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Trumpcated America: What it is, how we got here, and what to do about it

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The impact President Donald Trump has had on America is undeniable and widely reported on. Like the process of “truncation,” which reduces to overly simplify, and in psychological terms, refers to the deliberate and intentional exclusion of data or values when conducting data analysis, “Trumpcation” leads to flawed, incomplete conclusions, generally informed by cognitive biases, and typically produces undesirable and unintended consequences. While new to our era, it is not new to our country. We have faced these challenges before and have the tools and abilities to face them today.

Slightly more than a decade ago, on June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old self-identified white supremacist, strategically and purposefully entered Emanuel African Episcopal Methodist Church (AME), in Charleston, South Carolina, where he murdered nine parishioners and wounded one. The parishioners, all African Americans, were attending their regularly scheduled Bible study and prayer meeting. After his apprehension, Roof revealed he had surveilled the church and worshipers for months. He selected Emanuel AME Church because of its predominately Black congregation and its historic significance to Charleston, South Carolina. [1]

Upon entering the church, members of the congregation graciously extended an invitation to Mr. Roof to join the Bible study, which he accepted. While

parishioners participated in the evening's closing prayer, Roof, in a calculated and deliberate manner, shot and killed his defenseless victims. He was apprehended the next day and confessed to the hate crime.

Emanuel AME is familiar with hate crimes from the volatility of God-fearing segregationists and white supremacists. The church has been the target of an extensive, acrimonious campaign of harassment, discrimination, and lynchings of church congregants by white supremacists for more than two centuries. In 1822, Emanuel AME was burned to the ground when a planned slave insurrection was discovered and thwarted. Many of the slaves were executed, including Denmark Vesey. Because white residents feared more uprisings by discontented enslaved Blacks, all church services were barred and religious assemblies forbidden in the South for Blacks from 1834 until 1865. However, during that time, Emanuel AME defied the racist restrictions, meeting secretly in homes and private spaces. Over the 30-year prohibition on religious activities, the resilient congregation of Emanuel AME grew from 1,000 to 3,000 parishioners. [2].



On June 26, 2015, the eulogy for Pastor Clementa Pinckney and the other eight slain parishioners of Emanuel AME Church was delivered by then-President Barack Obama. President Obama reflected on the resistance, resilience, faith, activism, and forgiveness found in the history of Emanuel AME and the example of grace, commitment, and compassion exhibited by

the Rev. Pickney.

At the end of the eulogy, President Obama sang the opening stanza of Amazing Grace: [3]

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

It was a very moving sermon and tribute to the slain disciples. Still amazed at the grace and oratory skills exhibited by President Obama, I pondered in deliberate reflection, if the current president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, could have offered such grace and delivered words of condolence in such a compassionate, eloquent manner. I remembered that President Trump had an opportunity to demonstrate compassion and empathy in August 2017, immediately after Unite the Right rally, held in Charlottesville, Virginia. [4] During the rally, James Fields, Jr., drove his car intentionally into a crowd of counter protesters, killing Heather Heyer. Mr. Trump equivocated from his initial

condemnation of the violent rhetoric of white nationalists who vehemently chanted, “blood and soil.” Said Mr. Trump afterwards, “You also had some very fine people on both sides.” Unfortunately, humility, compassion, and empathy are not character traits of Mr. Trump.

The notion of the President of the United States, who also serves as commander in chief, as “consoler in chief” in times of crisis does, of course, pre-date President Obama. It is hard not to recall the 43rd president of the United States, George W. Bush’s “Bullhorn Speech.” President Bush delivered the unscripted remarks amid the rumble at Ground Zero in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, telling fire responders and others gathered, “I can hear you” when someone from the crowd shouted out “We can’t hear you,” adding, “the rest of the world hears you.” Or when Bill Clinton, the 42nd president of the United States, said at a memorial service for the Oklahoma City bombing victims, “Let us let our children know that we will stand against the forces of fear.” Or POTUS No. 40, Ronald Reagan, addressing the nation following the explosion of the spacecraft Challenger that killed seven astronauts in 1986, including a schoolteacher, which prompted many classrooms nationwide to wheel in televisions to show students huddled around.

Those are just recent examples, but the list goes on, featuring Democratic and Republican presidents alike. Although not an official title, most presidents have understood and embraced – perhaps even risen to the occasion – their role as consoler in chief, the one person a nation of people looks to for guidance, hope, and assurance in times of crisis – sometimes, but not always, drawing from their personal faith but most often delivering remarks intended to restore our faith in ourselves, our country, and our future.

Today, though, thoughts of President Trump and his lack of humility have a way of eroding one’s hope. At least, they have eroded mine. Recently, I have felt myself losing heart, sliding into an anguishing pathos of pity. I have felt troubled, apprehensive, agitated, unsure of the source of my despondency.

Ultimately, I sighed deeply, in resignation and recognition that something dark and evil had engulfed me. An eerie *something* was attempting to replace my hallowed faith with septic hollowness.

Overwhelmed by an undefined, foreboding darkness, suddenly, however, I experienced a divine “aha” moment of enlightenment. I had found language that helped me to better understand my current state of despondency and to identify one of the plagues of America: America has been, what I believe to be, “Trumpcated.” Allow me to explain.

Our Trumpcated America: The MAGA Movement

Trumpcation functions very similarly to the process of truncation. Although truncation is the deliberate act of making something shorter or quicker and in psychology relates to excluding data, it can also refer to an individual's lifestyle and objectivity. A person who constructs a truncated lifestyle seeks shortcuts to solutions, instant gratification, craves microwaveable results and magical thinking. Individuals with a truncated lifestyle think in black and white and believe that faster always equals better.

When perceiving an event or attempting to better understand a phenomenon, remaining objective is necessary to reduce perceptual error and the impact of distinct types of bias or prejudices. People with truncated objectivity tend to narrow the perception of the world *too much* and thereby limit the interpretation, context, and contributions contained in a phenomenon. The probability that a person utilizing a truncated objectivity will arrive at conclusions and outcomes that are routinely flawed, generally informed by cognitive biases, and typically produce undesirable and unintended consequences is raised considerably.

So, what is a "Trumpcated America"? Trumpcation, synonymous with the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, which has been and continues to be written about extensively, is really a new name for an old systemic process, which is what I want to focus on here.

Manufactured and socially engineered institutional structures, such as racism, sexism, and classism, are created to control, oppress, and exploit those with limited or no real economic, political, or legal power. In our Trumpcated America, the rich and elite who are indebted to Donald Trump behave as hedonistic curators who perceive people as property and a source of free labor or commodities for pleasure, profit, or both.

The MAGA movement represents, for the privileged, a romanticized desire to return to a time when life choices were guided by a rigid dichotomous perception of America:

1. White or Black
2. Superior or inferior
3. Male or female
4. Haves or have-nots.
5. Christian or infidel, barbarian (non-Christian)
6. Citizen or illegal alien, undocumented immigrant (non-citizen)
7. Heterosexual or LGBTQIA+ person (an abomination)



Whether the system managers were slaveholding Founding Fathers, death-dealing Democrats of the Confederacy, hegemonically driven Southern segregationists, or the contemporary cavalry of Christian nationalists, our Trumpcated America has always been led by a small group of individuals who were motivated by self-interest and obsessed with obtaining economic prosperity and unfettered personal and political power. Members of this self-interest group display little or no concern or regard for the marginalized, disadvantaged, and downtrodden.

The Trumpcation of America has made it more difficult for most Americans and the rest of the world, both allies and enemies, to recognize who “we” – as in “We, the people...” – are, what we believe in, and what we stand for. Symbols of freedom, justice, and democracy are being redefined.

My mind returns to the poem, “The New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus adorning the Statue of Liberty:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest- to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Our Trumpcated America is currently being reshaped to resemble autocratic nations. What has been lost or purposely discarded is the ethos of democracy and the moral principle of “inasmuch as ye have it to the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” We are becoming a nation devolving into a constant state of chaos, depravity, bile, and immorality. The love of money, the pursuit of economic wealth, the lust for power, and the abhorrent celebration of corruption and cruelty and bile behavior seem to be the new guiding principles for MAGA enthusiasts. These principles falsely symbolize America’s visible values to the entire world.

Evidence of a Truncated Lifestyle and Truncated Objectivity

Mr. Trump manufactured a truncated lifestyle and developed a truncated worldview long before he became POTUS. Many of President Trump's behaviors appear to be motivated by his self-aggrandizement, the process of promoting oneself as being powerful and important. Many of the characteristics associated with the self-aggrandizement, such as charisma, narcissism, authoritarianism, lack of empathy, and obsession with control and fealty, which are exhibited routinely by Mr. Trump, are disconcertingly similar personality traits also found in other authoritarian leaders.

Trump clearly understands the power of propaganda and mass media, how to create fear through repeated overt demonstrations of power, determine which groups to scapegoat, and using the veneration and indiscriminate use of violence. Moreover, Trump has acquired much of his personal wealth, position, and power through fraud, corruption, exploitation, and by presenting a distorted version of reality, often at the expense of and blatant disregard for others.

These distortions are referred to as self-aggrandizing truths. Self-aggrandizing truth is a deceptive practice where individuals distort or exaggerate reality and their accomplishments to enhance their own image or status, often driven by underlying insecurities and a need for validation and recognition. An example of Trump's tendency for self-aggrandizement is his consistent assertions about his ability to make "the best deals." The truth is that Trump has a long history of well-documented failures, from filing for bankruptcy multiple times to failed casinos, a failed university, airline, mortgage company, and foundation, as well as failed sports teams and sporting events, culminating with 91 criminal charges and 34 felony convictions. [5]

Given his history of failure, it is challenging to me to understand how some believe Mr. Trump is the master of the "Art of the Deal." Perhaps it is more accurate to observe that Trump has mastered the appearance of being the master of the "Art of the Deal," calling upon an ability to "spin" the story.

In William Shakespeare's play "As You Like It," [6] the character Jacques, the melancholy philosopher and commentator, delivered his observation of the cyclical nature of human nature and world events:

All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players;
they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays
many parts, his acts being seven ages.

For President Trump, the world is his stage, where he is the writer, director, producer, and principal performer. When Trump accepted the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, in grandiose fashion, he declared, "I alone can fix it, can save America, save the world, save you." The exaggerations, if not

outright lies, continued, as he distorted the reality of the crowd size of his presidential inauguration (claiming it to be the largest ever, bigger than President Barack Obama's), the attendance for his incendiary speech on Jan. 6, 2021 (claiming it was larger than the audience for Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech), and his most recent declaration regarding a letter supposedly written to Jeffrey Epstein: "I never wrote a picture in my life. I don't draw pictures of women," when in fact multiple media outlets were quick to report various pictures Mr. Trump has drawn over the years.

In a media-fueled age, leadership has become increasingly performative and less shaped by consistency and truth than by control over a narrative. Reality becomes malleable, scripted and more akin to entertainment than government. Facts can be omitted or decidedly considered untruthful if they don't match the leader's narrative. The leader's image becomes the focal point instead of the institution. This theatrical approach to power distorts public discourse and blurs the line between fact and fiction, further fueling chaos domestically and worldwide.

How Did America Become Trumpcated?



Whether we are willfully blind or woefully ignorant, the election of Donald Trump reflects the heart and desires of most Americans to, as embodied in MAGA's slogan, "Make America Great Again."

My evangelical Christian colleagues got it right when they said President Trump was the chosen one. However, God did not choose Donald Trump. He was elected by the will of the people. And as our non-consecutive, two-term president, who has manufactured a mountain of

problems for the United States and the rest of the world, let me be clear: Donald Trump is not the only problem.

One of America's major problems is our steadfast refusal to address the complete history of our nation. Book-banning, the eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, or removing the names and contributions of Harriet Tubman and Harvey Milk from U.S. history does not make our nation stronger. It only exacerbates the demise of our democratic society. If we want our nation to move beyond the recurrent issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and class, the narrated truths of all people who helped build and unite America must be heard and believed as a prerequisite. National healing cannot happen without the acknowledgment and inclusion of all perspectives of U.S. history.

The refusal of a broad swath of Americans to acknowledge this truth acts as a dysfunctional defense mechanism. This maladaptive coping mechanism helps

white men deal with their social status anxiety, the fear that their social position atop the hierarchy is changing. Their fears are that women and those labeled inferior, immigrants, criminals, and racial minorities will replace them -- exemplified by the bile demonstrations of white nationalists and neo-Nazis on the campus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. [7]



When social and political pressures threaten to change the hierarchal arrangement, both MAGA and white Christian nationalists seem to believe it is their patriotic duty to protect and defend the American way of life, by any means necessary, including violence. Prolonged denial of these truths has led to the institutionalization of this maladaptive strategy. This institutionalized denial has prevented

our nation from confronting the problems of racism and classism, hindered the growth and development of our nation, and led to discriminate allocation and distribution of precious resources.

MAGA is Trump's promise to America to return white men to their divinely ordained superior position of social and political dominance in America; the truest reflection of what America has always been. From the beginning of MAGA, I have seldom seen the historically oppressed embracing of the slogan "Make America Great Again." Members of MAGA who have political and religious power rarely use their power to protect the most vulnerable but to persecute them. Jesus referred to those leaders who manipulated their religious position and access to power for personal gain as hypocrites and vipers. Today, I refer to them as "cosmetic Christians."

Trumpcution, MAGA, and Trumpcated Christianity

Trumpcated Christianity is the deeply held belief that God has anointed Donald J. Trump as the Savior of America, that Christianity must direct and control our U.S. government, and embraces Christofacism (Dorothee Solle, 1970, German Lutheran Liberation Theologian), the political ideology that merges Christianity and fascism. It is the intersection of religious fundamentalism and governmental authoritarianism where, under the banner of Jesus, the use of violence to subvert, suppress, or subjugate any opposing group is permitted.

Trumpcated Christianity is a façade of faith in which outward appearances and verbal "Christianese" statements are used to hide corrupt, rapacious hearts that yearn for power, prestige, and privilege. Hypocrisy and hatred are hallmark characteristics of Trumpcated Christians, whose attitudes and behaviors are

antithetical to the Christian principles of loving the least, the last, and the lost. Trumpcated Christians, in their raucous behaviors, reject the core values of Christ: placing prosperity over poverty, retribution over forgiveness, and tyranny over peacemaking. They view the commandments to “love your enemy” and “bless those who despitefully use you” as weaknesses and unthinkable and are instead, encouraged to “put on the whole armor of God, and maybe strap on a Glock on the side of us just in case!” [8]

Trumpcated Christianity operates from a Machiavellian conviction of self-interest and self-preservation that constructs a dissonance of faith. Cognitive dissonance is the state of discomfort felt when two or more modes of thought contradict each other. The clashing cognitions may include ideas, beliefs, or the knowledge that one has behaved in a certain way. Trumpcated Christians can participate in the most vitriolic demonstrations of hatred and cruelty and then quickly justify their callous actions by blaming the victims, blatantly disregarding social norms and laws, or, because of their grandiosity, appear indifferent, apathetic, and antisocial.

The attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 was a vivid display of cosmetic Christianity. The goals of the insurrectionists, posing as devoted Christians, were to:

1. Reestablish the hegemony and dominance by white men
2. Participate in spiritual idolatry – the “America first” ideology is to be worshipped and defended against all enemies who challenge the Christian principles.
3. Redeem the world through the spread of republican government and the “American way of life.”



This translates to: Make America Great Again!

When President Trump declared to his deceived devotees, “You got to fight like hell or you won’t have a country,” these cosmetic Christians did not hesitate to become violent, extol hate, and seek to commit homicide, looking specifically for Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi and Vice President of the United States Mike Pence. Five people died on Jan. 6, 2021, or shortly thereafter. In the months following, four police officers, who attempted to defend the Capitol from the insurrectionists, would die by suicide.

America: Make Room for a Revolution of Hope

Burdened with the chaos and calamities of our Trumpcated America, my personal faith in God had been shaken. As is my custom, I prayed to the omnipotent,

omniscient, and omnipresent God who promised me he would never to leave or forsake us. But the thought that darkness and evil have been becoming normative in America has made my prayers more difficult. I struggled to maintain my belief in the immutable principles of physics and morality; that light still chases away darkness, that good will triumph over evil, and that one man could not destroy the democracy found in United States of America. I shudder when I thought that America would be added to his extensive list of failed endeavors.

I wrestled with my fears of our country's current recalcitrant leadership. The qualifications for recently hired, elected, or appointed to state and federal offices seems to be reduced to individuals who have an extensive criminal history, are professional incompetence, demonstrated ability to lie spontaneously or pathologically, sworn fealty, and blind allegiance to Trump. I remain troubled by the necropolitics that plague poor people in America. Necropolitics refers to the use of social, economic, and political power to make decisions that determine who may live and who must die, based on the predictable consequences of their decisions. In communities where people are viewed as disposable or deplorables, decisions that affect climate, toxic wastes dumping and environmental hazards, violent crime, clean air and water, and access to adequate health care typically determine who lives or dies.

To combat Trumpism, Americans must make room in our collective heart for a revolution of hope. To accomplish this feat, we must:

1. Stop saying that everything is unprecedented. The history of the United States is replete with illustrative examples of the abyss of degradation, malevolence, and cruelty our nation has extended to its most vulnerable denizens. President Trump is not America's first nor will he be our last "Terrible, Horrible, No-Good, Very Bad Day" [9] president.
2. Stop the practice of attempting to shame the shameless. Evil rarely repents or incriminates itself. The practice of offering honor and respect or dishonor and disrespect are genuine reflections of character.
3. Stop asking or expecting the oppressor to be gracious and merciful to the oppressed. Merciless tyrants are transactional and pleas for mercy only embolden them to become more abhorrent and abominable.
4. Stop discussing democracy and justice as some ethereal, unobtainable reality. We are not the helpless victims of autocrats, but moral militants who have voice and human agency. It is hypocritical to discuss democracy and justice without faithful determination and commitment to self-sacrifice.

James Baldwin was quoted in the New York Times in 1962 asserting, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." [10] America must admit to ourselves who we really are. We cannot

continue to look to the White House for the salvation of our nation. We must look inward and conduct honest self-examination.

The abatement of malevolent, oppressive, and inhumane policies must begin with an authentic assessment of one's internal ecosystem. The greatest deception presented to our nation will not become from lifetime politicians, our elected officials, or political pundits, but will be found in the hearts of the populous of America. Democracy, by its very definition, allows for personal choice. Therefore, the current state of America can be understood as an amalgamation or summation of our cumulative choices. Though Americans may be experiencing "buyer's remorse" or regretting the intended or unintended consequences of our collective choice of President Trump, our choice was not uninformed.

Though it may seem like it will never happen, one day Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, Speaker of the House of Representatives Mike Johnson, and President Trump will be replaced. I believe that one day our nation will institute democracy, justice, and righteousness as societal, judicial, and moral expectations and not diminishing exceptions. Somewhere in the crisis, chaos, and confusion of our Trumpcated America we will find clarity.

In his book, "The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology," Erich Fromm (1968) [11] examines the dangers of a society focused solely on material output and consumption driven by computers, and advocates for a humanized technology that serves human needs. He argues that America then was at a crossroads of determination: Allow the takeover of technology and machines to shape our world or promote the renaissance of humanism and hope, with humanity in the balance, to actively shape a more meaningful future for our nation. His fear was that only a few were aware of the impending dangers.

Our nation is once again at a crossroad. From pre-Civil War champions for freedom, such as Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and Harriet Tubman, to the moral militants of the civil rights era, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Ella Baker, to our contemporary civil rights defenders, such as John Lewis, Rev. William Barber, and Ciara Taylor, Americans must be willing to give their lives for virtues of democracy and justice. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. assured Americans, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" and asserted in his iconic speech at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, "No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

At a different time in history, Fredrick Douglass despaired of American's depravity, its resistance to racial inclusion, and its repudiation of the sobering truths of slavery and segregation. Douglass believed violence and bloodshed were the only methods to free Black people from slavery. In his 1881 autobiography, "The Life and Times of Fredrick Douglass," recounts Truth's question posed to him in a letter:

While describing the power of Slavery in the church and the state in furtherance of my argument, Sojourner in a distant part of the 'Hall' startled me and the whole audience with the question "Is God dead?" The suddenness and sharpness together with its impertinence brought me for a moment to a complete halt. I had said nothing that called for such a question but gave it a negative answer and went on with my speech. I have never been able to see why such an incident should be so often referred to. The effect of the question was much in the tone in which it was asked — and the moment in my speech when it came. It has been said I was completely unhorsed and discomfited by the question. Perhaps I was, but as I remember my condition at the time, I was about as self-possessed as my audience was. We were all for the moment brought to a standstill — just as we should have been if someone had thrown a brick through the window.

[12]

America needs a revival, a renaissance, a revolution of hope. Fromm believed that passive waiting was disguised hopelessness and impotence. He believed that the paradox of hope is neither passive waiting nor unrealistic forcing of circumstances that cannot occur. For those whose hope is strong, Fromm encourages them to look for signs of what is possible, to help birth hope which is ready to be born. Confront cruelty, condemn corruption, and pray for those who celebrate freedom and justice for all. For those whose hope is weak or developing, the strong will bear the infirmities of the weak.

Faith is certainty of the uncertain. Though it is getting darker, I am certain that God has not abandoned us. I do not know, nor can I predict the future outcome for America. Americans must resist the temptation to compromise hope and faith by transforming these virtues into empty promises, meaningless optimism, or unfounded faith. Julia Ward Howe's iconic and inspiring words, written in 1861, help ground my faith and renew my spirit to believe in the values of democracy, justice, and the cause of freedom:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

May Americans have the grace to see, admit, and accept that, as a nation, we are morally and spiritually blind and the courage to seize the opportunity to change our current direction. His truth is marching on; this, we must seek to see!

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