

FAKING THE NEWS

**WHAT RHETORIC CAN TEACH US
ABOUT DONALD J. TRUMP**

**Edited by
Ryan Skinnell, PhD**

**SOCIETAS
essays in political
& cultural criticism**

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Jennifer R. Mercieca

Afterword: Trump as Anarchist and Sun King

As the essays in this book demonstrate, Donald Trump's 2016 election to the presidency of the United States was a political rupture—it represented a break with traditional presidential campaign rhetoric as well as a break with a traditional presidency. Yet, according to political science “fundamentals” Trump *should* have won the presidency. 2016 was supposed to be a change election because the presidency had been held by the same party for two terms, the economy wasn't so great, and more Americans thought the nation was “on the wrong track” than thought that it was “on the right track.”¹ Being a change election, any Republican Party nominee should have defeated any Democratic Party nominee—no matter who the parties nominated. Based upon that analysis Trump's election wasn't disruptive at all, he even underperformed compared to what another Republican nominee might have done. So, why then did Trump's election *seem* so disruptive?

Being a historian of American political rhetoric, I see current politics through the frame of history. We might note at the outset that embedded within Trump's campaign rhetoric is a view of history—his campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” was inherently nostalgic (from the ancient Greek *nostos algia*, meaning “return home”). The most optimistic history of the Trump election would tell the story of how Trump's campaign appealed to those Americans who had a longing for a “return home” to an America from a different time—a time when America was “winning,” when “political correctness”

did not trump free speech, and a time, perhaps, when things seemed simpler or safer.² The less optimistic history of the Trump election would tell the story of how Trump appealed to Americans who held misogynist and racist opinions, of Americans who had a longing for a “return home” to a time in America when it was dominated by white male privilege.

Which of these stories of the Trump rupture will history remember? I suspect that both stories will eventually be told in an attempt to make sense of the Trump election. That Trump’s campaign theme was nostalgic is obvious, but what can we say about the implications of its view of history as a political program?

Historian Hayden White gives us a useful way to think about how the embedded views of history in public discourse reveal a political program related to change. He explains that within all historical narratives—including, I believe, the one embedded in Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign—we find “different conceptions of the desirability of maintaining or changing the social status quo” as well as “different time orientations (an orientation toward past, present, or future as the repository of a paradigm of society’s ‘ideal’ form).” According to White there are four orientations towards the possibility of achieving utopia through political change: anarchist, conservative, radical, and liberal.³ Very briefly, anarchists “are inclined to idealize a remote past of natural-human innocence from which men have fallen into the corrupt ‘social’ state in which they currently find themselves”; conservatives “are inclined to imagine historical evolution as a progressive elaboration of the institutional structure that currently prevails, which structure they regard as ‘utopia’”; radicals “are inclined to view the utopian condition as imminent, which inspires their concern with the provision of the revolutionary means to bring this utopia to pass now”; and, liberals “project this utopian condition into the remote future, in such a way as to discourage any effort in the present to realize it precipitately, by ‘radical’ means.”⁴ Locating utopia in different times and systems leads anarchists and radicals to

want to change the current political system, and leads conservatives and liberals to want to maintain it.

According to White's typology Trump's 2016 campaign was anarchy—it longed for a distant past outside of the current system. Trump argued repeatedly that the current American political system had to be destroyed because it had been corrupted by weak and ineffective politicians. He asked Americans to return to a simpler time when the federal government wasn't so big, regulations weren't so tough, and capitalists and capitalism were free. So doing, he promised, would restore American greatness. This represents a startling rupture in American political discourse. Since Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency our public discourse has been largely liberal—that is, despite political party, we've seen politicians argue for the stability of the system and incremental changes within the system to bring about their desired programs and policies. For generations, the American economic system and the American political system have been believed to be the best guarantors of freedom, equality, and justice (for most) and so have been unquestioned and unquestionable by mainstream political candidates. Trump questioned the long dominant liberal view of history. Trump's political campaign was illiberal; it was, in fact, anarchic. But, was Trump really an anarchist? If so, what long lost period of American history did Trump idealize and seek to recover?

The news coming out of Trump's March 25, 2016 interview with the *New York Times'* David Sanger and Maggie Haberman was that his foreign policy would be "America first."⁵ But, perhaps we ought to have paid a little more attention to one of the questions Haberman posed to Trump on that day.⁶ She asked him when he thought that America was greatest? He answered that he thought that America was at its greatest during the Gilded Age at the turn of the twentieth century—before the Progressive Era reforms that would protect the people from the abuse of corrupt corporations and elected officials. Trump, as it turned out, idealized the period in American history right before the liberal view of history took

hold among American politicians. Trump didn't say that he was in favor of corruption, of course, he said instead that he admired the Gilded Age because of its unrestrained economic growth—it was a “pretty wild time,” Trump thought.⁷

Why the Gilded Age? Trump isn't a fan of restraints, particularly restraints on himself. Trump is a fan of gilding—of adding a thin layer of gold or gold colored stuff to things to make them appear to be more valuable than they are.⁸ Gold gilding is the signature design feature of Trump-branded properties and products worldwide.⁹ According to Trump's decorator Angelo Donghia, his New York City apartment was designed as a gilded golden tribute to France's Louis XIV—the Sun King who once (perhaps, but maybe not) declared to his Parliament “*l'état, c'est moi*”—I am the state—in defiance of its attempt to restrain him.¹⁰ Trump has lived his life as a Sun King of sorts—he has believed himself to be above the law, never permitting himself to be held accountable for his actions.¹¹ In fact, Trump takes pride in his Sun King-like ability to decide what is and what is not. “The Golden Rule of Negotiating,” Trump once tweeted to his followers, is “he who has the gold makes the rules.”¹²

Trump's gilded Sun King *ethos* isn't just for negotiating, politics, or history. It belies his approach to rhetoric as well—instrumental, fake, unaccountable. Trump, believing he has the gold, made his own rules. His presidential campaign used rhetoric strategically—without regard to ethics—to help him to get what he wanted. He used rhetoric to intimidate, to overwhelm, to mock, to threaten, as well as to entertain. Trump weaponized rhetoric to disrupt the liberal consensus, which means that his rhetorical style was anarchic as well.

Of course, during normal presidential campaigns when the liberal view of history prevailed presidential candidates and presidents wanted to win and attempted to use rhetoric to set the nation's agenda, argue for their preferred policies, constitute the people, establish the power of the Executive Branch and a whole host of other things, but they didn't use rhetoric with impunity—they weren't anarchists.¹³

Perhaps, Trump's disruptive rhetoric, as Joshua Gunn argued, is truly "perverse" in the sense that it was "a deliberate and knowing deviation from assumed 'norms'." Despite the soundness of political science fundamentals, Trump's election feels so disruptive because he weaponized rhetoric to pervert the liberal norms of American politics and American political discourse. Trump is America's gilded anarchist, Sun King president and, since he believes that whoever has the gold makes the rules, he will be very difficult to control.

Notes

- 1 Daniel W. Drezner, "Why Political Science is Not an Election Casualty," *The Washington Post*, November 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/11/15/why-political-science-is-not-an-election-casualty/?utm_term=.1ec3bc4170f6. I'm indebted to my political science colleague Joe Ura for this take on the fundamentals.
- 2 "nostalgia, n.," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, June 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/128472>.
- 3 "utopia, n.," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, June 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/220784>.
- 4 White, Hayden V., *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973): 25.
- 5 David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman, "In Donald Trump's World-view, America Comes First, and Everybody Else Pays," *New York Times*, March 26, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy.html?_r=2.
- 6 Haberman actually asked, "What is the era when you think the United States last had the right balance, either in terms of defense footprint or in terms of trade?" The transcript subheading listed it as a discussion of "When America Was 'Great': "Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views," *New York Times*, March 26, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html>.
- 7 "No if you really look at it, it was the turn of the century, that's when we were a great, when we were really starting to go robust. But if you look back, it really was, there was a period of time when we were developing at the turn of the century which was a pretty wild time for this country and pretty wild in terms of building that machine, that machine was really based on entrepreneurship, etc, etc." "Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views."
- 8 "gilded, adj.," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, June 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/78269>.

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- ⁹ Alissa Walker, "An Architectural Tour of Donald Trump's Gaudy Ass Skyscrapers," *Gizmodo*, March 03, 2016; Lyndsey Matthews, "A Psychologist Reveals What Trump's Fixation with Gold Really Means," *Marie Claire*, October 07, 2017, <http://www.marieclaire.com/politics/a24996/president-trump-gold-obsession-meaning/>.
- ¹⁰ Herbert H. Rowen, "'L'Etat C'est a Moi': Louis XIV and the State," *French Historical Studies* 2.1 (1961): 83–98; Jennifer Fernandez, "Donald Trump's 1985 Apartment Looks Exactly How You'd Imagine It," *Architectural Digest*, July 27, 2016, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/donald-trump-1985-apartment-looks-exactly-how-you-d-imagine-it>; Robert Wellington, "Going for Gold: Trump, Louis XIV and Interior Design," *The Conversation*, January 22, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/going-for-gold-trump-louis-xiv-and-interior-design-71698>; Dan Evon, "Golden Throne of Lies," *Snopes.com*, August 14, 2016, <https://www.snopes.com/donald-trumps-golden-toilet/>.
- ¹¹ Or, Trump acts with "impunity" as Davis Houck observes in his chapter in this volume, based on Brian Beutler's November 2016 *New Republic* article. Brian Beutler, "This Single Concept Explains Trump's Many Outrages," *New Republic*, November 23, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/138975/single-concept-explains-trumps-many-outrages>.
- ¹² Donald J. Trump, Twitter post, July 30, 2013, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/362218621428187137>.
- ¹³ For typical uses of presidential rhetoric see Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).