CHAPTER 1

Building a Theory of Donald Trump and His Presidency

The United States has never had a president quite like Donald J. Trump. And, it is highly unlikely that there will be another one like him again.

He has been called, with good reason, “the most unorthodox president of modern times,”¹ and a “president unlike any other.”² He is in many respects the Black Swan of the modern American presidency,³ unique and unexpected, but also disproportionally consequential. And being consequential is Trump’s presidential purpose—all in the service of what I argue in this analysis is an effort at American Restoration.

The fact that Trump’s presidency is unprecedented, unexpected, and has already had substantial political and policy consequences does not necessarily mean that it will ultimately be successful. Mr. Trump’s presidential ambitions are to reformulate, reform, and where necessary replace a number of the dominant policy and political paradigms that have governed American political life for the last half-century. His presidential purposes are essentially transformative, as well as reformist and restorative.

Trump’s primary vehicles for successfully reaching those politically difficult and historically rare goals are his clearly observable and very distinctive presidential leadership style and equally unorthodox thinking patterns. Their foundations are a set of character traits and capacities along with habits of mind that go well beyond the narrow, hackneyed assertions that his narcissism is his only defining character trait.
Yet, while his leadership style may be unique, its half-life and transferability may very well be limited. Arguments have already been made by Trump’s allies that even if he is successful during his presidency, “the real danger with Mr. Trump is that he may end up changing little.” It remains to be seen, given the substantial array for forces mobilized against his presidency, his own avoidable mistakes, the unprecedented Coronavirus pandemic, the traumatic impact of the tragic death of George Floyd during a police stop and the peaceful demonstrations and riots that followed, and Trump’s response to them both, along the magnitude of the tasks that he has set for himself and the country, whether President Trump will be “successful,” and if so, how.

It has been clear from the president’s first days in office that:

President Trump is moving at an unprecedented pace to change the direction of the country and reset America’s place in the world. …If successful in making good on his vision, his presidency would be described as one of the most important and controversial of modern times—and no doubt one of the most contentious.

If.

**Developing a Theory of Mr. Trump and His Presidency**

This analysis is *not* an exploration that attempts to fit Trump’s particular traits into a pre-existing a priori theoretical framework and typology of “presidential character.” That most well known of these theories has many demonstrated problems of conceptualization, evidence, and inference. In any event, in Mr. Trump’s case, there is so little examination of the real range of elements that comprise his psychology in reality that simply taking the reductionist singular characterizations of Trump’s psychology and leadership style and putting them into a pre-existing theory would be a disservice.

The purpose of this analysis is theory building by *uncovering* core psychological elements in a deductive case study approach, and to assess the evidence both for and against the tentative theories developed to understand and explain Mr. Trump and his presidency. It would then be possible to assemble the particular elements that comprise this president’s psychology, ask how they are related, and examine how they affect the
core elements of presidential performance—leadership and the judgment reflected in his choices.  

Ordinary social science addresses and builds on the “literature.” Biographically based case studies like this one, using ordinary social science approaches to theory development and evidence, also build on the “literature,” when available or relevant. Thus we examine in some detail notions of political time as they relate to Trump’s presidential performance. We also delve quite deeply into the literature on the motivations of Trump supporters (see Chapter 10). We draw on diverse clinical theories of narcissism, both normal and pathological, to assess one major element of Trump’s psychology (see Chapter 6) and use those theories to assess his psychological and political fitness for office (see Chapter 7). We also obviously draw on, throughout this analysis, studies of past presidencies and the theories of presidential leadership associated with them. 

However, it is worth emphasizing that the primary “literature” available for an analysis of the Trump presidency is the enormous wealth of data generated by the Trump presidency itself. This effort then relies on assembling diverse data to inductively build a “theory of Trump and the Trump presidency.” Those provisional formulations can then be used to gauge their utility in understanding the patterns of an unfolding presidency. 

These efforts are meant to provide explanatory power and understanding of what we see President Trump doing as his presidency unfolds. They make use of a large range of data. One advantage of that approach is that when there are available facts that don’t fit with an initial understanding, we are required make sense of them. These research strategies are likely to bring us closer to understanding the real man and his presidency. However, it is true that however much effort we put into developing and clarifying our theories and understandings, they will still remain provisional to some degree. 

Analyzing President Trump While He Is Still in Office 

This book is an “initial” analysis of Mr. Trump’s presidency written as he completes almost four years in office, but not quite yet a full term. He may or may not serve another. His historical record and materials for the Trump archives and library are in the process of being enacted in real time. It is true that historical perspective and archival records can be grounds for revised understandings of any president, including Mr.
Trump, and they are obviously not available to scholars yet. Still, for reasons to be explained shortly, it is possible to reach some firmer more substantively based understanding of this complex man and presidency without waiting for his presidential library to open its doors.

This analysis breaks new ground in both its time frame and its conceptual framework. It does more than examine Mr. Trump’s time in office at six months, one, or even two years, highlighting the “highs” and “lows.” It does that to some degree with its use of “event data” (see Chapter 2). However, this analysis spans Trump’s life and personal development in search for patterns that can help us understand the man and his presidency.

Finding Core Patterns in a Kaleidoscopic Presidency

The framework of analysis that follows is made possible by the fact Mr. Trump is unusual in having governed with a leadership style that was entirely evident during both his presidential campaign and throughout his very public career as a business entrepreneur and empire builder. Not surprisingly, he has carried his unusual and unorthodox style into his presidency.

That is to be expected because these patterns and their underlying psychology have been developed and consolidated over a lifetime as a unique, singular CEO, and mostly successful career building an international business empire. As a result, his style and the psychological elements that support it have become firmly rooted and consolidated in this seventy-four year old president. They are key ingredients of his presidency, and likely to remain so.

Early in the Trump presidency the most informed observers could legitimately argue that “Trump Governs as He Campaigned: Unconventionally and Unpredictably.” Almost four years into Trump’s first term, it is unclear if Trump’s unpredictability is still as much of a shock and surprise as it was at the start of his campaign for the Republican nomination. Certainly, part of Trump’s “unpredictability” is related to the fact that he ignored conventional rules in gaining the nomination and the presidency and continues to do so as president. Yet that does not mean there were no patterns in his behavior.
Policy and News at Trump Speed

One of the ways in which President Trump is unlike any previous American president is the way that he dominates the news cycle on a daily and almost an hourly basis. The president is the center of so many policy developments and news stories and analysis about them—the myriad debates regarding his handling of the Coronavirus, his policy musings on homelessness, the latest installment of Trump’s first term long conflict with multiple Democratic investigations—including one dealing as the pandemic is unfolding with a focus on how the administration responded to the crisis, his impeachment and acquittal, the latest fight with his own party, the latest firing of someone in his administration, or a casual Christmas-eve conversation with a seven-year-old girl about whether she believes in Santa Claus—a question that revealed Trump’s capacity to blunder across appropriate lines. There are also the full array of policy and administrative initiations that the administration has undertaken in what we term the eight pillars of Trump policy reform (as he sees it)—the courts, economic growth and opportunity (including jobs and energy development), de-regulation, health care, immigration, foreign policy, trade, and lifting the fear of discussing many political debate topics (aka “political correctness”), all of which contain a great many discrete policies within those categories. All of these too are the subjects of endless rounds of Trump commentary and intensive opposition and debate as well.

The result is a kaleidoscopic tsunami of information that seems impervious to organization, much less understanding. You can think of this as Policy and News at Trump Speed. It certainly makes it hard to keep up with the unfolding Trump presidency, but more importantly it presents challenges to understanding it.

Consider some of the headlines reflecting a view of the president as having slipped the constraints of the office and his former advisors, who some had hoped would manage and constrain him:

After Another Week of Chaos, Trump Repairs to Palm Beach. No One Knows What Comes Next

White House shakeup shows Trump tired of hearing ‘no’ for an answer

Trump Relishes Off-Script Approach
Trump’s bad week: A policy rollback, a political setback and a still-defiant president\textsuperscript{27}

Reliable Allies Refuse to Defend a President Content With Chaos.\textsuperscript{28}

Actually, Dan Balz of the \textit{Washington Post} had the most insightful take on the turmoil and “chaos” regarding a batch of ongoing personnel and policy changes emanating from Mr. Trump\textsuperscript{29}:

There is no New Trump emerging here as this next phase begins. If anything, it is the reemergence of the old Trump, the pre-presidential Trump, who plays by his own rules and tries to rewrite the old ones he doesn’t like. This is what made him rich as a business executive and won him the White House.

Exactly.

There is no wholly “new” Trump when it comes to his patterns of behavior. However, there might be a “new evolving Trump,” as we argue there is, when one considers his presidential and life purposes in this stage of his life. I argue that his life’s purpose has changed, although not necessarily for wholly altruistic reasons (see Chapter 6). One major task of the book is to understand and explain the “old” Mr. Trump and the “newer” presidential one, and how they both fit, or fail to fit, with the emerging office of the presidency and Mr. Trump’s “Restorative” ambitions.

\textit{A Core Set of Dualisms at the Heart of the Trump Presidency}

Complicating the analysis of President Trump and his presidency is the fact that there is a pervasive dualism in both. One is the tabloid-like presidency of Trumpian bombast and dire predictions of demise that have not yet to date come to pass. The other part of his presidency is a slow methodical effort to set in motion and consolidate a “reconstructive” presidency. As David Brooks put it\textsuperscript{30}:

It’s almost as if there are two White Houses. There’s the Potemkin White House, which we tend to focus on: Trump berserk in front of the TV, the lawyers working the Russian investigation and the press operation. Then there is the Invisible White House that you never hear about, which is getting more effective at managing around the distracted boss.
It’s very questionable that President Trump is “distracted” and his staff is getting better in operating without him. The evidence suggests that in spite of Trump’s reputation for being unable to focus, he can be a micro-manager on issues where he wants to reach down into his government to get things done, like stripping medals given to prosecutors after they had, in his view, erroneously charged a Navy Seal for committing war crimes.

The dualism at the heart of the Trump presidency reflects the fact the president and his administration often operate at two levels simultaneously. The examples are legion at both the personal and policy level. He is a man publicly criticized for using other people’s money to fund his foundation, but he has a long record of helping people privately and anonymously outside of his public foundation (see Chapter 8). Trump’s public bluster is often on display, but privately he can be and often is very gracious and charming. He is man known from years of flashy tabloid exploits, who prefers to spend evenings at home. He is well known to treat woman both as objects and equals. He threatens North Korea with destruction, but travels around the world to meet its leader. He is a serial public provocateur who makes a number of safe moderate appointments. He relentlessly and publicly attacked the Mueller investigation while almost wholly cooperating with those investigations behind the scenes.

This is not a case of “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are on their way to the White House,” as one pundit wrote. It is closer to reality to note that “Trump brings many different personas to Washington.” The evidence noted above suggests that is true, but there is more to it than that.

The results of the research analyzed herein suggests that beyond the innumerable anti-Trump caricatures and beneath his varied public personas there are a core set of basic patterns that anchor Trump’s psychology. What then do the core dualisms noted just above reflect? They reflect a man and a psychology able to contain seemingly “opposite” perspectives on a range of things, that may or may not in reality really be opposite. It is the point of Walt Whitman’s “containing multitudes” quote that opened this book. Indeed it is one of the conclusions of the Washington Post’s deeply researched biography of the president: “Trump comes to this moment as a more complex man than is widely realized.”

The fact that Trump can publicly rail against the Mueller investigation for example while almost wholly cooperating with it, suggests that
the reality principle is, in that case and others, firmly established in Trump’s mind which does bear on his psychological fitness for office (see Chapter 7). Trump does feel, and there is evidence, that he and his administration were targeted on illegitimate legal grounds. It is understandable that the president would be angry about the frequently asserted but unproven allegations of his being a traitor. What innocent person repeatedly and publicly accused of such criminal, disgraceful, and unforgivable behavior wouldn’t be? On the other hand, the Muller investigation was a legal and duly authorized exercise of governmental power, and a failure to substantially respond to legitimate requests carried with it dire political and legal consequences. So, cooperate he did.

On a more personal level, when Trump first came to New York he frequented a number of night clubs on his evenings out and often dated beautiful women. Yet people who knew Trump then knew that he preferred homelife to nightlife, food to cuisine, and work to the playboy status he developed and cultivated. For all the hype around Trump’s tabloid years, he is essentially a homebody. One recent analysis of how Trump spends his time noted, “Early in this presidency, Trump’s staff tried to nudge him out into the city more often for dinners or to attend events, but the plans always fell apart, said one of the former senior administration officials who called Trump a ‘homebody’.”

Or, consider his relationships with women. Leave aside at this point the allegations that Trump physically forced himself on women in non-consensual sexual advances. Not one of the allegations have been backed up by concrete evidence beyond the assertions. And when actual evidence has surfaced, it has disproved the allegations. Looking instead at the object/equal treatment elements of the history of Trump’s relationships with women simply reflect a common dualism. Men can find women attractive and also treat them fairly and with respect for their talents and skills. They can also see women through the lens of physical attractiveness. Did Trump do both? Yes. Did Trump have affairs while he was married? Yes. Did he still put women in positions of power and authority because of their abilities? Yes.

The point here, and it will be encountered again, is that Trump cannot be reduced to a single pattern of behavior—with women, his presidency, and much else. He is a man of many dimensions. The dualisms noted above are all real, but none of them alone is defining. Rather, they reflect a range of potential behaviors that Trump appears to be able to act upon.
without feeling either inauthentic or inhibited. They are part of his behavioral repertoire which is much wider than he is given credit for having at his disposal.

Yet, this is not a description of a presidential chameleon. There are, to repeat, a number of core elements to Trump’s psychology that are fairly evident and which we will analyze. For example, too many causal observers among his critics conflate Trump’s real narcissism with his brand thus missing the real range and motivations of his psychology. We hope to do better here.

**In Search of the Real President Trump**

Mr. Trump’s bombastic, combative, and controversial leadership style has obviously given some credence to the many complaints lodged against him regarding his presidential demeanor and behavior. His public leadership style has never before been practiced in a modern presidency. His brash confrontational style (see Chapter 4) is a direct reflection of his psychology. It is also one that he sees as a necessary strategy given what he wants to accomplish and the widespread “resistance,” a purposefully borrowed term of self-referral that inappropriately evokes the heroic men and women who during WW2 risked and sometimes experienced torture and death for opposing the Nazis, arrayed against him. Analyzing the origins and relationship between these core elements of his presidential leadership style are essential to understanding his presidency. And understanding both the man and his presidency are the essential reasons for writing this book.

**President Trump: A Prisoner of His Persona?**

The dualisms at the heart of the Trump presidency suggest a somewhat unique issue that faces a psychoanalytically trained biographer of President Trump. That issue is distinguishing between Trump’s psychology and his persona. The editors and reporters for the Washington Post who interviewed him at length of their book and related articles, “wanted more than anything to figure out how much of Trump’s campaign manner was shtick and how much was real.” They were searching for the reality behind the “shtick.” Yet, what if the “shtick” is a real part of Trump’s psychology?
The point arises because Trump came into office with a very unusual background. Yes, he had no formal political experience, had not served in the military, and instead had a career in business, but that is not the point. What is more relevant is that Trump had a fifty-year career as the single, singular head of a vast and fast-moving business empire. There was no real organization chart and no detailed list of specific responsibilities. As Trump put it, “I prefer to come to work each day and just see what develops.” And that’s exactly what he did.

Most careers are steeped in tradition, be they in law, politics, the military, business, or academia. They have a set of norms, expectations, routines, and paths to advancement. Yet, as the single and sole decision-maker in the Trump Organization, he ran the show. As a result, he developed a personal style that would be difficult to maintain in almost any traditional organizational setting. That style included flamboyance, combativeness, risk taking, rhetorical sleight of hand (“truthful hyperbole”), impulsiveness and flexibility that allowed him to pursue personal and business indulgences with cool calculation, enormous levels of hard work, creativity, and resilience in a peripatetic and wide-ranging business career.

This diverse and sometimes contradictory set of traits all existed in the same person, and they are all part of the style Trump developed over fifty-plus years in his unique position. It would be very surprising if they did not become a real part of his psychology. And herein lies an issue: What if the Trump persona that we can so easily observe is now a real part of psychology? That immediately raises two questions. Is Mr. Trump’s psychology wholly explained by his persona? Critics would say yes, focusing on the most political and personally damaging items of the above list.

A more careful assessment would examine the full range of the Trump persona characteristics listed, and ask if there is evidence of any psychological elements that lie outside of this list. We argue in the analysis that follows that there are. One would then further ask which of these elements, person or persona, are related to Trump’s political circumstances and his presidential style. We would then be in a better position to appreciate if there is room in Trump’s presidency not for a “newer Trump” but of a different one.

Trump has said, “I won’t change,” and when he and his administration are under such relentless and continuing attack it may not be possible or wise for him to do so. There is however the danger that,
“Donald Trump may be turning himself into a captive inside the cage of his own very familiar persona.” In short, Mr. Trump, like any president, is advantaged when he is able to choose his response, not simply act on well-established patterns.

Here in lies a very core dilemma of Trump’s presidential leadership. He and his administration are the focus of an enormous number and range of attacks. As a result, Trump’s “fight club” persona and strategy, developed during his business career, serves a number of important purposes (see Chapter 4).

Yet, this observation leads to a core set of questions about President Trump that remain unresolved. They were directly put forward by Peggy Noonan several years ago:

Mr. Trump is a clever man with his finger on the pulse, but his political future depends on two big questions. The first is: Is he at all a good man? Underneath the foul mouthed flamboyance is he in it for America? The second: Is he fully stable? He acts like a nut, calling people bimbos, flying off the handle with grievances. Is he mature, reliable? Is he at all a steady hand?

It is at this point not difficult to answer the question of whether “he is in for America.” We present evidence that he is, which does not, however, preclude deriving a sense of personal satisfaction, validation and other personal psychological benefits from his presidential efforts. The separate question Noonan asks—“Is he at all a good man?” asks a different question. Along with Trump’s sometimes justifiable anger and clearly personal sensitivities to the unrelenting personal and political attacks against him and his administration, is there a part of Trump’s psychology that remains apart from the combative persona he’s developed and which has become a clear part of who he is? We present evidence in Chapter 8 (The Unexpected Trump) that there is.

However, in a milieu of constant attack, a combative president like Trump will respond as expected, combatively. That is one of the oppositions’ purposes. They wish to continuously push Trump to appear “unpresidential.” Doubtlessly, many Americans would prefer a “kinder, gentler” President Trump. However, those with that stance ultimately have to answer the question: what is a president to do when he, and his administration, are savagely and remorselessly attacked?
What Do You Make of a President Who…?

There is an expansiveness to the Trump persona that defies easy characterization. It is certainly more robust and consequential than the “Trump is unfit” narratives and memes that his critics push. Still, it is not easy to gain a firm fix on a president who takes great pride in his unpredictability.\(^{51}\)

This analysis argues that Mr. Trump’s real psychology and presidency is capable of being understood, even if not precisely predicted. Yet to do so one must be analytically willing to dive into the world of a very complex and contradictory man who purposely lived his life in a very public way, thereby providing the illusion that we know him well, when in fact there is much more to him that his public persona.

It may be true, as one report put it that, “All Presidents must contain multitudes.”\(^ {52}\) Yet, Trump contains more than most, and certainly more than are reflected in the caricatures that are presented as Trump analysis. One critical biographer wondered: “What do you make of a man who, when he argues with women stoops to insulting their appearance?” To which another analyst might add, yes—but what do you also make of the fact that Trump is “spoken of highly by the many women he has hired into high level positions and worked successfully with over many years?”\(^ {53}\)

That includes decades-long members of the Trump Organization’s inner circle like Barbara Res (chosen by Trump to head of construction at his major building sites, a position which was unprecedented for a woman to have that time). She wrote:

He would always hire the person he thought was best without regard to gender. I know I never got a break like the one I got from Donald.\(^ {54}\)

Another was Louise Sunshine (Vice President of the Trump Organization from 1973 to 1985 involved in the development of Trump Tower and other major projects, and the growth of the “Trump brand”).\(^ {55}\) Norma Foerderer was Trump’s long time administrator and gate-keeper. Rhona Graff,\(^ {56}\) also worked for Trump over a decade before being promoted to the same slot when Ms. Foerderer retired in 2005.

As the *New York Times* put it, opening a window into another little-noted aspect of the Trump father–son relationship, “Mr. Trump’s dedication to his secretary and hers to him is much like the relationship Fred C. Trump, his father, had with his secretary, Amy Luerssen, treating her like family.”\(^ {57}\) Mr. Trump also apparently has had no difficulty in
appointing women to high-level advisory positions in his administration.\textsuperscript{58} As noted above, Trump seems equally capable of treating women both as objects and as equals.

We might further ask: what do you make of a man who has been publicly and roundly criticized for using other people’s money to fund his own named charity,\textsuperscript{59} and sometimes criticized in the press for being slow to make good on his promised personal charity promises.\textsuperscript{60} Yet this very same man also once gave a dying child a check for $50,000.00 so that he could enjoy the last years of his life.\textsuperscript{61} He gave thousands of dollars to a family whose hardships he read about in the papers—something his then long-time administrative assistant Norma Foerderer noted he did often.\textsuperscript{62} Michael D’Antonio a frequent Trump critic and biographer writes that Trump agreed to a dying child’s wish to be “fired” from \textit{The Apprentice}, but when it came time to say those words, Trump couldn’t bring himself to say those words to a dying child and instead gave him a check for several thousand dollars and told him “to go have the time of his life”?\textsuperscript{63}

What do you make of a man who built a Manhattan real-estate empire based on nerve, ambition, innovation, and forging the necessary political connections mostly on his own after his father provided initial introductions and also financial help at key points in his career, and expanded it to global proportions. What do you make of a man who almost lost his empire, but weathered substantial economic difficulties, and emerged with a new innovative entrepreneurial idea-branding that vastly increased his success?

What do you make of a man who, at the same time wrote eighteen books (with help), many of which appeared on the \textit{New York Times} best-sellers list and was the host and chief personality for twelve seasons of a very successful television series—\textit{The Apprentice}, which made his name a household word and his brand synonymous with success?

And finally, what do you make of a man who, over decades, increasingly and publicly expressed his concern about the country’s strength, direction, and leadership and decided in 2016 to seek the presidency against seventeen other candidates many of whom had national reputations and substantial political resources—and won? And what do you make of a political novice who beat Hillary Clinton, one of the most experienced, well-funded, widely supported modern Democratic candidates for the presidency?

One thing that can legitimately be made of such a person and president is that he is a man of tremendous talents along with his easily observable
and obvious flaws. The analysis that follows will focus on both, along with some other traits and characteristics that are not so obvious. Trump deserves to be taken seriously not only because his talents are as real as his limitations, but also because both are an integral part of his presidential leadership style. And his presidency is proving to be as consequential as it is controversial.

**Analyzing President Trump: A Winding Road with Many Paths**

Many have been tempted to analyze Trump on a “what you see is what you get basis.” One strand of this narrative analysis argues that:

There really are no Trump mysteries. His flaws aren’t hidden away. He often attests to them himself, or demonstrates them publicly. For someone who cares so much about his image, and so assiduously crafts it, he’s a relative open book.

There is a large element of truth in that observation. Yet, there is more to Mr. Trump’s leadership style than serial bombast and a clearly observable, brash, and understandably controversial public persona. There is a pattern of motivation and thinking behind that behavior—one that reflects Trump’s formative experiences and his understanding of the nature of life and his present political circumstances and what he hopes to accomplish in his presidency. This work analyzes both, and their relationship to each other.

**President Trump: Beyond Psychological Caricature**

As the very useful *Washington Post*’s biographical book reporting on Trump’s background and candidacy put it:

We began this reporting on the theory that Trump, like everyone else is far more than his reputation or his brand...[we have discovered] that the man elected as the 45th president is far more complex than his simple language might indicate, that his motivations and values are informed by his parents and his upbringing, his victories and defeats and his life-long quest for love and acceptance.
In short, in fundamentally human and psychological ways, Trump is really just like many of us.

That said, it is hard to think of a more useful summary of Freud’s basic psychoanalytic framework than the second part of that Washington Post quote. The reporters who wrote the Trump book were interested in trying to establish basic facts around these elements. It is this analyst’s and this book’s purpose to try and use their and other factual reporting, wide-ranging interviews, and an extensive range of other information, to establish patterns that have explanatory power in understanding Mr. Trump and his presidency.

Tellingly, the conclusions of the Washington Post reporters who wrote the book, and this analyst who has spent the better part of five years carefully following Mr. Trump over a wide variety of circumstances and analyzing enormous amounts of data regarding him, have both reached the same conclusion. There is demonstrably more, much more, to Mr. Trump than the many shallow caricatures of him and his presidency.

As noted, there is much more to Mr. Trump’s psychology than his obvious narcissism. This single trait is not synonymous with Trump’s overall psychology. In so doing, we draw on an important distinction in the psychoanalytic and psychiatry literature between so-called “healthy”66 and “pathological” narcissism. “Healthy narcissism” includes an absolutely normal wish to gain respect and validation for one’s accomplishments. When that wish is stymied or denied, the person has the choice of slinking away to privately heal their wounds or fighting back for their own self-respect. Mr. Trump, throughout his life has always chosen the latter.

Ordinary healthy narcissism differs from what the psychiatric Diagnostic and Statistical Manual terms “narcissistic personality disorder” which Otto Kernberg, MD more simply terms “pathological narcissism.”67 The essential differences between the two are easy to grasp once the underlying theoretical distinctions are explained. Yet, Trump critics see only pathology and, as a result, put forward a wide variety of reasons, some psychological, some political, why Trump is “unfit” to hold office (see Chapter 7).

Finally, there is also much more to Trump’s presidential purposes than assuaging his ego or building his brand to benefit himself financially in his post-presidential years—and even during them according to some. Mr. Trump has undertaken literally hundreds of policy initiatives, large and small, in diverse areas both domestically and abroad. Internationally,
they could perhaps be grouped with some degree of accuracy under the concept of *America First* (see Chapter 11), but there is something more profound underlying that term and others that could be used.

**MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN: DONALD TRUMP’S HOPE AND CHANGE CANDIDACY**

What did Donald Trump offer the American public with his candidacy? He certainly did not offer a sterling political résumé or a polished understanding of public policy. He did not offer soothing rhetoric or detailed policy plans. He did however, offer something more important in that election cycle. He offered a vision of American being better than it had become, and a leadership psychology that would not let traditional political dos and don’ts, that favored the status quo, stand in the way of his achieving it.

His was an unprecedented, brash, bold, bracing, disruptive, rude, and sometimes coarse candidacy. And those characteristics have become integral aspects of his presidency. In so being, he has unequivocally conveyed that this candidacy and presidency would be different. When Trump said, “America doesn’t win anymore,” he was referring to much more than being taken advantage of in trade deals. His deeper point was that American had lost the confidence and capacity to take care of itself and get things done that needed doing, both domestically and internationally.

Trump clearly felt America had a number of long-standing problems—jobs, the economy, trade, immigration, and an equally large and important set of foreign policy issues that had been allowed to fester and drift. He ran as the candidate who was serious about his intention to take them on and do something about them. For many Americans, this rekindled the hope that someone was really listening to their concerns about the direction of the country, and would do something about them. Hope and change indeed.

Campaign slogans, if they resonate with parts of the public as Trump’s “Make America Great Again” did, capture an essential feature of presidential purpose for the public to interpret. They represent a promise not a policy blueprint. What are Trump’s presidential purposes?

On first glance they appear to defy easy categorization. They span domestic and foreign policies. They encompass executive orders, myriad administrative initiatives in almost all of the government’s executive
departments, major presidential initiatives in foreign policy that are constitutionally within his arc of legal and political legitimacy, and successfully working first with his Republican majorities in the Congress, and then only the Senate, on appointing judges, budgetary blueprints that reset spending priorities, and the passage of major tax reform legislation.

During his first term in office Mr. Trump has riled his opponents with his domestic initiatives in: immigration policy and enforcement; energy production; domestic environmental policy regulatory reform; education reform; judicial appointments; emphasizing policies that create jobs in America, and in response to the Coronavirus pandemic trying to help the country to recover from its enormous losses. He has done the same with a number of international policies including: withdrawing from several trade agreements and threatening to do so with NAFTA and South Korea; withdrawing from the Paris Climate agreements; loosening the restraints on the use of military force against ISIS and other terrorist groups; bombing Syria for crossing the red line he established about using chemical weapons; revising existing treaty understandings with our NATO allies; putting new pressures on oppositional regimes like North Korea, Iran, and Syria; cementing ties with traditional allies like Israel, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and India, addressing deficiencies in international organizations like WHO during the pandemic, and trying to maintain a working relationship with China while not avoiding criticisms about how it first handled the Coronavirus outbreak.

In all of these areas, one could add details about a range of changes to specific policies and practices. However, that would only underscore the fact that beneath the premature assertions that the Trump presidency is a failure, a narrative that began a mere month into his presidency, this administration has been very busy. As Atlantic Magazine, no friend of the administration out it, “Trump Has Quietly Accomplished More Than It Appears.”

The question is: how do we understand Trump’s many diverse initiatives in a variety of domestic and foreign policy areas? Are they really traditionally Republican or conservative after all? Are some, like his large infrastructure and immigration policy reform plans, more centrist and perhaps even a bit politically Democratic? And how are we to understand his unprecedented economic response to the pandemic that ignores decades of Republican economic orthodoxy?
All of Trump’s diverse policy plans and initiatives share at their core one common purpose. I frame this core purpose as the Politics of American Restoration. That phrasing raises the obvious question: what exactly does President Trump want to restore? The answer put forward herein is this: Mr. Trump wants to restore an America where the premises of policies that have not worked as promised, or have become outdated are reviewed, revised, and if necessary, discarded. He wants to restore a confident “can do” spirit that helps America gets things done. He wants Americans to identify and act on a common and not parochial ethnic or racial identity interests—one core element of his America First rhetoric. And clearly, given the savage effects of the global pandemic, he wants to restore some sense of “normality” to American economic and ordinary life more generally. And he wants to reform the primary institutions both domestically (for example, the FBI and CDC) and internationally (for example, the WTO, WHO) that have an important impact on American economic and political life.

Above all, he wants to restore an America whose political leadership acts at all levels, but starting first with the president, to re-earn the trust of Americans by doing what he promised. That trust has been steadily lost over the last five decades by the political establishment. Indeed, a July 2019 poll found that 70% of Americans, an astounding number, say “they are angry at the nation’s political and financial establishment.”

This last underlying presidential purpose is understandably somewhat ironic and surely paradoxical given the president’s difficult relationship with political facts, formulations, interpretations, and rhetorical precision. How is it possible for the public to ever be able to trust this president when almost every word he says is subject to second guessing from official and self-appointed fact-checkers who always find his accuracy wanting—sometimes for good reason (see Chapter 10)? Trump is not betting his reelection on winning over the myriad “fact checkers” who find fault with his hyperbole and grasp of nuance; he is counting on something else.

President Trump is betting on his capacity to “deliver the goods,” as he puts it in The Art of the Deal. That now includes helping the country to weather the brutal consequences of the pandemic, and responding to bi-partisan wishes to reform some police practices.
by doing so, he will be able to continue to change the basic policy narratives that have been the foundation of establishment-favored policies for decades. It is a large bet, but one entirely in keeping with Trump’s lifelong level of ambition and risk taking.

President Trump in Political Time: A Reconstructive or Preemptive President?

President Trump’s most basic presidential ambitions center around reversing the policies and assumptions that had resulted in decades of Americans feeling the country was moving in the wrong direction. To do so, he has pivoted away from what he considers to be the failed conventional policy wisdom of the last five decades. These include the view that unlimited immigration and limited enforcement of immigration laws has no downside, that low economic growth is the “new normal” and Americans should get used to it, that free trade is always a “win-win” for everyone, and that it is better not to insist on greater reciprocity abroad with American allies, or take a strong stance against adversaries.

These campaign positions were leadership signals, not coherent policies. They were meant to convey that Trump would be a different kind of president when it came to upholding and building on the conventional establishment policy consensus. And, he has been.

In almost four years in office Mr. Trump has angered his opponents with his domestic initiatives by: seriously enforcing immigration laws already passed by Congress and trying to stem immigration flows at the Southern border when Congress won’t act; encouraging all forms of energy production including those involving coal, fracking, and offshore drilling; dramatically cutting back on regulatory burdens; reforming environmental policy regulations; encouraging educational reform in the form of school choice and charter schools; focusing on judicial appointments—not primarily from a left–right perspective, but from a philosophy of jurisprudence perspective emphasizing original intent and text; emphasizing policies that create jobs in America including plans for a very large set of infrastructure rebuilding initiatives; and most recently confronting China and American allies about their trade practices.

Internationally Trump has: withdrawn from the Transpacific Partnership Trade agreements and threatened to do so with NAFTA and the South Korean Trade Agreement; withdrawn from the Paris Climate Agreements; loosened the restraints on the use of military force against
ISIS (and other terrorist groups) that has helped to decimate them; bombed Syria for crossing the red line he established about using chemical weapons—thereby reviving the important concept of reputation credibility; revised existing treaty understandings with NATO allies leading to them spending more for their own defense and focusing more on the threat of terror—as Trump had insisted; putting new pressures on oppositional regimes like North Korea while opening up negotiations with them, Iran, and Syria; and cementing ties with traditional allies like Israel, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and India.

The point of this list is its existence, not its policy virtue. These policies, if they gain traction, may be successful or not. What is undeniable however, whatever their fate, is that they represent a substantial new set of policy departures.

President Trump’s numerous policy and political initiatives in his first term in office make clear that he was very serious about revisiting, revising, and where he thought necessary discarding the underlying policy architecture and accompanying narratives of the past several decades. In this quest, he clearly differs from Presidents Clinton (G.W.) Bush, and Obama who were all deeply establishment figures. Those three presidents were all generally versed in the policy narratives of their times and their parties. They all shared many policy premises even if they diverged on the specifics of the issues that arose from these core beliefs.

All three were ardent “free-traders.” All three were ardent proponents of increased immigration. All three were ardent American internationalists and supported (Clinton and Obama more so and Bush somewhat less so), exercising American interests within the confines of international institutions. All three were, to varying degrees, supporters of expanding government’s role to address a wide range of political, social, and economic issues, a form of a liberal domestic order. In short, they shared a number of core assumptions that formed a rough consensus underlying a basic establishment perspective. This is exactly the point at which candidate Trump parted company with them and almost every single one of the GOP’s seventeen other candidates and certainly with the base and leadership of the Democratic Party.
President Trump in Political Time: Reconstruction or Restoration?

In its ambitions, the Trump presidency clearly resembles, to use Stephen Skowronek’s terms, a presidency of reconstruction. That kind of presidency can take place when the “established regime and pre-established commitments of ideology and interest have, in the course of events, become vulnerable to direct repudiation as failed or irrelevant responses to the problems of the day,” and further, that “there is a general political consensus that something fundamentally has gone wrong in the high affairs of state.” This allows a president in these circumstances to attempt “the wholesale reconstruction of the standards of legitimate national government.”

Yet, to date the reality of the Trump presidency is that it is, at present (again in Skowronek’s terms) a preemptive presidency. Mr. Skowronek writes of these kinds of presidents that:

The distinctive thing about preemptive leaders is that they are not out to establish, uphold, or salvage any political orthodoxy. Theirs is an unabashedly mongrel politics. ...These leaders bid openly for a hybrid alternative. Their leadership stance provides them with considerable license to draw policy positions and political commitments from different sides of the issues of their day and to promote their recombination in a loosely synthesized mix.

This reads like a description of the Trump presidency. It seems clear that the iconoclastic disruptive presidency of Mr. Trump has moved the country into a new political time zone according to Skowronek’s theory. Yet, it is unclear at this point exactly which political time zone that is. President Trump clearly aspires to have reconstructive presidency, but the most he has managed to date is to have a disruptive (preemptive) one. We take up the issue of how and under what circumstances President Trump could possibly emerge as a reconstructive leader, in Chapter 12.

This observation helps us to understand two key elements of the Trump presidency: why the opposition to Mr. Trump’s presidency is so intense, and why Mr. Trump’s fight-club presidency may be more politically consequential than simply a reflection of his psychology. In trying to move his presidency from preemptive to reconstructive, tough political fighting may not only be expected, but necessary. And if this is accurate, Mr. Trump’s fight club presidency may not only be a matter of
his psychology, which we argue it is, but of what he sees as a necessary political strategy.

**Mr. Trump’s Prospects for a Successful Presidency**

Whether President Trump can survive the clear efforts by his many establishment and resistance enemies to checkmate his presidency or deny him reelection is unclear. Whether he can effectively politically harness his protean psychology to overcome those efforts is another. These two very basic questions lead to a third: can Mr. Trump have anything resembling a successful presidency?

The correct answer is: maybe. There was during Trump’s first three years of office the ever-looming question of what, if anything, the Special Prosecutor looking into the Trump campaign’s possible relationship to Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election would find. Anti-Trump opposition members hoped for the best, which in their view included clear evidence and formal charges of collusion with Russia to steal the election and evidence of obstruction of justice that could lead to successful articles of impeachment and Trump’s removal by the Senate. In this they were sorely disappointed.

President Trump, for his part, insisted that he has done absolutely nothing wrong and said that the accusation and investigations were partisan “witch hunts” designed to destroy the legitimacy of his presidency. There is now evidence that he had a point. In the end, the Mueller investigation provided no concrete evidence that Mr. Trump, or any of his senior advisors, colluded with Russian intelligence to influence the election. NeverTrump opponents then put their hopes in the eighty-one current, ongoing Democratic House investigations of alleged administration wrongdoing, with more new investigations being added by the week. However, all of these together or individually were no more successful in providing a legitimate basis for removing Trump from office than the Mueller investigation did.

Mr. Trump was still not “home free.” He still faced and his to surmount an impeachment trial in the Senate passing on the two articles of impeachment voted on by the House along strict partisan lines. He also still faces public concern and scrutiny concerning his judgments and leadership in response to the medical and economic effects of the Coronavirus. More recently he has faced a nation-wide convulsion of anger and revulsion in response to the video of police force that resulted
in the death of an unarmed black man, George Lloyd, and the demonstrations both peaceful and violent that followed them. Critics have raised the question of whether it is possible to trust a president whom they have routinely and cavalierly branded as a racist, to address and help resolve the substantial racial disparities that effect the United States.

**Mr. Trump’s Home Alone Presidency**

President Trump aspires to be, in Stephen Skowronek’s terms, a reconstructive president. That is a rare accomplishment in American history, having happened only a few times during thankfully rare traumatic historical circumstances. Barack Obama was quite clear in his transformational intentions saying quite directly—“I want to transform this country.”

Yet he failed to do so.

President Obama had two terms in which to set that transformation into motion, but was unable to consolidate that effort after losing control of Congress to the Republicans and a substantial number of American voters by presenting himself as a moderate and governing as a progressive. Those failed transformative efforts set the stage for Trump’s 2016 election and his presidency has been aimed at dismantling both Obama’s policies and their underlying presumptions.

In a highly politically divided, highly skewed partisan public, enacting policy much less policy and political transformation is a daunting task. President Trump is in an even worse position to accomplish transformation than was President Obama for several reasons including the pandemic. President Obama had his party almost fully united behind him and had the support of many traditional establishment institutions.

Trump does not have these resources available to him. He most certainly does not have the support of the news media and major civic organizations and institutions (see Chapter 3). And his circumstances for his first two years in office were not dramatically much better among many Republican leaders.

President Trump lacks a natural base of allies within the traditional leadership wings of the Republican Party, among conservatives, or within most major American civic institutions—of which the media is only the most obvious. He therefore occupies in some important respects a rather unique go-it-alone presidency that extensively relies on the executive powers of his office, and the force and resiliency of his own psychology, and ordinary Republicans.
Peggy Noonan captured President Trump’s politically “home alone” dilemma in 2017 precisely\(^89\):

Normally a new president has someone backing him up, someone publicly behind him. Mr. Obama had the mainstream media—the big broadcast networks, big newspapers, activists and intellectuals, pundits and columnists of the left—the whole shebang. He had a unified, passionate party. Mr. Trump in comparison has almost nothing. The mainstream legacy media oppose him, even hate him, and will not let up. The columnists, thinkers and magazines of the right were mostly NeverTrump; some came reluctantly to support him. His party is split or splitting. The new president has gradations of sympathy, respect or support from exactly one cable news channel, and some websites. He really has no one but those who voted for him.

Consider that last sentence for a moment; it is both striking and informative. It is striking because it is so unlike every other modern presidency, even Jimmy Carter whose “outsider” position seems to resemble Trump’s circumstances, but really does not. It is informative because it provides one very clear explanation for why Mr. Trump’s presidency faces such strong and effective headwinds. His own party’s elected officials have been and remain to some degree ambivalent about his presidency, and act accordingly. Hence the president’s tweeted complaint and lament that “Republicans, even some that were carried over the line on my back, do very little to protect their President.”\(^90\) That is true even though the post-2018 Senate is much more strongly pro-Trump than its 2016 predecessor. In a recent example, several Republican Senators joined Democrats in placing legal limits on Trump’s ability to become involved in future military operations against Iran without Congressional approval.\(^91\)

In the ordinary course of events Congressional members of the president’s party do try to protect him both from opposition party critics and from legislative setbacks to his policies. That support is never unlimited—as Republicans’ response to President Nixon’s felonious behavior demonstrated. Nor does that support preclude more local focused reelection calculations by members of the president’s party.

That said, it is rare to see the party in power take clear decisive public steps to limit their president’s options as has happened with President Trump in several important areas.\(^92\) Nor is it usual to have a senior senator of the President’s party publicly rebuke the president’s response
to a controversial set of events (in Charlottesville), by saying, “The President has not yet been able to demonstrate the stability nor some of the competence that he needs to demonstrate in order to be successful.”

That criticism launched an ongoing public battle between President Trump and Senator Corker that spilled over into a very public fight when Senator Corker said that Trump’s “Recklessness Threatens World War III,” and then announced he would not seek reelection. Republican Senator Jeff Flake publicly criticized President Trump while announcing that he too would not run for reelection. In March of 2019, twelve Republican Senators joined their Democratic counterparts and voted against Trump’s emergency declaration that allowed him to use 16.3 billion dollars in military funds to help build a Southern barrier. More recently, a large number of House Republicans have announced their retirements complicating Republican efforts to regain control of the House in 2020.

These Congressional actions and the public rebuke of Mr. Trump and his presidency by some senior members of his own party reflect a lack of confidence that President Trump will respect and adhere to the boundaries that they wish he would abide by—willful ignoring traditional covenants of presidential “decorum.” Republicans in Congress are highly ambivalent about President Trump. He is increasingly a Republican president who does try to accomplish some traditional Republican goals—tax cuts, energy production, regulation reform, and staffing the courts with conservative judges.

On the other hand, he seems to some of them to be a mercurial policy maker whose specific views always seem to be in flux to some degree. Worse, from their standpoint, they are legitimately afraid that his rhetorical excesses and many public fights will scare away voters they might need for their elections and agendas. Trump remains extremely popular with ordinary Republicans and so there is a big risk in publicly opposing him—not the least of which is that he is not shy about picking fights with his party’s leaders.

It is a tenuous base from which to become a successful reconstructive leader, but Mr. Trump has spent a lifetime overcoming expectations that it can’t be done or he can’t do it. This analysis honestly tries to addresses the Trump presidency fairly, but also seriously. One of the critically important reasons for doing so is found in an early profile of Trump on the campaign trail by a reporter for Rolling Stone—no supporter of his presidency, and worth quoting at some length:

"Building A Theory of Donald Trump and His Presidency"
In all the hysteria, however, what’s often missed are the qualities that brought Trump here. You don’t do a fraction of what he’s done in life—dominate New York real estate for decades, build the next grand Xanadus for the super-rich on the far shores of Dubai and Istanbul, run the prime-time ratings table for more than 10 years and earn a third (or sixth) fortune at it—without being immensely cunning and deft, a top-of-the-food chain killer. Over the course of 10 days and several close-in encounters, I got to peer behind the scrim of his bluster and self-mythos and get a very good look at the man. What I saw was enough to make me take him dead serious. If you’re waiting for Trump to blow himself up in a Hindenburg of gaffes or hate speech, you’re in for a long, cold fall and winter.

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93. Senator Corker (R-TN) quoted in Jeremy Herb. 2017. “Trump Hasn’t Demonstrated the Stability or Competence to Be Successful,” CNN, August 18.

94. Jonathan Martin and Mark Lander. 2017. “Bob Corker Says Trump’s Recklessness Threatens World War III,” New York Times, October 8.

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96. Alexander Bolton. 2020. “12 Republican Senators Defy Trump on Emergency Declaration,” The Hill, March 14.

97. Deidre Walsh. 2019. “GOP Retirements Spike, Diminishing Hope of Retaking House Majority in 2020,” NPR, September 6.

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