

7

Trump

Donald Trump is a special kind of cultist. He is in no way totalistic—his beliefs can be remarkably fluid—nor is he the leader of a sealed-off cultic community. Rather, his cultism is inseparable from his solipsistic reality. That solipsism emanates only from the self and what the self requires, which makes him the most bizarre and persistent would-be owner of reality. And in his way he has created a community of zealous believers who are geographically dispersed.

A considerable portion of his base can be understood as cultist, as followers of a guru who is teacher, guide, and master. From my studies of cults and cultlike behavior, I recognize this aspect of Trump's relationship to his followers. It is evident at his large-crowd events, which began as campaign rallies but have continued to take place during his presidency. There is a ritual quality to the chants he has led such as "Lock her up!" and "Build that wall!" The latter chant is followed by the guru's question "And who will pay for it?," then the crowd's answer, "Mexico!" The chants and responses are less about policy than they are assertions of guru-disciple ties. The chants are rituals

Trump

that generate “high states”—or what can even be called experiences of transcendence—in disciples. The back-and-forth brings them closer to the guru and enables them to share his claim to omnipotence and his sacred aura.

Trump does not directly express an apocalyptic narrative, but his presence has an apocalyptic aura. He tells us that, as not only a “genius” but a “very stable genius,” he alone can “fix” the terrible problems of our society. To be sure these are bizarre expressions of his extreme grandiosity, but also of a man who would be a savior to a disintegrating world.

Steve Bannon (whether as campaign manager, chief strategist, or outside commentator) has greatly influenced Trump’s apocalyptic tendencies in relation to the key American democratic institutions. Bannon tells us that his own goal of “deconstruction of the administrative state” is consistent with Trump’s aims as president. He further characterizes Trump’s cabinet choices of people opposed to the work of their agencies as consistent with his own wish “to destroy the state.” Bannon has served as a facilitator of and a spokesman for the president’s state-destroying impulses.

But the most boldly apocalyptic Trump-related expression comes from the bizarrely conspiracist group known as QAnon, which believes Trump is actually working closely with Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller in preventing a coup d’état by Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and George Soros. That conspiracy also includes an international child sex-trafficking ring (as derived from an earlier “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory) run by politicians and liberal Hollywood actors. QAnon also uses such apocalyptic names for itself as “The Storm” and “The Great Awakening,” both of which refer to a moment of decisive military action in

Losing Reality

which anti-Trump figures will be incarcerated, including various Democrats Robert Mueller has been secretly investigating.

We may understand this as a version of conspiratorial apocalypse that will enable Trump as a true savior to preside over a politically and morally cleansed world. Trump has not publicly embraced this bizarre group, but adherents wearing QAnon buttons have been appearing at his rallies since the summer of 2018, and a major QAnon promoter was given a photo op in the Oval Office of August of that year. What we can say is that Trump would be very capable of embracing at least a part of the wild QAnon conspiratorial thinking should it contribute to a needed sense of self.

Over the course of his presidency, Trump has become still more grandiose. His lies and falsehoods have not only increased significantly in number but have been more and more in direct violation of concrete evidence in the form of his own recorded statements and tweets. That is, he has gone further than before in asserting an insistent solipsism that defies the most basic and immediate forms of reality. He has also become increasingly agitated, his monologues longer and even looser than before, and has had more difficulty in calling upon the “narrative necessity” to render his lies true.

Above all, Trump’s cultist interactions with his base have created an insoluble problem in connection with what is now simply called “the wall.” The wall is a messianic promise, and there is deep confusion in both Trump and his followers between the physical entity (a barrier between Mexico and the United States that will never be built) and the metaphysical vision of safety and racial purity.

Trump

A dangerous direction on the part of Trump is to translate his falsehoods into policies, as in his sending troops to the border to confront what he declared to be a murderous band of criminals and terrorists who are “invading” our country; in fact the caravan in question was made up mostly of desperate asylum seekers, a large number of them women and children. But the process has to be ultimately self-defeating. The very extension of solipsistic reality to national institutional practice comes to expose its falsehoods and dangers.

The whole process contributes to an expanding sense of Trump’s unfitness, affirmed by the writings of psychological professionals. That sense is often shared by Trump’s Republican supporters who speak in whispers about his “craziness” while defending him publicly for what they take to be political necessity. The arrangement is ultimately unstable but plays out a dynamic of enormous harm. Remaining followers can take on a Trump-centered identity that is difficult to either sustain or shed.

Overall, the revelations and investigations of Trump’s Russian activities, obstructions of justice, and financial illegalities have left him behaving like a man who knows he is in his endgame. To be sure, his extraordinary survivor skills—along with truth-suppressing interventions by such facilitators as Attorney General William Barr— may well enable him to hang in and run for reelection. But it is also possible that he will be forced out of office and contrive a new narrative of victory that includes his brilliant contributions as a savior of our country despite the resistance of his enemies, who can now step down and revive the world’s economy by means of his transcendent economic skills.