

The Trump Presidency

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

By Frank G. Splitt

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*The experience is shattering. How much stupidity! What delusion among such cultured and actually clever people! Just unconditional belief in the Führer, delight that 'finally our weapons speak'.*¹
—Erich Ebermayer, September 3, 1939

My September 21, 2020, essay "Trumpism and Its Factions: An Existential Threat to America's Democracy," began with the above epigraph and concluded with the following three questions:²

If the president has his way, who would be able to stop him from using all the levers of government to not only contest the results of the upcoming election if he loses, but also who would stop him from realizing his personal and political aims as well as his ambition if he wins either by votes cast or by a SCOTUS decision as in *Bush v. Gore*, 531 U.S. 98 (2000)? Shades of Germany in the 1930s?"

President Trump's loyal supporters counter such concerns as well as any and all criticism by citing his policies that resulted in ostensibly good if not great accomplishments. It has been claimed that these accomplishments have been negated by the president's offsetting personality.³ However, these "good" accomplishments, like beauty, are in the eye of the beholder—forming only a piece of an ugly story that goes far beyond the president's personality.

Not mentioned by his supporters have been vast international reputational as well as social and human costs that are still being paid for these accomplishments. Consider first the likely long-lasting impact of President Trump's assault on America's democracy and democratic values, as well as his demeaning of the office of the president via cruelty, incompetence, and alleged corruption as well as obstruction of justice.

Also not mentioned are the president's trade policies that have damaged the U.S. economy and alienated allies. According to Dartmouth economist Douglas Irwin: "the president sought to reduce the trade deficit, increase manufacturing employment, change China's policies, and reach better deals, but fell short on all accounts"⁴

Furthermore, consider the cost of the president's divide-and-conquer strategy that not only tore American's asunder, but also bolstered America's slide towards autocracy and the fact that bad behavior and policies have steep costs as well. The list includes: the minority-voter suppression highlighted in a recent *Commonweal Magazine* editorial,⁵ blatant lies and gross exaggerations, flagrant self-dealing, the tax evasion, the separation of children from their parents, the encouragement of white supremacists, conspiratorialists, and radical right-wing factions such as neo-Nazis, and, perhaps one

of the most egregious of all in terms of lives lost, the downplaying and politicization of COVID-19.

An ugly state of affairs has pervaded the fabric of our nation. Sadly, none of this ugliness has any apparent bearing on the actions of President Trump's loyal cult-like supporters of their tyrannical leader. For example, it has been reported that half of Republicans say Biden won because of a 'rigged' election.⁶ This belief appears to be a psychological phenomenon akin to the Hitler mania of the German people in the 1930s and the Jim Jones cult's suicides in 1978.

Seemingly, half of Republicans have unconditional belief in Trump who was prescient when he once boasted: "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters." These voters believe the election was rigged not only because that's what they want to believe, but more likely because Trump keeps baselessly saying it was rigged—insisting in a December 2, 2020, White House speech that he won the election.⁷

All of this would not be possible if these otherwise intelligent voters did not willfully suspend moral judgement and succumb to their avarice, self-interest, and/or any one of a number of political single-issues. This situation is not without its parallels, for example President Trump's "Stop the Steal" campaign recalls one of the most disastrous political lies of the 20th century.⁸

Trump will always have his apologists and his steadfast defenders. They believe he is one of them fighting for what is right against elitist plots and those of the Deep State, as well as any others who may have betrayed them. To abandon their leader now would be to admit they were wrong—deceived or conned by his lies and exaggerations that placated their heart-felt resentment of the socio-political state of affairs in America.⁸ And, worse yet, admit that it was wrong to have supported him in the first place. It seems that one of the most difficult things for a person to do is admit that they were wrong—sometimes even in the face of incontrovertible evidence.⁹

What can be said of the president's sycophantic congressional enablers? This group lives in utter fear of Trump's base of loyal supporters and seems to believe the president has the right to impede the transition to the Biden presidency to suit his self-centered present and future interests no matter the cost to national security and the health of American citizens. These interests include: raising money, solidifying his base, undermining the Biden administration, deepening and exploiting ethnic, demographic religious, and racial divisions, as well as positioning for a possible 2024 rerun.^{10, 11, 12}

Finally, in view of the above, what might a post-Trump presidency portend? Although no one can say with any degree of certainty, here is a potential worst-case scenario: President Biden's efforts to unite the country will fail, undermined beyond bearing by Trump who will be aided and abetted by Senate Republicans unwilling to stand up to him for fear of alienating his base. This will be followed by a further transition from democracy to autocracy while still conforming to the Constitution as interpreted by an unbalanced Supreme Court packed with Trump nominations and backed by a

formidable voting block of true believers. This scenario reflects “shades of Germany in the 1930s.”

We will see what we will see

NOTES

1. Ebermayer, a German liberal intellectual, made these remarks after a visit with aristocratic neighbors who, as Hitler-loyalists, expressed boundless uncritical faith in their leader. The encounter was on the day Britain and France went to war with Germany after it invaded Poland. See pages 368-69 of Frederick Taylor's book *1939: A People's History of the Coming of the Second World War* (Norton, 2020).
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12. Romano, Andrew and Walker, Hunter, "Trump in exile: How he will remain a force in the GOP, and a threat to Biden's politics of unity," *Yahoo News*, Nov. 18, 2020, <https://uk.sports.yahoo.com/news/trump-in-exile-how-he-will-remain-a-force-in-the-gop-and-a-threat-to-bidens-politics-of-unity-152709807.html>.
13. Mazewski, Matt, "Trump Can Run Again," *Commonweal*, Nov. 15, 2020, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/trump-can-run-again/>

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