Mr. Trump has now been president long enough for the patterns of his leadership style to have become crystal clear. He is a president of enormous physical energy and emotional stamina. At age seventy-four he is able to speak extemporaneously for more than two straight hours at campaign rallies. He has proved able to continue making progress on his presidential ambitions in the face of unrelentingly fierce and determined resistance, and a worldwide pandemic.

He has continued to redefine the roles of president and presidential leadership in unusual if not unprecedented ways.

However, one important question is how much of Trump’s leadership style will survive his presidency, win or lose a second term. Trump is unique in terms of his adult career as CEO, his psychology, and the circumstances of this particular period of political time. Trump’s most lasting contribution, should he achieve it, might be as a successful Restoration presidency rather than as an exemplar of the psychology behind his fight club presidency. That Restoration goal includes the herculean tasks of reforming the United States’ major domestic (eg., DOJ CDC, the national media) and important international institutions (eg., WHO, WTO, NAFTA). In the history of the presidency, policy paradigms are more enduring than psychological leadership paradigms. The latter serve mostly as ideals and exemplars since every period of presidential political time requires its own attributes for success.
Trump is a president of both determination and surprise in policy. Through political and legal setbacks and advances, he has relentlessly pursued building a border barrier, and has made progress. In some areas like troop levels and strategy in Afghanistan, and to a lesser extent in Syria, he has not acted on his “gut feeling,” of total withdrawal for American troops, but has settled for a more gradual, circumstances-based strategy of winding down military commitments. He has pursued a policy of inexorable economic pressure on Iran and China, and to a lesser degree with Mexico on both trade and immigration policy.

In pursuing these goals, Trump has continued to be a master of controversy. He appears to value riling his allies and his enemies by refusing to conform to their expectations, criticisms, or hopes. Trump’s fight club presidency shows no signs of winding down, in spite of the House voting to impeach him, his subsequent Senate acquittal, and facing a worldwide pandemic and a presidential election coming into clear view. It is unclear whether Trump could or would change during a second term, if he wins it. A major and at this point unresolved question is whether he will continue to govern primarily by presidential initiative and a working senate majority, whether a house Republican majority will be added to the equation, or whether he will govern alone without either.

In the meantime, basic questions about the Trump presidency remain to be addressed before we consider its future in Chapter 12. These include: the nature of his supporters and their relationship to Trump, how Trump thinks, and his equivocal relationship to various versions of “the truth.”

**TRUMP SUPPORTERS: REAL AND IMAGINED**

The shock of Trump’s election was exceeded only by the shock that so many people voted for him. Over 62 million people did so, and the question on many minds was—why? Many explanations of Trump voters were put forward (see Chapter 3).

Trump voters, it was suggested, were economically marginal working-class people who had been steadily losing ground. However that proved to be inaccurate. In the words of political scientists Robert Griffin and John Sides:

> The prevailing narrative of the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath focused heavily on the economic concerns of Americans, particularly
among one key subset of the population—the “white working class,” often defined as white people without a four-year college degree. These anxieties were said to be of unusual political salience, contributing to Donald Trump’s success, especially with the white working class. Our research suggests that this storyline is flawed.

They found that “working-class white people were not distinctively distressed relative to other groups.” Further, they found that “Trump voters in 2016 do not report more economic distress than do Clinton voters. If anything, the opposite is true.”

*Cultural Marginality, Status Threat, and “Racial Resentment”*

Another study also found that among Trump supporters, “change in financial wellbeing had little impact on candidate preference.” What did? That study offered, “A possible explanation is dominant group status threat” that occurs when “When members of a dominant group feel threatened.”

That study asserted that, “The 2016 election ... was an effort by members of already dominant groups to assure their continued dominance and by those in an already powerful and wealthy country to assure its continued dominance.” This raises the question of just which Trump supporters were members of the “dominant group”? When were working-class Americans without a college education the “dominant” group in the United States? What exactly does that word mean?

This study provides further puzzlement with the statement that, “The declining white share of the national population is unlikely to change white Americans’ status as the most economically well-off racial group, but symbolically, it threatens some whites’ sense of dominance over social and political priorities.” Absolutely no data whatsoever is presented on anyone’s views of that matter. The panel study “does not include repeated measures asking directly about racial status threat—[because] ... such measures might be susceptible to social desirability bias in any case.” Even more to the point, the author concludes by saying, “Another limitation in the panel analyses is that I do not provide direct evidence that dominant groups feel threatened.”

**Translation:** The purported sense of “some whites’ sense of dominance over social and political priorities” is nowhere actually measured.
It is simply inferred and asserted. Nor as is usual in cases of such assertions, is the term “some whites” more clearly specified. Would that be a plurality? A majority? How do they compare with other whites who don’t correspond to the characterization?

The author’s second suggestion about group status threats is even farther afield, to wit: “Americans feel threatened by the increasing interdependence of the United States on other countries.” More specifically:

For white Americans, the political consequences of racial and global status threat seem to point in similar directions with respect to issue positions: opposition to immigration, rejection of international trade relationships, and perceptions of China as a threat to American wellbeing.

The phrase “for white Americans” seems to include all white Americans. Yet again, no data are presented. One other rather large problem with this analysis is that on immigration, the policy issue substantially associated with racial status concerns according to the authors, they report: “to the extent that immigration is perceived as threatening by Americans, scholars find that it is due to the increased economic burden Americans believe immigrants place on the social welfare system rather than a threat to white status.” In other words, the “threat” from immigration was related to rising social welfare concerns, not “white status.” Another problem is that some American workers might be angry at establishment trade policy for reasons having nothing to do with “racial and global status.” They might well be upset about having their jobs exported to a foreign country.

There were, as noted, other explanations for Trump voters. They were said to be low information voters, racist, xenophobic and nativist, worried about keeping their white privilege, authoritarians looking for a Hitler-like leader who can make a complex world simple again, or just too plain ignorant or deplorable to know that their real interests, economic and otherwise, were better served by Mrs. Clinton and the Democrats. The general tenure of these explanations was well summed up in the title of an edited volume on Trump supporters entitled: Why Irrational Politics Appeals: Understanding the Allure of Trump. Translation: Trump supporters embrace “irrational political appeals.”

The most frequent explanation for Trump voters, however, is that they feel culturally marginalized and are, as a result, “racially resentful.” One study reported that:

We find that racism and sexism attitudes were strongly associated with vote choice in 2016, even after accounting for partisanship, ideology, and
other standard factors. These factors were more important in 2016 than in 2012, suggesting that the explicitly racial and gendered rhetoric of the 2016 campaign served to activate these attitudes in the minds of many voters.

Michael Tesler, the author of *Post-Racial or Most-Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Era*, is quoted as saying that the “evidence suggests that racial resentment is driving economic anxiety, not the other way around.” Philip Klinkner, a political scientist at Hamilton College is quoted as saying “whether it’s good politics to say so or not, the evidence from the 2016 election is very clear that attitudes about blacks, immigrants, and Muslims were a key component of Trump’s appeal.” For example, he says, “in 2016 Trump did worse than Mitt Romney among voters with low and moderate levels of racial resentment, but much better among those with high levels of resentment.”

That leads directly to the following questions: What exactly is “racial resentment”? How is it measured? How does one know that it is an important, perhaps the most important, factor in motivating Trump voters?

**“Racial Resentment” and Trump Voters**

“Racial resentment” is to explanations of voters who support Trump, as narcissism is to explanations of Trump’s psychology, the go-to explanation for their various deficiencies. Many studies use that term, and they almost all use the same four questionnaire items to measure it. As a result, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that none of the studies that use the term and those four questionnaire measures ever actually measure “racial resentment” directly. In reality, the term “racial resentment” is an exercise in concept-naming by inference—a form of racial tar and feathering by conceptual innuendo.

The validity of the measures that are used, that is, the extent to which they measure what they purport to measure is the issue here. A measure may be reliable, meaning you get comparable results each time it is used, but if the measures aren’t valid, one is simply getting the same invalid and mistaken results repeatedly.

Sides et al., for example, use a four-item “racial resentment” scale, each answer to which is given a level of agreement number on a five-point scale. The questions are the following:

1. Do you think blacks have too much influence in this country?
2. Do you think blacks are getting what they’ve earned in this country?
3. Do you feel that blacks should be helped into a better way of life or let on their own to deal with their problems?
4. Do you think blacks are less hard-working than other races?

Sides et al. then use a level of agreement number on a five-point scale of 1 to 5 to score each answer as indicating the degree of racial resentment. The questions are as follows:

1. Do you think that blacks have too much influence in this country?
2. Do you think that blacks are getting what they’ve earned in this country?
3. Do you feel that blacks should be helped into a better way of life or let on their own to deal with their problems?
4. Do you think that blacks are less hard-working than other races?
1. Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
2. Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.
3. It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites.
4. Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class.

Are there any questions among these four “racial resentment” items that ask respondents directly about their level of anger, an elementary dimension of resentment? No. Anger is inferred and attributed on the basis of the use of scale’s given name, “racial resentment,” but not directly measured. That is circular science, not social science.

Are there any questions among these “racial resentment” items that ask respondents about the respondents’ feelings regarding the unfairness of how they are being treated, another aspect of resentment? No. Are they asked if they are angry about that unfair treatment? No. Again, that respondents feel unfairly treated and angry about that, is inferred and attributed to them on the basis of the use of the term “racial resentment”, but these key elements are not directly measured.

Finally on his point, Sides et al., write in their book: “Racial anxieties may not necessarily be about rank prejudice but about simple resentment: the belief that other racial groups are getting something they do not deserve—but that you do.” Are there any questions among these “racial resentment” items that ask respondents about the respondents’ feelings regarding “racial groups are getting something they do not deserve—but that you do (emphasis added)”? No. Again, the observation that respondents’ feel that they personally are not getting what they deserve to get is inferred and attributed to them on the basis of the use of the term “racial resentment,” but not directly measured.

The problem with these questions, aside from their questionable validity, is that they are likely tapping something quite different than racial resentment, mostly likely political conservative policy views or ideology. For example, Feldman and Huddy found that:
Among conservatives, racial resentment appears more ideological. It is closely tied to opposition to race-conscious programs regardless of recipient race and is only weakly tied to measures of overt prejudice. Racial resentment, therefore, is not a clear-cut measure of racial prejudice for all Americans.

One might well add that not only is “racial resentment,” therefore, not a clear-cut measure of racial prejudice for all Americans, is it not a valid measure of what it purports to measure, because it doesn’t really directly measure any of its claimed emotional elements.

There is substantial evidence of the decline of overt racism in the United States. This is true even though wide disparities of outcome measures exist among some racial and ethnic groups, and deeply regrettable events like the death of George Floyd during a police stop can still occur. The data on views of interracial marriage, levels of interracial marriage, broad criticism of radical prejudice, and other factors all attest to this. Skeptics of these findings, whatever their reasons, are forced to conclude that, “outright stereotyping has declined, but in its place ‘color-blind’ racism has become the main way that racism is expressed.” In this view “colorblind racism” is “racism lite,” in which “instead of proclaiming God placed minorities in the world in a servile position, it suggests they are behind because they do not work hard enough.”

The issue here is immediately apparent. This explanation eludes the important distinction between overt racism (minorities are inferior in some basic non-remedial way or God placed minorities in the world in a servile position), and the very widespread American cultural assumption that people who work hard get ahead; or that it takes hard work to succeed. Many conservative believe these cultural aphorism to be true, but so do many Americans who are not “conservatives.”

Similar issues arise with the concept of “symbolic racism.” In the absence of much evidence of overt racism, the search for prejudice has focused on disguised (“color-blind”) or analogous hidden forms (symbolic) of racism. Racial resentment is a term that does not directly measure or reflect overt racism or feelings of resentment. As a result, its repeated application to Trump supporters is highly questionable.
**Further Measurement Issues with Racial Resentment**

Consider again the four questions used to measure racial resentment:

1. Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
2. Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.
3. It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites.
4. Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class.

One observer has written, “It’s possible that agreement with a statement like ‘Blacks should do the same without special favors’ reflects a resentful spirit, but it could also reflect a respectful one—a confidence that blacks are as capable as anyone else.”\(^{27}\) It certainly might be expected to be associated with views on quota-based affirmative action policy, but not tellingly, with affirmative action policy designed to insure wide ranging outreach.

Again, the idea of groups “working their way up” is obviously a staple of American cultural assumptions. It is a reflection of experience with upward mobility opportunities in the country and an article of faith strong enough to be a cultural belief. Moreover, the idea that “over the last few years,” “Blacks have gotten less than they deserve” might run headlong into the well-publicized efforts over the past four decades to overcome the barriers of past racial discrimination and its effects. The question would have been much better had it simply begun by saying, “In the past …”.

Considering those four questions, it seems likely that ideologically liberal respondents would strongly agree with the first and last of these four assertions and strongly disagree with the middle two. The opposite would be true of ideologically conservatives. True independents would probably range on the midpoint (3) of the 5-point scale.
Racial Resentment by Correlation

It is at this point that another measurement issue arises. Correlation analysis, which is the basis for all the “racial resentment” analyses takes a more (less) of this, the less (or more) of that approach. Scores on the 5-point scale for each question are aggregated to measure more, or less, “racial resentment.”

On a 20-point scale, however, how many respondents actually score at the extreme range, say 17–20 (even assuming the questions validly measure what they purport to measure)? How many Trump supporters do? We don’t know and the number is important, again assuming this scale measures something unique about them. Do 10% of Trump supporters score at the extreme? Is the figure 50, 60% or more? Reporting that Trump supporters are “more likely” to be racially resentful gives the impression that many or most are, without reporting the non-correlation data that would support that phrasing. If only 10% of Trump supporters score in the extreme range, are we justified in saying that “Trump supporters (notice the plural) evidence more racial resentment”? Perhaps not.

Are there overt racists that support Trump? No doubt there are. However it is certainly possible to hold conservative viewpoints without being racist.

Oddly, there is national data in data sets used by Sides et al. and others, who characterize Trump supporters as being suffused with “racial resentment” that would directly address the above questions. That is the ANES National Election Data set.28 That study contains a number of relevant questions of racial identity (pp. 47–50) like the following:

- How important is your race to you?
- Does having white skin give whites more/less opportunities?
- Does being White help/hurt you?

There are other, similar questions. However, the point here is that answers to these questions could shed direct light on the underlying feelings/dynamics that are an integral part of any real feelings associated with having “racial resentment” among respondents (including Trump followers). However, oddly, they are not reported in the many books and articles that purport to find Trump supporters marinated in “racial resentment.”
About Those Obama Trump Voters

One other major problem with the racial resentment narrative concerning Trump voters is that a large number of Trump supporters voted for Obama in previous elections. On election eve, Nate Cohen, the *New York Times* polling expert wrote that, “Clinton suffered her biggest losses in the places where Obama was strongest among white voters. It’s not a simple racism story.” Further, he wrote that “this election was decided by people who voted for Obama in 2012, and should figure into the analysis.”

Supporters of the “racial resentment” narrative of Trump voters have difficulty explaining how it was possible for racially resentful and racially prejudiced whites to vote once and even twice for President Obama and then support Trump. What happened to their racial resentment when they voted for Obama? What happened to their racial prejudice?

Supporters of this narrative like Michael Tesler are forced to argue that, “*Barack Obama won lots of votes from racially prejudiced whites.*” Perhaps, though he presents no evidence on this supposed link. Even if he did, it would still leave unanswered the two questions just raised. What happened to all that racial resentment and prejudice when white working-class voters pulled the lever for an African American instead of a white Republican candidate?

Other supporters of the racial resentment narrative have touted a massive study that studied vote switchers for both parties. It found that, “White voters with racially conservative or anti-immigrant attitudes switched votes to Trump at a higher rate than those with more liberal views on these issues.” Again, assume momentarily that the data and its analysis are correct. Those two nagging questions about what caused the unexpected change from voting Obama to voting Trump remain.

Note that the study finds that those with “racially conservative” or “anti-immigrant” attitudes were more likely to switch to Trump after Obama than whites with more “liberal” views, as characterized by the study. How were those views measured?

The racial attitudes scale was constructed of three items, each with a 5-point scale:

1. “I am angry that racism exists.”
2. “White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.”
3. “Racial problems in the U.S. are rare, isolated situations.”
It seems fairly clear what racially “liberal” or “conservative” means here, although it is unclear how requiring respondents to answer questions like No. 1 with a high degree of social desirability built into them (what kind of person are you that you aren’t angry that racism exists!) gets the analysis very far. Still, the questions, their scale placement and their naming, and the data suggest that white working-class “conservatives” on racial attitudes did vote for Obama and then switched to Trump, leaving the question of “why” still unanswered. The “liberal” or “conservative” emphasis in this study suggests we are again dealing substantially with political views and ideology.

The immigration questions in the study are even more problematic. They are preceded by the question: “What do you think the US government should do about immigration? Select all that apply.” [0 = selected, 1 = not selected]:

1. Grant legal status to all illegal immigrants who have held jobs and paid taxes for at least three years, and not been convicted of any felony crimes.
2. Increase the number of border patrols on the US–Mexican border.
3. Grant legal status to people who were brought to the US illegally as children, but who have graduated from a US high school.
4. Identify and deport illegal immigrants.

The study’s hypotheses, supported by the data was (emphasis added):

**H1b:** Anti-immigrant attitudes: White voters who express more punitive views on immigration will be more likely to switch their vote to Trump than similarly situated White voters with less punitive views on immigration.

The authors, respectable academics with long research histories, make a basic, category placement mistake so often made in studies of these kinds. First, they characterize their questions and their scale as “anti-immigrant.” That is their view, but it embodies a major conceptual and narrative error.

All four questions specifically reference those who have come into the United States without going through the necessary immigration procedures. As a result, they are here in violation of American immigration laws. Believing that immigration laws should be followed is not “anti-immigrant.”
As the Mutz study noted above says, Americans are generally very pro-immigration even as they worry about the impact of undocumented aliens. It is possible for both to be true. To whatever degree Americans take different positions on the specifics of any of the four policy ideas given to respondents in this survey, calling a disagreement over a specific policy “punitive,” as the authors do, is itself judgmental and ill-advised. Would “liberal” and “conservative” have done just as well here too?

Finally, one recent study goes even further in simply assigning racism on an a priori basis. In a recent issue of Political Science (PS) two researchers published an article with the title, “Explaining the Trump Vote: The Effect of Racist Resentment and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments.”35 They use those terms throughout and base their results on the very same troubled three-item index noted above (e.g., “I am angry that racism exists”). This study shares the conceptual and scale validity problems that the others examined in this section do. However, it does have the virtue of explicitly and directly making clear the working assumption contained in the naming of the term racial/racist resentment that supposedly characterize Trump voters. They are simply racist.

Respect and Standing: The Two Elements Linking Trump and His Supporters

Accusations of Trump supporters’ racism and other pathological “irrationalities” are no truer for being serially repeated. Still, there is without doubt a strong emotional and political connection between Trump and his supporters. The question is: what is it?

In Chapter 3 we argued that many voters were disheartened and disappointed by the performance, competence, and integrity of establishment figures on both sides of the political aisle. Many establishment elites felt the same about a large number of Americans and voters and thought of themselves as more reliable guardians of the public’s interests than the voters who put them into office.

We noted that Trump ran as the candidate and governed as a president who was serious about his intention to take on the problems he saw and act on them. For many Americans, this rekindled the hope that someone was really listening to their concerns. As a result, many millions of primary and general election voters were willing to take a chance on Trump, and did.
**Trump and His Supporters: A Powerful Emotional Connection**

The analysis that follows allows a closer look at a truly remarkable and in some ways unprecedented emotional and political connection, both in level and intensity, between Trump and his supporters. The general markers of this relationship are fairly clear. They are found in substantial support among Republicans for the president, 89% according to Gallup. That level of support has held even given some disapproval of Trump’s presidential demeanor and having had two articles of impeachment voted against him in the House. It is also reflected in the overwhelming support for Trump in the Republican party apparatus, something that did not exist when Trump won the Republican nomination in 2015.

Trump and his supporters obviously exist in relationship to each other. That statement means that each brings to the relationship their own histories, views, expectations, hopes, strengths, and needs. It is the degree of fit among these elements, the likelihood that the fit will be productive, and the alternatives that are available to both parties that determine whether the relationship prospers or withers.

For some anti-Trump pundits the relationship of Trump and his followers is easy and simple. One such shallow and reductionist analysis by a psychiatrist claims that:

> The mirror-hungry personality, which is Donald Trump, needs the ego-gratifying applause and roars of approval from crowds. There is a natural psychological fit between Trump and his followers. Trump’s core enthusiastic followers feel incomplete without a great inspirational leader to attach themselves to, someone to venerate.

We have already examined the gaping evidentiary and logical holes in the first part of this statement and speculative psychiatric narrative in Chapter 6. The second part of this assertion is no more substantive or useful. It envisions sixty million plus voters as being desperately incomplete people searching for a great inspirational leader to attach themselves to in order to feel complete. No evidence is presented for this psychiatric speculation beyond its assertion, which is as absurd on its face as well as fundamentally insulting to many millions of ordinary Americans.

Trump needed what every successful presidential candidate needs, a means to connect with and gain the support of enough voters to win the nomination and election. His standing as a true outsider without a long political history with either party was both an opportunity and a barrier.
He was free to construct his own candidacy from political policy elements that were not ordinarily associated with the past candidates or long-standing party narratives. He did that on trade, foreign policy, immigration, and what he saw as the generally ineffective and moribund thinking of establishment elites of both parties. In so doing, he was able to open up an important line of communication with voters who felt that many, if not all, of these elements were issues that a new nominee and president had to address.

These would be somewhat prosaic observations, and should be, were it not for the fact that they suggest that Trump’s first major and serious connection with the voting public that eventually supported him was on policy grounds, an often overlooked basis of their relationship. Republicans and other supporters did not start out gravitating toward Trump because he demonstrated that he would be the bull in the country’s policy china shop. They listened because he gave policy voice to what they thought.

Trump’s demeanor including his willingness to do what is necessary to fight back effectively cemented that connection. Many Trump voters felt that leaders asked for their votes but weren’t really interested in their views and either ignored or disparaged them after they got into office. They were suddenly faced with a nominee who had policy views similar to what they thought, and seemed willing to go the mat to defend them. You might, and many did, criticize how Trump thought, or what he said, but there was no doubt where he stood.

It was not only that Trump seemed “authentic.” He was. It was also that his authenticity included having policy views that resonated with his potential supporters. He also signaled a style that promised that he wouldn’t be bullied into submission, had the stamina and resilience to persist, and the determination to push forward on his policy goals come what may. He has kept those promises.

These twin core elements of Trump’s relationship with his supporters are joined by a third and powerful emotional connective bridge. Both he and his supporters have been mocked and disparaged by establishment elites; Trump since the time he entered the Manhattan building industry, and his supporters in every possible way before and since Trump became a winning candidate and then president. A recent Atlantic profile captured their feelings: “Donald Trump’s supporters would like to be clear: They are tired of being called racists.”39 That is not the only name they have been called or the only way in which they have been disparaged.
Many Trump supporters feel marginalized by establishment leaders and institutions. Yet feelings of not being listened to, heard, taken into real account, respected, and given the ordinary standing afforded Americans to give voice to their views long preceded Trump’s arrival on the presidential stage. Trump too was mocked and never taken seriously. In fighting to be taken seriously, Trump is also at the same time fighting for their standing. It is a powerful emotional bond.

Trump’s political brand is based in part on the insistence of standing and respect, for himself and those who support him. It is this sense in which Trump’s supporters are the “forgotten man.” Although in truth they have been less “forgotten” that disparaged and ignored.

*Everything for His Base?*

Those key elements define the relationship between Trump and his supporters. It began with an overlap of views. It was reinforced by a combative style of fighting for those views that gave supporters the feeling that Trump was listening to them, substantially agreed with them, cared what they thought, and would not forget or disparage them once he got into office. He hasn’t.

That is one reason why Trump has been able to retain support from some of the very groups that his policies, on trade for example, have harmed at least in the short term. They trust he is acting in the country’s best interests, and ultimately theirs. As a result, they are willing to experience some economic pain to allow him to do that.

Still the narrative persists that everything Trump does, he does is for his base. A fairly typical observation along these lines is the following:

President Trump pardoned a tough-on-immigration Arizona sheriff accused of racial profiling. He threatened a government shutdown if Congress won’t deliver border wall funding. He banned transgender people from serving in the military. And he is openly contemplating ending a program that shields from deportation young undocumented immigrants who consider the United States home. These and other moves have helped cement an image of a president, seven months into his term, *who is playing only to his political base.*

Leave aside the tendentious framing of all these issues, some of which some of his supporters care about and many of which his supporters do
not care about that much—what does only playing to his base mean? Does it mean that Trump has no personal position on these issues? Does it mean that he doesn’t really care about them and is only using them to stimulate support for his presidency? Isn’t it the case, that both Trump and his supporters both care about some of these issues (DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] security at the Southern border), but that there is a lot less overlap on other issues (pardon the Arizona Sherriff, transgendered military service).

Trump’s basic foreign policy is also supposedly all for his base. For example,

Trump’s moves against the Iran deal are chiefly motivated by his desire to unwind Obama’s legacy and play to his political base at home.  

Again, does Trump really not have any real personal policy views on Iran independent of the fact that it is an Obama initiative? Does his “political base” care deeply about his issue, as opposed to other issues like jobs and the economy?

Who exactly are Trump’s “political base?” That is an often-used term without any particular empirical anchor. Are they all 63 million-plus Trump election voters? Are they only the hundreds of thousands that have attended or watched one of his rallies, or the equally large number who have contributed to his presidential campaigns?

Every president considers his base, and Trump is no exception. Yet, as noted, this president is willing to pursue policies that cause some parts of his base economic pain in the short term. He has also determinedly pursued his economic program that has resulted in real economic gains for many, not only his base. He has pursued efforts to reform the criminal justice system and signed that bill into law—not a so-called base issue. Trump is making a bet that if he does enough of what he believes in and promised to do, his base (however defined) will give him some running room when he does things not on their list of preferences and concerns. Evidence suggests it was a prudent bet.

**TrumpThink/TrumpTalk: How Trump Understands and Explains His World**

The title of this section writes itself as an anti-Trump joke for those so inclined. Yet how Trump thinks and how he talks is at least important as
what he thinks, for which by now we have plenty of data. It has long been known that the “rhetorical presidency” has changed the nature of presidential leadership. Every president must now develop a strategy for mobilizing the public on behalf of his policies and informing the public of his views of the benefits and possible pitfalls of what he plans to do.

Given a divided and increasingly polarized political environment, any presidential initiative can expect intense opposition from those who oppose it. It will be well-organized, well-funded, opposition amplified by well-developed and refined media strategies. And, for any policies associated with President Trump there will be intense opposition. Small wonder that many modern presidents, including Trump prefer emphasizing the positive rather than engaging the public with a frank public appraisal of possible risks and rewards.

Sometimes when presidents are honest and frank they are criticized. Speaking during a major press conference on the possible spread of the Coronavirus Trump said:

Now, it may get bigger, it may get a little bigger. It may not get bigger at all. We’ll see what happens. But regardless of what happens, we are totally prepared. (February 27)

Speaking to a gathering of African American leaders, Trump said:

you know, it could get worse before it gets better. It could maybe go away. We’ll see what happens. Nobody really knows. The fact is, the greatest experts—I’ve spoken to them all. Nobody really knows.

For these direct and honest appraisals, Trump was criticized in a Washington Post news report because he “only added to the uncertainty,” and offered “a contradictory and ambiguous message about the virus.” Presumably, the reporters would have been preferred either a relentlessly upbeat or dire message, neither one of which was supported by the evidence.

Given this kind of tendentious response to frankness, it is not surprising that the public assessment of risks is now more substantially influenced vocal opposition that suggests dire consequences for a president’s preferred policies. From the standpoint of effective public understanding and support that is not really a desirable alternative.
One consequence of these circumstances is that many presidents and presidential candidates have become increasingly guarded and scripted. Talking points take the place of frank discussion. Spin insures that selected facts go in the right direction. Enormous effort is undertaken to present candidates and presidents as they wish to be seen, rather than who they are. One way to understand Trump’s political persona and style is that he simply skips the ordinary pretenses. He does not hide who he is or what he thinks. There is a basic honest transparency in this leadership stance, for better or worse.\textsuperscript{51}

TrumpTalk and the TrumpThink behind it are very unconventional. They reflect strong feelings rather than strong logic, and are often divorced from nuance. Yet they are also mostly devoid of scripted artifice, and startlingly original. Trump embellishes, presents the facts that he finds most congenial and omits others, is truly versed in the nuances of most policy arguments, and is not overly impressed with expert views—although he does listen to some of them some of the time. No previous candidate or president had ever repeatedly talked in public like that.

\textit{TrumpThink}

Entering into Trump’s mind requires one to take a circuitous journey through uncommon assumptions, idiosyncratic associations, fragments of facts and analysis, and sometimes surprisingly acute insights. It’s an unusual style, However, that doesn’t negate the need to try and understand it and its implications, positive and negative, for his presidential leadership and prospects.

TrumpTalk places a burden on the public and on his presidency. A fair amount of effort is sometimes needed to understand the thinking beneath Trump’s meandering and often somewhat opaque rhetorical style. This makes it difficult to fully immediately grasp his meaning.

When Trump was asked about what he would do in a second term, he replied\textsuperscript{52}:

We’ll, one of the things that will be really great… You know, the word experience is still good. I always say talent is more important than experience. I’ve always said that, but the word experience is a very important word… I never did this before…I was from Manhattan from New York. Now I know everybody, and I have great people in the administration.
Critics and concerned supporters noted that there was no real listing or discussion of Trump’s second-term policy plans, and that was true. Trump was making a more basic argument in his own mind, namely, that he knew little of Washington and then all of a sudden he was actually president and had to learn a lot and did. Tested by experience, a very understated word for what his presidency has had to deal with, he was now a deeply seasoned president. His agenda? More restoration and more deeply honed skills to accomplish it. Of course, as reading the quote above makes clear, that is not how Trump put it.

To his critics, Trump’s tweets and other off-script free associations reveal a mind riddled with an inchoate ménage of erroneous “alternative facts,” prejudices against various groups, self-promotional puffery, and a lack of curiosity and knowledge, all of which mitigate against his being able to mount a real, factual, and logical argument. Moreover, his critics say, these traits are pathological because they reflect an incapacity for judgment and its foundation, clear thinking. In this view, Mr. Trump’s free associations show he has no conscience able to contain his boisterous, uninhibited, and unrestrained Id.

To one well-known linguistics professor, “Trump’s Typos Reveal His Lack of Fitness for the Presidency.” Perhaps. Yet, as one *New York Times* analysis noted, “in running his norm-breaking campaign, Donald J. Trump shined a light on a larger truth: Voters have had it with the artifice, emptiness and elements of corruption that pervade the country’s politics.”

That analysis continued:

In an era when so-called message discipline has been made into a cardinal virtue for candidates, draining much of the spontaneity out of campaigns but lessening the margin for error, Mr. Trump said out loud what was on his mind. He did not have the fear of gaffes that the members of the political-industrial complex often instill in candidates.

*In this, he was more honest to the realm he had entered than most of the career politicians:* Like Mr. Trump, they too are consumed with their standing in polls, given to ridiculing their rivals and the news media and taken with their own talent and charm. They just do not say so in public.

There are, it seems, some larger Trump truths that exist side by side with his hyperbole, factual black holes, spelling and word usage errors, and his unusual and meandering thinking.
There is no doubt that Trump’s tweets and off-script associations reflect a vast archipelago of lifetime experience, honed and refined in the world of business, not politics. He has had neither the inclination nor the necessity to develop and refine his views to ensure a lifetime career in political power. Moreover, as the single head of a vast worldwide business empire for many decades, he enjoyed, and that word is used deliberately, the ability to speak his mind freely.

The conclusions of Trump’s thinking are not found on a yellow steno pad listing the pluses and minuses of an issue as were Richard Nixon’s. Nor do they resemble the well-practiced smoothness of Barack Obama who was able to replay the talking points of both sides of an argument. That ability conveyed the illusion of his own moderation, while he was, in reality, tenaciously attached to his own progressive politically transformational views and ambitions.

Trump’s meandering mind and thinking resembles neither of these presidents, nor any other president in our history. However, both those traits come with a political cost as well as advantages. They are disquieting even to those who support what he is attempting to do. That is one reason why so many Americans wish he would have tweet fights less often.56

Many Americans are uncomfortable with a president who insists on giving his unvarnished, sometimes harsh views. Longing for the end of partisan conflict, they are uncomfortable with a president who insists on repeatedly and publicly calling out his opponents and many enemies with little effort to hide his true feelings. This is a source of real discomfort to many Trump supporters even though they have felt ignored, managed, and insulted. One strong reason why they are willing to tolerate Trump’s excesses, and their discomfort with them, is because they feel that Trump does really care about them and will successfully fight for them.

President Trump’s serial brash, argumentative, and confrontation political style is unlikely to ever win majority, professional, or establishment praise. It is simply too jarring to deep public wishes for bi-partisan amity in spite of, or perhaps because of decades increasing harsh partisan political clashes that have been the rule. Yet, if Trump’s style results in the successful accomplishment of the promises he made as candidate and president against the concerted opposition of establishment Democrats, Republicans, and conservatives alike, a two year long Special Council investigation of his presidency, acquittal on two articles of impeachment and a worldwide pandemic with catastrophic effect on American life, he
will have carried off a truly remarkable example of modern presidential leadership.

TrumpTalk

Many Americans think that when their political leaders speak, they are literally, unbelievable. Into this minutely managed highly scripted political environment stepped Donald Trump. Rarely, if ever, in the history of presidential elections has a candidate said so much of what was on his mind. Moreover, he did so in a way that not only ignored well-established campaign decorum, but also violated the rules that govern ordinary conversation. Mr. Trump talked in public, as a candidate, like many people think in private—direct, earthy, and unvarnished by social convention.

Trump’s tweets and frequent off-script riffs are the free associations of his presidency. They are his often spontaneous, certainly unrehearsed responses to the issues that grab Trump’s attention, and his mind’s association to them. As one observer notes, “Trump follows whatever train of thought is headed out of the station, letting his speeches spiral well out into the countryside before he brings them back in.”

Examples of Trump’s meandering train of thought mixed with his stream of consciousness are legion. During Trump’s presidential campaign a Rolling Stone reporter accompanied him to a rally and filed this report about their discussion:

In those 26 minutes, he’ll devote some 90 seconds to his typewritten notes, diverted instead by the mentions of him on Fox and the crowd of whims and tangents in his head. To sit alone with Trump is to be whipsawed and head-snapped by his sentences that start and stop, his thoughts that take hard detours or suddenly become questions in midstream.

And then there is his actual rally performance:

And for 58 minutes, he goes on like this, playing the crowd like a Teletaster. Mexico’s taking your jobs. Ford and Nabisco are fleeing there. No more Oreos for Trump! What’s most striking is the case with which Trump does it—no note cards, no teleprompter, no prep in the car. Running his first race for office at 69, an age when other men are seeking help for bladder conditions, he gives every impression of being born for this—and of having the time of his life.
One need only watch any Trump rally replay like the two-hour Trump stemwinder in Battle Creek, Michigan. That featured: Trump talking about the 2016 election that no one thought he would win; the media’s failure to refer to him as “President Trump” at the time, instead of Donald Trump; why the media got his election wrong; the country being in a battle of “survival of this nation”—as exemplified by the Green New Deal; his restraint in not attacking that idea more because when he attacked Senator Warren too early, she rebounded; then back to the Green New Deal which will severely curtail air travel.

From there he went on a riff about wind-based power:

We’ll have an economy based on wind. I never understood wind. You know, I know windmills very much. I’ve studied it better than anybody. I know it’s very expensive. They’re made in China and Germany mostly—very few made here, almost none. But they’re manufactured tremendous—if you’re into this—tremendous fumes. Gases are spewing into the atmosphere. You know we have a world, right? So the world is tiny compared to the universe. So tremendous, tremendous amount of fumes and everything. You talk about the carbon footprint—fumes are spewing into the air. Right? Spewing. Whether it’s in China, Germany, it’s going into the air. It’s our air, their air, everything—right? So they make these things and then they put them up.

There is a certain amount of capacity and skill at work in these rally riffs. Speaking extemporaneously for one or two hours is no small feat, even for a much younger and presumably more energetic person. There is a degree of self-confidence in undertaking these performances, and a degree of intelligence at work as well. Trump has to reach into his mind and memory to summon his content, reprising old themes and weaving in new events. As noted, Trump does not possess the revolutionary cosmic brilliance of an Einstein or the deep pioneering analysis of a Freud. Yet it would be a large mistake not to recognize the keen intelligence at work.

Although Trump often speaks without any visible aides, he manages to make general associative sense in these riffs. They are not random unconnected thoughts. However, neither do they reflect the ordinary expectations of logic and sequential analysis that are associated with most politicians’ practiced rhetoric. Trump has so far proved unable or unwilling to mount the seemingly wide-ranging and detailed factual arguments associated with highly traditional verbally facile presidents like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. The word “seemingly” is used here because
verbally facile presidents can often mount what appear to be convincing arguments, but they are based on facts selected and arranged for that purpose. Their delivery may be smooth and seamless, but their narrative is purposeful.

Rather than hiding what he really thinks behind a wall of political consultants and poll tested equivocation, Mr. Trump is confident enough in himself and in the public to let them know what he really thinks. This is a point worth emphasizing. The president is unafraid to let the public know what he thinks. Surprisingly that includes allowing public exposure of his generally poor spelling abilities. For a president who is widely considered to be incapable of acknowledging error, this is quite an anomaly.

Trump’s tweets have been widely mocked by opponents for their many errors. A running count of these errors is available. So is a detailed analysis of Trump’s many language use eccentricities and errors that concludes:

The gaffes, lurches, rudenesses, and infelicities allow, it must be said, a certain transparency. No one could say that Trump uses language to dissimulate: The whole man is always blazingly on view.

That analysis ends: “That’s just the problem: Trump speaks as an unmonitored self, making it up as he goes along, rather than in the monitored style of a nation outlining ideals.”

TrumpTalk is often extremely provocative. Illustrative is the debate about whether Trump did really refer to some countries in scatological terms, if so which, and whether “dysfunctional” would have been a better word choice. Many presidents privately say things behind closed doors that they wouldn’t want revealed in public. Yet, Trump should be aware enough by this point in his presidency to know that nothing he says in a room full of people will not go unreported, and not always accurately. There is some truth in the dysfunctions he may have associated with some countries, yet sometimes diplomatic and empathetic discretion is preferable.

Some elements of TrumpTalk may be honest and heartfelt, but still better left as a private sentiment. Illustrative is a remark Trump made about how “incredible and so inspiring…” watching the Paralympics was to him, but that it was “a little tough to watch too much, but I watched as much as I could.” It’s understandable how both could be true, the
empathetic poignancy of athletes’ circumstances and the admiration for what it takes to overcome that kind of adversity. Yet, it is likely that the participants would have preferred an emphasis on the latter. One is reminded of Trump’s blunder across the line of a seven-year-old’s belief in Santa Claus (see Chapter 1). Stating the “total truth” as you know or feel it all the time no matter what, even if it could be known, is better left a conceit of fact-check enthusiasts, not presidents.

**TrumpFacts**

Trump’s barrage of hyperbole and his use of a virtual catalogue listing of logical fallacies (of relevance, ambiguity, and presumption) in his speeches and rhetoric have unleashed a torrent of “fact check” articles that now include his 140 character tweets. They have documented the frequently loose factual foundation of a number of his assertions and assumptions. Many fact-checked Trump statements are assembled under the category of “false or misleading statements.” That characterization is supplemented by the statement that Trump is “spouting exaggerated numbers, unwarranted boasts and outright falsehoods.” Of course the first two are very different than the third.

Mr. Trump often exaggerates, selects, and remembers the facts he likes best, ignores counter-evidence, is truly unversed in the nuances of many policy arguments, is not overly impressed with expert views—although he listens to some of them some of the time, as he did to former Secretary of Defense Mattis on waterboarding—frequently changes his publicly stated understanding of policies or events, and has no hesitation in contradicting aides’ publicly stated understandings.

Trump biographer Gwenda Blair recalls that she attended a Trump book signing event at which he spoke very briefly and then began signing books. She asked the clerk how many books had been sold and was told about two hundred, a respectable figure for those kinds of events. The next day she says:

I read Donald’s account of this event. He said, “850 had been sold and signed in an hour and a half.” Which would have been not just remarkable, but herculean. But this is who he is. He exaggerates everything, even when what he’s starting with is pretty good.
One is reminded of one reporter’s insight about Trump and his hyperbole, “When he makes claims like this, the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally.” That reality has provided ample ammunition, though not necessarily uncontestable evidence, for his critics to contend that he is a con artist, and a purveyor of “falsehoods.” More harshly and frequently, some like political scientist George Edward II, relying on the usual list of Trump “exaggerations’ and distortions” categorically writes “To put it simply, the president is a brazen and incessant liar.”

It is worth pausing a moment to consider that last harsh word. Sissela Bok’s definitive book on the subject makes clear that the central element of a lie is the conscious intent to deceive. Yet most of the thousands of “lies” attributed to Trump include exaggerations, hyperbole, statements that “mislead” because they do not provide exhaustive background by which to judge a statement, statements that are at variance with the fact-check reviewer’s own preferred view of the matters that Trump gives his views on, statements for which he personally does not provide evidence but around which debate has swirled, or just plain mistakes. As a result, many of Trump’s assertions may well be mistaken, not fully accurate, in need of much more information to give a balanced view, or “misleading” as every utterance that doesn’t contain the full, absolute and irrefutable “truth” can be said to be.

Yet calling each and every one of these kinds of omissions a “falsehood” or “lie” is an editorial and political decision. “Needs more context” is a very frequent fact-check characterization of many Trump statements. That simply means that Trump mentions his understanding and the fact check reminds readers that there are other facts and circumstances that might be relevant to consider. Not mentioning every fact that could be brought to bear on any long-standing complex political or political circumstances is de rigueur for almost all presidents. They are, after all, political leaders not doctoral students defending their Ph.D. dissertations. The lack of scrupulous adherence to factual balance and fairness is not a trait to be expected in any president trying to mobilize the public to support his preferred policies. It is a weak foundation on which to serve as a claim of a president’s basic unfitness, or Edward’s claim that Trump is a “brazen and incessant liar.” That is one reason why WSJ’s editor-in-chief cautions that, “editors should be careful about making selective moral judgments about false statements.”
“Fact checks,” of course, are not impartial arbiters of essential and incontestable “truths.” They reflect limited, often narrowly framed and focused, but strongly held views of what should count as “true” or “false.” They can be informative. Yet they can often be nitpicking, tendentious in style, and not infrequently just plain wrong. For example, President Obama’s promise that “if you like your health care you can keep it,” was rated “Lie of the Year” by Politifact. However in 2008, that same organization rated that same statement as “True.” President Obama’s assertions on the status of Syria’s chemical weapons system received a glowing factual endorsement, only to be revised by another fact-check organization a few days later.

Many of Trump’s “misrepresentations” turn on different views of what the “facts” used mean. That is, they are interpretations using of particular facts and not others. Even a casual reading of the many fact checks that claim to uncover Trump’s “false” or “misleading” claims, would find ample reason to doubt that strong often unequivocal language.

A case in point are the payments made to Iran in connection with the nuclear deal. Trump has frequently made the point that money being fungible, Iran paid for its military initiatives with funds collected as part of the nuclear deal. On a recent Face the Nation interview, Obama Secretary of State John Kerry agreed with that understanding. He and other supporters of the deal however argued that the money Iran received was owed to them from prior transactions:

There are nuances with the money Iran got. The $150 billion is a false claim Trump has repeatedly made; it refers to funds already belonging to Iran that were unfrozen as part of the nuclear deal signed in 2013, and it’s on the very high end of estimates. Others suggest it’s closer to $25 or $50 billion.

Given that money is fungible, Trump is likely correct that Iran did use money from the nuclear deal to fund its military initiatives. However, that money was already owed to Iran, and was unfrozen and given to them for their use. Trump simply noted that it was used for their military initiatives, which, according to Kerry, was accurate.

Trump used an estimate on the high side of ranges associated with that money. No suggestion is made that he made up the figure, just that he used one of many available. So the 150 billion is not a “false” claim in that it represents one of many efforts to estimate the amount of money
Iran received. Nor is it a false claim that Iran used the money to finance its military efforts. Money can be owed and paid and still used exactly for the purposes Trump noted. From Trump’s perspective the deal should never have been made and the money Iran gained as a result to fund its military activities should never have happened. This is a debatable policy position, and has been, but it is not a “false claim.”

Descriptive Imprecision and “Larger Truths”

President Trump is often imprecise with his characterizations of his policies. Consider the “wall” at the Southern border, one of his signature domestic policies. In 2014, he tweeted: “SECURE THE BORDER! BUILD A WALL!” In his June 2015 announcement of his candidacy he promised, “I would build a great wall, and no one builds walls better than me, believe me, and I’ll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great wall and I’ll have Mexico pay for that wall.” Throughout his campaign, Trump described his vision of a concrete wall, 30 to 50 feet (10–15 m) high and covering 1000 miles (1600 km) of the 1900 mile (3050 km) border, with the rest of the border being secured by natural barriers.

That vision changed substantially over time. As one useful overview noted: “‘A WALL is a WALL!’ Trump declares. But his definition has shifted a lot over time.” Sometimes he uses the words wall and fence interchangeably. Sometimes he said that a wall was better than fencing, because some existing border barriers are a “little fence” and can be scaled. The wall would he noted, “be made of hardened concrete, and it’s going to be made out of rebar and steel.” Later, he tweeted that it would be a “Steel Slat Barrier” design. He also said it would need to be “steel wall with openings,” so that the border patrol could see what was happening on the other side. In January 9, 2019 he tweeted:

We are now planning a Steel Barrier rather than concrete. It is both stronger & less obtrusive. Good solution, and made in the USA.

Sometimes Trump used the term “great wall,” conjuring up purposefully or inadvertently the “Great Wall of China.” At other times he is much more explicit about the Great China Wall as in this speech:
They built the Great Wall of China. That’s 13,000 miles. Here, we actually need 1,000 because we have natural barriers. So we need 1,000.

At one point Trump seemed to give up on characterizing whatever he was building in terms of stating basic and “larger” truths:

I can’t tell you when the government is going to reopen. I can tell you it’s not going to be open until we have a wall, a fence, whatever they’d like to call it. I’ll call it whatever they want. But it’s all the same thing. It’s a barrier from people pouring into our country.

It’s easy enough to understand the general reasons for all these changes. Trump started out with an idea in his mind, a “wall” that evolved into a concept with increasingly refined elements. These were at least a partial by-product of responding, without necessarily publicly acknowledging, legitimate criticisms and also learning more about the nature of the project he wanted from experts, once Trump actually had to start bring the “wall” into policy existence.

The moving target of Trump’s evolving understanding of what his wall or barrier idea would best entail in practice was one side of that truthfulness coin. The large, public debate about whether the barrier, however called, was actually being built was the other side of that coin. Trump, anxious to show progress on this campaign promise, touted wall construction at various points along the Southern border, though it was not strictly speaking “new” wall construction of which at first there wasn’t much. Critics pointed out that this was not “new” wall construction, as Trump had promised, but the replacement of old border barriers and therefore didn’t count as fulfilling his promise. That kind of criticism can provide an important deepening of the understanding of the large ambition of the project, although that was not its purpose.

Ironically, both Trump and his critics are right about barrier construction. Trump was correct in pointing to substantial barrier construction. That was in the traditional, not the political understanding of that word, “new.” It reflected the reality that the new barrier construction replaced old dilapidated fencing or four-foot high barriers that were designed to stop cars but not people. The new tall steel slat barrier designs represented a substantial improvement, but they were “replacements” for existing barriers not “new” wall construction where none had ever existed. So
critics were also technically correct if you defined new as never before having existed.

This dispute was the focus of numerous “fact check” articles, almost all of which came to the conclusion that Trump was “misleading” the public if not worse. For example, the *Washington Post* wrote of Trump’s 13,435 now estimated to be “more than 20,000” by the *Washington Post* “false or misleading claims⁹⁴:”

Almost one-fifth of these claims are about immigration, his signature issue—a percentage that has grown since the government shut down over funding for his promised wall along the U.S.–Mexico border. In fact, his most repeated claim—218 times—is that this border wall is being built. Congress balked at funding the concrete barrier he envisioned, so he has tried to pitch bollard fencing and repairs of existing barriers as “a wall.”

Oddly, the *Washington Post* fact-check feature relies on the view that many Trump statements said to be part of his long list of “exaggerated numbers, unwarranted boasts and outright falsehoods” require “need more context” as the basis for awarding Pinocchio’s. Yet more context is little in evidence in this and other fact-check analyses. It is not only that Trump has a point about how he sees those wholly new and more effective barriers as being part of building the wall. It is also that there are important reasons that they are relevant to the analysis as to why more of the wall has not been built.

The answer to why so little “new wall” and why so much “replacement wall” is clear. Opposition to Trump’s wall has been furious, relentless, and to some degree effective. The House has stymied Trump’s request for “new wall” construction funds. Court suits have been filed and been successful before reaching the Appellate level in limiting Trump’s new wall construction. Building new wall construction takes longer as a process than replacements because of eminent domain and environmental issues that must be addressed or litigated.

Whether a very new kind of replacement barrier does or does not count as “new” is a very narrow conceptual and semantic issue. It is not a window into either Trump’s veracity or the real motivations of his critics. That being the case, perhaps more “context” on the part of the fact check would have been informative and beneficial.
Policy Premises and “Larger Truths”

There is as well an interesting element of “larger truths” in assessing Trump. This seems, and is, paradoxical. It is also likely to be very controversial, but is no less real for that. One element of the “larger truth” argument is to point out that on a number of issues Trump does not have deep historical or factual understanding, but that doesn’t mean he’s not right. It is easiest to provide several general examples.

It is true that trade is generally a net advantage to countries that engage in it. However, the key word is “net.” Trump is correct that there are downsides to trade that include, among other things, its effect on domestic industries and the jobs associated with them in a primarily trade induced service based economy. There are as well national security concerns when a country no longer is able to make the things it might need. This is aside from the fairness and reciprocity elements of trade agreements that Trump took on with NAFTA, China, and others, and reached fairer “free trade” agreements. There are also dangers in outsourcing key medical resources as supply chain problems during the pandemic revealed.

Trump also had a point as well about NATO’s mission and purpose needing to evolve. He did not subscribe to the view that NATO was just fine as it was, still operating on the premises of its founding in 1949. Trump also had a point about enforcing existing country borders and immigration laws. He did not believe that there was no downside to failing to enforce immigration laws or agreeing to ever-higher levels of mass unskilled immigration. While there might be debate about the best policies to develop from these premises, the premises themselves were legitimate and sound.

These and other basic Trump policy premises were not buttressed by his assertion on their behalf with a large accumulation of analytical and historical facts. Trump simply does not possess them and is focused elsewhere. That does not mean his views were incorrect. Each of these policy premises has a large number of facts associated with them. A limited number were considered “conventional wisdom,” and thus were made the basis for all “true” factual argumentation. Trump’s facts might have truth value, but they were disparaged as partial truths at best, needing more “context,” and falsehoods and lies at worse, given that other traditional and preferred facts contradicted those that Trump used.
Facts contradicting other facts is not a sound basis for imputing that your sides’ facts are true and the other sides’ facts are lies.

**Promise Keeping: An Essential “Truth”?**

Trump does much better in keeping his promises than in speaking accurately about them.95 His supporters are focused on the “essential” accuracies of Trump’s positions that they support—(fairer trade agreements, enforcing immigration laws, creating more job for Americans). They are not focused on whether his facts need more context. Trump is betting that a number of Americans who don’t support him now will do so for his reelection, and beyond, because of the weight of his accomplishments. He is betting that they too will be less concerned that his facts lack context, and more interested in their prospects because of a robust economy.

Trump’s “promise keeper” approach to his presidency and reelection is another illustration of the “larger truth” element to Trump’s presidency. As a candidate, Trump showed every indication that he intended to follow through on his campaign promises. As president, he did. We noted some follow throughs in Chapter 8. Here are some more.

Withdraw from the Pacific Trade Accords? Check. Start renegotiating NAFTA? Check. Bomb Syria for crossing the no use red line for chemical weapons? Check. Confront North Korea’s decades long strategy of using threats to gain incentives? Check. Lay out a new foreign policy in which American national interests are essentially and explicitly part of its international leadership? Check?. Get laws passed that allow heads of agencies like Veterans Affairs to more easily fire those employees who are incompetent or uncaring about their responsibilities? Check. Pass a number of laws to help make health care more affordable and accessible. Check. Pass the largest overall tax cut in decades to help stimulate the economy? Check. Focus on the economy to stimulate job creation? Check. Dramatically cut back on federal regulations? Check. Renegotiate Chinese trade deals? Check. Sign a comprehensive Afghanistan withdrawal agreement. Check. Try to reopen parts of the country as quickly and safely as possible to help recovery from the pandemic? Check. Try to help development and pass a bill to reform some police practices like the use of “choke holds.” Check. Take presidential action to try to prevent the destruction historic and some iconic statues that are part of America’s heritage. Check. Send
federal forces to cities, like Portland and Chicago, besieged by violence to augment local police efforts.\textsuperscript{96} Check.

The above list is not meant to be definitive. Yet it does suggest why Trump supporters are keyed into a larger truth about his presidency. The border wall is Trump’s new metaphor for taking immigration enforcement and reform seriously. It does not reflect the immigration enforcement and reform paradigms that have dominated the last three decades of immigration debate: more and more exceptions to the enforcement rules, major amnesties (DACA and DAPA [Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents]) for undocumented aliens, and increasing unskilled legal immigration numbers. It is a new immigration paradigm that tightens enforcement and attempts to recalibrate the basis of new immigration from extended family reunification to education and skills.

Trump supporters clearly see in his response to the surge in undocumented aliens at the Southern border that Trump is serious about enforcement. He has tried in a number of ways, several very successful, to stem that surge.\textsuperscript{97} They can see his efforts to overcome all the hurdles he must surmount to build “new” wall construction and give him credit for trying. He may call “replacement wall” building the wall, but they are attuned to a larger, and no less real, truth. The new barriers, “replacements,” are more formidable and he is moving ahead.

Trump has followed through on his promises and views about immigration enforcement, of which the wall, new or “replacement:” is only one part. These efforts, both individually and in their entirety, are one large reason why Trump supporters don’t care very much whether Trump receives several Pinocchio’s for saying he is “building the wall,” when “fact checkers” take him to task because it is not “new wall” as they define the term.

No claim is being made here that all or most of Trump’s policies have already proved successful. One would have to more clearly define that metric. Yet, some Trump initiatives have been relatively successful by most metrics: a robust economy with very good job growth and wage increases before the pandemic and perhaps after it as well, reducing regulations, and enforcing immigration laws. Others like the withdrawal from the Iran nuclear and climate control agreements have been completed. NAFTA has been renegotiated (USMCA [United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement]) and at least phase one of the China trade agreements has been
accomplished. Other issues like NATO, Iran, and North Korea remain very much works in progress.

Trump’s efforts to keep his major campaign promises are more important to Trump’s supporters than his numerous fact-check violations. They concede that Trump embellishes and makes use of facts that others find questionable. They may even be aware that at least on one occasion, Trump made up an impromptu trade deficit “fact” about the US having a trade deficit with Canada in a discussion with PM Justin Trudeau\textsuperscript{98} that Trudeau insisted was not accurate. It turned out on checking, that Trump had stumbled on a factually accurate point, if you included energy and timber, which the Canadian PM had not. A more detailed analysis found that\textsuperscript{99}: “In 2017, the United States had a 23.2 billion deficit with Canada in goods. However, the United States had a $25.9 billion surplus, with Canada in services.”

So in fact, both Trump and Trudeau were factually correct. They simply used different accurate facts, which itself reflected an even more basic truth. There is more than one correct fact associated with such issues. They are not “alternative” facts in the snarky use of that term by critics, but they are additional ones. That would argue for prudence and modesty in being too quick to label someone’s fact “misrepresentations,” “misleading,” or “lies.”

Trump supporters accept all this as Trump being Trump. They accept that Trump presents the facts as he sees and understands them. They understand that his critics respond with facts they consider truer and more compelling. They are not concerned with whether Trump’s statements would benefit from adding more context. They are more interested in whether Trump’s facts correctly speak to at least a portion of what they think is true. And ultimately, they care more about whether Trump is true to his presidential promises than whether he is judged truthful by the standards of his critics.

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