

Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority

THE DEMOCRATIC

strategist



TDS STRATEGY WHITE PAPER:

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MENTAL DISORDERS

BY DREW WESTEN, PH.D.



Introduction

Readers of The Democratic Strategist are likely to know Drew Westen, Ph.D., as a Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at Emory University and a political messaging strategist, commentator, and consultant. In his prior career, however, he was an NIMH-funded researcher and expert on psychiatric classification and diagnosis, with a particular focus on personality disorders.

In November, 2020, he wrote a piece called, "All the President's Mental Disorders," reflecting his concern about the confluence of Trump's psychiatric disturbance, when diagnosed according to standardized criteria, and a nexus of politics events: the disinformation he had been systematically spreading about integrity of the election, the pieces he was moving on the political chess board (e.g., firing civilian military and legal officials and replacing them with loyalists), and his radicalization of a substantial portion of the electorate. This confluence of psychology and politics, he suggested, suggested a likely coup attempt followed by months or years in which Trump posed a serious and imminent threat.

The manuscript was long, however, and at the time, editors at outlets that publish long-form essays were not convinced that with Trump's defeat, a piece of this sort was still of relevance. Westen thus posted it on his consulting firm's website and in social media on November 23, 2020.

We read the article at the time, however, and the events in the intervening years led us to ask him to revise and reprise it, with a focus on how, in this case, an accurate psychiatric diagnosis might provide insight into political diagnosis.

The original article began with an explanation of why Trump's actions seemed so unintelligible to even educated observers: that his behavior cannot be explained as if he were on a spectrum of normal human functioning but becomes intelligible if not predictable when viewed with a different lens:

...The attempt to apply norms that apply to ordinary people and ordinary Presidents to a man who lacks the neural machinery to follow those norms is why commentators over the last four years have experienced a mix of appropriate outrage, astonishment, and bewilderment at Trump's latest "inhuman," indecent, or immoral act. For four years, political pundits have decried his lack of concern as to whether what he is saying is true; his indifference to the hundreds of thousands of Americans he has sent to their graves; his inability to admit to having done anything wrong, no matter how serious the consequences, insisting that whatever he did, he did "perfectly"; his desires for a Nobel Peace Prize and musings about his rightful place on Mount Rushmore; or his failure to see the problem with locking children in cages, as long as the cages were "beautiful" or "strong," his favorite and only adjectives other than "perfect."

We are similarly outraged and astonished by his having not given a second thought to extorting foreign leaders, governors who needed federal help at the early stages of the pandemic and were afraid to “cross” him, or his fellow Republicans, who can now either fall in line or fall on the sword of “his” voters; his ability to dehumanize hundreds of millions of his fellow-citizens because of the color of their skin or the color of their state, and his efforts to incite a race war, most recently calling out Philadelphia, Detroit, and Atlanta as centers of purported voter fraud; and his impulsive statements about things he has said that are readily fact-checked and proven false, such as his denial that he seriously suggested scientific experiments testing the efficacy of injecting disinfectants, an utterance by a person over age four so embarrassing that his White House enablers immediately terminated the Coronavirus Task Force rather than his Presidency...

Today, commentators do not know whether to respond with contempt or concern at his calling into question the counting of any ballot that does not have his name on it, selectively picking and choosing which states should and should not continue counting depending on which ballots might help him win, as if no one can see what he is doing; his continued trafficking in conspiracy theories, the latest and most pernicious regarding this election, although he did the same to explain his popular-vote debacle in 2016; his indifference as to whether he incites violence on Americans streets, as long as other people are taking the bullets, and his threats of an eleventh-hour war, all in the face of a sound defeat by nearly seven million popular votes and 306 electoral votes.¹

[The 99 percent of us who can distinguish reality from unreality and right from wrong might at first respond to electoral defeat with shame or anger], but we understand that ballots cast electronically in polling stations produce relatively quick results, whereas ballots submitted on paper... have to be counted by hand, [particularly when]...our buddies voted to delay counting until Election Day to create an apparent discrepancy that renders challenges more likely and time-consuming. We can see that unsubstantiated whispers from this or that precinct... wouldn't make a difference even if they were true, and that we just fell too far short in too many states to render a lawsuit any less frivolous. Nor do we believe that a “deep state” is after us, trying to undermine us at every turn.

...We may be entering the most perilous weeks of Trump's presidency, as a wounded animal without the evolved inhibitions seen in most animal species is a very dangerous animal... Understanding the patterns of Trump's mental disturbance is thus essential not only in writing a first draft of the history of the past four years but also in managing Trump's machinations in the weeks, months, and, more likely, years ahead, as he continues to lead the party he transformed.

¹ Virtually all these character traits have been apparent since Trump's rise to power. However, having an entire nation rebuke him has not only exacerbated these traits but led him to respond with rage, humiliation, and defensive grandiosity. The way he has already begun expressing those feelings is [ominous](#).

The piece concluded with a warning about what a man with Trump's psychiatric profile might actually be doing, in light of the actions he was taking circa October-November 2020:²

We can only hope that America's darkest days since the Civil War have passed, and that Trump's supplicants in Washington will ultimately decide to let him recede as gently into the night as he is capable. President-Elect Biden has handled Trump's actions with extraordinary judgment and his characteristic stability and unflappability, reassuring an increasingly worried nation and world that he is in charge and that we will shortly return to normal. That is not only precisely the public stance we need to see from the President-Elect and a profile in leadership. It is also the best way to starve a narcissist: Take all eyes off *him*.

We do not know whether Trump will stick primarily with bluster and ultimately threaten little more than another run at the Presidency in 2024... Perhaps he will tire of hectoring the new President from the sidelines and pass the torch of Trumpism... while continuing to pull the strings on the marionettes in [Congress], whose muscles seem to have atrophied on his watch. Or perhaps not.

Perhaps he will tire of hollowing out the executive branch by firing layers of career civil servants in his final days in office... Or perhaps not.

Perhaps Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's extraordinary statement about preparations for a Trump coup were not, as they would have been considered any other time in American history if made by a person in his position, an act of treason, given what he was telegraphing to our adversaries; or that his efforts to bring Republican state legislators to the White House to conspire to create slates of electors who match his delusions rather than the popular vote in their states will continue to fail. Or perhaps not.

And perhaps Trump's as-yet bloodless purges of Secretary of Defense Esper and replacement of his top deputies with men who will do his bidding, followed by his purge of the Department of Homeland Security's cybersecurity chief, Christopher Krebs, for daring to step on Trump's dangerous delusions about the "fraudulent" 2020 election, are "only" symbolic revenge-killings by a tantruming toddler, rather than subserving strategic...efforts...to undermine American democracy, or simply efforts by the furious would-be Fuhrer to take down the country he perceives as having taken him down. Or perhaps not.

Whatever the fate of Donald Trump, he leaves in his wake a dangerous legacy of Trumpism, which is 70-million strong, and whose psychology requires as much explanation as his own.

² He got into more detail about the socioeconomic conditions that activate the psychology of authoritarianism in a [Politics on the Couch](#) podcast that prompted him to write the article and remains relevant today.

Given what has occurred since, and that prediction is the strongest form of validation in psychiatry (and in science more broadly), we asked him to update the article, with a focus on its diagnostic analysis and its implications for what we might expect going forward.

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MENTAL DISORDERS

BY DREW WESTEN, PH.D.

AUGUST 7, 2023

We err whenever we think of someone who poses a clear and present danger as “just a madman” without understanding the patterns of his madness, which are anything but random.

In politics as in everyday life, we can ordinarily make sense of other people's behavior because we all share certain capacities, many with [specialized neural circuitry](#) that evolved through natural selection, such as the capacity for empathy, and we follow cultural rules, norms, and laws that render our own behavior and that of others generally predictable or at least explicable.

We cannot understand the actions of Donald Trump, however, by applying intuitive norms of how people behave, any more than he can apply those norms to himself to regulate his behavior, and for the same reason: he has a constellation of functional impairments of such low frequency in the population, and so far off the beaten bell curve of normal behavior, that understanding his actions requires having seen similar forms of pathology enough times and having the expertise to diagnose them.

If you start with the wrong assumption, that Trump has most of the characteristics we consider defining of a person, you will be perpetually surprised by his actions, because you are assuming a set of mental capacities he does not have. Of all the functional capacities a normal adult human brain confers that Trump's does not, three stand out.

First, most people have enough of a capacity to imagine what is happening in another person's mind to render social interaction both possible and intelligible³ and to adjust their own behavior accordingly.⁴ The ability to *think about* what other people want, need, or feel, however, is not enough to give us what we tellingly call “humanity.” That requires the ability to *feel for* other people as well.⁵

Skilled con men and psychopaths lack those feelings, more often using their ability to read other people's emotions for their own purposes rather than internally mirroring or experiencing them vicariously. They may also have a distinctive but poorly understood form of “social intelligence,” unmoored from normal emotional experience, that allows

3 A person who lacks this capacity entirely might, as Trump did in the second Presidential debate in 2020, tell the black woman moderating his Presidential debate, and the millions of people watching, that he is the “least racist person in the room,” especially after telling the white supremacist “Proud Boys” in the last debate to “stand by.”

4 Psychologists describe people who with a severe incapacity to do so as having deficits in [perspective-taking](#), [mentalization](#), or [theory of mind](#).

5 This capacity evolved long before humans did. Even [rats](#) evolved to feel the pain of their fellow citizen-rodents.

them to intuit other people's motivations so well that they can "play them" in ways most of us could not, even if we lacked the moral guardrails to stop us.⁶ Sadistic psychopaths, for example, often have an *exquisite* appreciation for the pain or terror they are inflicting (as was the case in a patient who recounted in graphic detail his pleasure in brandishing a knife over a woman's naked body for hours, and who was no doubt attuned, as well, to any signs of discomfort he might be inflicting on me in his recounting of the event). Otherwise, they wouldn't enjoy the experience.

Second, all but about [one percent](#) of humans have a sense of right and wrong.⁷ We experience guilt if we hurt other people unnecessarily or fail to live up to our own moral standards. The capacity for moral reasoning and the experience of moral emotions is the product of nature, culture, and development.

Third, [over 99 percent](#) of humans can distinguish reality from unreality. We can see and compare by visual inspection the number of people who came to hear us speak versus those who came to hear our predecessor. We may not like it, but we are cognitively incapable of replacing what we have seen with our own eyes with what we wanted to see in our mind's eye. Of perhaps even greater diagnostic significance, we are incapable of imagining that replacing reality with desire in our own mind simultaneously alters everyone else's perception.

Can a Psychiatric Professional Diagnose Mental Illness at a Distance?

Since [Trump's ascendance](#) seven years ago, many competent [mental health professionals](#), [journalists](#), and [political commentators](#) have raised [red flags](#), some of them very [psychologically sophisticated](#), about Trump's mental health. The last time we saw extensive psychiatric discussions of a current political figure's mental health was in 1964, when public discussions of Barry Goldwater's mental health led to an appropriate ethical principle against "diagnosis from a distance" by mental health professionals, who respected the so-called "Goldwater Rule" for the next half century.

That changed, however, when Trump's actions invoked another ethical requirement of mental health professionals, best reflected in an organization, body of writing, and [documentary](#) falling under the rubric, *Duty to Warn*. The "duty to warn" emerged from a civil suit in the 1970s, in which a court found a psychologist culpable for placing his patient's confidentiality above the safety of a homicidal patient's target, even after the psychologist warned the appropriate authorities. From that case emerged a legal and ethical mandate for mental health professionals to warn the likely victim, if known, of imminent harm.

But can experts accurately diagnose a person they have never met?

⁶ Although we are beginning to understand some of the neural circuits that differentiate some psychopaths from the rest of us, neuroimaging research finds intact neural pathways in some of the circuits involved in understanding other people's minds in [aggressive offenders](#).

⁷ Like the capacity to understand and feel for another person, the capacity for moral feelings is a product of [evolution, culture, and development](#).

Most of the time, in politics, doing so is at best imprudent, as the words of political actors typically reflect some mixture of what they really mean or intend, what they would like voters to believe they mean or intend, what advisors have suggested is in their interest to say, and what they are unconsciously or inadvertently revealing.

Under certain circumstances, however, the answer to that question is yes, if the observer has the requisite expertise, standardized measures or diagnostic criteria that can be applied reliably (e.g., leading independent observers to converge on similar conclusions), and adequate samples of the person's speech or behavior to make reliable judgments.⁸

Reviewing data from a distance is commonplace in medicine. Radiologists, neurologists, cardiologists, and other specialists routinely diagnose fractures, tumors, valve malfunctioning, and the like from X-rays, MRIs, sonograms, and other procedures administered by technicians. Radiologists rarely see the patients whose scans they examine, yet they have no difficulty reading those scans and rendering expert opinions.

Expert witness testimony by physicians or scientists who have not personally examined a person is equally commonplace and essential in courtrooms, where decades of precedent have established criteria as to what constitutes an expert on a particular question who can do just that. Class action suits and malpractice cases in which, for example, the patient died, require expert witnesses who understand the basic science and how to apply it to case records to offer probabilistic judgments as to whether or to what extent a putative cause contributed to a specific effect.

Using appropriate metrics, a competent psychiatric diagnostician can similarly make reliable diagnostic judgments. Unlike most Presidents, Trump has provided more than adequate samples of speech and behavior, in large measure reflecting his narcissistic pathology, expressed in both a need to "display" and to be the center of attention, and his impulsivity, expressed in his inability to inhibit speech that, for example, digs him deeper into legal trouble, presumably against the advice of counsel, or restrain him from showing off classified documents, for which we know of one occasion in which he did so apparently for narcissistic pleasure but can presume this was not the only time and have no idea whether did so for other purposes at other times, as we know that blackmail and extortion come easy to him.

I chose not to enter the fray regarding Trump's mental status in 2015 as Trump picked up steam in the GOP primaries when contacted by the anchor of one of the nightly news shows. At that point, as I told the interviewer, I had not seen enough of him to state more than

⁸ In all fields, however, experts need to be aware of their biases, whether diagnosing "up close" or at a distance; to present the evidence that led them to specific conclusions; and to offer opinions only when doing so is supported empirically. The dangers seem greater in psychology and psychiatry, where clinicians, for example, routinely testify in custody cases without a standardized battery of instruments or longitudinal data to override the well-documented empirical finding that, except in cases of adjudicated abuse, the best decision is usually equal custody. We have known for over 75 years that diagnostic predictions not grounded in specific instruments, with evidence of validity for answering specific questions, do no better than chance in making those kinds of judgments. Where money or partisanship can enter into judgments, clinicians need to be particularly alert to the potential for bias.

the obvious, for which we had adequate speech samples already, that he had a narcissistic personality disorder.

By the fall of 2020, however, as the election was nearing, Trump was making some ominous political moves, and well-informed lay commentators were expressing increasing distress that he was becoming “unhinged,” that I believed we needed diagnostic clarity about a set of *functional impairments* (capacities he lacks that we would expect to see, and should be deeply concerned about their absence in a leader) and *psychiatric syndromes* (disorders for which he met diagnostic criteria) I believed rendered him not only an imminent threat but the most dangerous internal enemy our nation has ever encountered.

Like virtually everyone, I was deeply concerned by his shout-out to the Proud Boys, but what concerned me perhaps even more was that, when asked about his knowledge of a fringe white nationalist group, *he knew who they were*. Whereas Obama and Biden might have known them from a terrorist watch list or Presidential Daily Briefing, Trump’s immediate response suggested intimate acquaintance. (Response time, in milliseconds, is one of the most reliable psychological measures of familiarity, which allows us, for example, to [assess voters’ unconscious emotional associations to candidates at scale](#).) Combined with his barely coded instruction to them, that suggested personal acquaintance a President should not have.

Most of Trump’s impairments can be examined by evaluating the extent to which he meets criteria for particular syndromes, disorders, or spectra⁹: “malignant narcissism”; a constellation of personality disorders called “externalizing” disorders” (narcissistic, psychopathic, and paranoid), characterized by a tendency to be angry or hostile, to blame others for harm they cause, and be self-centered, lacking in empathy, and impulsive; and grandiose and persecutory delusions.¹⁰

Does Trump Meet Criteria for Narcissistic Disorder or Malignant Narcissism?

The official diagnostic manual of mental disorders used in the United States and many other countries, the [DSM-5](#), recognizes 10 personality disorders, of which narcissistic is one.

That Trump has narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is not a difficult diagnostic judgment. The DSM-5 requires a person to meet five of the nine criteria, and as Trump does with everything, he does so “perfectly,” requiring the reader to go no further than the fifth symptom: grandiosity; preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, and brilliance; belief that he is “special” or unique; sense of entitlement; and requires excessive admiration. Q.E.D.

9 Most disorders today are diagnosed as spectra, with variations in severity and number or type of symptoms met, whether the patient crosses the threshold for “having” the disorder. Most people with significant narcissistic features, for example, do not have narcissistic personality disorder, just as most people with bulimic symptoms do not cross the formal threshold for diagnosis.

10 I do not claim originality for identifying most of these disorders as potentially characteristic of Trump. My goal here is simply to describe the specific criteria for each and the evidence for the extent to which he meets those criteria.

Although not included in the DSM-5, people who meet criteria for NPD, like other disorders, often vary in severity and [subtype](#). Among those who meet full criteria for the disorder, for example, some are high functioning and extremely successful in many areas of their lives, particularly at work. Our strengths and weaknesses, however, often spring from the same wells, and just as people with NPD may can draw attention, admiration, and acclaim for their achievements, such as scientific advances, technical breakthroughs, or creation of new industries that require an almost pathological belief in themselves and their vision, others, such as cult leaders and demagogues, do so through guile, deceit, and a dangerous form of charisma.

Where even high-functioning narcissists tend to run aground, however, is interpersonally, in an incessant need to display their plumage, a short fuse for people they devalue, or an inability to inhibit their anger when someone fails to meet their needs; and in their inability to regulate their self-esteem, often seen in defensive displays of grandiosity to cover underlying feelings of inadequacy.¹¹

Decades ago, clinicians began describing a much more severe variant of the disorder, which they called “malignant narcissism.” Although again not in the DSM-5 (whose Personality Disorders section remains, more than most, a “work in progress”), many observers have made a [compelling case](#) that Trump exhibits the clinical characteristics of malignant narcissism, a syndrome [first described by the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm](#). Fromm’s conceptualization of the disorder reflected his experience as a refugee from Nazi Germany and his attempt to understand the psychology of ruthless and gratuitously destructive autocratic leaders. As Fromm and subsequent theorists developed the concept, malignant narcissism is characterized by a mix of narcissistic, psychopathic, and paranoid features, combined with sadism.

To make a formal psychiatric diagnosis, however, requires diagnostic criteria against which the patient’s words and behavior can be assessed. In 2008, colleagues and I studied a large sample of patients with narcissistic personality disorder to see if we could identify subtypes. One of the three that emerged through purely statistical methods was the high-functioning subtype described above. Another, however, practically named itself: grandiose/malignant narcissism. [The criteria](#), derived empirically, read like a portrait of Donald J. Trump that could hang in the White House gallery:

Grandiose/Malignant Narcissism:

- Has an exaggerated sense of self-importance (e.g., feels special, superior, grand, or envied)
- Appears to feel privileged and entitled; expects preferential treatment
- Has little empathy; seems unable or unwilling to understand or respond to others’ needs or feelings

¹¹ As a public service, I should probably disabuse readers of what is often called “first year medical student syndrome,” in which people hearing about a disorder become terrified that it sounds too much like themselves. Having features of some syndrome does not mean one “has” the disorder, and many thoughts or fantasies that can sound pathological are just garden-variety variations in human functioning, as a brief trip to the internet exposes.

- Tends to blame own failures or shortcomings on other people or circumstances; attributes his or her difficulties to external factors rather than accepting responsibility for own conduct or choices
- Tends to be critical of others
- Tends to be controlling
- Tends to have extreme reactions to perceived slights or criticism (e.g., may react with rage, humiliation, etc.)
- Has little psychological insight into own motives, behavior, etc.
- Tends to get into power struggles
- Tends to be angry or hostile (whether consciously or unconsciously)
- Takes advantage of others; has little investment in moral values (e.g., puts own needs first, uses or exploits people with little regard for their feelings or welfare, etc.)
- Tends to be dismissive, haughty, or arrogant
- Tends to seek power or influence over others (whether in beneficial or destructive ways)
- Tends to hold grudges; may dwell on insults or slights for long periods
- Tends to be manipulative
- Tends to feel misunderstood, mistreated, or victimized
- Is prone to intense anger, out of proportion to the situation at hand (e.g., has rage episodes)
- Experiences little or no remorse for harm or injury caused to others

These symptoms alone account for many of the acts that have caused commentators and many voters to be continually shocked by his complete lack of empathy, remorse, or sense of responsibility for anything he has done. Classifying his behaviors over the last seven or eight years by each of these criteria alone could readily fill a book.

Consider one criterion above, which, empirically, is not unusual as a mild to moderate personality trait, but as a severe, defining, enduring aspect of personality is actually of low frequency in the population: the tendency to hold, dwell on, and never let go of grudges. One of the features of Trump's extraordinarily long memory for grudges that renders it different from "garden-variety" grudges is the way they do not dissipate when the cause for them is long gone, instead seeming to bring back the intense emotion of the original "insult," as if time has not passed.

This can be seen in his preoccupation with Hillary Clinton for "beating" him by three million popular votes seven years ago, despite his Electoral College victory or his undying hatred for John McCain for failing to fall in line with other goose-stepping Republicans on healthcare reform. Just as he could not "forgive" Hillary for winning the popular vote, and even had to try to regulate his frail self-esteem by instigating an expensive, absurd inquiry into her popular-vote victory, he could not forgive McCain, even in death, for thwarting his effort to dismantle the Affordable Care Act.

A salient difference between Trump and McCain on the Act exemplifies the difference between knowing and feeling characteristic of many of Trump's functional disabilities. Both men *knew* repealing the Act would restore the terror of "pre-existing conditions" to the half of Americans who have them (including anyone over about 40) and eliminate insurance for more than 20 million hard-working Americans who simply lack employer-based insurance. The difference was that McCain *cared* about that because he could step into other people's minds and shoes, feel their anxiety, and recognize that increasing their distress would be *morally* indefensible. For Trump, in contrast, ending "Obamacare" was all about *him*, about asserting dominance, particularly over Obama, whom he never forgave for the size of their Inaugural audiences (although perhaps Trump drew solace from having as big inaugural balls), and to rally his base, many of whom, as Trump knew, had no idea they came within one vote of losing their insurance: McCain's.

In his sea of indifference to suffering, we readily forget one of the most remarkable events—or non-events—of his Presidency, given the deaths of *hundreds of thousands* of Americans on his watch: *he never delivered a eulogy for them*. Doing so would likely have had advantages for his re-election, showing a more human face. However, that would have required empathy, or at least the appearance of it, which he was either incapable of feigning (which seems unlikely, as he is an accomplished con man) or perhaps could not do because he would have experienced it as an admission of failure or responsibility.

To Trump, the tragedy of Covid was not the way it afflicted over a million Americans who died from it or the millions more who lost loved ones to a horrible death – alone, isolated, and gasping for air. It never occurred to him to order millions of iPads for hospital rooms and nursing homes all over the country. The tragedy of Covid was the way it afflicted *him*, toppling the economy he counted on for re-election, as was evident in his seemingly childish complaints at campaign rallies in 2020 that all the media wanted to talk about was "Covid, Covid, Covid, Covid," as if one in every 300 Americans *had not just died of it*.

The criteria for malignant narcissism also suggest why he was not, like most Americans, horrified by his administration's policy of family separations, failing even to bother to record which child went with which "Mexican" (his omnibus term for immigrants of Latin descent). Trump, who married an immigrant or two himself (but only the hot ones...), was devoid of empathy for the carnage, torture, or other forms of suffering from which many of these families had just sought refuge on American soil.

A person can certainly have varying views on what to do at our southern border without being devoid of empathy or having narcissistic pathology. Ronald Reagan, for example, signed an immigration bill that placed substantial restrictions on immigration while offering what many in his own party derided as "amnesty" for immigrants who had been living here without papers for years and delivered his final, and very moving, speech as President on immigrants as the lifeblood of American innovation and ingenuity. Kamala Harris has championed the current Administration's policy of reducing immigration by reducing the

need for it with foreign assistance to countries whose people are fleeing for reasons we might be able to help them avoid (or helped cause, through our indifference to climate change until extreme weather reached our own shores). Nor is everyone in El Paso a racist for feeling like their town is being overrun with more refugees than they can accommodate.

But Trump, with his characteristic externalizing defense of “projection” (seeing negative impulses or fantasies in others instead of himself), probably told us more than he realized when he generated his own personal stereotype of Mexicans, of which I had never heard before, as “rapists.”

Does Trump Meet Criteria for Psychopathic and Paranoid Personality Disorders?

When colleagues and I first identified the criteria reproduced above for malignant narcissism, we hypothesized that it was at the intersection of the spectrum of narcissistic and psychopathic pathology. The reasons are apparent in comparing summary descriptions, or “prototypes,” of narcissistic and psychopathic personality we derived empirically in a set of NIMH-funded studies, using extensive data on samples of over 2,000 psychiatric patients in North America, in settings ranging from “elite” private practices through forensic centers and residential facilities for troubled teenagers.

The criteria we used, and the number per disorder, were designed to be more detailed, and to delve more deeply into psychological dynamics, than the limited number of criteria per disorder in the DSM-5 (e.g., eight for narcissistic personality), but they are so highly correlated with the corresponding DSM-5 diagnostic criteria that the differences are not relevant here. (The description below of narcissistic personality disorder also overlaps substantially with the description above of malignant narcissism because the latter is a subtype of the former.)

Although it is worth repeating the caveat that only experts can render expert opinions, as apparent from the descriptions below, anyone who has observed Trump over time can see his personality jump out of every sentence. That is uncommon. We developed these prototypes to allow clinicians to make *spectrum* diagnoses, to diagnosis personality dynamics that vary in severity and subtype, so that a person might not match a prototype at all, share one or two of its features, have be a borderline case, or be a close match to the prototypes taken as a whole but without meeting every criterion. In Donald Trump's case, true to his psychopathology, he is probably a “perfect” exemplar of both diagnoses:

Antisocial-Psychopathic Personality

Summary statement: Individuals with Antisocial-Psychopathic Personality exploit others, experience little remorse for harm or injury caused to others, and have poor impulse control.

Individuals who match this prototype take advantage of others, tend to lie or deceive, and to be manipulative. They show a reckless disregard for the rights, property, or safety of others. They lack empathy for other people's needs and feelings. Individuals who match

this prototype experience little remorse for harm or injury they cause. They appear impervious to consequences and seem unable or unwilling to modify their behavior in response to threats or consequences. They generally lack psychological insight and blame their difficulties on other people or circumstances. They often appear to gain pleasure by being sadistic or aggressive toward others, and they may attempt to dominate significant others through intimidation or violence. Individuals who match this prototype tend to be impulsive, to seek thrills, novelty, and excitement, and to require high levels of stimulation. They tend to be unreliable and irresponsible and may fail to meet work obligations or honor financial commitments.

Narcissistic Personality

Summary statement: Individuals with Narcissistic Personality are grandiose and entitled, dismissive and critical of others, and often show underlying signs of vulnerability beneath a grandiose façade.

Individuals who match this prototype have an exaggerated sense of self-importance. They feel privileged and entitled, expect preferential treatment, and seek to be the center of attention. They have fantasies of unlimited success, power, beauty, or talent, and tend to treat others primarily as an audience to witness their importance or brilliance. They tend to believe they can only be appreciated by, or should only associate with, people who are high-status, superior, or "special." They have little empathy and seem unable to understand or respond to others' needs and feelings unless they coincide with their own. Individuals who match this prototype tend to be dismissive, haughty, and arrogant. They tend to be critical, envious, competitive with others, and prone to get into power struggles. They attempt to avoid feeling helpless or depressed by becoming angry instead, and tend to react to perceived slights or criticism with rage and humiliation. Their overt grandiosity may mask underlying vulnerability: Individuals who match this prototype are invested in seeing and portraying themselves as emotionally strong, untroubled, and emotionally in control, often despite clear evidence of underlying insecurity or distress.

As with malignant narcissism, these descriptions, generated statistically, could be on Donald Trump's LinkedIn profile. Many of the examples above of the ways Trump's seemingly aberrant behavior becomes explicable if we view his behavior in the context of one diagnosis, malignant narcissism, applies as well to these prototypes.

I did not realize, however, the extent to which Trump matched a third prototype, of relevance to classic descriptions of malignant narcissism, which emphasize its paranoid dynamics, until writing this article:

Paranoid Personality

Summary statement: Individuals with Paranoid Personality are chronically suspicious, angry and hostile, and may show disturbed thinking.

Individuals who match this prototype are chronically suspicious, expecting that others will harm, deceive, conspire against, or betray them. They tend to blame their problems on other people or circumstances, and to attribute their difficulties to external factors. Rather than recognizing their own role in interpersonal conflicts, they tend to feel misunderstood, mistreated, or victimized. Individuals who match this prototype tend to be angry or hostile and prone to rage episodes. They tend to see their own unacceptable impulses in other people instead of in themselves, and are therefore prone to misattribute hostility to other people. They tend to be controlling, to be oppositional, contrary, or quick to disagree, and to hold grudges. They tend to elicit dislike or animosity and to lack close friendships and relationships. Individuals who match this prototype tend to show disturbances in their thinking, above and beyond paranoid ideas. Their perceptions and reasoning can be odd and idiosyncratic, and they may become irrational when strong emotions are stirred up, to the point of seeming delusional.¹²

We will return to this profile momentarily, as the symptoms described in the last section of the prototype, which address disturbances in thinking, are relevant to questions today about just how disturbed his thinking can become, his “intent” in the crimes for which he has been charged, whether he knows when he is lying, or whether it even matters.¹³

Is Donald Trump a Psychopath?

Like malignant narcissism, the DSM-5 does not include psychopathic personality disorder,¹⁴ instead including a close cousin, antisocial personality disorder, which focuses more on criminal behavior than on the personality dynamics that motivate the small subset of criminals who are also psychopaths to engaged in criminal acts. In clinical and forensic psychology and psychiatry, however, psychopathy is often the more widely used construct,

12 A caveat here worth noting: Whereas our other empirically derived prototypes closely mapped onto the disorders in the DSM-5, this one did less so but is far more faithful to clinical reality and to Trump. The diagnostic criteria for paranoid personality disorder in DSM-5 are perhaps the most problematic in the diagnostic manual, as they were not constructed empirically and describe more of a simple trait – paranoia – than the meaning of a “personality disorder,” which encompasses the ways individuals with a given disorder characteristically think, behave, feel, regulate their emotions (e.g., by projecting their own motives and thoughts on others), and behave interpersonally.

13 Elements of it are relevant, I suspect, to some of Trump’s most strident and violent supporters, described in historian Richard Hofstadter’s famous 1964 essay and subsequent book on [“The Paranoid Style in American Politics,”](#) who appear to evolved from McCarthyites to Goldwater Conservatives to Tea Party Conservatives to QAnon supporters and a narrow majority of today’s Republican Party, if polls on Trump’s support in the primaries are accurate. However, I lack either the knowledge or the volume of behavior samples I have from Trump to draw any meaningful conclusions.

14 The disorders is also called “psychopathy,” pronounced /sigh-kah’-puh-thee/).

in part because it better predicts recidivism (future crimes and convictions) and better distinguishes between criminality and a personality style that may or may not lead to criminal convictions. Most incarcerated people are not psychopaths, and many psychopaths commit egregiously unethical acts that border on or cross into illegality but elude prosecution or conviction through power or wealth.

The concept of psychopathic personality stems from the pioneering work of an extraordinary observer, Hervey Cleckley, a psychiatrist and professor whose 1941 book, *The Mask of Sanity*, described patients who *appeared* superficially and unnoticeably “sane” on the outside—and often remarkably charming and verbally facile, especially when they were lying—but who lacked many of the capacities that create stability and normal human experience on the inside. Commentators who have repeatedly employed the term “grift” to describe many of Trump’s actions, such as his ability and comfort in coaxing money from people of minimal means to support his billionaire’s tastes and legal bills, would certainly recognize Cleckley’s description. According to Cleckley, psychopaths are devoid of genuine emotion and feel nothing for people, such as compassion, empathy, or remorse, although they can often appear to feel things to get what they want.¹⁵

The diagnosis of psychopathic personality, as refined empirically since Cleckley, refers to a constellation of deficits and dysfunction in emotional experience, interpersonal functioning, and self-control.

Emotionally, psychopaths are characterized by a lack of empathy, guilt, or remorse. They exhibit a distinctively callous indifference to the needs, feelings, and particularly the suffering of other people. Although they lack emotional depth, they often present with a glib, “superficial charm.” They are unable to take responsibility for their actions, as they lack a conscience. Clinically, “right and wrong” to a psychopath means nothing other than “good or bad for me.”

Interpersonally, psychopaths are pathological liars, entirely unconcerned with whether what they say is true or false. They are exploitative and manipulative, often expressed in an uncanny ability to “con” people. They are also profoundly egocentric, as no one’s needs matter other than theirs, and can be arrogant and grandiose.

Behaviorally, they are reckless, irresponsible, and engage in numerous sexual liaisons they experience as emotionally meaningless. They often have multiple troubled marriages because of their fundamental incapacity to commit to anything or anyone other than themselves or people they perceive as useful to them.

¹⁵ Cleckley, who came to know the minds of his subjects more intimately than most observers do today, described a characteristic of their psychology not readily seen on the outside or often discussed today but certainly relevant to Trump, that their inner world was “chaotic,” and they created the same kind of chaos in people around them.

Together, these personality characteristics generate a strong tendency to engage in criminal behavior, although most criminals do not suffer from the severe personality disturbance that motivates psychopathic criminality, and many psychopaths skate the lines of criminality or escape conviction.

One of the most notable features of psychopaths, as Cleckley and all subsequent observers recognized, was that they are pathological liars, who seem entirely unconcerned about their lying. If caught and confronted, they simply make up another lie to explain it, deny it despite evidence to the contrary, or not understand what all the “hubbub” is about.

This speaks not only to their absence of conscience but also to the *impulsivity* characteristic of most psychopaths, which is often their undoing, as they do not think ahead when telling one lie about whether the person to whom they are lying has evidence to the contrary, or whether telling one lie might foreclose their opportunity to tell another. Often, they do not seem bothered by the logical inconsistencies of their lies, as if they can just offer a menu from which the listener can choose.

This, too, has been one of the most bewildering aspects of Trump's behavior, which is only bewildering because most of us, happily, do not have enough contact with enough individuals who are this severely disturbed in this particular way to have seen it before. Trump's “defenses” in response to the latest indictments by Jack Smith provide classic examples: he won the election, so any prosecution must be a persecutory “witch hunt”; he never really said, meant, or believed that he lost the election, even though he may have said it to a few people; maybe he did say he lost in private, but he did not really believe that, and he was just exercising his freedom of speech, as he was exercising it to say the opposite in public; he was just following the advice of counsel; his government attorneys were telling him he lost and that the proper course of action was to do what every other President has done, to leave office, but he sought the advice of enough attorneys that at least some would give him the answers he wanted; he is not an attorney and could not be expected to know where the lines are between speech and conspiracy.

These are not just the inventions of unscrupulous attorneys who want to be on television, although they are that, too, particularly now that they can work for Trump without worry that he will stiff them because they know he is, and by extension, they are, stealing tens of millions of dollars from little old ladies who think they are contributing to Trump's campaign but are instead contributing to the fees of lawyers who can hold their own in the Trump Integrity Open at Bedminster. Viewers in the U.S. and around the world are getting extraordinary access to the chaotic, impulsive inner world of a psychopath, the way he thinks, and the way he can generate (or if powerful enough, ask others to help him generate) claims, defenses, and allegations against those who are prosecuting him that have no logic, truth, or internal consistency, but one or more of which, he hopes, will exonerate him.

The gold-standard instrument for diagnosing this constellation of personality attributes is a 20-item measure derived from Cleckley's criteria, which captures the personality traits described above, with each item rated 0, 1, or 2 by an experienced clinical observer. A skilled rater or diagnostician can score a person based on an interview, all available evidence (e.g., criminal records for prisoners), or both. Like most psychiatric diagnoses, psychopathy is now considered a spectrum disorder, on which individuals can match the prototype of the disorder to a greater or lesser extent; however, a score above 25 or 30 is considered diagnostic, with the lower score often used in non-incarcerated populations because some of the items can only be applied to certain kinds of prisoners (although Trump may soon test the waters with even the most obscure, such as one pertaining to violation of conditional release, with which Trump is now flirting).¹⁶

When I rated Trump using this instrument in 2020, a conservative estimate of his score was 27, or 29 if I coded crimes such as extortion and obstruction, for which he had been impeached but not convicted; tax evasion, for which he was only under investigation; and sexual assault, for which had not yet been civilly convicted, as diagnostic of a criterion called "criminal versatility." Today, he meets that criterion and fully meets criteria for two others, for a score of 32. I cannot answer two items about his childhood behavior, such as bullying or animal torture, because I do not know how many cats he tossed down incinerators (microwave ovens had not yet been invented), so I conservatively scored them 0, but can conclude, as I did in 2020, that until or if he is incarcerated, he is as high on the spectrum of psychopathic personality as a non-incarcerated person can be, similar to the conclusion reached by comparing him to the "antisocial-psychopathic" prototype above.

The ways Trump meets psychopathic criteria barely require stating. His seemingly bewildering lack of empathy; his failure to take responsibility for anything; his incapacity to regulate impulses to such an extent that he cannot stop himself from defaming a woman he was just civilly convicted of raping, attacking the special prosecutor and the judge and making statements witnesses such as Mike Pence could take as threatening immediately after a judge filed a protective order; and his complete indifference as to whether the words coming out of his mouth are true or false, are all consistent with the behavior of a psychopath, while inconsistent with that of a person who is psychologically and neurologically intact.

The same is true of his "asking" Georgia's Secretary of State, and then "asking" again a little more forcefully, or perhaps in an "aspirational" tone, to "find" him votes he did not have; his watching with pleasure as the insurrection was taking place live on television, not just regardless of but likely because of how many people he could see bludgeoned or speared with American flags, as if the only thing missing to complete the experience was the movie-theater popcorn (although maybe he had that, too); and his indifference as to whether

¹⁶ Because the instrument was originally developed primarily with prisoners, it added some items, such as revocation of conditional release from prison, which require a criminal history and are not directly applicable to non-prisoner samples. As a result, diagnostic cutoffs for prisoners and non-prisoners may vary.

low-level functionaries at Mar-a-Lago take the fall for him and his rage at anyone who would not. To the 99 percent of us with normal-enough-brains, his incapacity to understand norms of reciprocity makes no sense: he would never fall on his sword for anyone else but is enraged if someone is “disloyal” by failing to do so for him. But to a psychopath, for whom “right” means “right for me,” the failure to do the “right” thing is cause for rage.

At their core, so many of these behaviors reflect the emotional life of a psychopath. Trump cannot feel what we feel. He does not appear tortured, even today, by the tortured screams of a Capitol Police officer jammed into a door, pleading with the sadists who were enjoying his pain as much as Trump undoubtedly was, that he had a family. He “had it coming” for his disloyalty, the same way Pence had a noose coming. We *know* Trump felt nothing, or nothing like what we felt, because he held the levers of power to put down the insurrection, not just to tweet to the mob to go home and enjoy the Trump Steaks waiting for them at their homes for their service. None of us could have emotionally borne the discomfort of watching what was happening on television and watching it again, let alone failing to call out all resources at his disposal to quell the insurrection.

The flipside of the emotional life of a psychopath is the capacity to feel things we cannot. Trump did not appear to feel an ounce of shame at sexual interest he casually admitted toward his own daughter, as if, sotto voce, he was giving expression to the thoughts and impulses he imagines every man experiences toward his own daughter if she were within the right age range, “hot,” and “his type,” perhaps like her mother at that age.

Does Trump Have a Psychotic Disorder?

Applying the DSM-5 criteria, the answer is yes.¹⁷

Psychosis refers to a break with reality, typically involving hallucinations, delusions, or disorganized or otherwise disordered thinking not on a continuum with normal thought processes. Delusions, according to DSM-5, refer to “fixed beliefs that are not amenable to change in light of conflicting evidence. Their content may include a variety of themes (e.g., persecutory, referential, somatic, religious, grandiose).”

Central to diagnosis in psychiatry, as in all fields of medicine, is *differential diagnosis*, that is, considering the range of possible diagnoses or dysfunctions a symptom or constellation of signs and symptoms might reflect, and using all available evidence to rule in or rule out disorders of greater or lesser likelihood.

¹⁷ Despite prescient claims by some psychologists, that was the last of the differential diagnoses I considered vis-à-vis Trump, until I re-read the diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5 and compared them to his speech and behavior.

Two kinds of delusions are of particular relevance to understanding Trump's psychopathology: grandiose and persecutory. A grandiose delusion is a delusion of "inflated worth, power, knowledge, identity, or special relationship to a deity or famous person."¹⁸

In Trump's case, a differential diagnosis of grandiose delusions first requires ruling out narcissistic personality disorder as sufficient to explain a symptom.¹⁹ A person can have both disorders, an example of "comorbidity" in psychiatry,²⁰ but grandiose delusions differ in severity and kind from the distortions in self-perception defining of narcissistic personality disorders (or narcissistic personality traits in relatively high-functioning people, which are far more common).

Perhaps the earliest warning sign of the presence of grandiose delusions occurred during the 2016 election, when Trump insisted he understood national security better than CIA Director Bob Gates. A person with narcissistic personality disorder would likely have had enough self-awareness to keep that thought to himself, or recognize after the fact that it was socially inappropriate and required explanation or deflection. In this example, as in those that follow, however, what was telling was the absence of any sense of irony or humor in making a claim that was manifestly absurd, as if he had just described the color of the White House. Were this not a fixed delusion or part of a delusional system, he would not have repeated it with the same seriousness as when he first announced it or gone on to make statements during and after his Presidency about his greater military acumen than our top generals or the Joint Chiefs.

One of the factors that renders these examples of disordered thinking rather than narcissistic bluster is the complete inability to recognize expertise and what is required to acquire it. A narcissistic patient might fancy himself the greatest cellist in the world when no one else sees it but would not presume he could apply his musical genius, which he no doubt also understands required cultivation through years of practice, to the battlefield. No other President, to my knowledge, has ever confused his civilian decision-making *authority* with the military *expertise* of the people who advise him. Nor would any politician who received two Daddy Deferments from Vietnam ever leave himself open to such an obvious attack for his combination of hubris, privilege, and cowardice. This failure to privilege the advice of his most well-informed experts over his own fantasies is obviously a dangerous delusion in a Commander-in-Chief.

18 In Trump's case, the first "diagnosis" to be "ruled out" in any differential diagnosis is "Presidency": for four years, he was, in fact, the most powerful person on earth. But so was every other President since the U.S. emerged as the world's superpower 80 years ago. One factor in ruling out that "diagnosis" in assessing a seemingly grandiose delusion is to determine whether it was persistent, irrespective of Trump's incumbency.

19 Many will recognize this as a form of "Occam's razor," starting with the most parsimonious explanation and only adding additional explanations if required.

20 The comorbid disorders may even resemble one another phenotypically or genotypically (e.g., a patient with narcissistic personality disorder who also has periodic bipolar episodes, or who has first-degree relatives with bipolar spectrum illness, whose manic episodes include extreme grandiosity).

Another grandiose delusion is at the heart of the Mar-a-Lago documents indictments, even setting aside what his motives might have been for taking and withholding the documents, like a child yelling “mine” at one toy after another, which could be attributable to any of the dysfunctions or disorders described here. No one who understands the concept of “classified” could even entertain the thought, let alone claim with cameras rolling, that he could declassify a document just by thinking it, which Trump repeatedly stated with the same serious, matter-of-fact tone as his comments about his military expertise. In terms of differential diagnosis, one of the factors that renders this statement delusional is the failure it reveals in what is called “reality testing,” the testing of an idea against reality to see if it is even possible. Reality testing is largely unconscious, and for most of us, this particular idea would likely never have risen to a high enough state of activation to be “considered” unconsciously against other potential rationalizations for his behavior. It would certainly not receive the level of unconscious activation required to influence conscious thought or speech, one of the characteristics of psychotic processes.

The statement is bizarre on its face, but it also logically entails the presupposition that everyone else with access to classified information would telepathically know that they, too, could now share it; or alternatively, that its level of classification was just for *him*, which is a bridge too far for even a non-psychotic narcissist. These characteristics also rule out psychopathy as the primary explanation, as in his throwing as many defenses against the wall as possible, all with the same demeanor of certainty and plausibility, to see what “sticks” in the court of public opinion, without concern for their truth or consistency. His delusions around classification, like his other delusions regarding national security, were and remain extremely dangerous, as in his cavalier attitude toward nuclear secrets or war plans after leaving office.

Trump’s inability to recognize any form of expertise that might compete with his genius extended to medicine, contributed to the deaths of thousands of people in the U.S. alone, and would likely have killed millions more had Joe Biden not taken over the federal response to Covid in January 2021. His grandiose delusions about his medical opinions provided one of the most memorable, frightening, and cringeworthy moments of his Presidency, precisely because of the extent to which it violated our intuitive norms of what a person could possibly say or do. The moment, of course, occurred when, surrounded by some of the leading experts in the world, he expressed the delusion that he might help them with their research, suggesting injections of antibacterial soap or bleach, or applying “special lights” to the skin, to cure the virus, even turning to one of those experts (Dr. Deborah Birx) to suggest clinical trials of his brilliant ideas.

Multiple aspects of both the thinking process and the social exchange indicate the presence of grandiose delusions and rule out other diagnoses. Once again, the ideas were bizarre, yet he advanced them with obvious belief in his intellectual largesse, sharing his medical genius with the infectious disease experts on his team. The ideas he offered were developmentally primitive, as if offered by a young child who reasoned that if the anti-

bacterial soap her teachers were having her use in preschool could help protect her from getting Covid, maybe giving people “shots” of the soap could wipe out the disease entirely. That these thoughts could reach the level of consciousness in a grown man, particularly one who had been briefed continuously on the pandemic and the ongoing research to develop a vaccine, is indicative of the extent to which his delusional beliefs about his own intellect trumped reality. Further, he demonstrated no awareness that his ideas were bizarre or might be perceived as absurd even if expressed privately. Nor did he see anything amiss in his impromptu tutorial on microbiology, with hundreds of millions of people around the world watching, to the internationally recognized expert in immunology and infectious diseases, pandemic preparedness, and vaccine research to whom he turned at the press conference to offer his genius (let alone the position in which he placed her).

Another less dangerous grandiose delusion is worth noting because it illustrates what a “fixed” delusion means, that is, one that lasts over time and is unassailable by facts: Trump’s repeated insistence that the number of people who attended his inauguration was larger than Obama’s. Only a psychotic person could hold that belief, as it was controverted by simple visual inspection of the aerial photographs Trump must have studied many times to try to distort them. Also contributing to the differential diagnosis from narcissistic personality disorder, or narcissistic traits on the spectrum of normal human behavior (even in the U.S., where norms of self-aggrandizement permit statements and behaviors that would elicit social ostracism in much of Asia and even Europe), was the abundance of rationalizations available to Trump that rendered the delusion unnecessary. Objectively, Obama’s inauguration was historic. To a narcissist, particularly one who is also a racist, that might seem unfair or infuriating, but it would not require a revision of visual reality and a public insistence that others alter their retinal image.

To Trump, however, his inauguration was objectively the most significant in history because it was *his*, requiring him to adjust visual reality to suit his fantasy, rather than the other way around. And as with the bleach example, as disturbing as the delusion itself, and as diagnostic, was his inability to recognize what other people were hearing, the attributions those outside his base were making about him, and what, to normal people, appeared as complete shamelessness in making such an absurdly grandiose assertion.

Trump’s grandiose delusions may not be the only delusions that necessitate a DSM-5 diagnosis of “delusional disorder,” which falls under the superordinate category, “Schizophrenia Spectrum and Other Psychotic Disorders.” A delusional disorder requires the presence of one or more delusions for a period of at least one month. Aside from his grandiose delusions, he also appears to meet criteria for “delusional disorder, persecutory type,” which “applies when the central theme of the delusion involves the individual’s belief that he or she is being conspired against, cheated, spied on, followed, poisoned or drugged, maliciously maligned, harassed, or obstructed in the pursuit of long-term goals.”

Distinguishing genuine psychotic delusions of persecution from psychopathic lying or the most severely disturbed thinking that can be characteristic of paranoid personality disorder can be difficult. Whether he genuinely believes in a “deep state,” lies regularly about it, and/or lies enough about it to believe his own lies, can be difficult to distinguish, but the sheer frequency, range, and tenacity of his conspiratorial delusions suggest a psychotic disturbance. At other times, his grandiose delusions have appeared to require persecutory delusions to maintain them.

Like the size of Obama’s inaugural audience, even after Trump had won the Electoral College and hence the Presidency in 2016, he retained the grandiose delusion that he had won the popular vote, despite Hillary Clinton’s three million vote margin, which he did not need to hold onto or enjoy his power from 2017-2021. Yet he could not let either one go and instead wove into his grandiose delusions persecutory delusions of malign forces within the deep state that changed the vote count, allowed dead people and undocumented immigrants to vote, and used other means to rob him of his rightful popular vote victory.

Those delusions about the 2009 Obama Inauguration and Trump’s 2017 “defeat” to Hillary Clinton then naturally extended to any possibility he could be defeated in 2020. He no doubt deliberately, consciously, and with premeditation began sowing the seeds of electoral distrust when he saw he might lose to Joe Biden. But these actions appear to have occurred in tandem with a delusional system that could not permit him to lose, creating an elision of lies, delusions, and willingness to destroy people if doing so was in his interest, for example, by seeing, and advertising to his most disturbed, dangerous, and racist acolytes, the handoff of secret thumb drives between two election workers, a mother and daughter, nefariously handing off mints in Atlanta. To a malignant narcissist, however, even if he got it wrong, who cares? The statement served its purpose, and “they had it coming to them” for participating in a process that humiliated him.

Government is Not the Right Institution for Donald Trump

Multiple consequences follow from this analysis, of which I will emphasize three.

First, as the editors’ introduction to this article makes clear, understanding Trump’s psychopathology and psychological dynamics renders many of his actions not only understandable but predictable. I was certainly not the first to forecast a coup attempt or connect the dots among some of the schemes taking shape in the fall of 2020, nor was I the first to predict that Trump would never leave the White House willingly. Personally, I was concerned for four years at how “delusional” so many Democrats seemed in failing to take seriously comedian and social critic Bill Maher’s prescient predictions of precisely that. But understanding Trump’s internal dysfunction and disorder allows a clearer view of the dysfunction and disorder he has created and continues to create.

Second, some readers may wonder about potential implications for the various criminal charges against him, and especially for establishing *mens rea*, or criminal intent. What do we make of the intent of someone who might be lying, believing his own lies, acting on the basis of delusions, or, most likely, as Cleckley described the mind of a psychopath, so chaotic internally that, sometimes, he is probably doing one or another, while at other times behaving in a way Freud called “overdetermined,” that is, determined by multiple processes simultaneously, many of them unconscious.

From the point of view of his upcoming trials, some of these considerations might be clarifying, but none is legally relevant. We do not give get-out-jail-free cards to psychopaths for their pathological lying, even though a substantial subset of psychopaths may have defective neural circuitry particularly involving regions of the frontal lobes essential to the capacity for empathy, moral emotions such as guilt, and impulse regulation. We do not give a pass to people whose narcissism leads them to self-serving actions that cross the line into criminal behavior, and we forgive far too many of their white-collar crimes, even though narcissistic executives likely cause the deaths of far more people than the most prolific serial killer, with as much premeditation. And for better or for worse, we regularly execute or permanently imprison young men whose adult lives have barely begun but who developed a first-episode psychosis in which voices, hallucinations, or delusions told them to kill, whose faces we so regularly see on television after mass shootings.

In another sense, however, these considerations might well have mattered in the hours, days, and weeks after January 6, 2021. Younger democracies than ours, such as Peru, have recently recognized how to handle coup attempts far better than we did, locking up the conspirators *immediately*, and *especially* those at the top; holding them without bond until they could be indicted and tried; and making clear to anyone, especially politicians, who might have considered siding with the secessionists after the fact that their actions would be met with swift justice. Democracies cannot afford to tolerate, fail to indict for two or three years, or release into the public dangerous criminals who will use the instruments of democracy to destroy it and create alternative narratives about an insurrection or a coup attempt, as we did.

The only reason we are now dealing with trial calendars extending past an election four years later and potentialities such as Trump getting re-elected, pardoning himself, and exacting retribution on those who “persecuted” him; “free speech” arguments justifying sedition; and a third of the country believing the election was stolen and no longer trusting virtually any legitimate institution of government is the unfortunate confluence of [too many Democrats incapable of recognizing and responding appropriately to aggression](#) and virtually all Republican elected officials behaving like such cowardly, frightened schoolchildren that they have refused to tell the truth about a man on whom they could have turned the page, and the key to his cell, before he continued to erode our democratic institutions.

Had Barack Obama done what Trump did, AOC shown potential “visitors” the layout of the Capitol before January 6, or Elizabeth Warren voted against seating a duly elected President the way Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley, and over 140 of their fellow Members of Congress did *immediately after an insurrection at the Capitol aimed at stopping the peaceful transfer of power on that same day*, Republicans would have imprisoned them in a fetal heartbeat for their participation in the coup attempt, and in so doing would have protected our country and our democracy.

Democrats had no trouble understanding that principle when a man attacked Paul Pelosi in his home with a hammer. The police did not release him and allow him to martyr himself for the next few years. They held him without bond while making a case as obvious as *The United States v. Donald J. Trump* was on the afternoon of January 6, when he interfered with putting boots on the ground, as he could have within seconds of their approach on the Capitol, but did not do so because he had not only incited them but saw them as his troops.

We are fortunate today to have Jack Smith at the helm, who has seen the face of evil before and knows how to prosecute it using the rule of law. I do not pretend to know Merrick Garland or his reasons for delay, but collecting millions of documents while the other side is collecting millions of AR-15s is a dangerous strategy. He knew he only had two years before an election that would, if the history of the prior 90 years’ midterm elections was any indication, put the insurrectionists in charge of the House, Senate, or both; and that two years later, we would have a Presidential election, in which Trump would likely run and claim he could not be prosecuted in the midst of an election. That was all predictable.

Normally, the judicial calendar and the political calendar are and should be independent. In response to a coup, however, they neither can nor should be. The House, under the leadership of Nancy Pelosi and the House Managers, understood the importance of that second impeachment, at warp speed, and did its job. We can only hope Jack Smith, and perhaps the prosecutors who have the power to indict Trump for charges for which he cannot pardon himself in the States, have time to do theirs.

That leads to a third and final implication. Analogies to Hitler are virtually always inapt, but one is worth noting. The Germans made a terrible mistake in imprisoning Hitler for less than nine months after a coup attempt, and they failed to take seriously what he openly wrote and said, beginning with his prison-penned memoir, *Mein Kampf*: that the German government was illegitimate, and that the best way to “fix” its parliamentary system was to win it democratically and then to dismantle it. They made a second mistake in not taking him at his word, an error they did not repeat last year in response to a right-wing coup attempt, rounding up the seditionists without delay, as did Peru and Brazil.

Donald Trump made one attempt at ending American democracy by winning and then subverting it. He showed tremendous prowess in managing a coup attempt with an extraordinary number of moving parts, with coordinated efforts to corrupt governors, secretaries of state, state legislatures, courts, local election boards, fake electors, Members of Congress, Cabinet members, White House staff, and the Vice President. He lacks the internal guardrails to stop himself if given a second chance and feels completely entitled to do so, and as we saw in 2020, the external guardrails holding him back are weak, rusty, and dependent on who happens to be holding them up.

Trump has clearly told us what he intends to do with a second term, with his paranoid fantasies of "retribution." Still enraged by his electoral defeat in 2020, [he wrote](#) on his social media vanity outlet, "A Massive Fraud of this type and magnitude allows for the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution."

In light of what we know of Trump's psychological functioning, we need to take him at his word.

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