

# The Magic of Donald Trump

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## *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again*

by Donald J. Trump  
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*Like Hercules, Donald Trump is a work of fiction.*<sup>1</sup>

Primed for miracles and wonders, Trumpsters in their thousands tilt their heads up toward the blue-black Florida sky. Behind the approaching *thwack-thwack-thwack* the electronic fanfare soars and above it now we hear the booming carnival barker's come-on: "*Now arriving out of the northwest sky, DONALD...J... TRUMP!*" Thousands of upturned mouths gape as the three floating lights, turning slowly, majestically resolve themselves into the shape of the big helicopter, the inevitable TRUMP in signature Akzidenz-Grotesk font just visible on its tail.

Six thousand roaring voices—or is it seven thousand, or eight, or nine?—crash in a wave of sound against the raucous electro-brass salute. The ear-splitting blare is the theme to *Air Force One*, a cheesy late-1990s hit starring Harrison Ford as Medal-of-Honor-winning President James Marshall, whose Boeing is seized by terrorists. (President Marshall growling to an about-to-be-defenestrated terrorist: "Get off my plane!") Can one imagine any other candidate using this as theme music? For Ted Cruz or John Kasich or any of the fourteen others who have wandered on and then off the stage, the irony—the lack of self-seriousness—would be unendurable. After all, they are—were—really running for president. With Trump we are already in the



Donald Trump; drawing by James Ferguson

knowing half-grin world of reality television. All irony fits into the self-affirming profile of an inside joke.

No accident, that: it all began as such. “Almost a year ago,” writes the former communications chief of his Super PAC,

I sat in Trump Tower being told that the goal was to get The Donald to poll in double digits and come in second in delegate count. That was it. The Trump camp would have been satisfied to see him polling at 12 percent and taking second place to a candidate who might hold 50 percent. His candidacy was a protest candidacy.<sup>2</sup>

A protest candidacy? Like, say, Pat Paulsen’s? No, no: much bigger than that. But alike in that there was no thought of actually winning. A celebrity making his protest run in part to bolster and increase his celebrity, for that is what celebrities do. Despite the hundreds of thousands of newspaper epithets marking him a “billionaire real estate magnate” or a “Manhattan developer,” these have not been the accurate or in any event the relevant words for at least a dozen years. I’m not a doctor but I play one on TV...

The celebrity in the distinctive modern sense could not have existed in any earlier age.... *The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness.*

His qualities—or rather his lack of qualities—illustrate our peculiar problems. He is neither good nor bad, great nor petty. He is the human pseudo-event. He has been fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness.... He is made by all of us who willingly read about him, who like to see him on television, who buy recordings of his voice, and talk about him to our friends. His relation to morality and even to reality is highly ambiguous.<sup>3</sup>

—Daniel Boorstin, *The Image*

Observe the celebrity known as Donald Trump saunter onto the stage at Boca Raton, twenty minutes after his helicopter swoops in. The slow and ponderous walk, the extended chin, the pursed mouth, the slowly swiveling head, the exaggerated look of knowing authority: with the exception of the red “Make America Great Again” ball cap perched atop his interesting hair the entire passage is quoted whole cloth from the patented boardroom entrance of *The Apprentice*, something that does not escape the delirious fans, even if it does most journalists. If when you see that outthrust chin you shiver with intimations of Mussolini, well,

you were never a fan.

Legions were; *The Apprentice* debuted on NBC in 2004 with 20.7 million viewers, ranking it seventh among all primetime programs. Twenty-eight million people tuned in to watch the season finale. The numbers went down from there but still in today's "fragmented entertainment marketplace" those numbers are, well, huge. Week after week for a dozen years millions of Americans saw Donald J. Trump portraying the business magus, the grand vizier of capitalism, the wise man of the boardroom, a living confection whose every step and word bespoke gravitas and experience and power and authority and...money. Endless amounts of money. The establishing low-angle shots of Trump Tower. The Donald strolling across the grass in front of his helicopter in his Brioni suits and signature red or blue or pink ties. In his presence or out, everyone, even the biggest celebrity retreads, referred to him in tones of reverent awe as "Mr. Trump."

The ability, the wisdom, the energy, the money. That was the theme song: "Money money money *mon-ey*..." Watch this show and see him in the boardroom. See how he does it, how he makes it. Follow him and watch him and listen to him and thereby do what we are insistently and seductively bidden to do by the very aura of all celebrities: come to know him.

How many of the thousands pressed together into this sweating mass in Boca, wearing shorts or sweatpants, smiling out under "Make America Great Again" hats, gobbling foot-long hot dogs—how many have come to know him in this way? How many among the millions who gave him his polling leads that began with his and super-model wife Melania's famous escalator ride down into the Trump Tower lobby last June and have never flagged?

We are told again and again: his is the most improbable political story in decades, perhaps in history. And yet that a reality television megastar, as Trump might put it, could outpoll sixteen dimly to barely known politicians, some new faces, many also-rans, seems less than shocking. Did tens of millions ever cast their eyes on the junior senators from Florida or Tennessee or Texas, or the governor of Ohio, not to mention the ex-governors of Arkansas or Florida, or the ex-CEO of Hewlett Packard, before they chanced to mount the stage for a debate with Donald J. Trump last August, a television event that drew the unheard-of viewership of 24 million? Those 24 million tuned in to see Trump. Only one man on stage had a name as famous and by then it was in such disrepute that he had seen fit to replace it with an exclamation point on his campaign posters.

Presidential elections have long been a windfall for television: campaigns raise hundreds of millions of dollars and then deliver that money to the networks in exchange for advertising. In the casually corrupt American political system the candidates serve as bagmen carrying cash from the corporations to the networks. But Trump has made possible another revenue stream. He himself is a ratings extravaganza. If television is the business of delivering audiences to advertisers, Trump has delivered audiences as no candidate ever has or could. Twenty-four million pairs of eyeballs mean real money. Trump brings those numbers, no one else.



NBC Universal/Business Wire/Getty Images

*Donald Trump with Chewbacca and Darth Vader in a Star Wars-themed episode of The Apprentice, 2005*

And if it is true that the networks have lavished upon him \$2 billion worth of airtime in the jocosely named “free media,” then surely they’ve made it back and more. Television has covered him wall to wall, for he means money. What other candidate is allowed to call in to morning shows or the sacred Sunday shows for television “interviews” whenever he pleases? So he has advertised less and spent less than any other candidate, relying on the endless interviews and news pieces, and feeding the beast with his own unparalleled feel for the news cycle. He shut down his Super PAC so he could claim to be “self-funding.” Trump didn’t need it. “The lamestream media,” as his supporter Sarah Palin is so fond of calling it, *is* his Super PAC.

And yet behind the money is the fascination. Standing amid the thousands at Boca’s Sunset Cove Amphitheater, as he surveys the crowd—“Beautiful! Beautiful! We love Florida!”—I feel the pull. He praises his introducer, then remarks on the recent fracas in Chicago, where the supposed threat of violent confrontation had led him to cancel a rally, triggering yet another avalanche of coverage. His musings all begin in medias res, launching into the story of his campaign, the story of his life, as if we are all experiencing it together, all gathered together in the Donald’s mind.

From his first words he welcomes us in and his very self-absorption, the narcissist’s fascination with his own sweet self, is the secret of the alarmingly mesmeric quality of his speeches. His one and only subject is himself and if he is frankly fascinated then so are we. We are all enfolded in the warm grandeur of his

narcissism. He knows what the Trumpsters want, that inclusion, the unmediated access to the Donald and his vision of himself, the shtick of the True Donald, and he reaffirms it by reassuring interjections that that is precisely what they are getting:

By the way, no teleprompters, right? No teleprompters. *No teleprompters....*  
No reading speeches.... Speak from the heart, and from the head. Speak from the heart.... And from the head....

He takes pride in the fact that his rallies are almost embarrassingly entertaining, a kind of guilty pleasure, and he tips his hat to himself as a performer, as he did the other day during a rally in Delaware:

Hey, “being presidential” for me is much easier than doing this. And you know what, if I was totally presidential—we have ten thousand people here or something?—I’d have about three hundred and you’d be falling asleep after twenty minutes. Okay, we have to have a little.... But honestly I probably wouldn’t even be here....

He acknowledges the power of his own shtick at the same time as he emphasizes its verisimilitude—the truth of the Trump he is exposing—and this in large part relies on the carefully cultivated illusion that it is all off the cuff, that it comes from the heart and that on a given day he might indeed say anything—that anything at all could happen. The protesters, of course, and their sudden exclamations multiply this feeling—the sense of an unpredictable threatening world from which the Donald will protect his followers (as he will from the illegals swarming over the border), the sense of improvised solidarity in the hall—and they add tension and drama, as the showman has himself acknowledged from the stage; but the driving force of his fascination is his narcissism, his sheer and pure conviction that he is the best, the smartest, the most successful. Strewn about his campaign book one finds dollops of it:

A lot of times when I speak, people say I don’t provide specific policies that some pollster has determined are what people want to hear. I know that’s not the way the professional politicians do it—they seem to poll and focus-group every word. But there’s nobody like me.

Nobody.

I ask people to look at what I’ve done throughout my whole career. Look at how successful I’ve been doing things my way. So they have a choice: They

can pretend some impossible solution is actually going to happen, or they can listen to the person who has proved that he can solve problems.

I started in a relatively small real estate company based in Brooklyn and made more than \$10 billion. I now live on what is considered the best block of real estate anywhere in the world—Fifth Avenue between 56th Street and 57th Street, right next to Tiffany’s in the heart of New York City.

It is easy to ridicule the provincialism of this—the idea that there can even be something “considered the best block of real estate anywhere in the world” and his simple faith in the self-affirming fact that he lives on it—and easy to seize on that single-word paragraph, that “Nobody,” as the height of monomania. One can find, in any speech or tweet, more concentrated versions, for example this tweet on Easter Sunday: “Another radical Islamic attack, this time in Pakistan, targeting Christian women & children. At least 67 dead, 400 injured. I alone can solve.”

I alone can solve. What gives a man who knows little or nothing of foreign policy the unsullied conviction to announce to the world that only he can solve, well, Pakistan? Or terrorism? Ignorance and narcissism are joined together here, surely, but they are fortified by the very fact of the amazing events of the last ten months. He hired no pollster. He spent relatively little money, bought few ads. He promulgated few policies. He merely flew on his own plane from city to city, from arena to arena, talking about himself—about how the country “has big problems” and how only he can solve them—and in between he chatted with television correspondents and pundits, very often by telephone, and with a staff of fewer than a hundred people—Hillary Clinton has a thousand—he has come within shouting distance of becoming the Republican nominee for president of the United States. Who is there to contradict his claim that “there’s nobody like me. Nobody”?

From the beginning about one in three Republican primary voters have agreed with him, have found in him the charisma Max Weber famously defined as

a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as divine in origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.

These “exceptional powers or qualities” include not just the reputed business genius—a mysterious power that makes the promulgation of specific policies redundant—but the ability to tell a story about why “our country is in big trouble” that is simple, convincing, and satisfying. “Our leaders are so incompetent,” he says again and again. Why have we lost jobs? Because “our leaders are terrible,” the system is corrupt—he knows because he buys politicians as part of his business: “No one knows the game better than me”—and other countries, whose leaders are much smarter than ours, take advantage of us. This includes not just Mexico and China but the countries of NATO, Japan, South Korea, even Saudi Arabia, the fabulously rich oil autocracy for protecting which “we get nothing. Nothing.”

This criticism gains credibility for turning on its head the entire drift of post-World War II American propaganda that said the country acted to rebuild Europe and protect the free world not out of national self-interest but out of good old exceptional American generosity. Trump, a baby boomer who was born in 1946 and imbibed this story with his breakfast cereal, clearly takes this roseate version of history as gospel truth and regards any country that would act in such a self-sacrificing way as a sap.

Anyone tempted to regard these views as opportunistic might take a glance at a full-page advertisement that appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Boston Globe* in September 1987 entitled “An Open Letter from Donald J. Trump on Why America Should Stop Paying to Defend Countries That Can Afford to Defend Themselves.” The letter opens with the salutation, “To The American People,” and continues:

For decades, Japan and other nations have been taking advantage of the United States.

The saga continues unabated as we defend the Persian Gulf, an area of only marginal significance to the United States for its oil supplies, but one upon which Japan and others are almost totally dependent. Why are these nations not paying the United States for the human lives and billions of dollars we are losing to protect their interests? Saudi Arabia, a country whose very existence is in the hands of the United States, last week refused to allow us to use their mine sweepers.... The world is laughing at America’s politicians as we protect ships we don’t own, carrying oil we don’t need, destined for allies who won’t help.



Twenty months later, after the attack on the Central Park jogger, Trump was back with another full-page ad, this one entitled “Bring Back the Death Penalty. Bring Back Our Police!” and opening with a question:

What has happened to our City over the past ten years? What has happened to law and order, to the neighborhood cop we all trusted to safeguard our homes and families, the cop who had the power under the law to help us in times of danger, keep us safe from those who would prey on innocent lives to fulfill some distorted inner need.

The answer to this is simple, Trump tells us partly in all-caps: “Criminals must be told that their CIVIL LIBERTIES END WHEN AN ATTACK ON OUR SAFETY BEGINS!” (As he declared last November about waterboarding terrorists, “You bet your ass I would!... It works.... If it doesn’t work they deserve it anyway for what they’re doing!”) Trump’s ad continues with a poignant memory:

When I was young, I sat in a diner with my father and witnessed two young bullies cursing and threatening a very frightened waitress. Two cops rushed in, lifted up the thugs and threw them out the door, warning them never to cause trouble again. I miss the feeling of security New York’s finest once gave to the citizens of this City.

I recall rereading these pieces before attending a luncheon with Trump in 1989 and finding myself struck by the odor of nostalgia for a stronger country emanating from that paragraph—the need for a national restoration to return us to a safer, greater world we had lost—that certain European leaders of the 1930s would have recognized. The sense of threat from the Other—whether it be Mexican rapists swarming over the border or Muslim terrorists posing as refugees or “two young bullies cursing and threatening”; the sense of national decline that this signals (“We don’t win any more...”); the clear path to a restoration of greatness marked by simple, autocratic solutions (imposing tariffs, pulling out of NATO, bringing back torture, “bombing the shit” out of ISIS)—all of it springs from the populist toolbox, if not the fascist



*Donald Trump; drawing by John Springs*



one, and the advertisements show that the roots of these positions and attitudes run very deep.

Why has this “fascinating intersection of celebrity and neo-fascism”—the words are Carl Bernstein’s—found its following now? Trumpism is partly the child of the 2008 Wall Street collapse and the vast sense of political corruption and self-dealing it brought in its wake: the sense that the country was looted on a vast scale and that the politicians of all stripes made sure the criminals were not punished. Many felt, and feel, an overwhelming sense that those in power betrayed them, “stabbed them in the back,” and this, added to the “very traumatic economic experience which is only eight years past us”—as Jason Furman, the president’s chief economist, memorably put it—accounts for a feeling of pervasive distrust of and fury at all conventional politics and politicians. Furman goes on:

Look at the Great Depression and the impact that that had on the way people thought about saving or the way people thought about inflation—in other places, hyperinflations. Those effects can last for decades and can affect the way you think.<sup>4</sup>

Those “other places” that Furman is too polite to mention include the Weimar Republic, where hyperinflation did indeed “affect the way you think.” Set against four decades of stagnant wages, the collapse and the further fattening of the elite that followed brought disgust and desperation, and anger at and fear of the Other—illegal immigrants, Muslim refugees, an African-American and possibly Muslim president who seems in league with both—that Trump has skillfully cultivated.

In doing so, as many have pointed out, he builds on and expresses loudly and clearly racist and nativist elements in Republican politics that have been central to the party’s appeal since at least the mid-1960s but that its leaders have preferred to signal rather than enunciate. Trump leaves the dog whistle behind, puts his fingers to his lips, and screeches. Again and again when I asked rally-goers why they supported Trump I heard the word “honesty.” “He doesn’t slip and slide like all the others,” a retired accountant in his seventies told me. Or else: “I see strength in him, power. He’s not afraid to say what he thinks....” That he speaks clearly—that he is unafraid of the police of political correctness—itself bespeaks a power to cut through the corruption and the dealmaking, to fight and fight to get things done: to actually end illegal immigration, to actually repeal Obamacare. It suggests he has the sheer fighting power and energy to do what he says.

We learned this of course on *The Apprentice* and even more on its spin-off *The Celebrity Apprentice*, when for example Vincent Pastore—better known to viewers as “Big Pussy” Bonpensiero on *The Sopranos*—demanded of Trump in one tense boardroom confrontation, “Do *you* wake up in the morning and fight with people?” to which the Leader replied: “Yes! My whole life is a fight.... It’s no different than him”—he gestures toward former heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis—“except I don’t use my fists, I sort of use this”—pointing to his temple. “My whole life is a *big, fat fight*.”<sup>2</sup>

That combativeness and defiance, that emanation of inexhaustible energy and personal power and strength, is central to his appeal. He, unlike the other candidates—“low-energy” tools of the Republicans’ mendacious self-dealing “donor class”—will fight for Social Security and Medicare, he will fight unfair trade bills, he will build that wall (“Build That Wall! Build That Wall!” is the loudest audience chant at his rallies). He will actually fight for us. Watching him blather and mug as he casually leaned over the podium in Boca Raton, seeing him cultivate the applause as if directing a symphony and then raise his two hands in thumbs-up gestures as he surfed the waves of applause and the deafening shouts of “USA! USA! USA!,” I recalled a remark that the philosopher Richard Rorty made back in 1997 about “the old industrialized democracies...heading into a Weimar-like period.” Citing evidence from “many writers on socioeconomic policy,” Rorty suggested that

members of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers—themselves desperately afraid of being downsized—are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else.

At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots....

One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion.... All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners

dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet.<sup>6</sup>

As Trump put it in Nevada, “I *love* the poorly educated!” Rorty’s words prophesy not only the strongman’s rise but his blithe refusal to let “political correctness” prevent him making sexist and bigoted remarks, and his fans’ euphoric enjoyment of their hero’s reveling in the pleasures of free speech. He says what he wants: he is rich enough, strong enough, to do what he pleases. Strength: though he has had no experience whatever in foreign affairs, polls consistently show he inspires the most confidence among Republicans when it comes to protecting the country. It is plain that Trump is highly sensitive to this, as he showed in this reverie about his campaign during a “press conference”—he took no questions from us though he did acknowledge the assembled reporters as “horrible, disgusting people”—at the ornate ballroom of his Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach after he’d won the Florida primary:

We came down the escalator, and it was about trade and it was about borders. And what happened is pretty quickly after that... I shot right up, I shot up to the top of the polls, and have been leading in the polls almost from the beginning without fail....

So we started, and something happened called Paris. Paris happened, and Paris was a disaster. There’ve been many disasters but it was Paris and then we had a case in Los Angeles, in California, where fourteen young people were killed. And it just goes on and on. And what happened with me is this whole run took on a whole new meaning. Not just borders, not just good trade deals.... But it took on a whole new meaning. And the meaning was very simple: we need protection in our country. And that’s going to happen. And all of a sudden the poll numbers shot up....

That this is a fact, and that Trump recognizes this fact, represents the greatest risk of that future that the political class still stubbornly refuses to take seriously: a Trump presidency. All odds are against it: he has made many enemies, particularly among groups (Latinos, women) that any Republican desperately needs to be elected. His “negatives” are historic for a candidate at this stage of the election, though his new campaign manager, the longtime lobbyist and fixer Paul Manafort, confidentially assured Republican National Committee Members:

When he’s out on the stage,... he’s projecting an image that’s for that purpose.... He gets it. The part that he’s been playing is evolving into the part that now you’ve been expecting.... The negatives will come down. The

image is going to change.

Perhaps it will, though if Trump gets the nomination what can be counted on to be a very bloody general election campaign fought across stark racial and class lines will make such a wholesale change in image very difficult. Even if Trump is “evolving” we are sure to be hearing a lot about “Crooked Hillary.” (“You have to *brand* people a certain way when they are your enemies,” he proclaimed to us at Boca. “You gotta brand people. . . .”) Trump is mercurial, unpredictable, and this, and his improvised ideological heterodoxy, make him much more difficult to “brand” decisively than the arch right-winger Ted Cruz. It is possible that facing Hillary Clinton he could put in play some states that the Republicans haven’t won in many years.

Still, as Trump declared, “we need protection in this country.” A President Trump could likely only emerge as a product of our own fears, carefully fostered as they have been ever since the airliners emerged out of that bright September sky one morning in 2001. A Republican nominee Donald J. Trump could be carried forward on all the disquiet about national decline and military vulnerability that the Republican Party has promoted for decades and especially since the September 11 attacks and the subsequent advent of Barack Obama, the Kenyan Muslim usurper who, refusing to produce his birth certificate (in Trump’s fantasy), unaccountably managed to take over the country.

After Paris, Trump declared last fall, “security is going to rule.” However unlikely Trump’s candidacy may be—and we have seen over the past ten months how the unlikely can be overtaken by reality television politics—such a nominee, despite his negative poll numbers among women and minorities and all the other factors that, we are told, will make his election impossible, might stand only one highly telegenic terrorist attack away from becoming the national embodiment of all our fears.

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1 See Stephanie Cegielski, “An Open Letter to Trump Voters from His Top Strategist-Turned-Defector,” *xoJane*, March 28, 2016. ↵

2 Cegielski, “An Open Letter to Trump Voters.” ↵

3 See Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (Vintage, 1992; first edition, 1961), pp. 57–58. ↵

4 Comments by Jason Furman at a Christian Science Monitor breakfast program, broadcast on C-SPAN on April 22, 2016. ↵

5 See *The Celebrity Apprentice*, Season 7, Episode 5. ↵

6 See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 89–90. ↵

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