

CHRONICLING TRUMP

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The following represent a series of letters written contemporaneously and submitted to newspapers for publication, three of which appeared in the NY Times and the LA Times. The dates reflect when the piece was penned.

October 10, 2016

About one month before the election

Believing in Believing

TRUMP: Finally, something to believe in!?

A curious feature of this year's upcoming presidential election is Donald Trump's popularity amongst the nation's evangelicals even though his life is hardly a testament to the values of the religious right. Serial marriages marked by outright adultery isn't what one thinks of when one speaks of "family values." A glaring inability to turn the other cheek, tendencies to bad mouth others and to mercilessly pummel his opponents, the spreading of malicious rumors (birtherism) all seem downright un-Christian. A lack of humility and charity combined with an overvaluing of the flesh—focusing on the material over the spiritual; emphasizing surface appearances over the beauty of the inner soul—round out a list of Trump's traits that hardly exemplify evangelical values. So, how do we reconcile these discrepancies?

Trump seems to be running a faith-based candidacy that is more about soliciting faith in Trump himself and not so much about Trump's demonstrating his own personal dedication to God almighty. Trump has whipped evangelicals into a frenzy by playing the role of the savior, the man who's the answer to their prayers. The fact he's propagating hatred is overlooked just as long as he plays the part of a candidate in whom they can comfortably place unquestioning trust.

People whose lives are all about believing need a larger-than-life figure to believe in, and Trump plays the part to a tee. His followers buy into his portrayal of strength, placing faith in a man who exhibits abounding self-confidence, which lends the impression he knows *beyond doubt* what must be done to restore calm and order.

It would be a terrible mistake to discount Trump's popularity as a fluke. His substantial following says something profound about what's troubling a segment of the populace—a segment gripped by levels of dread that Trump's rhetoric not only echoes but intensifies, leaving his followers clamoring for a strong leader who will take charge and deliver them from the ever-present threat of terrorism that has a knife at our collective necks. Is it any wonder that some are willing to forgive him his failings if, in fact, Trump can make good on his promise to make life safe again?

Many Americans presently feel the need for an archetypal character who'll reassure them in *no uncertain terms* that they need not fear—that ISIS can and will be wiped out *expeditiously*. Trump tells us he has a secret plan and insists it would be foolhardy to let the enemy in on the details. He knows better than to mess with the illusion he's carefully crafted so he takes great

care to never spell out what he has in mind while appealing to his followers to do what comes natural--to have faith: "In Trump We Trust." Such is a faith-based candidacy, which appeals to all who yearn for something to believe in--whether or not they are strictly evangelically-inclined. In this fashion Trump circumvents the pothole of fallibility while sustaining the illusion that he is as powerful and all-knowing as he claims to be. Hillary Clinton shakes her head and reminds us that life isn't so simple, but Trump's followers simply dismiss such rhetoric as typical political drivel.

One imagines a typical Trump follower thinking: "Finally, a candidate who's willing to spell it out in simple terms rather than complicate matters that—frankly—are simpler than our politicians suggest." According to such thinking, when all is said and done there are the good guys (us) and the bad guys ("thems" of every conceivable sort)—Right and Wrong, God and the Devil. Clarity reigns supreme as complexity and confusion recede from sight--seen as a victory for the bastions of common sense.

The history of mankind is replete with examples of times when people have clamored for an almighty leader capable of believably portraying strength incarnate. What a relief it must be to set aside judgment and embrace this seeming savior. Those capable of mustering up blind faith are rewarded by the comforting illusion Trump offers all who stand ready to believe because, at heart, believing is what they do--they believe in believing, and Trump offers them a chance to do just that.

October 19, 2016

About three weeks before the election

Behold: The making of a "sore" loser

As the election nears, Donald Trump is preparing to declare, should he lose, that the presidential election has been rigged. He further refuses to vow--when pressed—to accept the election results come what may. Widespread outrage is being expressed by politicians on both sides of the aisle in response to Trump's remarks. These politicians worry such claims of electoral fraud tear at our collective faith in the democratic process. In the meantime, those in the know about such matters assure us of the near impossibility of rigging an electoral system that is overseen by individual states. Lost in the discourse is a simple psychological explanation that could easily account for Trump's claim, which Hillary Clinton alluded to in a recent debate when she observed that Trump habitually cries foul each and every time the winds of defeat blow in his direction.

Trump is little more than a sore loser who's showing his hand by letting us in on his exit strategy—his plan to save his pride—his psychological hide—from the shameful charge he delights in calling others: "*loser*." Is there any better explanation for Trump's behavior than a wholesale attempt to save face?

November 11, 2017

4 days after the election, written after the extended Trump family appeared on "60 Minutes"

Run in the NY Times November 19, 2016

Sixty Minutes as Infomercial: What is wrong with this picture?

Many Americans are concerned that the Trump presidency not directly benefit the Trump brand. To allay fears, Ivanka vows that her family plans to work hard to avoid any conflict of interest that would issue from their father's political position.

Days later Ivanka appears on "60 Minutes" sporting a stunning diamond bracelet—a piece from her own line. The following day her company advertises that this bracelet can be purchased for the sum of \$10,000.

What is wrong with this picture?

November 12, 2016

5 days after the election, written after a man protesting Trump's election was shot at a demonstration

A protestor has been shot in Oregon

As her popular vote widens, and Hillary Clinton's dismayed supporters take to the streets to express their dismay and difficulty accepting such a nightmarish reality, one wonders what the protesters see as their end game. They declare that Trump is not *their* President, but there is no disputing reality.

For his part, Donald Trump grasps neither the gravity nor the implication of this degree of unprecedented post-election dissent. He declares the protests "unfair," de-legitimizing their significance, then changing tack and tweeting about the protester's passion for our country. The guys a moving target!

Though he isn't likely to recognize it as such, Trump now faces a major test of his post-election rhetoric, which does nothing to heal our divided land. A protestor has been shot in Oregon. What does Trump do? Does he speak out against the violence or smugly smile a contented smile? Lest we forget, it was he who expressed—in no uncertain terms—a desire to see protesters "roughed up" the way they used to do it in the good old days. Time will tell, though it is sobering to think that the protests may be headed down the road of martyrdom.

November 19, 2016

11 days following the election, written after a cast member from Hamilton took the post-curtain opportunity to lecture the VP-Elect who was in the audience that night

Trump as cry baby

A cast member called out Vice-President-Elect Pence from the stage of a recent performance of Hamilton, triggering our President-elect to demand that he apologize for such a display of disrespect. In a 6 am tweet, Donald Trump suggested that the cast member had violated a long-standing tradition that makes theater a “safe and special place.” While I generally stand opposed to most everything Trump advocates, I find myself unsure about where I stand on this matter. There’s a time and a place for such discourse and I am not quite sure whether that venue should be considered off limits. Just because Trump’s routinely shames his opponents doesn’t mean we all must stoop to his level.

Most disconcerting, however, is the fact that Trump--yet again—demonstrated both a disturbing intolerance of dissent as well as an unsettling proclivity to become easily provoked, leading him to act in a most un-presidential fashion. Surely he has more important matters that presently demand his attention? Must he act like a cry baby when things don’t go his way or his ego is bruised?

Such behavior is sobering, leaving us to wonder where our country is headed when our soon-to-be Commander-in-Chief rants on about the Second Amendment while seemingly ignoring the Amendment of Free Speech that precedes it.

November 21, 2016

13 days after the election, after the Alt Right held their rally on November 19

Heil Trump!!!

Footage from Saturday night’s Alt Right gathering sent shivers down the spines of American Jews who found themselves suddenly shifting from defiantly declaring “Never Again!” (in reference to Holocaust) to astonishingly asking “Not Again?”

From the podium, Richard Spencer spoke of “the struggle” (read: “Mein Kampf”), used the inflammatory term “Lügenpresse” (lying press: an expression used in the 1930s by Nazis to discredit their opponents), then topped off the evening by declaring “Hail Trump. Hail our people (White Europeans). Hail Victory,” as some in the audience stretched their arms in Nazi salute.

The best Trump could offer in response was a reiteration of his opposition to racism of every sort, steering clear of specifically condemning the actions of this segment of his supporters. The following Monday Trump met with leaders of the American media who he specifically called out as “liars,” eerily echoing Spencer’s chant.

Have American Jews grown unjustifiably skittish or is our country headed down a dark, foreboding alley?

April 15, 2017

written in response to the President’s about face in his position regard NATO

Run in the NY Times April 15, 2017

An about face to save face

Note How President Trump speaks. He says "NATO is no longer obsolete," taking care not to say--to never say--"I've changed my mind about NATO," which comes dangerously close to words we have yet to hear, and will probably never hear our President utter: "I was wrong."

How convenient then that the world does him the favor of changing so that he is spared the narcissistic injury of having to admit was wrong and he is fallible.

May 10, 2017

(written after the President unceremoniously dismissed the FBI Director)

Soothing a seething scion

After repeatedly praising FBI Director James Comey while on the campaign trail—literally blowing him kisses shortly after the election—President Trump hadn't the decency to fire Comey to his face—Trump's signature TV maneuver. Having fumed his way through the week, seemingly incensed that the Russian investigation wouldn't go away, President Trump fires Comey for reasons that had previously elicited his praise—his handling of the Clinton email matter.

Comey's firing came in the form of a letter crediting Comey with his having reassured Trump *three times over* that the President himself wasn't under investigation. Referencing this "fact" in a transparent effort to telegraph that message to the American people, President Trump inadvertently shows his hand—raising questions about exactly why Comey would feel it necessary to repeatedly reassure the President on so many different occasions.

Did Comey feel moved to soothing a seething scion when things weren't going his way? If so, what does that say about our Commander-in-Chief's emotional makeup?

June 7, 2017

(Written after President Trump seemingly misconstrued a statement made by London's Mayor, leading the President to tweet: "At least 7 dead and 48 wounded in terror attack and Mayor of London says there is "no reason to be alarmed!"

(Run in the Los Angeles Times)

"Never Mind!"

President Trump got it wrong when he said that London's Mayor told his citizen's not to be alarmed by terrorism. In fact, the mayor was encouraging the people of London not to be alarmed by an increased police presence.

Our President's behavior comes laughingly close to that of the hard-of-hearing character played by Gilda Radner on Saturday Night Live.

On the show, Radner's Emily Litella would deliver a strident reaction to a news story she'd completely misunderstood but spoke about with absolute authority. She'd indignantly complain, for example, "What's all this FUSS I keep hearing about endangered feces? After working herself into a lather and when told the real issue was endangered species, Emily smiled, looked into the camera, and said: "Never mind!"

If only Trump could admit erring.

June 7, 2017 (after the President's son, Eric Trump, called his father's opponents "Not even people")

"NOT EVEN PEOPLE"

On Tuesday night, Eric Trump opined on the Fox news show "Hannity" that Democrats who oppose his father's agenda "weren't even people." Speaking through political surrogates is now common practice, so the off-handed remark of a member of the First Family requires a response when the rhetoric employed is alarmingly dehumanizing. Anytime a politician, or his or her spokesperson, labels groups of people "deplorables" or suggests they are "lesser beings" we should sit up and speak out, since the use of such language sometimes proves prelude to war—characterizing one's enemy as subhuman so they can be annihilated with impunity. Collective opposition is needed when tongues wag wildly in the wind and a politician or his surrogate speaks unspeakable as demagogues of yesteryear would do.

June 11, 2017

Regarding Trumps continuing, if not widespread, popularity

Taking the pulse of the nation

The amount of attention paid daily to the outlandish behavior of Donald Trump distracts us from seriously considering the root cause of the "Trump phenomenon"—what his candidacy says about the mood of our nation. Like it or not—like *him* or not—we must face facts: Trump's

unexpected and implausible popularity reflects something profound about the prevailing zeitgeist amongst a segment of the population. Political positions aside, rarely have we seen such wide disparity in the way a given candidate is regarded by different segments of the electorate.

In a presidential race where likability—or the lack thereof—takes center stage, we shouldn't be surprised by the extent to which the perception of a candidate's personality significantly effects voters' attitudes. In this last election we saw two very different characters pitted against one another: one who struck some as being like a brainy teacher's pet—a bespectacled, studious girl who sits with her hands folded in the front of the room, patiently waiting to thrust her hand in the air to answer each and every one of the teacher's questions pitted against an overweight, irreverent bully who sits in the back of the room rolling his eyes and mocking the proceedings, as he and his posse lob spit balls at individuals singled out for such mistreatment.

There is more psychology in political races than most are comfortable admitting. If there's anything analysts know about it is people's deepest hopes and fears. Patients lie on the couch, remove the mask and dare to share what they'd never before shared with another. Being privy to this degree of candor is a profound privilege—exposing analysts to the core of unadorned human experience. This is how Lacan arrived at his profound understanding about the human yearning to have an all-powerful, all-knowing person (“le sujet suppose savior”—the one who is supposed to know) to turn to when things are beginning to feel unbearable—in times of heightened fear, need and/or uncertainty. Many amongst us hunger for the appearance of someone who knows best how things should be done—someone who can restore confidence in the belief that *someone* out there who knows what they are talking about, knows what has to happen, and knows how to get it done.

It appears that many Americans see Donald Trump as embodying this principle. He is seen as behaving in ways that help evoke and support the belief that he is just such a man—a man filled with earned self-confidence, a man who knows *beyond doubt* what must happen next, a man who truly knows the way forward.

For many, there is something deeply reassuring in Trump's portrayal of strength. He behaves in ways that fly in the face of conventional wisdom. He has brazenly broken all the rules that heretofore would have sunk another hopeful's candidacy. The fact that Trump has not only survived but thrived on speaking his own mind and paying heed to nearly no one is, frankly, impressive. Clearly, the guy has chutzpah of awe-inspiring magnitude.

The fact that some Americans don't feel an acute need for just such an archetypal character doesn't negate the fact that many others deeply yearn for a leader who'll reassure them in *no*

uncertain terms that they need not fear—that ISIS can and will be wiped out *expeditiously*—contributing to the illusion that such matters are much simpler than present leaders make them out to seem. Other problems that have longed plagued our nation, Trump promises, will likewise be resolved under his regime. All of this sounds great, a dreamy situation that clears up every gnawing matter.

Some Americans are shocked that others are willing to take Trump at his word—believing that if he says he’ll eradicate terrorism he will do just that. Trump tells us he has a secret plan and insists it would be foolhardy to let the enemy in on the details. That explanation sits well with his followers who are more than willing to believe he can accomplish this feat. At some level they know better than press Trump to spell out just how he plans to bring this about. Illusions can never stand the light of day, and were Trump to tell us just how he plans to accomplish his pie-in-the-sky promises we might begin to see the practical limitations of his plans, thus revealing the man behind the curtain—the Emperor who has not clothes. Trump knows better than to do that. He nurtures his image of “the one who knows” while taking great care to never speak concretely, seemingly circumventing the pothole of fallibility.

The history of mankind is replete with examples of times when people have clamored for a leader capable of believably portraying strength incarnate. Some see Trump as nothing more than a petty schoolyard bully while others regard him as fearless leader helping us face a fearful, uncertain and harsh future. What a relief it must be to set aside judgment and embrace this savior, this cowboy who kowtows no one, this giant of a man who will stand up to anyone who dares try to stare him down or behaves in ways designed to leave us quaking in our collective boots. Those who are incapable of mustering up blind faith or indulging in such reassuring illusions are left out in the cold, unable to partake in the immense comfort that Trump has to offer all who are willing to believe. Too bad for them?

Mid-Year 2017

Disinhibition run amok: Trump’s irrepressible way

Regardless of how one feels about Donald Trump, there is no denying the fact that the strength of his base has yet to waver. While his opponents hope that Trump will eventually cross a line that finally erodes the faith of his followers, that has yet to happen—leaving us to wonder about Trump’s Teflon-like ability to remain popular with a wedge of the populace in the face of behaviors that outrage the masses.

Pundits offer a host of theories to account for Trump’s continued popularity. They talk of an unrecognized groundswell of discontent on the part of Americans who feel displaced or

marginalized. They note a depth of resentment felt toward the arrogance of liberals who speak dismissively about Middle America—calling it the “great fly over.” They lament a loss of national identity as our country ceases to reflect the racial makeup of our founding fathers.

While psychoanalysts are prohibited from commenting on the psychology of public figures they’ve never examined, nothing stops us from commenting on a politician’s “personae”—aspects of a politician’s character as it appears to others.

There is one thing about Trump’s outward behavior about which we might all agree: Trump is remarkably uninhibited—and it’s this trait, I submit, that captures the imagination of a segment of the populace who are enamored with his shoot-from-the-hip style that flies in the face of convention and terrifies many Americans who expect a President to come up with a *seriously weighed response* to matters of significant import. His followers, on the other hand, seem tickled by his impulsive style, and may even consider the practice of thoughtful consideration to amount to little else than the political practice of hedging one’s bet.

Behind Trump’s unique lack of inhibition is his amazing ability to get away with it. Others might try to “pull off” such a feat, but only Trump seems to do so with such panache. His bluster, his self-assuredness, his apparent lack of humility, his ability to bully with impunity, his stick-with-it-ness in the face of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, his freedom to say and do as he pleases without ever having to eat crow, say he is sorry or admit he’d been wrong—these exhibited behaviors are features of Trump’s personae. Whatever is true of his inner world, Trump’s “presented self” is pretty much as described.

Such behavior proves awe-inspiring to some while it horrifies others. There are those who are fascinated by a man who exhibits such a lack of inhibition that he can pretty much do and say as he pleases when social convention dictates that one should do otherwise. Trump’s critique of political correctness goes a step beyond—his outward behavior flies in the face of what we call “manners.” After all, there is something to be said for common courtesy—and I don’t think it is a stretch to characterize Trump as having largely dispensed with such social graces.

Trump appears to have effectively freed himself from the shackles of polite society, which allows him to haul off and say whatever he damn well pleases without feeling obliged to censor himself out of concern for the feelings of other or how he himself might be viewed. Trump behaves in an unprecedented fashion—in ways that we all might fantasize acting, though few of us would dare act, and his behavior is so downright riveting that it’s proven hard for the media to keep their eyes off the man.

Trump represents disinhibition run amok. He acts like a man who not only cannot and will not say “no” to himself but furthermore refuses to bend to the efforts of others to reign him in. His advisors plead with him to tweet less often but to no avail. Our President exhibits a devil-may-care attitude. *OH . . . to be so free*—a hero to some, a bull in the china shop to others. Trump’s appearance is that of an earthy creature of mythic proportion—an irreverent and irrepressible man who is dead set against bending to anyone’s rules.

Humans are forever balancing satisfaction of their own needs with a concern for the needs of others—a balance that leaves individuals perpetually discontented with the societally-dictated task of self-restraint for the good of all. Civilization and It's Discontents. How fascinating it is, then, when an individual seems to solve the problem that plagues us all by perennially prioritizing his needs by acting the part of the enfant terrible. Trump's appeal may then boil down, in part, to his capacity to do what we all wished we could do, but know better than to do.