The paradox and the challenge of analyzing President Trump is that he must do many of the things that every modern president must do. However, he does almost all of them in his own unique way. One consequence of this fact is that conventional models of presidential behavior, and the literature surrounding it, offer only limited insight into how Trump approaches his presidential responsibilities, and their resulting consequences. Analyses of Trump’s presidency therefore would be advantaged by putting aside several major tradition-based expectations.

This is not a suggestion that Trump be excused from evaluations of his leadership. Mr. Trump, like any president, must be able to successfully carry out his responsibilities to “preserve and protect” and help Americans to prosper. He will obviously try to do so within the boundaries of his own vision of presidential leadership. That too will need to be assessed.

That said, analysts need to approach Trump’s leadership style with an open mind. The real basic question of the Trump presidency is not how much it deviates from past practices, but what, exactly that entails, how well it accomplishes his purposes, and whether those purposes are in some very basic and accountable way, successful. Presidential leadership is an extremely robust activity. It is able to encompass presidents as diverse as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Rutherford B. Hayes, Warren G. Harding, Grover Cleveland, Lyndon Johnson, and others including now Donald J. Trump.
American presidents and their circumstances have all of course, been more or less unique, and each presidency has reflected a particular mix. Donald Trump’s does too. Yet he is also a truly unique president facing domestic and international circumstances whose nature has been in flux for several presidencies, and an unprecedented modern day pandemic. It is unclear whether the Trump presidency is helping to bring some of these circumstances to the fore, or whether they were reaching fruition as Trump assumed office. Either way, it is an extremely consequential period, domestically and internationally, in which to be president.

Trump’s Unique CEO Experience: Prelude to an Unorthodox Presidency

It is true conventional wisdom that the presidency is a unique office. As a result, every president, including Trump, only begins to truly understand the nature of the office once he is in it. Still, presidential scholars continue to believe that certain kinds of prior experiences are helpful. Among them are past experience in formal political roles: Senator (Barack Obama), Governor (George W. Bush), Vice President (George H. W. Bush), Congressman (Andrew Jackson), or senior level military experience (Dwight D. Eisenhower). Many American presidents have had experience in both the private and public sectors over their careers. The common denominator here is political, business, and executive experience that results in familiarity with a wide swath of political, cultural, and economic life. These experiences allow potential presidents to gain some familiarity with balancing competing interests and views, and getting things done in a “political” setting.

Donald Trump represents a unique set of prior experiences for a president. He is not only a “businessman.” He was the chief operating owner of a vast business empire that spanned the globe for over four decades. He has been at the center of every one of its thousands of ventures, at every stage of their development. The company under his direction has had many substantial successes, a number of projects that didn’t reach fruition or live up to expectations, and in the 1990s a near business economic death that Trump eventually surmounted.

Trump’s life is not a narrative of having advanced step by step through either a political or military hierarchy. Indeed his work history is more usefully seen as the free-wheeling, often creative, sometimes self-indulgent singular expressions of his ambition, drive, resilience, and unusual “out
of the box” thinking. It is exactly that set of characteristics that makes Trump’s transition from CEO to president worth examining in more than generic CEO terms.

Trump’s experience as CEO of the Trump Organization has been viewed in part through his own highly varnished view of it in a series of Trump “How to” books, myriad interviews in which he repeats his official version of his business history, and partisan attacks that he owes any success to his father’s money, allegations of illegal and barely legal political ploys, and shady if not shoddy personal behavior. As this analysis has attempted to make clear, there is both more and less than meets the eye to many observations about Trump, and in this area too, the need for fair factual analysis remains.

**Trump’s View of the Implications of His Business Experience for His Presidency**

Mr. Trump’s own view of how his business experience would be helpful in having a successful presidency is twofold. The first is that he is “not a politician [and] I have worked in business, creating jobs and rebuilding neighborhoods my entire adult life.” The implication is that the lack of a robust political resume may be a hindrance, but that he had the knowledge and experience to do that again as president. The evidence to date, before the pandemic, seemed to support that claim.

The second premise had to do with Mr. Trump’s branding of his own success and his assertion that the skills that led to it in business would carry over into his presidency. The question raised by this claim is: what are those skills? Mr. Trump’s “successes” in business were real, but mixed, as would be true for anyone building a vast empire. Some Trump initiatives didn’t work out and his presidency would predictably be no different in that respect.

Mr. Trump’s business successes reflected hard earned knowledge of the arenas in which he competed, for example, real estate and construction. He also had detailed knowledge of the specific circumstances, Clifford Gertz’s “local knowledge,” in which he operated. He knew the motivations and nature of the people he dealt with, what they wanted, what they needed, and what it would take to reach a deal.

As a political novice starting his learning curve in the presidency, he had little such knowledge either about national politics or governing. He didn’t know the vast numbers of political players and stakeholders and
their very specific legislative and political interests, with which he had to deal as president. He had no experience dealing with the slow incremental timing of the legislative process, and even less experience with sustained, powerful, and united partisan opposition. He also had no real experience with the complex reality of trying to forge an effective set of domestic and foreign policies.

This experience and knowledge deficit understandably led Trump to make novice mistakes, the flawed roll out of travel restrictions on nationals of several counties with substantial terrorism problems being only the most visible. It is safe to say that Trump, like every president, has learned more of the office’s powers and limitations as he has tried to both lead and govern.

**Trump as CEO and President: Transferable Experience or Political Dead End?**

Some think Trump’s business career is irrelevant and even counterproductive to being an effective president. Washington Post pundit Daniel Drezner thinks so, writing:

> The Trump administration has offered several object lessons in how not to govern. One of the most important is that success in the private sector means very little when it comes to managing the public sector.

Aiming for a tone of bemused condescension, he adds, “Maybe—and I’m just spitballing here—but maybe running the public sector well is different from running a for-profit organization.”

One professor of business makes this point more explicitly writing that, “Trump wasn’t a genuine CEO.” In his view a “genuine CEO” runs a public company [that] is subject to an array of constraints and a varying but always substantial degree of oversight. There are boards of directors, of course, that review all major strategic decisions, among other duties. And there are separate committees that assess CEO performance and determine compensation, composed entirely of independent or outside directors without any ongoing involvement in running the business.

In other words, the CEO with experience in the large bureaucratic business organization will gain experience in managing those bureaucratic
aspects of the presidency including dealing with other “outside” centers of power, oversight, and evaluation. The author’s point is a fair one. Trump was not the CEO of a major public business and thus can’t bring to the presidency those particular experiences. Yet, this leads to a rather strange criticism of Trump:

His experience overseeing an interconnected tangle of LLCs and his one disastrous term as CEO of a public corporation suggest a poor background to be chief executive of the United States. As such, “nobody knows who’s in charge” may be the mantra for years to come.

This is extremely odd since if there is one thing that Trump and anti-Trump supporters can easily agree with, it is that for better or worse Trump is the master of his own ship. The buck not only stops at his desk, it often and publicly doesn’t travel very far from it.

Other Trump critics name several more issues. Princeton professor and former vice chairman of the Federal Reserve Alan Blinder writes,10 “All the checks and balances that characterize American democracy would drive a hard-charging CEO, accustomed to getting his own way, crazy.” That too is a fair point.

Blinder goes on to note that the generic CEO business type he discusses worships “efficiency,” whereas “some notion of ‘fairness’ is typically paramount in government.” He is absolutely right, again, except that given Trump’s peripatetic decision-making style, he can never accurately be accused of being or aspiring to efficiency. There is, of course, a large irony in Trump’s repeated support of the group he labels the “Forgotten Man” in support of fairness to overcome their having been left behind.11 Blinder did not anticipate that Trump would add a new group to the American fairness debate.

Binder also points out that:

Top business executives focus single-mindedly on “the bottom line,” meaning profits. Among the reasons why so many smart business people fail in politics and government is that there is no bottom line—or perhaps I should say there are so many bottom lines that the search for a single one is futile.

Binder is absolutely right. We have noted that Trump is on record several times about his use of money as one measurement of success—“Money is
never a big motivator for me except as a way to keep score.” He does keep score.

However, there is also abundant evidence that creativity, bringing his vision to fruition, his palpable love of country, and doing what has not been done before are also a large part of Trump’s motivation. As argued in Chapter 7, there is now more to Trump’s ambition than applying those more personal wealth accumulation measurements to his business career. There is what he wants to accomplish as president.

While Trump honed the psychology that serves him in his presidency, for better or worse, one thing he did not bring to that office from his CEO experience was a deep knowledge of Washington, with all that term entails. He did not know the players, major or minor, or their histories. He did not know or understand their standard operating procedures, and the psychology and ideology of their foundations. He had few if any real relationships with them. And the same was true of Trump’s knowledge in the foreign policy domain as well. Trump came to the presidency as an informational naïf.

**Business Empire Building and Transformative Presidential Ambitions**

Trump has said a number of times, in different ways that there is much that he wants to do for the country. It could be argued that this is part of the “Trump con,” and that in reality his presidency is an example of his efforts to increase the net worth of his business. To substantiate that claim, one would have to explain why the Trump presidency has had very mixed effects on his company’s bottom line. One would also have to explain why Trump, who has been single mindedly focused on publicly pointing to what he sees as his successes, would not be interested, for some reason, in being successful in his presidency. Finally one would need to explain the enormous amount of energy, resilience, and commitment, in the face of savage and unrelenting criticism, including impeachment, that he has invested to accomplish his presidential purposes. These are some of the traits a unique CEO like Trump brings to his presidency.

There are some other assets that Trump’s CEO experience does allow him to bring to the presidency. One analysis asked whether good businessmen make bad presidents and concluded.
a business background is not somehow uniquely qualifying. Presidents need to be smart, to have good judgment and good emotional IQ. They need wide experience of the world and people, and it probably matters little in what field that experience is gained, though knowledge of business certainly isn’t a handicap.

Another observer pointed out that one of Trump’s business assets is not having internalized a bureaucratic mindset as CEO. That analysis noted:

His lack of political nuance has resulted in taking on big issues, including an effort on significant deregulation and cutting back on bureaucratic red tape. It will take longer than just four weeks to see if Trump remains committed to those projects, but he didn’t take long to at least get them started.\(^\text{16}\)

In considering the impact of Trump’s business career on his presidency it is impossible to ignore that his psychology has been instrumental to both. In business, Mr. Trump’s ambitions (to “transform the New York skyline”), fierce will to win,\(^\text{17}\) resilience,\(^\text{18}\) creativity,\(^\text{19}\) attention to detail (though one of the many psychological paradoxes about Mr. Trump is his enormous attention to detail in his work and the reverse in his many public pronouncements),\(^\text{20}\) monumentally large work ethic,\(^\text{21}\) and large big picture\(^\text{22}\) and innovative\(^\text{23}\) thinking were elements of his success when that happened. Those are obviously applicable psychological traits for a successful presidency in many, but not every political circumstance.

Large ambitious policy thinking, thinking big, for example can be a recipe for success, but only in a political context in which it is desired or needed. President Obama harbored large transformative ambitions for the country. However, he mostly kept them to himself and used his modulated tone to convey a moderate political persona that wasn’t consistent with his ambitions. When his transformative ambitions and their progressive nature and direction became clear, strenuous grass-roots opposition arose (see Chapter \textit{3}).\(^\text{24}\)

Mr. Trump also has transformative goals. His ambitions, \textit{The Politics of American Restoration}, challenge the policy orthodoxies of the last several decades across a range of policy areas. Trump is quite direct and clear both in his repeated public rhetoric and the executive actions that he has taken to date.\(^\text{25}\) There is no mistaking what he thinks or what he wants to do. He is unsettling, but he doesn’t hide. As a result, his presidency is,
paradoxically given his reputation, truthfully authentic and, as a result, a major motivator of his political opponents.

And lastly there is one more Trump asset that he brings to his presidency from his business career:

Mr. Trump is not a child. He has been in negotiations all his life. It’s the one skill he brought to office that can’t be gainsaid.26

Mr. Trump’s trade dispute with China for example, has been long, arduous, and complex. The issues that led to the dispute have been clear for years, decades in some cases. No other president has so directly confronted China over these difficult issues. No other president has seriously imposed sanctions and persevered through the many twists and turns of the negotiations to reach a solid preliminary agreement.27 Trump’s business experience and the psychology associated with it clearly was instrumental in his being able to successfully mount this effort.

**Trump Enters the Oval Office:**

**Expectations and Reality**

At this point, almost four full years in the president’s term of office, whatever errors and successes he has accumulated are a result of Trump’s own leadership choices and governing style. They are much less the result of the preparation that his business career either did or did not provide him or the normal learning curve of first time presidents. Every president must, to some degree, learn on the job and Trump is no exception.28

Jenkins notes29:

Serving as president has been an education for Mr. Trump as it would be for anybody. His rhetorical instincts may be unchanged but he can’t help having picked up a degree of knowledge about public policy and how government functions. This unwonted expertise already has begun audibly leaking into his unscripted responses to press questions.

There are numerous small examples of Trump’s learning curve in action. They are more important for demonstrating Trump’s capacity to learn than for demonstrating any major changes in either his psychology and leadership style that are attributable to his becoming president. At many of his raucous nomination political rallies, his supports would yell “lock
her up” referring to Hillary Clinton. By July before the election Trump would shake his head no, and say to his supporters “let’s defeat her in November.” Washington Post reporters, often critical of Trump pointed out,30 “He’s learned a lot, this first-time candidate. At the outset of his speech, the crowd was yelling ‘Trump! Trump! Trump!’—until he told them to chant ‘USA! USA!’ instead.” That is certainly an unexpected request for a purportedly “needy narcissist.”

These are small changes to be sure, but others have been more substantial. For example in describing Trump’s Asian trip in in early 2017, including his first post-inauguration phone call with China’s Xi Jinping, a White House summit with Japan’s Shinzo Abe, and twenty-seven holes of golf with Mr. Abe, a report noted, “Unlike some of his earlier encounters with foreign leaders, this round demonstrated sobriety, careful planning and respect for allies.” In these and other cases Trump demonstrates a capacity for very basic and important diplomacy. Trump is clearly capable of ordinary presidential behavior.

Debates regarding Trump’s presidential demeanor are a well-established motif of his presidency (see Chapter 4). Less examined and equally important are the assumptions with which Trump came into office. They can be divided into several categories: policy surprises; the nature of American political life; the scope and nature of government; on being adequately prepared to be president; and the real life consequences of command. Again, every new president, and Trump is no exception, has many things to learn about his new role, his political circumstances, and how his style will mesh or clash with these realities.

**On Trump Being Adequately Prepared to Be President**

When we say that no new president is ever fully prepared, that word, prepared, has a double meaning. It refers both to actual experience as would be the case for a second term president. Yet it also refers to feeling prepared in the sense of believing you can and actually have, the capacity to do the job well, even if you are not fully prepared for it in terms of actual experience.

No political party nominee or president elect has ever expressed public doubt about their ability to do the job, and Mr. Trump is, again, no exception. One report noted31:
Just a week ago, Mr. Trump was taking a breezy posture toward the job that awaits him. In an interview in his New York skyscraper on Friday, he halted the conversation when his cellphone rang. He was instantly absorbed by the call, broadly smiling and reveling in a brief chat about political strategy. “Oh, I can’t believe I used to build buildings,” Mr. Trump said as he turned his attention back to his guests. “Actually, truth, it’s sort of the same thing.”

Trump’s not so “Easy” Presidential Promises

During the nomination process Trump expressed the view that several things would be “easy.” The anti-Trump website Huffington Post collected a list of them in an article entitled “Donald Trump Thinks Being President Is So Easy, Even He Could Do It.”32 Those included expanding the American economy, building a barrier on the US–Mexican border, besting Hillary in the general election, lowering the deficit, and defeating ISIS.

Only in lowering the deficit has Trump made absolutely no progress and in fact has helped fuel its rise.33 On all the other items, he has made substantial progress in the directions he promised. Although how “easily” he has done so is another matter.

A major element of Trump’s nomination and general election pitch to the public was, “to jump-start America, and it can be done, and it won’t even be that hard,” Trump said in a speech to the Detroit Economic Club.34 The Huffington Post quoted another one of its site’s articles35 warning Americans that “Trump’s vaguely fleshed-out economic agenda could trigger the longest recession since the Great Depression.” It has not. Quite the opposite. Trump’s substantial reduction of regulations, the passage of a major tax cut and the resolution of two large trade disputes, NAFTA and China, have helped stabilize and expand the American economy. That has given the country an economic cushion from which to start recovering from the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic.

As to the barrier at the Southern Border, the Huffington Post articles quote Trump as saying, “It’s not even a difficult project if you know what you’re doing.” In reality, there are a number of construction issues, all solvable, but not without their difficulties.36 However, the most difficult part of building the barrier has clearly been political, not technical.

At a rally Trump said of his chances to become president: “Folks, I haven’t even started yet,” Trump told supporters of his presidential
campaign in early May. “Now I’m going to start focusing on Hillary. It’s going to be so easy.” Trump obviously won the presidential election and Hillary Clinton lost. Yet, it was a very close and difficult fight that Trump barely won. So it is hard to credit his boast that it would be easy, as more than campaign hyperbole.

As to defeating ISIS, before announcing his candidacy he told a radio interviewer: “There is a way of beating ISIS so easily, so quickly and so effectively, and it would be so nice,” Trump told Iowa talk radio host Simon Conway last year before announcing his presidential candidacy. “I know a way that would absolutely give us absolute victory.”

What was that way? In Trump’s own words: “Bomb the sh-t out of them.” In more gentle language, Trump loosened the restraints on his military leaders, and they in turn unleashed a brutal bombing campaign against the caliphate. ISIS lost all its territory, its self-status as a state, and is now tarred with defeat. Trump announced that ISIS was 100% defeated, which was not 100% true, but close enough for government work as a wag would say. ISIS went underground and is trying to regroup. As result of Trump’s engagement strategy, they had suffered a major incontestable defeat.

**Trump’s Optimism Sobered by Reality**

Trump’s optimism that he could do the job was tempered, as every president’s is likely to be by the complex, difficult, even fraught realities of that office. Not surprisingly, Trump was soon admitting that “This is more work than in my previous life. I thought it would be easier.” When he met with an old friend Newt Gingrich he commented, “This is really a bigger job than I thought.”

Trump’s unexpected meeting with the realities of the presidency is not startling or novel, and his acknowledgement is a reassurance. He is, as is his style, more vocal about almost everything he is thinking and asked about, including what surprised him about the presidency. This is of keen interest to an analysis of the real psychology of the Trump presidency.

**Trump Entering the White House: Policy Surprises**

In transition talks with President Obama, the latter ran down a list of his views of the major problems facing the country and the new president. Asked about that, Trump discreetly kept his predecessor’s advice
confidential but said: “He told me what he thought his, what the biggest problems of the country were, which I don’t think I should reveal, I don’t mind if he reveals them. But I was actually surprised a little bit.”

Speculation has centered on North Korea and perhaps Pakistan.

Trump also expressed surprise at General Mattis’ response to a Trump question on waterboarding. In an early interview with the Wall Street Journal, Trump also said that he had underestimated the complexities of the relationship between China and North Korea.

Finally, at a meeting of the nation’s governors at the White House discussing health care, Trump said:

We have come up with a solution that’s really, really I think very good. Now, I have to tell you, it’s an unbelievably complex subject. Nobody knew health care could be so complicated.

In reality, many people would be able to give detailed informed analyses of these and similar matters. They are most frequently found in the relevant bureaucracies (e.g., HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare], the CIA, DOD [Department of Defense], State Department) or in the partisan think tanks that support one side or another in these and similar policy debates. The partisan talking points of presidential candidates count for much less as real knowledge since they often operate as ready-made responses to signal familiarity and depth, without however necessarily really being built on them in actuality.

It’s not surprising that any president, including Trump, would have to be informed of the arcane intricacies of health care, Chinese-North Korean strategic considerations and history, or other complex policy matters. It is somewhat surprising, given that Trump rarely admits anything less than superlative about himself, that he would publicly admit a lack of knowledge. With waterboarding he did apparently change the policy, but not his mind. With North Korea he seems to have learned something that will help counter his impatience for results. He eventually did accept, as a fact of his political circumstances, as he must if his presidency is to survive, the vehement opposition to himself personally and his presidency’s policies.
Trump Surprised by the Deep Conflictual Nature of American Political Life

Some of Mr. Trump’s assumptions on entering office were surprisingly naive for a man touted by his followers, and himself, as suspicious, skeptical, and capable of being very tough when necessary. As a successful presidential candidate, Trump keenly grasped what many Americans wanted for their country and president. He was less able to fully grasp the degree of antipathy toward his presidential ambitions and himself personally.

In an interview for Time Magazine he said: “The détente with the press after the election that I had hoped for never came.” In fact, “It’s gotten worse. It’s one of the things that surprises me.”

 Asked in that same interview if he feels his administration has been too combative, he makes a brief allowance. “It could be my fault,” he says, “I don’t want to necessarily blame, but there’s a great meanness out there that I’m surprised at.”

Leaving aside the chicken or egg question, Trump clearly felt that things would change once he was elected. Perhaps the most startling example of this assumption was reported by Rush Limbaugh who said:

Trump, told me in February that he was surprised that the country had not unified around the presidency by that time. He was genuinely surprised at the continued opposition. Well, that told me that in his mind he expected after he won and was inaugurated that the country would come together. I couldn’t believe he told me that when he told me.

Perhaps Mr. Trump’s thinking reflected the assumption of a traditional “honeymoon period” for a new president. However, if Trump clearly grasped what some supporters wanted, he was much less in touch with what his opponents feared. They were alarmed that he would govern as he had promised, as a bold, brash, president used to doing what he wanted and getting his own way, who would follow through on his clearly stated intention to uproot four decades of traditional domestic and international policy premises.

Trump Surprised by the Real Scope of Government

“Huge” is a favorite word of Mr. Trump’s, applied liberally to almost all of his undertakings. As big as his projects were, they did not seem to
prepare him for the actual size of government. In one interview, he said he has been surprised by “the size, the magnitude of everything” and being president can be a “surreal experience in a certain way.”

In another interview, asked what surprised him, Trump replied:

I think the size, the magnitude of everything. So, I was a very big real estate person. I build a building for 500 million or $900 million. And here, you look at an airplane contract where you can save $600 million on 90 planes. I saved more than $600 million. I got involved in negotiation on a fighter jet, the F-35. And by the way, Lockheed Martin, a great company. But they weren’t bringing their price up. I got involved, I saved more than $600 million as their (inaudible). But the magnitude of—you can do that at every level of government.

Later in his presidency, Mr. Trump personally became involved in negotiating the costs of two new Air Force One planes and was able to lower the initial costs to somewhere between one and three billion dollars. Mr. Trump clearly does not share the depression mentality of his late father Fred who used to pick up and reuse nails lying on the ground of his construction projects. Yet, like his father, he does like to get good deals, and is proud of doing so.

Toward that end, he has repeatedly demonstrated in his business dealings the willingness and the stamina to engage in long term strenuous bargaining. This was an experience that was no doubt tested in his negotiations with China over trade. Indeed, one could usefully examine any presidency, but especially Trump’s, though the perspective of policy bargaining. The essence of bargaining in business is appropriately getting as much of what you want as you can. The essential of presidential policy bargaining is the same thing.

There is nothing novel about this general observation. What is unique about Trump are the areas, range, and purpose of his many negotiations. In the eight policy pillar areas, and their numerous subsidiary elements, he is engaged in serious efforts to substantially revise existing establishment policies. In response, one of the major questions that must be addressed in this analysis is how entrenched conventional policy narratives change (see Chapter 12). Engaging in sometimes tense and difficult negotiations, and being able to keep pushing them in support of change is one part of Trump’s answer to that question, and a strategy and associated set of skills that he has brought with him into the White House is another.
The Real Life Consequences of Command

The most powerful, most difficult, and most emotionally fraught decisions a president makes are those literally concerned with life or death. Every presidentially approved combat mission entails political risk. Yet, at their core they reflect the likelihood that as a direct result of the president’s decision, people can and will die, even if the mission is successful. Every modern president confronts this reality for the first time in the presidency.

 Asked how he has changed since taking office, the former businessman, who as a candidate touted his ability to cut deals, said: “The magnitude of everything is so big, and also the decisions are so big. You know, you’re talking about life and death. You’re not talking about ‘you’re going to make a good deal.’”

A longtime friend of the president, Chris Ruddy at Mar-a-Lago at the time that the president authorized airstrikes on Syria recalled the president emerging on the patio moments after the US began missile strikes against targets in Syria, which won praise even from some Democrats. “I congratulated him when it seemed to have gone well,” and he said, “I had no choice,” Mr. Ruddy recalled. “He was very sober. He wasn’t gloating about it. I think he’s coming to understand that these are life and death decisions he’s making now.”

As a result of the weight of such decisions, even the often emotionally voluble Mr. Trump will understandably be subdued.

The Scope of Trump’s Decisions

Every president faces circumstances that require a response and those that are more discretionary. The 9/11 attacks and the Coronavirus pandemic are non-discretionary presidential problems. Nerve gas attacks against civilian populations in Syria during the Obama and Trump administrations were somewhat less non-discretionary circumstances. The far broader array of presidential policy interventions and decisions are “voluntary.” They represent choices that the president makes to further the agenda he brought to his office, that need attention but are not pressing or in Trump’s case items, like the color scheme of the New Air Force One jets or the architecture style of federal buildings that just interest him.

How a president is able to further that voluntary agenda depends on the distribution of party power within Congress. Obama came into office
with a unified Democratic Party majority in both houses of Congress. As a result, he was able to pass a major health care plan before losing control of Congress to the Republicans. Thereafter, he had to operate domestically primarily via the administrative power of the presidency. He was also able to concentrate on foreign policy agreements that did not strictly speaking require Congressional approval, and were not formally submitted for approval (e.g., the Paris Climate Agreement, the Iranian nuclear agreement).

Trump faced a different and more difficult set of circumstances. He too started his term with a Republican Congress. However, they were far from unified behind him. Indeed one of his chief Senate Republican opponents, John McCain, was able to scuttle Trump’s plan to repeal President Obama’s health care plan. Thereafter, Trump was able to unite his party around a very traditional Republican preference for tax cuts, deregulation, and judicial appointments. Yet many in his party remained strongly opposed to him. In 2018 the Republican Party lost control of the House resulting in a literal barrage of investigations into the Trump administration.

Trump has also been slowed and in some cases stymied by his own lack of actual political and governing experience. It has taken Trump several years to learn how to more effectively manage his administration given his political circumstances. Those include the widespread and concerted opposition whose membership spans establishment institutions both inside and outside of government, and within his own White House as well. They also include a two year investigation of his administration by a Special Council, harsh preparation for governing in the midst of an impeachment inquiry, and afterwards, a Senate impeachment trial.

In considering the scope of Trump’s presidential efforts it is also prudent to keep in mind one further distinction. Trump is aiming to reverse several decades of policies and policy narratives in the eight pillar policy areas already noted (see Chapters 1 and 3), and the numerous policy elements within them. Unlike President Obama, Trump is not seeking to add to the deepening or thickening of the liberal administrative state. He thus cannot count on the support that comes from those who benefit from and support the direction of those initiatives. Quite the contrary.
A President and Administration Interested in Many Things

It would be a mistake to conflate Trump’s personal interest in any particular group of policy issues with his detailed knowledge of their substance and nuances. As the Wall Street Journal put it, when earlier in his term Trump was trying, and failing to repeal Obama’s health care legislation, the “freedom caucus,” has now been handed a final offer from a president who “can believably present himself as uninterested in the details of health care policy.” Trump has many more policies that he has an interest in changing than an in-depth knowledge regarding any one of them.

Given Trump’s interests in a large number of policy areas several questions immediately arise. How is it possible for a president with a well-documented aversion to long-winded presentations or debates, and a relatively short attention span for those things that he’s not interested in doing, to be in touch with the substance of so many policy areas? How is it possible for a president who is famously unschooled in the depth and nuances of many policy areas to have anything but a general interest in the policies he champions, if that?

Recall, that one of Trump’s early traits as a builder and dealmaker was his extraordinary attention to detail.

Blanche Sprague, his vice president for condominium operations said of him:

He’ll show up at 6 to watch construction guys replace piece of cracked marble. Nothing escapes him and he drives me insane.

At the Trump Plaza, Trump’s signature project:

on a recent visit, Mr. Trump spotted a hairline crack that others could barely detect in a bathroom of one of the 140 cooperative apartments. He not only complained but stood there until a work crew came and replaced the marble.

At another major project, The Trump International Golf Club in Dubai, the New York Times reported:

We walked through the golf course and he said: “You see that tree; move it 10 feet there. That tree is too small; make it bigger,” recalled Niall
McLoughlin, a senior vice president at Damac Properties, which owns the project. “His attention to detail is tremendous.”

A fair question is what happened to that Trump attention to detail in his presidency. One element of an answer is that his attention to detail in the building industry was a result of very early developmental experience. It was literally honed at his father’s knee when, as a young child, he accompanied his father as he worked on his projects. Then, too, Trump came of age in that profession with enormous “local knowledge,” an advantage he did not have in Washington. As Trump has remarked about what has surprised him, government is vast. That sounds like a truism and is, but it is one kind of knowledge in the abstract and quite another when you are in theory, and often literally, especially if there are any controversies, actually in charge of it all.

Given the scope of what Trump wishes to accomplish and the need to keep track of progress in his eight policy area pillars and their associated elements, one possibility is that his much commented upon attention to detail has developed into a capacity for keeping track and keeping up in a more general way in order to know when to provide added push. Yet Trump is perfectly capable of going into the weeds when it interests him as he did for the two new Air Force One planes, or the medals given to military personnel for an unsupported set of charges against Navy Seal Edward Gallagher. Trump is a man who likes to get things done. Sometimes that means keeping general track of a large list of ambitious initiatives, other times that requires of him a deeper more direct dive. His is a restless and peripatetic ambition, not confined to discrete policy areas. Immigration is a case in point. Yes, Trump wants to build a “wall,” or a barrier, but that is part of a much larger effort in immigration policy enforcement. And that larger effort is part of a still larger, as yet unrealized policy ambition, to reform the whole immigration system in favor of a skills/education emphasis.

We can see the same levels of policy change and Trump interest in other areas like health care. He has put forward policies to require transparency in medical costs which sparked an industry furor to allow the importation of drugs from Canada, and to expanded health care options for business among other initiatives. At the same time, he has been actively and often intensely involved in other policy areas like developing and applying deterrence theory as the basis for his Iran policy, negotiating new trade deals with China, South Korea, and the NAFTA
countries, pushing a “Space Force” initiative, and many others that could easily be listed.

At the same time, he has found the time and interest to negotiate a new less expensive deal with Boeing for the new models of Air Force One. He suggested some new red, white, and blue paint design features for it as well that one Democratic Congressman filed legislation to block. His presidency is a combination of attention to necessary policy developments (e.g., what to do strategically about China, Iran, and North Korea), Trump signature issues (e.g., immigration, trade, domestic economic concerns), matters of public concern (health care, dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic), and issues that strike Trump’s interest (the proposed new design elements of Air Force One and privatizing the United States Post Office).

Again, this representative list does not imply that every Trump initiative will be successful according to his preferred outcomes. Nor does it imply that even if they are, they are necessarily desirable. It is meant only to call attention to a very basic and overlooked aspect of the Trump presidency. He is involved in a great many policy initiatives. Even considering his two to three year presidential learning curve, the initial disarray of his administration, the leaks, the internal efforts to sabotage his administration, lawsuits, and epic opposition, his presidency, like the man himself, is enormously energetic. Paying attention to all of this as Trump must, may be the presidential equivalent of moving golf course trees or seeing and fixing hairline cracks in one of his opulent apartments.

How Things Get Done: Trump’s Work Ethic

No analysis of this president or his presidency would be accurate without noting Trump’s work ethic, which is prodigious. Gwenda Blair who spent eleven years researching her Trump family biography said of that:

One of the things that perhaps surprised me most in working on this book was to grasp just how hard Donald, his father and his grandfather actually work … the sheer effort involved is mind-boggling, as is true, I think, of almost everyone who achieves extraordinary success. It’s easy to write him off as the son of a rich guy, but that kind of misses the point. These people never stop.
When Trump was on a Christmas Day video conference with troops serving abroad this exchange took place:

GENERAL ODOM: Sir, our real question for you, today, is: How are you going to spend your holiday here in the coming—today, tomorrow, and hopefully into the weekend, sir?
THE PRESIDENT: Well, I’m at a place called “Mar-a-Lago.” We call it the “Southern White House” because I really, pretty much work—that’s what I like to do is work. And we’ve made a lot of progress.

For once, a simple statement sufficed, and it was accurate.

How does Trump spend his time? One reports says, “But most days and nights, if Trump is not on the campaign trail or a foreign trip, he happily stays inside his White House Bubble and the residence—working late into the night and very early in the morning.” Another official quoted in that same story put the matter more succinctly:

He is a workaholic, so he wakes up early and works out of the residence.
It’s just the way his internal work clock has been for decades.

Trump’s work ethic has to be considered in the context of his rather unusual physiological temperament. Trump is a man who, from childhood on has been extremely physically active and according to the results of his annual presidential medical checkup, “he sleeps four to five hours a night. And I think he’s probably been that way his whole life.” As a result, he has a lot of time, more than most people available to him to do what he likes. What he likes to do is work. That is as true of his presidency as it was of his business life.

HOW TRUMP DECIDES

Every president’s primary task is making decisions. Yet obviously, presidents differ with regard to what they want to decide, what they have to decide, and how they go about deciding. One constant for almost every modern president, Trump included, is that they didn’t go through the rigors of seeking the presidency to generally turn these responsibilities over to others. They—Obama, G. W. Bush, Clinton and those before them, are all “deciders.”
This point arises because one of the narrative myths that follow some, especially Republican presidents, is that they are not the authors of their own decisions. Fred Greenstein’s seminal analysis of Eisenhower’s sharp intelligence surprised many. Democratic “wise man” Clark Clifford referred to Ronald Reagan as an “amicable dunce,” presumable incapable of mastering policy options and dependent on his advisors. Karl Rove was widely regarded as Bush’s Brain, the implication being that Bush didn’t have one of his own. Trump too has been the subject of these kinds of observations with Steven Bannon ordinarily placed in the role of his Svengali, and Stephen Miller the runner up for actually being in charge of Trump policy.

Three-plus years into Trump’s first term as president there is now enough data, from diverse sources, to draw a reasonably accurate picture of his decision making style. What follows are substantively based sketches of some of these major elements. They begin with the most elemental and obvious observation: There has never been a president who has more carefully and intensely guarded his own decision prerogatives. Trump has spent his whole adult life in singular charge of his vast empire and peripatetic tabloid-featured private life. After decades there, he is very much at home at center stage, savors that “Tiffany” location, and would no more cede it to others than he would immediately step down from his presidency and spend the rest of his life quietly living as a recluse in Mar-a-Lago.

Trump is a man and a president who truly likes, indeed relishes, being in charge.

He is also aware, even if he has not read Neustadt, that there is ample reason for him to be attentive to preserving his prerogatives. There are instances reported, and denied, of high level White House aides removing documents from his desk. There are Anonymous White House policy saboteurs touting their opposition in the New York Times. There are the fierce battles within the White House to modify or reverse some Trump policy views, domestically and in foreign policy (see Chapter 12 for a detailed example of this in foreign policy). In addition, there are for the Trump presidency, the normal ferocious political, legal and personal battles that every president faces.
Trump’s Judgment: Essence of Understanding

Elsewhere I have taken up in some detail the nature of presidential judgment and what “good judgement” requires. Here, for this section, I borrow a term that Graham Allison made famous in a book entitled *Essence of Decision.* Somewhat modified, that title more closely reflects Trump’s essential approach to judgment and decision making. He is, as noted, famously impatient with long winded presentations and meandering discussions.

In one pre-presidential interview Trump said he likes his briefings short, ideally one page if it’s in writing:

> I like bullets or I like as little as possible. I don’t need, you know, 200-page reports on something that can be handled on a page. That I can tell you.

In a Washington Post interview Trump was discussing someone who wanted to send him a report on China trade practices:

> But he said I’d love to be able to send you—oh, boy, he’s got a lengthy report, hundreds of pages. I said no, no, give me three pages. I’m a very efficient guy. Now, I could also do it verbally, which is fine. I’d always rather have—but I want it short. There’s no reason to do hundreds of pages because I know exactly what it is.

Trump is eager for results by nature but he is not always so. We noted that when Trump was in the building skyscraper phase of his career, he was able to bide his time when necessary because of economic or political circumstances. He was also able to move extremely quickly when windows of opportunity opened. Asked about his famously short attention span and its impact on his presidency, Trump responded:

> Well I mean I have an attention span that’s as long as it has to be. But I don’t have to sit around with a group of generals to tell me about Iraq being a failure. Iraq was a total failure.

In that statement is an essence of Trump’s view of his own decision making process. Trump, like every president, operates within multiple policy and political time frames. Some decisions require decisive action in
the political moment and others must be nurtured as they develop. Sometimes as in Trump’s North Korean outreach, both kinds of time frames set the boundaries. Trump did startle conventional practice by initiating a meeting with Kim Jong-un. He did walk away from another meeting when it was not making progress. It’s possible there will be another high level meeting at some point. The point here is not so much that Trump operates in multiple time frames as every president does, but that given the anti-Trump conventional narrative about his impulsivity that he can.

**Instinct and Gut Feelings: A Partial Decision Metric for Trump**

The president, as is widely reported, and as he acknowledges, has substantial confidence in his feelings in making his decision choices. Sometimes he frames these choice metrics with reference to his “gut.” In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Trump said this:

I’m not happy with the Fed. They’re making a mistake because *I have a gut, and my gut tells me more sometimes than anybody else’s brain can ever tell me.*

Speaking of his decisions regarding Afghanistan policy, he used different phrasing:

My original instinct was to pull out. And historically, I like following my instincts.

It seems that Trump understands and uses both terms interchangeably, but what does he mean? It seems that both reflect back to Trump’s feelings about a choice or set of them, most particularly whether one or another “seems right,” or whether there is something clear or latent that gives him pause. Phrased in this way judgments seems almost mysterious and certainly not synonymous with the usual steps touted for models of “rational decision making.” Those have of course, long since been overtaken by understanding that “bounded rationality” is much more prevalent.

The answer however is not particularly mysterious. When presidents like (G. W.) Bush or Trump say they rely on their “gut” or instincts, what they are really saying is that they rely on their experience, and their reflective judgment about it. Those experiences would most likely include
circumstances when they choose wisely and those when they didn’t. Their “instinct” then in any particular case would be a reflection of the degree of appropriate fit between their current circumstances and what they have taken from past ones.

The degree to which “instinct” fits is one question, but there are others. At what point does “instinct” decide? Does it close Trump off from fairly considering real options? Is it a deciding metric in all or only some cases, and which ones? Is it a metric used to decide among nuanced options, or is it also used to frame some very fundamental considerations? Very importantly, what is the relationship between relying to some degree on instinct and keeping an open mind?

\textit{Trump: Open Minded, to a Degree} \\
No president comes into office fully aware of the many issues they will face, their history, and the various understandings of them that form the histories and narratives with which they are presented. Trump is not an exception to this rule. The questions then arise: what does he think he knows and how willing is he to change those views if and when he realizes he doesn’t adequately understand?

Trump’s Twitter troll that he is a “stable genius”\textsuperscript{86} in response to accusations about his mental health notwithstanding, it is clear that he thinks very highly of his own intelligence. Asked about climate change in one interview, the president said\textsuperscript{87}:

\begin{quote}
One of the problems \textit{that a lot of people like myself, we have very high levels of intelligence} but we’re not necessarily such believers. You look at our air and our water, and it’s right now at a record clean.
\end{quote}

Trump’s real intelligence (see Chapter 12 on whether Trump is best understood as a dunce, a hedgehog or a fox), clearly has an impact on his capacity to process policy information and make some accurate assessments regarding what he really does and doesn’t know. A truly ignorant president would be overwhelmed by his responsibilities and presumably be highly dependent on others to help him through. A president who overvalued his own intelligence and knowledge would be too prone to depend on their own self-assessments of their capacities and be much less inclined to listen to other advisors or their debates.
In the minds of some critics, Trump represents the worst of both of these possibilities. George Will presents Trump as suffering from a “dangerous disability,” characterized by “intellectual sloth but of an untrained mind bereft of information and married to stratospheric self-confidence.” Others, like pundit Daniel Drezner, taking Trump literally for purposes of his criticism, focus on Trump’s comment that:

When I look at myself in the first grade and I look at myself now, I’m basically the same. The temperament is not that different.

Did that mean that Trump had learned nothing in his six-plus decades building and heading a vast business empire? No, but Drezner presents Trump that way. Did it mean that Trump had not acquired views about adult subjects in his adulthood? No. He simply meant that in terms of energy levels, and an emphasis on getting things done, Trump could see the child in the adult.

One could have easily, if one were searching for a hook on which to hang another misreading of a Trump quote, have noted that Trump once said in response to fighting back against allegations regarding his pledged charitable giving to Veterans’ Organizations, “You think I’m going to change? I’m not changing.” It’s clear that in the context in which it was made that quote meant that Trump would not stop fighting back against allegations he thought unfair and unfounded. Did it mean Trump would never change his mind about any of his views regardless of advisors’ advice or debates? No, as the evidence below makes clear.

There is now a substantial body of evidence, from different sources and from different policy debates that suggests that Trump is not only able to, but also has changed his thinking in response to new information. None of these data negates the fact that on large signature items that Trump feels strongly about, neither his advisors, critics, or experts can have much success in changing his mind or his determination. Examples of that include the Paris Climate Accords, the nuclear agreement with Iran, getting NATO to pay more of its fair share for defense, helping to develop a more modern mission for NATO, fairer trade agreements with China, NAFTA, and the EU, enforcing immigration laws, and a host of other matters. Here Trump has kept his word, his policies, and his views.

In several matters, however he has proven open-minded. Consider China’s ability to press North Korea. This was an article of faith for
Trump until he discussed the matter at length with the Chinese premier. Trump reported on the conversation as follows:  

And you know, you’re talking about thousands of years … and many wars. And Korea actually used to be a part of China. And after listening for 10 minutes I realized that not—it’s not so easy. You know I felt pretty strongly that they have—that they had a tremendous power over China. I actually do think they do have an economic power, and they have certainly a border power to an extent, but they also—a lot of goods come in. But it’s not what you would think. It’s not what you would think.

On the efficacy of waterboarding, that Trump supported, he had this to say:  

General Mattis is a strong, highly dignified man. I met with him at length and I asked him that question. I said, “what do you think of waterboarding?” He said—I was surprised—he said, “I’ve never found it to be useful.” He said, “I’ve always found, give me a pack of cigarettes and a couple of beers and I do better with that than I do with torture.” And I was very impressed by that answer. I was surprised, because he’s known as being like the toughest guy. And when he said that, I’m not saying it changed my mind. Look, we have people that are chopping off heads and drowning people in steel cages and we’re not allowed to waterboard. But I’ll tell you what, I was impressed by that answer. It certainly does not—it’s not going to make the kind of a difference that maybe a lot of people think. If it’s so important to the American people, I would go for it. I would be guided by that.

On Trump’s decision to support the continuation of the Export-Import Bank that he originally had not supported, he had this to say:  

I will tell you what, I was very much opposed to Ex-Im Bank, because I said what do we need that for IBM and for General Electric and all these—it turns out that, first of all lots of small companies will really be helped, the vendor companies, but also maybe more importantly, other countries give it. And when other countries give it, we lose a tremendous amount of business.

Finally, although it is not the only remaining example of this aspect of Trump’s decision making, there was his reluctant decision to commit more American troops to Afghanistan. We noted above that Trump’s
“original instinct was to pull out.” Shortly after he came into office Trump initiated a major review of American options. In his speech to the nation, Trump said, “After many meetings, over many months, we held our final meeting last Friday at Camp David, with my Cabinet and generals, to complete our strategy.” In fact, other reports indicate that Trump insisted that there be a detailed discussion of what “victory” would look like and also insisted on metrics to measure it.

The “what does victory look like” is the kind of basic question Trump is inclined to ask. It is not an “in the weeds” question that illuminates one or another detailed option being debated and which reflects the askers’ detailed nuanced understanding. Rather it is a step back to consider a more basic primary question that can facilitate rethinking and reframing debates.

Mr. Trump finally put forward a broader strategy for Afghanistan, one that would require thousands more American troops but placed more conditions on the Afghan government. According to several officials it, “was less a change of heart than a weary acceptance of the case, made during three months of intense White House debate by the military leaders who dominate his war cabinet.” So, contrary to the Trump is ignorant and impulsive narrative assumed by critics, there is evidence that the president’s decision making is not limited to a narcissistically based repetition compulsion.

On some strongly felt matters, Trump won’t budge. On a range of others, he can be convinced, even if reluctantly so. On some of his deeply held starting positions, like China’s leverage with North Korea, his views can clearly be modified.

Trump Adopts a Public Version of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Competing Aides Strategy

The president has had an unusually high level of turnover among his aides. He has sought to find the right mix of views given his own anchoring positions on the policy spectrum. He has also been searching for individuals with whom he feels comfortable and who are, in turn, comfortable with his decision style.

Shortly before Gary Cohn resigned as Trump’s senior economic advisor, “Trump dismissed talk of chaos in his White House while acknowledging that he deliberately fostered a fractious atmosphere.”
That “chaos” narrative is largely a by-product of the ordinary bureaucratic in-fighting conducted through leaks published in the nation’s major media outlets, exacerbated by internal leaks designed to wound the administration by members of the opposition, and Trump’s tendency to publicly test his own sometimes shifting thinking on some major policy issues. The net result is a narrative that emphasizes the Trump White House as a continuing seething caldron of chaos, conflict, carelessness, and confusion.

There was certainly a substantial amount of that in the formative period of Trump’s first term. Yet, as this analysis has argued, there were from the start two Trump presidencies. One was the public dire narrative of imminent collapse for one or another reason, including White House “chaos.” The other the increasingly well-functioning administration effort to make progress on its agenda.

Interestingly, that bifurcated dual reality parallels what real insiders understood about Trump in his business empire building days. Norma Foerderer was Donald Trump’s top aide for twenty-six years. When she joined the Trump Organization in 1981, he had only seven other employees and she knew Trump professionally and personally. In the only in-depth interview she ever gave, she said of Trump:

there are two Donald Trumps: One is the Trump that appears to the public, making often outrageous comments on television to get attention for his brand and now his presidency; the other is the real Trump only insiders know. He listens without a touch of bravado. That private Trump is “the dearest, most thoughtful, most loyal, most caring man.”

In the real world of Trump’s presidential performance, he has clearly adapted a variant of FDR’s strategy of setting various aides on the same information quests unbeknown to each other. That way, he receives a mix of different perspectives to consider. Unlike FDR though, Trump is willing to have his advisors scramble in public to keep up with his policy trial balloons. This often leads to stories regarding Trump “undercutting” his aides and there is some truth to that. Yet, much of Trump’s supposed undercutting has less to do with reminding aides who is really in charge, although it certainly is a reminder, than in Trump’s propensity to think aloud and publicly share his thoughts, whatever they may be at the moment.
Trump is a president who likes a wide variety of advice (see below), but he also learns from conflict and having his advisors debate the merits in front of him. In a Q & A, he had this to say about that process:

I like conflict. I like having two people with different points of view, and I certainly have that. And then I make a decision. But I like watching it, I like seeing it, and I think it’s the best way to go. I like different points of view.

As President Obama said of Trump, “He’s somebody who I think likes to mix it up and to have a vigorous debate.”

**Seeking a Wide and Eclectic Range of Advice**

One question that arises with regard to Trump’s decision style is whether and how he gets information relevant to the issues he faces. It’s clear that Trump does not like or read long policy memos. It’s also clear that brevity is a virtue to him in ordinary presentations, but that he is capable of and likes sitting through debates at which his advisors argue their positions and rationales (see above).

Trump was known to reach out to those he was working with when he was CEO of the Trump Organization during evenings, weekends, nights and whenever he wanted to discuss issues.

The evidence is that he hasn’t changed that style. In an interview his former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said:

I talk to him just about every day. I see him several times a week. He calls me late at night, on the weekends, when something comes into his head and he wants to talk. He may call me at any moment, at any time.

Another behind the scenes look at Trump’s work style reported that, “the bulk of his work in the mornings, late afternoons, evenings and weekends happens in his private quarters where Trump can call staff and advisers as early as 6 a.m. and up to midnight.” And the *Washington Post* reports:

The chatterbox in chief has eschewed the traditional way that presidents communicate with members of Congress, calling lawmakers at all hours of the day without warning and sometimes with no real agenda. Congressional Republicans reciprocate, increasingly dialing up the president directly
to gauge his thinking after coming to terms with the fact that ultimately, no one speaks for Trump but Trump himself.

Trump is simply not, and never has been, a 9 to 5 worker. He spends a lot of his so called “Executive Time,” for which some have criticized him, seeking input, testing ideas, and building relationships. The New York Times take on this aspect of Trump’s style is that it reflects his insecurity. “Those who know him best say that his outer confidence has always belied an inner uncertainty, and that he needs to test ideas with a wide range of people.” The Times does not name “those who know him best” so there is no way to judge the accuracy of this statement. What is clear is that sounding out a wide eclectic variety of people has always been Trump’s equivalent of reading long reports. As the evidence below suggests, he seems to learn from doing so.

Asked how he developed his heterodox views of the Republican Party he responded:

*I’m not sure I got there through deep analysis*. My views are what everybody else’s views are. When I give speeches, sometimes I’ll sign autographs and I’ll get to talk to people and learn a lot about the party.

In response to the downing of an American drone by Iran, “President Trump bucked most of his top national-security advisers by abandoning retaliatory strikes in Iran on Thursday.” That report went on as follows:

*The president is known for seeking a range of opinions*, and he did that again amid rising tensions with Iran, even reaching out to Fox News host Tucker Carlson, according to people familiar with those conversations. Mr. Carlson has opposed military intervention in Iran on his prime-time television show.

Yet more than conservative media celebrities, Trump is well known for reaching out to a very large group of unusual people for their views. The New York Times put it like this:

As Mr. Trump’s White House advisers jostle for position, the president has turned to another group of advisers—from family, real estate, media, finance and politics, and all outside the White House gates—many of whom he consults at least once a week.
The list included in that article is an eclectic one including “moguls” (Rupert Murdoch); the media (Sean Hannity, Chris Ruddy); lawyers (Sheri A. Dillon); campaign advisors (Corey Lewandowski, Newt Gingrich); childhood friends (Richard LeFrak); peers (Thomas Barrack, Jr., Stephen Schwarzman, Steve Roth, Phil Ruffin, Carl Icahn), “Man of Mystery” (Roger J. Stone); Mar-a Lago members (Ike Permutter, Robert Kraft); the (former) Speaker of the House (Paul D. Ryan); former NJ governor (Chris Christie); and Trump’s wife and children (Melania Trump, Eric Trump, Donald Trump, Jr.).

Another report on the president’s decision making regarding Afghanistan policy noted that the day before an important Principal’s Meeting, Trump¹⁰⁹:

had invited four soldiers who had served in Afghanistan to the White House for lunch. His exchanges with these enlisted men, an official said, left him sober about the prospects for turning around a war that has dragged on for nearly 16 years. He showed up the next day determined to ask hard questions.

Those questions included the “what’s victory look like” question noted above.

There is one other aspect of the above examples that may escape notice and that is that Trump listens. Whether it is while signing autographs, or discussing Afghanistan with four soldiers who fought there, Trump seems very interested in new, different views than the ones that any president ordinarily hears.

This does not seem to reflect a desperation to find “answers,” so much as an effort to gain diverse perspectives as he moves toward initial decision or follow through. Many of these outreach efforts are not with people considered “expert” in the ordinary Washington use of that word. Trump has a deep set of mixed feelings about conventional experts. He learned early on in his presidency that sterling résumés are not synonymous with insight or perspective and, as a result, with good advice.

Trump retains a skepticism even towards experts whose knowledge and perspective he trusts. Here is Dr. Anthony Fauci on that distinction¹¹⁰:

…because to his [Trump’s] credit, even though we disagree on some things, he listens. He goes his own way. He has his own style. But on substantive issues, he does listen to what I say.
It seems clear that President Trump canvases a wide variety of people many of whom would be considered unorthodox presidential advisors. Yet, seeking and taking advice are not synonymous. That raises the question of whose advice does Trump trust?

**Advising Trump: The Issue of Trust**

Trump spent his adulthood in an extremely competitive, indeed fierce, business environment. Enormous amounts of money, power, and prestige went to those who succeeded. In the end for any project, ordinarily, only one business “won.” Trump was willing to do what it took, but so were many others. It’s not a set of circumstances that facilitates trust.

Asked about trust, Trump replied\(^\text{111}\):

Do I feel I can trust anybody, OK? I’m a very suspicious person. I am not a person that goes around trusting lots of people.

Trump’s adult long business experience is probably the source of the much repeated Trump quote\(^\text{112}\):

> Life is a series of battles that ultimately end in either victory or defeat. I enjoy combat. I enjoy fighting my enemies. I like beating people and winning, yes.

Trump’s intense will to succeed in a fierce business environment is only part of the explanation of Trump’s mistrustfulness. As the single owner of a vast business empire Trump was, and remains, a very powerful, very rich man. As a result, he is also to many people a possible exploitable mark and target.

There is no mistaking Trump’s litigiousness. He has used lawsuits to obtain legitimate relief from individuals, governments, and businesses. He has used lawsuits to deter and punish those in business or in life who have, in his mind and in reality, tried to harm him. As president he has had to defend himself and his administration against myriad personal, political, and policy lawsuits meant to make life unbearable for him, his family and his supporters, and to impede his presidency.\(^\text{113}\)

The number of these legal cases runs into the thousands.\(^\text{114}\) They cover such expected areas as branding and trademark cases (85), casino related cases (1863), cases against his campaign (17), contract dispute
cases (208), employment cases (130), golf club cases (63), government and tax cases (190), and media and defamation cases (14). Anti-Trump news stories highlight allegations meant to cast Trump in a bad light, without giving the countervailing claims or the disposition of the cases, which are often devised in Trump’s favor.\textsuperscript{115}

One anti-Trump legal author wrote\textsuperscript{116}:

I found myself deeply offended by his [Trump] anti-legal approach to the constitution, the courts and the rule of law … “what to do about Trump?” I asked myself. “Write something” came the answer from my inner self … Here I trust, I have “killed the monster.”

These sentiments would seem to be an effective recipe for anti-Trump confirmation bias.

The \textit{USA TODAY} listing of all the lawsuits share an anti-Trump perspective. One article from that series highlighted the claims of people who said they weren’t paid by Trump for work they did. However, deep in the article this caveat appears,\textsuperscript{117} “To be sure, Trump and his companies have prevailed in many legal disputes over missing payments, or reached settlements that cloud the terms reached by the parties.” The same is true for legal claims of accidental falls on his properties, being passed over for advancement because of looks, and so on.

However, The \textit{USA TODAY} disclaimer most relevant to Trump’s trustfulness is this one\textsuperscript{118}:

As a public figure for decades, Trump has faced so many different kinds of lawsuits that not all can be easily categorized. These other suits involve everything from divorce-related cases with his ex-wives to \textit{dozens of lawsuits from prisoners and other private citizens hoping to cash in on his enormous wealth or drag Trump into litigation}. Many of those cases were dismissed before they could reach a courtroom.

In an early interview there was the following exchange\textsuperscript{119}:

\textit{Playboy:} You wrote in \textit{The Art of the Comeback} that women are gold diggers. Do you still believe that?

\textit{DT:} I think it’s hard for women who go out with very wealthy guys not to get seduced by that lifestyle—the apartments at the top of Trump Tower, the helicopters and airplanes. But I don’t think all women are gold diggers. I’ve known a lot of really good women and have had amazing
relationships over the years. But as with men, there are good ones and bad ones.

In a business focused adulthood shaped by competitiveness, alliances of convenience, betrayal, false claims, and zero-sum circumstances, real trust is in short supply. And that was before Trump entered the White House. Yet, no president, even one who reaches out to many diverse people for their views, can avoid making judgments about which advisors and advice he trusts most.

The important answer to that question for Trump is family. Trump clearly develops confidence in some who work with him and advise him. He agreed, reluctantly, with General Mattis on waterboarding, but not on Afghanistan. For other advisors, it is the fit between their views and Trump’s as it was on immigration with Jeff Sessions until as Attorney General he recused himself from the Russian probe and Trump forced him to resign.

Trump’s confidence in his most trusted advisors seems to hinge on three general elements: that person’s established independent stature in their field, the overlap of their general views with Trump’s, and Trump’s assessment that the person has his best personal and political interests at heart. Ordinary Trump advisors start out with a disadvantage if they can’t established their bona fides in at least one of these three elements over time. Whom could you count on to hit the mark regularly on at least two of those three elements, especially the crucial one of having your best interests at heart? Family.

That is why among many people that Trump reaches out to for discussions and advice are his family, including his wife Melania, his daughter Ivanka, his son-in-law Jared Kushner, and his two sons Donald Trump, Jr. and Eric Trump. Their concern with Trump’s best interest does not necessarily mean that their advice will overlap with his views. Nor does it ensure that their views will be acted upon. However, one of the advantages that trusted family members bring to the president is that, as his son put it, “Ivanka, Eric and I have the ability to be very candid with our father.” All have been given repeated high profile administration assignments, a sign of the trust that Trump places in them.

Yet, in the end, Trump must turn to the only person who he can always count on to have all three of those important basic elements operating—himself.
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