

# THE PSYCHODYNAMICS FUELING TRUMP'S SPIKE IN POPULARITY WHEN ACCUSED OF CRIMINALITY

Peter Wolson

Democrats are dumbfounded that with each new criminal charge brought against former President Donald J. Trump, his popularity rises among Republicans who have traditionally stood for law and order. This includes his sloppy handling of top secret classified documents at Mar-A-Lago, his rallying the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrectionists to obstruct the certification of the 2020 presidential election and even his conviction by a jury of his peers for raping and defaming journalist E. Jean Carroll.

Trump loyalists claim that the charges against him are politically motivated by Democrats, woke progressives and the liberal media, even when there is concrete evidence to support them.

Psychologically, their reactions are not surprising.

Idealizing Trump can corrupt one's morality and undermine objective judgment. The roots of this psychodynamic extend back to early childhood. As young children, it's natural to idealize one's parents, to see them as perfect and all-knowing. Children are strongly motivated to deny parental flaws to preserve their vital connection to them. This is strikingly evident in abused children who would rather blame themselves for parental abuse than their parent. This unconscious psychodynamic often plays out when adults idealize powerful authority figures, like former President Trump. For example, members of his base display extreme idolatry toward him. This blinds them to the reality of his transgressions. Instead of losing faith in him, they will scapegoat his enemies, such as the Democrats, the Department of Justice or the FBI for unfairly

persecuting him. Moreover, Christian Evangelicals will soft pedal his immorality by seeing him as a flawed human being.

In addition, cognitive dissonance, explains why Trumpers deny objective evidence of his trespasses. UCLA psychologist, Leon Festinger, found that when people are confronted with information that negates their strongly held beliefs, instead of questioning them, they become more convinced of their validity. This is because the threat to their tribal identification makes them defend their beliefs more adamantly. For example, Festinger studied an apocalyptic cult that believed the world would end on January 1<sup>st</sup>. But when it didn't, instead of doubting their nihilism, they rationalized that God had favored them for believing in it. Thus, they were even more convinced that the world would end the following year.

In a CNN interview (February 6, 2024) conducted by Chief national reporter John King, a South Carolina woman said she believed that the 2020 election was fraudulent, even after King told her that numerous Trump appointed judges had concluded it wasn't. She responded. "All kinds of people are against him" and added that she believed Trump was sent by God to be President. Obviously, God can't be wrong.

A third psychodynamic facilitating Trump's spike in popularity involves "projective identification." Many of us love identifying with an anti-hero, like Dirty Harry who takes the law into his own hands to solve crimes more quickly than the police, or Charles Bronson's "Death Wish" revenge and retribution for personal injustices. Fans of Donald Trump love him for expressing their rage toward an elitist Washington establishment that they feel has ignored them. Thus, they enjoy his insults, snarky comments and wish for revenge and retribution against people whom he perceives as betraying him. He becomes a powerful projected expression of his base's frustration and animus.

Moreover, they love identifying with being above the law.

The wish to be above the law and seek revenge against those who hurt us lies dormant in our psyche from childhood before we were socialized and taught to suppress our primitive impulses out of concern for “the other.” Learning to act morally and ethically in a civilized manner involves sacrificing our freedom to express primitive passions unhindered which is what we felt before the straitjacket of socialization. “An eye for an eye” is much closer to our unconscious primordial impulses than “turn the other cheek.”

Trump is the embodiment of “his majesty the baby,” as psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud put it, the grandiose toddler who freely expresses forbidden aggression and sexuality and attacks the adult establishment that is perceived as forsaking his true believers. He remains popular because he represents the unconscious wish to fulfill one’s dreams for power, money and sexual gratification, by hook or crook. And that, along with idealization and cognitive dissonance stokes his popularity when accused of acting immorally and committing crimes. Many devotees regard him as the “second coming” and this has transformed the Republican party into a power-seeking, polarized MAGA cult, submitting to Trump’s whims while sacrificing what is best for the country. This is illustrated by the Republican House of Representatives’ and GOP Senators’ rejection of the Senate bipartisan border deal that they had previously pressured the Biden administration to negotiate. They reportedly submitted to Trump’s fear that it would strengthen Biden’s presidential campaign against him. Thus, Republican congressmen sacrificed securing the strongest bipartisan American border protection against illegal immigration at the altar of Trump’s quest for power.

Considering this intransigent, psycho-dynamically infused devotion to an idealized leader, Democrats are unlikely to convince Trump’s followers to reject him. But I believe he

probably can be defeated, not only by Democrats and Independents who support Biden but also by voters on the fence. They could be swayed by Biden's many accomplishments and the dangers of voting for a criminally indicted authoritarian who believes he has the right to commit crimes as President.

Nonetheless, the worrisome question remains, Will Americans be rational and ethical enough to prevail over him in 2024?