

The Founding Nightmare Realized: Demagoguery, Fascism, And Donald Trump

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Abstract

Donald Trump's campaign was remarkable for a number of reasons. One of these was the way it generated discussion of the phenomena of demagoguery and fascism among scholars, citizens, and politicians. Prior to the 2016 presidential election, it would have been almost inconceivable to think that someone plausibly labeled a demagogue or a fascist could be elected to the highest office in the United States. This paper utilizes the Trump campaign and the early portion of his presidency as tools to assess what demagoguery and fascism are, why they are problematic for the effective exercise of statesmanship, why they cannot be reconciled with constitutional democracy, and how they relate to one another, highlighting the stark distinctions between the reality of Trump's practices and the desires of the founders.

When the founders conceived the leadership role of the executive, they envisioned a dynamic and unified branch actuated by a commitment to the common good and, being relatively immune to popular pressures, capable of making difficult decisions for the long-term benefit of the people. Although they sought to promote the effective exercise of statesmanship, the founders were concerned with limiting the potential for the abuse of executive power and with minimizing the reliance of the executive on popular appeals rather than constitutionally derived authority. Certain types of leadership, namely those that entail the abuse of power or that rely on "popular arts," are inherently antithetical to these principles. The candidacy of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential race and the early actions of his presidency have thrown into sharp relief the incompatibility of

demagogic and fascist leadership with constitutional democracy and statesmanship as conceived by the founders.

Demagoguery: The Concept Explained

Demagoguery is a style of rhetorical leadership characterized by appeals to “passions and prejudices rather than to reason.”^{1,2} Following James Ceaser, one may classify demagoguery as one of two types: hard and soft. Hard demagoguery is predicated upon appeals to negative emotions, such as fear and anger, and tends to be divisive. Soft demagoguery is based on obsequious appeals and is harder to detect. It relies on “flattery that tells the people they can do no wrong or of seductive appeals that hide behind a veil of liberality, making promises that can never be kept or raising hopes that can never be satisfied.”³

¹ James Fennimore Cooper, “On Demagogues.” In *The American Democrat*, (Cooperstown: H&E Finney, 1838), 90, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081777090;view=1up;seq=1>

² The use of emotional language is obviously not the exclusive province of demagogic leaders; the definition of demagoguery is not binary, but rather something more akin to a sliding scale based on a preponderance of appeals to emotion and a relative absence of appeals to reason. Because of the mixture of appeals to reason and emotions found in most political rhetoric, it can often be difficult to ascertain exactly where the line between demagoguery and conventional rhetoric lies. In defining the demagogue, it is also important not to confuse demagoguery with populism. We often deride populist leaders we don’t like as demagogues, but the two can be exclusive; it is possible to promote a populist agenda without relying on the inflammatory rhetoric characteristic of demagogues or possessing “overwhelming popularity that transcends ordinary popularity” (Logue and Dorgan, 4).

³ James W. Ceaser, "Political Parties and Presidential Ambition," *The Journal of Politics* 40 (1978): 716, DOI: 10.2307/2129862

Demagogues, the leaders who ascribe to the practice of demagoguery, rely extensively, and virtually exclusively, on passionate appeals to connect with the people and further their political power.⁴ “The peculiar office of the demagogue,” as James Fennimore Cooper articulates in the *American Democrat*, is to “advance his own interests by affecting a deep devotion to the interests of the people.”⁵ Demagogues, by affecting this “deep devotion” to the people, create an “intense and visceral connection” with them.⁶ The “raging popularity” this connection affords is then harnessed to reward the personal ambition of the demagogue and to subvert established rules and conventions, often to the detriment of democracy and the people.^{7,8}

The proclivity of demagogues for undermining existing laws may be understood in terms of the type of people demagogues

⁴ Although the term “demagogue” is pejorative in its colloquial usage, eliciting comparisons to “political villains from a hall of horrors, ranging from epic sociopaths such as Hitler and Mussolini to a modern “ethnic cleanser” like Slobodan Milosevic, to a rabble-rousing bigot like George Wallace,” it is not a normative term in its original signification (Signer, 34). “Demagogue” comes from the Greek words *agogos*, meaning leader, and *demos*, meaning people, and was originally conceived to describe a new type of popular leader who emerged in conjunction with the decline of the aristocrats who previously dominated Athenian politics (Signer, 34).

⁵ James Fennimore Cooper, “On Demagogues,” 100.

⁶ Michael Signer, *Demagogue: The Fight to Save Democracy From Its Worst Enemies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 35.

⁷ *Ibid*, 35.

⁸ There are a few notable exceptions. As Michael Signer points out in *Demagogue*, the activities of demagogues may be widely beneficial to the people in societies where the people are oppressed by bad laws, as was the case with Lech Walesa in Poland and Boris Yeltsin in the U.S.S.R. (Signer, 36).

exploit and the basic properties of individual ambition. Demagogues find fertile ground in the downtrodden and disillusioned, those people who have the least to lose and the most to gain in times of political upheaval.⁹ This subset of the people tends to blame, often justifiably, “the establishment” and the “elites” for its problems. By militating against the “establishment” and the “elites,” and transitively the laws that are seen to perpetuate the status of the “elites,” demagogues create the appearance that they have common cause with the people. They use this appearance of common cause to claim the mantle of popular authority. The vast majority of demagogues express anti-establishment sentiments, a tendency that may be observed in an analysis of virtually any demagogue’s rhetorical practices and political strategy. In his 1934 senatorial campaign, Theodore Bilbo “portrayed his opponent as an enemy of the people and friend of the wealthy” while he presented himself as ‘one of the people’ who knew their problems, sorrows, privations, hopes, and ambitions.”¹⁰¹¹ Jeff Davis of Arkansas gained the support

⁹ Throughout American history, demagogues have consistently appealed to this demographic. Daniel Shays appealed to debtors, Andrew Johnson to conquered southerners, Jeff Davis of Arkansas to the impecunious whites of his state, and Huey Long to Louisiana’s poor. Demagogues nearly always capitalize on economic and social frustrations and fears.

¹⁰ Theodore Bilbo (1877-1947) served two terms as the governor of Mississippi. He also served in the United States Senate from 1935 until his death in 1947. Bilbo built his reputation on vitriolic rhetoric and the exploitation of racial fears. Even Bilbo’s contemporaries considered him an extreme racist, which says something given the prevailing attitudes of his era.

¹¹ Jerry Hendrix, “Theodore G. Bilbo: Evangelist of Racial Purity,” in *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues*, ed. Cal M. Logue and Howard Dorgan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 156.

of Arkansas's impecunious whites by militating against the railroads and trusts.¹²¹³

Ambition is the other main reason for demagogic subversion of the laws. As Abraham Lincoln expresses in "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," true political ambition cannot be satisfied by "maintaining an edifice that has been erected by others," but only by destroying a polity and rebuilding it from the ground up. For the ambitious leader, "distinction will be his paramount object; and although he would as willingly... acquire it by doing good as harm; yet, that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling it down."¹⁴ The Constitution was designed to channel ambition and prevent such destruction from occurring. This intention is captured in "Federalist 51," which expresses the ideas that "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place" and "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men... you must... oblige it to control itself."¹⁵ According to James Ceaser, the founders sought to control ambition through institutional arrangements that would allow ambition to "curb its own excesses."¹⁶ Demagoguery is not a form of constitutional leadership; it creates a

¹² Jeff Davis (1862-1913) served as the governor of Arkansas and in the United States Senate. He was widely known for his folksy charm.

¹³ Annette Shelby, "Jeff Davis of Arkansas: Professional Man of the People" in *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues*, ed. Cal M. Logue and Howard Dorgan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 20.

¹⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," in *Readings in American Government*, ed. Mary Nichols and David Nichols (Dubuque: Kendall Hunt, 2013), 262.

¹⁵ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 319.

¹⁶ Ceaser, "Political Parties and Presidential Ambition," 717.

source of authority entirely separate from that of the Constitution.¹⁷ Demagogues therefore can exercise their power outside the channels of the Constitution, and are not subject to the means by which ambition might be institutionally proscribed or neutralized. Because they are not constrained in the same way that institutional leaders are, demagogues remain free to pursue their natural and absolute ambitions, undermining the laws and destroying the polity.

Unlike fascism, which is by nature adverse to liberty, there is nothing necessarily malignant about demagoguery. Demagoguery has a certain duality; it exists as both a common institutional practice and a tool. As a tool, it may be an instrument of effective statesmanship if used selectively to garner support for particular purposes necessary for the common good, such as preparing the country to face external threats.¹⁸ When demagoguery becomes a common institutional practice, however, it poses problems for constitutional democracy and the effective exercise of statesmanship.

Peripheral Qualities Associated With Demagogues

At its core, demagoguery involves a leader binding the people to his or her person through manipulation of passions, and using this connection for political gain. There are a number of peripheral qualities associated with demagogues and demagoguery that are often, but not always, present in the cases where demagoguery manifests itself. Related to appeals to peoples' passions is the frequent use of crisis psychology as a tool to garner political support. A demagogue will often concoct a crisis, "define the cause of the crisis as being a simple abstract or concrete evil" and then "with himself as the leader" "provide a new escape from the crisis, 'a new

¹⁷ Ibid, 718.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 40.

faith, a new belief.”¹⁹ “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman’s rhetoric affords an excellent example of crisis psychology in action: while on his speaking tours, Tillman asserted that a crisis loomed over the South in the form of the threat of domination by African Americans, a position evident in his statement that “The sword of Damocles, threatening Negro domination, is hanging over our heads.”^{20/21} Tillman blamed the North for this threat, asserting that northerners had “instituted national policies that severely injured southern political and social institutions. As a conqueror, the North had turned southerners over to ‘carpetbaggers, the nigger, and Southern scalawags and scoundrels.”²² Implicit in Tillman’s argumentation was that by voting for him, voters would secure a champion who would “educate the North” and “teach them the fundamental truth that the white man has the God-given right to govern this country.”²³ While demagogues often use crisis psychology, it is also possible to manipulate fear and anger without identifying a specific crisis and its cause, or to rely on “soft” demagogic appeals.

Demagogues, by necessity, speak at the level of the people they endeavor to connect with. Because demagogues cater to people who make up the lowest echelons of society in wealth, status, and education, they typically employ a level of discourse that is coarse, unrefined, and simple, avoiding complex policy issues.

¹⁹ Cal M. Logue and Howard Dorgan, “The Demagogue” in *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues*, ed. Cal M. Logue and Howard Dorgan, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 6.

²⁰ Benjamin Tillman was a South Carolina senator well known for his inflammatory rhetoric on the subject of race.

²¹ Howard Dorgan, “Pitchfork Ben’ Tillman and ‘The Race Problem from a Southern Point of View,” in *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues*, ed. Cal M. Logue and Howard Dorgan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 58.

²² Ibid, 54.

²³ Ibid, 51.

In order to “affect” a “deep devotion” to the people, demagogues must present themselves as sharing a common identity to the people, a task accomplished through the use of colloquial speech and constant suggestions of familiarity. Jeff Davis’ political career captures this strategy:

Essential to Davis’ strategy... was a sense of community. The rhetorical figure was a joining of hands. Davis reinforced this complicity through making common cause with “the average perspiring, honest yeoman.” He often began speeches with the phrase, “my fellow citizens.” “I’m one of you,” he told the common folk. And he proved it by identifying with their background, lifestyle, and value system.²⁴

Though often associated with demagogues, familiarity is a peripheral characteristic because it is merely a tool demagogues employ. Appearing familiar gives demagogues greater emotional leverage and creates a more genuine appearance of common cause with the people, but demagogues don’t always rely on familiarity. While one may easily imagine having a beer with Jeff Davis, Joseph McCarthy and Andrew Johnson hardly seem ideal drinking companions.

Demagogues generally avoid major policy issues beyond those most intimately related to social frustrations and the establishment. In order to fill the void created by the lack of content, demagogues construct larger-than-life personalities and shift the focus of their political activities from the issues to themselves, in effect making themselves into the issues. During Eugene Talmadge’s political career in Georgia, he “made himself the dominant issue” in

²⁴ Shelby, “Jeff Davis of Arkansas, Professional Man of the People,” 29.

“all his stump speaking.”²⁵²⁶ As one reporter illuminated during one of his campaigns, “there is only one issue with the voters and that is Talmadge. They either like him or they do not.”²⁷ As *The Arkansas Gazette* pointed out during Jeff Davis’s third gubernatorial campaign, “Davis is the issue.” Demagogues carve out these larger-than-life personalities by grabbing publicity through outrageous actions, as Huey Long did when he received a German naval commander in his green silk pajamas and Jeff Davis did when he assaulted political rivals with his cane and compared himself to Jesus.²⁸²⁹ Due to their larger-than-life personalities, demagogues often become the centers of something akin to cults of personality, with their supporters playing the role of cult followers. The nicknames bestowed on many of history’s demagogues speak to the tendency of demagogues to achieve the status of folk legends. Benjamin Tillman became “Pitchfork Ben.” Jeff Davis of Arkansas was “The Wild Ass of the Ozarks.” James Kimble Vardaman was “The White Chief.” Eugene

²⁵ Eugene Talmadge (1884-1946) served as the governor of Georgia from 1933 to 1937 and 1941 to 1943.

²⁶ Cal M. Logue, “The Coercive Campaign Prophecy of Gene Talmadge, 1926-1946,” in *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues*, ed. Cal M. Logue and Howard Dorgan, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 210.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 210.

²⁸ Huey Long (1893-1935) served as governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932 and in the United States Senate from 1932 until his assassination in 1935. Long constructed a political machine that dominated Louisiana politics; virtually every government official from the parish level up was in some way beholden to Long. He controlled Louisiana with dictatorial authority; his replacement as governor, O.K. Allen, was essentially his puppet. According to Earl Long, Huey Long’s brother, “A leaf blew in the window of Allen’s office. He signed it” (Signer, 115).

²⁹ Shelby, “Jeff Davis, Professional Man of the People,” 32.

Talmadge was “The Wild Man from Sugar Creek.” Theodore Bilbo was simply “The Man.”

Demagogues are often extremely egotistical, a feature intimately related to the maintenance of their larger-than-life personas. Julius Long, Huey Long’s brother, said of him that “the only sincerity there was in him was for himself” and that “there has never been such an administration of ego and pomposity since the days of Nero.” He also asserted that Huey Long’s political method was predicated on “the comic impudence, the gay egotism, the bravado, the mean hatred, the fear.”³⁰

Demagogues tend to benefit from, or are at least negligibly affected by, criticism levied by the media or other organs of the cultural elite. When Aristophanes ridiculed Cleon with multiple comedies, going so far as to dress up in a fat-suit and “mimic Cleon’s famously drunken visage,” he “failed in his political objective... to topple Cleon. Cleon continued, unscathed, to attack his opponents, to hand out money to the *demos* with abandon, and to provoke military expeditions.”³¹ Negative attacks in the press aided Jeff Davis in creating a bond with Arkansas’s “rednecks and hillbillies.” The *Helena World* referred to Davis as a “carrot-haired, red-faced, loud-mouthed, strong-limbed ox driving mountaineer lawyer... a friend to the fellow that brews forty-rod bug-juice back in the mountains.”³² Davis used such attacks as opportunities to enhance his identity as a man of the people and to paint the press as a mouthpiece of the establishment and enemy of the people.³³

Demagogues are most at home in speech and rally environments. These environments are the perfect places for

³⁰ Signer, *Demagogue: The Fight to Save Democracy From Its Worst Enemies*, 116.

³¹ *Ibid*, 50.

³² *Ibid*, 28.

³³ Shelby, “Jeff Davis, Professional Man of the People,” 33.

whipping up emotion through “vitriolic oratory and bizarre behavior.”³⁴ Demagogues treat their public appearances like shows. Demagogues speak combatively, love hecklers, and thrive off interacting with crowds.

Demagoguery: the Problem

In its most problematic form, the demagogue was the founders’ nightmare.³⁵ The founders regarded demagoguery as an evil on par with faction, a concern reflected in *The Federalist*, which literally begins and ends with warnings about demagoguery.³⁶ The founders regarded the institutional practice of demagoguery as dangerous because of its potential for abuse. In “Federalist 71,” Hamilton outlines the perils of demagogic leadership, writing that “by the wiles of parasites and sycophants, by the snares of the ambitious, the avaricious, the desperate, by the artifices of men who possess their confidence more than they deserve it” the people may be led into error.³⁷ In other words, demagogues can, by manipulating the emotions of the people, lead them into situations adverse to their interests and liberty. As the founders sought to create a rights-preserving regime, they were negatively disposed towards, or at least extremely wary, of any institutional practices that could compromise individual rights.

Demagoguery also jeopardizes individual rights, and prevents political leaders from acting as statesmen, through its tendency to undercut the role of the Constitution and replace it with informal sources of authority. From the founding perspective, office holders ought to “rest their claim on the legally defined rights and

³⁴ William J. Cooper, Jr. and Thomas E. Terill, *The American South*, vol. 2, ed. 4, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 592.

³⁵ As a common institutional practice.

³⁶ Signer, *Demagogue: The Fight to Save Democracy From Its Worst Enemy*, 32.

³⁷ Hamilton, Jay, and Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, 431.

prerogatives of their office,”³⁸ serving as “constitutional officers”³⁹ who derive their power from the constitution rather than from informal sources. Demagogues derive their power from popularity, an informal source of authority that “enables the demagogue to carve out a space that he alone dominates, to undermine legitimate constitutional authority.”⁴⁰ A leader whose claim to power is predicated on extra-constitutional authority, such as that generated through the popular arts, has no stake in the preservation of the rights guaranteed under the Constitution. The power of the demagogue is therefore not circumscribed in ways conducive to the preservation of individual rights, as the powers of “constitutional leaders” are. The authority of demagogues is circumscribed in other ways, however. The dependence of demagogues on popularity for their power restricts their ability to act as statesmen.⁴¹

Popular leaders achieve and maintain their power by mirroring public opinion, so if they make unpopular decisions, they lose the foundation of their power. Public opinion, as characterized by the founders, is often transient, misguided and ultimately injurious to the common good. Publius references the “indelible reproach” faced by “popular liberty” for “decreeing to the same citizens the hemlock on one day and statues on the next.”⁴² In “Federalist 63,” he asserts that “there are particular moments in public affairs when the people, stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, or misled by the artful misrepresentations of interested

³⁸ Ceaser, “Political Parties and Presidential Ambition,” 718.

³⁹ James W. Ceaser, Geln E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette, “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11 (1981): 162, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27547683>.

⁴⁰ Signer, *Demagogue: The Fight to Save Democracy From Its Worst Enemies*, 36.

⁴¹ Ceaser, “Political Parties and Presidential Ambition,” 719.

⁴² Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, 383.

men, may call for measures which they themselves will afterwards be the most ready to lament and condemn.”⁴³

Essentially, people don’t always know what is best for them, particularly in the long term. In “Federalist 71,” Publius states that “When occasions present themselves in which the interests of the people are at variance with their inclinations,” it is the duty of statesmen to “withstand the temporary delusion in order to give them time and opportunity for more cool and sedate reflection.”⁴⁴ Because statesmanship entails doing what is ultimately best for the common good, regardless of public opinion, and because public opinion is often at odds with the common good, relying strictly on public opinion is problematic for statesmanship.⁴⁵ A leader who simply mirrors public opinion is no statesman, so a demagogue is no statesman.

Utilizing demagogic techniques undermines the dignity of the presidential office. The founders would have been negatively disposed toward treating public appearances like shows, as demagogues tend to do. As Jeffrey Tulis articulates in *The Rhetorical Presidency*, “Nothing could be further from the founders’ intentions than for presidential power to depend upon the interplay of orator and crowd... the effect of such activity upon his dignity, upon his future ability to persuade, and upon the deliberative process as a whole is likely to be deleterious.”⁴⁶

The founders’ fear of demagoguery was derived in part from an understanding of demagoguery’s historic role as the agent by which most democracies are destroyed, an idea expressed in “Federalist 1” when Publius writes “History will teach us that ... of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious

⁴³ Ibid, 382.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 431.

⁴⁵ Ceaser, “Political Parties and Presidential Ambition,” 719.

⁴⁶ Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 89.

court to the people, commencing demagogues and ending tyrants.”⁴⁷ The founders were well versed in ancient history. According to Michael Signer, the classical depictions of “democracy’s self-destruction at the hands of demagogues shaped the Founding Fathers’ own thoughts.”⁴⁸ The ancients, including Plato, Polybius, and Aristotle, collectively characterized demagoguery as democracy’s natural nemesis through “through dark books with sordid plots and ominous endings.”⁴⁹ Aristotle wrote that “revolutions in democracy are most generally caused by the intemperance of demagogues.”⁵⁰ Demagoguery was an agent that turned Polybius’ cycle of regimes.⁵¹ Because of demagoguery’s historical role as democracy’s chief enemy, the founders, in creating a democratic polity, would have been remiss if they did not fear it and work to reduce its influence.

Trump: The Demagogic Archetype

Based on his campaign rhetoric and the actions of his early presidency, Trump is thoroughly deserving of the appellation “demagogue.” Trump appeals to the passions instead of reason; his rhetoric is simple, emotive, and designed to stir up fear. During the campaign, Trump fashioned himself as a man of the common people, derided the “elites” and the “establishment,” used harsh invectives to paint his opponents as establishment lackeys, utilized crisis psychology, transformed himself into the election’s key issue, and derived benefit from criticism levied by the media. Trump excels in rally environments; his affinity for rallies is such that he has

⁴⁷ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, 29.

⁴⁸ Signer, *Demagogue: The Fight to Save Democracy From Its Worst enemies*, 33.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 31.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 31.

⁵¹ Ibid, 39.

continued to hold them since the election.⁵² Trump is unequivocally egotistical. Throughout the campaign, he displayed blatant disregard for laws and conventions, and in the early days of his presidency, he has shown a monumental disrespect for the Constitution and rule of law, placing the people above both.

An analysis of his base supports Trump's positive identity as a demagogue. As stated earlier, demagogues tend to rely on the support of the disaffected and disillusioned. In the 2016 election, Trump did well in states with declining median incomes and the most severe losses of manufacturing jobs, and was highly successful among white voters lacking higher education, a demographic frustrated by an unfavorable economic environment and relatively declining socioeconomic status and particularly concerned with the implications of globalization and immigration. Exit polls for the 2016 election indicate that Trump won this group by the largest margin of any candidate since 1980, receiving 67% of its votes to Clinton's 28%.⁵³

Despite his billionaire status, Trump's rhetoric has struck a chord with a lot of people because he "says what they are thinking," "doesn't talk like a politician" and is massively politically incorrect. Trump has effectively presented himself as relatable and forged, as conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh put it, "a connection with

⁵² Julie Hirschfield Davis, "Campaign Over, President Trump Will Hold a (What Else?) Campaign Rally," *New York Times*, February 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/us/politics/campaign-over-president-trump-will-hold-a-what-else-campaign-rally.html>

⁵³ Alec Tyson and Maniam Shiva, "Behind Trump's Victory: Divisions by race, gender, and education," *Pew Research Center*, November 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory->

his voters that most politicians don't have."⁵⁴ Trump's faculty in this area can be meaningfully compared to that of Eugene Talmadge, another wealthy (though not to the extent of Trump) and well-educated politician, who, when on campaign, would cultivate familiarity wherever he went.

When he entered a town, Talmadge behaved in a manner familiar and acceptable to white Georgians. Although he was college trained and from a successful family, he had lived on a farm; thus, he stressed his credentials as a man of the soil.

This schooled lawyer cultivated an image of being one of the masses and disguised himself as a spokesman concerned about both their cruel working conditions and their abuse at the hands of government and the business elite.⁵⁵

Donald Trump behaves in a manner that is more than familiar and acceptable to his base; the coarseness of his speech is wildly applauded, his flaws are looked upon as advantages. Although he is well-educated, having attended Fordham and the University of Pennsylvania, and despite the fact that he came from a wealthy family, Trump has stressed his credentials as a self-made businessman the wealthy dislike. In a 1990 interview with *Playboy*, Trump said "Rich men are less likely to like me, but the working man likes me because he knows I worked hard and didn't inherit what I built."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Tom Kludt, "Limbaugh on the news media: 'They're enemies of Trump,'" *CNN*, February 17, 2017.

<http://money.cnn.com/2017/02/19/media/rush-limbaugh-donald-trump/>

⁵⁵ Logue, "The Coercive Campaign Prophecy of Gene Talmadge, 1926-1946," 211.

⁵⁶ Scott Glover and Maeve Reston, "How Trump Sees Himself,"

CNN, April 1, 2016,

<http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/01/politics/how-donald-trump-sees-himself/>

Throughout his campaign and presidency, Trump has affected the classic anti-establishment stance of the demagogue. He has consistently painted the politicians whom he labels as “Washington insiders” as corrupt and out-of-touch. His campaign promise to “drain the swamp” effectively captures this stance, as does his treatment of Hillary Clinton, whom he accused explicitly of corruption, citing her handling of emails as Secretary of State and the activities of the Clinton Foundation. In his inaugural address, Trump expressed the sentiment that

For too long, a small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered, but the jobs left and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country.⁵⁷

Trump also sought to perpetuate the narrative that “the system” is rigged by the elites in favor of the elites; in a speech delivered in Roanoke, Virginia, he stated that the goal of his campaign was to “take on the big donors, and big business, and big media” and “the rigged system” these entities drive.⁵⁸

Demagogues appeal to passions and prejudices in order to stir people up for personal political advantage. Statements such as “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you... They’re sending people that have lots of

⁵⁷ Donald Trump, “Inaugural Address” (speech, Washington, DC, January 20, 2016), *Politico*, <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907>

⁵⁸ Donald Trump, “Full text of Donald Trump’s Virginia rally speech” (Speech, Roanoke, September 15, 2016), *WHSV*, <http://www.whsv.com/content/news/WATCH-Live-raw-video-of-Trump-rally-in-Virginia-394694121.html>

problems, and they're bringing those problems... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" are what makes Trump a textbook demagogue.⁵⁹ Trump's campaign speeches and electoral success were largely based on the exploitation of fear and anger. Trump generated these sentiments where they didn't exist in sufficient strength, and fed off them. In the above statement, Trump associates Mexicans with crime, tapping into prejudices and stirring up fear. Trump's statements regarding Syrian refugees and Muslim immigration in general also play upon fears of terrorism and prejudices against non-Christians.

Subsumed in Trump's exploitation of the passions is a sophisticated use and understanding of crisis psychology. In his speech at the Republican National Convention, Trump stated that, "Our Convention occurs at a moment of crisis for our nation. The attacks on our police, and the terrorism in our cities, threaten our very way of life."⁶⁰ Trump laid the blame for the security "crisis" squarely at the feet of the Obama administration. Trump then identified himself as the sole champion of the people, stating "I am your voice" and "nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it."⁶¹

⁵⁹Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "Donald Trump's false comments connecting Mexican immigrants and crime," *Washington Post*, July 8, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donaldtrumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/?utm_term=.416d82b528fe

⁶⁰ Donald Trump. "Donald Trump's Speech at the Republican convention, as prepared for delivery," (speech, Cleveland, July 21, 2016), *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/22/politics/donald-trump-rnc-speech-text/>

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Trump fails to adhere to conventions. Every major-party candidate over the last forty years has released his or her tax returns.⁶² Trump did not. Upon election, Trump also failed to meaningfully divest himself from his business interests, a breach of typical practice for elected officials. The members of his staff go so far as to promote his businesses.⁶³ Trump's acrimonious relationship with the press is also at odds with convention. While previous leaders have had strained relationships with the press, none have called reputable news outlets "fake news" or banned the press corps from travelling

with them.⁶⁴

Egotism and narcissism define Trump's personality. He brags constantly about his net worth. At a CIA meeting, he stressed his monumental electoral victory.⁶⁵ Statements such as "I know more about renewables than any human being on earth," "I know more

⁶² Nicole Hensley, "Trump's 2005 tax return leak leaves more questions than answers," *New York Daily News*, March 15, 2017, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/trump-2005-tax-return-leak-leaves-questions-answers-article-1.2998434>

⁶³ Jackie Northam, "Trump Talks Up His Luxury Hotel; Ethics Expert Pounces," *NPR*, January 19, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwoway/2017/01/19/510623152/trump-talks-up-his-luxury-hotel-ethics-expert-pounces>

⁶⁴ Kathleen Hennessy, "Breaking tradition, Trump doesn't permit journalists to cover his first meeting with Obama," *PBS*, November 10, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/breaking-tradition-trump-doesnt-permit-journalists-cover-first-meeting-obama/>

⁶⁵ Noah Bierman and Brian Bennett, "Trump boasts and attacks the media in solemn CIA setting," *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-cia-20170121-story.html>

about Isis than the generals,” and “Nobody reads the bible more than me” capture his narcissism.⁶⁶

Trump has unfailingly stressed the primacy of the people and paid scant attention to the Constitution. His inaugural address captures this tendency. Trump failed to mention or invoke the Constitution or his presidential responsibility to uphold it, but the address is replete with such passages as “we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the people” and “what truly matters is not which party controls the government, but whether the government is controlled by the people.”⁶⁷ Trump also stated “the oath I take today is an oath of allegiance to all Americans.”⁶⁸ The presidential oath of office, however, is not intended to be an oath of allegiance directly to the people, but is rather an affirmation of loyalty to the Constitution that reads “I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of the President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.”⁶⁹ By suggesting that the oath he took was not to the Constitution, but to the people, Trump effectively asserted that the people are a higher authority than the Constitution. In the words of James Fennimore Cooper, “the demagogue always puts the people before the constitution and the laws, in face of the obvious truth that

⁶⁶ Eric Zorn, “Nobody is more skeptical of Donald Trump’s boasts than I am,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 18, 2016, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/zorn/ct-donald-trump-ignorant-policy-perspec-zorn-1019-20161018-column.html>

⁶⁷ Trump, “Inaugural Address.”

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Liam Stack, “The Oath of Office: 35 Words That Are Harder Than They Look,” *New York Times*, January 19, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/us/politics/presidential-oath-of-office.html>

the people have placed the constitution and the laws before themselves.”⁷⁰ As Donald Trump has placed the people above the Constitution and the laws, it follows that he is a demagogue.

Trump is the founders’ nightmare realized. He has demonstrated scant knowledge of the Constitution, let alone reverence for it. Trump can hardly be expected to act as a constitutional officer. He has claimed the mantle of popular authority, suggesting that he speaks for the people and laying the foundation for non-institutional rule. Non-institutional rule does not carry with it the same protections and benefits as constitutional rule. If Trump disregards the Constitution, the rights of all Americans are at stake. His ability to act as a statesman is impaired. If exigencies compel him to act in defiance of popular will, his administration will be throttled. Already, Trump has allowed demagoguery’s negative potential to be realized; he has successfully cultivated fear and division within the American people and inspired violence.

Fascism Explained

Fascism differs from demagoguery in that fascism is a regime type rather than a tool for securing political control. Fascist regimes, however, often use demagoguery as an instrument, entrenching themselves through divisive appeals and fear-mongering. As Umberto Eco illustrates in “UR Fascism,” fascist regimes can be difficult to identify because no two are identical.⁷¹ Fascist regimes manifest themselves in different ways in different places. Francisco Franco’s “hyper-Catholic Falangism,” for example, differed from Nazism.⁷² Accordingly, it is probable that fascism in America would differ in outward appearance from fascism elsewhere. Although fascist regimes are not identical, they share a family resemblance.

⁷⁰ James Fennimore Cooper, “On Demagogues,” 99.

⁷¹ Umberto Eco, “UR-Fascism.” *The New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/>

⁷² Ibid

They share certain features, but don't necessarily exhibit all of the same features. Eco identifies fourteen features associated with fascist regimes and fascist ideology. These features include:

1. A cult of tradition
2. Irrationalism and rejection of modern thought
3. Dismissal of intellectualism
4. An inability to withstand analytical criticism
5. Racism and the exploitation of fear and difference
6. Exploitation of social frustrations, often within the middle class
7. Obsession with plots and conspiracies against the regime
8. Followers who feel humiliated "by the ostentatious wealth and force of their enemies"
9. Permanent conflict
10. "Popular elitism," in which adherents of the regime enjoy privileged status
11. Education with the intent of developing heroes
12. Machismo
13. "Selective populism" in which "The People is conceived as a monolithic entity expressing the Common Will..." while "the leader pretends to be their interpreter."
14. Simplicity of speech. "Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak."

Fascism: The Problem

Fascist leadership styles cannot be reconciled with statesmanship because fascism is in direct conflict with the constitutional dictates and moral ideals upon which statesmanship is based. The dangers fascism presents for democracy and American constitutional principles are innumerable and vary depending on the manner in which fascism presents itself, so the scope of this paper does not permit their full discussion. It is possible, however, to examine some of these dangers through a cursory analysis of Trump's campaign and presidency.

President Trump: Proto-Fascist?

While it would be incorrect to label the current American regime as “fascist,” Trump has exhibited many disturbing tendencies while campaigning and in office and there is a real possibility that his actions will push the polity in a fascist direction. Many of Trump’s political and rhetorical practices exhibit close parallels to the characteristics of Ur-fascism. As he has only been in office a short time, it is difficult to say what the long-term effects of these practices will be, but owing to these close parallels, Trump’s practices might be the germ of fascism in America. They therefore warrant close examination.

Trump’s campaign was based on a cult of tradition. His campaign slogan, “make America great again” glorifies the past by harkening back to a mythic, idealized version of it.

Trump consistently rejects objective truth, reason, and enlightened thought. Even though his inauguration was not as well attended as those of his predecessors, his administration insisted that it was.⁷³ He also claimed, without evidence, that over three million people voted illegally in the 2016 election (conveniently the margin of his loss to Hillary Clinton in the popular vote).⁷⁴ Despite overwhelming consensus within the scientific community, Trump has rejected climate change, going so far as to claim that it is a hoax

⁷³ Glenn Kessler, “Spicer earns Four Pinocchios for false claims on inauguration crowd size,” *Washington Post*, January 22, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/01/22/spicer-earns-four-pinocchios-for-a-series-of-false-claims-on-inauguration-crowd-size/?utm_term=.af7e8806dcd4

⁷⁴ Abby Phillip and Mike DeBonis, “Without evidence, Trump tells lawmakers 3 million to 5 million illegal ballots cost him the popular vote,” *Washington Post*, January 23, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/postpolitics/wp/2017/01/23/at-white-house-trump-tells-congressional-leaders-3-5-million-illegal-ballots-cost-him-the-popular-vote/?utm_term=.e47165065f6a

perpetrated by the Chinese.⁷⁵ Trump provided the impetus behind the birther movement, which erroneously claimed President Obama was not a United States citizen.⁷⁶ These are just a few examples of Trump's irrationalism among many.

In his discussion of irrationalism, Eco points out that it relies on the rejection and condemnation of intellectual thought. Trump epitomizes anti-intellectualism. He is coarse and unrefined in his speech and manners. He shuns the intelligence community and the work of knowledgeable advisers, and does not attend to briefings.⁷⁷ He hardly ever reads.⁷⁸ Trump's campaign was largely based on condemning the "elites," the vast majority of whom are well-educated and liberal.

Irrationalism such as Trump's cannot stand up to analytical criticism. This explains his acrimonious relationship with the press. Because the press is an organ that voices analytical criticism, Trump cannot tolerate it. During the campaign, he asserted he would open

⁷⁵ Edward Wong, "Trump Has Called Climate Change a Chinese Hoax. Beijing Says It Is Anything But," *New York Times*, November 18, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/world/asia/china-trump-climate-change.html>

⁷⁶ Michael Barbaro, "Donald Trump Clung to Birther Lie for Years, and Still Isn't Apologetic," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/17/us/politics/donald-trump-obama-birther.html?_r=0

⁷⁷ Louis Nelson. "Trump: I don't need daily briefings." *Politico*, December 11, 2016. <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/trump-briefings-232479>

⁷⁸ Marc Fisher, "Donald Trump doesn't read much. Being president probably wouldn't change that," *Washington Post*, July 17, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/donald-trump-doesnt-read-much-being-president-probably-wouldnt-change-that/2016/07/17/d2ddf2bc>

up libel laws when he became president.⁷⁹ When news outlets challenged the veracity of Trump's statements, he challenged their legitimacy, referring to CNN as "fake news."⁸⁰ He is rude to reporters during press conferences, frequently shutting them down, and he refuses to travel with the press.⁸¹

The exploitation of social frustrations and the creation of divisions are characteristics that help render Trump both a demagogue and a fascist. Trump's anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric, discussed at length in the section on demagoguery, are consonant with fascist rhetoric. Trump capitalized on economic dissatisfaction. His promises to restore and preserve the manufacturing sector and industries like coal mining earned him powerful support from areas of the country caught in spirals of decline or economic doldrums.

An obsession with plots and conspiracies is another characteristic Trump exhibits that may also be associated with fascist regimes. Trump's unsubstantiated accusation that President Obama ordered the wire-tapping of Trump Tower provides evidence of Trump's obsession.

Trump personifies machismo, a form of exaggerated masculinity characterized by swagger and condescension toward women. Trump's masculinity is grounded in misogyny and

⁷⁹ Hadas Gold, "Donald Trump on libel laws: We're going to 'open' them up," *Politico*, February 26, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/blogs/on-media/2016/02/donald-trump-libel-laws-219866>

⁸⁰ Kelsey Sutton, "Trump calls CNN 'fake news,' as channel defends its reporting on intelligence briefing," *Politico*, January 11, 2017. <http://www.politico.com/blogs/on-media/2017/01/trump-refusing-to-answer-question-from-cnn-reporter-you-are-fake-news-233485>

⁸¹ Hennessy, "Breaking tradition, Trump doesn't permit journalists to cover his first meeting with Obama."

braggadocio. He conceives the value of women to be intimately related to their appearances. When he attacks women, he does not discuss their intelligence or views, but rather their appearances. He referred to Fox News host Megyn Kelly as a “bimbo”⁸² and compared Heidi Cruz’s appearance unfavorably to Melania’s.⁸³ He also paid great attention to Carly Fiorina’s appearance during the primaries, stating, “Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next president? I mean, she’s a woman, and I know I’m not supposed to say bad things, but really folks, come on. Are we serious?”⁸⁴ In any discussion of Trump’s misogynistic behavior, there is also the Billy Bush recording to consider. Bragging about sexual assault definitely suggests the presence of machismo.

Trump practices selective populism. Trump claims to be the arbiter of the people’s will, explicitly asserting that he is their voice. This was evident at the RNC, where Trump declared, “I am your voice!”⁸⁵

⁸² Tobias Salinger, “Trump calls Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly a ‘bimbo,’ posts doctored image in continuing Twitter rant,” *New York Daily News*, January 28, 2016,

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/trump-calls-fox-news-anchor-megyn-kelly-bimbo-article-1.2512993>

⁸³ Christine Ayala, “War of the wives: Cruz calls Trump a ‘sniveling coward’ for comparison,” *The Dallas Morning News*, March 24, 2016, <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2016/03/24/the-twitter-war-continues-trump-compares-his-wife-to-heidi-cruz>

⁸⁴ Jessica Estepa, “Donald Trump on Carly Fiorina: ‘Look at that face!’” *USA Today*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nationnow/2015/09/10/trump-fiorina-look-face/71992454/>

⁸⁵ Trump, “Donald Trump’s Speech at the Republican convention, as prepared for delivery.”

Trump's rhetoric is simple. When the Flesch-Kincaid Test, an algorithm designed to determine the level of speech and writing, was applied to Trump's announcement speech, it revealed that he spoke at a fourth-grade level. Compared to the announcement speeches of the other candidates, Trump's was the simplest. As a point of reference, Mike Huckabee and Carly Fiorina spoke at around a tenth-grade level, Ted Cruz spoke at a ninth-grade level, and Martin O'Malley and Hillary Clinton at a roughly eighth-grade level.⁸⁶ Trump's announcement speech is just one example of the low level of discourse that characterized his campaign. In the August 6th Republican candidates' debate, he also spoke at a fourth-grade level,⁸⁷ and at a Michigan press conference, at a third-grade level. Eco wrote "Ur-fascism speaks Newspeak." Trump and his administration are distinctly Orwellian in their speech. Terms like "alternative fact" would hardly be out of place in *1984*.

Trump's fascism is a threat to American democracy because, like other forms of fascism, it cannot tolerate rational scrutiny. Regimes with this vulnerability can only survive by suppressing dissent, often by restricting freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Restrictions of these freedoms are incompatible with the First Amendment. Trump's fascism derives its power from social frustrations and widespread fear of certain ethnic groups. Fascist regimes with these characteristics often single out specific groups for

⁸⁶ Matt Viser, "For presidential hopefuls, simpler messages resonate." *Boston Globe*, October 20, 2015.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2015/10/20/donald-trump-and-ben-carson-speak-grade-school-level-that-today-voters-can-quickly-grasp/LUCBY6uwQAxiLvVXbVTSUN/story.html>

⁸⁷ Jack Shafer, "Donald Trump Talks Like a Third Grader," *Politico*, August 13, 2015,

<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/donald-trump-talks-like-a-third-grader-121340>

persecution. This tendency cannot be reconciled with the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The founders sought to create a rights-preserving regime. Fascism is deleterious to individual rights, and so is at odds with the founding ideal.

Conclusions

Demagoguery and fascism are complex ideas, but refracted through the lens of Trump's America, they may be more easily understood. Demagoguery in most instances, and fascism in every instance, are inconsistent with the founding ideals of liberal, rights-preserving democracy and with the principles of statesmanship. Demagoguery and fascism have awful potential; they are destroy civil liberties and are vehicles for division, fear, pain, and suffering. We can only hope that the worst is not realized under Donald Trump.

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