WHY TRUMP?

Why Some People Support Him—
How the Rest of Us Can Respond

Douglas Giles

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How the Rest of Us Can Respond

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1. Framing the Issue; What Is the Issue?

Much ink has been spilled over how to think about Donald Trump. Some people love him, and some people hate him. Some people try to explain why people love or hate Trump. What everyone shares is a lack of clarity about why they or anyone else loves or hates him.

Regardless of how you feel about Trump, the fact remains that he wins. He won the 2016 election fair and square. Yes, he lost the 2020 election fair and square, but he turned that into a win, as evidenced by the unquestioning devotion he still receives from a segment of the US population. Trump still possesses considerable social power.

Neither academia nor the right-wing (dis)information sphere can accurately explain the phenomenon that is Trumpism. Why is Trump popular? Why does Trump win? The answer is deceptively simple.

Why Trump? Why do people support him? Why has the subject of Trump become the dominant subject of US politics? I will consider those questions, and connected questions, and attempt to answer them in a constructive manner.

But what if I told you that the subject of these questions isn't Trump? It isn't; not really. Realizing that simple reality opens the door to a deeper understanding of the particular strain of US political culture that is behind the movement that currently takes Trump as its center of focus. There is little new in Trump or the things he says and does. His success in attaining power lies in his ability to harness a long-simmering feeling in a segment of the American population

It's Not About Trump

When I began conducting research for this book, I did a search for ""Trump" in my far-too-large collection of saved e-mails. The oldest e-mail I still have that mentioned Trump is this one from 2011.

MAY 16, 2011

Comedians Beg Trump to Reconsider

20,000 Jokers March on Trump Tower

NEW YORK (**The Borowitz Report**) – Distraught at the news that Donald Trump will not seek the Republican nomination for President, the nation's comedians took to the streets today, begging Mr. Trump to reconsider.

The largest gathering of comedians took place in Mr. Trump's hometown of Manhattan, where an estimated crowd of 400,000 jokers marched on Trump Tower.

"I for one am devastated that Donald Trump has decided not to throw his hair in the ring," said Jackie LaRossi, a comedian who is a regular at Manhattan's Chuckle Barrel comedy club.

Shelley Schwartzenbaum, who headlines at the Komedy Kantina in Teaneck, New Jersey, added, "I guess he wanted to spend more time with the family of ferrets who nest on his head."

A huge roar came up from the crowd when Mr. Trump made a brief appearance, reassuring the comedians that he would continue to be a laughingstock in the private sector.

Comedian Andy Borowitz's satirical e-mail newsletter, The Borowitz Report, reminds us that as early as 2011, Trump was both mulling a run for president and was the butt of ridicule.

Trump didn't run in 2012 but did in 2016. Initially, his run for the presidency was either dismissed as a joke or as the road to an extremism so unpalatable and unthinkable that it couldn't possibly succeed. Few thought he would win the election, including the Hillary Clinton campaign, which helped to elevate Trump's profile early in the primary race, believing him to be the potential Republican nominee most beatable as a

general election candidate.[1] Clinton and her team were correct in labeling Trump as a "Pied Piper candidate," but wrong in believing that he would lead the Republicans to electoral defeat.

But this book is not another inside-the-beltway rehash of electoral politics. Nor is it another retrospective on what Trump has said and done. This book is neither a hit piece against Trump, nor a hagiography extolling Trump. This book is about the United States and its unique strain of right wing politics. Love him or hate him, Trump is a product of America—and here's the important thing: Trump is a symptom far more than he is a cause.

Yes, we are witnessing a right-wing movement that centers itself on Trump, but this movement isn't about Trump. He is a focal point, yes, but there is much more going on here. Casting the movement as being led by Trump mischaracterizes not only the movement but the nature of American culture and politics.

In this book, I will try to clarify this mischaracterization by asking a simple question. Why do some people follow Trump? They have a movement; they call it "MAGA." Yes, the Trump campaign team pushes the slogan "make America great again," but their marketing was more reaction than innovation. The 1980 presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan invented the "make America great again" slogan.[2] Crucial to understand Trump's appeal is to realize that there is little new in Trump's message. Technology, particularly social media, sharpens and intensifies the message, but its contents, and the feelings behind it, are nearly as old as the United States.

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[1] Gabriel Debenedetti, "They Always Wanted Trump," *Politico Magazine*, November 07,2016. https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/hillary-clinton-2016-donald-trump-214428/.

[2] Robert E. Matthews, Jr., "Button, Ronald Reagan, 1980," *The Smithsonian Institution*, accessed June 7, 2024, https://www.si.edu/object/button-ronald-reagan-1980%3Anmah_522618.

The Need to Dig Deeper

It is common in the media to attribute support for Trump to disaffected whites.[3] This well-worn trope has a grain of truth to it and has the appeal of simplicity, but it is a judgment that is vague and inadequate. To say those who support Trump because they are "disaffected whites" is contemptuous and unproductive. It dismisses the complexities of social life and real people who possess real power.

I will step away from condescending dismissal and the partisan bickering of America's political duopoly and take seriously the question of why people support Trump. What do they see in him and why? Why do they feel that Trump is a solution to the problems they feel are present in America?

The issue isn't Trump. The issue is that reservoir of American feeling that he has managed to tap into and exploit. The issue is what has come out of the shadows and into the mainstream—a strain of reactionism that is unique to the United States deriving from the country's unique history.

If you want to say that Trump is a wannabe strongman or authoritarian, you have good grounds for such an argument. But more important than such an argument is solving the riddle of why some people want a strongman as head of an authoritarian government.

Politics is about power. Anyone can want power, but no one can gain political power alone. Trump was fairly elected in 2016 by people who wanted him to become president, many of whom now want him to again become president. Why do they want Trump? The power resides in those people more than in Trump.

The movement that takes Trump as its focus cannot be ignored. It is necessary that we perceive these voices, hear what they say, see what they are doing, and think about why all of

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[3] Clarence Page, "Why Donald Trump appeals to disaffected white voters," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov 10, 2015, https://www.chicagotribune.com/2015/11/10/why-donald-trump-appeals-to-disaffected-white-voters/.

this is happening. When the MAGA movement hides behind simplistic sloganeering, name calling, and memes, we need to peel back that surface and look at the people within the movement. They are real people even when they behave like monsters. Who are they? What are their concerns? What good are they seeking? They are seeking what they see as the good, and we need to keep that in mind. What do they believe and why? The "whys" are particularly important, because there is little new in Trump and MAGA, and uncovering the "whys" will reveal a great deal about America past and present.

Those who support Trump frequently say they are living under tyranny in America. What do they mean? Why do they imagine that a better alternative is an authoritarian government that would be even more tyrannous? Is it because they believe they would not be the target of the tyranny? Would they be correct? What are people in the MAGA movement really hoping for? What do they feel would make America great?

We need to also ask if people in the MAGA movement are really willing to resort to violence. The January 6, 2021, attack on the United States Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., has become so much a political football between the two major parties that the significance and implications of the attack have been lost. Was it an aberration or a prelude? Today, some Trump supporters say they see bloodshed as necessary.[4] Talk is cheap; do they intend to follow up their words with actions?

We need to dig deeper, beneath the simplistic dismissals, jokes, and talking points, and ask questions. The issue isn't Trump. The issue is much larger, deeper, and older. Let's dive in.

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[4] Rachel Leingang, "'No Way Out without Bloodshed': The Right Believe the US Is under Threat and Are Mobilizing," The Guardian, June 2, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jun/02/far-right-mobilizing-biden-presidency.