later found themselves in his cabinet is genuinely impressive. Of course, once they outlive their usefulness, they are discarded just as swiftly.

This transactional nature extends to his value for truth. Truth and facts matter when we're thinking long-term, not short-term. As noted in *The Truth About Truth*, we wouldn't even care about the fact that a lion is lurking behind the hill if we're focused solely on surviving the next ten seconds. The same is true for almost all ethical principles, like justice, fairness, empathy, responsibility, or consistency. He also lacks integrity—symbolized by the incident where he appropriated a crest from another family, replacing the word "Integrity" with his own name. In

the ongoing battle between short-term impulses and long-term values, Trump has a clear—and consistent—winner: the pursuit of immediate attention and admiration.

With public admiration being a key driver of his self-worth, Trump faced a serious issue in the 1990s: he wanted to be seen as a successful businessman, but the reality was that he wasn't. His list of spectacular failures is long. Due to multiple bankruptcies and other failed ventures, he reported losses every year from 1985 to 1995—some astronomically high—making him perhaps the biggest individual loser of money among American taxpayers. Crucially, these failures don't fall into the typical business pattern of "You try a lot, some things fail, some succeed." These weren't bold tech moonshots; they were ventures in mature, stable industries—real estate, airlines, and consumer products—with well-trodden paths to profitability. The same applies to his casinos, where bankruptcies are even more astonishing, given that casinos essentially operate by people willingly giving them their money—a business model so reliably profitable that a casino license is often considered a license to print money. These ventures didn't fail due to bold, high-risk innovation, but rather because of mismanagement—marked by over-leveraging, operational missteps, and repeated legal and ethical controversies.

Let's take a step back: What makes a successful businessperson? There are different paths to success, but certain key ingredients are typically crucial. These include visionary, long-term thinking; the stability to build and grow; a keen eye for details and subtleties; self-discipline and level-headed decision-making; rational thinking and advanced problem-solving skills; a strong work ethic; financial acumen—including a deep understanding of cash flow, budgeting, and profitability; and a solid grasp of the law to avoid legal trouble. However, perhaps the most important factor is one's ability to relate to other people. Success is rarely a solo journey—it involves effectively working with investors, employees, customers, and business partners. Trump made little effort to build such collaborative relationships. His nonpayment to contractors, misleading investors, financial misreporting, aggressive legal tactics, and putting a fake gold veneer over failure were notorious. Furthermore, who would want to engage with someone known to betray trust when it becomes financially advantageous to do so? Given all these criteria, when people are asked to name someone who embodies the qualities of a good businessperson, how many would mention Trump?

And what about his wealth? This may be the clearest indicator of Trump's limited business success. He has long claimed he only received a "$1 million loan" from his father, which he "paid back with interest." But a 2018 investigation by *The New York Times* revealed that he actually received at least $413 million (adjusted for inflation)—not as loans but mostly as gifts and inheritances. That's an extraordinary amount of money, powerful in its own right. For example, if $50 million had been invested in the S&P 500 in 1966, when Donald Trump was just 20 years old, it would be worth $13.84 billion today. For comparison, Trump's wealth in 2025 is estimated at between $4 billion and $7 billion. Of course, he hadn't received the entire amount by 1966—but this example illustrates Einstein's insight that "the most powerful force in the universe is compound interest." The exact timing and structure of Fred Trump's wealth transfers—often involving legally questionable tax-avoidance schemes that cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars—remain intentionally opaque. That in itself may be telling. If this were truly a story of business genius, it would be marked by transparency, not mystery. Moreover, the previous estimate of Trump's hypothetical wealth today, had he invested it

passively, might be conservative, as some projections go much higher. A detailed account of Trump's handling of his father's wealth can be found in *Lucky Loser: How Donald Trump Squandered His Father's Fortune and Created the Illusion of Success*, authored by journalists Russ Buettner and Susanne Craig.

All of this meant that in the 1990s, Trump had a problem: he was widely regarded as a reckless and not particularly savvy businessman, especially among Wall Street and industry insiders. The public primarily knew him from the tabloids, which focused on his flashy lifestyle, financial and legal troubles, shrinking empire, infidelity, and failed marriages ("Ivana better deal"[2]). The turning point came with the launch of a reality TV show. *The Apprentice* didn't just improve his brand—it reinvented it. Gone was the messy businessman with bankrupt casinos; in his place stood a commanding figure in a gleaming boardroom, surrounded by gold accents and a cadre of ambitious contestants vying for his approval. The show bore little resemblance to the complexities of the real business world. It was pure theatrical fiction—heavily scripted and meticulously edited to emphasize drama, conflict, and a clean narrative arc. Contestants were judged on TV-friendly qualities—like charisma and dramatic appeal—rather than actual business performance. The tasks—though themed around marketing, selling, and pitching—were oversimplified and contrived. Boardroom scenes were often staged and reshot to heighten tension and deliver memorable catchphrases like "You're fired!" This carefully crafted image was a far cry from Trump's actual business situation. Yet it worked remarkably well—brilliantly reshaping his public persona into that of a decisive, high-powered business titan presiding over a booming empire.

The Greatest Conman of All Time?

While all of this is superficial, hollow, a show and a lie, it does point to Trump's real talent in a specific field of business: marketing. His brand-building strategy proved highly successful, benefiting him in multiple ways: through his businesses—both his own ventures directly and through licensing his name for loyalty fees with no financial risk—by boosting his personal recognition, and ultimately in politics. But what exactly is it that makes him so successful as a showman?

The foundation is his strong **motivation**, which has several aspects. First, as mentioned, his intense desire for attention and recognition is deeply rooted in his youth and childhood. Second, it's simply a question of necessity: if you don't have much to show for, you have to make it a show. Third, recognition is his most important goal *by far*. While others may also get a kick out of fame, it often still serves another purpose—whether benefiting business, enhancing sexual attractiveness, or helping achieve other goals. For Trump, it's the ultimate goal. This gives it a distinct purity, directness, and exclusivity, further intensifying his motivation. This exclusivity also becomes apparent when considering the absence of other ultimate goals. Cherishing family?

[2] "Ivana better deal" was a tabloid newspaper headline playing on Trump's highly publicized divorce. Ivana Trump was Donald Trump's first wife (1977–1992). During their marriage, Trump began a relationship with Marla Maples, who would later become his second wife (1993–1999). Trump's private life was a goldmine for the tabloid press—and also benefited him, as it helped build his celebrity status and kept him in the public spotlight.

Nurturing long-term friendships? Just having fun and a good laugh[3]? It's debatable how important these goals are to Trump, but they pale in comparison to his pursuit of attention and recognition.

Moreover, his showmanship **skills** are impressive. His unshakable confidence—whether warranted or not—can be highly persuasive, and to many, he exudes charisma. His willingness to bend the truth (to put it mildly) allows him to craft the narratives he desires and that people want to hear. Operating almost purely on emotion and instinct, unhindered by rational checks, enables him to connect directly with people's feelings. His ability to employ stark contrasts and sensational statements creates a dramatic effect that captivates his audience. His clear, easy, and direct language is appreciated by those who struggle with anything more sophisticated. Similarly, his black-and-white thinking, polarization, and preference for massively oversimplified but strikingly clear stories resonate with many. This is crucial, as clarity can be such a strong human need that it often outweighs accuracy, as discussed in *On Rules and Laws*. Additionally, his readiness to scapegoat minority groups or incite hatred against "the elite" allows people to channel their anger into a seemingly purposeful mission, even if entirely unjustified.

Still, as in any discipline, motivation and skills aren't enough—it takes relentless **practice** to achieve true mastery. Trump honed his skills over decades in the limelight. Moreover, he spent over 11 years as the central figure on a wildly popular reality TV show—an unparalleled form of media training for any politician. This experience made him a master of media manipulation for self-promotion, whether by amplifying his message, spreading disinformation, or mobilizing his followers. It enables him to build a cult of personality and, crucially, craft and control narratives that serve his interests.

Another factor that makes Trump such a compelling showman is his **complete identification** with the performance and the role he plays within it. He's not an actor who spends weeks preparing for a part, only to essentially fake it. It's the role of his life—one he knows instinctively and plays around the clock, or at least whenever someone is watching. This blurring of the line between performance and reality also helps explain his unusual relationship with facts, something that, in turn, makes it even easier for him to stay in character.

Paradoxically, this makes him **appear authentic**—albeit in an unconventional manner. Contrary to common belief, authenticity doesn't necessarily stem from someone believing what they say. Instead, it often arises from the absence of disbelief—from not signaling they think what they're saying is false. Audiences are surprisingly good at detecting deception, primarily by picking up on mismatches between words and nonverbal cues such as tone, expression, and body language. To avoid detection, one approach is to become a skilled actor. Another approach—the Trump approach—is to operate without a strong sense of truth or falsehood. Only what works matters,

[3] It's interesting to analyze why Trump hardly ever laughs—referring here to full-hearted, spontaneous, genuine laughter, not just a controlled chuckle or smirk. Mary Trump notes that in this regard, he resembles his father; both men rarely laughed. She attributes this to a family environment where unrestrained laughter was discouraged because it implied vulnerability, a loss of control, and letting one's guard down. Trump *does* laugh on occasion, as seen in a resurfaced clip from the season five finale of *The Celebrity Apprentice.* However, the fact that this rare moment went viral—"shocking the internet" and making Trump seem like a completely different person—may be the clearest sign of how much emotional vulnerability is suppressed in his persona.

making the question of what he believes irrelevant. This implies that when he says something false, he may not perceive it as a lie. That alone can make him seem sincere.

So, he's a showman—but is he also a conman[4]? Let's take a closer look. His online playbook—from the official campaign site to his Truth Social posts promoting TrumpStore, along with his relentless fundraising emails—feels like a modern twist on the old Uncle Sam poster, upgraded from "I want YOU!" to "I want YOU**R MONEY**!" While selling private merchandise like $55 MAGA hats and a slew of other Trump-branded gear to devoted followers might be seen as cashing in on his presidency—and selling the illusion of patriotism—it's still debatable whether that qualifies as a con. However, when donations from supporters intended for his political campaign are used to cover personal legal expenses—like his defense against E. Jean Carroll's sexual assault accusation—it becomes much harder to argue that he hasn't crossed a line.

It's important to recognize how remarkable this con is—almost deserving a kind of perverse respect. On the one hand, there's the story of a wildly successful businessman with more money than he knows what to do with; on the other, the image of a man in desperate need of financial help. Convincing two different groups to believe these opposing narratives would already be a challenge—especially today, when information is so easily accessible and messaging inevitably overlaps. But here's the real genius of the grift: it's often not two different audiences. More often than not, it's the same people who believe both—that he's a billionaire mogul and that he needs struggling Granny's last $25 to fight for America.

Trump's foray into the world of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) is also drifting into grifting territory. NFTs are digital assets—often released in limited editions—that function as collectibles, much like baseball cards. In December 2022, Trump launched a series of such digital cards, some featuring himself in superhero poses, priced at $99 each. The fact that these cards are inherently worthless doesn't, in itself, make the venture a grift; after all, the same could be said of baseball cards. But the *context* of their release—tapping into the hype around both his political persona and the broader NFT investment craze—along with the high likelihood that their value will plummet once the hype fades, raises serious concerns.

The situation became even clearer when Trump launched the *Trump Coin*—and, trying to be a good husband, also *Melania Coin*—his personal cryptocurrency. Introduced in January 2025, just days before his second inauguration, Trump Coin quickly surged in value, reaching a market capitalization of nearly $58 billion. Since then, it has lost most of its value—down 86%, with Melania Coin dropping over 95%—but Trump still profits immensely: the combined revenue from the initial sale of 20% of the tokens and trading fees netted him at least $350 million, and the remaining 80% is set to be sold over the next three years. While it's all too obvious what is going on for experienced market participants—who often take it with humor ("pump-and-dump rhymes with Trump")—the marketing squarely targeted Trump's political base, many of whom

[4] The term "conman" is used here because—as will become clear—it fits Trump perfectly. There's also no need to force a gender-neutral alternative like "conperson," since this field remains very much a boys' club. A few women do carry the flag for their gender—Cassie Chadwick, Anna Sorokin, and Samantha Azzopardi come to mind—but they're few and far between. Of course, there are more neutral terms like "con artist," "scammer," or "fraudster," but there's just something about "Trump" and "conman" that makes them go together like a horse and carriage—try, try, try to separate them, it's an illusion.

lack experience in financial markets. According to a recent analysis, while 58 cryptocurrency wallets collectively profited more than $1.1 billion, roughly 764,000 smaller investors lost money. It's a textbook case of exploiting loyalty for personal gain. And it's crucial to remember that behind the chart showing the collapse of Trump Coin are real people, lost savings, and lives destroyed.[5]

To give Trump a brief reprieve from being labeled a conman, let's exonerate him in one area some might consider a con: his casinos. It's a grey area. On one hand, casinos engage in heavy psychological manipulation—constantly creating the illusion of winning and enticing people to keep playing even as they lose, using flashing lights, near-misses, and free drinks. Slot machines are designed to be addictive (see: *losses disguised as wins*), while games like craps or blackjack offer a false sense of control, making it seem like skill can outplay chance. On the other hand, casinos don't conceal the house edge—it's public knowledge. They offer entertainment value, are heavily regulated, and a few lucky players do walk away richer. So, in this case, let's give Trump the benefit of the doubt and say casinos don't quite qualify as a con. But let's also be clear: his casinos lightened people's pockets by billions over the years, and they are, without question, finely tuned machines engineered to separate people from their money.

Trump's attraction to cons can also be inferred from his admiration for other conmen and criminals. For example, he has repeatedly expressed admiration for the "lovely man" Al Capone—although, in typical Trump fashion, he claims to have "beaten" him, boasting that Capone was indicted only once, while he himself has been indicted four times (which, also in typical Trump fashion, isn't true; Capone was indicted at least six times). He frequently praises autocrats like Putin, Kim Jong Un, Erdoğan, and Orbán—leaders who maintain power through corruption, repression, and the criminal abuse of power. Trump admires authoritarian leaders—undoubtedly because they've achieved something he himself aspires to.[6] And last—but in his mind, never least—he looks up to himself; his 34 felony convictions, while publicly a clear setback, may still spark a flicker of pride, making him feel like one of them.

It perfectly fits the pattern that Trump consistently pardons other conmen. In 2018, Steve Bannon and a few others, including Brian Kolfage, launched the crowdfunding campaign *We Build the Wall*, raising over $25 million from Trump supporters who believed their donations would help build parts of the U.S.–Mexico border wall. Bannon pocketed over $1 million and was part of the scheme in which Kolfage used donor money to fund his much-needed luxury SUV, boat, and cosmetic surgery. Trump pardoned Bannon before he could go to trial (though Trump could only pardon him from federal charges; Bannon later pleaded guilty to separate state-level charges). Trump's pardoning of Paul Manafort and Charles Kushner—father of his son-in-law, who,

[5] For example, see Trump Voters Lose Everything on TRUMPCOIN, Trump Voter LOSES $1MILLION of His Grandpa's Money, and UPDATE: Wife Leaves Trump Voter who LOST $1MILLION.

[6] There may be a deeper psychological reason behind Trump's admiration for Putin—and why Putin seems able to influence him. While it's often assumed that authoritarian figures always strive to sit at the top of the power pyramid, that's not always the case. Many authoritarian personalities emerge from authoritarian households, where strict boundaries were enforced by dominant parental figures. In such environments, submission isn't just expected—it's ingrained. Returning to that dynamic can evoke a sense of familiarity and even comfort. People who think in hierarchical terms often feel compelled to play both roles: to dominate those below, but also to defer to those above. It's akin to the image of a boss who exerts control all day, only to seek submission at night with a dominatrix—sometimes, the need to control masks a deeper desire to be controlled.

among other things, hired a prostitute to lure his brother-in-law to a motel room and filmed them having sex to use the recording against him—along with Sholam Weiss, Billy Walters, Conrad Black, and numerous other fraudsters, leaves no doubt about how seriously he believes cons are morally wrong.

Trump's talent for conning people becomes even more striking when considering *who* he cons. It's not just the gullible or uneducated. Let's take Rudy Giuliani, for example—a seasoned political operator, former mayor (even "America's Mayor"), and a federal prosecutor who brought down the mob. This is someone who had pulled off power plays of his own—not some wide-eyed amateur. And yet, Trump got him fully invested—emotionally, professionally, and publicly. Giuliani became Trump's lead lawyer during the post-2020 election chaos, front and center pushing wild claims of voter fraud, filing lawsuits, and doing media rounds. He probably saw Trump as a vehicle to reclaim relevance, maybe even enrich himself. But once things got legally dicey, Trump ghosted him—refusing to pay any legal bills and sending him into freefall. By the end, Giuliani was disbarred, drowning in lawsuits, and a national punchline—reportedly so broke he couldn't even buy his food. If you can con the con, you're King Con.

Conning individuals—especially experienced ones—isn't easy, though there's always a chance they may show a moment of personal weakness that can be exploited in a one-on-one setting. But Trump managed to con companies whose entire business is to analyze risk and assess credibility. In February 2024, a judge imposed a $364 million penalty against Trump and his companies for defrauding banks—which, tellingly, are often nicknamed "banksters" for their own reputation as conmen—between 2011 and 2021 by inflating his wealth on financial statements, misleading lenders and insurers to secure favorable loan terms. This wasn't some sophisticated valuation sleight of hand; it was remarkably crude. A penthouse of about 11,000 square feet was claimed to be 30,000. Golf courses were valued based on imaginary uses—such as assuming houses could be built where zoning laws prohibit it. Mar-a-Lago was valued at $739 million—even though expert assessments placed it closer to $18–27 million. And all this came after banks had decades of experience with Trump. By the early 1990s, he owed around $3.2 billion to 70 banks—debt so unsustainable it triggered major restructurings and substantial lender losses. He later defaulted on a $640 million loan for a Chicago skyscraper—and responded by suing the bank for predatory lending, a dubious move that nonetheless helped him negotiate a settlement and ultimately save his neck. These weren't isolated incidents but part of a long-standing pattern—too many cases to list.

However, despite all the evidence, something in us hesitates to call him the "master of conmen." That's because he doesn't come across as a clever, shrewd criminal—and for a simple reason: he isn't. His conmanship isn't the intelligent kind. He took classified documents to Mar-a-Lago, storing some in his bathroom, and asked staff to move boxes around to hide them. He tried to flush sensitive documents down the White House toilet—something staff noticed when the toilets kept clogging. Hardly the stealthiest of crimes. He recorded himself—with multiple people listening—asking Georgia's Secretary of State to "find" votes. He pressured Ukrainian President Zelensky to "do us a favor" and investigate Joe Biden while officials listened in. He told people to "go to the Capitol" and "fight like hell" on January 6th—*on national TV*. There are plenty more cases like this—actions that aren't just shady, but cartoonishly clumsy.

This raises the question: why does it keep working? Why isn't he held accountable—at least not to the extent that he should be? Let's get the easy explanation out of the way first: yes, luck has certainly played a major role in his life. Had the banks refused to forgive large portions of his debt when he was technically bankrupt in the 1990s—which, despite all the conmanship, was entirely possible—his career might have ended right there. Several legal cases could have led to far more disastrous outcomes, including career-ending convictions or even prison time. If Mark Burnett hadn't pitched *The Apprentice* to Trump, history might have taken a very different path. Likewise, his 2016 presidential victory hinged on a razor-thin margin—just 80,000 votes across Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. And finally, his coincidental, last-second head tilt during the July 13, 2024 assassination attempt quite literally saved his life.

However, attributing Trump's continued success solely to luck would be far off the mark. Trump and his businesses have been involved in over 4,000 lawsuits from 1973 to his election in 2016. Nobody has so much luck that it could explain why he mostly walked away unscathed—never spending a single day in prison. This doesn't even account for the many other potential cases he likely avoided—the lawsuits were probably only the tip of the iceberg.

There must be real talent behind his cons. It's just not easy to see, probably because we tend to assume that the path to great conmanship must be the intellectual, conscious route. But there's another one: the subconscious, instinct-driven, emotional way—which is why it's sometimes called con *artistry*. This isn't referring to the emotions of the people who get conned—that obviously always plays a role—but rather to the emotional side of the conman and showman. He's not playing "4-dimensional chess," as some of his defenders claim when he acts erratically; instead, it's his intuition that often guides him right. When he stretched his fist into the sky after the assassination attempt, covered in blood, he wasn't thinking, "I'll do this because it's what people want to see." It was pure instinct—an instinct few other politicians would have shown. Trump outsmarts hardly anybody. But he outguts almost everybody.

And sometimes, even his guts aren't required—just being Trump is enough. For instance, he often repeats lies over and over until people believe them. This can be highly effective, thanks to a phenomenon called cognitive ease: repeated statements are easier for our brains to process, and when something feels familiar, we're more likely to accept it as true. There are other explanations too, and chances are, Trump doesn't know any of them. He just knows it works—and that's what matters. But here's the point: even if he didn't know it works, he'd still behave that way, for rather simple reasons. His memory isn't the best—so he repeats things because he forgot he already said them. Or he doesn't have other smart things to say, so he sticks to the

same lines. He's just being Trump.[7] Now let's compare this to the traditional politician: someone who's been trained to write polished essays and speeches at university, getting feedback like, *"You already said this in the previous paragraph—cut it out."* They're conditioned to avoid repetition, less likely to forget what they've said, and they usually have other intelligent points to make. The result? A stringent, articulate, non-repetitive, and error-free speech. And in practice, Trump just bulldozes them.

But still, considering all the clumsy points mentioned above—it was rather stupid to do those things, right? They could have brought him down. Maybe, but things aren't that simple. First, the fact that he wasn't held accountable for them shows that his intuition was right. Where you and I would have stopped, he pushed forward—showing why he's the great conman, not us. Importantly, these cases don't just carry a potential downside—they also offer him something in return. When he behaves visibly unlawfully, he's sending a message: *"You want to hide behind the law? You won't succeed with me. I'll get you."* That scares people and makes them behave the way he wants. Additionally, it serves as a way for Trump to identify who is truly on his side, staying loyal even when he's blatantly breaking the law—acting as a kind of political litmus test. In conclusion, what might seem stupid or clumsy was, in reality, him achieving his goals.

There's another benefit to his seemingly "stupid" actions that plays a crucial role in his success: he's **massively underestimated**. He became the most powerful man in the world—twice—yet many continue to dismiss him as a ridiculous clown. Intellectually, he may be one. But when it comes to knowing how the game is played, he's operating on a different level—one that allows him to fly under the radar. If he came across as highly intelligent and slick, the threat would be much less severe, because people's defenses would go up.[8] But instead, he moves in a way that many—including his political opponents—don't understand well. And on that level, Trump

[7] A relevant book in this context is *Let Trump Be Trump* (2017), written by Corey Lewandowski (Trump's first 2016 campaign manager) and David Bossie (a top campaign advisor). It's an insider's memoir of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign, offering a behind-the-scenes look at what it was like to work with Trump—the chaos, the strategy, the rallies, the plane rides, the firings—everything. A key message in the book—and the inspiration for its title—is that Trump was most powerful when he followed his gut. Any time the campaign tried to make him more "presidential" or traditional, it either backfired or felt inauthentic. For example, using a teleprompter to stick to the script made him come across as wooden and unconvincing. The campaign also tried nudging him toward a healthier diet—instead of the McDonald's he loved—for a more polished image, but it proved more effective to lean into his authenticity: a billionaire who ate like a regular guy. One particularly controversial moment came when Trump criticized Judge Gonzalo Curiel, who was overseeing the Trump University case, claiming the judge couldn't be impartial due to his "Mexican heritage." The backlash was intense, and many advisors urged Trump to walk it back or apologize. He refused—frustrating his team—but his base saw it as Trump standing up to political correctness and the media, which only deepened their loyalty. There are countless other examples, but they all reflect what became the campaign's core philosophy: stop trying to manage Trump and instead let him unleash his instincts.

[8] It's important to recognize that Trump's limited intellectual capabilities aren't necessarily an obstacle to his success—in many ways, they actually contribute to it. As mentioned, they enable him to connect directly with people's emotions and lead others to underestimate him. Another factor is that individuals with higher intellectual abilities are often acutely aware of the limits of their knowledge, making them more cautious. The extreme example is Socrates' famous statement, "I know that I know nothing." Those with more limited capabilities, by contrast, may lack this self-awareness and project greater confidence and energy, sincerely believing they can solve any problem. This is the essence of the Dunning-Kruger effect. It can be highly persuasive—not just because it promises solutions, but because it feels authentic: they genuinely believe what they're saying.

doesn't face much competition. In that light, the real question might not be why he got so many votes, but why he didn't get more.

Also typical of con artists is that they brazenly keep pushing a scam as long as it works. In 1925, Victor Lustig posed as a French government official claiming the Eiffel Tower was being sold for scrap due to high maintenance costs. He invited top scrap metal dealers to a secret meeting at a luxury hotel, complete with forged documents and official-looking stationery. One dealer took the bait, paid a hefty bribe to secure the "deal," and Lustig vanished to Austria with the cash. Since the victim was too embarrassed to go to the police, Lustig returned to Paris and tried to sell the Eiffel Tower a second time to a new group of dealers. This attempt didn't pan out, but in classic conman fashion, Lustig didn't dwell on failure—after all, it was worth a shot—and simply shifted to his next grift: the "Romanian Box," a bogus machine that supposedly duplicated money. Similarly, Trump pushes one con as long as it works, and once it doesn't, he switches to the next. For example, the *Trump Foundation* was positioned as the philanthropic arm of his empire—public messaging and media appearances gave the impression it donated to veterans' groups, supported children's health initiatives, and helped with disaster relief. However, even with a fair amount of creative bending, it's difficult to classify many of the actual uses of the Foundation's money—such as Trump buying a $10,000 giant portrait of himself, or spending $158,000 to settle a lawsuit against one of his golf clubs—as "disaster relief." The judge seemed to agree, ordering Trump to pay $2 million for this scam foundation. But in true Lustig fashion, Trump didn't let it drag him down—he simply pivoted to the next round of grifts, one of which was the so-called "Election Defense Fund," a fund based on the "stolen election" lie that, as it turned out, never actually existed. The $250+ million raised under that banner was funneled into Trump's political operation and spent on things like $200,000 at Trump-owned properties, $700,000 to the firm that organized the Jan. 6 rally, millions in legal fees for Trump and his allies, and $260,000 for Melania Trump's stylist.

Closely related to this is Trump's almost surreal resilience—another hallmark of a "good" conman. CNN ran the headline *"Donald Trump Just Won't Die"*—in 1990. A 1991 documentary titled *Trump: What's The Deal?* posed a similar question: "Who is this guy, who rose so high and fell so fast?" That was before any of his '90s bankruptcies had even hit. And it's not just business. Trump has weathered an onslaught of legal battles, exposed scams, sex scandals, leaked video tapes (including the one where he brags about groping women), the Mueller investigation, four indictments totaling 91 felony counts—including 34 convictions—a lost election, and two impeachments (more than any other U.S. president). Or, how many of us thought, while watching the January 6 insurrection attempt, "Despicable—but at least, this must now be the end of Trump"? There's a reason he published *The Art of the Comeback* in 1997 (of course, he didn't actually write it—just like *The Art of the Deal* in 1987, it was ghostwritten[9]). However, while his comeback qualities are very real, what's framed as strategic brilliance is often simply dumb luck—just cleverly rebranded. As Reuters put it: *The Art of the Spin*.

[9] What's more, there doesn't seem to be any longer, coherent piece of writing authored solely by Trump—not even a single page. Most of what he has personally produced—especially on platforms like Twitter or Truth Social—reads like stream-of-consciousness: heavy on caps-lock, riddled with grammatical issues, and often veering into incoherence or contradiction.

Spinning things around is also a classic tool in the conman's arsenal. It's not just about denying or downplaying allegations—it's about *flipping* them into assets that reinforce his image. Law enforcement investigating Trump's crimes becomes a "witch hunt," which only *increases* support from his base. Lies become truth, and truth becomes "fake news." He casts himself as the *victim* of a stolen 2020 election, while those who stormed the Capitol in a violent attack on the Constitution become "patriots." When he hoarded classified documents and the FBI raided his home, he reframed *them* as the threat to safety. These are psychological judo moves—using the opponent's force against them. Trump has pulled the flip-the-script tactic so often that it's become his signature.

Trump employs countless other tactics that come straight from the conman's playbook. He often acts as if he has insider knowledge or a secret advantage—"I alone can fix it"—mirroring Charles Ponzi, the infamous swindler who convinced people he had discovered a brilliant, exclusive investment system that only he could execute. Like Trump, Ponzi never explained how it worked—he just projected confidence and said, "trust me." Their audacity isn't just part of the act—it *is* the act. (The term *conman* is short for "confidence man," coined in the 19th century to describe swindlers who earned trust only to exploit it.) Trump is also a master of gaslighting, frequently denying things he previously said or did, causing people to question their own memory or perception. For instance, he claimed he never called COVID a hoax—despite video evidence of him implying exactly that. He regularly uses "whataboutism" to deflect, shifting blame by accusing others of similar or unrelated wrongs. For example, when asked about mishandling classified documents, he pivots to Hillary Clinton's emails. He also leans on straw man arguments, distorting opponents' positions to make them easier to attack—like claiming Democrats want "open borders," when that's not actually their position. Then there's flooding the zone: unleashing so much disinformation, chaos, and controversy that the public becomes confused, exhausted, or disengaged. It's a classic distraction technique—keep the audience so overwhelmed that they stop trying to make sense of it all.

A special acknowledgment is due for the fact that Trump is pulling this off right in front of our eyes. Or at least, much of it—there's surely more happening behind the curtain. Many of his cons are well-documented, publicly accessible, and widely reported in mainstream media. He's been known as "Don the Con" for decades, and from 2016 also as "Conman-in-Chief." That alone sets him apart from most conmen—Ponzi, Madoff, Abagnale Jr., Stanford, and others—who thrived only as long as their bluffs went undetected. Their success depended on secrecy. The closest comparisons to Trump's brand of public con artistry might be L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology, or a handful of evangelical fraudsters like Jim Bakker. But they all operated on a different scale.[10]

Talking about scale, at the heart of the conman's game is the *lie*—and in Trump's case, we're fortunate that there's been some diligent tracking. The *Washington Post* documented that Trump made 30,573 false or misleading claims during his first term—an average of about 21 per day.

[10] Another important distinction to keep in mind is that traditional conmen tend to dehumanize their victims to avoid guilt, but they don't necessarily relish the harm they cause—for them, it's primarily about getting the money. With Trump, however, there's an added emotional payoff: domination, the humiliation of others, and the public spectacle of personal triumph—making him feel even more like a winner. This may give Trump the extra motivational fuel that makes him even more successful as a conman.

While modern fact-checking is a relatively recent development, it's safe to say that Trump surpasses any former president in this regard. It would also be difficult to find any public figure, political or otherwise, who comes close. But even more striking than the sheer number of lies is how they're perceived. In a poll conducted in August 2023, Republican voters were asked whom they trust most to tell them the truth. 71% said they trust Trump. Even more astonishing: they trust him more than their own friends and family, who came in second at 63%, followed by conservative media figures (56%) and religious leaders (42%). In other words, Trump doesn't just tell the most lies—he's also the most successful at making people believe them.

What's more, Trump succeeded in convincing a significant portion of the public that facts are subjective, negotiable, or even irrelevant—leading to a world of "alternative facts" and post-truth politics. How this was possible will be explored in the upcoming series on truth. For now, what matters is that he pulled off the con—and not just any con, but one on a completely new level. This isn't the classic snake oil salesman who tricks people into believing the snake oil works. This is a snake oil salesman who convinces people it doesn't matter whether it works at all—and they buy it anyway.

Also talking about scale, how should we think about the current massive cuts in the U.S. budget—initially targeting $2 trillion, later reduced to $1 trillion—while simultaneously preparing tax cuts totaling $4.5 trillion? Can this be considered a con? The main argument for calling it one is simple: the spending cuts fall heavily on healthcare and food stamps—programs that disproportionately affect the poor. Meanwhile, the proposed tax cuts are designed to overwhelmingly benefit the wealthy, especially the ultra-rich. It's hard to see this as anything other than a reverse Robin Hood—taking from the poor and giving to the rich. The only real defense would be that these tax cuts will eventually benefit everyone, as the money flows back into the economy. There are valid reasons to doubt that—when the rich get richer, they don't spend, they save—but that political or economic debate isn't the focus here. It's about whether it qualifies as a con. And for that, we have to zoom in on what reveals it most clearly: the intent. On one hand, there's the view that Trump is proposing this for the long-term, overall benefit of the American people. On the other, that it's a short-term, transactional move—one designed to deliver a political "win" and enrich himself, along with his billionaire ~~friends~~ acquaintances whose approval he craves. If you find yourself leaning toward the former, it might be worth reading this article again—more closely this time.

Trump's budget cuts and tax breaks reveal the vast scope of his con in two ways: first, it involves staggering amounts of money—trillions. Second, it affects nearly everyone. This isn't the kind of con that only touches a handful of unlucky individuals, the sort people read about in the news but feel far removed from. It has a kind of pervasive, total impact. The "old world" resembles how Tolstoy depicted the Napoleonic Wars in *War and Peace*: while massive historical events, they often feel somewhat distant. Military figures like Prince Andrei or Pierre appear, but the war exists in a kind of parallel track—occasionally intersecting with personal life, but never fully consuming it. The main characters return to salons, drawing rooms, philosophical musings, and romantic entanglements. It would be impossible to write such a book set during the Second World War. That war was too encompassing, too total—it left no one untouched. In the same way, this new con isn't something you can tune out. It's knocking on everyone's door—no

matter what side you're on, what business you're in, or whether you're interested in politics or not.

Additionally, not only is everyone *affected* by the con, but in some way, everyone *is* conned. It's tempting to look at the examples above and think, *"It's unbelievable how gullible people are. How could they fall for this?"* The simple answer: because he's a conman—and a great one. But that question also misses the deeper truth. To really understand how people get taken in, we only need to look at ourselves. Have you, dear reader, ever thought of Trump as a successful businessman? Maybe even a self-made billionaire? Perhaps you believed that at one point in your life—or even right up until reading this article? If so, there's no need to point fingers—he conned you too. It's not a binary between the duped and the savvy, but a sliding scale. Everyone is affected in some way. And that, too, reveals the totality of the con.

Furthermore, this isn't the end of the story. We're not summing up a conman's legacy after he's been jailed or buried; we're still watching the fraud unfold in real time. The list of cons will keep growing. Additionally, some cons that are happening now won't even be recognized as such until years from now. Many of those campaigning for Trump—urging their friends to vote for him—will face a harsh reckoning when the consequences hit. Similarly, those riding high today—building political careers on the back of his lies—should ask themselves: what will the world look like in 10, 20, or 30 years when accountability comes due? No matter how high you fly, gravity always wins. And in all probability, it won't even take that long. So far, for almost anyone who's sided with Trump, it's ended in tears. As his biographer Michael Wolff puts it: *"*Nobody comes out alive.*"* In any case, Trump won't care—he probably won't be around when most face the reckoning. But many will pay the price—only then realizing that they, too, were played.

This means that the awareness of having been conned is on a sliding scale as well. When research for this article began, the assumption was that Trump was simply a politician acting in his own self-interest—like many do. But as the investigation deepened, the first signs of genuine conmanship began to surface. That raised a new question: could he be compared to history's most notorious conmen? And if so, is he truly in the same league? Eventually, the answer became clear: he doesn't just belong in the same league—he surpasses them all, operating in a league entirely his own. In other words, recognizing the full extent of the con is a gradual process, one that each person navigates at their own pace. The truth will ultimately reveal itself to everyone—if they live long enough. The only question is: where are you on that path?

To back up the claim that he's in a league entirely his own, we need to look at the numbers. Here's the bottom line: whether it's the number of cons pulled, the number of people conned (which probably includes you), the sophistication of his victims, the scale and severity of the cons' impact, the years he's been active as a conman, the number of people who still trust him despite his cons, the sheer volume of legal cases (without spending a single day in prison), the variety of con tactics employed, or the money gained from his schemes[11]—Trump outshines

[11] Many politicians have stolen billions from the public—Putin, Suharto, Maduro, and Mubarak come to mind—yet those were more straightforward acts of corruption. What sets Trump apart is that his approach is a true con: instead of relying on brute power, it focuses on mesmerizing the crowd, selling the illusion, and gaining power through

nearly every other conman in every category. And when taken all together, there's just no competition. Last but not least, there's his resilience: calling Trump "still going strong" would be an understatement—he's the most powerful man in the world. In this respect, Trump more than earns the title of the greatest of all time (GOAT). Or better yet, GCOAT—the greatest conman of all time—which fits, since a coat can hide, mislead, and cover things up.[12]

That brings us to a major dilemma in Trump's life. Usually, he's not shy about claiming he's the best at anything he touches—whether it's being president, a dealmaker, a debater, a hostage negotiator, or the best-words-haver. He once famously declared himself a "very stable genius," and claimed to be unmatched in his respect for women, commitment to free speech, and love for the Latino community. According to him, his knowledge is unsurpassed when it comes to tech, trade, tax laws, ISIS, the Bible (despite not being able to quote a single verse), "windmills" (he meant wind turbines), campaign finance, and infrastructure. There are plenty more examples, but listing them all would double the length of this article. Of course, these claims are so ridiculous that hardly anyone bothers wasting breath to disagree. However, when it comes to calling himself the best conman—essentially claiming he's the best at being the worst—he knows that's not exactly great for PR. So he doesn't say it.

Isn't that a tragedy? He's desperately longing to be the GOAT at something, and he finally found the one thing where it's actually true—but he can't say it! He's dying to say it—it's eating him alive. So here's a prediction: one day, he will say it. When he has nothing left to lose. When the show is coming to a close and he's facing the final curtain, he won't just leave the stage saying he did it his way—he'll declare, "I conned you all… and I'm the greatest conman who ever lived." And for the first time ever, we'll have to agree.

Feasting on Unhappiness

No matter how good a conman is, his act will never work if there aren't also those who are willing or at least vulnerable to being conned—*it takes two to tango*. With that in mind, the focus should now shift from the conman to his victims.

Who's easiest to con? Undoubtedly, the conman's favorites are those driven by emotions. Any trace of rational thinking or logic could risk revealing their bluff. The stronger the emotions, the better, as they distract from rational thinking and cloud the mind. And since *negative emotions* can be much stronger than positive ones, they're usually the most fertile ground for the conman to exploit.

---

democratic elections. Another key difference is that Trump achieved this without controlling the entire media landscape—unlike many dictators throughout history who maintained a tight grip on propaganda.

[12] For example, the use of a coat as a disguise in literature stretches from Homer's Odyssey—where Athena cloaks Odysseus as a beggar so he can return home in secret and assess the suitors—through Shakespeare's King Lear, where Edgar hides his noble identity by wearing rags and a coat to pose as the mad beggar "Poor Tom," all the way up to Rowling's Harry Potter, whose invisibility coat hides the wearer completely, allowing them to sneak, escape, or conceal others.

Trump was fortunate to find such fertile ground. The *General Social Survey*, which has been tracking happiness since the 1970s, revealed that overall happiness in the U.S. has reached a historic low. The *World Happiness Report 2025* confirmed this. Americans are among the most stressed people in the world, suffering more and more from anxiety, depression, and trauma. Deaths of despair—primarily from suicide and drug overdoses—have more than doubled over the past two decades, reaching record highs. Overall life expectancy is also decreasing sharply.

As always, there are many factors contributing to these developments, but some deserve to be pointed out. A key one is financial anxiety: the cost of living has increased significantly. While wages have risen—in some cases even outpacing inflation—there's a lot hidden behind those averages. First, inflation doesn't affect everyone equally. Lower-income households have been affected more since they spend a greater proportion of their income on necessities like housing, food, and utilities—areas that have seen significant price increases. Perhaps even more relevant are psychological factors: due to loss aversion, we tend to feel the pain of higher prices more intensely than the benefits of increased wages; sharp increases in grocery prices make the impact of inflation more noticeable; and drastic negative changes—even if offset by drastic positive changes—create a sense of uncertainty that often undermines happiness. We saw this pattern during and after COVID: inflation spiked sharply, followed only some time later by strong wage growth, but the lag and unpredictability between the two left people feeling unsettled. People always prefer certainty and stability.

Beyond the constant pressure of everyday costs, there are also major expenses that have contributed to a sharp rise in financial anxiety. Housing costs, for example, have risen much faster than wages in many areas. The stress of unaffordable or unstable housing amplifies a sense of insecurity. Healthcare costs continue to surge—and even for those who are healthy, the fear of getting sick or injured and facing an unaffordable bill can be deeply unsettling. Student debt has skyrocketed, creating major concerns for younger generations and delaying life milestones like buying a home or starting a family—leading to anxiety and a sense of falling behind. A 2021 survey even found that 1 in 14 borrowers had considered suicide due to student debt. In general, Americans are saving less and carrying more debt, making their financial balancing act feel increasingly like walking a high wire without a safety net. The rise of the gig economy and second jobs has done little to ease these pressures: even if they are technically employed, many lack job security, benefits, or predictable income—all of which contributes to an "always on" grind mentality and a culture of burnout, especially in a country where vacation time is scarce and often unused (driven by guilt over taking time off, pressure to stay constantly available, and fear of falling behind). And while stock markets have performed strongly over the past decade, the gains have disproportionately gone to the wealthy, widening the gap between rich and poor. Even if people aren't actually worse off, comparing themselves to richer peers can still make them feel that way.

Another major contributor to unhappiness is *loneliness*, which has been increasing globally—and especially in the United States. Americans have long been at higher risk of loneliness due to the country's culture of individualism: independence and self-reliance are deeply valued, which can be empowering, but also lead people to prioritize personal success over relationships, making it harder to build or maintain deep, lasting connections. Furthermore, American loneliness feels almost designed: cities are often built around cars rather than people. This creates a physical

separation that makes spontaneous encounters with friends, neighbors, or even strangers less likely—the kind of casual social contact that's more common in walkable European or Asian cities. There's also a cultural tendency toward emotional stoicism and a stigma around expressing loneliness. Admitting to loneliness or needing others is often seen as weak, stopping people from reaching out—or even acknowledging those feelings in the first place. Changing family structures—fewer marriages, fewer kids, and relatives often living far apart—can leave older adults especially vulnerable to isolation. Younger people face similar challenges, but in different forms: social media, texting, and remote work can create a sense of constant online connection, yet still leave people feeling deeply lonely—that kind of "ambient connection" doesn't replace real-life intimacy or emotional support. Meanwhile, classic community institutions—churches, civic groups, unions—are fading away. Then, on top of it all, came COVID. That's not easy to take for such social animals as humans.

Financial stress and social isolation are arguably the strongest contributors to declining happiness. They also reinforce each other: financial hardship feels twice as tough when there's no one to support you financially or even just to talk to. There are also other factors that add to the pressure. Information overload can be overwhelming—even when it offers more choices—but it's especially draining when most of that information is negative. This reflects the tendency of negative news to spread more rapidly and widely. Political and social polarization, in particular, weighs heavily on many people, intensifying emotional strain. To make matters worse, many people are losing trust in institutions—like the media, government, healthcare, courts, science, and education. These systems are supposed to provide protection and support, but when they're seen as failing, it just makes people feel even more unstable and disconnected. All of this, combined with worries about climate change and global conflicts, leaves many feeling like the world is spinning out of control.

This is a conman's dream. They know that when we're unhappy—or, even better, desperate—we fall back on short-term thinking and listen to our emotions. When we get hit, we want to hit back—often without thinking about where we aim. We just want relief, and we'll grab at whatever promises it quickly. Trump delivers those promises—boldly and with unrestrained confidence ("you'll get tired of winning"). It's not just about promising to fix the problems—it's about making us feel better about them. For example, by insisting that we weren't responsible for those issues to begin with. If we've failed in life due to our own mistakes and shortcomings, it simply feels good to hear that it was actually the fault of immigrants, other countries, political opponents, or the corrupt elite.[13] This isn't meant sarcastically; it genuinely feels good at first—for everyone. The difference is that some people manage to regulate that feeling with rational thought and face the truth. But that takes energy, stability, and often education or social support—things many people haven't been fortunate enough to have.

[13] The real solution lies in doing the exact opposite: taking full responsibility for oneself. This mindset can be a powerful catalyst for personal growth. When we stop seeing ourselves as victims, we take action instead of blaming circumstances. This holds true even in extreme cases. For example, if we are wrongfully imprisoned for a crime we didn't commit, it's natural to feel outraged by the injustice. But the real danger is staying stuck in that outrage. Instead, we should ask ourselves: Did we associate with the wrong people? Did we make choices that increased our risk? Did we fail to prepare legally? Adopting a *Radical Responsibility* mindset not only drives us to improve our situation but also turns helplessness into a powerful sense of control over our lives.

Trump simply says what people want to hear—and it works, even when it's completely detached from rational thought. In fact, it might be more accurate to say it works *precisely because* it's detached from rational thought—allowing him to bypass complexity and appeal directly to people's emotions. For example, when he accuses immigrants of taking Americans' jobs (wrong), increasing crime rates (wrong), spreading diseases (wrong), or even eating pets (wrong), it doesn't matter that none of those claims are true. What matters is that he creates a simple, emotionally charged narrative with a clear enemy—one that offers a release, a target for fear and frustration. It's simple, visceral, and doesn't require any critical thinking. The same applies to the measures he proposes against immigrants. Everyone understands the idea of "kicking them out"—it's direct, emotionally satisfying, and easy to grasp. And what about preventing them from coming in? More advanced border controls might be effective, but they're too complex and abstract. A *wall*, on the other hand, is easy for everyone to understand. And the cost? Reallocating funds or raising border tolls and entry fees? Too messy. Lowballing the cost so the project feels cheap at first, then revealing the real price later when it's too late to back out? Not bad, but that only gets you a 6 out of 10 on the conman exam. What people want to hear is: "Mexico will pay for it!" It's the perfect emotional solution—simple, satisfying, and free of nuance. It's even better than if the wall were free, because the enemy gets punished by having to pay for it. In a strange way, there's something the rational mind can almost envy in Trump's approach: his complete freedom from the constraints of facts, which must feel incredibly liberating. And it's highly effective—as long as people are driven primarily by negative emotions.

The above is also a textbook example of a classic manipulation tactic used by con artists: presenting yourself as the best solution to a serious problem—that you created yourself. Once you convince people that your message about "dangerous immigrants" is true, they're almost certain to accept the second part: "...and I will fix it." Trump consistently undermines public trust in institutions by repeating the same lies over and over, then positioning himself as the only one who can "clean up the mess." Ironically, he gains the most support from those most harmed by this erosion of trust—people whose faith in institutions forms the core of their worldview and sense of stability. When the stock market drops 10% because of tariffs Trump imposed, and then rebounds 5% after he withdraws them, his supporters often celebrate him for the recovery. It's like setting a fire and then being applauded for showing up with a bucket of water. Anything becomes possible when emotions and anger cloud judgment.

The conman also thrives on people's desperation because it often feels like "anything is better than our current situation." That feeling has evolutionary roots: pain makes us think, "This just has to stop," prompting us to do anything to make it go away. But in today's complex world, that instinct is often misleading. No matter how bad things seem, they can always get worse. In fact, most possible actions make things worse—there are countless ways to damage a situation, but only a few that genuinely improve it. Nevertheless, our primal instincts often take over, so when a leader comes along and says, "I'll change things," that's often all people need to hear. Rational questions like *How? What? Why?* fade into the background. Ironically, when the leader makes things worse, he has technically delivered on his promise to bring about change. People may later say, "Well, we didn't mean *that kind* of change," but by then, it's too late.

One factor that makes things worse is the U.S. two-party system. It leads people to think "I wasn't happy under Party A, so I must vote for Party B now," which is clearly flawed. It also lets people switch off their brains: once they've decided they dislike one party, voting for the other side becomes automatic. Moreover, strong feelings about a single issue—like wokeness—can drive someone to vote for the opposing party, even if they disagree with most of their positions. This dynamic benefits conmen, as it allows them to focus entirely on slandering, vilifying, and demonizing the other side rather than offering real solutions—a game in which the most ruthless player always wins. It also plays perfectly into Trump's hands, reflecting the zero-sum, divisive, black-and-white, trench-warfare mindset that he embodies like no one else.

One striking example of where this dynamic leads is the Muslim community's support for Trump. Trump has a long and well-documented history of hostility toward Muslims. He once stated that "Islam hates us," claimed to have seen Muslims in New Jersey celebrating after the 9/11 attacks (which was debunked), considered closing mosques in the U.S., and recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital—a move widely condemned in the Muslim world. He also called for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States," a policy he later partially enacted and referred to as "Muslim ban." One might assume that such actions would limit his support among Muslims to no more than 0.01%. Yet in the 2024 election, not only did Trump significantly increase his share of the Muslim vote compared to 2020, but in some cities, he even received more Muslim votes than any other candidate. Shortly after his 2025 inauguration, Trump proposed a plan—consistent with his respect for Muslims—to forcibly remove the entire Palestinian population from Gaza, a move so extreme that it even surprised Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu—hardly a figure known for his gentle stance on Muslims. This led some Muslim Trump supporters to feel the first flickers of doubt about whether they had made the right choice. But perhaps the more interesting question is how they came to support Trump in the first place. The main reason was the two-party system: many Muslims were frustrated with the Biden administration's failure to restrain Israel in Gaza and concluded that the only way to express their discontent was to shift their vote—from the neglectful guardian to their unapologetic hangman.

Trump's ability to exploit people's unhappiness is evident even when he says something that, on the surface, sounds positive. The word "again" in his slogan "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) subtly suggests that America has declined. In what way? It doesn't say—and that vagueness is precisely its strength. Everyone gets to fill in the blanks with whatever they feel they've lost: jobs, cultural values, status, safety, respect, or even loved ones who've passed away. Of course, Trump won't bring them back—but that's already thinking too rationally. It's the feeling that counts—and nostalgia is a powerful force. This is how MAGA unites people whose goals couldn't be more different. Whatever Black voters—who doubled their support for Trump in 2024 compared to 2020—have in mind when wearing their MAGA hats, it's likely very different from what white supremacists envision when they long for the Jim Crow era, when Black Americans were disenfranchised, excluded, and segregated. The MAGA slogan is also simple, catchy, and quick to say. It includes the word "great"—which literally sounds great. It mentions "America," appealing to national identity and a sense of belonging—and if you push back against it, you risk seeming unpatriotic. It makes people feel like it's about me, about us, right now. It also positions Trump as the only one who can stop the fall. And not only is the

slogan great, but Trump made it great.[14] He repeats it endlessly: in speeches, rallies, social media, and through a massive merchandise campaign that makes it nearly impossible to escape. The merch doesn't just spread the message—it turns MAGA into a symbol, transforming a slogan into a movement. A hat becomes a flag. A shirt becomes a statement. This is how marketing is done.

Being part of a movement can also give positive feelings—it can feel empowering—but that doesn't change the fact that without a strong underlying unhappiness, none of it would be possible. This means Trump has a strong incentive to keep it that way. If people were happy and balanced, there'd be no anger to exploit—and they'd be more likely to reject his lies. Therefore, it's a mistake to assume that when he damages the U.S. economy, people will "wake up and see how bad he is for the country." That's wishful thinking—based on the false assumption that people will connect the dots. In the short term, his approval ratings might dip—but in the long run, he's laying the groundwork for even more people to seek blame and rally behind him. And for those already in his camp, the discontent only fuels deeper radicalization. The real solution would be to Make America Happy Again (MAHA)—but Trump has every reason to avoid that, as he thrives on people's anger and unhappiness.

However, this applies to long-term, underlying happiness. Trump still needs to provide short-term happiness to his supporters—if they felt like they were being punched in the face by him every day, they'd walk away. One way he achieves this is by doing what he's best at and providing what many Americans crave: a show. Americans have always had a penchant for shows and the celebrities in them, often without seeing the need to draw a strict line to politics (Reagan, Schwarzenegger, etc.). Recent developments have heightened this trend. When people are struggling, Hollywood plays an even more important role as a window to the American Dream. Similarly, the value of shows as a form of escape has increased, which explains the rise of highly fantastical, imaginative shows that allow audiences to experience an alternate reality far removed from their own (*Stranger Things*, *The Mandalorian*, *Game of Thrones*). During difficult times, people also seek more laughter—and Trump lends himself to comedy not only because of his actions but also due to his distinct speaking style and looks that can easily be caricatured and mocked. With rising uncertainty and polarization, politics has become an increasingly popular topic for shows like *The West Wing*, *House of Cards*, and *Veep*. Trump fully embraces his role as ~~politician-showman~~ showman-politician, commenting on the impeachment hearings that they will get a lot of viewers: "The ratings will be through the roof" (which isn't exactly the point of the impeachments). And finally, Americans are getting more bored, so when they switch on the TV, they don't want to see "Sleepy Joe"—they want to see how Trump body-slams WWE Chairman Vince McMahon (earning him a spot in the WWE's Hall of Fame), his cameos in *Home Alone 2*, *Sex and the City*, and other films and TV shows, and his pairing with Mike Tyson, among many other stunts. We can say whatever we want about those

[14] To give Trump appropriate credit, it should be noted that the slogan "Make America Great Again" does appear to have been his original phrasing. Ronald Reagan had used a very similar line before ("Let's Make America Great Again"), but it was not central to his campaign and was used far less prominently. Trump has said he only learned about Reagan's version later, and in this case, that's plausible: he described testing out variations like "We'll make America great," then "Make America great," and finally settling on "Make America Great Again"—a backstory that feels too specific to be one of his usual blunt fabrications. In any case, regardless of who first coined the idea, it was Trump who immediately recognized its potential—not through careful reasoning, but entirely on instinct—trademarked it, and turned it into a defining brand and political rallying cry.

performances—they're just a show, and they shouldn't influence the serious decision of who to vote for. But they do provide many with immediate satisfaction and a quick sense of joy.

Providing short-term happiness is likely the key differentiator between Trump and other politicians. Most political campaigns are future-oriented: they focus on which actions will, over time, improve the country. Trump's rhetoric pays lip service to that, but his real appeal lies in delivering emotional gratification right *now*. He blames others, allowing his supporters to feel better about themselves *now*. He tackles loneliness by giving people a sense of belonging in the MAGA community *now*. He offers hope that doesn't need to be justified to make people feel better *now*. And that feeling is real. It's not just empty promises about future benefits—it's immediate emotional relief. Again, we can argue that it's all a bubble, that they'll be worse off later, or that it's happening only in their minds. But happiness is always in our minds. Asking a MAGA hardliner to abandon the Trump movement is essentially asking them to give up a key source of happiness. That's a steep call—one we likely wouldn't answer either, if we were in their shoes. As Jeremy Bentham put it, *pleasure and pain are the masters of mankind*—governing everything we do. In that light, Trump has given a certain group of people something no one else has, and in record time. So it's only logical that they love him.

Becoming a Cult

When Trump said he could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody without losing any voters, the shocking part wasn't that he made the statement—the shocking part is that it's true. This "beyond criticism" attitude among his base points to a different kind of followership: not one rooted simply in gratitude for what he's done or hope for what he might do, but one that borders on the religious.

For a conman, becoming the center of a cult must always be the ultimate goal. Once that point is reached, followers effectively agree to leave reason at the door. The conman then gains the ultimate freedom: he can tell any lie he wants, make his followers do whatever he wants, and exploit them endlessly for personal gain.

It's crucial to understand just how successfully Trump managed to do that. First, there are his obvious, straightforward lies on specific topics—lies that most of his base firmly believe. This includes belief that the 2020 election was stolen even after more than 60 court cases failed to prove fraud; that he had the largest inauguration crowd in history—even though simple pictures proved the opposite; that climate change is a hoax created by China; that millions voted illegally in 2016; that the sound from wind turbines causes cancer; and much more.

Then there are the more elaborate lies—complex constructs of paradigms and narratives completely unmoored from any evidence. These include the "deep state" conspiracy, which claims that bureaucrats and intelligence officials are secretly conspiring to undermine Trump. He has also embraced QAnon—a sprawling conspiracy theory centered on the belief that a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping, cannibalistic elites (including Democrats, Hollywood figures, and

others) is running a global child sex-trafficking operation.[15] This echoes earlier conspiracies like "Pizzagate," which claimed that such a ring operated out of the basement of a Washington D.C. pizzeria. It's tempting to think no one could seriously believe something so ridiculous—not just because of how absurd it is, but because believers' actions often defy logic. For instance, some responded to Pizzagate not by calling the police, but by leaving 1-star Google reviews—an odd way to confront a supposed child-trafficking ring. But some also took more decisive action—like Edgar Welch, who stormed the pizzeria with a rifle and fired shots in an effort to "save the children." He was arrested at the scene and, following his conviction, began serving a four-year prison sentence.

But perhaps most remarkable is how people directly suffer from Trump's actions and then reinterpret their experience to avoid criticizing him. This includes farmers harmed by the China tariffs who respond with, "Short-term pain, long-term gain"—a dangerous rationale that could justify *any* action, no matter how severe the consequences; the husband cheering for Trump's "wins" while his wife is dying of cancer due to budget cuts; people who support Trump's immigration policies even after their friends or family are deported; and COVID patients who kept repeating Trump's claims that the virus was exaggerated or not serious—as they were dying from it. It's like the stalker who gets a call from his victim telling him to stop—and interprets it as proof she wants to connect. When the belief is strong enough, people will twist and turn the facts until it fits their worldview.

These aren't isolated cases. Several statistics related to his broader base show that rationality consistently takes a back seat. For example, a 2017 study fact-checked Trump's false statements and observed his supporters' reactions. Although they did develop a better understanding of the facts, it had no measurable effect on their attitudes toward Trump or their voting behavior. Equally telling is a 2024 study showing that 82% of Republicans believe Trump cares about ordinary people. This doesn't just mean that Trump is taking actions in their favor—which wouldn't necessarily imply caring, as his goals might simply happen to align with theirs—but that he is genuinely concerned for their lives and struggles. That level of emotional connection is extremely rare in politics—most politicians struggle to reach even 50% on that metric. If someone can achieve that level of trust while consistently demonstrating that he cares only about himself, then something deeper must be at play.

How did Trump achieve this status, making emotions trump facts? Beyond widespread dissatisfaction, another influential factor is a cultural tendency—deeply embedded in parts of

[15] Trump never directly said "I support Pizzagate," but he's certainly played footsie with it—amplifying those who promoted it and never disavowing it, which matters *a lot* in conspiracy land. He retweeted or "reTruthed" dozens of accounts that had promoted Pizzagate. He also repeatedly hinted at elite child-trafficking rings with vague statements like, "We're cracking down on human trafficking like no one else has," and, "You wouldn't believe the horrible things going on. Horrible." These kinds of phrases echo Pizzagate and QAnon rhetoric, and are often taken as "confirmation" by conspiracy theorists—even if he never names specifics. He also invited Pizzagate- and QAnon-adjacent figures to the White House. In 2020, many in those circles rebranded under the "Save the Children" banner—presenting a less creepy, more socially acceptable front. Trump echoed that language too, calling himself "the most pro-child anti-trafficking president in history." Most importantly, when asked directly to denounce QAnon or conspiracies like Pizzagate, Trump usually dodged, saying things like, "I don't know much about it, but I hear they like me." This kind of *plausible deniability* allows him to sidestep direct responsibility while still feeding and energizing his most loyal believers.

American life—to prioritize personal conviction over empirical evidence. Often shaped by faith traditions, this kind of belief-centered thinking can offer meaning, resilience, and a strong sense of purpose. But as history shows, what fosters hope and trust can also become a gateway to manipulation. That's why con artists have long targeted tight-knit, trusting communities—particularly religious ones, as documented by agencies like the SEC and FBI. This isn't a critique of faith itself, but rather a reflection on how deeply held and socially reinforced beliefs can be both powerful and exploitable. The following isn't a sarcastic or rhetorical question—it's sincere, and every reader should answer it honestly: if you had to convince someone that the moon is made of cheese, would you begin with a scientist who demands testable evidence—or someone whose worldview already includes room for miracles, mystery, and the unseen?

It's important to recognize that, ultimately, it's always about emotions. Even rational thinking serves that purpose—it's not an end in itself, but a tool we use to pursue happiness. If people come to believe that rationality won't help them achieve that, then it's only rational for them to abandon it. A striking example is the case of televangelist Peter Popoff, who amazed audiences by claiming to receive divine revelations about their personal details, illnesses, and addresses. However, skeptic James Randi and his team uncovered the truth: Popoff was using a hidden earpiece to receive information from his wife, who had collected it beforehand from prayer cards filled out by attendees. The reaction of Popoff's followers was astonishing. Instead of directing their anger at him, many lashed out at those who exposed the scam—feeling their hopes had been shattered. More about this in *The Truth About Truth*.

But once again, we should be cautious about pointing fingers and asking, "*How could people believe Trump's crazy lies?*" The answer lies within ourselves. What exactly made Trump so successful at conning us into believing he's a savvy businessman? Maybe we didn't bother to cross-check the information. Or we trusted friends who repeated the lie—explicitly or implicitly. There are likely other reasons too, but the key point is this: we're not as different as we'd like to believe. There's a bit of a Trump-believer in everyone. While some may be more deeply affected, it's the same underlying scale—only the degree differs.

Also relevant in this context is the fact that everyone starts out with the initial perception that Trump is a successful businessman. The media doesn't even need to actively portray him that way—simply being constantly in the news and referred to as a billionaire is enough. This alone leaves a strong impression on us, especially when we're young. The key point is this: while that impression is emotional, correcting it always requires rational effort. Hence, the reason many people continue to see him as a successful businessman is simple—they either can't, or don't want to, take that rational path of correction. Importantly, the idea that *"everyone starts out this way"* isn't hyperbole—it's literally true for everyone. Even a child who sees Trump on TV for the first time, being framed as a successful businessman, and hears their parents say five minutes later, "Don't believe him, he's a fraudster," still starts with that initial impression. The only way this wouldn't be the case is if someone were introduced to him like this: *"Let me tell you about a fraudster. You've never heard of him before. His name is Donald Trump…"* But is there a single person on the planet who first came to know him that way? The first impression is always impression—and once you're emotionally impressed, it can be difficult for rationality to override it.

In general, going by emotions is always the easier path. Critical thinking is complex, burdensome, and exhausting. Logic and reason are also only secondary—not in terms of importance, but in how they develop. We aren't born with a built-in commitment to them; we start out entirely emotional. These concepts are learned over many years and are layered on top of our emotional core. When things get difficult, we tend to fall back to emotion—even though those are the moments when rational thinking is most crucial. In such situations, we often switch off independent thought and look for a leader—someone to think for us, to provide direction, and, importantly, to offer a convenient excuse if things go wrong. It gives us the comforting illusion of transferring responsibility: "*I was just following them—and so were my friends.*"

So, how do we choose our leaders? The most powerful factor—on an emotional level—is **identification**. Let's consider why that is. Who are people drawn to, and ultimately vote for? In essence, they want to vote for the person they value, trust, and admire most: themselves. But when they step into the voting booth, they cannot find their name anywhere on the ballot. So they do the next best thing—they vote for the candidate in whom they see themselves. More precisely, they choose an *idealized version* of themselves: more powerful, more confident, more successful. This identification happens purely on an emotional level, and that has two interesting implications. First, it influences even those who rationally know better but don't *feel* it. For example, some voters may intellectually recognize that Trump is an unsuccessful businessman—yet emotionally, the myth persists, because it runs deep. Second, emotional identification often bypasses the rational question of whose policies actually align with their interests. That's why egoists vote for egoists—even though the egoists they elect, of course, will only fight for their own gain.

The role of identification has deep evolutionary roots. Nature continuously rewarded species that successfully replicated their genes, programming us to take actions supporting that goal. This includes not just us as individuals, but also our relatives who share our genes. But there's a challenge: using DNA tests to check genetic similarities before taking action wasn't possible in the past—and isn't practical today. So we rely on a shortcut: assuming that others who look like us probably share our genes. This sense of group belonging—and our tendency to trust those who resemble us—appears everywhere, from choosing friends with similar physical traits to kids being more cooperative with others wearing the same-colored T-shirts.

People are also drawn to groupthink because of its simplicity. You're either inside the group or you're not—black-and-white thinking at its finest. It overrides the complexities of reality and can be deeply seductive. Once this mindset takes hold, a conman can easily exploit it. For example, this kind of binary thinking allows a group to define itself not by what it stands for, but by what it stands against. When Trump attacks certain groups, and people already harbor resentment toward those groups, they become "united by hate"—falling into the trap of thinking "my enemy's enemy must be my friend." This is a serious error in thinking, one that populists are quick to exploit. By creating the illusion of battling evil forces, such figures convince groups they are allies. In reality, they use this tactic to infiltrate the group—ultimately destroying it from within.

However, the biggest danger of groupthink is that the validity of a statement or action becomes irrelevant—what matters is solely who made it. Any criticism is dismissed purely because it

comes from an outsider. As flawed as this is, it's a very robust mindset. First, it appeals to emotions: people believe they're doing something good—even altruistic—by "defending their group." Second, it not only dismisses specific arguments but also rejects any challenge to the mindset itself—simply because it comes from someone perceived as an outsider. It's devilish—but also devilishly clever.

We must always keep in mind the crucial role of identification. For example, Trump's speeches are often rambling, full of half-finished thoughts, simplistic phrases, gut feelings instead of facts, insults, exaggerations, rudeness, and raw anger. When people are then asked why they vote for him and respond "Because he talks like us," it's easy to chuckle and dismiss it—but that would be a grave mistake. He didn't win *despite* those flaws, he won *because* of them. In that sense, Trump offers a painful insight into the American soul—one that hurts, but we must confront it if we ever hope to find a way out.

Identification is also deeply connected to the questions "Who am I?" and "Who are we?", making anything that touches on this highly significant. And as we've seen, identification matters most when people are driven by emotion, especially during difficult times. Consider their situation: life hits them hard, their friends and family are struggling, their cherished religion is retreating, and local industries are collapsing. In that state, it's only natural to long for the familiar—for stability, for the "good old days"—just to keep the world from sliding further off its tracks. And then you come along and say, "Forget millions of years of evolution—from now on, people can simply declare whether they're a man or a woman." Then, well… good luck with that.

It's crucial to understand that this isn't just one issue among many—it goes straight to people's hearts. Critics often mock this perspective, claiming that there are more important things to worry about. You'll hear sarcasm such as: "Sure, the economy is collapsing, our alliances are falling apart, democracy is crumbling—but hey, at least no transgender man will win a women's sports competition." But that reveals a fundamental lack of understanding. For many, identity comes first—and overrides everything else. Logic and reason are always just a fragile superstructure built on top of our emotional foundation. In emotionally charged moments, the arguments that follow are often just backward rationalizations aimed at defending those core emotions.

Talking about gender and identification, Trump receives strong support from a group that is typically considered rather progressive: young men. Here again, mounting unhappiness is a core driver, stemming from several factors. First, boys and young men are increasingly falling behind their female peers in educational performance. This is often attributed to a school system that rewards behaviors—sitting quietly, following rules, and staying organized—where girls tend to excel earlier; the rise of the "soft skills economy," where jobs increasingly require communication, collaboration, and emotional intelligence—areas where, on average, women score higher; and the lack of role models for boys due to the scarcity of male teachers. At the same time, the decline of jobs in manufacturing, construction, and mining—once strongholds of working-class male identity—has led to what has been called a "mancession," with one out of five working-age American men currently jobless. The implications of this are not just financial; they strike at the heart of male identity, given the still-prevalent belief that men must be

powerful, breadwinning protectors within their families and broader society. This crisis is often obscured by statistics such as the fact that, for a long time, there were more CEOs named "John" than female CEOs—a figure that reflects only a narrow elite and not the lived reality of over 99% of men. In fact, psychologically, it worsens the situation, reinforcing the image that men must be highly successful to be valuable. To make matters worse, men often find it difficult to manage emotional challenges, as societal expectations encourage them to "tough it out" rather than seek help, making them more likely to suffer from untreated depression and to commit suicide. Additionally, programs intended to support women or minorities in their careers—though well-meaning—can leave many men feeling disadvantaged, demonstrating the risk that, if not handled with care, efforts to remedy one injustice can unintentionally alienate others. Moreover, while the #MeToo movement was essential in confronting sexual misconduct, it left many men feeling insecure—worried about misinterpretation, false accusations, or discomfort with shifting gender norms. For some, these changes are perceived as a threat to traditional male identity. Into this picture steps a man who symbolizes masculinity by being strong, dominant, and unapologetic, and who vows to fight back. This image can feel immensely compelling. In fact, the endorsement of hegemonic masculinity was the strongest predictor of support for Trump in 2016 and 2020, even more so than political party affiliation, gender, race, or education. This dynamic contributed to the overwhelming majority of white men—particularly those without college degrees—voting for Trump.

Now, while such a dominant—and in some cases overtly misogynistic—demeanor may appeal to some men, it raises an obvious question: when it comes to elections, wouldn't this be more than offset by women obliterating such a candidate at the ballot box? Surprisingly, the answer is often no—and a key part of the answer may yet again be identification, albeit in a slightly different form. Identification can reflect the roles people believe they and others should play in society. Many women are drawn to strong, dominant male figures—a preference shaped in part by evolutionary patterns. Historically, being with the leader of a tribe often meant greater protection for themselves and their offspring. This attraction can manifest in extreme cases, like women supporting aggressively misogynistic figures like Andrew Tate, or in much subtler ways, such as the common preference for taller male partners. Of course, this isn't true for every woman—but evolutionary legacies are deeply ingrained and don't disappear overnight.

Identification also plays a role where one would expect it least: the close relationship between Trump and Christians. When it comes to Trump's attitude toward Christianity, the instinct of most Americans—and even the former Pope—is right: he's not a member of the club. He does not belong to a church, nor does he attend services except for political appearances. He rarely invokes God in his speeches in a meaningful or personal way, and seldom references the Bible—and when he does, it's often inaccurate. He doesn't ask God for forgiveness and didn't place his hand on the Bible while taking the oath of office during his inauguration in 2025. He has been involved in industries that many religious people consider morally questionable, such as casinos and adult entertainment. More importantly, much of his behavior and many of his statements directly contradict Christian values: vindictiveness rather than forgiveness, self-praise rather than humility, dishonesty rather than integrity, aggression rather than peacemaking, impulsiveness rather than self-control, insults rather than kindness, self-interest rather than servanthood, disrespect rather than dignity for others, rarely admitting wrongdoing rather than practicing repentance, infidelity rather than marital faithfulness, or (insert any other Christian value here)

rather than (insert Trump's corresponding behavior here). He has violated multiple of the Ten Commandments—some say half, others 7.5, and some argue all ten. In fact, it's hard to think of another public figure whose conduct more consistently contradicts Christian ethics. Beyond that, he has shown signs of active disrespect for Christianity itself—misusing sacred symbols, posing as the Pope, allegedly mocking his evangelical supporters as "fools" and "schmucks," referring to them as "those fucking evangelicals," and asking, "Can you believe that people believe that bullshit?"[16] Still, there are some things he does like about the Bible: he once told a reporter that his favorite verse is the vengeful "Eye for an eye," which aligns with Mike Pence's account: "He really liked the passages about the smiting and perishing of thine enemies. As he put it, 'Ya know, Mike, there's some really good stuff in here.'" And he seems to particularly respect one part of Christianity: the religious leaders who can make their followers fall for their scam.

How Trump gets from this background to achieving the support of 82% of white evangelical protestants is surprising, to say the least—even to Trump himself, who has, on several occasions, admitted having a hard time wrapping his head around how this is possible. For example, he said, "I'm not sure I totally deserve it"—and when Trump shows humility, we know something truly unusual is going on. So, how on Earth—or heaven or hell—do Christians identify with Trump? One reason could be that he often gives them what they want—whether it's appointing conservative judges to the Supreme Court, which resulted in the overturning of the constitutional right to abortion; backing the display of the Ten Commandments in schools; or creating a task force to combat anti-Christian bias—all of which blur the line between church and state. However, seeing Trump purely as a transactional figure doesn't fully explain why many Christians genuinely identify with him on a personal level. This connection happens on an emotional plane, so we need to look for answers there. One factor is that many see Trump as a defender of their values, believing that their faith is under attack—a perception Trump mirrors by often casting himself as a victim of political persecution, media bias, and institutional hostility. Not all of these perceptions are justified. For example, the decline in Americans identifying as Christian—from 78% in 2007 to 62% in 2023—isn't an attack, but a reflection of evolving beliefs. Science's success isn't about attacking anyone; it's about improving life for everyone. And allowing same-sex marriage isn't about targeting Christians, but about ensuring that one group's beliefs don't restrict another group's rights. Still, some situations understandably feel invasive. For example, a Christian baker who refused to make a wedding cake for a same-sex couple—citing his religious beliefs—was sued for violating anti-discrimination laws. To him, this felt like being forced to act against his conscience. Some concerns are indeed valid—and they deserve to be approached with empathy. In any case, when it comes to emotion, it doesn't matter what is objectively justified and what isn't—the crucial point is that it *feels* like an attack. And when a confident figure comes along, vows to fight back, and promises to make religion great again—it hits a nerve.

[16] These reported statements shouldn't be taken immediately at face value—they are anecdotal, and come from Michael Cohen, a former ally turned adversary. Still, there's something about them that feels deeply plausible: they align remarkably well with Trump's broader behavior and public statements. It's a bit like the famous quote attributed to Louis XIV, the French absolutist monarch who ruled for over 72 years: "L'État, c'est moi" ("I am the state"). Historians generally agree that he never actually said this, yet the phrase has endured for centuries because it so perfectly captures his worldview. Likewise, Trump's alleged comments about religion—whether or not he ever uttered them—are strikingly consistent with his overall attitude toward faith. As such, they serve as fitting shorthand for how he seems to view religion.

Identification with Trump among some segments of American evangelicalism can also be explained by deeper structural parallels in worldview and communication. First, both emphasize the importance of strong, authoritative leadership. Many evangelicals—particularly those shaped by hierarchical or authoritarian environments—are drawn to leaders who promise order, moral clarity, and a well-defined social structure. Second, evangelical theology often presents reality in binary terms: good versus evil, saved versus unsaved, light versus darkness, moral versus immoral—aligning closely with Trump's black-and-white framework. Finally, both perspectives place conviction and belief above empirical validation. Christianity openly affirms that faith precedes sight or proof—*"We walk by faith, not by sight"* (2 Corinthians 5:7)—a principle that resonates with Trump's style of communication, where emotional impact and loyalty often take precedence over factual accuracy. In that sense, Trump shares a key characteristic with many Christians: he, too, is a believer. That his belief is directed entirely at himself becomes almost secondary; what matters is not so much *what* one believes, but *that* one believes—unshakably. This reflects a particular outlook on life, one that champions certainty and conviction. It mirrors how many religious people respect the conviction behind other—even contradictory—faiths more than they respect non-belief.

Once a deep emotional connection is formed, it becomes easy to rationalize away all conflicting information. This can take the form of classic excuses like "nobody is perfect," or "he's part of our team, that's what really matters." Often, his short-term actions are downplayed or justified by appealing to a higher ideology. This "short-term pain for long-term gain" mindset is dangerous, as mentioned before. It often also leads to contradictions. As one January 6 protester reportedly put it, "He may lie, but he fights for the truth."

However, since offense is sometimes the best defense, many supporters follow Trump's tactic by not only rationalizing conflicting information away but also by flipping the script—by using the script: the Bible, a rich and multifaceted text, provides numerous opportunities to select verses that fit a desired narrative. For example, one recurring theme in the Bible is that Jesus values those who have turned away from sin and now "see the light." This concept allows believers not only to forgive Trump's past actions but also to deepen their support, seeing his journey as a redemption story. Similarly, Trump's legal battles and clashes with political enemies are sometimes framed as comparable to Jesus' suffering and persecution—seen by some as evidence of his righteousness, reinforcing Trump's "witch-hunt" narrative. This mindset isn't limited to Trump's base; even high-profile supporters adopt it. One symbolic example occurred during a Senate hearing on April 2, 2025, when Sen. Ted Cruz argued that the high number of injunctions against Trump was an argument *in favor* of Trump, proving him to be a victim. Just as symbolically, when Sen. Amy Klobuchar countered that the unusually high number of injunctions was due to Trump's unusually high number of constitutional violations, Cruz wasn't there to hear it—he had already left the room.

For some, the religious parallels go even further, as they see Trump as a "Cyrus"—the pagan Persian king in the Bible whom God used as a flawed instrument to fulfill divine purposes. Some even elevate him to a near-sacred level alongside Jesus. The slogan "Jesus is my Savior, Trump is my President" is widely popular, appearing on countless t-shirts, mugs, and bumper stickers—undeniably pushing him into the realm of faith and obedience. And yet, some go even further: when they see Trump's actions conflicting with Jesus' teachings, they side with Trump, rejecting

what they perceive as Jesus' "liberal talking points." Just when you think you've seen it all, some Christians begin to abandon Jesus in favor of Trump.

It's no surprise that Trump actively promotes this messianic narrative. He compares himself to Jesus, even opening some of his rallies with a video that begins, "On June 14, 1946, God looked down on his planned paradise and said: I need a caretaker, so God gave us Trump." He sells the "God Bless the U.S.A. Bible"—pocketing $300,000—and claims that God spared his life so he could save the country. He presents himself as a warrior-redeemer figure, battling evil and rescuing the faithful—a lone hero fighting corruption and taking all the attacks "for you." He positions himself as the chosen one—the only one who "gets it"—constantly under siege from outsiders, elites, or traitors. This "we're special and misunderstood" narrative bonds insiders and isolates critics—perfectly feeding into a groupthink mentality that makes followers reject any challenges to this mindset outright.

There's also a darker, more unsettling aspect to Trump's support among fundamentalist Christians. Many of his followers believe in the "end times," a period marked by decay, destruction, and the ultimate eradication of the world, paving the way for the "Second Coming of Christ." This belief extends beyond fundamentalists, with around 39% of Americans sharing this apocalyptic outlook. Trump's rhetoric, often marked by a sense of finality—as in his decisive, "once and for all" statements—can be seen as aligning with this apocalyptic vision. Some of his actions, like recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital or the displacement of people from Gaza, directly resonate with end-time narratives. Furthermore, his ominous statements, such as "In four years, you don't have to vote again. We'll have it fixed so good, you're not gonna have to vote," can be viewed through this prophetic lens, especially by those predisposed to see signs of the end. This perspective frames Trump's destructive tendencies as positive, seeing them as hastening the end of the world, the dramatic prelude to Christ's triumphant return. The main reason for believers to look forward to the world's devastation—aside from having the ultimate "I told you so" moment—lies in the concept of the "rapture." In this belief system, all true Christians will be taken up to heaven, spared from the ensuing suffering and tribulation, while those left behind will endure anguish and torment.

Of course, not every Trump supporter shares those beliefs. But many do—certainly enough to decide elections—and even among those who don't, a significant number are still part of the cult. While it's difficult to quantify exactly how many belong to it, some statistics give a sense of its scale. For instance, around 36% of Americans still reject the legitimacy of Biden's 2020 election victory—a striking indicator of how deeply these beliefs run. The belief in this "Big Lie" may be the clearest dividing line between Trump's true believers and his other supporters.

The *Con*quering of a Party

Not every Trump voter is blind to his lies, egoism, or other flaws. Many still support him out of a mix of perceived personal or political benefits, believing he's still better than the alternatives, combined with a tendency to downplay or rationalize his negatives—without fully grasping the extent of the con. These voters make up what can be considered the "second group" of Trump supporters. Their view of Trump will be explored later. For now, the focus is on the "third

group": those who fully recognize the con but choose to become co-*con*spirators—opportunists who ride the Trump wave much like Trump himself: transactionally, without scruples, and for personal gain.

First and foremost, this group includes the Republican Party. All the party insiders, strategists, and elected officials who chose to support Trump know exactly what's going on. In this context, their education, savviness, and intelligence become a disadvantage, as they can never plausibly "play dumb" or claim they were simply mesmerized like the first group. They backed Trump for a calculated, strategic reason: to exploit his broad base of support and secure power. Many don't even bother to hide it—they openly call Trump a con artist while still endorsing him. Of course, there's no true loyalty between the players: Trump would abandon the Party the moment it stops serving his purpose, and the reverse is just as true. There's no need to search for values here—it's purely transactional on both sides.

But let's take it step by step. How did Trump manage to take control of the Republican party? The primary reason is that he found a weak party ripe for a hostile takeover—and there were several factors behind this vulnerability. First, by the early 2010s, following the 2008 financial crisis and Barack Obama's election, the Republican Party was experiencing an identity crisis. The traditional GOP establishment, characterized by pro-business, interventionist, tax-cutting policies, was increasingly out of touch with the mood of its own base. Then came the Tea Party movement (2009–2010), a populist revolt that was anti-establishment, anti-globalization, anti-bailout, and anti-Obama. The movement laid the groundwork for a new style of politics—more emotional than policy-driven, centered on identity, nationalism, and resentment, and open to outsiders who could "tell it like it is." However, the movement lost momentum because it lacked a key ingredient: a leader. That absence created the perfect void for Trump to fill.

The second factor that weakened the party was the deep, unresolved tensions within its ranks. For decades, especially since the Reagan era, the Republican coalition was often described as a "three-legged stool." *Traditional conservatives*—represented by figures like the Bushes, Mitt Romney, and Paul Ryan—were pro-business and pro-military, favored low taxes and free trade, and prioritized fiscal conservatism and strong institutions. *Libertarians*—like Ron and Rand Paul—championed individual liberty, deregulation, and skepticism of foreign intervention, while advocating for smaller government and limited surveillance. *Evangelicals*—represented by Mike Huckabee and Rick Santorum—emphasized religion, morality, and family values, focusing on issues like abortion and school prayer. None of these factions held a dominant vision for the party's future, and no leader emerged to unify them. This ideological stalemate weakened the party's cohesion and identity, creating fertile ground for an outsider like Trump to break the traditional framework and reshape the party around a new, populist dynamic.

The third factor that weakened the party was the personal weakness of many of its members. Once Trump gained momentum, many feared that resisting him would cost their political careers, since he demands total loyalty, obedience, and submission. As a result, many chose to fall in line, even if it meant sacrificing their core values. For instance, libertarians typically champion free trade, yet Trump embraces tariffs and trade wars. They often advocate for open or more liberal immigration policies, while Trump's stance is the opposite. They call for a drastic reduction in government spending and the national debt—both of which ballooned during

Trump's first term. Libertarians also defend free speech, privacy rights, and protection from government surveillance, whereas Trump favors expanded surveillance powers and frequently undermined press freedom. But at least they kept their jobs—for now.

Trump also benefited from the Republican Party's decentralized power structure, which lacked any central authority capable of enforcing discipline. Unlike in some parliamentary systems—or even the Democratic Party during certain periods, such as the 1980s and 2000s with the superdelegate system—the GOP had no effective mechanism to block or marginalize a populist insurgent. Since primary voters—not party elites—determine nominations, Trump had a direct path to power, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. He didn't need the party's backing to rise. With his celebrity status, personal wealth, and media savvy, he spoke directly to voters—especially through television and Twitter—rendering the party apparatus largely irrelevant.

Trump's decision to take over the Republican Party—instead of the Democratic Party—was driven purely by circumstance, not by loyalty, shared values, or historical alignment. His party affiliations have always reflected a calculation of which political vehicle would best help him achieve the "wins" he craves. The number of times he has switched parties—Republican in 1987, Reform Party in 1999, Democrat in 2001, Republican again in 2009, Independent in 2011, and Republican once more in 2012—is virtually unmatched by any serious political candidate. Paradoxically, Trump's lack of ideological commitment has been one of his greatest strengths: like a chameleon, he adapts to the political environment as needed. Even if one were to give him the benefit of the doubt—that he holds any values whatsoever—they certainly wouldn't be Republican ones. Earlier in his career, he supported a ban on assault weapons and advocated for longer waiting periods to purchase firearms. He signed a public letter urging the U.S. government to take action on climate change. On abortion, he once described himself as "very pro-choice." He advocated for open borders. With respect to tariffs, he once said "I love free trade. I'm a free trader, 100 percent." He was publicly supportive of LGBTQ+ rights, including same-sex marriage. There are many more examples, but the pattern is clear: Trump does not hold fixed beliefs on these issues—he simply says what people want to hear, counting on their short-term memory or persuading them that he's finally seen the light. Maybe he did see the light—not from newfound values, but from the lightbulb flash of how to hijack a party.

Trump transformed the Republican Party into something entirely different from what it was in previous decades. No matter which speeches or interviews we examine—from Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, Reagan, Bush I, or Bush II—it's clear that Trump's Republican Party bears little resemblance to theirs. The party's tone and rhetoric were once optimistic, unifying, and grounded in civic responsibility. The party's foreign policy was once firmly pro-globalization and pro-NATO—now it embraces an isolationist streak. It's telling that Trump openly admires strongmen like Putin, a longtime American adversary, and has shaped the GOP in Putin's image, both in tone and substance. The modern GOP still pays lip service to balanced budgets and fiscal restraint, but in practice, those values have all but vanished. Where the party once championed free trade, it now advocates protectionism, tariffs, and economic nationalism. While social conservatism has always been a thread in the party's fabric, today's GOP places an aggressive, all-consuming focus on culture wars that dominate its identity. The party's hostility and ruthless rhetoric also don't reflect the Republican voters many of us know. As one letter-writer to a

newspaper put it, “All the Republicans I know are caring and kind people.” Let’s be clear: the Republican Party that the world and generations of Americans once knew is dead.

Many long-time Republican voters fail to realize this. Today, marking an X next to a Republican candidate’s name doesn’t show loyalty—it’s a betrayal of the very values the party once stood for. Naturally, Trump has every incentive to obscure this truth. In classic conman fashion, he flips the script: calling Republicans who don’t follow him “Republicans in Name Only” (RINOs), when, in fact, *he* is the one who diverges most radically from the party’s historic ideals. Trump’s tactic is strikingly predatory: hollowing out the GOP from within, maintaining its outer shell, and tricking millions into believing it’s still the same party they once knew. It’s like the Killer Cuckoo Catfish—a parasite that tricks mouthbrooding cichlids into raising its young. The catfish hatch first and then devour every one of the cichlid’s real offspring, while the host mother fails to see the switch.

A key reason people don’t see the switch is that the change didn’t happen overnight—it happened gradually, in many small steps over a long period of time. Like the boiling frog—where the frog doesn’t notice the slowly rising heat until it’s too late—people adjust to small changes, normalize them, and never step back to see the bigger picture. Another major obstacle is the deep emotional and historical connection many people have to the party. When the party acts in ways that contradict what people believe it stands for, they feel uncomfortable—and to resolve that tension, they rationalize or downplay the changes, cling to loyalty and tradition, or convince themselves, “It’s still the same party deep down.” For many, changing political identity is like changing religions or family—it’s not just intellectual, it’s deeply personal. The media ecosystem—whether Fox News or online echo chambers—also plays a role: it creates a sense of continuity by framing Trumpism as a natural extension of past Republican values, invoking figures like Reagan, and using familiar language such as “freedom,” “patriotism,” and “faith.” It also reinforces the “us vs. them” narrative, ensuring that anything from the “other side” is dismissed without a second thought. More reasons will be explored—along with possible solutions—in the next post.

Some may question whether the opening statement—that this isn’t a partisan post—truly holds up. However, what has just been said supports that claim: this cannot be a critique of the Republican Party, simply because it no longer exists in its traditional form. The conversation is no longer about the usual issues where Democrats and Republicans once clashed—taxes, government spending, or gun control. Instead, it is now about principles both parties once agreed on: the importance of the Constitution, the value of open debate, and the belief that facts are objective. What we are dealing with now is something entirely different, more accurately described as the “Trump Party,” supported by “Trumpists.” This distinction is crucial, underscoring that this article isn’t criticizing the Republican Party but, rather, making the opposite point: that the United States—and the world—desperately needs the return of the true Republican Party.

The Dangers of Trump

For many, it's already clear that Trump is causing damage on a massive scale. Still, it's important to dig deeper and understand the intricate details of that damage. What might seem like pure masochism is, in fact, a necessary exercise for several reasons. First, those already aware of the harm can become even more energized to take action. Second, by pinpointing where the damage is most severe, efforts can be directed more effectively toward defending what matters most. Third, for those who haven't fully grasped the extent of the damage, this offers a crucial opportunity to understand what's at stake.

The first category of damage stems from Trump's fundamental lack of qualifications and knowledge in the realm of statesmanship and politics. Before his presidency, he had never held elected office, served in the military, or worked in public service. We can criticize traditional politicians all we want, but most have spent decades navigating the system, learning its mechanics, making laws, and developing at least a basic level of diplomacy. Trump, by contrast, lacks not only the experience and knowledge but also the inclination to treat politics as a serious craft. This isn't about malice or self-interest—it's simply about basic competence. He doesn't know how to do the job, shows no interest in learning, and refuses to listen to advisors who do.

This last point—that he's unwilling to listen to advisors—is even more significant than it may seem at first. In typical presidential elections, the candidate is not just a figurehead but a representative of a broader team—politicians, advisors, and subject-matter experts. Voting for them usually means voting for that entire network of expertise. This is far less true with Trump, who often feels confident making decisions in areas where he lacks competence. Many emotionally driven voters see this as a strength, appreciating the sense of directness and authenticity—a "what you see is what you get" appeal. This satisfies a deep psychological need for certainty, which can overshadow the more critical question of whether the actions taken are actually good.

There are many policy mistakes that stem from Trump's incompetence, one example being his use of tariffs—widely criticized by economists for harming all parties involved. Trump repeatedly claims that foreign countries are paying these tariffs, which isn't accurate: U.S. importers—and ultimately consumers—bear the cost. This raises the question of whether he genuinely misunderstands how tariffs work. It's possible he knows the truth but frames it this way for populist appeal. However, a more compelling explanation lies in his worldview: because Trump sees everything as a zero-sum game, imagining that tariffs punish other countries makes him feel like he's winning—making him more likely to believe his own distorted narrative.

Trump's lack of basic knowledge has been evident in various instances—such as speculating about using disinfectants to treat COVID-19, reportedly not understanding Pearl Harbor, or shocking Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the remark, "It's not like you've got China on your border." While this undoubtedly creates risks, the damage becomes much more severe when Trump defends and doubles down on false statements—something he often does, since admitting a mistake feels like losing to him. This can lead to genuinely absurd situations. One example is when Trump incorrectly claimed in 2019 that Hurricane Dorian would hit Alabama—a statement quickly corrected by weather stations, since Alabama was far outside the projected path. This angered Trump, so he presented a map that had been altered with a Sharpie to falsely show Alabama in the danger zone. He also pressured aides to make the weather bureau retract

their statement—something they ultimately did under threat of being fired, compromising scientific integrity and the agency's ability to deliver life-saving information. The incident is sometimes referred to as "Sharpiegate"—but where such a scandal would have sunk any other politician, it will only be a footnote to the Trump presidency.[17]

Trump's reactions to hurricanes are a revealing reflection of his broader approach to problem-solving—one that raises serious concerns. First, there are his public statements that hardly inspire confidence: describing Hurricane Florence as "one of the wettest we've ever seen, from the standpoint of water," or telling the world, in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, that Puerto Rico is "an island surrounded by water. Big water. Ocean water." Then there's not only the lack of knowledge—"I've never heard of a Category 5 hurricane before"—but also the apparent lack of learning, as he made that same remark multiple times, years apart. His reactions are often too late, partly because he downplays the risk—and later, the suffering—and partly because he's preoccupied with other matters, like golf. Worse still, he's even blocked support, as in the case of Hurricane Maria, where he delayed the release of $20 billion in disaster relief for Puerto Rico that had already been approved by Congress—a delay that cost lives, and that he later actively obstructed investigations into. True to form, he described his administration's response as an "incredible, unsung success" and claimed it deserved "A-pluses." And true to form again, when criticized for mishandling of such crises, Trump resorts to a mix of gaslighting, script-flipping, and distraction—creating, in effect, a storm of his own: a storm of lies, including false accusations that the Biden administration mishandled hurricane relief.

Perhaps most telling is Trump's reported proposal to use atomic bombs to stop hurricanes. While literal in that instance, it's also a fitting metaphor for his broader approach to solving problems: just nuking them. Consistent with his inflammatory rhetoric, his method is often one of force and escalation. He has resumed executions, reinstated the federal death penalty (despite its lack of deterrent effect), encouraged police brutality during arrests, and reportedly proposed shooting both protesters and undocumented immigrants. He has advocated deploying the military against "enemies from within," executing opponents for treason, and, according to reports, discussed bringing back firing squads, hangings, and even the guillotine. Between 2022 and October 2024, Trump has made over 100 threats to investigate, prosecute, or punish his perceived enemies—most recently demanding that the DOJ prosecute his political opponents. He said it best when asked what would happen if, because of his rhetoric, one of his supporters shot a reporter: "It's my only form of fighting back!" Indeed, his only tool is a hammer, making every problem look like a nail.

---

[17] Another telling example of Trump's refusal to admit mistakes is the "Central Park jogger case." In 1989, five boys—aged 14 to 16, four Black and one Latino—were arrested for the brutal assault and rape of a white woman jogging in Central Park. Before any verdict was reached, Trump took out full-page ads in four major New York City newspapers, calling for the return of the death penalty. While the accused were not named, the timing and language made it unmistakably clear that the ads referred to this case. All five teens were later convicted and sentenced to years in prison, based largely on confessions obtained during intense and coercive police interrogations. Many legal experts have argued that their convictions were also influenced by public pressure and climate of fear and outrage surrounding the case—pressure that Trump's ads significantly amplified. In 2002, Matias Reyes, a convicted rapist and murderer, confessed to the crime, stating that he had acted alone. DNA evidence confirmed his involvement, while none of the five men's DNA was found at the scene. The convictions of the five men were vacated that same year, and in 2014, they received a $41 million settlement from New York City. Not only has Trump never apologized for publicly calling for the execution of these innocent teenagers, but he has doubled down—repeatedly asserting their guilt even after their exoneration, despite a confession and overwhelming proof to the contrary.

Even when it's less violent, it's still a "hit first, think later" strategy—whether it's trying to repeal Obamacare without a replacement, withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal without a plan, causing the longest government shutdown in history without a clear strategy to secure wall funding, abruptly pulling troops from Syria without coordinating with allies or securing the area, or pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) without an alternative trade framework—among many others. It's all bold and unilateral, poorly planned, chaotic, and aimed only at symbolic, short-term wins. Effective problem-solving demands the opposite—strategic, measured, and long-term thinking, rooted in facts, ethics, and a willingness to listen. But again, that kind of nuance just isn't in his toolbox.

The root cause of this behavior isn't a lack of knowledge in specific areas, but rather a fundamental absence of the character traits expected of a leader. Trump's volatility results in a series of ad-hoc, impulsive decisions, making it nearly impossible for individuals, businesses, or governments to plan effectively. His short-term thinking may have worked for him personally (though that's debatable, as it didn't give him lasting happiness), but it certainly doesn't work on the scale of a nation, which must plan long-term—not just for the immediate future, but for generations to come. Furthermore, his tendency toward tantrums, vindictiveness, and poor self-control often causes situations to escalate unnecessarily. A recent example is the renewed trade war with China, during which he repeatedly raised tariffs over just a few days, ultimately reaching 145%. These abrupt and extreme measures disrupted global supply chains and heightened economic uncertainty—demonstrating how erratic leadership can destabilize international relations. This is just one of many such instances, all pointing to the same conclusion: Trump's character alone renders him fundamentally unfit for any public office, let alone the presidency.

Another danger posed by Trump lies in the simple fact that his goals are not aligned with the core purpose of a democratically elected president: serving the people. Instead, Trump is focused entirely on maximizing his own personal gain—it's government of Trump, by Trump, for Trump—at a level of intensity and ruthlessness unmatched by any previous U.S. president. His interests only align with those of his voters in two situations: either by coincidence or because he believes he still needs their support. Both of these conditions are inherently unstable, and as his many grifts have shown, he is more than willing to exploit even—or especially—his most loyal supporters.

Incidentally, there's one group that understands the danger of Trump better than anyone: those who know him well. The closer someone is to Trump—personally or professionally—the greater the likelihood of disillusionment, even disgust. Proximity may be the single best predictor of turning against him—stronger than age, gender, religion, party affiliation, or even alignment with authoritarian masculinity. No recent figure in U.S. politics—and certainly no president—has left behind such a long trail of former allies turned critics. Many entered Trump's orbit as loyalists, only to emerge as opponents after direct experience with his leadership, temperament, or ethics. This principle extends beyond his inner circle. There's a reason Trump is unusually unpopular in his own home state: New Yorkers simply know him well. He underperforms even in Republican-leaning upstate regions, where other GOP candidates do much better. This reversal of the typical "home state advantage" is almost unheard of among politicians. It's no surprise he broke with

New York himself—changing his official residence to Florida in 2019, as if fleeing a place that knew him too well. With increasing distance from Trump, the effect weakens—but it's still there. When Trump takes action as president—giving people who are far removed a chance to know him a little better—his favorability ratings decline. The pattern is so clear, it suggests a natural law: *Trump's Law*, a twist on Newton's, where the *force of realization that Trump is a conman is inversely proportional to the square of the distance between the subjects*.[18] For those who don't know Trump well yet—still on the periphery—there's no reason to despair: as Trump expands his gravitational field, they'll get to know him eventually.

A particular danger posed by Trump stems from his susceptibility to adversarial influences, regardless of how malevolent they may be. This includes Putin, who bears primary responsibility for hundreds of thousands of deaths and has devastated both his own country and others. In light of Russia's full-scale invasion of the U.S.-supported Ukraine, state-sponsored cyberattacks on U.S. critical infrastructure, provocative nuclear threats, bounties paid to the Taliban for killing U.S. soldiers, strategic partnerships undermining U.S. interests, fighting a proxy war against the U.S. in Syria, espionage operations within the U.S., growing influence in Africa against U.S. interests, and its formal declaration of the U.S. as an enemy, one thing is clear: Putin's Russia is an enemy of the United States. Yet, despite these clear threats, Trump has consistently acted in ways that favor Russian interests over American security. His actions reveal a clear pro-Russian stance—whether by advocating negotiations on Russia's terms in Ukraine, labeling Zelenskyy a dictator, freezing military aid to Ukraine, stopping cyber operations against Russia, disbanding task forces targeting Russian oligarchs, undermining NATO, siding with Russia, North Korea and Belarus in the United Nations, praising Putin, even referring to Putin and himself as "we," spreading Russian propaganda, considering lifting sanctions against Russia, and siding with Putin over U.S. intelligence agencies. This behavior appears rooted in both Trump's admiration for authoritarian leadership and the political advantages he gains from Russia's actions: election interference, disinformation campaigns designed to divide American society, and the support of right-wing, Trump-aligned media figures. Rather than defending America, Trump is aligning himself with its enemy. From this angle, Trump's slogans like "America First" and his labeling of anti-Russian voices as "enemies from within" may simply be further examples of him flipping the script.

While Trump's flaws in knowledge, character, and intent cause serious damage, there's a natural limit: he's still just one person, with only 24 hours in a day—many consumed by golf—and capable of making only one decision at a time. What multiplies the danger exponentially is the people he appoints. In business, there's a saying: "A players hire A(+) players, and B players hire C players"—a reflection of their inability to spot top talent, desire to remain dominant, and fear of being replaced. The same holds true in politics. Trump doesn't hire based on merit—he hires based on loyalty. In this way, incompetence becomes institutionalized. That's how the U.S.

[18] The idea that the closer people are to Trump, the more they dislike him, may go even deeper—perhaps to the very core: there's compelling evidence that the person who dislikes Trump the most is Trump himself. In his book *Nobody Hates Trump More Than Trump*, David Shields argues that Trump's insecurities, fractured psyche, and low self-esteem drive a pattern of self-destructive behavior—such as an addiction to attention, even when it harms him—which reflects a profound lack of self-respect. It's plausible: extreme low self-esteem amounts to believing "I'm worth nothing," a belief that comes very close to self-hatred. This is further supported by the tendency of people with unstable identities to project their self-loathing onto others—helping to explain Trump's aggression. As the writer Anaïs Nin said, "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."

ended up with a health secretary who is both a conspiracy theorist and a science denier, a Putin and Assad sympathizer leading the intelligence community, a former Fox News host with no serious defense credentials as Secretary of Defense, and a Trump ultra-loyalist and conspiracy peddler with no experience in law enforcement at the helm of the FBI. And then there's the nepotism. It's all a natural extension of Trump's business life, where loyalty always outweighed competence. As some put it, "Stormy Daniels is the only true professional Trump has ever hired."

Another way Trump multiplies harm is by serving as a highly visible role model—of the most damaging kind. We want to teach our children to be kind, tolerant, loving, forgiving, humble, thoughtful, polite, respectful, compassionate, honest, generous, cautious, warm, rational, and well-informed. But how can we convincingly promote those values when, apparently, the exact opposites get you elected to the highest office in the land? Social psychology shows that when authority figures behave this way without consequence, it causes a shift in social norms—lowering the bar for what is considered acceptable. A 2018 study found a significant increase in hate crimes in counties that heavily supported Trump after his first election. There's also the "Trump Effect" in schools, where students have used Trump's own words to justify racist, sexist, or xenophobic behavior. Under the beacon of such destructive conduct, people feel emboldened to let their worst sides out.

And what about corruption? It's important to be cautious with such emotionally charged words, so let's consider the textbook definition. Corruption is most commonly defined as "the abuse of public office for personal gain." How could anyone seriously argue that the world's greatest conman is somehow exempt from such behavior? It would be utterly contradictory. The case becomes even harder to defend given Trump's recent actions: dismantling government ethics oversight, removing independent fraud inspectors, disbanding the Department of Justice's anti-corruption task force, halting anti-kleptocracy initiatives, picking openly corrupt individuals for top positions, pardoning corrupt politicians, and—just to drive the point home—effectively legalizing bribery. Beyond those steps that foster an environment of corruption, Trump also took more specific actions to facilitate his personal use of bribery through the introduction of his cryptocurrency memecoin. Cryptocurrencies enable anonymous transactions, making it extremely difficult to trace the origins of investments. Anyone—including foreign governments—now has an easy, invisible way to say "Thank you." And while shady transactions were already difficult to track, Trump evidently decided it was better to be safe than sorry: in April 2025, he disbanded the Justice Department unit responsible for investigating crypto-related crimes.

Seeking the Endless Con

While these developments are serious and damaging, at least some of them can—in theory—be reversed rather quickly. A different level of damage happens when the changes become permanent: when the people's choice is taken away, allowing those in power to do anything they want, making the con irreversible. The question is: is talk of dictatorship fear-mongering, or is there a real risk?

What should alarm everyone is that Trump doesn't see it as a risk at all—in fact, he sees the opposite as the real threat. For him, achieving permanent dominance would be the ultimate "win" over everyone else—his holy grail. The alternative—stepping down from politics—would mean leaving the limelight and surrendering attention, a scenario his psychological wiring makes intolerable. Moreover, he may not just want it—he may need it too. Should his presidency end in January 2029, many legal cases currently paused due to presidential immunity may resume. Like any conman's story, it's about pushing further—no retreat, only attack. It's all or nothing. Additionally, given Trump's inherently short-term thinking, he may believe he wins regardless: even if the attempt to consolidate power fails, it still floods him with attention—the thing he craves most. Given his tendency to prioritize spectacle, he'll undoubtedly prefer a grand, attention-grabbing exit to quietly fading away.

This shows that Trump's core motivation for absolute power couldn't be stronger. Are there internal factors that could hold him back? Asking "Perhaps respect for the Constitution?" would seem childishly naïve or purely rhetorical to any attentive reader. Moreover, Trump's statements, such as proposing to "terminate the Constitution" or branding himself a monarch ("Long live the king"), hardly inspire confidence that this would restrain him. Other restraining factors, like fear of legal consequences or public disgrace, can be dismissed. The only factor that might influence his drive for absolute power is reduced energy due to old age. Yet, he has more than enough energy now, and even then... it wouldn't be his style.

What's even more worrisome is that not only does Trump want—or need—a dictatorship, but many of his supporters as well. The first group, his true believers, would likely welcome it, as it could easily align with their worldview in a way that feels righteous. They may not call it a dictatorship, but instead frame it as "restoring order" or "taking back our country." As their leader has put it, "He who saves his country does not violate any law." Some may even think, "Since the beginning of time, we've been locked in a battle with the Democrats—finally, a chance to win it for good." The fact that Democrats and liberals would oppose it would only intensify the appeal, as in their binary worldview, seeing their enemies suffer proves it's good. The third group, the co-conspirators, would mostly support it, as like Trump, they need to escape accountability. The idea of returning to a normal world, where the con is exposed, the lies revealed, and their protector dragged into court, would be unthinkable. A bit of text on some paper saying that presidents can only serve two terms certainly won't stop them. They know full well they have no one who could remotely replace Trump—neither in inspiring loyalty from the masses nor in the sheer skill needed to keep the house of con together. There is no alternative to Trump, and thus no alternative to what once lay beyond the limits of imagination.

Another factor may push Trump supporters to conclude that dictatorship is the only way out. Let's step back: when is a dictatorship needed? Fundamentally, it becomes necessary when the majority of voters no longer support you—otherwise, you can rely on elections. Trump, in classic conman fashion, promised people heaven on Earth in many areas. It's a highly effective strategy when voters don't think critically. But the higher the hopes, the greater the disappointment. Second, Trump built his appeal largely by positioning himself *against* things—Democrats, the media, experts, and various minority groups he's used as scapegoats. This is powerful, especially among those who share these grievances. It allowed him to unify a wide range of people under a shared sense of opposition—and that can be enough to win an election.

But governing is another matter. Once in power, decisions must be made. Declaring what you're against is no longer enough. And at that point, it's clear he can't serve the diverse—and often contradictory—interests of the groups he rallied. This explains his declining approval ratings, with even right-leaning publications now discussing another impeachment. From the conman's perspective, the logic is clear: they took the bait—but now, for the con to work, the switch must happen.

So: Trump wants a dictatorship—and many of his supporters do too. But will they succeed? To answer this, we must look to historical precedents. Such comparisons are emotionally charged, so let's be clear from the outset: Trump is not Hitler. There's a vast difference between someone indifferent to others' suffering and someone actively seeking the extermination of entire groups. There are other distinctions, but the key point is that drawing parallels doesn't mean equating things in every way. That's why we must approach these comparisons carefully and commit to a high standard of precision.

To achieve precision, we need to look closely and zoom in—and for that, a good piece of glass is useful. Let's imagine we've ordered a brand-new, magical one—a "window to the past." Through it, we begin examining how Hitler rose. What do we see? We see people's unhappiness and anger, economic anxiety, a sense of being left behind, and the feeling that the country has lost its former glory. Into this picture steps a charismatic outsider: a narcissistic, racist populist—divisive, ruthless, and openly admiring authoritarian strongmen—skilled at manipulating the media and connecting with people's emotions. He builds a cult around himself, offering a sense of community, strength, and purpose. He lies relentlessly, speaks with unwavering confidence, and promises to fix everything—for good. He understands the power of performance—rallies, slogans, staged outrage—using spectacle to command attention, stir emotion, and turn himself into a myth. He casts himself as a fighter for the forgotten, hardworking citizens. Many don't believe he means what he says—they assume it's just performance, playing to his base. He rallies the religious behind him—some seeing him as a savior. As part of his rise, he undermines trust in independent institutions—the press (derided as the "lying press"), the courts, academia, and experts—each dismissed as biased, decadent, or unpatriotic. He portrays the government itself as weak, inefficient, and corrupt. He aims to rewrite his country's history. He's against everything—the hallmark of fascism—uniting people through hate. Portraying himself—and his followers—as victims of corrupt elites, foreign powers, and internal enemies conspiring to destroy the nation, he promises to restore it—morally, politically, even racially—by purging the forces he blames for its decline. He fuels conspiracy theories, painting internal enemies as part of secret plots to destroy the nation. He toys with the very meaning of citizenship—treating it not as a right, but as a privilege to be granted or revoked based on loyalty, race, or ideology. He claims some people aren't entitled to due process, using legal shortcuts or brute force to deal with those he deems threats. He scapegoats other countries, political opponents—"enemies from within"—and minorities, proposing mass deportations. He speaks of "cleaning up" the country, casting whole communities as filth to be removed. He accuses others of the very things he himself does—fraud, corruption, betrayal—turning reality inside out until only allegiance remains. Violence is encouraged—against protestors, political opponents, or communities—as a show of strength, loyalty, and a way to impose order. He appeals to national pride, vowing to put the country first and make it great again. He rises because no one stops him: his political opponents, whom he demonizes, underestimate him—dismissing him as a clown they could outplay. Then

they prove too weak, complicit, or cowardly to offer real resistance, with many downplaying his danger or opting for appeasement. He calls elections illegitimate, claiming voter fraud, and tries to overturn election results. He attempts a coup, it fails, but the judicial system proves unwilling or unable to hold him accountable. He uses the support of traditional conservatives—discredited and no longer in control of the right—to acquire power. Corporate leaders, initially cautious, gradually fall in line—some in pursuit of profit or influence, some out of fear. He survives an assassination attempt, largely by luck. He acquires power entirely through legal means—not by force—buoyed by support from the lower middle class, many of whom feel economically and culturally threatened. He wastes no time pardoning his convicted allies, targeting political opponents who he brands as terrorists, stoking hostility toward other nations, and embracing an anti-globalist, isolationist agenda: withdrawing from international organizations and even pushing for territorial expansion. Internally, he attacks democracy itself, undermining and hollowing out the constitution and the rule of law. He surrounds himself with loyalists, rewarding personal allegiance over competence—dismissing those who dissent and elevating sycophants who echo his worldview. That's what we see through our glass. But then, something in the corner looks off. We reach for it, tug gently—and only then realize: we never removed the aluminum foil that came with the glass.

There are more parallels worth exploring in detail. Both then and now, it doesn't *feel* like we're heading toward authoritarianism. For one, it's because people are experiencing it for the first time, lacking the emotional reference points to recognize it. Second, authoritarianism never shows up waving a flag with its name—if it did, people would resist immediately. At most, they get a first taste, but the rest has to be projected by the rational mind—a steep ask in a time when rationality itself is under siege. Third, it's the boiling frog phenomenon again: as *How Democracies Die* makes clear, authoritarianism rarely arrives all at once. It advances incrementally, and people often realize what's happened only once it's too late.[19] It's like a black hole—crossing the event horizon feels like nothing at all. But once you've crossed it, there's no escape from total annihilation.

Another factor contributing to slow recognition is that people often fail to grasp the consequences of their actions, not connecting abstract or identity-driven beliefs with the practical realities of daily life. For example, some farmers strongly supported Trump's immigration stance, only to be shocked when their undocumented, much-needed farm workers were deported. Similar patterns appeared in 1930s Germany: some Jews later reported being treated with kindness by teachers and classmates during Nazi rule—yet those same individuals were swept up in, or passively accepted, the regime's broader antisemitic ideology. Abstract hatred or fear can coexist with personal decency—this phenomenon is called *compartmentalization*, where people hold contradictory beliefs without reconciling them. Understanding that actions have consequences requires rational reflection, but many only make the connection once they *feel* the impact—but by then, it's too late to change course.

[19] A relevant book in this context is Victor Klemperer's *I Will Bear Witness*, the diary of a Jewish professor living in Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1941. Klemperer meticulously recorded the daily changes in ordinary life, offering a unique perspective: not the hindsight of a historian, but the uncertain, day-by-day experience of someone caught inside the regime. His account captures the gradual normalization of dictatorship, with occasional moments of stark realization that disaster was unfolding.

Closely related to that is the belief that “It can't happen here.” One reason is our general optimism, which is usually a strength but becomes dangerous when it isn’t grounded in facts and turns into naivety. Another is the belief, conscious or unconscious, that *“*people wouldn’t want this.” Apart from the fact that many people *do* want it, there’s a deeper flaw in the assumption: it presumes that the majority’s wishes still matter. But the very essence of dictatorship is that it no longer does. We try to assess a new world through the lens of an old one, where the majority’s will was decisive. We take it for granted that the majority rules because we’ve never experienced anything else. Those values—fundamental and unquestioned—are what’s now at risk. It takes a second, third, and fourth look to grasp that. In 1930s Germany, many believed their democracy was too strong, their society too modern, for dictatorship to take hold—until it did.

This danger doesn’t just threaten democracy—it threatens many of our most fundamental values. We take the rule of law, freedom of speech, the right to privacy, and others for granted, treating them as unquestionable, permanent facts—until we cease to see them altogether. It’s like conspiracy theorists who claim the system is totally oppressive—without realizing that if it truly were, they wouldn’t be allowed to publish books, hold rallies, or reach millions online. As we grow blind to these freedoms, we become more likely to dismiss attacks on them. In 1930s Germany, many said, "Yes, I don’t like what Hitler says about the Jews either. But look at what he’s done for the economy..." Today, the language echoes almost exactly: "Yes, I don’t like his attacks on the Constitution, but I think he might be good for business." We forget that there is a hierarchy of values—and that when the foundations collapse, everything else goes with them. We must never take democracy for granted—ever. As Benjamin Franklin warned at the close of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, when asked whether the delegates had created a republic or a monarchy, he replied: “A republic—*if you can keep it*.” His words are a reminder that we must always fight for our freedom. Every. Single. Day.

Another reason many people don’t push back hard enough against the trend toward dictatorship is that they think dictatorship would be bad. No—it wouldn’t be bad. It would be sheer horror. This isn’t just semantics; it’s a crucial point. As long as we underestimate the consequences, we won’t fight with the urgency and force required. That's why it’s vital to vividly imagine what dictatorship would truly mean. It would be the end of the "land of the free": freedom of speech, the freedom to organize, protest, or even disagree would vanish. Free religion would die too—dictators live by one rule: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” Everyone would be watched—phones tapped, conversations monitored, neighbors turned into informants. You wouldn’t even feel safe in your own home. Normal life would become dangerous. Sharing a meme, attending the wrong meeting, saying the wrong thing—anything could get you arrested without trial. Families would be torn apart, with children turned against their own parents in loyalty to the regime. No care for ordinary people: no Affordable *Care* Act, no Medi*care*, no Child *Care* Fund, no Foster *Care* programs, no Veterans Affairs health*care*. The poor would be squeezed hardest—higher prices, lower wages, no way to fight back. Injustice and violence would rule: secret police, torture, disappearances. Creativity, innovation, and science—the true engines of American greatness—would dry up and flee to freer countries. Children would be forced to pledge loyalty in schools. Real history would be erased, replaced by propaganda and lies. Corruption would explode, and the economy would rot. Local communities would lose all control over their own schools, towns, and churches. Everything would answer to the regime. If the dictator had a personal grudge against another dictator or country, he wouldn’t hesitate to

drag us into wars—and draft you, your friends, and your children. Worst of all, dictatorship is nearly impossible to reverse. It wouldn't end in four years. It would bury us for generations—decades of fear, decay, and lost hope. A lost America.

But it can get even worse. When one person holds all the power, everyone is at the mercy of their moods, whims, or paranoia. Hitler's hatred of Jews provides a chilling example. It's a mistake to assume Germany was full of Jew-haters when Hitler rose to power—quite the contrary. Antisemitism wasn't widespread in Germany, unlike in Eastern Europe, where it was more prevalent. In Germany, people fell into three main groups. The first—and largest—didn't mind Jews at all. The second had reservations—Jews weren't entirely "kosher" to them. The third—a small extremist minority—wanted Jews made second-class citizens. But even that group never considered killing them all. That was Hitler's madness alone. He tried to incite mass hatred against Jews—organizing a boycott of Jewish businesses in 1933, passing the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, and unleashing the Kristallnacht pogrom in 1938—but public enthusiasm was often lukewarm or uneasy. It's no coincidence the worst death camps were built in Eastern Europe, far from the eyes of the German public. Almost all historians overwhelmingly agree: without Hitler, there would have been no Holocaust. One man's delusion, combined with the terror of dictatorship and a corrupt system, led to the deaths of over six million people. When a single person controls everything, all bets are off.

Returning to the Trump-Hitler comparison right after mentioning the Holocaust feels a bit heavy, so to reiterate: Trump and Hitler aren't identical in every detail. However, the comparison is legitimate because even Trump's closest supporters make it. In 2016, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. compared Trump to Hitler and Mussolini, calling him a "threat to democracy." That same year, J.D. Vance went even further, calling Trump "America's Hitler." Trump's actions only fuel those allegations. He openly admires Hitler. He claims immigrants have "bad genes," that they are "poisoning the blood of our country,"—language that unmistakably echoes Nazi eugenics rhetoric. He calls them "not people," "not human," and "animals." At rallies, Trump stated that undocumented immigrants will "rape, pillage, thieve, plunder and kill" American citizens. He called them "stone-cold killers", "monsters", "vile animals", "savages", and "predators" who will "walk into your kitchen, cut your throat. He describes political opponents as "vermin," and speaks in his campaign rhetoric about a "unified Reich." He has pardoned and commuted sentences for outspoken Nazis, tolerated Nazi salutes from his allies, and welcomed neo-Nazis into his home. Despite countless opportunities, Trump has refused to distance himself from far-right, white supremacist extremists. Quite the opposite, he told them to "stand back and stand by," giving them every reason to believe their moment is coming. This is more than enough to justify Trump being one of the few politicians with an entire Wikipedia page dedicated to their relationship to fascism. Whatever the actual risk of the U.S. drifting into dictatorship, one thing is certain: if it happens, no one will be able to say the writing wasn't on the wall.

Trump's flirtation with Nazi sympathizers points to another risk: even if Trump himself wouldn't seek the extinction of freedom in the United States, he may enable the radical flanks who do. It's crucial to remember that Trump's—and any politician's—supporters aren't homogeneous. It's like a bell curve: some supporters are more moderate, others extreme. With Trump's rising tide, the entire curve floats upward, like a bell buoy lifted by the sea, its bell sounding a warning of dangers ahead. This tide brings into view those usually hidden—the scoundrels, the ne'er-do-

wells, the embittered—who find purpose for the first time in their lives. The pattern also applied to Hitler: he lived a directionless life of repeated failure until he joined the military during World War I, where he found discipline, recognition, and a sense of mission. He excelled, earning both first- and second-class Iron Crosses among other honors. That success gave him purpose, belonging, and identity—making it irresistibly compelling. Much the same is true for many neo-Nazis today: often adrift and unfulfilled, they find in extremist movements clarity and meaning they had lacked before. They are always there, kept hidden by the laws of a healthy society—but if it falters, they emerge.

What prevents the United States from sliding into dictatorship? That responsibility falls to the Constitution, which divides power among three branches—Executive (President), Legislative (Congress), and Judicial (Courts)—while placing clear limits on presidential authority. Changing these limits requires constitutional amendments, a process that is intentionally difficult and, under normal circumstances, rare. This constitutional design is often cited as a key difference between the United States today and 1930s Germany, giving many the confidence that "it can't happen here." But is that confidence truly justified?

There are several reasons for concern. First, we must never forget a key difference in the Germany analogy: we are looking at it from over 80 years' distance, long after everything played out. But we are in the middle of what is currently happening in the United States. To truly compare the situations, we must look at Germany not after the fact, but before Hitler had fully seized power—around 1932–1933. How did the world look then? Unfortunately, the similarities become even more unsettling. Many Germans thought that "the system"—the courts, traditional elites, and President Hindenburg—would keep Hitler in check. They underestimated how fragile their institutions were under pressure. Of course, not everything was exactly the same. For example, the United States doesn't have an "Article 48" that allowed Hitler to declare an emergency and rule without parliament. But the U.S. has presidential emergency powers that could prove dangerous if a president pushed the limits, and Congress and the courts failed to intervene. Even Abraham Lincoln famously suspended *habeas corpus*—the right not to be detained without trial—during the Civil War without clear congressional approval, despite what the Constitution demands. But the main point here is that looking back at history can make it all seem inevitable. Hindsight is 20/20. As mentioned earlier, if the U.S. becomes a dictatorship, future generations will rightly say it was obvious all along.

Another reason to be cautious about relying on the Constitution becomes clear when we consider what a constitution actually is. Although written on physical paper, its true nature is more abstract: a set of principles and rules that lives only in the minds of the people. This makes it inherently fragile—it is only as strong as the collective will to uphold it. More than that, a constitution must not simply be obeyed; it must be actively lived and continuously renewed to remain alive. Political parties play a key role in this process, with emphasis on the plural—parties. The Weimar Republic, the German state from 1918 to 1933, had a fatal flaw: only one major party—the center-left—truly stood for the Constitution and democracy. It didn't stand on two democratic legs, but balanced precariously on one. This meant there could be no natural, peaceful alternation of power between parties, which is essential to a healthy democracy—or if a switch did occur, it would be fatal. Hence, historians often call Weimar "a Republic without

Republicans."[20] When examining the parallels between then and now, it's striking—and chilling—that sometimes even the wording matches exactly.

No matter how compelling theoretical reasoning may be, it still comes second to the only true way to assess a constitution's strength: by testing it in practice. And tested it gets. The Trump administration is defying court orders, issuing executive orders that bypass Congress, and ignoring Congress's power of the purse. It is considering an unconstitutional third term, attempting to control universities unlawfully, seeking full control over federal agencies, and challenging the Constitution's guarantee of birthright citizenship. Attacks on the First Amendment—the freedoms of speech, press, and assembly—are well underway: revocation of press protections in leak investigations, restrictions on media access, threats to revoke broadcast licenses of networks airing content critical of Trump, funding cuts linked to free speech, and targeting of legal professionals are just the beginning. These attacks will continue—and, in classic flip-the-script conman style, will no doubt be justified in the name of free speech. While the courts' ultimate reactions remain to be seen—and judicial delays are natural—the damage already inflicted is real and deep, casting serious doubt on the Constitution's ability to swiftly and effectively safeguard rights when they are most under attack.

The U.S. Constitution also contains several structural vulnerabilities. One significant flaw is that it gives the President control over federal law enforcement functions—including agencies like the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the FBI. As a result, if the President or their officials abuse power or violate the law, the system relies on the executive branch to investigate and hold itself accountable. When a President exerts undue influence over the DOJ—through loyal appointees, as is happening now—they can shield themselves and their allies from consequences. The framers of the Constitution assumed political norms, public scrutiny, and the separation of powers would be enough to restrain executive misconduct. They didn't anticipate a Trump.

Similar flaws exist throughout the Constitution. The Electoral College was intended to prevent "unqualified" candidates from becoming president, but in practice, it distorts democracy. Presidents—like Trump in 2016—can win even after losing the popular vote, undermining the principle of majority rule. The President also has the power to pardon almost anyone for federal crimes—even friends, allies, or potentially even themselves—inviting obvious abuse. The Constitution says little about what a president can do in emergencies, allowing them to expand their authority during crises they themselves define (as Trump did during COVID), while Congress struggles to respond. Ultimately, the Constitution assumes a president acting responsibly, guided by norms, traditions, and good faith—qualities Trump embodies the opposite of. It wasn't made for someone like Trump—which is exactly why it was made for him.

However, the biggest test of the Constitution is already behind us—and it failed dramatically. Who are the true enemies of the Constitution? It's simple: those who attack it directly. There is

[20] Talking about historians, one of the greatest German historians must be mentioned here: Sebastian Haffner (1907–1999). He masterfully synthesized vast amounts of information into sharp, pointed conclusions, avoiding the overcomplexity that often burdens historical texts. Much of the content for this article is inspired by his work. His book *The Meaning of Hitler* offers a succinct, piercing analysis of Hitler's personality and politics, while *Defying Hitler* provides a personal account of how everyday Germans experienced the rise of Nazism. Both books are must-reads for anyone interested in understanding the historical dynamics of 1930s Germany, and they offer valuable insights that resonate when reflecting on political and social developments in the United States today.

no more blatant or disrespectful assault than attempting to usurp power after losing an election. It is the purest betrayal: ignoring the will of the people and taking by force what was denied at the polls. Any constitution that fails to punish such enemies of freedom and even permits them to run again—not for any office, but for the highest office—has failed miserably. Anything that cannot defend itself against its enemies is doomed, for its attackers will not stop until they succeed.

Despite these facts, something in us resists accepting such a harsh verdict on the Constitution. That's probably because it served the country so well for so long—over 200 years. But could it have held simply because it was never truly tested? Drawing the parallel to 1930s Germany: the Weimar Constitution is often described by historians as one made for "good weather"—functioning well when conditions are stable, peaceful, and political actors respect it. But what you really need, when a constitution's true value is revealed, is one made for bad weather. When the bad weather came, the Weimar Constitution sank. Could it be the same for the U.S. Constitution? To be sure, the U.S. has faced "bad weather" before—most notably during the Civil War. But that was different: it involved states rejecting the Constitution and forming their own nation. It was not about hollowing it out from within—this is the test now unfolding for the first time. Given how the Constitution has performed, there is little reason for optimism that it will weather the storm.

This doesn't mean we should write off the U.S. Constitution—but it does mean we cannot rely on it to protect itself. It's too weak for that, with too many flaws and enemies. It will take everything we've got to defend it. Perhaps the Constitution's true value now isn't that it can fully defend itself—it cannot—but that it slows its enemies long enough for people to wake up and rush to its defense. But the waking up must happen soon, because the clock is ticking. As the main protagonist of this story put it (he was speaking about Ukraine, but it applies just as urgently to America): "Better move fast for your country, because otherwise, you won't have a country left."

*The next post will explore what specific steps **you** can take to bring this con to a con-clusion and save American democracy. Get alerted when it's live.*