

Trumpian Demagoguery: A New Era in Political Messaging

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Introduction

Donald Trump will go down as the most divisive president in American history, beloved by his base and despised by almost everyone else. He has been coined a moron and a genius, tyrant and a liberator, a crook and law enforcer: the list goes on. No matter which side of the political aisle we lean to, Trump is always at the center of attention and dominates every conversation. For the last five years, Trump has captivated both a national and global audience with his unprecedented and radical form of politicking. His popularity with his most loyal supporters is undeniable, the attention he draws from media outlets across political leanings is borderline obsessive, and his impact on American politics is immeasurable. The question many Americans are asking is, what is the source of Trump's popularity? A majority of Americans would agree that Trump's personality is not necessarily likeable; he is abrasive, abusive, rude, and quite frankly annoying. These are not just my personal observations of Trump; polling suggests a general understanding that his personality is not his appeal:

	Applies %	Doesn't apply %
Above-average association with Trump		
Is intelligent	58	40
Is a strong and decisive leader	51	49
Can bring about the changes this country needs	50	49
Average association		
Keeps his promises	47	51
Understands complex issues	45	53
Puts the country's interests ahead of his own political interests	43	55
Cares about the needs of people like you	43	56
Can manage the government effectively	41	57
Below-average association with Trump		
Is honest and trustworthy	37	62
Is likable	37	62
Is a person you admire	35	64
Has chosen mostly good advisers and cabinet officers	33	64
Works well with both parties in Washington to get things done	31	67
GALLUP, JUNE 1-13, 2018		

Figure 1 (Newport)

According to this Gallup poll, around 62% of Americans rated Trump with below average association to the categories of likeable, honest and admirable; he's certainly no John F. Kennedy. Beyond just being relatively unlikeable, his resume is not relatable to most of his base; a New York raised, billionaire son of a billionaire real estate broker, whose favorite activities include playing golf at his private resort, hosting a reality TV show, avoiding taxes, and conning fellow elites through bankrupt business schemes. This stands in stark contrast to Trump's base of middle-class service workers from generations of manufacturers and tradesmen. Prior to being elected President, he had no relevant political experience nor did he have any significant support from his party. From his very first political speech, he has been engulfed in scandal after scandal that would have ended other political careers in their tracks. Yet, somehow, he has managed to organize and captivate an audience of millions of loyal followers, many of whom have little in common to Trump's lifestyle. If it is not his personality and not his background, then what about Trump has evoked this massive movement?

The common answer is that he is a populist; his ideology and rhetoric have organized a certain portion of the electorate against elites and political establishment. I think this answer, while correct in its essence, is an easy way out that places Trump in a blanket of fellow populists without recognizing his uniqueness and therefore his danger. Trump has been able to achieve something that no fellow populist has done since Andrew Jackson: win the United States presidency. Pure-populists in the same category as Trump –William Jennings Brian and George Wallace to name two examples– have attempted to win presidential elections by stirring up popular support against elites to no avail. Their movements never garnered the same emotional connection and momentum that Trump currently yields. Neglecting to analyse what separates Trumpism from other populisms risks oversimplifying the nature of the Trump movement and

the potential longevity of its political supremacy; there is a reason Trump has seen more success than arguably any other American populist. Indeed, Trump has demonstrated classical populist narratives like speaking for “real Americans” and rejecting the established political and cultural elite. We have seen a similar rise in populism in Europe, take Hungary and Poland for example. I would contest that Trump’s brand is different based on the sheer fact that Europe and the U.S. exist in two separate global conditions:

European populists [seek] to preserve their national institutions against encroaching Europeanization – a term they use sometimes interchangeably with globalization. Globalization is a force that has contributed to putting large numbers of people, particularly young people, out of work and facing a bleak future on both sides of the Atlantic. In contrast, Trump questions the legitimacy of political institutions and the reality of facts in a manner that European populists do not[...] Trump’s electoral victory is a peculiarly American product of working-class unemployment, a deep distrust of and resentment of educated elites[...] Trump exploited the fears, feelings of neglect and fantasies of his voters. He deploy[s] rhetoric that combine[s] a cadence of danger with megadoses of emotional empathy (Berezin).

In Europe, populism stems partly out of resistance to globalization and the desire of nations to preserve their national identity rather than immerse themselves into a conglomerate of European states, which European populists believe do not share their same values. This can be seen with the Brexit vote and the anti-immigration rhetoric of European populists. As we know, this anti-immigration sentiment is mirrored by Trump. However, it is often done in a different context against not just immigrants from majority muslim countries, but immigrants from the southern border as well. Despite the nationalist sentiment which fuels European populists movement, the Nazi experience is also a factor which has created a significant barrier and general distaste for right wing parties which is not the case in the U.S. Additionally, the U.S.’s long history of slavery has created further societal divisions that are less prevalent in Europe. European governments may also create barriers for populism; the multi-party system used by many European states allows for the fracturing of right wing parties from moderate conservative

parties, whereas the GOP is forced to encompass “all of the above” when it comes to conservative movements. These are just some of the factors that differentiate “Trumpism” from European populism, but there is still more to the story.

I believe that the classification of Trump as a populist is somewhat less important to understanding his success beyond recognizing that Trump capitalized on notions of populism among certain groups of Americans to propel his movement. Trump’s ideology is not entirely unique; politicians before Trump have been populists, racists, xenophobic, misogynistic, anti-elite and have preyed upon the anxieties of certain parts of the population. But to my knowledge, there has never been an American political movement, populist or any other, where the follower’s very identity has been tied so closely to the main figurehead as is the case in Trump’s movement. This is the critical piece of Trump’s brand of populism that sets him apart from his European and past American counterparts. Berezin identifies this distinction as Trump’s unique ability to exploit the “fears, feelings of neglect and fantasies of his voters” combined with “megadoses of emotional empathy.” This is what I classify Trump’s deep ceded “emotional connection” to his base, formed by strategic messaging and rhetoric which, in my opinion, is the root of Trump’s popularity.

To create fire there must be both fuel and a spark. Trump’s messaging is that spark which ignited his base with the fires of fear and anger towards anyone that Trump identified as an enemy. This highlights the uniqueness of the *brand* of Trump, and the way he has used messaging to form an authentic and impenetrable connection with his base of supporters. The messaging strategies that Trump has used in the last five years are remarkably different from nearly every other politician in the last decade. Not only is messaging the essence of Trump’s popularity, but it is the link between Republican party “policy” and the Trump movement which has transitioned the traditional GOP into a right-wing fear factory. Trump’s connection to his

base goes beyond policy and ideology; it is an emotional connection carefully crafted and refined through dynamic messaging. Trump is able to form this emotional connection through a deep and calculated understanding of the emotions, fears and desires of his base supporters. It is this base of supporters, who Trump is supremely loyal to and who rally behind him, that have given him immense power and protection. This power not only manifests itself in his election to the White House, but in his control over the Republican Party, right-wing media and the national news cycle.

I refuse to submit that this support can simply be explained by political undercurrents that have given rise to a right wing populist movement where Trump was at the right place, with the right ideology, at the right time. As much as Democrats may hate to say it; there is something very special about Donald Trump. By identifying and analyzing a number of Trump's messaging strategies, this thesis will demonstrate that Trump's popularity with his base is a result of a deliberately crafted emotional connection, forged by a highly strategic messaging arsenal that withstands any moral, legal or political challenge and will last for the foreseeable future. In doing so, this paper will not only identify messaging as the source of Trump's popularity and its longevity, it will also conclude that other political figures with demagogic instincts could form (and perhaps already are forming) similar connections to a Trump style base. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) is certainly one example of someone using similarly controversial and combative rhetoric that resembles Trump's. Other potential candidates may include Tom Cotton (R-Ark) or perhaps Madison Cawthorn (R-NC). Part of the danger of Trump's messaging is that it is relatively easily translatable to fellow demagogues. To be fair, Trump does possess certain intangible traits that assist his effectiveness; he is physically imposing, he is overly confident, he speaks in a memorable manner, he is famous, and he is captivating. While these qualities are important, they are certainly not unique to Trump and his authoritative persona can manifest

itself in other potential demagogues. As I will demonstrate, the most important facet of Trump's messaging is establishing an emotional connection to the base. To begin, I will first identify the specific demographics and ideological traits that comprise Trump's base.

The Base

The foundational premise to this work is that Trump's connection with his base is the source of his power and authority. In 2016, the Republican elites dreaded the thought of Trump being named the Republican nominee; they believed that his divisive and offensive rhetoric would shun moderate voters and all but guarantee a Democratic victory. During the 2015 Republican primaries, Senator Lindsey Graham tweeted commentary along the lines of "if we nominate Donald Trump, we will get destroyed... and we will deserve it," and "you know how to make America great again? Tell Donald Trump to go to hell" (@LindseyGrahamSC). So how did we go from *Trump is the end of the world* to "Happy Birthday, Mr. President! You're keeping your promise to make America safer and more prosperous. And unfortunately for me, you're doing this without losing a step in your golf game" (@LindseyGrahamSC)? The answer rests in Trump's control over the base. Lindsey Graham is not the only member of the GOP who has come full circle on Donald Trump, it is a party wide revelation. According to one of the few remaining never-Trumpers, Rick Wilson, in his book *Running Against the Devil*:

The shame elected GOP leaders feel about Trump is generally about one inch behind their bluster on his record. The combination of fear and ambition will make them even more determined to defend Trump until the bitter end. His power over the mob has broken them, even in the wake of the spanking they received in 2018. It's Trump's party now, and the postconservative moment rewards obedience over ideas, ass-kissing over principle, and forelock-tugging deference even to Trump's most egregious behavior (159).

Trump's stranglehold of the Republican party is a result of his control over the base; those who oppose him face wrath of the right-wing removing them from office. Members of the GOP are not the only ones locked in a bizarre love triangle between Trump and his supporters; conservative media networks, particularly Fox News, find themselves more and more inclined to air right-wing propaganda or face the dissatisfaction of Trump's base. In the wake of the 2020 election, Trump accused Fox News of catering to the left by calling the state of Arizona much too early and giving him unfavorable coverage of the election. In the next few weeks, he called for a boycott of Fox News and recommended his base to turn to other right-wing networks such as Newsmax and OAN. For the months after the election, Fox News ratings were in a free fall while Newsmax became the most downloaded app on the appstore (Folkenflik). Although, these numbers have rebounded in Trump's absence from twitter and his apparent make-up with the GOP, which coincided with an easing of Trump's attacks on Fox News. The bottom line is that anyone wishing to enter the conservative nightclub, must pass through the Trump bouncers at the door. Trump *is* the Republican party, the moderates like Mitt Romney and the late John McCain are a relic of the past.

If Trump's power comes from his ability to control "the base," we must ask ourselves who exactly does this term refer to? Understanding the demographics of Trump's base is key to understanding the unique issues they have faced in the last decade and why they turned to Trump to exert their political will. Throughout this paper, I will be using the term "Trump base" and "Trump supporters" to refer to the most loyal group of Trump voters; those who voted for him both in 2016 and 2020 and share an emotional or ideological connection with him. I will explicitly specify when I am referring to everyone who voted for Trump overall, including those outside his base. Moderates who switched parties in 2020, or who voted for Trump grudgingly

out of GOP loyalty, are not part of Trump's base for the purpose of this paper, as their connection is clearly not an emotional one.

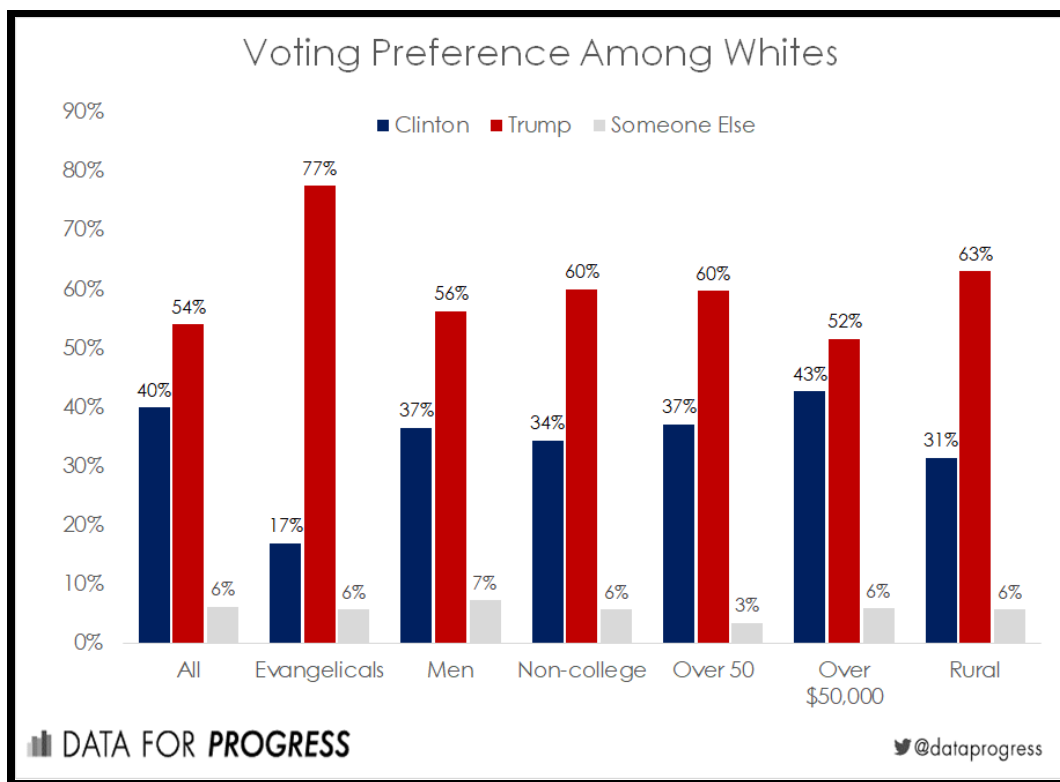


Figure 2 (McElwee).

The data in *Figure 2* demonstrates Trump's popularity among various groups of White voters from the 2016 election. The base is predominantly White, encompassing both rural and urban working-class individuals, frequently male, many of whom are nearing or past retirement age and often without a college degree (McElwee). Notably, evangelicals and rural voters were the groups most likely to be Trump voters over Hillary voters. While these numbers shifted slightly during the 2020 election, the core of Trump's base remains the same, and we must not forget that he actually added 11 million more to his total than he had in 2016. Trump's loss was not as a result of a de-energized base, rather it was a result of a negative reaction to the President that mobilized the Democrats and moderates in key swing states to vote against him. This is supported by the fact that turnout increased by about 17% from 136 million to 158 million, in

turn making it the largest turnout of eligible voters since the 1900s with over 66% of the population participating (Desilver; O'Neill). To understand the nature of Trump's popularity, it is important to consider this demographic of people and what makes them tick. Trump exploits underlying issues, fears and desires, unique to his base, to form an emotional connection with them.

This is not to say that Trump's base is homogeneous nor that they necessarily care about the same issues. One study from the Democracy Fund categorizes Trump's base into five distinct ideological blocks based on a latent class analysis study of 8,000 Trump voters and their political concerns, to identify unique voting clusters. The five sections and their proportional share of Trump's total supporters are: American Preservationists (20%), Staunch Conservatives (31%), Anti-Elites (19%), Free Marketeers (25%), and the Disengaged (5%) (Ekins).¹ According to Ekins, American Preservationists "have nativist immigration views, and a nativist and ethnocultural conception of American identity[...] They are far more likely to have a strong sense of their own racial identity and to say their Christian identity is very important to them. They take the most restrictionist approach to immigration — staunchly opposing not just illegal but legal immigration as well." This xenophobic sentiment is evidenced by their nearly unanimous views on restricting immigration, as shown in *Figure 3*. They also possess the lowest level of formal education and the lowest income of all the Trump voting groups (Ekins). American Preservationists are the particular portion of Trump's base that feels most threatened by the urban liberal agendas of racial equality and social justice: "they believe that anti-white discrimination is as pervasive as other forms of discrimination, and they have cooler feelings (as measured on a feeling thermometer scale) toward minorities" (Ekins). Trump's willingness to portray minorities

¹ I will not devote any analysis into the Disengaged category of Trump's supporters in this section because they represent a small percentage of Trump voters and the authors of the study essentially contest that this portion of Trump's base are statistical anomalies or people who refuse to reveal information on surveys.

as outcasts and to support white supremacist sentiment are a major source of appeal to this particular section.

Staunch Conservatives are the most loyal group of Republican voters that “embrace moral traditionalism, and have a moderately nativist conception of American identity and approach to immigration” (Ekins). They also endorse similar nativist and ethnocultural views as the American Preservationists, but perhaps more subconsciously or at least not as outwardly and aggressively. This particular group is on the older side of Trump’s base and possesses moderate levels of income and education. While it is not mentioned explicitly in the study, I believe that this particular group encompasses evangelicals and religiosity: “[Staunch Conservatives] feel that having lived in the U.S. for most of one’s life and being Christian are very or fairly important components of being a real American” (Ekins). This particular section is also the most politically engaged. Staunch Conservatives are “one of the most likely groups to have correct knowledge of political facts” (Ekins). These are voters that have likely voted in the past, and closely identify themselves with the Republican party.

Staunch Conservatives are not to be confused with Republican loyalists; while Staunch Conservatives are highly favorable to the Republican Party, they did not necessarily vote for Trump out of blind party loyalty. It is true that there are certainly some conservatives who were dissuaded by Trump’s rhetoric and offensiveness yet still voted for him out of party affiliation, however, most of the Staunch Conservatives have embraced Trump’s hardline stance on traditional conservative issues like immigration and combatting terrorism (*Figure 3*). Unlike the next group I will discuss, Staunch Conservatives oppose measures like taxation of the wealthy and tend to be less concerned with the actions of elites. American Preservationists and Staunch Conservatives combined make up 51% of Trump voters and their ideological leanings make

them a huge majority of Trump's base (Ekins). Clearly, issues of identity and fear of other races are incredibly important to these particular sections.

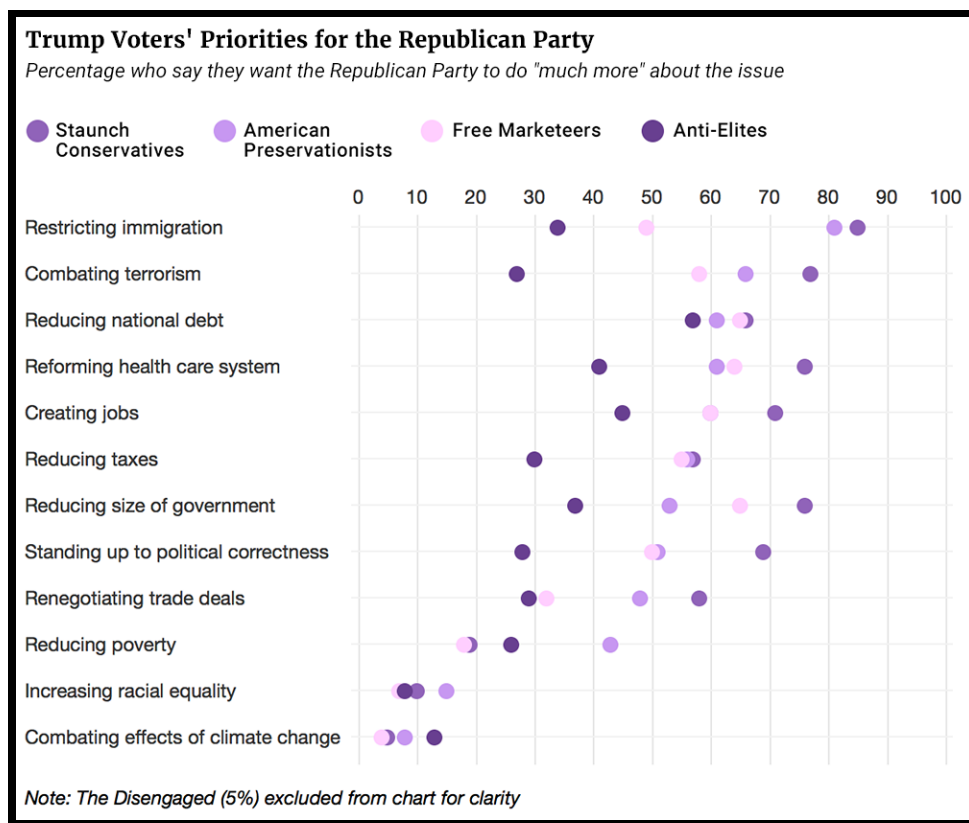


Figure 3 (Ekins)

Anti-Elites on the other hand, tend to be younger and more formally educated than American Preservationists or Staunch Conservatives, and share more progressive views on unexpected issues. For example, they express little concern for “Standing up to Political Correctness” compared to other Trump voting blocks as identified in *Figure 3*. Their main political concern is disdain for the elites, which is supported by the fact that 40% of this group said that they had favorable views of Bernie Sanders (Ekins). It is worth noting that the name of this particular group applied by Ekins is misleading; almost all of Trump's base contains elements of anti-elitism. However, this particular group tends to be less fundamentally conservative than the rest of Trump's base, and primarily identifies with Trump's attacks on the

elites. In looking at the political priorities of the Anti-Elite group in *Figure 3*, it is clear that they are the most moderate group of Trump's base. It is only when strictly analyzing their perception of the American economic system (*Figure 4*), that we see how their opinions align with the most hardline Trump voting sections, like the American Preservationists, on the issues related to elitism.

Free Marketeers, the smallest of the four primary demographics in the study, are another group that is less Trump-loyal than the American Preservationists or the Staunch Conservatives. They are a group of fiscally conservative voters who based their support of Trump out of opposition to Hillary Clinton's promises of increased taxes and government spending in 2016. This stems from the fact that they are the wealthiest group of Trump supporters who strongly oppose increases in taxes and market regulation as a threat to their collection of wealth. It is worth noting that Free Marketeers were the group most in agreement that reducing the size of government should be a main priority for the Republican Party, while also being the group least likely to agree that the government only benefits the wealthy (*Figures 3 & 4*). Ekins writes: "although they are a loyal Republican voting group, Free Marketeers are the most skeptical of Trump. A minority voted for him in the early primaries, while Ted Cruz was their other favorite. For the general election, most say their aversion to Clinton, not support of Trump, was their true motivator." Additionally, they generally skew from the strict nativism and ethnic/religious conceptions of identity that are highly important to the rest of Trump's base. However, *Figure 3* suggests that they are generally more conservative on social issues than their younger, less-wealthy, Anti-Elite counterparts.

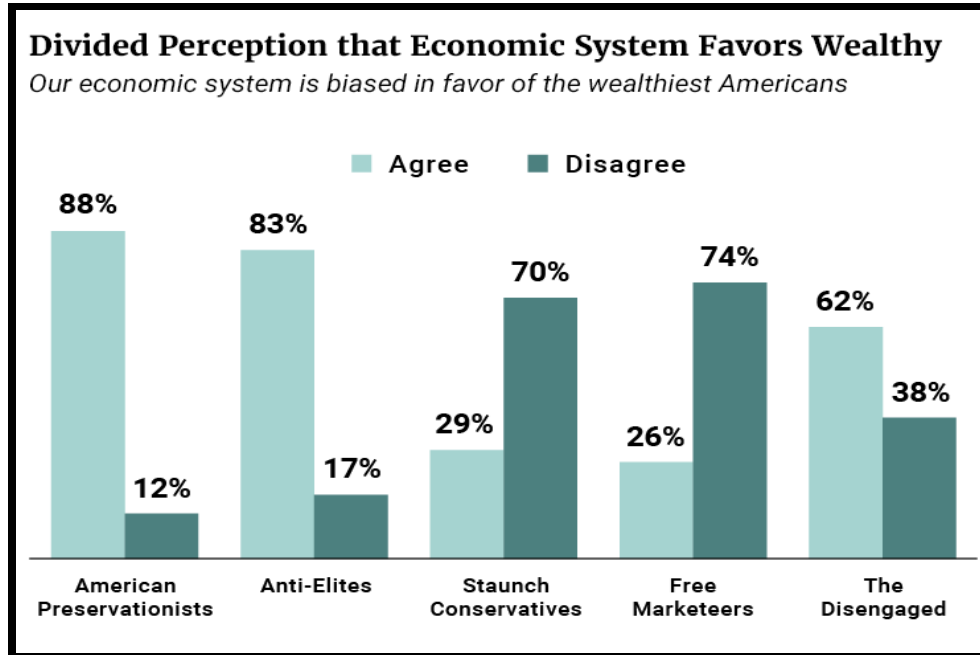


Figure 4 (Ekins 2017)

For this paper, American Preservationists and Staunch Conservatives make up the brunt of what I consider Trump's base; their strict conception of American identity combined with disdain for political correctness, cultural elites, and the progressive agenda, make them prime targets for Trump's messaging. Anti-Elites and Free Marketeers are more scattered in their affiliation with Trump, some are likely part of the base and some are not. These latter two groups seem to generally vote on one particular issue or because of party loyalty, particularly in the case of the Free Marketeers. Regardless, this study demonstrates a handful of critical ideological trends that are important to Trump's base of supporters. The first chapter will discuss the specific political undercurrents that have impacted Trump's base and what he offers that they so desperately desire. Namely, he provides an answer to a crisis of authority, evokes a sense of class consciousness, emphasizes traditional GOP narratives which they identify with, and divides them against the rest of America by creating the notion of a culture war. These four pillars are the nature of the emotional connection between Trump and his base.

Chapter I: Anger, Fear and Hate

The Authority Crisis

The absence of trust in authority in the U.S. has been an escalating crisis in the last few decades which has culminated with a complete lack of confidence in American institutions. According to the Pew Research Center, nearly 73% of Americans trusted the government to do what was right “most of the time” or “almost always” in the year 1960 (Pew). Today, that number is just 17% and trending downward (Pew). There is no one explanation for this concerning trend, but the following phenomena of the last half century provide plausible theories. What is important for this analysis is recognizing that Trump’s base yearns for an authority figure that resonates with them ideologically and who is separate from the political apparatus that they believe no longer works for them.

U.S. Military interventions: Beginning with the Vietnam war in the early 1960’s, the U.S. has engaged in a series of embarrassing, costly and damning military interventions that lacked general public support and have ultimately weakened trust in the federal government. It is not a coincidence that decline in American’s trust for their government coincides with the height of the Vietnam war. Throughout the war, 58,000 men and women lost their lives in war that never made sense to the American public (“The Vietnam War”). While politicians claimed that the end was in sight, Americans watched graphic nightly images of young soldiers dying in a distant jungle. The release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 revealed to the American public that they had been led to believe certain facts about U.S. involvement in Vietnam that were blatantly and outright untrue (Marlantes). More specifically, the Pentagon Papers revealed disturbing details of American

involvement dating back to the 1960s including our compliance with the Diem Coup, the fabrication of the Gulf of Tonkin incident and various escalations of involvement in Vietnam through multiple administrations without the public's knowledge (Marlantes). Ultimately, the Vietnam War inspired Americans to become more skeptical and more cynical about our statesmen and women as well as our political institutions; a trend that has continued right through to the present day. The American consciousness has never recovered from the lies and deceit that surrounded our involvement in Vietnam.

Vietnam was not the first instance of a U.S. intervention that eroded public trust and it would not be the last. Throughout the Cold War the U.S. covertly and overtly involved itself in regime change in Latin America, the Middle East and Asia, sometimes in democratically elected governments and without congressional approval. Another significant and costly war was the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent demolition of a sovereign nation, recognized by the UN, as a result of the ill planned and ill executed U.S. offensive.

It is widely accepted that President Bush either manipulated or intentionally ignored specific intelligence so as to justify the pretext for invading Iraq and overthrowing Saddam Hussein. Americans were told that the reason for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was because Saddam Hussein supported terrorists in the region and possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) which represented a national security threat to the U.S. The claims about WMDs turned out to be not only false, but in direct opposition to what the intelligence community had reported to the Bush administration. In October of 2002, President George W. Bush claimed that the Iraqi government had a "massive stockpile" of chemical weapons. CIA director George Tenet would later testify that this claim was an outright lie (Matthews). One month later, Condoleezza Rice stated that aluminum tubing purchased by the Iraqis was "only really suited for nuclear weapons programs," despite being told by the Energy Department that it was highly unlikely that this was

the case (Matthews). Finally, in August, Dick Cheney claimed that “there’s simply no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction,” when in reality there wasn’t only doubt but significant sentiment in the intelligence community that this was not true (Matthews).

Not only were the pretexts for Iraq dishonest, but the operation itself was a complete disaster, creating immense human suffering and international ridicule. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Saddam regime, basic resources and institutions disappeared. Water, electricity, waste management, food supplies, jobs, and many more essential services fell apart and were left unaddressed by the American occupation (Blumel). Looters ravaged business and former government buildings with no authority to prevent the anarchy. When the U.S. did replace a government, the sectarian divisions between Shia and Sunni Muslims were widely ignored, and the newly installed Shia government persecuted the Sunni populations. In the absence of real authority and as a response to the oppression at the hands of the new government, militant Salafi Islamic groups (including what would later become ISIS) fought for influence in the years following the invasion.

Despite the clear disarray of the country, President George Bush declared victory on May 1st of 2003 behind the backdrop of a massive “Mission Accomplished” sign on the USS Abraham Lincoln, an image that signifies the ineptitude and hypocrisy of our involvement in Iraq. As we know, the mission was not accomplished, and to this day the American public scowles at the mention of our involvement which many consider a national embarrassment. The withdrawal of major American forces from Iraq was not completed until 2011, and residual forces remain to this day. Bush’s declaration of victory on the USS Abraham Lincoln will live forever in infamy as a propaganda stunt that completely ignored the actual conditions on the ground and was a certifiable lie to the American people.

In further fallout from the invasion, the vacuum of power created by the conflict led the way for a terrorist group Al-Qaeda in Iraq, later to be called ISIS, to take control of parts of Iraq and begin establishing themselves as the most horrific force in the region. ISIS terrorized the Shia population as well as other minority religious sects, and executed U.S. allied foreign soldiers along with Western journalists in graphic viral videos that circled the world over. Americans looked on in horror, struggling to come to terms with the fact that our questionable invasion and subsequent failure paved the way for this disaster in the Middle East. We began hearing words like “homegrown terrorists” and read news stories about impressionable youth joining the caliphate. ISIS was not defeated until 2017 but the region will be scarred forever. The result of the Iraq war for the Iraqis was massive human suffering and over a decade of hardship. For the American people, it was another substantial blow to the level of trust in the government which had lied and failed once again. Iraq and Vietnam represent just two of the many U.S. military interventions that have impacted trust in government. But foreign interventions alone are not enough to create the level of distrust we now have today; domestic scandals have also changed the way we view our government.

Scandals: Beyond costly interventions and the lies associated with them, the abundance of scandals, both local and high profile ones, have contributed to a weakened trust in government. The one that tops them all and has given us the “-gate” suffix, is the Watergate scandal. Members of the Nixon administration were paid to break into the Democratic National Committee’s Watergate office building, with Nixon’s knowledge, during his reelection campaign in 1972. In June of that year, two men were arrested for the burglary and were quickly revealed to have been part of the reelection campaign staff, and to have received \$25,000 from the campaign (“Watergate Scandal”). As the investigation continued, details about Nixon’s spying

and secretly taped White House conversations bubbled to the surface. Nixon repeatedly denied all wrongdoing and lied through his teeth on national television claiming that he had no knowledge of any of the alleged crimes, and that those responsible had hid information from him. Ultimately, senate hearings aired all the dirty laundry of Nixon's attempted cover up and he was forced to resign facing impeachment. It was also revealed that officials in the Nixon administration had instructed staffers to break into a psychiatrist's office where Daniel Ellsberg, the man who leaked the Pentagon Papers, was a patient. By the end of the release of the Pentagon Papers and the culmination of the Watergate scandal, American's trust in government had dropped to just over 25%, the largest drop in trust in our nation's history and it has never recovered since (Pew).

Nixon was just the beginning in a long tale of scandals that became increasingly more public with the invention and use of mass media. Other scandals that come to mind include the Iran-Contra affair, where the Reagan Administration sold arms to Iran despite a U.S. imposed embargo, and then used the profits to fund a paramilitary group in Nicaragua which the U.S. congress had pledged not to support. Next was Bill Clinton's turn. When President Clinton was accused of sexual relations with White House intern, Monica Lewinsky, he too famously looked the American people in the eye and lied straight to their face, saying: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." Just a few months later President Clinton would admit that he "misled" the American people with that statement. While there has not been another major presidential scandal since Bill Clinton (at least until Trump took office), political scandals in other branches of the federal government are just as abundant and equally damaging to the American psyche.

Beyond scandals involving the government, other major institutions, which at one time were considered trustworthy, have been degraded by high-profile scandals. Look no further than

Wall Street, where scandals involving white collar criminals like Bernie Madoff schemed financial systems for their own pockets. In addition, big banks that caused the 2008 crash were rewarded with massive bailouts while millions of Americans suffered through the great recession. The stained history of our financial institutions has created a general sense that Wall Street is an evil empire of money hoarding elites ready to screw the American public at any given chance. This sentiment is not even unique to Trump's base; the left-wing of the Democratic party led by Bernie Sanders thrives on popularity from anti economic-elite notions.

Even what some would consider the most "sacred" type of institution in America, the Catholic Church, has been plagued by scandals. Scandal does not even begin to describe the number of cover ups of sexual abuses, not just in the U.S. but throughout the world, perpetrated by the Church. The Catholic Church was at one point an institution that Americans trusted as sacred and pious, a beacon of family values. That reputation is now completely dismantled. In sports, schools, Hollywood, police departments, you name it, scandals have fractured what in the past represented proud American institutions.

All of these scandals are made worse by mass media and the internet where an event in one small town halfway across the country makes the nightly news and becomes a national story that is easily accessible for eternity by a simple google search. Further, scandals and cover ups are the type of news stories that grab lots of attention because they are alarming, surprising, and entertaining in nature. The development of mass media and the information era have given these scandals a megaphone of impact that has severely damaged trust in government. Some observers have classified this phenomenon as "echo chambers," meaning the natural inclination to seek out information on the internet that aligns with our current viewpoint:

Echo chambers refer to people's tendency to seek information that confirms their existing perspectives and assumptions, including their political views. Filter bubbles refer more specifically to the mechanisms within online social networks that provide users with content that is appealing to them, which often is content

that is consistent with their current view[...] it becomes easier to inhabit online worlds that are almost hermetically sealed off from others with different perspectives. The irony is that the internet, which originally promised to be a tool for enlightenment and liberation by providing everyone with access to all human knowledge, has, according to some critics, ended up isolating each user in a ‘unique, personal universe of information created just for you by an array of (invisible) personalizing filters’ (“Why has Trust in Media and...” 2017).

This is more than just information that aligns with our interests or political identity; online media and “filter bubbles” encourages an internet culture where click-bait headlines and scandal content generate unprecedented popularity compared to other content. The sheer access to immediate information, combined with the type of information that generates popular momentum on the internet, contribute to declining trust in government. Similar to scandals, conspiracy media is another example of a discourse that decreases trust in government and spreads more rapidly than it ever has with the use of online mass media.

Conspiracy media: After the Jan. 6th Capitol attack, many pundits and political experts wondered how on earth Trump was able to convince so many supporters of a stolen election conspiracy that motivated them to conduct a terrorist attack on the U.S. Capitol. Deep analysis reveals that the writing was on the wall for this event. Trump’s effectiveness at gaslighting his base into believing his election claims aside, American’s tendency to believe conspiracy theories is much more deeply rooted and historically prevalent than once thought. Whether this is a symptom or cause of weakened trust in government is up for political debate. I tend to side with the latter because many conspiracies target the government as the enemy of the people and reinforce one another with the theme of *government is bad*.

Conspiracy theories are essentially explanations of a particular event that blame menacing or ominous powerful groups (like aliens or the “deep state) in contrary to the accepted cause. Some conspiracy theories are not based on any events at all and may simply accuse a

menacing group of doing something out of the public eye. Conspiracy theories invoke a sense of class consciousness by identifying a specific enemy of the masses; *the elites are hiding something from you*, or *the elites have done something in secret* etc. Through much of the last decade, conspiracy theorists have been categorized as a fringe phenomenon that is unanimously ridiculed (at least before Jan. 6th that was the case). Despite this popular belief, their prevalence in American minds is actually astoundingly common and disturbing. According to an article published in the American Journal of Political Science:

Four nationally representative survey samples collected in 2006, 2010, and 2011 indicate that over half of the American population consistently endorse some kind of conspiratorial narrative about a current political event or phenomenon[...] These findings suggest that conspiracism is not only an important element in American political culture, but also is expressive of some latent and powerful organizing principles behind American mass opinion (Oliver 953).

These “organizing principles” behind mass opinion are a critical element to understanding both the events of Jan. 6th and the nature of Trump’s connection with his base. Worldviews have been so seriously warped by conspiracy theories that objective truth as a principle is no longer politically relevant. I will discuss more on the “post-truth” era later in this thesis. For now, it is sufficient to say that conspiracy theories are not only abundant but diverse in their content.

Conspiracies range from all sorts of topics. One example is the Area 51 conspiracy that suggests a top-secret American military base in Nevada holds intelligence and artifacts confirming the existence of Aliens. Famously, a Facebook user created a “facebook event” calling on users from across the internet to sign up to “Raid area 51” because “they can’t stop all of us” (Frank). The Facebook post received a lot of popularity, and 2 million people signed up to go to the facility and “raid” what they believed was a secret government conspiracy. This sparked the U.S. Air Force to actually acknowledge the planned event and warn people not to go to the facility where they would be dealt with handily. The actual event was a dud, but some

groups of people showed up at the base and the surrounding towns for a music festival “Alien-stock” (Frank). While the Area 51 Raid was a harmless internet joke, it reveals a deeper dilemma with how American’s view the government as a secret and clandestine institution.

A second major conspiracy theory that has been perpetuated online, is that the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center were orchestrated and executed by the Bush administration. Even mainstream media has embraced the popularity of this narrative, as numerous television documentaries on popular channels like the History channel endorse conspiratorial “scientific” analysis of the 9/11 attack. Often the evidence relies on questionable scientific principles presented as facts, doctored images or unverifiable/manipulated witness accounts (“9/11 Conspiracy Theories...”). Despite the debunking of the 9/11 conspiracy, it still remains popular both in online culture and with conspiracy enthusiasts.

Another significant conspiracy theory of the last decade is one endorsed by Donald Trump: the Obama “birther” hoax. Birthers believe that Obama was not born in the U.S. and was therefore not legally able to be the President according to the constitution. Trump began the theory in 2011, demanding that Obama release his birth certificate to prove the fact that he was an American citizen. Later, Trump would demand college application records and continued to perpetuate the claim until his own presidential campaign in 2016. The birther hoax played into issues of race and identity among right-wing conservatives, and Trump became the champion of this movement. I will discuss this issue in more depth later on as part of my analysis on Trump’s messaging.

In addition to the birther hoax, Trump has created an even bigger conspiracy that now is widely accepted by his base. This of course is the “deep state” conspiracy, where Trump claims that a cabal of elites secretly run the government and have colluded against Trump, who is the manifestation of good in the fight against evil. The precursor to this Trump-led campaign against

clandestine government operatives began with the 2016 Pizzagate affair where an online internet group claimed that Hillary Clinton was running a child sex ring out of a pizza place in Washington D.C. (Robb). This conspiracy later evolved to the widely popular QAnon group, considered to be a domestic terrorist threat to the U.S. by the FBI. According to the New York Times: “QAnon is the umbrella term for a sprawling set of internet conspiracy theories that allege, falsely, that the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who are plotting against Mr. Trump while operating a global child sex-trafficking ring” (Roose). Trump has yet to disavow the QAnon group and a handful of elected officials outwardly support its theories.

The prevalence and spread of conspiracy theories is both a cause and symptom of Trump’s popularity, and has increasingly weakened trust in government by giving popularity to outrageous stories that paint the government as working against the people in evil and viscous ways. Conspiracy theories simplify complex or unknown political dilemmas into unprovable myths. They are self-reinforcing and use the lack of evidence as evidence to the case: *that's what they want you to believe*, and *they own the media* or *they own the scientists* are common refrains along this line of thinking. Therefore, we can see how conspiracies can be manipulated into becoming the only explanation for the unknown that actually makes sense and needs no evidence; every single piece of counter evidence against the conspiracy can be flipped to reinforce the theory itself as part of some coverup. The government and powerful elites are often a target of these theories that reshape reality to a battle of good versus evil where “the common people” are being tricked or coerced. The use of online mass media and the guise of anonymity it provides, has allowed for the escalating spread of conspiracy theories which have weakened trust in government.

Dynastization: The accumulation of wealth and power by very public elite families is another cause of mistrust in government. Most obviously, the dynastization of the federal government by the Bush and Clinton families has had a negative impact on Americans' faith that our leaders are elected based on their competence and character rather than because of advantages given to them by their last name. However, while the Bush and Clinton families (along with the Kennedys) are two of the most publicly obvious dynasties, they are certainly not the only ones; Trump himself is the beneficiary of a wealthy dynasty that propelled him to success. Kevin Phillips, author of *Wealth and Democracy*, writes “If we lack an official House of Lords, there are Bushes, Tafts, Simons, Rockefellers, Gores, Kennedys and Bayhs out to create a kindred phenomenon. Laura Bush is the only wife of a 1996 or 2000 major-party presidential nominee who has not yet entertained seeking a US Senate seat in her own right. The duchesses of Clinton, Dole and Gore have already considered” (11). I could just as easily add the McCain’s and the Cheney’s to that list as well. These families have consistently held a disproportionate share of positions in the federal government. Scepticism is further spawned out of the manner in which these dynasties have intertwined themselves with massive multinational corporations –take the Bush’s and Enron or the Biden’s and Burisma for example– which puts into question where their interests really lie.

It is important to remember that the 2016 election could be seen as a referendum on the political establishment, but more specifically, on political dynasties. Donald Trump resoundingly beat Jeb Bush, although part of a dense field of Republican primary candidates, and later went on to defeat Hillary Clinton; two presidential campaigns that were the products of political dynastization. The dynastization of American politics is what brings all the abovementioned authority crises together; it was Bush who brought us into Iraq, Bill Clinton who had a presidential sex scandal and both families which are a part of the “deep state” conspiracy. The

economic stagnation and political frustration of Trump’s base has caused them to identify far closer with conspiracies than ever before, rejecting American institutions and dynasties that have dominated the most powerful circles of the American elite for the last half century.

All of the above examples, disastrous interventions, scandals, conspiracy media, and dynasties are just some of several possible explanations as to why Americans have been left hopeless by their government. Authors of the Knight Commission, dedicated to studying trust in government, summarize this political trend in the following manner:

Starting with the Vietnam War and Watergate, a series of governmental actions served to diminish public trust. Bad behavior by elected officials—including the Clinton impeachment, after the President was accused of lying under oath; the Iraq War, which turned out to have been launched under false assumptions; a failure to defend against foreign interference in elections; and the gridlock that seems to have dominated U.S. political processes in recent years—provided ample grounds for Americans to doubt the effectiveness of their government (“Why has Trust in Media...” 2017).

The question remains: who can be trusted? Trump intuitively understood that this was on the minds of many Americans, and he sought to be their answer. I will demonstrate that much of Trump’s messaging is geared towards establishing himself as a political authority figure at a time where trust in government has collapsed. Not only does his messaging portray himself as an authority figure, but also as someone who is authentic and who does not “conspire” against the American people. In reality, Trump’s actions are the same, if not worse than the “deep state” politicians that came before him in terms of his plundering of the American Government (Frum 114). However, Trump’s emotional connection with his base, formed through dynamic and strategic messaging, has shielded him from the same criticisms that he levies against political opponents.² Trump’s ability to establish himself as an authority figure is used in unison with capitalizing on a sense of nihilism against the old system –the establishment– which his base has

² This is a strategy I call Reflection, which I discuss in Chapter IV.

come to reject. Trump's messaging reflects authoritative strategies that allow his base to look to him for leadership. Beyond authority, Trump's messaging is also geared towards creating an identity of being a Trump supporter.

Class Consciousness

While I reject the premise that populism as a result of economic decline is the full story behind Trump's popularity, certain aspects of populist movements like the creation of class consciousness are indeed a critical part of understanding Trump's messaging strategy. Much of Trump's brand of populism rests on two key nationalist ideologies: 1) the creation of hope through promises of economic prosperity to disenfranchised, working-class, white Americans, and 2) defining a rigid identity of "real Americans" (based on those same qualities) that rejects and scapegoats special interest groups which Trump's base blames for their woes. These two identities conjoin to formulate a strict identity that centers around one additional connection that completes a circle of class consciousness and in-group unity: being a Trump supporter.

In addition to realizing economic success and rejecting "the other," the Trump brand of class consciousness rests on identifying not only politically, but identifying emotionally with Trump. For his base, he is the only true supporter of working-class, White America, and it is he alone that acts with their best interests in mind. Trump promises to bring back American industries like manufacturing which were, at one time, an integral part of the medium-income identity. Instead of actually "bringing back" these industries that once formed a working-class identity, Trump has created a new identity by welding a connection between whiteness, evangelicalism, and the working-class into being a Trump supporter. His base supporters recognize that people like them support Trump, wear a MAGA hat, go to Trump rallies and put a

Trump sign in their front lawn. Beyond just political opinion, Trump's brand of class consciousness centers around himself and has actually penetrated his base's behaviour; not wearing a mask in public, rejecting modern science and trusted institutions, has become synonymous with being a Trump supporter. Political commentators have also identified this type of comradeship that exists in Trump's movement:

Unlike other political groups, Trump supporters often feel aligned with other Trump supporters on a deep level, even if they have never met one another before. There is a shared sense of communal understanding. Though Democrats may feel that they too have cohesion with their Democrat leaders, I assure you it is nothing compared to the feelings of admiration, respect and protectiveness that a Trumper feels towards Trump (Mourer).

Therefore, it can be said unequivocally that a culture has been created around his movement and vigorously supporting his quest for power. The emotional connection is blended with communal and even tribal (southern white) identity, making it able to withstand any legitimate challenge. It goes beyond political and ideological affiliations and enters the conceptions of his supporters own sense of identity. This sense of class consciousness can also be related to economic conditions that his base has experienced in recent memory, which Trump promises to fix. The economic woes of this group are not a deeply complex phenomenon, rather, they are a well understood result of decades of globalization and neoliberal economic policies.

The economic conditions I will briefly present in this section are overly simplified and do not do full justice to the economic forces which have participated in the disenfranchisement of Trump's base. However, for the scope of this paper, I will attempt to highlight some critical points. The modern pursuit of financial capitalism has resulted in a deepening of income inequalities in the last two decades that has particularly affected working-class people. The Tea Party movement and the Occupy Wallstreet movement are the political manifestations of this income inequality: despite their polar opposite ideological leanings, the basis of their movement

was anti economic-elite. Neoliberal economic policies, and the resulting de-industrialization of the U.S. in favor of cheaper operating costs in foreign factories, has created a “decomposition” of the working-class, who find themselves disenfranchised from economic activity that has migrated to service work in urban centers or industrial jobs in foreign countries. This has created a stagnation of economic mobility that threatens future prospects of working-class, formerly industrial workers:

Mobility, as measured by the percentage of children who go on to achieve an income higher than that of their parents, has declined dramatically. Mobility has fallen from approximately 90 percent for the cohort of children born in the 1940s, to 50 percent for those born in the 1980s, with the largest declines occurring in middle-class families. The study attributes most of the decline in mobility to the uneven distribution of national economic gains, with most going to the top earners and much less to the rest of the population (“Why has Trust in Media and... 2017)

As prospects for a better future, the proverbial “American Dream,” have become increasingly thin, Trump’s base has become increasingly resentful and angry with the “powers that be.” The ruling elites have long told them that they are “white-privileged” and “politically incorrect” despite their own unique struggles and political worldview. While systemic injustice based on race is a verifiable and very real condition, Trump’s base is limited to the perspective of a dwindling future which creates fear, anxiety, and resentment. This emotional reaction to a decline in economic mobility left the base vulnerable to demagoguery, and Trump entered the scene with promises of prosperity and revenge.

In addition to a decline in economic mobility, the 2008-09 financial collapse delivered a global shock that significantly impacted working-class Americans who experienced a recession and massive unemployment. Famously, the banks were bailed out by the government because they were “too big to fail,” while millions of Americans lost their savings or jobs. The financial collapse was caused by big finance yet the working-class American people bore the brunt of the fallout. Unemployment skyrocketed and long standing angers about the trajectory of the

American economy bubbled to the surface. The 2008 crisis along with pre-existing trends of deindustrialization, combined to disrupt the conceptions of working-class identity. According to British sociologist Imogen Tyler:

One of the effects of the transition from industrial to financial capitalism is class decomposition, which means that people may no longer recognize themselves as belonging to an existing social class or positively identify with historic class names. In particular, there has been an erosion of the ‘working class’, both as an interpretative sociological lens, and as a political identity category deployed by people in everyday struggles against exploitation (498).

Against the fading backdrop of working-class identity that once represented strength through manufacturing, industry and technical skill, Trump promised to redefine the American working-class as a new politically oriented force, defined by their rigid conception of identity and nationalist ideologies. We have all heard Trump talk about bringing back jobs and touting America first policy, even though the results have been spotty at best. The results matter little; the identity is the attraction. His voice is their voice, his actions are their actions, and his victories are their victories. Voting Trump into office represented a political victory after years of economic defeats, which is critical to understanding the attraction of Trump and the class consciousness brought about by his movement. Instead of deriving a sense of worth and self-pride from the occupation of working-class identity, Trump’s base is empowered by being part of the Trump movement itself, and defining their identities from associations with its success.

Beyond just creating a new identity for the American worker, Trump rewards his base with emotional fulfillment on an ethnic/racial level: “conservative populisms remake the white working class as a racial/cultural category. That is, with the rise of conservative populism in the twenty-first century, the white working class has increasingly become a cultural category linked to white nationalism (Pied 203). The “real America” that Trump represents is that of the White,

working-class *and* Trump supporters. This is not just an ideological current but a political strategy as well. Withholding funds from Democratic states, attacking Democratic governors, and alienating Democratic voters is the manifestation of Trump's bargain to solely take care of those who vote for him. One way in which Trump creates a rigid identity in his movement, is by scapegoating his base's economic despair on immigration and minorities as the face to blame for his base's conditions. This "fear of the other" is as much a part of the Trump populist identity as is class. The message Trump sends is that not only is it ok to be a racist, but a key component of the Trump populist identity is hite nationalism. From the Dog Whistling, "stand back and stand bye," to the race baiting, "when the looting starts the shooting starts," Trump deliberately creates a rigid and defined identity that inspires class consciousness.

Creating a class consciousness that is defined by both class and race is part of the emotional connection to Trump. By building this identity, Trump has reinforced and enabled White nationalist ideology that his supporters have been told is "politically incorrect" for decades. The remarks that Trump makes and the way he attacks political opponents, is an empowering component of the populist class consciousness that he has created. The Trump movement gives his base something to believe in and something to be passionate about. He represents their only hope to preserve what they see as their ever shrinking "real American" identity. As I will demonstrate, much of Trump's messaging can be traced back to establishing this class consciousness against political and cultural elites, and against minorities who they blame for their insecurities. A final significant part of Trump's emotional connection is Trump's hijacking of long-standing Republican party narratives that were pre-existing components of his base's identity.

Long Term GOP Narratives and the Culture War

The final component of Trump's emotional connection to his base is the emphasis on traditional GOP narratives that they identify with, in contrast to the perceived liberal agenda which threatens them. These themes are not unrelated to the populist class consciousness which Trump has incited, but they are a separate category of beliefs that affirm a different emotional connection which paints conservatism in a battle against the "radical-left." These narratives existed before Trump and they will most likely remain after him. He has not crafted them; he merely benefits from them. Additionally, they are political themes –religiosity, patriotism and fiscal conservatism– that form and ideological identity as opposed to a social identity. They are also narratives created for one singular purpose; to strengthen the Republican party against their political opponents, the Democrats and the "fake news" media. Trump has emphasized the importance of these narratives by manufacturing the perception of a culture war between his base and liberals, which threatens the very fabric of what they hold dear in favor of radical left-wing change. Recognizing these narratives and their context in the "culture war" is critical to understanding much of Trump's messaging that is centered around isolating his base from reality and capitalizing on creating divisions in American society.

One way of thinking about the Republican metanarrative is summarized excellently by authors in Harvard's *Kennedy School Review* Student Publication:

By nature, people are immoral and lazy. But Christian families create moral, hard-working children, and our capitalist economy rewards their hard work. Our government exists to keep our prosperity safe from evil, both at home and abroad. And this is how America became great: self-disciplined people were given a chance to succeed and granted a government to protect them. Today America holds the moral high ground because we alone have set up the right balance of freedoms and rewards (Hawkins and Flint).

And for the liberal narrative, the authors provide the following template:

By nature, people are pretty much the same everywhere. Race, religion, and gender are just superficial categories that allowed white Christian men to subjugate others. These artificial categories justified American slavery, segregation, sexism, and homophobia. The social movements for women's rights, civil rights, and gay rights have been slow marches toward a more just society and economy. Our government exists to help move forward this work of making society fairer for all (Hawkins and Flint).

Obviously, these narratives are just the foundations of a long complex story that both parties have woven about themselves and each other. Additional themes for Democrats might include a perceived responsibility to protect the natural environment over business interests, or that the government has a role in achieving universal healthcare for all of its citizens. For Republicans, I would add something about limiting the size and scope of government. The bottom line is that these “metanarratives,” as they are called by the authors in this particular piece, establish background precedents about the ideologies of each party respectively, even if they do not live up to them: “We use narrative[s] to make sense of a chaotic and unpredictable world, to imbue events with moral significance, and to define our own selves[...] Any meta-narrative is a simplification, and our reduction of American political attitudes into a binary requires exaggerated language and little nuance. Nonetheless, these narratives help explain the landscape of our polarized reality” (Hawkins and Flint). While both political parties have these metanarratives, there are differences in their delivery and more importantly their effectiveness at garnering popular support.

When it comes to metanarratives, I am inclined to say that Republicans have pursued big picture, more general themes like “restoring patriotic education” or “supporting our troops” as opposed to Democrats who tout specific policy platforms like Obamacare and the Green New Deal. Traditional narratives about the Republican party are that they are patriotic, supporters of individual freedoms, fiscally responsible, and defenders of family values. On the other hand, Democrats are portrayed by Republicans as the un-American party, supporting regulation,

subversive to traditional family values, and big spenders. The Republican party has successfully warped political realities to fit these narratives. Democrats are indeed often more critical of the country given their push for civil rights legislation, fixing institutional bias and their loyalty to special interest groups. This of course does not make them any less patriotic than Republicans, but the narrative which Trump supporters wholeheartedly buy is that they “hate America.” When Trump threatens that the Democrats are *coming after the monuments, teaching our children to despise America and cancelling history*, he is playing into the belief that the Democrat’s pursuit of social justice comes at the expense of American culture.

Secondly, the Democrats’ constituencies benefit from an active government; one that provides healthcare, protects civil rights, and supports general welfare. This has been commandeered to the narrative that Democrats are regulators and frivolous spenders, when in fact Democratic presidents have added less to the national debt overall than Republican presidents (Amadeao and Johnson). Look no further than Trump’s frequent attacks on Obamacare and environmental regulation to see how this narrative fits into the perception of a culture war; Trump uses these examples to call all Democrats socialists or identify the policies as part of the Democratic “manifesto” with all the implied Red Scare connections. This was a major part of Trump’s plea to Hispanic Americans in the 2020 campaign which was widely reported to have positive results, particularly in Florida. Below I have included a screenshot from a popular Trump 2020 ad:



Figure 5 (Bernal)

America's conditioned opposition to communism serves to make Trump's portrayal of the "radicalization" of the Democratic party a serious concern for conservatives even beyond his base. Beyond just accusations of communism, Trump characterizes the Democrats' push for civil rights as a method to restrict freedoms like the right to free speech. This manifests itself in Trump's messaging centered around mocking trends like cancel culture or refusing to submit to the "political correctness" which calls for sensitivity and tolerance in political speech.

Finally, Republicans define "family values" in the heteronormative sense in alignment with their evangelical religious followers, whereas Democrats believe in a much more inclusive view of sexuality and family. For Trump, this narrative is used to identify with evangelicals as victims of religious oppression at the hands of the Democratic Party. When Trump claims that the Democrats want to *take God out of the pledge of allegiance* or *cancel Christmas*, he is relying on these types of traditional narratives that the Democrats are anti-religion. The accusation from Republicans is that Democrats represent a threat to religious freedom; or perhaps more accurately put, a threat to the freedom to oppress others on the grounds of religion.

To prove how strong these narratives are, one needs to look no further than Donald Trump: a man who is not a patriot, who is a violator of family values, and who is fiscally

frivolous yet has now been embraced by the Republican party and most of its supporters. Despite his obvious contradictions to the narrative, the Republicans have done such an impressive job at sewing these notions over time that to conservative voters, Trump is who the Republican party says he is. When considering the traditional Republican narrative that has been the centerpiece of the GOP's support in recent memory, it is abundantly clear that Trump fits almost none of these categories. Lets begin with patriotism; does Trump behave like a true patriot? For starters he only paid \$750 in federal income tax in 2016, not exactly doing his part to be an honest tax paying American like the rest of us (Buettner et al.). Further, his bizarre criticisms of the late Senator John McCain and other POWs demonstrate complete and utter disrespect for our nation's veterans and service members. We all remember Trump famously stating "I like people who weren't captured" in reference to McCain's POW status, however the strange view of the military doesn't end there (Blake). In a report originally published in the Atlantic, Trump is exposed to have allegedly stood over the grave of 1st Lt. Robert Kelly, General John Kelly's son, and remarked "I don't get it. What was in it for them," showing clear and utter ignorance to the sacrifice and commitment made by our fallen heroes (Blake). Later, the article summarizes a conversation General Kelly reportedly had with Donald Trump: "'Why should I go to that cemetery? It's filled with losers.'" In a separate conversation on the same trip, Trump referred to the more than 1,800 Marines who lost their lives at Belleau Wood as 'suckers' for getting killed" (Blake). Further, the article references two occasions of Trump allegedly calling George H.W. Bush a "loser" for being shot down by a Japanese fighter pilot in WW2 (Blake). Lastly, Trump's failure to confront Putin on the alleged bounties of American Soldiers in Afghanistan tops the list of examples of Trump's anti-patriotism. The catalogue of Trump's alleged remarks about fallen heroes is as extensive as it is offensive. Yet Trump, who dodged the 1968 draft due to "bone spurs," has still managed to maintain a "patriotic" appearance to his base. I credit some of this to

the strength of the Republican narrative of patriotism which has shielded Trump from criticism, combined with Trump's use of patriotic symbolism is his messaging (playing *God Bless the U.S.A* by Lee Greenwood as his walk-up at every rally is an example of this). Regardless, patriotism is a hot button issue for his base that includes subjects related to gun rights, military spending and our nation's history. In his messaging, Trump accuses Democrats of attempting to decimate all of these patriotic values. Trump, who is not actually a patriot in any true sense of the word, stands with the Republican party on these issues and, by default, further strengthens his emotional connection with his base.

The second glaring contradiction between Trump and the Republican party narrative is that Trump strays very far from the path of conservative, religious family values. To date, 26 women have accused Trump of sexual assault which, combined with the infamous Access Hollywood tape, provides solid evidence of Trump's treatment of women. Additionally, Trump paid \$130,000 in hush money payments to Stormy Daniels after a story threatened to be aired alleging an extramarital affair between the two while Trump was married to his third wife Melania. From these very public scandals, we can conclude that Trump not only brags about sexually assaulting women but also has allegedly been unfaithful in his marriages. I mention these discretions not to hold Trump to a higher standard than anyone else, but merely to contrast what the GOP claims it stands for and who the face of the party actually is. At the very least we can all agree that Trump does not represent the narrative of "traditional" evangelical family values. Still, when the most damning evidence, the Access Hollywood tape, emerged as a massive story in the 2016 election, evangelicals played the fool and rallied around Trump claiming that Hillary was a threat to religious freedom. The evangelicals, which support Trump more firmly than anyone else, would vote for Satan if he ran under the Republican party nomination.

The Republican party narratives are the third source of Trump's emotional connection to his base, and are escalated by Trump's emphasis on the impending culture war between *patriotic American conservatives* and *America-hating communist liberals*. The uniqueness to Trump's messaging strategies related to these narratives, as opposed to the authority crisis and his establishment of class consciousness, is that he uses them to spread fear and anger against Democrats. For the religious crowd, Trump plays on the fear that the subversive Democrats are seeking to restrict and eliminate religious freedoms. For the patriots, Democrats are pictured as anti-American and wanting to "get rid of history." For the financially minded, the Democrats are accused of wanting to increase taxes and expand the welfare state. By spreading this type of fear, as I will mention at depth later in my analysis, Trump drums up support for himself as the savior of these values. The Trump-savior narrative as it relates to long term party metanarratives, are an important aspect of Trump's emotional connection to his base through defense of conservative values.

Emotion Trumps Reason

Ultimately, Trump's messaging rests on the above mentioned three key pillars: the authority crisis juxtaposed with his strength, class consciousness as defined by the Trump movement, and the savior of Republican narratives in the face of destructive Democrats. Each pillar contains its unique structural elements. For the authority crisis, Trump represents authenticity, strength, truth, a new slate and someone who will cleanse America from the elites who have poisoned it. For class consciousness, Trump represents the enablement of White nationalism, a defined identity that sets his base apart from "the other," along with a justification to persecute and despise minorities, and a movement that embraces frustrated White workers to

channel their anger through Trump. Finally, for the Republican narratives, Trump represents an ideological savior as a counter to Democratic influence, a defender of American exceptionalism, a champion of Religious freedom and a guarantor of financial prosperity.

This emotional connection is exclusive to the base as I have defined above. I cannot overemphasize that Trump's base is his unique strength; they are his protection from persecution, his control over the Republican party, and mobilizing them is the key to his power. For this reason they are in a symbiotic relationship of loyalty: he caters exclusively to their needs, forming an emotional connection with them, and they reward him with limitless and undeniable support. We now understand the nature of the emotional connection between Trump and his base but the mechanics of this connection are the true fascination. Afterall, the undercurrents of an escalating authority crisis, shattering middle class identity and Republican party narratives have existed for quite some time but no one has been able to create the mobilization that Trump has. Therefore, I contest, the most significant consequence of the Trump era is the deliberate and fascinating messaging strategy that he has cultivated.

Authoritarianism for Dummies: How to Become a Demagogue in Just Sixteen Easy Steps

The previous sections identified specific societal conditions that Trump has capitalized on in his plethora of messaging strategies. I argue that Trump's messaging machine has escalated the fear, anxiety and anger of his base, which has ultimately fueled the Trump movement to the White House and beyond. It is through messaging that Trump has been able to establish such a firm emotional connection with his base; a connection that has infiltrated their behavior, identity and perception of reality. Anyone who takes a deep look at Trump's messaging understands that

his strategies are often not inherently complicated and have very little to do with actual policy (standing in stark contrast with his Democratic opponents). Trump's messaging targets specific base motives such as fear of the other, the impending culture war that threatens their identity, dissatisfaction with economic stagnation, nihilism towards the political establishment, empowerment on an ideological level, and distrust of authority. Trump's simplistic messaging strategy is not to be confused with laziness or incompetency; I argue that Trump has intuitively recognized that his style of rhetoric is incredibly effective at this point in American history, and he has carefully crafted his messaging around basic themes that serve his political desires. These observations reveal the most frightening aspect of the Trump movement: it can easily be replicated. Trump's messaging has very little to do with charisma or leadership and is more about how he plucks the chords of his disenfranchised base. By this logic, any half-competent demagogue could replicate this strategy and pick up right where Trump left off, certainly some have already as I have previously mentioned. The next chapter will aim to break down Trump's messaging to its most basic principles in order to classify and organize tactics that Trump regularly employs.

First, a word about my methods. This paper discusses sixteen different messaging strategies across four different categories. The proposed messaging strategies and evidence presented in this chapter are a result of my own independent research into hundreds of hours of Trump's rallies, debates, interviews, press-conferences and twitter feed. The four platforms listed here are Trump's most preferred methods of communication. First, campaign rallies are used to deliver ideological victories to the base, create class consciousness, attack opponents without fear of rebuttal, create false narratives and ultimately serve as his best tool of directly mobilising the base. I have devoted an entire chapter to rally-specific strategies, and I will save the discussion on their advantages for that section.

On twitter, Trump accesses a much different audience than his other platforms, as he is speaking to supporters and opponents from across the globe. On twitter, Trump's messages must be succinct and easily digestible; some of his most blatant and straightforward strategies come from his twitter use. Twitter also is an effective tool to reach a wider audience, even if they do not want to be reached. Controversial statements, which are liked, re-tweeted, and quote-tweeted by millions of users, are easily able to reach every corner of the internet. Even those who would rather not hear Trump's messaging are forced to listen by the megaphone that twitter creates. This is how Trump uses twitter to maintain the initiative and focus on himself in the rapidly changing 24-hour news cycle. Trump's tweets garner intense media attention and his twitter page is one of the most popular in the world. He can address, deflect, or create any controversy with a simple tweet that will reach his base (and others) anywhere, anytime.

Trump uses debates as the premier platform to attack his opponents and demonstrate an image of strength. Trump never backs off, never backs down and never shows weakness on the debate stage; he remains constantly on the attack all the time, often overwhelming his opponents and weakening their image while boosting his own. Not even the moderators are safe from Trump's debate assaults. Debate stages allow Trump to deliver more complicated messages that he cannot do in the length of a tweet. However, messaging content is entirely secondary to the main benefit Trump derives from debates: humiliating opponents. The physical presence associated with debates allows Trump to impose his authoritative and disruptive manner of speaking over his opponent. Trump's base is rewarded by his bullying and verbal overpowering of his opponents, which devolve debates from political discourse to political combat. Considering Trump's strategic goal of overpowering his opponents, it's no surprise that Trump refused to participate in a virtual debate with Joe Biden.

Lastly, Trump uses interviews differently depending on the political identity of the host. For friendly interviews, Trump uses the time to minimize his actions, scapegoat others and continue to gaslight his audience by developing false narratives which are generally supported by the interviewer. In unfriendly interviews, Trump essentially uses the same strategies he uses in debates to attack the interviewer and the media that they represent. Trump has a knack for the camera and his TV persona background shines on television. He will often walk back previous outrageous claims and minimize his own statements in national interviews which he knows will garner lots of ratings. The same is true for his White House press conferences where he is in front of a majority of hostile media reporters.

Notably, advertisements are missing from this discussion on media. While a larger look at Trump's campaign messaging should include his advertisements, my focus is on Trump's personal messaging, meaning his own words, not the team of advertisers responsible for making Trump advertisements. It is my opinion that Trump's emotional connection to his base is formed mostly by messaging that he himself distributes. There is plenty of existing literature on GOP advertisements, and Trump's advertisements offer minor additions to this wealth of knowledge. Additionally, these ads lack the personal touch of Trump, and while I am sure he watches and approves of their content, the advertisements present a messaging strategy that is separate from my focus in this analysis.

When analyzing Trump's messaging, I chose to direct my focus to the last two months of both the 2016 and 2020 campaigns; many of my evidence will come from these brief segments of Trump's time as a candidate/President. I have elected to focus on these two specific windows because they represent comparable periods of time where Trump was the most active in terms of getting his message out to his base due to the stakes of an impending election. Additionally, I feel it is important to focus on a succinct time window, not only for the scope of this thesis, but

because it will allow me to demonstrate the consistency in Trump's strategy beyond the just newspaper headlines that we are all too familiar with. Not all of Trump's many messaging strategies generate widespread media buzz and attention. Therefore, sticking to a specific time window allows for observation of less-obvious strategies that are otherwise neglected when only considering all of Trump's "greatest hits." Furthermore, by analyzing a small and specific time period of two separate election cycles, I will demonstrate how Trump replicated identical techniques in both 2016 and 2020, suggesting that these strategies are not just natural, but intentional.

With that being said, no picture of the Trump presidency is complete without careful attention to the most memorable moments like the 2016 Republican Primaries, North Korea talks, COVID-19 response, sexual assault allegations, cabinet turmoil, the Impeachment trial(s), offensive and controversial comments, and of course the attack on the Capitol among countless other landmark events. Many of these in themselves represent some of the most clear and universally recognizable Trump strategies that I would be remiss to leave out of my analysis. I will use statements from various infamous Trump events as complementary evidence to my research on Trump's messaging. In this analysis, I will classify 16 different messaging strategies, distinct from one another in their delivery, implementation, or purpose. Many of these strategies are used together or overlap in certain aspects and can therefore be categorized under four general subjects: self-identifying strategies, rally strategies, creating false narratives, and attacks. Under these four categories, I will demonstrate the style, purpose and effectiveness of Trump's strategic messaging, and prove why it is the source of his popularity.

Chapter II: Self-Identifying Strategies

Love at First Sight

It is simply impossible to talk about Trump's messaging without identifying some of the core techniques which have defined his campaigns and presidency, and are used unanimously across any media. They are part of the narrative that defines Trump as an authority figure and what attracts his base to his style of politicking. The authenticity, the "truthfulness", the brashness, the bullying, the "call it like I see it" mentality, the unapologetic "winning temperament," and the empowerment to commit violence are all part of this specific set of strategies. These are the strategies that set him apart from other politicians in the opinions of his base. Included in this category are: *Authoritative Statements*, *Perfectionism*, *Simplistic Explanations*, *Dog Whistling*, and *Incitement*. Some might contest that these strategies are not strategic and are entirely based on Trump's personality. To the contrary, my analysis will show that while Trump's manner of speaking is certainly unique, the messaging itself is beyond a character trait and instead is the result of a skillfully crafted language that serves a deliberate purpose.

These strategies serve as a beacon to the base. An immediate attraction—a love at first sight—to an empowering style of political discourse, which violates norms of behavior and speech, and has become a foundational tenant in cultivating the Trump movement. When Trump supporters say things like *he is authentic*, *he is not a politician*, *he tells it like it is*, or *he speaks for us*, they are referencing his self-identifying messaging strategies. This highlights a critical conclusion derived from studying these techniques; they are unique to the Trump messaging machine and intentionally different from other politicians, thus acquiring the "self" identifying

label. That's not to say that Trump is the only person who can use these strategies. Instead, I believe their simplicity makes them easily replicable.

Trump uses self-identifying messaging strategies to build trust, assert dominance and maintain influence over the base. My analysis will demonstrate that seemingly innocent strategies, like white lies and distortedly simple explanations, evolve into complex manipulations of reality with dangerous consequences. Interestingly, the novelty of Trump's manner of political messaging has not worn off in the 5 years since his arrival to the political scene. Given the Jan. 6th attack on the Capitol at the hands of the most dangerous section of his base supporters, it has seemingly gotten even stronger. I believe that this speaks to the sense of empowerment that these messaging tactics deliver to the base, which has not waned since early on in Trump's path to the presidency. The base admires his self-identifying traits and tie their own identity very closely to them. He is their manifestation of ideological desire in human form, saying and doing what they wish they could do. This sense of empowerment is essential to Trump's movement and is best expressed in the following self-identifying strategies.

Authoritative Statements: *Definitive claims presented as facts relating to policy, people, opponents and himself.*

You would've have been in a war without me, because North Korea, we were going to have a nice nuclear war with North Korea. And now I get along great with him. And everyone says, "Oh, that's terrible" that I get along. No, it's a good thing. Getting along is a good thing, not a bad thing. And you get along through strength, not through weakness. You never get along through weakness (North Carolina, 10/15/2020).³

³ Throughout this paper, I will deviate from the general MLA in-text citation format for Trump's speeches. Rather than use the author-page convention, I will use location-date when I am obviously quoting from Trump's rallies. I use this style because the timeline of Trump's statements is significant to my research and it is much easier to identify the source in the works cited page.

Trump's use of Authoritative Statements provide headline material for unfiltered news agencies and emphasize his success or his opponent's failure. The messages themselves are commonly infused with hyperbole: Trump uses extreme descriptions like *greatest/worst*, *most/least*, *first/last*, *never/always* along with other overly aggressive adjectives like *horrible*, *evil*, *tremendous*, or *excellent*. This may be simply a linguistic trait of Trump, but it serves him politically as well. By commonly using hyperbole, Trump can easily wiggle out of any critiques of these statements by criticising the media for being too detail focused. Trump constantly attests that the media covers him unfairly or picks apart anything he says. This defense of lies or embellishments is supported by consistent and deliberate Authoritative Statements on the grounds that *it's just the way he talks*. Trump himself, in *The Art of the Deal* (qtd. in Hassan) writes: "I play to people's fantasies[...] That's why a little hyperbole never hurts... I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion" (240). While Trump may acknowledge his hyperbole as innocent, I would argue that it's not only effective, as Trump admits, but it is actually dangerous when used in certain contexts. Authoritative Statements also serve to reinforce a theme or narrative where Trump poses as a subject matter expert and provides unquestionable proclamations on certain subjects. These exaggerations make up for what Trump lacks in actual subject-matter knowledge with authoritative claims and confidence. The "authoritative" aspect of these statements is that Trump presents himself as an expert, or at least with the counsel of experts, and delivers a clear and concise message laced with hyperbole that is easily consumed by the base.

Beyond just emphasis, the Authoritative Statement is delivered in a simplistic and direct language that angers detail focused liberals, but rallies his base who cares less about minute details and more about the class consciousness and emotional connection to Trump. Authoritative Statements are not unique to any medium, and are part of Trump's personality and

attraction to the base who prefer the populist, shoot from the hip, manner of speech delivered by Trump as opposed to the cautious and carefully scripted manner of traditional politicians. Authoritative Statements are one of the most frequent messaging strategies in the Trump arsenal.

One of the main focus areas of Authoritative Statements is related to policy critiques of political opponents. While Trump himself rarely reveals his policy agenda as opposed to his ideological agenda, he is quick to attack policy initiatives of his opponents. Trump exercised his authoritative critique on the NAFTA trade deal throughout the 2016 campaign: “we're gonna renegotiate the horrible NAFTA deal which is maybe the worst deal ever made from an economic development standpoint – I'm not just talking in this country I'm talking about in the world” (Columbus OH, 8/1/2016). Legitimate criticism of NAFTA aside, to call it the *worst deal in the history of the world* is at best an exaggeration and at worst a lie. Here, Trump positions himself as the ultimate judge of trade, and he delivers a severe critique against his opponents' policy. This critique plays into what Trump's base already believes; *the political establishment has been screwing us (the American worker) for a long time*. Trump delivers this message with such conviction and convincing (authoritative) language, that the base accepts it as fact.

The use of Authoritative Statements as a messaging strategy can also be observed in Trump's critiques of the Iran Nuclear deal: “The [Iran] deal is one of the worst negotiated deals of any kind that I've ever seen if you look at it, just study it” (Virginia Town Hall, 6/9/2016). Trump knows that the majority of his base won't actually study the Iran deal, and therefore his claim that it is one of the worst deals “of any kind” will be accepted as fact from his base which trusts his judgement at face value. Again, the base has been conditioned through the historical authority crisis mentioned in the previous chapter, to believe that international commitments like the Iran deal put foreign entities over American interests. Therefore, it is not hard for Trump to

position himself as the absolute authority on all sorts of political issues, from trade to nuclear, treaties when he proposes that establishment politicians have failed them.

In combination with policy critiques, Trump uses Authoritative Statements to discredit political opponents. In 2016, Trump called Hillary Clinton “the most corrupt person ever to seek the office of the presidency of the United States” (Leesburg VA, 11/6/2016). Additionally, Trump mirrored this strategy in attacks on the press, calling them “the world’s most dishonest people[...]” and later adding “honestly, they’re among the most dishonest people I’ve ever met in my life. They’re bad people. They’re bad people” (Wilmington NC, 11/5/2016). As with all messaging from Trump that attacks the media, this strategy is self-reinforcing: the more Trump criticizes the media, the more they cover him negatively, and the more he can claim that they are out to get him. Joe Biden of course was not exempt from Authoritative Statements about his fitness for office either: “He may be the worst presidential candidate in history, and I got him, I got him. It actually puts more pressure on you. If you ran against a great candidate, there’s actually less pressure” (Orlando FL, 10/12/2020). And on Twitter: “Biden got failing grades and polls on his clueless handling of the Swine Flu H1N1. It was a total disaster, they had no idea what they were doing. Among the worst ever!” (@realDonaldTrump 6/18/2020).⁴ Here, we see the pattern of labeling opponents as *the worst in history*. These are claims stated as fact when of course they are generally subjective opinions. This highlights a key component of the Authoritative Statement strategy; turning Trump’s personal opinions into expert judgements perceived as facts. The message is clear in all three cases; *we are facing a crisis more severe than any other time in our nation’s history*, whether it be the most corrupt candidate, the most

⁴ Like his rallies, I am deviating from MLA guidelines for Trump’s tweets. Throughout this paper I will include dates for Trump’s tweets to distinguish when they took place and provide additional context to the reader.

dishonest media, or the most incompetent candidate. These Authoritative Statements add an element of historical significance to Trump's attacks on his opponents.

Aside from opponents' policies or credibility, Trump predictably uses Authoritative Statements to exaggerate or fabricate his own political achievements. During the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, Trump notoriously downplayed the severity of the pandemic by claiming it would be gone in a matter of months. In fact he was recorded acknowledging that he was downplaying the virus in order to prevent a national panic: "I wanted to always play it down," Trump told me [Woodward] 'I still like playing it down, because I don't want to create a panic'" (Woodward, *Rage*, 21). One of the major problems at the beginning of the pandemic was the U.S. fell very far behind in terms of testing per capita compared to other nations. This allowed the virus to spread secretly throughout the nation as only one CDC facility was able to read and return tests. While many developers had created test kits in the first months of the pandemic, the FDA was a cumbersome roadblock to getting kits on the market and left the U.S. blind for the first few crucial months of the pandemic (Shear et. al.). Other nations like South Korea, which at one point appeared to be the second epicenter of the pandemic, were able to avoid the per capita rates that the U.S. experienced because of expansive testing programs in the earliest phases.

Regardless, Trump has used Authoritative Statements to try and change the narrative about his administration's response: "The FDA has acted as quickly as they've ever acted in history. There's never been a time and no president has ever pushed them like I pushed them either, to be honest with you. But the FDA is approving things in a matter of weeks, that used to take a matter of years" ("Donald Trump Leaked 60 Minutes..."). Instead of simply defending his administration's timeline, blaming China's deception, or any other political factor that may have resulted in this slow start, Trump takes his claim one step further; not only to declare that his

administration performed to par, but in fact he himself *pushed harder than any other president* to force the FDA to act *quicker than they ever have in history*. Trump would even go as far as to say that he was responsible for a medical miracle: “The Swine Flu (H1N1), and the attempt for a vaccine by the Obama Administration, with Joe Biden in charge, was a complete and total disaster. Now they want to come in and take over one of the ‘greatest and fastest medical miracles in modern day history.’ I don’t think so!” (@realDonaldTrump, 12/11/2020). In reality, Trump and his administration had little to do with the development of a vaccine other than submitting public funds to major pharmaceutical companies to develop it. But through Authoritative Statements like this, Trump creates the impression that he is owed the gratitude and credit for this development.

In other examples, Trump uses Authoritative Statements to boost his own image in addition to his accomplishments. Trump has notoriously made egregious comments about Mexican immigrants, Muslims and the Black community. In August of 2016, he received some backlash for his motto of “what do you have to lose?” when making his appeals to the Black community, which came off as demeaning and derogatory. To try and remedy his image as a racist bigot, Trump had the following to say in an interview with Detroit Pastor Wayne T. Johnson:

I'm the least racist person that you've ever met. You know, a very big – very important black leader called me racist and he knows me. And he then called me and said, could I come up and see you? And then, he apologized. And he actually apologized[...] so many of my friends who are black, they say, you are the least racist person. But, no, I am the least racist person that you have ever talked to. That I can tell you (Detroit MI, 1/9/2016).

Obviously, most people would agree that Trump is not the *least racist person ever*, and to even have such an argument about anyone is senseless in the first place. Trump has infamously made other outrageous claims about his racial sensitivity: “the fact is that I've done more for the black

community than any president since Abraham Lincoln. I say it. Nobody can dispute it. Nobody can dispute it, it's true. Nobody can dispute it" (The White House, 10/10/2020). This comment is not only comically ridiculous, but it trivializes the long history of Black Americans who have been subject to unimaginable conditions. Lincoln, perhaps as an idea rather than in actuality, represents a moment of progress in Black history whereas Trump most certainly does not.

In another example of Trump's ridiculous boasts, Trump claimed that no president has ever been as loved as he is, using evidence that a "we love you" chant was some sort of landmark event in presidential history:

I'm just saying, they have not been able to find, in the history of politics in this nation—even we loved Ronald Reagan— but they have not been able to find where people broke out and said, 'We love you,' about, I guess I have to call myself a politician. I don't feel like a politician. How nice is that? I never heard it. I've been to a lot of different speeches and rallies. I've never heard crowds go, 'We love you'" (Toledo OH, 9/21/202).

An important characteristic of Authoritative Statements identified here is that the effectiveness of the message is not necessarily related to the surface-level claim. I would hypothesize that even most of Trump's own supporters would not defend him as the *least racist person ever* nor would they confuse the legacy of one of the most beloved American Presidents in Abraham Lincoln (not to mention a face of Mount Rushmore, the monument they so strongly defend) with that of Donald Trump. Not to say that they don't believe Trump is a great president, but it is hard to conceive how any president has usurped Lincoln's passing of the Emancipation Act in terms of "doing more for Black people." They too, would not necessarily equate one chant at a rally into a historical signal of popularity. Am I assigning misguided praise to the Trump base? Maybe. But I believe they interpret Trump's intention not his literal claim; *he isn't racist and he is widely popular*. In these examples, the Authoritative Statements are not taken as fact, rather they are

understood as an alternative to the commonly accepted narrative portrayed by the “fake news” media.

In summary, Authoritative Statements are a broad and wide ranging strategy used both in a negative manner on opponent’s and their policies, and in a positive manner on Trump and his policies. In general, Authoritative Statements provide a voice of clarity and expertise by turning Trump’s subjective opinions into accepted reality. Additionally, they are used to counter mainstream narratives, create the impression of historic crises/accomplishments, are easily defended as hyperbole rather than lies, and are approved by the base without fact checking. These Authoritative Statements are part of Trump’s effort to fill the void of the authority crisis by providing clear and direct statements or claims that agree with longstanding angers of the base. Trump uses them to make himself an expert while simultaneously discrediting any source that disagrees with him, monopolizing the source of his base’s information. As I mentioned in the outset of this section, the use of Authoritative Statements is empowering to the base; his victories are their victories. Therefore, it is easy to see how Trump’s use of absolutist hyperbole invigorates and resonates with the base.

Perfectionism: *Consistent refusal to admit error, accept defeat, hold responsibility, apologize or acknowledge any criticism in order to maintain an image of perfection.*

Well, I have much better judgment than she does. There’s no question about that. I also have a much better temperament than she has, you know? I have a much better — she spent — let me tell you — she spent hundreds of millions of dollars on an advertising — you know, they get Madison Avenue into a room, they put names — oh, temperament, let’s go after — I think my strongest asset, maybe by far, is my temperament. I have a winning temperament (“Debate: First Presidential Debate...”).

In Mary Trump's book, *Too Much and Never Enough*, M. Trump hypothesizes that Trump's extreme arrogance and Perfectionist tendencies are a result of emotional abuse that the Trump children experienced at the hands of their father, Fred, throughout their childhoods.⁵ M. Trump describes an environment where Donald was raised to fear disappointing his father to the extent that bullying, lying, arrogance and opposition to authority was not only tolerated but encouraged (M. Trump, 25-31). M. Trump's account of Donald Trump's upbringing gives us some insight into Trump's perspective on his messaging and political strategy. Trump sought for approval from a cold and seemingly cutthroat father for much of his childhood. He was raised in a competitive environment where love and affection was won by strength and the appearance of flawlessness. M. Trump writes that Trump and his siblings were expected to uphold a standard of perfection, and they did anything in their power to avoid appearing weak in front of their father. Hassan takes this hypothesis even further, suggesting that Trump may have developed clinical narcissism as a result of this emotionally traumatic childhood: "The attitude of parents of children who will develop malignant narcissism is controlling and sadistic. They demand that their children be tough, tolerate pain, show no emotion and learn to manipulate others' [...] With his cold and distant—indeed absent—mother, and his hard-charging and authoritarian father, Trump appears to fit this pattern" (126). While I will leave psychological diagnosis to the experts, it may be that Trump has a natural propensity toward Perfectionist messaging through an upbringing where Trump was conditioned to never show weakness.

Just as was the case in his childhood, Trump was seeking approval and support from the electorate in both 2016 and 2020. The Office of the Presidency, much like Trump's childhood home, is a similarly cutthroat environment. Strength is indeed a virtue, although not the only one, and this reinvigorated those same defense mechanisms from Trump's youth which required him

⁵ I will henceforth refer to Mary Trump as M. Trump for the sake of clarity.

to display an image of perfection for his father's approval. Therefore, it is not surprising that Trump uses the same strategies to garner approval from his father as he uses in his political messaging strategy to garner support from voters.

Perfectionism is directly related to Trump's strategy of Authoritative Statements. As I mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, Trump makes numerous claims about himself being the greatest, most influential, most impactful, most loved etc... president in history. These statements reinforce Trump's perfect image by emphasizing his presidency as a monumental moment in U.S. history. The examples I used in the Authoritative Statements section, like being *the least racist person ever*, are more general proclamations that are repeatedly used to boost Trump's image of perfection, but these statements could just as easily be applied to the Perfectionist strategy and are very similar to the examples I will use here.

Trump frequently loses focus or gets distracted by his own claims of perfection due to the fact that he often goes off-script to emphasize his Perfectionist qualities. While at a campaign rally in Ohio, Trump was talking about his love of the state and some former business dealings there, when he suddenly veered off into a Perfectionist tangent about a former business: "And interestingly, after I sold it, the job went very bad. The job went very bad. I mean – my timing was very good. I listened to people but I really listened to myself and the timing was beautiful" (Columbus OH, 8/1/2016). Here, Trump goes out of his way to boast about his intuition and decision making in an awkward way. At an "Environmental Accomplishments Rally" Trump made the following remarks: "They [Senators] said that, 'This will make us and make you the number one environmental president since Teddy Roosevelt'[...] when they said that, that was like a challenge. So I said, 'Well, why does it only have to go back to Teddy Roosevelt, which is over a hundred years? Why can't we say from George Washington? Right from the beginning?'"[...] But it's true, number one, since Teddy Roosevelt, who would've thought, Trump

is the great environmentalist” (Jupiter FL, 9/8/2020). Obviously this tangent leaves a lot of questions like what exactly has Trump done for the environment? What was George Washington’s environmental agenda? And who in their right mind would pronounce Trump the greatest environmentalist president since Roosevelt? Questions aside, Trump always jumps at any opportunity to emphasize how perfect his accomplishments, agenda, or skill set is. Like the Authoritative Statement, merely the reiteration of what his base already believes, that Trump is the greatest (most perfect) president in history across the board, is enough to deliver the strategy.

Still, Trump’s use of Perfectionism as a messaging strategy goes beyond just grandiose claims and random self-obsessed tangents. There is a deliberate, and in some ways stubborn, pursuit of Perfectionism under any circumstance. In the midst of public outcry in support of the NFL star, Colin Kaepernick, who kneeled for the National Anthem in protest against police brutality, Trump took the time to contrast an image of “strength” against “weak” NFL players that had turned their fame in to platforms for social justice: “See, we [Trump supporters] don't go by these new and very much softer NFL rules. Concussion. Whoops. Whoops. Got a little thing in the head. No, no, you can't play for the rest of the season. Our people are tough” (Lakeland FL, 10/12/2016). Here, Trump’s claims of perfection extend beyond himself and onto his base, who are *tougher than head trauma*, unlike these “soft” football players. Trump is referencing an old school style of football where head-to-head collisions were much more common, unlike the modern era where players are more protected by the penalization of such vicious hits. While Trump’s mockery of “softer” NFL rules is not necessarily a particularly harmful statement, it is certainly odd to proclaim that he and his supporters prefer the head trauma and violence of the old era. Here, Perfectionism is beyond historical relevance, but more so a tolerance, maybe even a preference, for violence and toughness.

Trump's use of Perfectionism also focuses on his own physical prowess and health, which was a frequent point of comparison between himself and Joe Biden. As we know so well, the COVID-19 pandemic is more dangerous to people over the age of 65 compared to younger age groups. Trump is 74 years old, and clearly part of the most vulnerable age group, not even considering other factors such as weight and work stress level. Nevertheless, he still had the following statement on his COVID-19 risk: "You know the risk groups, you know the older people. See, fortunately, I'm not an old person. I'm very young and I'm in such perfect shape. I'm in such great shape. I said that the other day. I said, 'Well, I'm very young, and I'm in great shape, perfect shape'" (Orlando FL, 10/12/2020). This may seem like self-deprecating humor when read in this transcribed form; I assure you it's not, and a listen to the speech will support my claim. While not saying it explicitly, Trump is implying that despite the proclamations of respected scientists, he is not at risk for serious side effects from COVID-19. Not only is this claim false but it is misleading and detrimental to the national effort when the most important government official neglects common sense science. This is all done out of a stubborn motivation to create an image of absolute perfection under any circumstance. Trump's claims about his health and youth are related to depicting Trump as strong and invulnerable to reinforce the image of Perfectionism.

Besides personal traits, Trump uses the Perfectionism strategy to deny wrongdoing, even in the face of significant evidence to the contrary. In an ABC News Town Hall moderated by George Stephanopoulos, Trump was asked about his administration's efforts in hindsight of the severity of the outbreak in the U.S:

STEPHANOPOULOS: *"I want to move on to some other subjects, but we're still [inaudible 00:11:56] with 195,000 deaths in the United States right now. When*

you see that, when you think about that, does that give you any pause? Does it make you think, "Is there anything I could have done differently?" Anything-

TRUMP: *"I think we could have had 2 million deaths if we didn't close out the country."*

STEPHANOPOULOS: *"So you regret nothing?"*

TRUMP: *"No, I think we did a great job[...]"* (ABC News Town Hall, 9/16/2020).

Trump consistently doubled down on his misleading boasts about his response to the pandemic on *Twitter*:

I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the 'borders' from China - against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News new narrative is disgraceful & false!" (@realDonaldTrump, 3/18/2020).

Generally, I think most Americans agree that a majority of politicians and federal institutions, including the Trump administration, did not act decisively to curb the spread of the virus. For anyone who held public office in the last year, nevermind the Commander-in-Chief, to look back at the events of the COVID-19 pandemic and to have no regrets or remorse is absolutely absurd. Even the smallest concession, like closing the European border earlier or expediting the FDA's approval of testing kits, could have potentially saved thousands of lives and seriously decreased the effect of the pandemic. These acknowledgements are omitted from Trump's response. Trump could have even used this opportunity to scapegoat China and perhaps say something like *I wish they had let us know sooner*. Instead, Trump does not budge from the image of perfection in the slightest, and remains vigilant in his defense that the administration did no wrong.

The constant attention and focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, plus the lackluster performance from the Trump administration, ensured that Trump would have to repeat this strategy throughout the 2020 campaign trail. In a White House Press conference, the following

quotation was Trump's response when asked why he does not trust his own experts and if he knows better than them: "Oh, not all of them. Yeah. In many cases I do. I think we have a bigger problem with China than we have with Russia. I think China is a far bigger problem. I said, 'Well, that's okay if you want to think about Russia, but what about China?' I think that's appropriate. I thought that the definition of Antifa was an absolutely incorrect definition, so I speak up. I like to speak up" (9/18/2020). While at least denying that he knows better than *all* of his experts, Trump still casts humility aside and proclaims that he is better than some of them, an assertion I think most presidents would avoid saying directly.

The strategy of Perfectionism is well-suited to deny wrongdoing and was repeated in the first impeachment trial, where Trump was accused of withholding military aid to pressure the Ukrainian president into investigating Joe Biden and Hunter Biden. From a simple word search on the TrumpTwitterArchive, Trump tweeted that his phone call with the Ukrainian president was "Perfect" over 28 times from September of 2019 to January of 2020.⁶ That number is just from his own tweets, not including retweets or other forms of public statements. Many of the tweets sounded something like the following: "The call to the Ukrainian President was PERFECT. Read the Transcript! There was NOTHING said that was in any way wrong. Republicans, don't be led into the fools trap of saying it was not perfect, but is not impeachable. No, it is much stronger than that. NOTHING WAS DONE WRONG!" and "I JUST GOT IMPEACHED FOR MAKING A PERFECT PHONE CALL!" (@realDonaldTrump 11/10/2019, 1/16/2020). In these examples, Trump is not only claiming perfection in his diplomacy with Ukraine, but he is even warning other Republicans not to budge an inch from defending his phone call as perfect or even conceding that it could have been better. Despite Trump's denials, the phone call was enough for the House to approve the articles of impeachment against Trump. There is no better example of

⁶ <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?searchbox=%22perfect%22>

Trump's use of Perfectionism than his literal declaration of perfection in a verifiably less-than-perfect phone call.

In summary, Trump's use of Perfectionism is a strategy used to project an image of authority and success by emphasizing strength, never owning up to mistakes and never accepting defeat. This last point, acceptance of defeat, played out on a dramatic scale with the January 6th Capitol attack, spawned by Trump's claims of election fraud. Trump's messaging on the election fraud conspiracy will garner much attention in my sections on Gaslighting and Incitement later in this work, but they are related to his Perfectionist message. Before, during, and after the 2020 election, Trump attacked the results as fraudulent in order to undermine his base's ability to reason with, and accept the outcome. I see this as a preparatory measure; by undermining the election throughout the 2020 campaign, Trump could easily continue his Perfectionist messaging strategy in the event of a loss, that would undermine his appearance of perfection, by claiming that it was an illegitimate defeat. This was not only the case in the 2020 election, but also in the 2016 Republican primaries and 2016 general election: "Ladies and gentleman, I want to make a major announcement today. I would like to promise and pledge to all of my voters and supporters, and to all of the people of the United States that I will totally accept the results of this great and historic Presidential election... if I win [applause]" (Delaware OH, 10/20/2016). This joke infuriated Democrats in 2016, and similar remarks had the same effect throughout 2020. Through continually discrediting elections before they even happened, Trump was easily able to convince his base that this one was stolen so that he would never need to reconcile with defeat.

Simplistic Explanations: *The use of accessible and direct language (layman's terms) to provide easy answers to complex political problems.*

When I was first elected, you had things that were in such bad shape and now they're fixed or being fixed at a cost of a lot of money, but they're either fixed or being fixed and soon there'll be in better condition than they were the day they

were built, which was many, many decades ago. We have things that were built a long time ago that were in a state of disrepair that you wouldn't believe (Jupiter FL 9/8/2020).

Trump uses Simplistic Explanations to provide common sense solutions for complicated issues that are of particular concern to his base. Before Trump, many voters were used to hearing nuanced and highly complicated policy agendas that were difficult to understand for the average listener. Trump strays from the norm by neglecting policy discussions in favor of broad and easily understandable agendas. Trump's background in entertainment has a shining influence in this strategy; much of his messaging fits into marketable phrases or statements that provide the most basic explanations to political issues. Some infamous examples that highlight this strategy are: *we are going to build a wall and Mexico will pay for it, getting along with Russia and North Korea is a good thing, I am a businessman so I will make good trade deals, and I got more votes than any Republican in history so we should have won the election.* Trump's basic package to voters is often centered around simplistic claims like the ones mentioned above which can be translated into the following problem/solution format: *Mexican immigrants take your jobs and bring crime so I will build a wall. Russia and North Korea have nuclear weapons, and who really cares about human rights, so we should get along with them. I made business deals that benefitted my companies so I will make trade deals that benefit us. We didn't win the election so it was stolen and now we have to fight.*

Furthermore, Simplistic Explanations are part of Trump's identity as "authentic" and "not a politician." This observation of Trump's Simplistic Explanations make sense; in my experience, most politicians do not attempt to break down complex political issues into basic and simple ideas to the extent that it becomes misleading like Trump does. In the era of Trump, this conception of politicians may be outdated as more and more Trump loyalists in the GOP begin to copy his same rhetoric. There is nothing wrong with simplifying political issues within reason,

but Trump's Simplistic Explanations are more on the side of lies, scapegoating, and excuses rather than honest, logical answers. Again, like Authoritative Statements, this strategy is related to the authority crisis in that Trump establishes himself as the first politician in many of his base's lifetimes to give them fundamentally simple explanations to their current political concerns, that also align with their preconceived notions about elites, minorities, the media and other targeted groups. I believe that many students of political science would agree that politics is a multivariable discipline where $A+B$ does not always $= C$. Cultural, geographic, historical, social and religious factors, among countless others, are unique across various political issues and each play a role in policy both internationally and at home. Trump's use of Simplistic Explanations neglects this reasoning, and instead describes a political arena where political dynamics are easily explained by Trump through basic vernacular and structure. In Trump's reality, $A+B$ always $= C$, as long as Trump says so.

Other, less oft-repeated uses of Simplistic Explanations, highlight how Trump uses this strategy to create a reality where political dynamics are broken down to the most basic concepts that can be understood by anyone with no political background: "We're going to turn this country around and we're going to make it so strong and so great, and we're going to run it smart. We're not going to run it stupid like it is" (Columbus OH, 7/1/2016). What is the problem? America is run "stupid." How do we fix it? Run it smart. If you polled a class of 3rd graders, they could give you more nuanced and appropriate explanations than Trump has in this example. Similarly, Trump claimed that the real key to defeating ISIS was "making a plan," something that no politician in the last decade had previously come up with: "So we're going to convene my top generals and give them a simple instruction. They will have 30 days to submit to the Oval Office a plan for soundly and quickly defeating ISIS" (Greenville NC, 9/7/2016). Economic policy you ask? Please, no more softball questions:

I am running to reverse these failures and to create a new American future, and there will be. And that future begins with prosperity at home. My economic agenda can be summed up in three words: jobs, jobs, jobs (Laconia NH, 9/15/2016).

On the issue of North Korea, Trump admits that his solution was so simple, it even perplexed him that it had never been done before:

He [Obama] told me the biggest problem we had was North Korea, and he was telling me why. He was telling me lots of horror stories. I said, ‘Uh, excuse me, have you ever tried calling him?’ I got nominated for two Nobel Peace Prizes. Can you believe it? (Middletown PA, 9/26/2020).

And when it came to crime, Trump declared that it was actually only a Blue state phenomenon: “And outside of poorly run Democrat states and cities, you don't have crime in this country. Our country is doing fantastically” (Orlando FL, 10/12/2020). Some of Trump’s Simplistic Explanations are so bizarre that it is hard to discern how they apply to any political issue:

Well, but two things work, and I say it all the time. When you come up, when you're a brilliant scientist, you develop a new chip, you develop a new laptop or computer, in about three weeks, it's obsolete. It's worthless, right? A wall will never be obsolete. And what else won't be obsolete. A wheel. There's two things that will never be obsolete, a wall and a wheel. Everything else is trouble (9/26/2020, Middletown PA).

When a Kennedy loses a Democrat Primary in Massachusetts, by a lot, it just shows how far LEFT that party has gone. Joe Biden will never be able to hold them back (@realdonaldtrump, 9/2/2020).

In the above mentioned examples, Trump takes complicated issues and translates them into simple solutions like *running the country smart*, *creating a plan to destroy ISIS*, or, *giving North Korea a phone call*. While, of course, the Obama administration both had a plan to defeat ISIS and had attempted diplomatic means to reign in threats from North Korea. Trump presents these simple solutions as common sense ideas that politicians have neglected in favor of overcomplicating issues. Trump’s most famous slogan, *Make America Great Again*, is in its own

right, a Simplistic Explanation; America is confusing and complicated now, we will make it great and simple again.

This messaging technique has two effects; first, it makes politics reachable to his base which, in general, has been distant or cast aside from political participation. Everyone understands concepts like making a phone call or building a wall. And believing that all cities run by Democrats are hell holes is no giant leap from the existing discourse on the American culture war. By using these Simplistic Explanations, Trump's makes politics more accessible to his base, who are in turn energized to support him. Second, it allows Trump to justify and perpetuate the harmful ideological conceptions of his base, like xenophobia or racism, as legitimate and reasonable solutions to political problems. When the explanations are as simple as *it's the immigrants fault*, bigotry changes from a fringe and unacceptable ideology to a reasonable political stance. The connection to empowerment and identity tied to Trump is clear; Simplistic Explanations help legitimize the base's ideology and thus once again reinforce the emotional connection under the belief that Trump is their only true voice in Washington. Another more deliberate means of legitimizing fringe ideologies is through the messaging strategy of Dog Whistling.

Dog Whistling: *Using coded keywords or phrases that suggest a racial or ideological message, targeted at marginalized groups that are the scapegoat of the base's anger, without provoking a negative reaction on the grounds of outright racism.*

Antifa as a member and as a resident of your suburb? I don't think so too much. Say, 'Darling, who moved in next door?' 'Oh, it's a resident of Antifa.' 'No, thank you. Let's get out of here. Let's get the hell out of here, darling. Let's leave our suburbs. I wish Trump were president. He wouldn't have allowed that to happen.' And that's exactly right, I won't allow it to happen (Freeland MI, 9/11/2020).

Dog Whistling is a well understood messaging strategy, in no way unique to Trump other than the frequency in which he uses it, that has become increasingly common in the last decade as political correctness has stifled mainstream racists. Ian Haney López, author of *Dog Whistle Politics*, writes: Dog Whistles are “coded racial appeals that carefully manipulate hostility toward nonwhites. Examples of Dog Whistling include repeated blasts about criminals and welfare cheats, illegal aliens, and sharia law in the heartland. Superficially, these provocations have nothing to do with race, yet they nevertheless powerfully communicate messages about threatening nonwhites[...] American politics today—and the crisis of the middle class—simply cannot be understood without recognizing racism’s evolution and the power of pernicious demagoguery” (13-14). In this definition (although he covers his tracks later in the book) López glosses over an important element of using Dog Whistling; coded language. Dog Whistling is used to deliver ideological victories to the base, often capitalizing on the base’s fear of “the other,” without generating backlash from the general public's distaste for blatant racism. There is an element of secrecy to this strategy, as the base understands the coded language even if the media may not pick up on it (or if they do Trump will deny it). Trump understands that he risks losing the moderates by outright racism, and therefore must use coded language that is clear enough to reward the base and subtle enough to fly under the radar.

Dog Whistling may not be an overt attack, but it implies or insinuates a problematic and bigoted message. Both supporters and marginalized groups understand the reference and are either vindicated or hurt respectively. Political opponents will sometimes, but not always, decipher the Dog Whistling messages and generate controversy criticising these statements. For the most part, however, Trump generally leaves himself enough room to walk the comment back or minimize its significance, without detracting from the message itself. The base interprets the

message as originally intended. This strategy inspires a class identity through a unique coded language and an ideological agenda that is exclusive to the Trump base.

The coded language component of Dog Whistling is suited for situations where Trump is in front of a neutral or negative audience, because it signals an ideological based message without blatant and outright attack which would most likely draw criticism and turn away moderate voters. In this way, Trump can communicate to the hyper-right base with bigotted Dog Whistles without alienating the center. When Dog Whistles are picked up by the media, it is difficult to prove Trump's intent, and he defends himself by minimizing, clarifying or scapegoating his comment. Along with reinforcing a class identity, this strategy empowers the base by enabling a type of behavior and ideology which is considered offensive and inappropriate by political opponents. Lastly, Dog Whistling reinforces the emotional connection to Trump through establishing a non-verbal commitment between him and his base.

A number of Trump's most famous Dog Whistles are particularly memorable and have stood the test of time throughout his two election campaigns and presidency. These quotable moments that picked up media momentum, have become rallying cries for the base and serve as self-identifying statements, part of Trump's identity, which serve as billboard attractions to his base. I will briefly note some of them here. First, at Trump's campaign announcement speech on June 16th, 2015 in New York NY, Trump said the following: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." Trump animates the country of Mexico and its citizens as a mob of degenerate rapists and criminals, who are "sent" to us intentionally to wreak havoc on our country. Immigrants, particularly from the southern border, are a target of the base's anger as a scapegoat for diminishing job prospects

and unwanted change. Trump empowers this attitude and racist bias against Mexican immigrants by giving these awful Dog Whistles legitimacy and a political platform.⁷

Another classic Dog Whistle from Trump involves a second group of targeted immigrants: Muslims. Trump consistently emphasized the fear of terrorist threats from Muslim countries and used this fear as a basis to unfairly attack and threaten the Muslim population. The following two remarks are alarming examples of Trump's islamophobic Dog Whistles :

I want surveillance of these people that are coming in the Trojan horse. I want to know who the hell they are[...] Just to set it clear I want surveillance of these people. I want surveillance. If we have to and I don't care. I want it[...] want surveillance of certain mosques OK[...] I watched when the World Trade Center came tumbling down. And I watched in Jersey City, New Jersey where thousands and thousands of people were cheering as that building was coming down. Thousands of people were cheering. So something's going on. We got to find out what it is[...] I will absolutely take [a] database on the people coming in from Syria if we can't stop it (Birmingham AL, 11/21/2015).⁸

But one thing we have to do is we have to make sure that – because there is a problem [with Muslim immigrants]. I mean, whether we like it or not, and we could be very politically correct, but whether we like it or not, there is a problem. And we have to be sure that Muslims come in and report when they see something going on. When they see hatred going on, they have to report it. As an example, in San Bernardino, many people saw the bombs all over the apartment of the two people that killed 14 and wounded many, many people. Horribly wounded. They'll never be the same. Muslims have to report the problems when they see them (2nd Presidential Debate, 10/9/2016).

These statements push the boundary of a Dog Whistle, and trend in the direction of Fearmongering or race baiting.⁹ However, I kept this in the category of Dog Whistle because Trump is claiming to promote border security and addressing the terrorist threat, while implying that Muslim's cannot be trusted. He demands that Muslim immigrants be "tracked," later adding that places of religious worship, mosques, should be monitored. He even goes as far as to

⁷ Trump not only targets Mexican immigrants, other immigrants of Hispanic descent are also subject to this bigotry as was the case with the 2018 Migrant Caravan. This particular quote, however, calls out Mexicans explicitly.

⁸ The "Trojan Horse" metaphor, used in the first sentence of this quotation, was a consistent reference to Syrian refugees in the 2016 election. Trump criticized Clinton and Obama for wanting to increase the threshold for Syrian refugees, claiming they post a threat, just like the Trojan Horse of the Greeks.

⁹ "Fearmongering" is a strategy I discuss in Ch. IV, hence the capitalization.

suggest, without evidence, that Muslim communities celebrate terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, indicating that there is a deep problem with Muslim Americans or that there is an organized effort to conspire against America. These Dog Whistles are categorically and verifiably untrue. Still, the vilification of Muslims serves base fears of immigrants and anti-Islamic sentiment, and Trump's attack on these groups place him as the figurehead of Islamophobic ideology which attracts right-wing constituents to this self-identifying characteristic.

So far, the two examples I have looked at focus on a more general critique of groups of people rather than individuals. It is important to identify, however, that Trump's Dog Whistles have often targeted political opponents who represent oppressed groups that are ideological targets of the Trump base. Barack Obama, hero of the Democrats and mortal enemy of the white supremacist portion of the Trump base, has been a frequent target of Trump's Dog Whistles. The birther hoax which I discussed in Chapter I, is in itself one big Dog Whistling campaign. It is not a coincidence that Trump adopted the generalship of a conspiracy theory denying the American birth certificate, and therefore *the right to be president*, of the first and only Black President of the United States. I consider this conspiratorial crusade a Dog Whistle because while Trump argued that his motives were to uphold the constitution and legitimacy of the POTUS, the despicable message to the alt-right base was clear; no Black man or woman should ever be an American President.

While Trump was eventually forced to drop the birther hoax, his Dog Whistling attacks on Obama continued. At many times throughout both the 2016 and 2020 campaigns, Trump went out of his way to emphasize Obama's middle name: Hussein. The real story behind this now controversial name is remarkably unremarkable. Obama was born to a Kenyan father, a country with Arabic influence where the name "Hussein" is not uncommon. Still, this Arabic association is a cause for concern among the islamophobic Trump base, and Trump has rarely neglected to

prey upon this conscious bias. When talking about his nomination for the Nobel Peace prize, Trump went on the following brief tangent: “And when Barack Obama, Barack-*Hussein* Obama got nominated, no, when Barack – when Barack-*Hussein* Obama got nominated, he didn't know why he was nominated” (Swanton OH, 9/21/2020). This strategy is best observed when listened to and this transcription does not do justice to the bigotry that can be heard in this Dog Whistle. In other rallies, Trump even acknowledges his Dog Whistles on Obama’s name and credits fellow alt-rightist, Rush Limbaugh, with coming up with the strategy: “Barack Hussein Obama. Remember Rush Limbaugh would always do that? He'd do, ‘Barack *Hussein* Obama’ (The Villages FL, 10/23/2020). The implication is an astounding victory for the base; if the POTUS is un-American for having a name of Arabic influence or origin, what does that make the other millions of Americans of Arabic, Persian or Islamic descent? The boundaries between real American and fraud are clearly defined by these Dog Whistles.

Hillary too was subject to Dog Whistling based on her identity. Trump used misogynistic Dog Whistles to emphasize traditional stereotypes about women and to suggest that Hillary’s gender made her unfit to be President. He had the following to say about Hillary commanding the military: “I saw these unbelievably brave recipients of the Medal of Honor and I said to them, ‘how would you feel to have Hillary Clinton as your leader?’ And they're, they're wonderful Americans and I refuse to tell you what they said but it wasn't good, believe me. Can you imagine these people taking orders, these great people taking orders from her?” (Hershey PA, 11/04/2016). While anecdotally, Trump can twist and defend this statement by claiming that it had nothing to do with her gender, or that he was simply repeating the words of soldiers (a claim that is unverifiable in the first place), but the statement insinuates that *because* Hillary is a woman, she won’t be respected by the military.

The last type of Dog Whistling that is important for understanding this strategy strategy, are Dog Whistles that Trump uses to defend or praise the white supremacist portion of his base. Trump has gone further than any other politician in recent memory in terms of his outward support and defense of white supremacy. His most infamous statements are synonymous with his identity, which, like his islamophobia/xenophobic rhetoric, serves as a beacon for the support of white supremacist groups. One example being the assertion that there were “very fine people on both sides” after a white supremacist rammed his car into a group of counter protestors at a Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (7/15/2017). While that brief quotable line received much of the attention, the full quotation is equally appalling:

But you also had people that were very fine people on both sides. You had people in that group – excuse me, excuse me. I saw the same pictures as you did. You had people in that group that were there to protest the taking down, of to them, a very, very important statue and the renaming of a park from Robert E. Lee to another name[...] Oh no, George Washington was a slave owner. Was George Washington a slave owner? So will George Washington now lose his status? Are we going to take down – excuse me. Are we going to take down, are we going to take down statues to George Washington? How about Thomas Jefferson? What do you think of Thomas Jefferson? You like him? Okay, good. Are we going to take down his statue? He was a major slave owner. Are we going to take down his statue? You know what? It's fine, you're changing history, you're changing culture[...]

Defending the founding fathers in their historic place in American society is one thing, but the last line, attacking protestors as “changing culture” for denouncing slavery is a brutal declaration that slavery, and thus discrimination is a part of American culture. Another infamous example of Trump’s sponsorship of white supremacy is his declaration calling for the proud boys to “stand back and stand bye” at the first 2020 presidential debate when asked to condemn white supremacy (“First Presidential Debate in Cleveland...”). In this situation, Trump was widely condemned for the comment and eventually walked it back and condemned white supremacy, but the message was already delivered. Once again, Trump appointed himself as an

ally of white supremacists and a magnet for their support. These Dog Whistles are unique to others mentioned in this section because not only are they racially problematic but they are actually used in defense of specific organizations; neo-nazis and white supremacists. In my opinion, this takes Dog Whistling to a higher level; in Trump's America, organizations like these that were once considered fringe groups now enjoy a celebrity host and a far reaching platform.

A common thread throughout Trump's use of Dog Whistling as a messaging strategy is that Trump's coded attacks on marginalized groups gives a voice to ideology and rhetoric that is harmful and considered out of touch by the mainstream media. Promoting white supremacy, islamophobia, misogyny, and xenophobia among other ideologies, attracts a wide variety of alt-right supporters that combine to form a significant portion of the base. Rather than promoting these ideologies outwardly and risk losing the moderates, Trump uses Dog Whistles to signal a string of coded comments that weave a narrative rewarding this offensive type of ideology, all without alienating other parts of the base that have less of an appetite for it. Their loyalty to the GOP or fear of the "radical-left" allows them to look past his comments and accept his excuses at face value. Dog Whistling belongs in the self-identifying category because the mere fact that Trump takes this messaging risk, promoting ideologies that have long since been considered fringe, is both unique and consistent to his public personality, and serves as a major attraction to the base. For this reason, it is essential to the Trump movement's popularity and thus to Trump's self-identifying messaging category.

Incitement: *Encouraging, legitimizing and enabling destructive behavior, both overtly and covertly, to 1) generate controversy, 2) achieve political goals propelled by the anger of the base and 3) invoke a class consciousness centered on nihilism and violence.*

I bring rage out. I do bring rage out. I always have. I don't know if that's an asset or a liability, but whatever it is, I do (Woodward, *Rage*, 11).

Incitement is a Trump messaging strategy that we have become incredibly familiar within the last few months, spanning from the Jan. 6th Capitol attack and the resulting impeachment trial which acquitted Trump of inciting it. This category belongs closely to the Dog Whistling strategy, because it also employs coded language which the base interprets as justification to commit violence with the approval from the Commander-in-Chief. Trump always needs a back door to excuse himself from actually inciting violence, so he employs Dog Whistling techniques that incite violence without getting his hands dirty. This analysis will not particularly focus on Trump's legal culpability for the Jan. 6th attack, nor will spend much thought discussing whether or not Trump intentionally caused it. I will merely demonstrate that Incitement is a bonafide messaging strategy that Trump uses frequently, both on Jan. 6th and at other points in his career, to serve motives not exclusive to changing the legitimate outcome of a free and fair election.

At the most basic level, Trump incites violence against anyone who expresses discontent with Trump's ideology through protests. Trump has repeatedly condoned the use of brute force against counter protesters at his rallies. In a February 2016 rally, Trump told the audience "if you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato knock the crap out of them, would you? Seriously, just knock the hell – I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees. I promise. I promise" (Cedar Rapids IA, 2/1/2016). This demonstrates how Trump uses Incitement to invoke an emotional connection; *I have your back if you have mine*. Meaning, if a supporter gets arrested

for assaulting one of their mutual enemies, Trump will support them. In other examples, Trump's use of Incitement reinforces the Trump-fueled class consciousness:

We're not allowed to punch back anymore. I love the old days. You know what they used to do to guys like that when they were in a place like this. They'd be carried out on a stretcher folks[...] He's walking out like you big high fives, smiling, laughing. I'd like to punch him in the face I'll tell you (Las Vegas NV, 2/22/2016).

Part of the problem, and part of the reason it takes so long, is nobody wants to hurt each other anymore, right?[...] and protestors, they realize it, they realize there are no consequences to protesting anymore. There used to be consequences, there are none anymore[...] Our country has to toughen up folks (Sommers-Dawes).

The audience swung back. And I thought it was very, very appropriate. He was swinging. He was hitting people and the audience hit back. And that's what we need a little bit more of (West Palm Beach FL, 3/11/2016).¹⁰

By using this nostalgic rhetoric like *there are no consequences anymore, we need to start fighting back, we need to toughen up, and the good old days were tougher*, Trump harps on the class consciousness sentiment related to the perception of a culture war. Trump's base believes that liberals want to create a safe space for everyone, and get rid of "American" culture by softening our natural "American toughness." They want to weaken America while Trump promises to make it strong again, which starts with condoning assaults on political opponents. Trump's use of Incitement and his notions of nostalgic class consciousness and "tradition" pretend that the progressive liberal agenda, which obviously opposes violence, is soft and weak. In reality, political violence against one another has historically been considered crossing the line and has never been openly acceptable by either party until Trump came along. Trump uses Incitement as part of a class consciousness to deepen the divide between his base and outsiders by claiming that liberal culture is incompatible with his base's values, and that violence is a solution to this incompatibility.

¹⁰ Trump speaking at a press conference, not a rally.

Beyond just inciting violence against demonstrators, Trump received a lot of attention for his use of Incitement messaging strategies at his 2016 campaign rallies against Hillary Clinton. An example of this is his Dog Whistle threat of an assassination against Hillary Clinton if she were to be elected: “By the way, and if she gets to pick... [Booing] If she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks. Although the Second Amendment people, maybe there is. I don't know” (Wilmington NC, 8/9/2016). This statement was accompanied with a similar tweet in September of the same year: “Crooked Hillary wants to take your 2nd Amendment rights away. Will guns be taken from her heavily armed Secret Service detail? Maybe not” (@realDonaldTrump, 9/17/2016). Here, Trump is insinuating that 2nd Amendment people (gun owners) could do “something” extralegal to Hillary Clinton that would prevent her from nominating a liberal supreme court justice. Predictably, Trump defended the statement as referring to lobbyists, but the message was received loud and clear by the base; violence against Hillary Clinton is approved by Trump. Just over a month later, Trump doubled down on his threats:

I think what we should do is, she goes around with armed bodyguards like you have never seen before. I think that her bodyguards should drop all weapons. They should disarm right? [Applause] Right? I think they should disarm immediately. What do you think? Yes? Yes. [Applause] Take their guns away. She doesn't want guns. Take their – let's see what happens to her. Take their guns away. OK? It'll be very dangerous (Miami FL, 9/16/2016).

This is less of a Dog Whistle and more of just straightforward Incitement to harm Hillary Clinton. Thankfully, these Incitement tactics never came to fruition in Hillary's case. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who was the subject of a foiled kidnapping attempt in October of 2020, came dangerously close to becoming a victim of Trump's incitement. In the lead up to the FBI exposed plot, Trump had used Incitement messaging to rile up his Michigan followers against the Governor's lock down policies; tweeting “LIBERATE MICHIGAN!” amongst a

string of other remarks supporting anti-lockdown protests (@realDonaldTrump). The use of “liberate” implies that Michigan was threatened with a hostile takeover or some sort of impending threat against freedom. As most health experts point out, Governor Whitmer was acting in the best interest of Michigan citizens when she locked down the state with COVID-19 restrictions. Her actions were not only constitutional, they likely were beneficial to combating the spread of the virus. Still, Trump used the lockdown protests orchestrated by his supporters as a means to create media controversy through encouraging his followers to revolt against their governor. Lo and behold, a few months later, the FBI arrested 13 men, all belonging to local militias, associated with a plot to kidnap and potentially assassinate the governor in order to “start a civil war” (Bogel-Burroughs et al.). Just a week after the kidnapping attempt was foiled, Trump had the following to say in North Carolina: “But we've been suing a lot of people and we just won in Michigan against –what she did was terrible– I mean, what she did, it's like a prison warden” (10/15/2020). Clearly, not even the threat on Whitmer’s life was enough to dissuade Trump from inciting attacks.

In 2020, many of Trump’s Incitement messages were geared towards either attempting to rival Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestors or overthrowing the results of the election. In the case of the BLM protests, many political commentators accused Trump of inciting violence against the protestors with tweets like “when the looting sharts the shooting starts” and his repetitive emphasis of law and order. Instead of being just Incitement, I consider these particular statements to be a means of distraction: Trump saw the BLM protests and civil unrest as a way to incite fear in his base and to distract from the failures of the COVID-19 pandemic which had been abysmally mishandled so far. Therefore, Trump made controversial statements similar to the ones mentioned above in order to generate as much controversy as possible and make BLM protests an agenda setting issue for the 2020 election instead of COVID. Distractions aside,

many of Trump's statements, like the following response to a question about BLM protests in a Jeanine Pirro interview, were intended to incite violence:

So what's going to happen – and this is a shame – you're going to have a backlash like you've never seen, if these people don't stop. Because you have very smart, very tough people that aren't going to take it anymore. And once they say we're not going to take it anymore, it's going to end in a very vicious backlash and that's a terrible thing (“President Trump Sits Down with Judge...”).

This is a Dog Whistle disguised as a warning. When Trump says *they aren't going to take it*, the message to the base is that it is time to rise up and fight back “viciously” against the left, manifested in BLM protestors.

Around the same time period, Trump made the following statement about his friend and President of the UFC, Dana White: “He was looking for a place and they said, ‘Well, that sport's never going to make it. It's too violent.’ They just don't know how violent the American people are, do they? They never quite figured that out” (Henderson NV, 9/13/2016). This statement is immediately odd even in the context of Trump's speech. Trump is implying that violence is a virtue, and that Americans are exceptionally violent. Additionally, he makes violence a defining characteristic of Americans, implying anyone else who does not condone violence is somehow un-American; hence his phrasing of “they never quite figured that out.” This is a Dog Whistle against “soft” Democrats who don't condone physical violence, and a praise of his supporters who do commit physical violence. Context is important here as well considering the social justice protests happening all around the country. Trump frequently criticized the violence committed by BLM protestors, yet ominously hinted at the violence that his supporters would be willing to commit in order to protect American values.

Why would Trump want to cause political violence amongst protests and counter protestors? Wouldn't civil unrest and yet *another* domestic crisis reflect poorly on Trump's reelection bid? Perhaps it seems like a desperate move, but Trump needed some sort of narrative

to grab the attention off of COVID-19 and his failures. As will become apparent in the next few sections, Trump may sacrifice short term criticism to establish long term messages. In this case, causing division and inciting violence gave him negative press but ultimately aligned his base even closer with him and generated reactionary fear against the BLM movement. Secondly, I hypothesize that Trump believed encouraging a culture war between civil rights and law & order protests (manifestations of the ideological left and right) may have had the same effect of a “wartime” popularity boost. This theory is further supported by other Trump comments like “the Democrat Party declared war on our great police and law enforcement” (Orlando FL, 10/12/2020). From these examples surrounding 2020 police brutality protests, we can see how Trump uses Incitement to condone violence against political opponents and exacerbate the tensions of the perceived culture war.

The most infamous example of Incitement can be derived from the Jan. 6th Capitol attack. Throughout the 2020 re-election bid, Trump created a false narrative that the Democrats had “stolen” the election from his movement, and he promoted conspiracy theories which radicalized and mobilized a significant portion of his base. Trump intentionally led this radical sect of his supporters to believe things about the election that were simply not true. There are some components of Dog Whistling here as well; Trump cannot just tell his base to take up arms, he must command them through coded language. However, by creating the narrative that American Democracy and his base’s freedom was threatened by allowing Biden to be sworn in, he subtly Dog Whistled to the base that something had to be done. The psychological manipulation of the base into believing in non-factual realities is a well known strategy called “Gaslighting” which I will discuss in Ch. IV. Dog Whistling and Gaslighting played a significant role in the Jan. 6th attack, which set the groundwork for Trump to be able to incite the offensive on Jan. 6th.

In every election that Trump's name has been on the ballot, he has preemptively discredited the election as fraudulent. Trump's stubborn refusal to accept defeat is part of the motivation behind inciting his base to commit violence in the wake of the election. Discrediting of the election, however, is still just one step shy of inciting the base to commit violence. The Gaslighting of this false narrative about the stolen election *combined* with provocations and consent to commit violent acts, are the two messaging strategies which enabled this horrific display of extremism. In the lead up to Jan. 6th, Trump's messaging became increasingly inciteful and differed from his generic complaints about the election:

If a Democrat Presidential Candidate had an Election Rigged & Stolen, with proof of such acts at a level never seen before, the Democrat Senators would consider it an act of war, and fight to the death. Mitch & the Republicans do NOTHING, just want to let it pass. NO FIGHT! (@realDonaldTrump, 12/26/2020).

Don't let Big Tech steal our Country, and don't let the Democrats steal the Presidential Election. Get tough!(@realDonaldTrump, 12/29/2020).

Still, while there clearly was some Incitement happening prior to the attack, the best examples of Trump's Incitement occur from Trump's speech delivered on the morning of Jan. 6th:

[...]something's wrong here, something is really wrong, can't have happened. And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore (March to Save America, 1/6/20).

[...]we're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue. I love Pennsylvania Avenue[...] We're going to try and give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country (March to Save America, 1/6/20)

After the riots had already started, Trump voiced his support for their efforts:

I know your pain, I know you're hurt. We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election and everyone knows it, especially the other side. But you have to go home now. We have to have peace. We have to have law and order. We have to respect our great people in law and order. We don't want anybody hurt. It's a very tough period of time. There's never been a time like this, where such a thing happened, where they could take it away from all of us. From me, from you, from our country. This was a fraudulent election, but we can't play into the hands of these people. We have to have peace. So go home. We love you, you're very special (Moreau).

And then, after the day had ended, Trump still defended and condoned their violence:

These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever! (@realDonaldTrump, 1/6/2020)

From the examples listed above, it is clear that whether Trump conspired to start these riots or not, Trump enabled, condoned and defended the Jan. 6th terrorist attack on the Capitol. My analysis does not even include statements made from other people related to the campaign, which may have also been made in coordination and consultation with Trump.

Regardless of whether or not Trump incited the attack, there is no question that he actively stifled attempts to squash it, and even encouraged the violence once insurrectionists had stormed the Capitol. Inciting this violence allowed Trump to reassert his power over the Republican base in the wake of a lost election, and to threaten both Republicans and Democrats who had opposed him while in office. Trump was able to flex his muscle, demonstrating both the power and destruction his grip on the base could wield. Secondly, it created an agenda setting issue that his base will hold on to until 2024. Just like the other examples, Trump's Incitement on Jan. 6th generated extensive controversy that has kept his name in the headlines and at the forefront of the Republican party ever since. Likewise, it achieved the political goal of threatening Republicans-in-name-only (RINOs) and Democrats who had opposed his election fraud narratives. Third, it built comradery and class consciousness among the base of supporters who now see themselves as veterans and soldiers in Trump's army which fought for the pursuit of freedom. Trump creates a sense of empowerment and protection by inciting violence, which is a self-identifying strategy that is attractive and unifying to the base.

Trump's self-identifying strategies discussed in this section define the character of the Trump movement. With Authoritative Statements, Trump establishes himself as the ultimate judge, jury, and executioner on any conceivable issue regardless of his own qualifications. He over-uses hyperbole, to the extent that it becomes deceitful, in order to discredit opponents and prop-up himself or his accomplishments. These messages are empowering to his base, who is starved for an authority figure that will lead them to political success. With Perfectionism, Trump portrays an image of strength by never conceding an inch of fault or defeat. For the base, which speaks through him, his image of perfection is their image of perfection, and they are empowered by his brute force and arrogance. When combined with Simplistic Explanations, Trump is able to make political issues accessible to the base and assigns their ideological micro-aggressions as legitimate explanations for their problems, when the reality is much more complicated. This becomes even more applicable when considering Trump's Dog Whistles, which entertain and promote bigotted and offensive ideology that was long considered going out of style. Ideological leanings satisfied, Trump empowers his base to express their anger through violence, and protects them when they do so. These strategies combine to create the narrative that Trump is authentic, strong, not a politician, accepting of fringe ideology, disruptive, a winner and a fighter. This image is further supported by Trump's messaging strategies that he uses at his most popular and effective medium of communication: campaign rallies.

Chapter III: Rally Strategies

The Magic of MAGA Rallies

A sea of red hats, a screaming crowd, Air Force One on the tarmac, Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." playing in the background; these are the scenes we have become accustomed to at Trump's MAGA rallies. These events are more than just displays of Trumpism blended with patriotic symbolism; MAGA rallies have welcomed a following of Trump cultists that rivals the infamously mobile Dead Heads of the 70's. Attending a MAGA rally is the ultimate pilgrimage for the most feverishly loyal portion of Trump's base. Am I being too dramatic? Perhaps. But the "____ for Trump" signs, the offensive or threatening t-shirts, the "lock her up" chant coming from the crowd, the assaults on counter protestors, the audible booing after Trump overpronounces Barack *HUSSEIN* Obama with all the intended tonal insinuation, all lead me to believe that Trump rallies (for better or for worse) are on a different level to rallies that we have seen before.

Despite many political pundits doubting the effectiveness of campaign rallies in terms of actual voter turnout benefits, I would argue that while Trump gains marginal ground on centrist voters and perhaps turns off a fair share of moderates from his conduct at rallies, his actual goal is to motivate and agitate his base (Chinni). Therefore, even if he doesn't add any voters to his total, Trump rallies are more successful at energizing the base and keeping them engaged with him. Both Trump campaigns also seemed to share this view, as Trump's sheer quantity of rallies was one of the major differences in overall strategy vs. both of his opponents in 2016 and 2020. In 2016, Trump did at least 248 rallies for the general election alone compared to just 151 for

Hillary.¹¹ At times, he would do up to four rallies a day. In 2020 these numbers were drastically reduced due to his commitments as President, the additional restrictions added by the pandemic, and because of his own brief bout with the illness in October which took him out of the action for over a week. Still, Trump campaigned very hard on the ground when he was able to do so, meanwhile receiving criticism from public health experts and others given the risks associated with COVID-19. In 2020, Trump was only able to notch roughly 79 rallies, a decrease of over 170 from the previous cycle, but still twice as many as the Biden camp held in the same period of time, including twice as many in the last week of the campaign (Rutthart and Berlin). The decision to hold the rallies despite all these risks shows just how important the Trump campaign believed they were to the election effort.

Still, it is important to note that Trump's use of rallies is not limited to just election cycles. While in office, excluding the 2020 campaign, Trump held just under 100 rallies including several "Victory rallies" for states that voted for him in the 2016 election. These non-election cycle rallies took a darker twist in the wake of the 2020 election, as Trump used them to spread false election fraud claims and ultimately to invoke a terrorist attack on the U.S. Capitol building. What is abundantly clear, however, is that Trump devotes a large amount of time and energy into rallies and they are an integral part of his messaging strategy.

First, I will identify the advantages and overall theme of rally messaging strategies. The rallies themselves give Trump a unique platform to communicate with his base that cannot be achieved on any of the other four that I will analyze in this chapter. Rallies are uniquely personal compared to other forms of communication which distance Trump from his friendly audience. Rallies are generally homogeneous in terms of their political orientation, with the exception of

¹¹ These numbers include Presidential candidate, Vice Presidential candidate, and combined candidate events. Interestingly, however, Tim Kaine did 69 solo events compared to Hillary's 66. Trump on the other hand set the pace with 127 events compared to Pence's 108 (FairVote).

occasional counter protestors. Therefore, Trump essentially has the freedom to say whatever he wants without rebuttal. This is not unique to Trump, all politicians enjoy being in front of the “home crowd.” But this gives Trump a level of protection and energy to make provocative statements that most other politicians tend to avoid making. Trump’s base is motivated by ideological talking points as opposed to political policy, and the campaign rally allows Trump to hit on hot topics that deliver ideological victories. The follow-through on policy initiatives is irrelevant; in the context of what his base perceives as a culture war, simple statements that go against the grain of political correctness are a unifying theme.

Beyond the friendly nature of rallies (for Trump that is), Trump uses the rallies in somewhat of a theatrical display for mass media. Some of Trump’s most memorable and obscene comments occur on the rally stage. Calling Mexican immigrants rapists and drug dealers in his announcement rally, mocking disabled reporter Serge Kovalski at a 2016 Myrtle Beach rally, or perhaps claiming that “2nd Amendment people” could stop Hillary Clinton from picking a Supreme Court Justice at North Carolina rally in the summer of 2016, are a few memorable moments that come to mind (Carmon). These are just a drop in the bucket, and not even the most outrageous ones at that. More analysis of statements like these will follow, however, the point I would like to make here is that the display of comradery at campaign rallies, combined with the outrageous statements, serves to lessen the blow of the comment. Trump may accidentally let some of these slip because he feels so comfortable in front of a friendly audience, or perhaps these “headliners” are intentional to garner media attention, keeping the initiative on himself, and highlighting his popularity with his audience. While watching the news, viewers at home witness Trump saying something that was widely criticised as horrific, yet the statement will be frequently accompanied with a laughing, cheering or rowdy crowd behind him. This visual demonstrates an image of solidarity within the Trump movement, and the message is *this type of*

behavior is ok here. Trump gets so much media attention from these problematic statements that campaign rallies double as advertisements given the rate at which they are replayed in mainstream media.

Additionally, Trump is notorious for improvisation instead of sticking to prepared remarks, often reacting to the audience to go on anecdotal tangents. He can also use this technique in debates and interviews, but it is often met with hostility or at least interruption from the host or debate partner. Only on the rally stage is Trump truly free to ramble and improvise uncontested and without a 140 character limit which he is restricted to on Twitter. Trump does indeed usually have a stump speech that he uses essentially as an outline, but he rarely reads more than one sentence from it at a time (at least this is the case in my limited observation). Most of Trump's speeches, sometimes exceeding 90 minutes, are improvised. This fits right into Trump's narrative of "being an outsider" that is "not a politician." Still, it is difficult to improvise all the time, and some of the tangents become difficult to understand and are, frankly, illiterate when transcribed. Take this example from a July, 2015 rally in South Carolina:

Look, having nuclear — my uncle was a great professor and scientist and engineer, Dr. John Trump at MIT; good genes, very good genes, okay, very smart, the Wharton School of Finance, very good, very smart — you know, if you're a conservative Republican, if I were a liberal, if, like, okay, if I ran as a liberal Democrat, they would say I'm one of the smartest people anywhere in the world — it's true! — but when you're a conservative Republican they try — oh, do they do a number — that's why I always start off: *Went to Wharton, was a good student, went there, went there, did this, built a fortune* — you know I have to give my like credentials all the time, because we're a little disadvantaged — but you look at the nuclear deal, the thing that really bothers me — it would have been so easy, and it's not as important as these lives are (nuclear is powerful; my uncle explained that to me many, many years ago, the power and that was 35 years ago; he would explain the power of what's going to happen and he was right — who would have thought?), but when you look at what's going on with the four prisoners — now it used to be three, now it's four — but when it was three and even now, I would have said it's all in the messenger; fellas, and it is fellas because, you know, they don't, they haven't figured that the women are smarter right now than the men, so, you know, it's gonna take them about another 150 years (Golshan).

If there is one thing that Trump and I agree on, it's that "it's all in the messenger." Other than that, he might as well have been speaking a foreign language. This is an extreme example of the tangents, self-interrupting and topic-shifting that mark Trump's rally speeches, but it does demonstrate just how unstructured and free-flowing these particular speeches tend to be. In light of this evidence, Trump's rambling may seem like a negative aspect; how can Trump get his message out in a clear and concise manner if he is constantly improvising and rambling? It hasn't seemed to hurt him so far. To the contrary, these tangents are actually appreciated by the audience, as they demonstrate a "conversational" style that many listeners are not accustomed to from politicians. The bottom line is Trump uses the rally stage to project an image of authenticity by giving improvised speeches in a conversational format.

What then does Trump attempt to accomplish at these rallies? One of the most important aspects is that he can say anything without opposition. At rallies, Trump attempts to convince his base of conspiracies or political conditions that are often distorted or simply false. With no one to fact-check or question his improvised facts and anecdotes, Trump uses this time to create alternate realities with "alternative facts" that are much more difficult to do through other mediums. Much of Trump's rally strategies are minor forms of gaslighting, a strategy I will cover later. Trump's rally strategies foster the same sense of dependence on Trump that gaslighting does, by the creation of alternate realities and facts that are dependent on Trump. Again, through his improvisation, this is made even more possible because none of his facts are prepared and he can easily defend himself by saying he misremembered rather than reading a speech with outright lies.

Secondly, Trump's base appreciates ideological victories as opposed to policy victories. These are frequently delivered on the rally stage. The hype and energy of a rally empowers his base, and Trump fuels this feeling by provoking an "us vs. them" message. Put yourself in the

shoes of a Trump supporter: You look up, Donald Trump proclaims that immigration should be banned from Muslim countries because Muslims are dangerous. This is something you have been told you can't say, yet here is your leader, proudly expressing his prejudice as political policy. You look to your left and right, thousands of like-minded individuals chant "Build the wall!" This evokes an extremely powerful sense of belonging. While it is admittedly hard to empathize with bigotry such as that preached by Trump, this exercise is helpful in understanding the source of Trump's popularity.

Related to the ideological victories, Trump uses these rallies to build a sense of class consciousness with his base by allowing them to identify with him as a personality trait. Trump can Dog Whistle and imply things on other communication platforms, but the rally is the most effective place to invoke this type of class consciousness. Something about having unanimous control and support from the audience makes these ideological victories more severe. In this section I will look at three strategies I have titled: *Crowd Control*, *Imaginary Friends*, and *Trumpstats*. I will admit these strategies do exist on other media; however, their effectiveness is best at rallies given the lack of opposition. These strategies all center around the theme of embellishing reality through the medium of campaign rallies where Trump can say anything without opposition. They boost his own image, generate comradery amongst the base, and allow him to convince his base of realities that are simply untrue.

Crowd Control: *The habitual exaggeration and emphasis on the size of the audience in attendance as evidence of overall popularity.*

They do stories so big on Elizabeth "Pocahontas" Warren's crowd sizes, adding many more people than are actually there, and yet my crowds, which are far bigger, get no coverage at all. Fake News! (@realDonaldTrump, 8/27/2019).

Trump often equates the size of the crowd as a measure of his popularity within a state, despite the obvious flaws in such an argument. In nearly every single rally, Trump begins by noting how the crowd is bursting at the edges with “thousands” of people waiting to get in. This is done regardless of the actual size of the rally and even when the rally is remarkably small, as was the case in Tulsa when an army of Tik Tok users ghost booked the event (Lorenz). Trump uses a variety of phrasing for many of these crowd-emphasizing points:

We have more people outside than inside. (Warren MI, 10/31/2016)

There is a whole other crowd just around the corner! (Latrobe PA, 9/3/2020)

The fire marshal said they are worried about a stampede. (Manchester NH, 10/28/2016)

We get the biggest crowds in the history of politics. (Carson City NV, 10/18/2020)

This place is filled to absolutely maximum capacity. (Waukesha WI, 9/28/2016)

Trump boasts of gigantic crowds, meanwhile highlighting, without evidence, the smaller size of his opponents crowds. Even during the 2020 election, when the Biden campaign was intentionally hosting limited capacity events due to COVID-19 concerns, Trump declared that Biden could only muster small crowds of double-digit attendees: “So he goes out. Gets no people at any of the rallies. I go out, we get 35, 40,000, 25,000, 15,000[...] We get the biggest crowds in the history of politics[...] He gets nobody. And then they say, we're tied” (Carson City NV, 10/18/2020). While the exaggeration of crowd size may seem like a simple white-lie meant to create the impression of momentum and popularity in one particular town or city, it’s repetitiveness suggests a more intentional and deliberate pattern that serves a strategic goal. Even in the limited examples I have given here, it is obvious that this strategy stretches across both election cycles and through different locations.

Trump doesn’t just make a simple innocent remark about the large crowd; he invents narratives. The infamous “fire marshal” was mentioned on multiple occasions in both 2016 and 2020. For example, at a rally in Lakeland Florida, Trump cited “thousands of people” being

turned away by a fire marshal who, of course, was a Democrat operative: “And over there, there's thousands of people trying to get in. I wish the fire department would let them in, in all fairness. We're outside. You don't need a fire marshal. We're outside. So fire marshal, will you let the people in, please. These people [shakes head]. I assume the fire marshal is a Democrat. I assume. Unbelievable. It never, it never stops” (Lakeland FL, 10/12/2016). It is my impression that Trump makes these remarks because he considers this particular crowd to be a small one. He attributes this as a result of the evil Democrats fixing the game against him. This provides an adequate excuse for those at the rally and satisfies an ideological agenda for those watching at home who have been led to believe that the Democrats are a cabal of powerful elites working against Trump. Additionally, this strengthens the “evil Democrats” narrative by claiming that they can even infiltrate the minute local government appointments like that of the fire marshal. It truly “never stops.”

Beyond just using this invisible fire marshal as a scapegoat, Trump used the Crowd Control technique to provide “evidence” for election fraud claims: “This is not the crowd of somebody that's going to lose the State of Michigan[...] This is not the crowd of a second place finisher. Do you agree with that? No. No. This is our crowd” (Grand Rapids MI, 11/2/2020). With Trump, what you see is what you get. *Do you see all these people here with you? Look how enthusiastic they are about me. How can we possibly lose? If we do lose, it must be fraudulent.* It is easy to follow how Trump’s simplistic argument leads to claims of election fraud, stemming from something seemingly so simple and innocent like the size of a crowd. This all plays into Trump’s culture war and his discrediting of the truth and the media. The only thing Trump supporters are told they can believe is what they see with their very own eyes, because everyone else is lying. The attacks on the media go hand in hand with exaggerations of crowd size:

[They were] the biggest rallies anyone's ever seen[...] They [the media] never show it. They should show it because nobody is showing up to watch Barack

Hussein Obama. See the red lights? See those red lights or all those red lights? [points at camera operators] That means you're on live. Are you ready? Oh, they just turned them off because I was insulting. Look, they just went off. Can you believe it? You know they're tormented, the fake news, they're tormented[...] So you'll see it go on and off a little bit. No, they just turned off. Did you see that? Boom. Anytime I start talking they sort of say "Now let's go to a commercial break now, please."[...] They're fantastic ratings, but at the same time they don't want to be talked about in a bad manner, right? But you have to talk about it because they're corrupt. They have to report the news. They are the enemy of the people. They really are. They're the enemy of the people (Allentown PA, 10/26/2020).

Here, Trump equates the media not moving the camera wide enough to encapsulate the whole crowd, to the media being the enemy of the people. Personally, I have never seen the camera operators change the scope of the frame at any rally, Democrat or Republican. Obviously, the cameras don't stop recording when Trump insults CNN because we heard Trump's insults about the "fake news" for over four years without interruption. By pointing at the camera operator and making up evidence about blinking red lights, Trump is gaslighting his audience and creating a fake reality where even the camera crew in the back row, simply doing their jobs, is against them. This technique of gaslighting is in itself its own category, but is used in combination with Trump's assertions about the size of his crowd.

Lastly, it is important to note that this emphasis on size is not necessarily meant for those physically at the rally. In fact, it could be argued that this is exclusively for those watching at home or catching brief clips on the news. While Trump certainly aims to rile up the crowd and grab a quick cheer from the in-person attendees by acknowledging their size, the crowd that is at the rally already knows what the scene looks like, or at least knows that he is exaggerating it. Trump's references to the crowd, and more specifically demanding that the cameras show the whole crowd, is clearly aimed at reaching a wider audience of viewership. This strategy makes logical sense; those who are at the rally are the most energetic and motivated Trump supporters (especially those who attend mid-pandemic like in 2020). He probably does not have to worry

about them showing up on election day, given that they show up to his campaign events. Yet, by exaggerating crowd size and making up claims about the corrupt media, Trump is attempting to create the appearance of momentum for those watching at home who may be less convinced to support Trump. Phrases like “nobody has seen anything like this” and “we are breaking record crowd numbers” also serve this goal by making it seem like supporting Trump is the popular thing to do.

Ultimately, the strategy of Crowd Control serves multiple purposes beyond just energizing the audience. Crowd Control messaging is used to compare and attack opponents' crowds, generate conspiracy about election fraud, gaslight the base about the media, and to create the appearance of momentum and solidarity. These relate back to the larger underlying theme of creating a class consciousness by declaring that the movement is united and strong in their conviction for Trump. And likewise, it is applicable to the historic authority crisis by defaming the media's coverage and integrity, further promoting Trump as the base's only “honest” source of information.

Imaginary Friends: *Claims of support from vague, unnamed individuals –often touted experts, insiders or unexpected political opponents– as evidence to justify a statement or concept without giving specifics regarding alleged supporter's identity or the nature of their alleged support.*

They [foreign leaders] don't want to deal with Sleepy Joe. One of them said to me, one of the leaders said, ‘Well, I hope you win because we don't want to deal with somebody that sleeps all the time.’ Do you believe him? (Allentown PA, 10/26/2020).

Trump frequently cites anonymous sources and “friends” who applaud one of his initiatives or claims as evidence of its effectiveness and widespread popularity among “experts.” Like many of his messaging techniques, Trump makes bold claims and then provides his own evidence,

assuring the audience that he is absolutely correct regardless of what others say. This strategy is a mutation of the Crowd Control strategy; Imaginary Friends support a baseless claim with unverifiable and probably fake evidence in the same way that Trump's crowd exaggerations are not based in reality. In this derivation, however, Trump is manufacturing targeted expert support as opposed to popular support. This strategy is used outside of campaign rallies, but the fact that nobody can, or is willing to fact check him in front of a rally crowd makes it most effective through this medium.

The use of Imaginary Friends is particularly effective when Trump is making a claim in a subject that most rational people would not consider him an expert on, or in which he is creating a narrative that goes against accepted fact. Take the following example of the Mueller Investigation, which was widely seen legitimate in both purpose and intent: "And now the Mueller scam, these people, the worst people. I have a friend, a very smart guy, a very streetwise guy. He said, you have to be the most honest guy in the world to go through three years of investigations, where they have the worst human beings in the world" (Minden NV, 9/12/2020). Here, Trump's illusive "streetwise" friend not only praises Trump's supreme honesty, a questionable claim at best, but in the same sentence he denounces Trump's enemies as the "worst human beings" in the world! Couldn't we all use some friends like Trump's? Worth noting, Robert Mueller had bipartisan support as impartial, highly intelligent and most definitely capable of leading the Russia investigation (Berman 2017).

Beyond just acquaintances, Trump uses Imaginary Friends messaging to declare that even international leaders bow before Trump to pay their respects: "I had the leader of a very important country in my office recently[...] He said, 'Thank you, sir. You were the one that got rid of ISIS.' I said, 'I was the one? You're actually giving me credit?' He said, 'Absolutely. When you took over, ISIS in Iraq and ISIS in Syria was all over. It was growing at a level like we've

never seen. You came in, and you absolutely wiped it out” (Freeland MI, 9/11/2020). While it is impossible to know for certain whether or not this conversation took place, the way the conversation is presented seems unnatural and unlikely. Rather than just say that he got rid of ISIS without all the pomp and circumstance of this elaborate story, Trump declares that an international leader, a very important one at that, actually went out of his way to thank the President himself for single-handedly defeating the caliphate. In this message, Trump constructs an image of authority and political legitimacy by being a respected international leader who is applauded by his fellow heads of state. He also promotes the marketable claim that Trump is responsible for defeating ISIS. He does this to counter the claim frequently made by his political opponents that Trump has made the U.S. just short of a pariah state, which is evidenced by the lack of actual international support for Trump. This pronouncement of respect from friends and leaders, is used to build the conception of Trump as a well-respected individual who is fit for political office.

Personal accolades and international respect aside, Trump has used the Imaginary Friends card to stir up conspiracism:

So, Hunter has no energy experience. He has no job. He has no income. His father becomes Vice President. And here's just a few of the things he gets: \$183,000 a month[...] 1.5 billion dollars to manage, which is millions and millions of dol—from China. I said to a friend of mine, the biggest on Wall Street, very smart guy and I said, ‘Is that possible to get?’ Then he said, ‘It's not possible for my firm to get it.’ He got one— And it took it approximately 10 minutes of dealing with the Chinese (Allentown PA, 10/26/2020).

Here, Trump’s “highly intelligent and powerful friend” on Wall Street provides the evidence that not even a major Wall Street firm could get the alleged money that Hunter Biden received from China. Even Trump himself would admit that he has an agenda to amplify these claims about the Bidens, but by providing anonymous “evidence” from an alleged Wall Street expert, Trump is legitimizing his own claim by making it seem like he has a credible external source with no

implicit bias. Another example of this is found in his promotion of election fraud conspiracies: “I went from 63 million to 75 million, a 12-million vote difference. That's the biggest margin in history. They say if I got 67, the smartest people in the business [say], if I got 67 million votes I couldn't lose. I got 75 million and they say I lost. I didn't lose. The election was rigged” (Kilmeade). Again, Trump is creating a false reality where even basic rules of statistics and mathematics don't apply. Trump is asserting that there is a certain vote threshold he needed to win the race, as opposed to an electoral college victory which is how our elections actually work. Not only is his concept of the electoral process misguided, his opponent won 81 million votes, 7 million more than Trump received. His most staunch defenders would argue that he is merely using hyperbole, and what he *really* means is that the Democrats could not have gotten the amount of votes that they did. But that argument falls short of recognizing the fact that Trump's base takes him for his word thanks to his long history of discrediting the media and fostering information dependence on himself. Not to say that Trump supporters don't understand the electoral college, but Trump's claims about a statistical win based on some imagined vote total supported by Imaginary Friends messaging, provides further evidence to Trump's election conspiracy claims. It imagines a world where elections can be gamed by expert math predictions, and where a 7 million vote difference is just an anomaly. Even if some respected expert had forecast a vote total needed for Trump to secure the victory, election turnout rates were shattered across the board which is just one of several reasons why 74 million votes did not win the election. This fact is hidden from Trump's base, who take Trump and his Imaginary Friends as the foremost experts on any topic.

In addition, Trump uses the Imaginary Friends strategy to demonstrate occasions when he did not take expert advice because he knew better than the experts and so called allies who advised him: “We saved tens of thousands of lives by doing it [shutting down], and then we

banned Europe from coming in. And even the experts were against me, but they turned out and they all said, ‘Great job’” (North Carolina tele-rally, 9/4/2020). In reality, Trump was warned by close advisors about the severity of the pandemic in July and his advisors encouraged him to shut down the border rather than opposed him like he suggests (Woodward, *Rage*, 9). Still, in Trump’s revisionist history account of his response, he outsmarted the experts and saved American lives. He knows that this won’t be fact checked by anyone other than his political opponents, whom he has already discredited as deceitful and motive driven, and who his base has learned to identify as the enemy.

Lastly, the Imaginary Friends strategy has been used to antagonize and insult his political opponents. On the 2020 campaign trail, Trump brought up a mysterious friend, a former Democratic senator, who tipped him off that Biden was not very bright: “Long time ago. I had a friend, a Senator, a Democrat[...] This is 25 years ago. I said, ‘Who's your dumbest Senator?’, ‘Joe.’, ‘Who's Joe?’, ‘Joe Biden.’ ‘Oh, I see.’ ‘He's – He is really, yeah, he's the dumbest senator.’ Well, now he's a lot dumber than he used to be, I can tell you that” (Dayton OH, 9/21/2020). Trump remembers asking a friend who the dumbest senator was 25 years ago? I am skeptical at best. The message however, is that despite Trump’s obvious bias, even his impartial “friend” who was a former colleague and politically ally to Biden, perceived him to be mentally unfit.

The strategy of Imaginary Friends is used by Trump at campaign rallies to invent evidence when there is none. By citing powerful, smart, and respected people, even without listing them by name, Trump depicts himself as intelligent and powerful through their support and alleged backing of his ideas. Most of the conversations he reports having are so obscure and vague that I find it very difficult to believe that they have occurred or that anyone would remember them. Of course, I could never know this for certain, but the effectiveness of the strategy works the same regardless of the morality behind it. By citing anonymous people, Trump gives them both

limitless knowledge and undeniable partiality, simply by the fact that his witnesses cannot be questioned or tarnished. The strategy of Imaginary Friends is another way that Trump presents himself as an authority figure, by giving the impression of credible powerful supporters.

TRUMPSTATs: *Using vague, unspecific, or made-up statistics with no discernable source or relevance, that support a specific argument.*

Big Stock Market Numbers! (@realDonaldTrump, 8/11/2020).

Like both Crowd Control and Imaginary Friends, Trump's use of made-up numbers serves to portray himself as an authority figure with all the facts, numbers, evidence and support to be successful, when the real stats prove otherwise. Some might contest that Trumpstats is a strategy that is not unique to campaign rallies. To that point I would argue that while he employs this strategy on a regular basis, their impact is diminished in front of a negative audience that does not take Trump at his word or who fact checks him. This does not happen at rallies and therefore the effectiveness of Trumpstats is unique to this medium.

Trump invents statistics as a means to provide support for his agenda when there is legitimate opposition and often *actual* numbers that go against it. Sometimes the numbers apply to a certain theme, and other times they have nothing to do with anything at all. On at least one occasion, he just used the hypothetical existence of "bad numbers" as evidence to why he should be president: "When I look at your numbers, when my statistician writes all this stuff out, it's just one bad number after another. It's a terrible – I mean, honestly, it's a terrible thing" (Columbus OH, 8/1/2016). By citing this type of non-existent evidence, Trump creates the impression that he has his finger on the pulse of impending doom and "bad numbers" to which his base is not

privileged too. Even his simple remarks that are related to no particular subject at all serve to create an atmosphere of fear surrounding these alleged numbers.

The use of Trumpstats as a strategy takes on two distinct categories; negative and positive. Negative numbers are used to make up statistics that insinuate an impending crisis or conflict that only Trump knows about and, therefore, only he can take care of. In 2016, Trump often used the threat of ominous “yet-to-be-released” numbers that would allegedly shock the nation. Trump made claims about these numbers for Syrian refugees, Obamacare and other hot button issues of that election cycle. Take this example from an August rally:

The numbers are so bad on Obamacare, so bad, that on November 1, they're going to be announced. Those numbers are presidential election changing numbers. Those numbers are going to be so high, beyond anything we've had, and President Obama is trying to change the date to December 1, because when people see what's going to happen to Obamacare and to your health care numbers, they're so astronomical that people will never vote for crooked Hillary Clinton (Columbus OH, 8/1/2016).

The effectiveness of this strategy is in its simplicity; Trump has given the appearance of significant “election changing”, factual evidence, without providing anything at all. Further, Trump does not even elaborate on where these numbers come from or what issue surrounding Obamacare he is referring to. Premium payments? State taxes? Fines? Quality of care? Insurance rates? Enrollment rates? No! It’s just numbers! This particular use of negative numbers is generally used to create fear; the threat of unknown numbers has limitless potential. A more blatant example is the issue of crime and Trump’s use of phrases like “We're gonna reduce surging crime, which is going down at bad, bad numbers” (Lakeland FL, 10/12/2016).¹² Where? What crimes are going up? Since when? At what rate? Simple prodding of Trumpstats reveals glaring questions to his claims. Beyond crime, the negative numbers strategy is used to stoke fear

¹² Trump misuses the phrase “going down” here when he actually means going up. While confusing when read as transcribed, a live listen to the speech clearly reveals that he is talking about rising crime numbers.

about our nation's defense: "The military has been so badly treated in terms of its equipment and the money being spent, and this is a time where we need our military perhaps more than ever. When you look at the number of ships, you look at the number of military personnel, you look at the numbers that are setting records for all time lows, we can't have that" (Washington DC, 9/16/2016). For reference, the U.S. spent \$611,000,000,000 on the military in 2016, which was over $\frac{1}{3}$ of global total military spending (Ocbazhi 2017). Trump refuses to give actual data, not only because he does not know it, but because real statistics frequently contradict his fear-oriented messaging. This is why he must make up his own numbers and leave them to the imagination of the audience.

The technique is the same when Trump uses the strategy of positive Trumpstats. This was most frequently the case in the 2020 election campaign when Trump needed to prop up the results of his own time in office. Trump, the champion of deregulation and climate change denial, had the audacity to invent numbers about his positive impact on the environment: "We have the best environmental numbers we've ever had, meaning, I guess, over 50 years because before that you didn't have too much action, right? But we have the best environmental numbers, ozone numbers, so many other numbers" (North Carolina, 10/15/2020). The irony that I have pointed out here perhaps has its own strategic importance as well; I contest that statements like these are intended to antagonize the media and Trump's political opponents who balk at Trump's disregard from climate science and environmental protection, rather than to boast to his base who, quite frankly, does not believe in climate change. I address this matter in the *Antagonize* section of Trump's attack strategies. Regardless, Trump uses positive Trumpstats to manufacture accomplishments on issues that he has no grounds to boast about.

Instead of predicting ominous future numbers as was the case in 2016, Trump resorted to predicting enlightening future numbers in 2020:

We created the greatest economy in the history of the world and then we had the plague come in from China and now we're doin' it again. Our numbers are unbelievable and by the way you're gonna have a very big number. I even say hold off in your vote until it happens, 'cause a lot of you wanna wait till Tuesday anyway[...] I don't know what it is but the Atlanta Fed just predicted a very big number, biggest in the history of our country. You're going to have GDP coming out, it's gonna be announced and it's gonna be announced probably on the 1st, maybe a day before the 1st. And if that number is not big, you don't even have to vote for me, okay? I think it's gonna be maybe the biggest number in the history of our country (Bullhead City AZ, 10/28/2020).

Here, Trump is clearly referring to the predicted GDP growth, but he is referencing numbers that have not been released, only speculated, and he is blowing their significance way out of proportion. Yes, the U.S. was in the midst of an economic recovery, but the quarterly growth from the previous quarter is skewed based on the abysmal state of the economy for the prior 6 months. As many economists are quick to point out, Trump's classic boasting of the stock market and GDP do not identify the true crisis like unemployment and hunger which suggest different realities of suffering than the idealistic picture of the economy that Trump paints. Still, Trump uses the idea of a yet-to-be-released number as support for his accomplishments in office.

Given the severity of the economic and public health fallouts caused by Trump's handling of the COVID-19 crisis, Trump faced a numbers crisis in his 2020 re-election bid; climbing death and infection rates, low testing capacity, high unemployment, high income inequality and other stats flooded nightly television screens with abysmal numbers that Trump struggled to escape. So he restored to his tried and true strategy of making up his own evidence:

And it's happening. You see what's happening. Job numbers, retail sale numbers, they're all at records. It's happening. It's happening very fast. It's actually happening in a super V, not a V. It's a super V and you'll see that, and big numbers are coming out and have come out, and just watch your set or watch your newspaper. Read your newspaper. You're seeing numbers that, congressmen, we haven't seen those numbers ever before, actually. We've never seen them (Latrobe PA, 9/3/2020).

Whether used as a positive or negative strategy, Trump's invention of numbers is effective at inventing his own credibility and creating alternate realities that his base believes. Trumpstats, like other strategies that his supporters defend as white lies, are actually part of a dangerous gaslighting campaign that undermines legitimacy and fact.

The three strategies identified as part of Trump's messaging platform specifically geared toward campaign rallies are by no means a complete picture of the variety of strategies Trump employs in front of friendly audiences. However, Crowd Control, Imaginary Friends, and Trumpstats are three of the most common and effective strategies used on the campaign trail. One of the biggest takeaways from these strategies is the emphasis on creating realities defined by Trump that defy logic or factual evidence. The crowds are as big and boustrus as Trump says they are. Instead of trusting *real* experts, the base trusts Trump's Imaginary Friends. Instead of trusting actual data, the base trusts Trumpstats. The relentless attack on factual reality has created an atmosphere where one man controls what is perceived as truth for millions of supporters. Some may look at these strategies as insignificant, afterall who cares if Trump embellishes the size of his rallies, he has done much worse things? I urge caution in this line of thinking; undermining his base's sense of reality does not simply begin with Trump committing a massive scandal or instructing them to *fight for their country*. Rather, it is the slow and gradual structural fracturing, a death by 1,000 cuts, that divorces his base from factual evidence, logic, and reason, meanwhile substituting a world ruled and defined by Trump. The next section will dive further into Trump's strategies of creating false narratives, a topic tied very closely to the creation of alternate realities.

Chapter IV: False Narratives

Trump's Truth

We now live in what many call the “post-truth era” where factual reality is second fiddle to narratives imposed and supported by those in power who control the means of information. My interpretation of this “novel” condition is that it has really always been this way; but only recently have we come to terms with it. Donald Trump is not the architect of this trend, but he is its most prominent beneficiary. When there is no such thing as objective truth, there becomes no standard of which to judge lies. The implication for a devious demagogue like Trump, is that millions of people can be led to believe things that are contrary to reason and logic. By attacking truth and creating alternate realities, Trump is able to institute his own false narratives that serve his political agenda and hunt for power. In his book *Trumpocracy*, David Frum writes: “All we can know for certain[...] are ‘narratives’: yours, mine—and no way of judging between them, except on the basis of race/class/gender[...] (358). Wilson echoes this sentiment: “Trump broke something fundamental in our politics: the value of facts and truth. He alters the truth based on whims, and spreads both accidental and deliberate misinformation. His more cynical followers view this as part of his five-dimensional chess game, but America is now a post-truth republic, to our detriment” (183). As I mentioned in the first chapter, the connection between the post-truth era and the rapid spread of conspiracism, particular amongst Trump’s base, are part of the same societal trend. Conspiracies represent an inclination and a weakness to believe outrageous narratives without evidence, stemming from a breakdown of our ability to distinguish between truth and lies.

One of the most pivotal pieces to Trump's messaging strategy is the creation and maintenance of false narratives. Trump uses narratives as both offensive and defensive strategies as well as a means to assert control over the base. He has created narratives about his opponents, implicating them in highly exaggerated scandals or blatantly untrue lies. He has created false narratives about himself, declaring that he is the victim of a massive covert campaign to defeat his movement and restore evil to the government. And he has created false narratives about conditions in America that leave his base frightened and desperate for Trump's authority to save them from the very fears he has incited. One common thread throughout Trump's use of false narratives, is that the only evidence or support they require is Trump's own testimony. Trump's undermining of institutions like the media and the political establishment has created an environment where it is Trump's word against his enemies. Nobody can be trusted. So it's no surprise that nothing reported by the mainstream media is given much credence by Trump's base; they get their information from one source and his name is Donald Trump.

In this section, I will discuss three pinnacle false narrative messaging strategies: *Gaslighting*, *Fearmongering*, *Reflection* and *Cascading*. These strategies are very important to Trump's emotional connection with the base because they justify and identify the causes of their disenfranchisement with ideological enemies like "the other" and the political establishment. They separate Trump's base from the rest of society and drive them closer and closer to Trump through fear and lies. He takes advantage of this deep bond and acceptance of false narratives to use the powerful connection to the base to shield himself from persecution, hold control over the Republican party, and to execute his political will, even if it means insurrection. Some strategies that contribute to false narratives on a smaller scale have already been identified in this thesis, however the information presented in the following section highlights more overt false narrative strategies that pass well beyond white lies and embellishment.

Gaslighting: *Confusing the base's sense of reality until truth and reason are rendered obsolete. Weaken judgement and foster a reliance on the gaslighter as the sole authoritative source of information and direction.*

Read the Transcripts! Also, see where I say “us” (our Country) as opposed to “me” (meaning me) and where I then say that the Attorney General (of the United States) will call you. People still remember Schiff’s made up and fraudulent version of my conversation. Witch Hunt! (@realDonaldTrump, 12/7/2019).

This is one of the most dangerous and perhaps most well recognized of Trump’s messaging strategies, and I have hinted at it already on several occasions in this brief review of Trump’s messaging. Like Dog Whistling, Gaslighting is a well understood tool of psychological manipulation often associated with domestic abuse. The term “Gaslighting” actually comes from a 1944 play about a couple where the male partner convinces the female that she is crazy, by dimming the lights and making her believe that she is hallucinating (Huizen). One psychological publication writes: “Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse where a person or group makes someone question their sanity, perception of reality, or memories. People experiencing gaslighting often feel confused, anxious, and unable to trust themselves” (Huizen). Trump certainly employs a variety of Gaslighting techniques, but the outcome seems to be slightly different than this article would suggest. Instead of feeling anxious and uneasy, Trump’s base is angered by their perceived exploitation at the hands of target groups like elites and minorities. His base becomes untrusting of the world around them and thus looks increasingly towards Trump for answers.

Gaslighting plays a part in a majority of the strategies that Trump regularly employs. Despots, fascists, tyrants, and other authoritarians have exemplified this strategy long before Trump; he merely represents the newest interpretation. As I addressed in the section on

Incitement, Gaslighting a narrative that the election was stolen was a pivotal messaging strategy used even before Nov. 8th that enabled the events of Jan. 6th to conspire. By developing dishonest political narratives that isolate Trump's base from the rest of American society through confusion and manipulation, Trump fosters a relationship of dependence by becoming the only "reliable" and honest source of reality, which gives him dangerous control over the base. According to Paul Rosenberg (qtd. in Hassan p. 152): "The ultimate power of the gaslighter is to make it impossible for his targets to imagine a reality different from the one he imposes," (Rosenberg 2019). Hassan elaborates further:

When someone with presidential authority makes a false claim—and states it over and over—people can become disoriented, especially if they are predisposed to trust him and especially if they are a supporter. The bigger the lie, the greater the disorientation. Ultimately a person can begin to question their own perception of reality[...] The goal is to undermine a person's judgment and increase their reliance on the gaslighter (152-153).

Keeping Hassan's observations in mind, Trump's use of a collection of lies and conspiracies repeated tirelessly has significantly altered the conceptual realities of millions of Americans. A major component of Trump's Gaslighting messages are his attacks on the free media, the institution responsible for reporting factual information. To create an alternative reality filled with "alternative facts" and conspiracies that paint Trump as the hero in a battle of good vs. evil, Trump recognizes that he must discredit and divorce his base from news sources which contradict Trump's Gaslighting with factual reporting. This is no defense of the media as perfectly honest in all circumstances, but in general, journalistic integrity is a respected principle, whereas Trump depicts mainstream journalists as vile. As I argued in the first chapter, the authority crisis and other existing conditions leave Trump's base susceptible to be influenced by this type of messaging. Trump has enabled their established distrust of institutions, like the

media, which have traditionally checked the demagogic instincts of politicians to create these types of false narratives.

While Trump's Gaslighting has one focus on the media, respected political institutions, the scientific community, the tech industry and others have come under fire as targets of Trump's Gaslighting. Trump Gaslit his base into believing that Hillary's emails represented a much larger threat than they actually were. Similarly, Trump tried to Gaslight the base into believing that the Hunter Biden scandal threatened Chinese influence over Biden. When Trump claimed that his impeachable call with the Ukraine president was "perfect" and that the investigation was a "witch hunt," he was using Gaslighting messaging strategies. The more he repeated these claims and pretended like they were accepted as fact, the more his base lost control of the story and succumbed to Trump's use of mass confusion. In all of these cases, Trump's messaging was geared towards confusing his base into submission, thus encompassing the strategy of Gaslighting.

Rather than identifying every time Trump lied, I will analyze a handful of important Gaslighting narratives that Trump has used in his political career. One of the most important, is the belief that the "fake news" is just an arm of the Democratic party which has a radical vendetta against Trump. Trump tweets and makes remarks endlessly about "how bad" the media is for America, or how dishonest they cover the Trump movement. In all mediums, Trump relentlessly attacks the media at any chance he gets and applies his hatred of them to almost any issue. Whenever he boasts about himself, spreads conspiracies about his opponent or needs to put a spin on a current event, he follows up by saying "but you don't hear that because the Fake news won't say it." Trump repeats Gaslighting claims against the media so frequently that it is impossible to encompass all of them in the scope of this thesis. One of the most common forms

is demonizing their intents and clearly marking them as the “enemy of the people,” placing their threat to America even higher than the Democratic party:

They are going wild. The very dishonest media, the world's most dishonest people. Today I was watching [crowd chants] they're bad people, they're bad people and they're dishonest people. They don't tell the truth, they don't write the truth (Sterling Heights MI, 9/6/2016).

The Fake News Media in our Country is the real Opposition Party. It is truly the Enemy of the People! We must bring honesty back to journalism and reporting! (@realDonaldTrump, 1/7/2020).

I'm not running against Sleepy Joe Biden. He is not even a factor. Never was, remember 1% Joe? I'm running against the Radical Left, Do Nothing Democrats & their partner, the real opposition party, the Lamestream Fake News Media! They are vicious & crazy, but we will WIN! (@realDonaldTrump, 5/16/2020).

The Do Nothing Democrats and their leader, the Fake News Lamestream Media, are doing everything possible to hurt and disparage our Country. No matter what we do or say, no matter how big a win, they report that it was a loss, or not good enough. The Enemy of the People! (@realDonaldTrump 5/5/2020).

We don't have a free and fair press. Our media is not free, it's not fair. It suppresses thought, it suppresses speech, and it's become the enemy of the people. It's become the enemy of the people. It's the biggest problem we have in this country (“March to Save America”, 1/6/2021).

In these examples, Trump goes beyond just undermining the legitimacy of the media or criticizing their bias, he goes as far as to say that they are in control of the Democratic party and that they are the manifestation of the notorious deep state. In the above examples, Trump claims that the threat of the Fake News media is even more severe than that of the Radical Left.

Another hallmark Gaslighting campaign common to Trump's messaging strategy is the manufacturing of conspiracies surrounding elections. Just like the Fake News media has a vested interest in seeing Trump fail, elections have been rigged against Trump by deep state actors so their results cannot be trusted (if Trump loses). The claims are submitted with no evidence of fraud, yet they are echoed by Trump's right-wing network and emphasized to the point that his already vulnerable base comes to believe them. The pattern of Trump preemptively discrediting

elections before the outcome has been decided is so consistent that justifies the accusation of intentional strategy. By Gaslighting the legitimacy of elections, Trump leaves himself a path to continue to hold on to power in the event that he loses; after all, he predicted that the election would be stolen! Contesting elections attracts attention to Trump, and gives his base a reason to be angry and motivated to carry such energy to the next election thus keeping Trump relevant. Gaslighting election narratives, in the event of a loss election, allows Trump to remain in control of the base even if he is not in control of political office. Some of Trump's classic election Gaslights about the 2016 Republican Primary are similar to the following examples:

Based on the fraud committed by Senator Ted Cruz during the Iowa Caucus, either a new election should take place or Cruz results nullified (@realDonaldTrump, 2/3/2016).

We are now at 1001 delegates. We will win on the first ballot and are not wasting time and effort on other ballots because system is rigged! (@realDonaldTrump, 4/29/2016).

First of all, it [the Democratic Primary] was rigged, and I'm afraid the election is going to be rigged, I have to be honest. Because I think my side [the Republican Primary] was rigged –if I didn't win by massive landslides– I mean, think of what we won in New York and Indiana, California, 78 percent. That's with other people in the race (Columbus OH, 8/1/2016).

Notably, Trump frequently made allegations of voter fraud even after he had won the nomination. Likewise, this pattern was replicated in the general election. Trump began making specific grievances leading up to and even after the 2016 general election along the lines of the following statements:

There is the issue of voter fraud. Is it amazing the way they say, 'There's no voter fraud.' Folks, it's a rigged system and it's a rigged election. Believe me. According to the highly respected Pew, there are 24 million voter registrations in the United States that are either invalid or significantly inaccurate. A lot, right? Twenty four million, a lot. There are 1.8 million dead people that are registered right now to vote. And folks, folks, some of them vote (Cleveland OH, 10/22/2016).

Of course there is large scale voter fraud happening on and before election day. Why do Republican leaders deny what is going on? So naive! (@realDonaldTrump, 10/17/2016)

Serious voter fraud in Virginia, New Hampshire and California - so why isn't the media reporting on this? Serious bias - big problem! (@realDonaldTrump, 9/27/2016).

And finally, the strategy does not change much into the 2020 election, including the following examples:

We have a big enthusiasm edge, but when they throw these things in your face and the lists are inaccurate and people are dead and dogs have gotten ballots –they have– Dogs have gotten ballots and they know I'm right and everybody knows I'm right and they say I'm right behind the closed doors and it's a disgrace, what they do to our country. 80 million unsolicited ballots. People that had no idea. People that weren't going to vote in all fairness. It's really unfair because our people have enthusiasm, they're going out to vote (9/3/2020, Latrobe PA).

11,00 North Carolina residents get incorrect voter registration forms. 2000 LA County Voters received “faulty” Ballots, with NO WAY TO VOTE FOR PRESIDENT. Many others throughout USA. Here we go. This will be the most corrupt Election in American History! (@realDonaldTrump, 10/6/2020).

This will be one of the greatest fraudulent, most fraudulent elections ever because of this whole thing with... They're sending out millions and millions and millions of ballots. Where are they sending them? Who's sending them? Where are they going? Where are they coming back from? How many are fraudulent? Are they being thrown away? Are they being sold? (“Trump Gives Presidential Debate Reaction in ‘Hannity’ Exclusive”).

As is the case with all of Trump’s Gaslighting messaging strategies, the repetition of these election fraud claims (repetition being another strategy in its own right) is critical to creating the alternative reality defined by Trump. Considering Trump’s position of authority and the emotional connection he has established with his base, it is easy to conceive why these Gaslights are so easily accepted. Like many of Trump’s messaging strategies, we can also see how the messages are self-sustaining. When Trump claims that one election is fraudulent, and the Fake

News media provides evidence to the contrary, that goes on to support Trump's claims that they are out to get him, that they "fix" elections, and that they cannot be trusted.

While there are certainly other examples of Gaslighting, many of them are covered in other strategies throughout this paper. The Reflection and deflection of scandals as I will discuss in Trump's attack messaging strategies are premier examples of this. Gaslighting's wide applicability to other strategies is no coincidence as it is one of Trump's most important techniques. Trump is the mastermind of psychological manipulation, and Gaslighting is one of the key messaging strategies which has tightened the emotional connection between himself and his base. Fearmongering, my next strategy of discussion, is a targeted example of Gaslighting.

Fearmongering: *Manufacturing a crisis or threat that creates a sense of impending catastrophe against the base, for which they can only rely on the Fearmongerer to fix.*

Critical Race Theory is being forced into our children's schools, it's being imposed into workplace trainings, and it's being deployed to rip apart friends, neighbors, and families[...] Teaching this horrible doctrine to our children is a form of child abuse in the truest sense of those words. For many years now, the radicals have mistaken American's silence for weakness, but they're wrong. There is no more powerful force than a parent's love for their children, and patriotic moms and dads are going to demand that their children are no longer fed hateful lies about this country. American parents are not going to accept indoctrination in our schools, cancel culture at our work, or the repression of traditional faith, culture, and values in the public square. Not anymore (The White House, 9/4/2020).

This strategy is similar to Gaslighting in that it creates a reality defined by Trump that achieves a political goal and depend reliance on his authority. However, it veers in a different direction with the component of fear and invented enemies, which deserve their own separate analysis. Fearmongering is about creating anxieties based on a deep sense of insecurity and fright of some external threat. Gaslighting is a general strategy that pushes misinformation, but there is nothing

particularly fearful about a fraudulent election or an unfair media. Fearmongering takes it one step further than these narratives, by singling out political opponents and groups of people that put a frightening face and story behind the messaging strategies. Hassan writes: “inspiring fear of real or imagined threats overrides people’s sense of agency. It makes them susceptible to a confident authority figure who promises to keep them safe, and can make them more compliant and obedient. Fear defines Trump’s philosophy, his personality, and his presidency” (209).

Like many of Trump’s tactics, using fear as a messaging strategy creates attention and buzz surrounding his statements that keeps him in control of the news cycle. When Trump stokes the anxious fears of his base, the media is quick to try and put out the flames while incidentally just adding fuel to the fire. In addition, Fearmongering is one of the many strategies that deepens Trump’s emotional connection with his base. By creating an environment where threats both seen and unseen always have Trump supporters in their sights, the base is more inclined to shelter around Trump for protection as he becomes the only answer despite being the source for such fear. Part of this strategy is creating fear of “the other,” whether that be differences in race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, or political affiliation. This anxiety and disdain caused by Trump’s Fearmongering, deeply divides Trump’s base from other Americans. It creates the conception of a rigid and specific “American identity,” a class consciousness, that is defined by strict identity traits and affiliation with Trump.

In 2016, many of Trump’s Fearmongering messages were geared towards presenting the country as if it were in a state of disrepair. Trump made bold statements about the conditions of infrastructure, military equipment, hospitals, cities etc. to claim that the country was falling apart, both literally and metaphorically, and close to the brink of disaster. He used this claim as a basis to say that the elitist politicians were bleeding the country dry meanwhile neglecting the very infrastructure that millions of Americans had worked so hard to build. Along with critiques

on infrastructure came the proclamations of increasing homicide and drug use in the crumbling inner cities. Implied in these messages about the state of American infrastructure were that if nothing was done soon, the country would crumble away to pieces: “Our infrastructure is a disaster. It is draining our country, our roads, our tunnels, our bridges, our schools, our hospitals, everything. Our infrastructure is a disaster. This is draining us” (Greenville NC, 9/7/2016).

Trump would go as far as to compare the U.S. to that of a Third-world or war torn country:

It can't get any worse, the crime, the jobs. No jobs. No education. Worse education. More unsafe – you go to Afghanistan, right. We hear Afghanistan. I mean we have cities that are far more dangerous than Afghanistan (Miami FL, 9/16/2016).

Our airports are like from a third world country. You land at LaGuardia, you land at Kennedy, you land at LAX, you land at Newark... and you come in from Dubai and Qatar and you see these incredible — you come in from China, you see these incredible airports, and you land — we've become a third world country (“Hofstra University Presidential Debate” 9/26/2016).

Our infrastructure is like that of a third-world country. The homicide rate last year experienced the biggest, single-year increase in 45 years. Nobody tells you that. Heroin overdoses are surging and meth overdoses in Nevada (Reno NV, 10/5/2016).

In 2020, Fearmongering about infrastructure was less of a campaign issue, perhaps because Trump believed it would reflect poorly on him if it hadn't been addressed, or maybe because there were bigger fish to fry. However, we do get this somewhat comical reference to it in a Hannity interview when asked about the Green New Deal:

Our country will be a Ninth World country, not a Third World country, a Ninth World country. We won't have energies. Look at what's happening with the rolling blackouts in California? Look at where California is going to have to ration water? You know why? Because they set millions of gallons of water out to sea, out to the Pacific because they want to take care of certain little tiny fish that aren't doing very well without water to be honest with you (“Hannity with Trump call-in interview...” 10/8/2020).

These notions of impending doom are accompanied with offerings of Trump as the only solution:

“The only one to fix the infrastructure of our country is me - roads, airports, bridges. I know how

to build, pols only know how to talk!” (@realDonaldTrump 5/12/2015). Some might look at these criticisms of infrastructure as harmless and maybe even justified –some of our public works have certainly been neglected– but when Trump begins to tie “crumbling cities” with homicide, drugs and the images of disparate “third-world countries,” notions of fear well beyond the actual conditions in American cities perpetuate amongst his believers.

Trump’s Fearmongering focuses on creating the impression that America is changing for the worse, and that our way of life will no longer continue to exist if something drastic is not done. In a more deliberate focus on creating feelings of insecurity, Trump frequently strokes fears about an inadequate military like in this example from 2016: “There was a documentary recently on our jet fighters. They’re so old we can’t get parts. We get the parts from airplane graveyards and from airplane museums. We take the parts off planes that are in museums and graveyards and we put them on our jet fighters. This is not the United States of America, folks. This is not the United States” (Greenville NC, 9/7/2016). The message is that our prized infrastructure and military dominance, which once surpassed that of the rest of the world, has become a national embarrassment. In reality, the U.S. remains the wealthiest country in the world for the time being, with the largest military by tenfold, and continues to dominate the global economy. Are there infrastructural projects that are needed to revitalize major public works? Probably. But is this a symptom of becoming a “third-world” country? Obviously not. Regardless of the facts, by spreading fear about these conditions, Trump is able to manufacture an urgent crisis, which mobilizes the base in support of his efforts.

This strategy was used even more clearly on Trump’s messaging about immigrants. As I mentioned in the first chapter, declining job prospects and economic stagnation have created anxieties amongst Trump’s base. Trump scapegoated the source of these problems and worries on immigrants who he accused of entering the U.S. illegally and accepting labor positions for

cheaper wages than natural born citizens. In addition, Mexicans were accused of bringing the crime and drugs mentioned in Trump's attacks on collapsing American cities, and they were also scapegoated for "stealing" American jobs and, even worse, bringing horrendous crime:

Josh was a student in a high school. Good student, good kid, everybody loved him. He was murdered at the age of 17. He was tortured, strangled, beaten to death by the illegal immigrant and then his body was set on fire. Everybody wanted this guy out. They wanted him incarcerated. In July, right here in Pennsylvania, an illegal immigrant with a previous deportation record, horrible record, raped a young child. The illegal immigrant had been arrested for aggravated assault on numerous occasions but he was set free. He was set free. Everybody that knew him said, please, please don't set him free. He was set free by weak ineffective policy, by weak ineffective leadership. A Trump administration will end this vast nightmare of violence. (Hershey PA, 11/4/2016)

To use the citizenship status of these perpetrators as an indictment on an entire group of people is obviously unfair and inaccurate. Not only does it perpetuate negative stereotypes, but it really does not do the victims justice by using their deaths as a means to spread hatred and bigotry instead of actually addressing the issues like poverty, drug addiction and crime which contributed to their death. Still, this is the exact type of demonizing and horrific narratives, the "nightmare of violence," that Trump uses to mobilize his base out of fear.

Likewise, in October of 2018 right before the midterm elections, Trump used Fearmongering to mobilize the base when reports of a migrant caravan approaching the Southern border began to surface: "Sadly, it looks like Mexico's Police and Military are unable to stop the Caravan heading to the Southern Border of the United States. Criminals and unknown Middle Easterners are mixed in. I have alerted Border Patrol and Military that this is a National Emergency. Must change laws!" (@realDonaldTrump, 10/22/2018). In this example Trump keenly preys upon his base's distrust and fear of both Muslims and Mexican immigrants to manufacture a dangerous situation which would give his base a rallying cry. To many observers, Trump's strategy is so transparent and intellectually simple that it becomes incredibly frustrating:

Mexican criminals AND Middle Easterners... what horror! Trump escalated fears even further by describing the caravan as essentially a travelling immigrant militia group that was engulfing everything in its path: “The Caravans are made up of some very tough fighters and people. Fought back hard and viciously against Mexico at Northern Border before breaking through. Mexican soldiers hurt, were unable, or unwilling to stop Caravan. Should stop them before they reach our Border, but won’t!” (@realDonaldTrump 10/31/2018). Not only were they supposedly violent and dangerous, they were coming to invade.

KARL: *But what we see is a lot of deeply impoverished people fleeing violence, many of them women and children. You're going to send 15,000 active-duty U.S. military to –*

TRUMP: *Actually it's mostly men. Actually mostly young men. And a lot of rough people, lot of rough people, Jon. You look — and it's been well reported — it's a lot of young people, lot of young men. They are pushing the women right up to the front — not good[...]*

KARL: *But they're 900 miles away. The active duty military — you know the law. You're the president — they can't arrest people crossing the border —*

TRUMP: *Well it depends, it depends.*

KARL: *No, they're not allowed to—*

TRUMP: *National emergency covers a lot of territory. They can't invade our country. You look at that it almost looks like an invasion. It's almost does look like an invasion—*

KARL: *You think those caravans are an invasion?*

TRUMP: *I do think so. When you look at some of them, when you look at some of the people within the caravan, I think it could be considered an invasion of our country. We can't have it. We can't have it from a cost standpoint, Jon.*

KARL: *These are some of the poorest people in the world coming up here.*

TRUMP: *These are some dangerous people, some rough people* (“Interview: Jonathan Karl of ABC News Interviews Donald Trump... 10/31/2018).

In reality, the caravan that Trump so desperately tried to turn into an army, was a group of impoverished and starving asylum seekers, who were fleeing violence not creating it.

Regardless, Trump’s declaration of a national emergency and mobilization of the military further served to create the false narrative that the Southern border was under attack by a band of murdering and raping immigrants (pardon my bluntness). Trump’s description of these desperate folks is barbaric, overtly racist, and categorically untrue. The plan was obvious: create a crisis so

the base gets out and votes for Trump allies who will protect the border. He did not use this strategy covertly to persuade his base into voting during the midterms without directly stating it, instead he outwardly proclaimed the “national emergency” of the approaching caravan as a reason to vote: “Every time you see a Caravan, or people illegally coming, or attempting to come, into our Country illegally, think of and blame the Democrats for not giving us the votes to change our pathetic Immigration Laws! Remember the Midterms! So unfair to those who come in legally” (@realDonaldTrump 10/22/2018). Through this example, it is easy to see how Trump’s Fearmongering involves aspects of demonizing and animating specific enemies into Hollywood-esque plots.

In other circumstances, Trump uses Fearmongering about political opponents to create fear surrounding false narratives about their intentions or capabilities. This strategy is often closely related to messaging surrounding the “culture war” between the liberal coasts and the conservative center of America. Trump uses fear to create a derogatory image of the type of society we would be if the Democratic party’s agenda were to succeed. In Trump’s Fearmongering, this manifests itself as liberal “cancel culture” encroaching on “true American” beliefs. He had this to say about a future with Joe Biden as the president: “Under Biden, there will be no school, no graduations, no weddings, no Thanksgiving, no Easter, no Christmas, no 4th of July. No nothing” (Butler PA, 10/31/2020). It sounds like something that the Burgermeister Meisterburger would impose from the 70’s children’s special *Santa Claus is Comin’ to Town*. In fact, he actually does give himself the role of the savior of Christmas:

And the Christmas season will be canceled. Look, remember I said we're going to bring back Christmas? The name. Remember? We brought it back. Remember? I used to go around saying, "We will bring..." Because I saw these big department stores. They thought it was politically correct. So they'd say, 'Have a great season.' I say, 'No, I don't want to have a great season. I want to say Merry Christmas. Say Merry Christmas.' Now, they're all saying Merry Christmas (Carson City NV, 10/18/2020).

While most of the base probably digests this as an exaggeration, the repetition of absurd statements like this still has the effect to create the fear that liberals will bring radical change that is incompatible with conservative beliefs. This strategy becomes more tangible when Trump incorporates Fearmongering about things like BLM and police reform:

But for the entire summer, Biden was silent as far left rioters viciously attacked law enforcement in Democrat run cities all, burned down businesses, terrorized civilians, and just recently marched through the streets chanting, "Death to America." This is what we have. Death to America (Latrobe PA, 9/3/2020).

Sleepy Joe Biden and his supporters continue their dangerous war on the police. They're putting the lives of our brave officers directly in harm's way. At his convention, he never even mentioned the words, 'law and order,' never mentioned them once (Henderson NV, 9/13/2020).

The left wing mobs have torn down statues of our founders, desecrated our memorials, and carried out a campaign of violence and anarchy. Far left demonstrators have chanted the words, 'America was never great.' The Left has launched a vicious and violent assault on law enforcement, the universal symbol of the rule of law in America. These radicals have been aided and abetted by liberal politicians, establishment, media, and even large corporations. Whether it is the mob on the street or the cancel culture in the boardroom, the goal is the same: to silence dissent, to scare you out of speaking the truth, and to bully Americans into abandoning their values, their heritage, and their very way of life.

BLM protests created the perfect scenario for Trump to capitalize on his Fearmongering strategy. Trump understood that a major portion of base was inherently threatened by Black people given their white supremacist ideologies. What better way to distract from his poor performance on COVID-19 than to rally his base around fear of the mysteries "ANTIFA" and their vague association to Black Lives Matter? Trump's antagonizing of race relations and Dog Whistling by Fearmongering his base meanwhile instigating the left represents the epitome of Trump's instincts for psychological manipulation. Ultimately, Trump uses Fearmongering messaging strategies to create false narratives which are accepted as truth by his feverishly loyal base.

Reflection: *Accusing opponents of doing reprehensible things that the Reflector himself does, and projecting his own failures, scandals, or shortcomings on to political opponents.*

I said, 'How's it going? Everything good? Are you struggling?' They said, 'Sir, Sleepy Joe Biden did an ad that you,' me, 'that you closed football.' I said, 'What do you mean I closed? I didn't close.' The guy did an ad. It's called disinformation. It's called the opposite of what the fact is (Toledo OH, 9/20/2020).

This strategy serves two purposes; 1) to discredit opponents by creating false narratives about them and 2) to distract from his own failures himself by forcing his opponents to defend against the same accusations that he must defend himself against. By reflecting behaviors or actions that he is accused of on to political opponents, Trump levels a playing field which is generally tilted against him in terms of credibility and fitness for office. Hassan gives another definition of the phenomenon, referred to by the psychological behavior of “projection,” and uses Trump’s attacks on women which he projects on to Bill Clinton as an example:

Projection is a powerful psychological defense mechanism, one that is a hallmark of malignant narcissism. But it is also an incredibly powerful technique of psychological manipulation[...] Projection is Trump’s consistent response to criticism. When he was accused of being misogynistic, he immediately defended himself, claiming no one respects women more than him. He then deflected the accusation, accusing Bill Clinton of abusing women. ‘There’s never been anybody in the history of politics in this nation that’s been so abusive to women. So you can say any way you want to say it, but Bill Clinton was abusive to women. Hillary Clinton attacked those same women and attacked them viciously’ (249-250).¹³

¹³ While Hassan and I both agree on the general mechanics of Projection/Reflection, and it is to him that I owe my interest to this particular strategy, our approaches to the usage and reason behind its use are distinct. First, I disagree with the classification of “projection” because it misses an important piece of my analysis. Trump uses this... strategy to *reflect* criticisms against him. He isn’t inventing behaviors for his opponents (although he does do this and it falls under other strategies); he is creating an excuse for *his own* behavior by specifically reflecting actual criticisms, not made up conspiracies. In this way, Trump doesn’t necessarily control this narrative, because its effectiveness is in reflecting what he *is actually criticized for*... otherwise we are just talking about lying. Projection is a one-sided action. The two-sided act, criticism *then* reflection, is important to my understanding of the strategy. Trump may preemptively reflect on to an opponent before a certain criticism has been leveraged against him, but he is still doing this as a defense measure rather than an offensive measure. Secondly, Hassan approaches Trump’s projection/reflection from a psychological diagnostic perspective, identifying it as a defense mechanism implicating Trump as a malignant narcissist. The term “projection” is used to identify a well researched psychological behavior. My analysis is different because I believe that Reflection is more of a savvy political messaging strategy than an inherent psychological trait.

Trump has little relevant experience to be president and is arguably one of the most corrupt politicians in the history of the country: he has been impeached twice and accused across multiple states for crimes varying from tax fraud to sexual assault. And his conduct in office? In the words of David Frum, author of *Trumpocracy*, “Trump tangled government, family, and business in the style of an authoritarian Third World kleptocrat” and “costly as the Trump family was to the presidency, the presidency was correspondingly lucrative to the Trump family” (101-111). Trump’s nepotism, lavish lifestyle and exploitation of the presidency to benefit his Trump brand business dealings, have left a paper trail suggesting abuse of power on an unprecedented scale, even though he has yet to be convicted of a crime.

Beyond just his conduct during his presidency, Trump has been implicated in scandal after scandal. In 2016 there was the Hollywood Access tape followed by numerous women coming forward with sexual assault allegations, which was then followed up by the 2018 revelation of the hush money payments paid to porn actress Stormy Daniels. In another instance, Trump was recorded by Bob Woodward admitting to intentionally downplaying the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Racist, xenophobic and misogynistic comments have had their time in the limelight as well. Most recently was Trump’s attempt to overthrow the results of a legitimate election, including when he was recorded attempting to pressure the Georgia Attorney General to “find” the necessary votes for him to win the state, which culminated with his rhetoric inspiring a terrorist attack at the Capitol on Jan. 6th.

The list of Trump scandals are so long that I could write an entirely separate thesis on them alone. The relevance to my topic is that with such a long list of dirty laundry, the Reflection strategy serves to give Trump a moral equivalency to his, generally, less corrupt and more capable opponents. By projecting traits like corruption, dishonesty, deceit, ill-temperament, and unfitness for office among many others, Trump makes his opponents defend themselves on the

same things that he is accused of. In the eyes of his base, this creates the psychological impression that Trump is just as bad or just as good as everyone else. Secondly, by making these claims against his opponents, Trump appears to his base as the whistleblower, which has the effects not only distracting from his own shortcomings, but also making himself seem morally opposed and therefore incapable of doing the things he accuses others of doing.

While Trump's use of Reflection is often related to his high profile scandals, they are not always associated with some major controversy and may be just simple jabs that insult his opponent and distract Trump's own shortcomings. I will first look at some of Trump's most basic examples of Reflection in terms of criticizing his opponents for less controversial or scandalous claims. For example, Trump occasionally declared that Hillary was not focused on policy: "And by the way, did you ever notice, she never talks about policy, she never talks about illegal immigration, she never talks about anything. All she does is a total hit job on Donald Trump. She makes up terms, right? She makes up terms" (Greenville NC, 9//72016). Anyone who watched a Hillary Clinton speech in 2016 would probably respond that not only did Hillary talk about policy, she did so to the extent that it seriously detracted from the momentum of the movement and was actually a significant downfall of the campaign. The Hillary campaign was widely viewed as being overly analytical and policy driven as opposed to Trump's brash style, a classic trait of recent Democratic presidential campaigns. Rick Wilson comments on this phenomenon: "We've seen it over and over again—a top-down, rigid ideological checklist of programmatic messages that sound like a focus group at a Democratic Socialist Alliance meeting in Burlington, Vermont, shocks Democratic candidates by exploding in their faces, because the ideas are at odds with the way Americans speak, think, and live" (91). Trump on the other hand rarely ever discusses actual policy or plans and notoriously delivers ideological "shiny-objects" as opposed to coordinated and calculated policy initiatives. "Building a wall" is not a plan. "Creating a

Muslim database” is not a plan. “Securing the border” is not a plan. “Repealing and replacing” Obamacare is not a plan. “Restoring patriotic education” is not a plan. All of these repetitive talking points satisfy the basic ideological agendas of his base, but neglect to provide the framework to entail *how* he will achieve these goals. Still, Trump reflected this lack of policy to Hillary, even though it was not grounded in any reality. The base, not familiar with Clinton’s rallies or probably her platform at all outside of what is reported by Trump and Fox News, accepts this as fact and does not demand any actual firm policy from Trump because they believed Clinton didn’t have any either.

Staying in 2016, Trump made a huge emphasis of Hillary’s “basket of deplorables” comment in referencing Trump’s supporters. Trump made the comment more than just an offense to conservative voter, going as far as to insinuate that it was an attack on their voting rights: “Clinton was using a very deliberate page from the Democratic Playbook – smearing someone with one of those names in order to scare them out of voting for change. She just took it to a whole new level by applying it to tens of millions of people. She used these vile words in order to bully and intimidate honest citizens out of seeking government reform” (Asheville NC, 9/12/2016). This may sound familiar. Where do I remember hearing about the “dangerous” and un-American “radical” left?: “You don’t hand matches to an arsonist, and you don’t give power to an angry left-wing mob. Democrats have become too EXTREME and TOO DANGEROUS to govern. Republicans believe in the rule of law - not the rule of the mob. VOTE REPUBLICAN!” (@realdonaldtrump, 10/6/2018). And of course Trump is not exempt from intimidation of the left; in the first presidential debate of 2020 he urged his supporters to “watch [the polls] very closely” for evidence of voter fraud. In this case, Trump used Reflection about Hillary’s deplorables comment to respond to accusations that he is divisive and neglects more than half of the American electorate. Yes, Hillary made a regrettable mistake in calling Trump supporters a

basket of deplorables to describe what, at the time, was roughly 63 million Americans. But Trump emphasized this mistake (a strategy called Bulldogging which I will examine in the next category) to the extent that one would think she had used some sort of racial slur. All the while, Trump has used divisive and offensive language nonchalantly. This use of Reflection was most likely a reach to the undecided or moderate voter, to put Trump's divisive foul language and behavior on the same level as Clinton's.

Some of Trump's Reflection messaging on Clinton's time as secretary of state, was preemptive for his own time in office. Frequently, Trump criticised Hillary for "breaking the law and putting her government office up for sale" whereas Trump was a "successful private business person, following the law all the way" (Pueblo, CO 10/3/2016). Trump also claimed that Hillary was "the most corrupt person to ever run for the presidency of the United States. #DrainTheSwamp" (@realdonaldtrump, 10/18/2016). Trump said similar things on the 2020 campaign trail: "These corrupt forces, they don't see our nation as a protector of its citizens, but as a vehicle for personal profit and power at your expense," along with, "Joe Biden is and always has been a corrupt politician. He always has been. And as far as I'm concerned, the Biden family is a criminal enterprise" (North Carolina 10/15/2020, Carson NV 10/18/2020, "Final Presidential Debate" NBC News). While I am no lawyer, Trump's well documented business career of shady projects like Trump University and his notoriously bankrupt business deals, combined with the ongoing investigations into his finances, lead me to believe that Trump was not really "following the law all the way." Additionally, while in office, Trump sold the American presidency unlike any president in history. Once again I will return to Frum's account of Trump's plunder:

The Trump hotel in Washington, DC, collected \$4.1 million more than projected in the first four months of that year [2017][...] Foreign governments, US corporations, and Trump's own super PAC made the Trump hotel their first choice of venue[...] The Republican National Committee, Trump's 2020 reelection effort, the Republican Governors Association, and other GOP campaigns and

committees together spent about \$1.3 million at Trump properties in the first half of 2017 (114-115).

Later, Frum gives the following specific accounts of Trump's potential misuse of political office:

Through the transition period, President-Elect Trump and his family used their new position to recognize old business associates and seek new ones. On November 14, 2016, Trump spoke for fifteen minutes to the president of Argentina, Mauricio Macri. According to reports in the Argentine media, Trump mentioned that a Trump-licensed building in Buenos Aires was stalled in the permitting process. The next day, Trump's local partners triumphantly announced that the building was moving forward (123).

On November 18, 2016, President-Elect Trump would meet with Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe, at Trump Tower. Photographs of the encounter between the two leaders showed Trump's daughter Ivanka in attendance. Jared Kushner joined the group as well. At the time of the meeting, Ivanka Trump was in negotiations to license her clothing brand to a big Japanese retailer. That retailer was owned by a Japanese bank, which was in turn wholly owned by the Japanese government (124).

Days before the 2016 election, the brutal president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, named the developer of Manila's Trump-branded property as his special envoy to the United States. Duterte would collect his reward in the form of a flattering phone call from President Trump on April 29, 2017 (125).

The government of China approved thirty-eight Trump trademarks in the single month of March 2017. By the end of May, China had granted the president a total of seventy-seven, plus a spate more for his daughter Ivanka. The Trump Organization had applied for these marks only a year earlier (127).

Ultimately, Trump's criticisms of Hillary "selling" her office as secretary of state and Joe Biden's "corrupt" political career was just a Reflection messaging strategy used to provide cover fire for himself so that he could take advantage of the presidency for his own financial benefit.

Other uses of Reflection seem to serve as defensive messaging strategies for specific issues or scandals as opposed to general agendas mentioned so far. For example, Trump faced major criticism in regard to his entanglements with, and seemingly obedience to, Russian President Vladimir Putin. Namely, the 2016 election interference at the hands of the Russian government in coordination with the Trump campaign, culminating in the Mueller investigation

into Trump and his associates. In addition, other scandals like Trump's choice not to confront Russian's alleged bounties on American soldiers, which Trump called "fake news" despite legitimate evidence to the contrary, forced Trump to defend criticisms of his relationship with the Russians. To detract from this narrative, Trump reflected similar scandals on Joe Biden, accusing him of foreign influence through improper business deals in both the Ukraine and China: "He cheered the rise of China as a positive development for America and the entire world. Remember that? Now he's trying to say, 'Well I can be tough on China too.' No he can't. China owns him. China owns Sleepy Joe" (Latrobe PA, 9/3/2020).

This reflected narrative was often suited for Twitter as he was able to broadcast dozens of accusatory tweets with no evidence that implicated Biden in some major scandal. Trump tweeted things like: "China wants Sleepy Joe sooo badly. They want all of those billions of dollars that they have been paying to the U.S. back, and much more. Joe is an easy mark, their DREAM CANDIDATE!" and "Joe Biden is a reclamation project. Some things are just not salvageable. China and other countries that ripped us off for years are begging for him. He deserted our military, our law enforcement and our healthcare" (@realDonaldTrump, 4/18/2020, 7/6/2020).

This strategy was repeated in the first debate: "Joe got \$3.5 million from Russia and it came through Putin, because he was very friendly with the former mayor of Moscow and it was the mayor of Moscow's wife. And you [Joe Biden] got \$3.5 million. Your family got \$3.5 million. And someday you're going to have to explain, why did you get three and a half? I never got any money from Russia. I don't get money from Russia" ("Final Presidential Debate," NBC). The irony in Trump criticising Biden's foreign influence, "desertion" of American soldiers, and even his relationship with Russia, is not an oversight; it is intentional psychological deception that forces Biden to defend himself in the same manner in which Trump does. The only

difference being Trump's "evidence" against his opponent is categorically disproven, yet Trump's base presumes Biden to be guilty on the mere accusation of wrongdoing.

Not convinced? A few more examples will demonstrate this pattern even clearer. Related to issues surrounding accusations of Trump's illegal foreign activity, Trump's first impeachment was in regards to evidence that Trump used congressionally approved military aid for the purpose of extorting the Ukrainian president into investigating Joe Biden. At the center of the trial was the principle of *quid pro quo* and whether or not Trump was guilty of it in his phone call with the Ukrainian President. The impeachment trial dominated headlines prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, and Trump was forced to defend himself and his phone call; commonly tweeting things like "No quid pro quo", "my phone call was PERFECT", and "READ THE TRANSCRIPT" (@realDonaldTrump). Predictably, Trump made his best effort to back Joe Biden into a similar corner with a debunked conspiracy theory about Hunter Biden in Ukraine:

And he [Hunter] got an upfront payment of \$3 million from Ukraine. This is because of his great knowledge of energy, but he had none. They said, 'Do you know anything about energy?' 'No, I don't happen to know anything.' Oh. And then the father [Joe Biden] called for the prosecutor, 'Get him out or you're not getting your billion dollars from the United States.' Whoa. They got him out and here's your billion. That's not a quid pro quo. Right? (Middletown PA, 9/26/2020).

In these quotations, Trump openly attempts to equate the speculative evidence about the Bidens, essentially fabricated by the Trump campaign, to the transcript and impeachment trial that Trump was constantly defending. He uses this same Reflection messaging in other examples as well:

Not once have I heard the fake news, not once have I heard them say, 'A billion dollars. If you don't change that prosecutor, you're not getting the billion dollars.' And then he goes, 'Whoa, the prosecutor was changed.' The prosecutor against his son. Not once have I heard them talking about that question. Can you imagine if we did that? (Orlando FL, 10/12/2020).

TRUMP: *It's a very important issue to find out whether or not a man is corrupt, who's running for president. Who's accepted money from China, and from Ukraine, and from Russia. Yeah, I think that's an important issue.*

STAHL: *All these things have been investigated and discredited.*

TRUMP: *It's incredible the way you can try and say this and sit there and look me in the eye and say it. He accepted money, his family, from Russia, from Ukraine, from China and from other places. His brother who didn't have experience became a big builder in Iraq, without experience. Take a look at what's going on, Leslie. And then you say that shouldn't be discussed? It's the biggest scandal out there, Leslie.*

STAHL: *And you think it's the biggest issue to campaign on?*

TRUMP: *I think it's one of the biggest scandals I've ever seen[...]* (“Donald Trump Leaked 60 Minutes...”).

Ultimately, Trump’s attempts to force Joe Biden to defend against accusations of quid pro quo, foreign influence and general corruption, is an excellent summation of the Reflection strategy. By forcing opponents to answer the same allegations as himself, Trump is able to equate his own actions with those of his opponents. This is both an attack and a defense, and has served Trump by generating lots of positive/negative media attention and generating false narratives that his opponents are often unable to dodge.

While this concludes the general and most common uses of Reflection messaging, one particular example sticks out that deserves its own separate conversation. On a more sinister level, one could look at numerous Trump statements in his political history in context with the January 6th Capitol terrorist attack, to say that Trump used a Reflection messaging strategy to help incite his base into believing false claims that the election was fraudulent. Trump has maintained a discredited conspiracy claim that the Obama administration and Democrats spied on his campaign. He has equated these accusations into evidence of a failed insurrection: “This is treason. We caught them trying to take down a duly elected administration/president” (“Hannity with Trump call-in Interview”). In another example: “I wonder if it would have been different. We caught them spying on our campaign. We caught them trying to take out a duly elected President of the United States. That's treason. That's treason. We caught them. And someday, maybe something's going to be done about it, too. You know? Maybe. Boy, oh boy, oh boy” (Traverse City MI, 11/2/2020). In this statement, Trump is ominous threatening that someday, his

enemies will pay for going against him. To prepare the groundwork, Black Lives Matter protesters were also accused of being treasonous: “Black Lives Matter leader states, ‘If U.S. doesn’t give us what we want, then we will burn down this system and replace it’. This is Treason, Sedition, Insurrection!” (@realdonaldtrump, 6/25/2020). My personal favorite from this archetype is from the same 2020 interview with Fox news host Jeanine Pirro:

PIRRO: *What are you going to do ... Let's say there are threats, they say that they're going to threaten riots if they lose on Election Night, assuming we get a winner on Election Night. What are you going to do?*

TRUMP: *We'll put them down very quickly if they do that.*

PIRRO: *How are you going to do that?*

TRUMP: *We have the right to do that, we have the power to do that if we want. Look, it's called insurrection. We just send them in and we do it very easy. I mean it's very easy. I'd rather not do that because there's no reason for it but if we had to we'd do that and put it down within minutes, within minutes. Minneapolis, they were having problems. We sent in the National Guard within a half an hour. That was the end of the problem. It all went away (“President Trump sits down with Judge...”).*

The irony is so absurd that it almost is difficult to believe. As we all know, Trump not only incited, applauded and cajoled the terrorists on Jan. 6th, but he also delayed approving the National Guard to be allowed to rectify the situation. Here, just months before Trump-inspired insurrectionists stormed the Capitol, Trump boasted about how quickly he would respond to an insurrectionist assault to protest the results of an election. Irony aside, this is an example of the Reflection strategy because the message is that Trump is anti-insurrection and pro-rule of law when in fact he enabled an insurrectionist riot against the certification of the election. By touting this type of anti-insurrectionist rhetoric, Trump creates the impression that he is totally against anti-government riots and that he would do anything to stop them. With this sewed in the minds of the base, when Trump called on them to “fight” against “a crooked vicious foe, the Radical Left Democrats,” they perceived it to be a legitimate call to arms for the sanctity of the nation rather than an insurrection (@realdonaldtrump, 12/24/2020).

Unlike the other examples of Reflection, the use of this strategy in the lead up to the Jan. 6th attack was preemptive rather than reactionary. By vehemently opposing insurrection and political violence from opponents, accusing others of treason and attempted coups, and by boasting about the force he **would** use against rioters in the event of an insurrection, Trump convinced his base that he would never condone such a thing. When he called them to rise up, they interpreted the perceived threat to be so severe that even the “anti-insurrectionist” Trump was calling for action. The attack on the Capitol was not viewed by the base to be treasonous, it was a fight for the sanctity of the nation and getting rid of the satanic Democrats. The main takeaway, and what sets this form of Reflection different from the others, is that by reflecting the narrative of treason and insurrection on to political opponents, Trump was able to prime his base to commit their own insurrection.

Cascading:¹⁴ *The creation and constant maintenance of a stream of information, both negative and positive, truths and falsehoods, relevant and irrelevant, in order to avoid being stuck to one issue or scandal and to create a constant stream of information that desensitizes everyone to the Cascader’s actions.*

I mean, I had to devote a lot of time to a fake impeachment. Now you see how fake the impeachment was. What about Biden's son getting three and a half million dollars from the wife of the mayor of Moscow? And then they say, "Donald Trump is dealing with Russia. Donald Trump." I never even made a call. "Donald Trump is dealing." This guy got three and a half million dollars from the wife of the mayor of Moscow. What the hell was that for? Probably his great experience in energy, but he didn't have that. And then it revealed yesterday that he got a lot more money from China than we thought and he got a lot more money, right? It's just all stuff. It's like perfect. It's like unbelievable (Middletown PA, 9/26/2020).

¹⁴ I first encountered this term “Cascading” as a label to Trump’s constant information stream in lectures from Professor Clifford Brown, Political Science Department, Union College.

This is the *no publicity is bad publicity* strategy of politicking. Trump generates a non-stop stream of information that numbs both friends and foes to his controversies. The introductory quote I provided here does not do the strategy justice; it is the frequency in which Trump generates headlines, not the content, that makes this strategy so effective. However, I found the last line “It’s just all stuff. It’s like perfect” to be a great representation of Trump’s cascading. By keeping his name in the headlines with controversial statements, Trump controls the national narrative by diminishing the amount of visibility his opponents can grab and allowing Trump to set the agenda on which issues matter to Americans. Wilson writes:

Trump fills the political ether with a constant background radiation of tweeting, shit-talking, madness, and lies, using it to corrode both his political and his media opponents. He knows that the media and political ecosystem is trained and primed for one shitstorm to devolve into another shitstorm at his hands, feeding the ravenous but shallow attention economy with wave after wave of tweets and clicks (281).

Trump is both so controversial and so popular that all of his remarks make for must see news, and are covered on networks across the political aisle. The Cascading strategy leverages this paparazzi effect to serve a political motive: distracting from Trump’s many weaknesses, crimes and failures. In a more long term perspective, Cascading desensitizes the general public to Trump controversies; his supporters and moderates just assume it's another Democrat attempt to discredit Trump, and his opponents slowly lose their energy and motivation to create an uproar from news about Trump after each successive scandal fails to bring him down or affect his popularity. Cascading is unique to most other strategies listed in my analysis because its use is less about content and more about timing and procedure. While Cascading does not necessarily entail *creating* false narratives, his constant stream of information desensitizes his base to critical thinking and allows Trump to *maintain and perpetuate* false narratives which demands that it belongs in this category.

In general, this strategy is well-suited to defend against attacks from unfriendly media: Trump essentially renders their reporting obsolete by completely controlling the national narrative and forcing them to jump from one issue to another before they can fully expose him on one particular topic. This strategy exhausts opponents because they cannot stick him to one issue, and the moment they do, he has already tweeted a falsehood or posed with a bible in the middle of a BLM protest. Cascading is a hallmark of Trump's political TV personality, and frustrates and Democrat sponsored attempts scandalize Trump.

The nuance of this strategy makes it particularly difficult to explain using the conventional methods I have been using so far in this paper. While most Trump strategies can be sampled and identified using anecdotal evidence, the Cascading strategy requires careful analysis of patterns across multiple topics in their relation to specific allegations against Trump. In this section, I will incorporate existing research from reputable sources that have studied the ability of Trump to generate news stories that distract from negative publicity. One of the most infamous examples of this is the Access Hollywood tape released on October 7th 2016, which just so happened to coincide with the wikileaks drop of the John Podesta emails. The following day after the tape, Trump apologized. The next day, October 9th, he was back focused on Hillary's emails with the following tweets among a string of others:

Basically nothing Hillary has said about her secret server has been true.
#CrookedHillary (@realdonaldtrump, 10/9/2016)

Hillary's 33,000 deleted emails about her daughter's wedding. That's a lot of wedding emails. #debate (@realdonaldtrump, 10/9/2016)

Many believed that Trump would be hard pressed to defend himself for his comments in the upcoming presidential debate which took place two days after the tape's release. In the debate itself Trump quickly brushed off criticism from the moderators, citing Bill Clinton's scandal as "actions" while his was just "words." When Hillary accused Trump of never apologizing,

including for the “racist lie that President Obama was not born in the United States of America,” she concluded that “He [Trump] owes the president an apology, he owes our country an apology” (“October 9, 2016 Presidential Debate...”). Hillary had given Trump a softball; he implemented the Reflection strategy, which I have already discussed, to claim that it was actually *Hillary* who owed Obama an apology for the birther hoax because *Hillary’s* campaign had started the claim, Trump had just reported it. Trump then went in to a Cascading crusade about the emails:

But when you talk about apology, I think the one that you should really be apologizing for and the thing that you should be apologizing for are the 33,000 e-mails that you deleted, and that you acid washed, and then the two boxes of e-mails and other things last week that were taken from an office and are now missing. And I’ll tell you what. I didn’t think I’d say this, but I’m going to say it, and I hate to say it. But if I win, I am going to instruct my attorney general to get a special prosecutor to look into your situation, because there has never been so many lies, so much deception. There has never been anything like it, and we’re going to have a special prosecutor[...]. When I speak, I go out and speak, the people of this country are furious. In my opinion, the people that have been long-term workers at the FBI are furious. There has never been anything like this, where e-mails—and you get a subpoena, you get a subpoena, and after getting the subpoena, you delete 33,000 e-mails, and then you acid wash them or bleach them, as you would say, very expensive process. So we’re going to get a special prosecutor, and we’re going to look into it, because you know what? People have been—their lives have been destroyed for doing one-fifth of what you’ve done. And it’s a disgrace. And honestly, you ought to be ashamed of yourself (“October 9, Presidential Debate...”).

In hindsight the strategy seems overly simple and obvious; distract, make up lies about Hillary and divert as much attention from Hollywood Access as possible. Given this simplicity, shouldn’t we expect the general public to see right through it? Unfortunately no. My own analysis of Google search trends provides some preliminary evidence that Trump’s diversion tactics were widely successful. Using the Google Trends feature in *Figure 6*, I am able to

demonstrate the most searched topics for the month of October 2016 in which both the wikileaks emails, initiated by Roger Stone, and the Hollywood Access tape were released:¹⁵

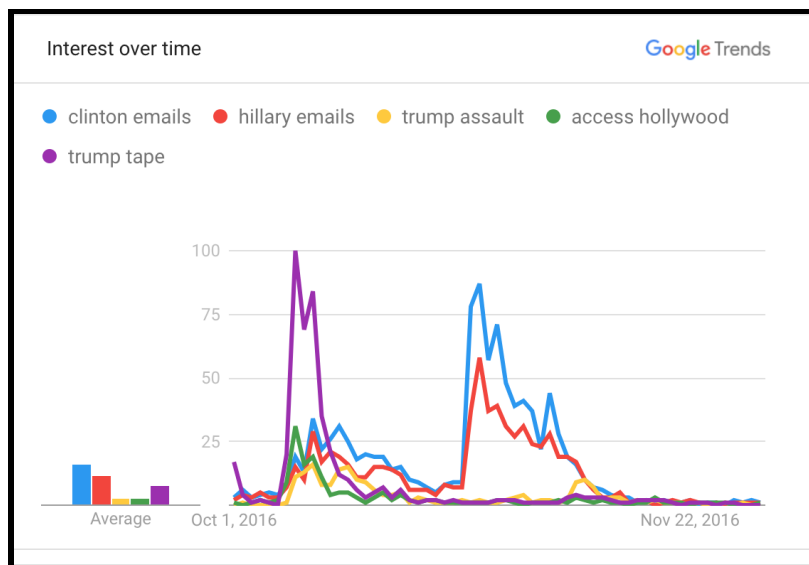


Figure 6

The chart in *Figure 6* demonstrates that while searches for “trump tape” (purple) dominated google’s browsers for the day-of and few days immediately following the release of the Hollywood Access tape, by October 12th (a mere five days after it’s release) searches for “clinton emails” (blue) became the most popular and remained so for the rest of the month. Of course some of this is due to the wikileaks drop of 20,000 emails on Oct. 20th, but it is important to note that Hillary’s emails were the most searched topic *prior* to Oct. 20th and remained so afterwards, indicating that Trump was stringing the narrative along throughout October and seriously detracting from the coverage of the damaging tape. And after the Oct. 20th wikileaks drop, searches for “trump tape” were nothing compared to the interest Hillary’s scandal received (keep in mind Hillary’s “scandal” was essentially manufactured by the Trump campaign). Obviously I am no statistician and there are much larger trends besides google searches which

¹⁵ According to Google: “Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term.”

may have indicated the national narrative at the time. Additionally, my data may not encompass the correct search terms which would paint a different picture. My evidence is circumstantial at best, but it at least entertains the *possibility* that Cascading is a legitimate Trump messaging strategy and that it had a tangible impact on getting attention off of himself. If Google Trends analysis held true across other platforms, then the impact of Trump's Cascading is significant.

Other examples also indicate success in Trump's ability to manipulate the media. Lewandowsky offers another example using Google Trends to point to Trump's success diverting attention from his own actions:

President Trump unleashed a Twitter tirade against a Broadway production of Hamilton after its cast read an open letter at the end of a show, pleading for respect of a 'diverse America.' This Twitter event coincided with the revelation that President Trump had agreed to a \$25 million fraud settlement of three lawsuits targeting his (now defunct) Trump University[...] The success of this distraction can be illustrated by comparing the Google search trends for the two search terms 'Trump University settlement' and 'Trump Hamilton' [Figure 7]. It is clear from the figure that the court settlement was of considerably less interest to the public than the Twitter event relating to a Broadway play (Lewandowsky et. al., *Using the President's Tweets...*, 362).¹⁶

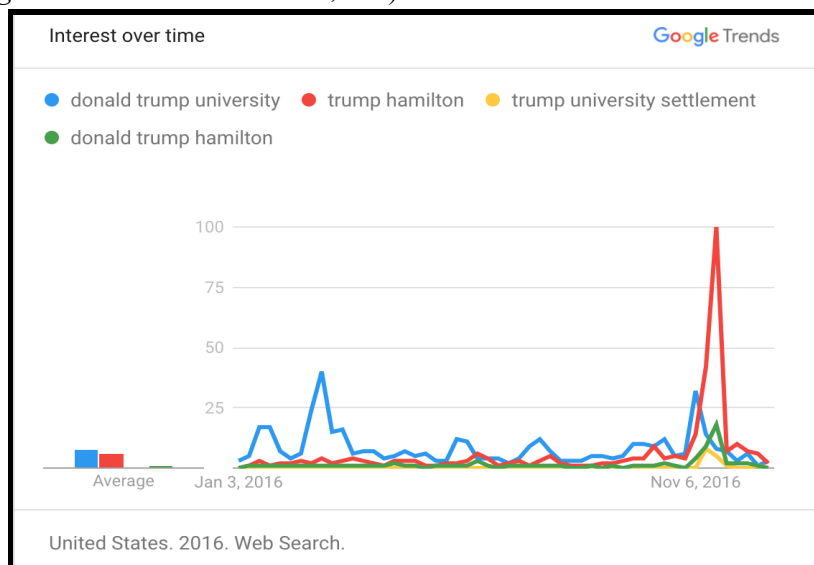


Figure 7 (Lewandowsky et. al., *Using the President's Tweets...*, 362)

¹⁶ I have instituted my own chart from the Google Trends feature, adding new terms and a more succinct timeline, rather than use the original one from the article which just included two terms and a different timeline.

Again, I am skeptical of this data but it suggests an interesting pattern. It is important to note that the rise in searches for Trump's reaction to the Broadway situation *after* he escalated it on twitter. The blue line represents searches for what seem to be related to the Trump University settlement, which spiked right before Trump talked about Hamilton on twitter and right before a corresponding hike in searches on that topic. Still, simply adding "Trump university" to the search instead of "Donald Trump university" alters the graph so that the former dominates all other searches. Were people searching for where Trump had gone to college or were they looking for his fraudulent Trump University endeavor? We see how this data is imperfect and can be viewed in different ways to serve a certain purpose.

The same authors cited above would later revisit their 2017 anecdotal claim about Trump's use of Cascading, in a 2020 study that analyzed Trump's tweets as a means to manipulate and suppress media attention on negative topics.¹⁷ While the first two examples, the wikileaks drop and the Broadway tweets, were one-shot diversions, Trump employs Cascading similar to Gaslighting; a long term means to desensitize audiences to his antics. This 2020 study tested the hypothesis that Trump deliberately uses Twitter to divert attention from negative news, positing that "any increase in harmful media coverage may be followed by increased diversionary Twitter activity." Likewise, the study analyzed the success of the diversion based on whether or not it had the outcome of "depress[ing] subsequent media coverage of the harmful topic" (Lewandowsky et. al. *Using the President's Tweets...*). To do so, the study focused on the Mueller investigation as a particularly harmful negative message that threatened Trump's image and revealed damaging information about his campaign's efforts to collude with the Russians. Additionally, many of Trump's associates were being indicted on the probe which allowed for

¹⁷ I decided to keep the "Cascading" label because diversion implies that Trump is offering a specific story to distract from negative attention. In my view, Trump strings together several stories on a range of topics to create a cascade of information, rather than a singular diversion.

media coverage to continually pick up on a new story. The study looked at the first 731 days of Trump's presidency using his tweets, all *New York Times* coverage, and all ABC *World Evening News* coverage. The research compared both the timing and content of Trump's tweets to the timing and content of the news sources and discovered the following results:

We find that increased media coverage of the Mueller investigation is immediately followed by Trump tweeting increasingly about unrelated issues. This increased activity, in turn, is followed by a reduction in coverage of the Mueller investigation—a finding that is consistent with the hypothesis that President Trump's tweets may also successfully divert the media from topics that he considers threatening. The pattern is absent in placebo analyses involving Brexit coverage and several other topics that do not present a political risk to the president[...] (Lewandowsky et. al., *Beyond Misinformation*).

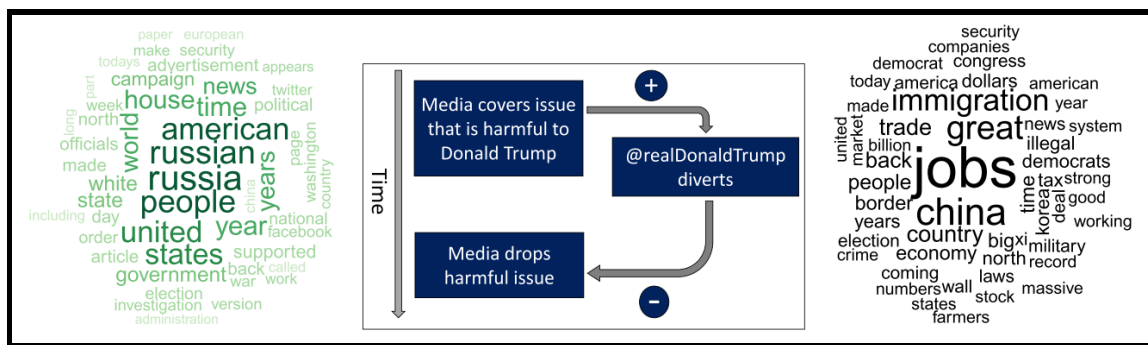


Figure 8 (Lewandowsky et. al.).

It is notable in this context that a recent content analysis of Donald Trump's tweets identified substantial linguistic differences between factually correct and incorrect tweets, permitting out-of-sample classifications with 73% accuracy.^[18] The existence of linguistic markers for factually incorrect tweets makes it less likely that those tweets represent random errors and suggests that they may be crafted more systematically (Lewandowsky et. al., *Beyond Misinformation*).

The results statistically demonstrate that there is an observable relationship between negative news about Trump (centered around the Mueller investigation) and Trump releasing Cascading tweets which include keywords unrelated to the Mueller investigation. This pattern does not repeat itself with other major news events that are neutral to Trump, like Brexit, or even non-newsworthy events. This seems to indicate that the pattern is intentional or at least

¹⁸ Van Der Zee et. al.

instinctual for Trump. Secondly, Trump's cascades are an effective tactic; the study concludes that both news organizations' negative news coverage on the Mueller investigation *decreased* following Trump's use of Cascading tweets. Given the fact that both news sources politically oppose Trump and outwardly vow to report accurately on his misgivings, it is unlikely that these decreases in coverage are intentional, rather they are caused by Trump's diversion to other topics which the media outlets are inclined to cover.

Empirical evidence aside, political commentators unanimously agree that Trump has a remarkable knack for escaping controversy after controversy with his support intact. Is this a representation of the deep emotional connection with his base? Or can it be attributed to Trump's use of Cascading as messaging strategy which, at least in the case of the Mueller investigation, significantly decreased negative coverage against him? Probably a symptom of both. One point worth emphasizing on this topic, is that COVID-19 seemingly brought the one issue that Trump could not cascade his way out of. Whether you blame him for the catastrophic effects of the virus or not, the devastating pandemic was the most riveting and narrative dominating issue throughout 2020. From economic fallout, death tolls, testing mishaps, cancellations, school closures, curfews and any other major COVID milestones, Trump could not avoid the onslaught of criticism and condemnation despite his best efforts. Multiple times, from the outbreak of the virus to its peak in the fall of 2020, Trump tried to downplay its severity by claiming that it would *go away by easter*, or that *the end was just around the corner*. He also tried the strategy of saying absurd things like *maybe we can inject our lungs with bleach* or reiterating the claim that COVID was just *a liberal hoax that will go away after the election*. Importantly, Trump's strategy on COVID-19 was always centered around a PR image and the optics rather than addressing the actual issue. Briefly, civil unrest eased some of the pressure off of Trump, but

ultimately the COVID narrative remained and insulated itself as an agenda setting issue for the 2020 election.

Finally, the evidence I presented in this section suggests that Cascading is a strategy unique to Trump's use of Twitter. Much of the evidence presented in this description uses cascades of Tweets to demonstrate Trump's attempts to overload the media. While the use of Twitter may be the main and most effective medium, Trump certainly uses similar techniques in all other platforms. I have already mentioned Trump's Perfectionist rants where he goes off topic to demonstrate a positive quality about himself through a convoluted and confusing story; that is a form of Cascading. When Trump tells Hillary to apologize for her emails, in the same sentence claiming that Hillary started the birther hoax, rather than apologize for his comments about sexually assaulting women; that is Cascading. When Trump asks his advisors to look into injecting bleach into the human body to kill the COVID-19 virus; that is Cascading. When Trump holds a bible up in front of a church for a photo-op in the middle of a BLM protests; that is Cascading. Generating a flow of stories and controversies that distract from Trump's actions is not a Twitter strategy, it's the founding commandment of the Trump political playbook.

Cascading is a critical piece of Trump's ability to create false narratives. By creating a constant flow of information, news and controversy, Trump draws attention to himself in a way that is nearly invincible. No matter what he says, even if it's wrong, it will generate attention and coverage which enables him to emphasize his platform to a wider audience. The implication for false narratives is that they will always have a place in the national spotlight. In the context of post-truth, Trump's creation of false narratives credited to his captivation of the media through Cascading, are able to be repeated and digested by major audiences. Partially because of the fact that Cascading desensitizes Trump's base to truth, false narratives are quickly accepted as fact.

The post-truth messaging category of false narratives will stick with us through the post-Trump era. False narratives will continue to be accepted by fact as supporters and as lies by opponents until we can find a way to establish a standard of truth. I would like to say that the best way to combat false narratives is to establish truthful ones but this is easier said than done. Trump's false narrative techniques are so simple and adaptable that I suspect Democrats may conform to perpetuating small-scale false narratives of their own. Trump's creation of false narratives is a cynical and intentional method of psychological manipulation; Fearmongering is implemented after Gaslighting to further tighten Trump's grip on the base and to inspire support through threats of change and the "other." While Trump plunders and pillages the presidency to his own benefit, he reflects any criticism by attributing his own corruption and deceit onto his opponents, which creates the impression that he disapproves of the behavior and would not do it himself. Once false narratives are established, Cascading demands their constant attention and repetition. These four fundamental strategies are what make Trump such an effective liar, and which have fostered such a strong information dependence on himself from his base.

Chapter V: Attack Strategies

Burn All Bridges

The final major category of Trump's messaging strategies I will discuss in this paper are his attacks against opponents. Trump has brought an unprecedented level of harshness and brutality to political slander that knows no boundaries or remorse. At first, Trump's attacks shocked traditional politicians, and was reprimanded by the Republican party out of fear that his style was too disgraceful to win a presidential race. They could not have been more wrong. Once again I return to Wilson:

Your father will become the latest Rafael Cruz, noted assassin of John F. Kennedy. Your husband or wife will become a figure of ridicule for his or her looks and weight. He will attack your children. Your successes will be portrayed as abject failures, your pinnacle moments as mere nothings. Ever had a medical issue you'd rather not discuss in public? How about your spouse? Your kids? They'll use it. For Democratic candidates who have had an extramarital affair, you'd better have the come-to-Jesus talk with your spouse and your staff, because they will find it, they will use it, and Trump will have no shame or self-awareness about how hypocritical he looks attacking you on it[...] You cannot shame him. You cannot correct him. You cannot hope he will reflect on his actions and words. He is the Douchebag Terminator, a bullying, demeaning thug until you raise the pain level. His audience thrives on seeing him attack with impunity, like the hangers-on around every bully in history (282-283).

Instead of turning people away, Trump's ruthless political attacks unlocked a portion of voters who rallied behind his offensiveness, his low-blows, and his unfiltered verbal assaults. Trump's base does not want to see bipartisan cooperation, they do not want to see civil political discourse, and they certainly don't want to see Trump making friends with their enemies. Trump's base is rewarded by the complete and utter verbal annihilation of political opponents, who drown helplessly in a sea of Trump insults. Trump's political discourse represents the way his base wishes they could express their anger.

Beyond just empowering the base, Trump's attacks cause an uproar of condemnation and media coverage which plays into Trump's ability to control the national narrative. Because his base is unmoved by any comment no matter how offensive, Trump has an incredible amount of wiggle room to go after his political opponents without the fear of retribution. As we have seen in the previous category, Trump uses controversial attacks, like those on the Clintons, to distract from his own issues.

The following strategies, *Antagonizing*, *Bulldogging*, and *Flustering*, represent three of the major attack strategies that Trump uses on a regular basis. Attacks are often related to some of the categories already mentioned above as they generate media attention, demonstrate images of strength and authority, and help create false narratives. Their uniqueness is in their methodology of directly targeting and overwhelming political opponents. Another critical aspect of Trump's attacks is that they violate conventional norms of politics, and surpass boundaries once though objectionable to the general public. One particular example is Trump's desire to solicit reactions and frustrate political opponents through Antagonizing.

Antagonizing: *Using controversial or offensive statements humorously, ironically, or sarcastically to solicit a laugh amongst supporters while provoking or infuriating political opponents.*

But the racist word, it's the oldest play in the Democratic playbook, and Americans have had enough of it, OK. We get it. We get it. (Miami, 9/12/2016).

Trump's use of Antagonizing is a "schoolyard bully" strategy; by making fun of political opponents and watching them react, or by baiting them with comments and behaviors that contradict their perception of reality, Trump entertains his base and creates a feeling of superiority amongst his supporters. Trump's use of Antagonizing has become essential to the

identity of the Trump movement and to the general attitude about political opponents. The base strongly associates themselves with mocking the detail-focused and “sensitive” liberals as a source of pride and identity. They feel rewarded and empowered by how much their candidate infuriates and humiliates his opponents. They live vicariously through Trump and revel in the chaos that these attacks create as if they were their own. Antagonizing political opponents, particularly sensitive and politically correct Democrats, is viewed as a quality of strength and formulates comradery amongst the base. The Democrats, a predictable bunch to say the least, reach for the familiar mainstream media to defend themselves and over-analyze Trump’s Antagonizing which even further rewards the base by allowing them to enjoy the shockwave created by these inflammatory actions or comments.

Trump’s Antagonizing messages are most recognizable when they are personal attacks as opposed to antagonizations about a political theme. In 2016, Trump had the following to say about accusations that he tried to impose himself in Clinton’s personal space in the first debate after an awkward initial handshake:

So I'm standing at my podium by my chair. She walks across this room. She's standing in front of me, right next to me. And the next day, I said, why did the paper say? They said, he invaded her space. I invaded her space. Believe me. The last space that I want to invade is her space (Lakeland FL, 10/12/2016).

Obviously, this innuendo (a Dog Whistle in itself) is intended to disparage Clinton’s physical appearance, usually considered an “out-of-bounds” insult in political discourse. This comment did draw negative press but of course had no impact on Trump’s popularity with his base who despise the Clinton’s and approve of these unfiltered insults as authentic and genuine language. Clinton was not the only woman subject to Trump’s Antagonizing; one of the most memorable misogynistic comments from the 2016 campaign trail was Trump’s response to Megyn Kelly questioning about his misogyny:

KELLY: *Mr. Trump, one of the things people love about you is you speak your mind and you don't use a politician's filter. However, that is not without its downsides, in particular, when it comes to women. You've called women you don't like "fat pigs, dogs, slobs, and disgusting animals." [Laughter] Your Twitter account...*

TRUMP: *Only Rosie O'Donnell. [Laughter]*

The following week in an interview with Don Lemon, Trump doubled down on his Antagonizing of female opponents by making these remarks about Megyn Kelly in regards to the debate question: “she had blood coming out her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever” (Yan 2015). Although Trump denies the claim, he was obviously indicating that Kelly was menstruating. An extremely offensive and sexist insult that was once thought long removed from fair fame in politics. These two examples are just some of the many hundreds of personal insults Trump has used as part of his Antagonizing strategy.

Related to personal insults, one of the most recognizable and frequently used Antagonizing messaging techniques is the use of nicknaming. This is a subcategory of Antagonizing that could probably be its own separate category, but generally has the same effect of Antagonizing. Nicknaming is a way of mocking Trump’s political opponents with a marketable insult that is difficult to shake. Some of Trump’s most famous nicknames include: Crooked Hillary, Lying Ted [Cruz], Little Marco [Rubio], Sleepy Joe Biden, Crazy Nancy [Pelosi], Mini Mike Bloomberg, Low Energy Jeb Bush, Crazy Bernie [Sanders], Schifty [Adam] Schiff, Pocahontas [Elizabeth Warren], Fredo [Chris] Cuomo, and Sleepy Eyes Chuck Todd. A deeper analysis would reveal more, I am sure. However, this list simply off the top of my head, exemplifies the variety of nicknames Trump has created. By using this strategy, Trump places his opponents in an awkward situation: Do they acknowledge the nickname and defend themselves even though it would show weakness in that Trump’s teasing may have gotten under their skin? Do they ignore it and appear weak by *not* defending themselves? Or do they turn around and

give Trump a nickname, “stooping to his level” of childish Antagonizing (of which they probably have criticized)? There is clearly not an easy answer. Beyond just strategically frustrating his opponents, Trump enables his base to laugh at the expense of their ideological opponents through these one-liner nicknames that stick. They have no problem with the violations of political discourse because traditional establishment politics is a game that they are tired of losing.

Beyond personal insults and nicknaming, Trump antagonizes his opponents by discrediting their most serious fears and conceptions of scientific reality. For an example, the COVID-19 pandemic presented numerous opportunities for Trump to use Antagonizing messaging, as his bases’ views were much more nonchalant about the severity of the virus than most others, and the degree to which the pandemic was taken seriously was relatively split down party lines. Democrats favored imposing stricter lockdown measures for longer periods of time and highly encouraged mask mandates and social distancing. In general, Republicans were less inclined to impose strict lockdown measures until they absolutely had to, and were less emphatic about mask wearing and physical distancing. Trump himself embodied the “half-assed” approach to COVID-19 adopted by the Republican party; he was often seen in close quarters without a mask, openly encouraged other people not to wear them, downplayed the severity of the virus, and refused to mandate certain measures that would have helped slow the spread. Given the fact that the Democrats took the virus so seriously and his base did not, Trump used this opportunity to antagonize Democrats about the public health measures they so strongly advocated for. In the following example, Trump antagonizes Joe Biden for wearing a mask while speaking in public:

I've never seen a man that liked their mask. Look, I'm all for it, we have a big weekend, distance on the weekend, and all of that stuff, and wear your mask when you're close together in particular, and wash your hands, all those things. We have Labor Day Weekend coming up. But did you ever see a man that likes a mask as much as him? And then he makes a speech and he always has it, not always, but a lot of times he has it hanging down. Because you know what? It gives him a

feeling of security. If I were a psychiatrist, right? I'd say, "This guy's got some big issues." Hanging down. Hanging down. Congressman, give me your mask. I want to have it hanging from my ear (Latrobe PA, 9/3/2020).

More than just Antagonizing Biden's caution, Trump is subtly criticizing everyone who frequently wears a mask which as we know, is a trait commonly associated with liberal-leaning voters. Here, Trump attempts to equate Biden's generous use of masks to Biden having a mental disorder related to his sense of security, thus implying that anyone who wears their mask outside of the absolute bare minimum requirements must have a problem with being insecure. Perhaps what Trump and his base would call "weak." With further analysis, while it may be difficult to pick up in this transcribed passage, Trump's phrasing of "did you ever see a *man* that likes a mask" as much as Biden, as opposed to using "anyone," seems awkward and possibly intentional when listened to live. If this is indeed the case, Trump is further stating that wearing a mask at all times is not only trivial but un-masculine. Beyond his use of masks, Trump also criticized Biden for not campaigning aggressively in-person out of precaution for the potential spread of COVID-19 at campaign rallies. In the final debate when asked about his regrettable summer comments that the virus would be over soon, Trump diverted the line of questioning by Antagonizing Biden:

I didn't say over soon. I say we're learning to live with it. We have no choice. We can't lock ourselves up in a basement like Joe does. He has the ability to lock himself up. I don't know. He's obviously made a lot of money someplace, but he has this thing about living in a basement. People can't do that. By the way I as the president couldn't do that. I'd love to put myself in the basement or in a beautiful room in the White House and go away for a year and a half until it disappears. I can't do that ("Final 2020 Presidential Debate..." NBC News).

Trump turns Biden being relatively homebound like the rest of America into Biden "locked in his basement," hinting that he was hiding from something or doing some sort of abnormal behavior, while comfortably sitting on a mound of wealth. In reality, Biden staying home from campaign rallies was particularly unremarkable and had nothing to do with Biden's wealth or anything else

other than public safety. Holding large events was contradictory to the Democratic party line on how to confront COVID-19. However, by making these Antagonizing claims against Biden and poking fun at him, Trump shifted the attention from himself, gave his supporters a talking point they could latch on to, and demonstrated strength through insults.

In other cases, Trump antagonizes opponents by soliciting a reaction rather than directly insulting. When Trump recovered from his own bout with COVID-19, he antagonized his opponents by contradicting medical experts and encouraging opposition to physical distancing based on his own anecdotal experience with the illness:

One thing with me, the nice part, I went through it. Now they say I'm immune. I feel so powerful. I will walk into that audience. I'll walk in there, I'll kiss everyone in that audience. I'll kiss the guys and the beautiful women, and everybody. I'll just give you a big, fat kiss (Orlando FL, 10/12/2020).

And I know there's a risk. There's a danger. But that's okay, and now I'm better. Maybe I'm immune. I don't know. But don't let it dominate your lives. Get out there. Be careful. We have the best medicines in the world, and they're all happening very shortly, and they're all getting approved (White House Vlog, 10/5/2020).

Not wearing a mask became an identifying behavior of Trump supporters in the 2020 election because of Trump's politicizing of the issue with Antagonizing comments like these. This infuriated opponents who followed scientific evidence religiously and believed that social distancing and masks should be exemplified, not condemned, by the President. What infuriated Democrats the most about these statements, were that Trump was actively giving medical advice despite not being a doctor, and downplaying the virus simply because he recovered from it. Most Americans do not have the same type of medical care afforded to the President, and we know from the real experts that the virus affects everyone differently. Despite the widely available expert guidelines, Trump either believed or wanted to demonstrate that he knew better than all the experts by creating his own guidelines of "don't let it dominate your lives." Trump

understood that he had more to gain with his base by insulting Democrats and instigating reactions from the media than from responsibly and effectively responding to the pandemic.

Trump's Antagonizing strategy is not always centered around popular issues and can be used opportunistically. An issue that was pushed to the back burner in 2020, no pun intended, was the outbreak and spread of massive California wildfires in August. While forest mismanagement does play some role in these fires, most scientists agree that dryer conditions as a result of warmer temperatures are a major factor in the increase in number and severity of wildfires across the country (Pierre-Louis and Shwartz). Rather than treat the wildfires as natural disasters, Trump instead claimed that the scientists got it wrong and that the wildfires were actually a result of mismanagement by the state of California. In this claim was implied that the science behind climate change was inaccurate or over exaggerated. The first of the following examples is from a panel discussion on forest fires with Donald Trump and specific local politicians from the Southwest, and the second is Trump's remarks on an interview on with Sean Hannity

CROWFOOT: if we ignore that science and sort of put our head in the sand and think it's all about vegetation management, we're not going to succeed together protecting Californians.

TRUMP: Okay. It'll start getting cooler.

CROWFOOT: I wish- I wish science agreed with you

TRUMP: Well, I don't think science knows actually ("Remarks: Donald Trump Participates in a Briefing...").

But you also have to have forest management. We send them so much money. I don't have to, but I want to help California. But they have the biggest forest fires because they don't manage their land. They don't have separators. They have trees that have been laying on the ground that are stone cold dead, dry like a matchstick. You throw a cigarette butts on between the leaves and the trees, everything catches on fire. You lose 200,000 acres in a short period of time. They get to manage their forest. And if they manage their forest, you're not going to see the forest fires ("Hannity with Trump call-in Interview Tonight...").

While Trump has infamously called climate change a hoax, he has generally eased off of that rhetoric since he took office in 2016, only tweeting about it on two occasions throughout the entire presidency from what I could find.¹⁹ It should be mentioned that Trump does have a vested interest in deregulating industries like the energy sector, and his actions in removing environmental regulations have been harmful to the environment. While I concede Trump's pro-business leanings certainly have had a significant impact on his stance on climate change, I suspect that Trump also denies the scientific consensus surrounding human's effect on the planet as an antagonist messaging topic to counter and instigate Democrats with more of an alarmist view on the warming of the planet. Trump knows that climate change is an issue that is extremely important to the wings of the Democratic party. By refusing to acknowledge the science and blaming these fires on mismanagement, Trump is intentionally Antagonizing those who believe climate change is the most important issue facing our country. In the most basic sense of this messaging strategy, Trump rewards his base by refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of their ideological opponent's fears.

Another 2020 issue that became a topic for Trump's Antagonizing was Trump's refusal to commit to accepting the results of the election. While Democrats were sensitive to Trump unjustly holding on to power, Trump used this criticism and fear to antagonize his opponents:

And 51 days from now, we're going to win Nevada, and we're going to win four more years in the White House. And after we win four more years, we'll ask for maybe another four or so.. Well, thank you very much. Whenever I say that ... Look at all that news back there, look at all that fake news. When I say that, their heads explode (Henderson NV, 9/13/2020).

In this example, Trump threatened to unconstitutionally seize the Office of the Presidency for a 3rd term, resembling the political style of the dictators and authoritarians that he so openly

¹⁹ <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?results=1&searchbox=%22global+warming+%7C+climate+change%22>

admires. For good reason, considering Trump's rhetoric about not accepting the outcome of the election and his other various degradations of American Democracy, this threat was not taken lightly by Trump's opponents. I can't say with certainty that another President has openly mocked the constitution and functions of American Democracy to the extent that Donald Trump has. Despite the alarming rhetoric, Trump generally shrugs off criticism of his comments as insincere hyperbole, and implies that the media covers him unfairly by paying too much attention to remarks like these. By minimizing the unprecedented nature of his remarks and their implication for democratic governance, Trump normalizes these threats and slowly degrades his base's conception of the constitution. Following this logic, we can see where seemingly minor messaging strategies like Antagonizing sow the seeds of insurrection amongst Trump's most loyal supporters.

Antagonizing is one of the most commonly used strategies in Trump's messaging arsenal. It requires very little intellectual effort and is centered around doing things that his base has been told should not be done or saying things that they have been told should not be said. This liberation and freedom that accompanies Trump's humiliation and instigation of his opponents is a rewarding feeling that inspires a group identity surrounded around supporting Trump. Additionally, Antagonizing serves political goals beyond just entertaining the base, by legitimizing attacks on democracy, and Gaslighting accepted science on "political" issues like COVID and climate change.

BULLDOGGING:²⁰ *Taking a political event, a specific remark, or a perceived personal weakness of an opponent, exaggerating its importance well beyond its actual significance, and repeatedly sticking it to political opponents with obsessive consistency.*

Look at the way Crooked Hillary is handling the e-mail case and the total mess she is in. She is unfit to be president. Bad judgement! (@realDonaldTrump, 11/1/2016).

Yet another strategy that seems to relate back to Trump's media career, Bulldogging is the ability to make headline stories out of small grains of sand, and keep them in the headlines long after their due relevance. Bulldogging is a two step process; it begins with magnification of a certain issue. Trump identifies a potential weak point and lashes on to it as a talking point. He uses Imaginary Friends, Trumpstats, Gaslighting, Reflection and any other strategy in his arsenal to magnify the importance of the perceived weakness exponentially larger than its real significance. Once he has magnified the issue, he then begins to Bulldog by repeatedly forcing it to the center of discussion at every possible moment. The victim cannot escape Trump's relentless Bulldogging and is forced to confront it or risk being swallowed by it. This strategy is circular in nature; when Trump makes outrageous claims about insignificant things, the media is forced to react to his claims out of a desire to refute them, thus allowing the story to be amplified and multiplied on a national scale through both friendly and unfriendly news networks, even though the former is generally trying to deny its relevance. Bulldogging helps create negative narratives about Trump's opponents by giving heightened importance to less significant details. Bulldogging in its essence is an offensive strategy: by Bulldogging a particular cause, perhaps one that the public is not familiar with or has no grounds to object to, Trump's opponents have to defend themselves against ridiculous exaggerations. The simple visual of opponents defending

²⁰ Like Cascading, lectures and conversations with Professor Clifford Brown of Union College are the source for the title of this strategy.

the Bulldogging gives the argument credence and legitimacy, even if they are categorically denying it with valid evidence. If they choose to ignore the Bulldogging, Trump can then claim that they are afraid to respond and therefore hiding something. In many situations, it is a “no way out” scenario for the target of the Bulldogging.

The reason these Bulldogging messages are accepted at face value is because Trump's base already does not trust the “deep state,” and is more inclined to believe conspiracies and cover ups as part of a coalition of corrupt government forces that lie, cheat and steal. As I mentioned in the first chapter, conspiracism is also self-sustaining and builds upon other conspiracies to create narratives of good vs. evil. Conspiracism and fading trust in authority allow Trump to create false narratives with no evidence, through using strategies like Bulldogging which create negative narratives about his opponents. There is a defensive component to this strategy as well; by creating media attention and controversy, Trump can distract from his own actions and scandals, because the media is forced to cover his new controversial and untrue statement as opposed to sticking him to the last one. While Bulldogging helps create false narratives, part of the strategy is forcing opponents to acknowledge Trump's Bulldogging even if the claim has no factual relevance. The incessant repetition of Bulldogging is an attack strategy that is very difficult to counter and thus belongs in the attack category.

The essence of Bulldogging is Trump simply taking a piece of information with little relevance and turning it into a political attack. In 2016, there were some small stories about foreign leaders not meeting Obama at the tarmac or violating diplomatic etiquette to express contempt over certain Obama policies. In particular, at the Beijing G20 summit, there were reports that the Chinese government had snuffed President Barack Obama on the runway by not bringing out the ceremonial red carpet stairs. News agencies and Obama himself chalked it up to a misunderstanding but Trump declared it humiliating. Earlier that year, there had been some

news buzz about Saudi's King Salman not welcoming Obama at the tarmac due to Obama's stance on Saudi actions in Yemen. In Cuba too, Obama was not greeted on the tarmac by then president Raul Castro on his visit to Havana. White House aides and news agencies attributed much of these "snubs" up to diplomatic posturing in response to Obama policies. Trump bulldogged them as insults to America :

They [China] want to tweak us[...] Look at our President. They wouldn't even give him stairs to come out of Air Force One[...] He went to Saudi Arabia and the top people didn't greet him, right? He went to Cuba and Castro, the brother, was not there to greet him. And I said to myself, you know, if that happened, I'd land and hear he's not there to pay respect to the country, not to him, to pay respect to our country. I would say, 'Thank you very much, fellas. That's OK. Close it up. Boom. Let's go back to Washington'[...] In the history of Air Force One, which is long and distinguished, these are the only three times where incidents like this have taken place. Think of it. Lands in Cuba, doesn't have high officials to greet him, lands in Saudi Arabia, which we protect[...] But lands in Saudi Arabia and they don't have the high officials to greet them, the highest officials. And I said to myself, that's probably the only time in the history of Air Force One where it goes into a country, lands, and you don't have the appropriate officials to greet, right? (Virginia Town Hall, 9/6/2016)

China wouldn't provide a red carpet stairway from Air Force One and then Philippines President calls Obama 'the son of a whore.' Terrible! (@realdonaldtrump 9/6/2016).²¹

Here, Trump was using the minor detail of foreign powers violating diplomatic etiquette to bulldog a much bigger narrative that fit Trump's campaign message. Trump aimed to make the Obama administration, representing establishment Democrats and thus Hillary Clinton, appear weak. By Bulldogging these minute examples of diplomatic posturing, Trump was attempting to create the image that foreign nations no longer respect the American president, and by proxy, American people. These ring similar to other Trump messages like: "I will rebuild the military, take care of vets and make the world respect the US again!" (@realdonaldtrump, 9/15/2015).

²¹ Phillipino President Duterte is notoriously foul mouthed and uses "son of a whore" to describe nearly every major Western industrialized nation as well as their associated institutions like the EU and UN which condemn Duterte's human rights abuses. It was no surprise when he said those words about Barack Obama, nor was it taken as personal insult even though it was rude.

Trump creates the impression that American's are the laughingstock of the world and that we are being disrespected by inferior foreign nations. *We are being ransacked in foreign trade, taken for granted in NATO, and ridiculed publicly by foreign leaders* were all themes in Trump's first presidential campaign. Trump, in contrast to "weak" Obama, offers himself as an authority figure who will make America feared again, and who will put a stop to disrespect from foreign powers. Here we see how a minor inconvenience is turned into a larger narrative.

Hillary Clinton was the subject of the most infamous of Trump's Bulldogging attacks. The Hillary email scandal, where she was accused of having acted negligently by using a private email server to send and receive sensitive government information, became the primary focus of the 2016 election. The "Crooked Hillary" nickname, perhaps the most memorable of all nicknames, will go down in history as the most remembered aspect of Trump's Bulldogging. More than a referendum on climate change, more than an up and down vote on the liberal agenda, maybe even more than a referendum on establishment political institutions, 2016 to a large extent was a vote on whether or not Hillary Clinton could be trusted, in which the email scandal was front and center thanks to Bulldogging its importance.²² While the use of a private email server was a mistake, it was not the national security threat that Trump made it out to be. In 2019, the State Department Inquiry of Hillary's emails found that "there was no persuasive evidence of systemic, deliberate mishandling of classified information' (qtd. in Edmondson). Additionally, during Trump's impeachment trials, it was revealed that Trump White House officials also used private emails to conduct White House business (Edmondson). Clearly, Hillary's emails posed no actual threat to national security and were, in retrospect, an honest

²² Comey's announcement of an investigation into Hillary's emails in the last week of the election in effect put Hillary's emails on the ballot.

mistake. Nevertheless, Trump turned this non-scandal into the hottest national issue, even going as far as to suggest that Hillary should be in jail:

How can Hillary run the economy when she can't even send emails without putting the entire nation at risk? (@realDonaldTrump, 6/21/2016).

Many people are saying that the Iranians killed the scientist who helped the U.S. because of Hillary Clinton's hacked emails (@realDonaldTrump, 8/8/2016).

This is really, if we bring it up, this is like Watergate, only it's worse, because here our foreign enemies were in a position to hack our most sensitive national security secrets. No one takes all the risks Hillary Clinton took unless they're trying to cover up massive, massive crimes (Greenville NC, 9/7/2016).

Foreign enemies with easy access to hack – and, believe me, she's vulnerable, and she makes us vulnerable, because foreign enemies – you look at her server, and they're probably hacking her all over the place. Unfortunately, maybe we'll find out at a later date (Novi MI, 9/30/2016).

Hillary Clinton should have been prosecuted and should be in jail. Instead she is running for president in what looks like a rigged election (@realDonaldTrump, 10/15/2016).

Of course, these few examples here are just a drop in the bucket for Trump's messaging on Hillary's email server. In every debate, every campaign rally and a handful of tweets on any given day, Trump would bring up Hillary's "dangerous" and "criminal" use of her email server, both of which have since been proven verifiably untrue. The Bulldogging of these false claims was combined with labels like "Crooked Hillary" and continuous assaults on her character, decision-making and legal standing, to reinforce the message that Hillary had betrayed American security and that she had done something horribly wrong..

Trump replicated the Bulldogging strategy in 2020, although I will say he did so with less focus and success than in 2016. While Trump criticized Hillary disproportionately on more than just emails, the email scandal was the clear and agenda-setting attack in 2016 that hit close to home for the Trump base. In 2020, Trump's Bulldogging attacks were a bit more scattered and the election remained a referendum on Trump, COVID-19 and civil unrest. One topic of repeated

interest was Biden's age and fitness for office. Let's face it, Biden does have a handful of awkward moments or speech slip-ups, not uncommon for someone who grew up with a speech impediment, and his manner of speaking is much slower than Trump's. Still, Joe's awkward blunders or mispronounced words are not a symptom of dementia or mental degradation. They are what they are; simply mistakes and errors. Trump tried to turn these verbal blunders into evidence that Joe Biden was a very sick elderly man who would put the American people at risk by his tarnished and deteriorating mental state:

You know, Joe always calls it the N1H1. He gets it mixed up. No, it's the H1N1, Joe. Not that it matters, I guess. No. Do you ever notice, he's always calling it the other. He calls it the opposite. He has no clue where he is" (Latrobe PA, 9/3/2020).

But you see, I deal with all of these people, and they don't have the kind of mental problem that Sleepy Joe has. They're very sharp. Kim Jong-un. Kim Jong-un doesn't know about the problems that Joe has. We need very sharp people. I'm sorry. Joe is not qualified for this position" (Henderson NV, 9/13/2020).

Joe, they ask him a question, a very simple question, and he's reading it off a computer. He's saying, "Move the computer. Move it, bring it closer, bring it..." He couldn't see it. "Bring it closer." On a question that that anybody could answer. I mean, it's a very simple question. We can't have this[...] we can't have this as our president ("Donald Trump Radio Rally").

He calls it N1H1. It's actually H1N1. I say, "Joe, it's not. It's H1. H comes..." It's easy because H comes before N. I said, "Joe, Joe, that's what it is." I said, "Just go with swine flu. You don't have to call it... The numbers are too complicated." Three days ago he said, "I'm a proud Democrat running for the United States Senate, and I hope I have your support." Look, we can't play games. You've seen enough. Haven't you seen enough? This is crazy (Tampa FL, 10/28/2020).

They (his handlers) ripped Sleepy Joe off the stage yesterday when he got lost in a 'mental fog'. A disaster. Very little reporting on this! (@realdonaldtrump, 10/27/2020).

My personal read on this strategy is that Trump's extensive use of doctored advertising which misrepresented Biden's blunders, combined with this Bulldogging strategy in his public statements, *could* have been a very powerful tool in Trump's reelection messaging bid. However,

Biden deserves a lot of credit for remaining relatively blunder-free in the last 3 months of the campaign trail, and for holding his own against a very aggressive Donald Trump during the presidential debates. Biden was also probably helped by his lack of public appearances due to COVID concerns. Regardless, at least in my interpretation, Biden's mental health did not become an agenda setting issue the way that Hillary's emails had in 2016 despite Trump's best efforts.

Similarly, Trump tried to use Bulldogging of the Hunter Biden conspiracy by applying undue hype to the "laptop from hell" story, where Rudy Giuliani "discovered" that a blind computer repair shop owner had reportedly given the FBI a laptop containing damaging data on Hunter Biden: "Hunter Biden's laptop is a disaster for the entire Biden family, but especially for his father, Joe. It is now a proven fact, and cannot be denied, that all of that info is the REAL DEAL. That makes it impossible for '50%, or 10%' Joe, to ever assume the office of the President!" (@realdonaldtrump, 10/18/2020). In a previous section on the messaging strategy of Reflection, I devoted significant analysis to Trump's plundering of the presidency, alleged crimes, and impeachments including the charge of quid-pro-quo. Here, Trump also emphasized the Hunter Biden conspiracy theory as part of a Reflection strategy. While I will spare reiterating the same examples in this section, the Hunter Biden case represents a great example of how Trump combines different messaging strategies.

Ultimately Bulldogging is one of Trump's innate messaging strategies that defines his style as a politician: he pins his opponents to a specific issue and exaggerates its importance to an unprecedented degree. Trump's conspiracy-hungry base devours every morsel of controversy and scandal that reinforces their historic ideological crusade against "the deep state." Giving these conspiracies a platform amplifies their popularity. Denying them acknowledges their existences while ignoring them creates even more controversy. Trump himself is immune to these conspiracies; Trump is the whistleblower and any attempts to discredit him are simply

corrupt “witchhunts.” The ideological captivation of the base as demonstrated by Trump’s use of Bulldogging as an attack strategy is simply fascinating and unique to Trump. Other politicians cannot make these outrageous claims, because they must answer to a rational and non-conspiratorial base. Therefore, I contend that Trump’s use of Bulldogging is skillful and intentional, as part of a greater messaging strategy that put plainly, lets Trump do things his opponents cannot.

Flustering: *The consistent interruption or constant attack of debate opponents, moderators, or reporters aimed at stopping the continuity of the opponent's argument or line of questioning.*

GUTHERIE: *But our death rate is worse than, well, not Spain, but those other countries.*

TRUMP: *Well, I have thing right here that will tell you exactly the opposite.*

GUTHERIE: *Me too.*

TRUMP: *The UK is up 2500%, because I knew you'd be doing this. I know you very well. The UK is up 2500%. The EU is up 722%. And the United States is down 21%.*

GUTHERIE: *But we have per... Our deaths per capita is among the highest of all-*

TRUMP: *Excess mortality.*

GUTHERIE: *I'm sorry?*

TRUMP: *Excess mortality, we're a winner on the excess mortality (“Donald Trump ABC Town Hall...”)*

Flustering is mainly used as a lifeline for Trump to wiggle out of any debate criticisms or attacks which he cannot defend. It also projects an image of strength by verbally dominating and abusing those involved in the debate/press conference. When an opponent begins to speak negatively about Trump, he employs Flustering to disperse the argument and disrupt any clear point or factual evidence that may be presented. By interjecting, bullying, and providing untruthful interruption, Trump makes it impossible for the opponent to complete their argument and solidify damning evidence against Trump.

Flustering tirades are frequently combined with fabricated evidence or personal attacks which force the opponent to defend themselves. Trump thus flips a situation where he is on the defense to one in which he is on the offense. Some might ask, how is Trump's debate behavior a messaging strategy? Is this not just inherent qualities of Trump's personality? While Trump certainly is abrasive and imposes his will on others, I argue that Flustering as a means to deflect criticism is no different from other strategies like Reflection or Cascading where Trump creates a diversion from his own actions. In fact, Flustering is a small-scale manifestation of Cascading: whereas Cascading is a constant stream of information and news that numbs opponents and supporters, desensitizing them to Trump controversy, Flustering is a constant stream of attacks that disorients opponents for a brief time period before debates. Of course they will call him out on lies after the debate is over, but, in the moment, opponents struggle to wade through his Flustering attacks.

Flustering must also be looked at in its effect on image. Trump intentionally comes off as abrasive to project an image of strength. As I have demonstrated, this type of aggressive, erratic, unpredictable, politically incorrect, unprofessional behavior is *exactly* what the base appreciates from him. Watching career politicians like Joe Biden and mainstream media pundits fall apart under Trump's ruthless Flustering strategies is a powerful message in itself. Once again, Trump is a vessel for his base and he has convinced them through tactical and targeted messaging that they speak through him. When Trump dominates a debate stage by Flustering his opponents, his base feels strong and empowered. Keep in mind, in part due to the fact that Trump and his radical allies have created the impression of a culture war between liberals and conservatives, virtues of strength and authority are appreciated and accepted in the battle against the "sensitive" and "weak" left. In the same grain, the base is entertained when opponents are seemingly gasping for air to reign in Trump's Flustering. When Trump's opponents are unable to get a word

in or complete a coherent sentence on account of Trump's Flustering, they appear weak and incapable of holding their own against him.

The most obvious example of Trump's use of Flustering are in his debate performances, where he has been widely condemned as overly aggressive and unprofessional. On the other hand, his base is empowered by Trump's authority and aggression because it is a behavior they interpret as strength and dominance, so the media critiques fall on deaf ears. Hillary Clinton, who is much more passive and mild-tempered than Trump, struggled to fight off Trump's Flustering attacks. In the following passage, Trump responds to Hillary claiming that her renewable energy plan will create jobs for Americans whereas Trump has no actual plan to create jobs:

TRUMP: *For 30 years, you've been doing it, and now you're just starting to think of solutions.*

CLINTON: *Well, actually-*

TRUMP: *I will bring — excuse me. I will bring back jobs. You can't bring back jobs.*

CLINTON: *Well, actually, I have thought about this quite a bit-*

TRUMP: *Yeah, for 30 years.*

CLINTON: *-And I have — well, not quite that long. I think my husband did a pretty good job in the 1990s[...]*

TRUMP: *Well, he approved NAFTA[...] which is the single worst trade deal ever approved in this country.*

Trump then goes on to criticize Hillary's initial support of the Trans-Pacific-Partnership in a rather long winded and confusing rant which I have excluded here. The conversation picks up with Hillary defending herself:

CLINTON: *Well, that is just not accurate. I was against it once it was finally negotiated and the terms were laid out. I wrote about that in-*

TRUMP: *You called it the gold standard. You called it the gold standard of trade deals. You said it's the finest deal you've ever seen.*

CLINTON: *No.*

TRUMP: *And then you heard what I said about it, and all of a sudden you were against it.*

CLINTON: *Well, Donald, I know you live in your own reality, but that is not the facts. The facts are — I did say I hoped it would be a good deal-*

TRUMP: *Not!*

CLINTON: *-but when it was negotiated, which I was not responsible for, I concluded it wasn't. I wrote about that in my book-*

TRUMP: *So it's President Obama's fault?*

CLINTON: *-before you even announced-*

TRUMP: *Is it President Obama's fault?*

CLINTON: *Look, there are differences-*

TRUMP: *Secretary, is it President Obama's fault?*

CLINTON: *There are-*

TRUMP: *Because he's pushing it* ("Debate: 1st Presidential Debate Between Donald Trump and Hillary...").

This exchange between the two candidates represents some of the most critical components of the Flustering strategy. In the 4 minutes that this conversation lasted (I've chopped most of it down here), Trump interrupted Hillary fifteen times whereas Hillary interjected once. At the beginning of the topic, Trump was being accused (accurately I might add) of denying human effects on the alarming acceleration of climate change and bizarrely blaming it on China. This is clearly a weak topic for Trump as most moderate voters agree that climate change is not a hoax. Instead of defending himself, Trump flips the script to attack Hillary for holding political office for so long and not implementing the changes she says she would make as president. Of course, this argument is pointless because Hillary's roles in government as Senator and Secretary of State limited her capacity to implement the same type of policy initiatives that she would have as President. When Hillary tries to defend this point, Trump constantly interrupts her with accusations about NAFTA and her views on trade. When she tries to defend *those* attacks, Trump interrupts her and accuses her of blaming Obama. Throughout the exchange, when Clinton hears a falsehood about her conduct in office she naturally moves to defend herself, but Trump has already moved to the next lie and she is one step behind. In this case, Trump jumps from talking about her ineffectiveness in government to her husband's policies. Bill Clinton was admittedly a weak spot for the Clinton campaign; his scandals in office combined with an increasingly bipartisan negative perception of his presidency were problematic for Hillary. Knowing this, Trump was sure to bring him up as a Flustering tactic to defend himself. When Hillary adjusted

to that, pointing out that Trump's account of NAFTA & TPP was not based in fact, Trump moved to accuse her of selling out Obama. We can thus see clearly that Hillary had no opportunity to complete her arguments against Trump and no time to defend herself completely. Through Flustering, Trump stifles her every move to change the dynamic of the conversation with brute force and lies.

In 2020, Trump's use of Flustering took on a heightened importance as attacks on Joe Biden's mental capacity were an essential component of the Trump campaign. If Biden appeared lost or confused in debates, this would support Trump's additional messaging about Biden's fitness for office. Additionally, it would have been beneficial to Trump if he could have forced Biden to commit a serious blunder in the debate. To do this, Trump attempted to overwhelm Biden by constant interruption and unfounded attacks without evidence. The result was a national embarrassment, with many political analysts calling it a low point for American political discourse: "[America] witnessed history in the making. The proceeding was an epic spectacle, a new low in presidential politics, a new high watermark in national shame. The stain will be visible for many years to come. It will serve as a reminder of the night the dam broke[...]" (Harris). This negative reaction to the debate was caused in part by Trump overusing his Flustering strategy. I would like to emphasize however, that Trump's base emphatically approved of Trump's attacks and especially the reaction it caused in the media. From the opening bell, Trump appeared to see red, and went on attack mode without relenting until the debate was over. In the following exchange from the very first topic of the debate, Biden tries to defend himself from Trump's accusations that Biden wanted "socialist" healthcare:

BIDEN: *And one of the big debates we had with 23 of my colleagues trying to win the nomination that I won, were saying that Biden wanted to allow people to have private insurance still. They can. They do. They will under my proposal—*
[crosstalking]

TRUMP: *That's not what you've said and it's not what your party is saying.*

BIDEN: *That is simply a lie—*

TRUMP: *Your party doesn't say it. Your party wants to go socialist medicine and socialist healthcare.*

BIDEN: *The party is me. Right now, I am the Democratic Party—*

TRUMP: *And they're going to dominate you, Joe. You know that.*

BIDEN: *I am the Democratic Party right now.*

TRUMP: *Not according to Harris.*

BIDEN: *The platform of the Democratic Party is what I, in fact, approved of, what I approved of[...] there's seven million people that contracted COVID. What does it mean for them going forward if you strike down the Affordable Care Act?*

TRUMP: *Joe, you've had 308,000 military people dying because you couldn't provide them proper healthcare in the military. So don't tell me about this—*

BIDEN: *I'm happy to talk about this—*

TRUMP: *And if you were here, it wouldn't be 200, it would be two million people because you were very late on the draw. You didn't want me to ban China, which was heavily infected. You didn't want me to ban Europe.*

WALLACE: *All right, gentlemen, Mr. President—*

TRUMP: *You would have been much later, Joe, much later.*

WALLACE: *Mr. President—*

TRUMP: *We're talking about two million people.*

BIDEN: *You're not going to be able to shut him up* (“First Presidential Debate in Cleveland with Donald...”).

Just like Trump’s use of Flustering against Hillary, Trump first claims that Biden is going back on his word about healthcare, and that he is being controlled by the Democratic party. When Biden interjects to defend himself, Trump switches to saying that Harris has made comments about Joe Biden’s perceived weaknesses. Just when it seems like Joe Biden was about to come full circle, defend himself and get back to his main point, Trump interrupts *again* this time claiming that over 300,000 “military people” died because Joe Biden didn’t give them access to healthcare. This claim, loosely based on a 2015 report about the waiting system at the VA, was also debunked by Politifact (Fiske). When Biden is ready to address Trump’s made-up lie, Trump shifts the topic *again* to Biden’s stance on banning travel from China. This stream of nonsense is impossible to follow, impossible to defend, and impossible to criticise because it is so overwhelming that the opponent cannot pick a statement to begin. The worst part is, it was repeated endlessly for the entire night. In the following exchange, Trump used the Flustering strategy against the moderator, Chris Wallace, to disrupt questions that he did not like:

WALLACE: *Mr. President, the Supreme Court will hear a case a week after the election in which the Trump Administration, along with 18 state Attorney Generals are seeking to overturn Obamacare, to end Obamacare-*

TRUMP: *That's right.*

WALLACE: *You have spent the last week-*

TRUMP: *Because they want to give good healthcare.*

WALLACE: *If I may ask my question, sir. Over the last four years, you have promised to repeal and replace Obamacare, but you have never in these four years come up with a plan, a comprehensive plan, to replace Obamacare-*

[crosstalk]

TRUMP: *Yes, I have. Of course, I have. I got rid of the individual mandate.*

WALLACE: *When I finish I'm going to give an opportunity-*

TRUMP: *Excuse me. I got rid of the individual mandate, which was a big chunk of Obamacare.*

WALLACE: *That's not a comprehensive plan-*

TRUMP: *That is absolutely a big thing. That was the worst part of Obamacare.*

WALLACE: *I didn't ask, sir-*

TRUMP: *Chris, that was the worst part of Obamacare.*

WALLACE: *You're debating him not me. Let me ask my question-*

TRUMP: *Well, I'll ask Joe-*

WALLACE: *No-*

TRUMP: *The individual mandate was the most unpopular aspect of Obamacare.*

WALLACE: *Mr. President, I would like you to-*

TRUMP: *I got rid of it. And we will protect people with preexisting conditions.*

WALLACE: *Mr. President, I'm the moderator of this debate and I would like you to let me ask my question and then you can answer ("First Presidential Debate in Cleveland with Donald...").*

Wallace literally becomes mentally fatigued from Trump's Flustering and can no longer deliver a coherent question about Trump's healthcare plan. As Wallace tries to point out, ending the individual mandate is not a comprehensive healthcare plan alone. This point, which Wallace was bravely trying to make given his Fox News affiliation, is missed on the viewer because of Trump's spectacle of interruption and random lies. In one final exchange, Trump delivers personal insults mixed in with lies as a tactic of Flustering.

BIDEN: *The fact is that everything he's saying so far is simply a lie. I'm not here to call out his lies. Everybody knows he's a liar-*

TRUMP: *But you agree. Joe, you're the liar. You graduated last in your class not first in your class.*

BIDEN: *God... I want to make sure-*

WALLACE: *Mr. President, can you let him finish, sir?*

BIDEN: *No, he doesn't know how to do that.*

TRUMP: *You'd be surprised. You'd be surprised. Go ahead, Joe.*

BIDEN: *You picked the wrong guy, the wrong night, at the wrong time-*

TRUMP: *Listen, you agreed with Bernie Sanders and the manifesto.*

BIDEN: *There is no manifesto, number one-*

WALLACE: *Please let him speak, Mr. President.*

BIDEN: *Number two-*

TRUMP: *He just lost the left.*

BIDEN: *Number two-*

TRUMP: *You just lost the left. You agreed with Bernie Sanders on a plan that you absolutely agreed to and under that plan [crosstalk 00:15:10], they call it socialized medicine ("First Presidential Debate in Cleveland with Donald...").*

At the beginning of this section, you notice that Biden is forced to go out of his way to acknowledge that most of what Trump is saying are flat out lies. He has to do this to make sure the audience recognizes the lying because Biden simply cannot confront Trump's lies on his own; they are too numerous and too absurd. Clinton did something similar in the example I used earlier. When Trump calls Biden a liar and claims that he graduated at the bottom of his class, Biden is even further flustered by the personal insult. Although I didn't mention it in the example from the 2016 election, Trump also used "low-blows," like this one on Biden's class rank, about Bill Clinton's transgressions as part of Flustering strategies against Hillary Clinton.

Ultimately, when using Flustering as a messaging strategy, Trump controls the event's narrative by jumping from topic to topic trying to force his opponent to make a mistake. This is not just about defending against questions or topics that he does not like, but it also projects an image of strength and authority, and represents and empowering behavior which his base appreciates. One can argue whether or not this is an inherent quality of Trump or if it is actual technical strategy. I believe the consistency in which this strategy is employed, across nearly every hostile interview or debate, speaks to its intent and strategic purpose. Furthermore, it is hard to argue that Trump did not try and step up this strategy in the first debate against Joe Biden to potentially expose his mental incapacity; Trump's Flustering in the first debate was radical even for Trump's standards.

While brief in light of the plethora of attack strategies in Trump's tool box, these three examples of attack strategies are essential components. In all three examples, no political candidate has ever explored the limits to decency and disrespect that Trump has. Trump plays dirty politics; he antagonizes opponents to entertain his base and alienate his enemies, he bulldogs non-scandals into massive outrages, and he flusters opponents to the point of near mental collapse. Nothing about Trump's attack strategies is remotely similar to the way most other politicians talk about each other. Because his image is so unshakeable, Trump pursues victories of imposing strength over clean temperament and respect. This style breaks political norms that we have been accustomed to seeing, and political opponents have yet to catch up to this new model.

Chapter VI: Lock Him Up!

Red, White, and Bruised

“Constitutions work when those in power want them to work.” These are the wise words I once heard from a Classics professor during a discussion on the collapse of the Roman Republic.²³ This observation is just as true in Ancient Rome as it is today. We can adopt this idea to say that *democracies* work when those in power want them to work. Trump’s messaging strategy embodies the antithesis of behavior and rhetoric that is fundamental to the unwritten upkeep of democracy. Most of the techniques I have outlined in this thesis counter long standing traditions of democratic cooperation, political decency, moderation, restraint, respect and a willingness to make democracy work. I suspect that Trump has not sat down and formally crafted the messaging strategies discussed in this paper, rather, his messaging platform is the result of an brute and offensive attitude that has awarded him with immense success. Trump has cultivated his messaging strategy around undermining the principles of consent and civility which once regulated politics and are essential to a functioning democracy. He has formulated his messaging around this destructive attitude, and has done so with no regard to the structural integrity of Democracy.

In all of the above categories, Trump’s messaging contains elements of constant and unrelenting attack. This is more than just Trump’s emphasis on Perfectionism, refusing to concede any ground, or his use of Flustering to verbally overpower his opponents. While these two examples demonstrate Trump’s attacks on the most basic scale, nearly all of Trump’s tactics are aimed at discrediting his opponents in some way, and often involve violating some political

²³ Professor Hans Friedrich Mueller, Union College.

norms. It is more than just a simple jab or an underlying insult; Trump never lets off the gas for a moment. He creates minor facts and details to make his opponents seem weak just as easily as he creates entirely made up narratives to accuse them of corruption. Attacking opponents is the fundamental unifying concept of Trump's entire messaging platform. Attacking without conscience, without reason and without fact defines Trump's messaging.

With constant attack comes constant defense, and Trump has created an environment where political opponents are increasingly made on edge by Trump's tendency to lash out. The fabric of trust and limits to legitimate discourse have been eroded as a result of Trump's attack-riddled messaging. The instances of cooperation are increasingly slim; the lines in the sand are dug deep, as are the cuts from Trump's attacks. Trump understands that his attacks need not be true, rather they must be delivered with conviction and intent to cause harm in order to be believed by his base. As we know, Trump's attacks are not just limited to political opponents; they encompass any form of opposition. Institutions like the media have come under an assault from Trump's messaging strategies as the biggest enemy to himself and his movement. Trump's discrediting of the media undermines truth and disables nearly 40% of the population from engaging with constructive and accurate news. The *Washington Post's* slogan, "democracy dies in darkness" is a shivering warning of the real threat that Trump's attacks on the media have presented. Trump's base is quite literally in the dark. They are captivated by Trump's attacks and divorced from reality because of them. Democracy cannot survive when the truth of millions is defined by one man; especially a man with no inclinations of upholding democracy.

Like the rest of us, Trump sees the power that he has been able to hold with this type of rhetoric. He knows that his messaging works for his purposes, even if the content threatens the unwritten fabric of democracy. Why stop or why change? Every accusation of subversiveness is met with overwhelming support from the base. Trump recognizes that a new form of politics

reigns supreme; one that does not care about morals, one that does not need cooperation, and one that appreciates a gladiatorial, fight-to-the-death, attitude over any sort of traditional politeness. Trump's nihilism and incessant attacks empower his base with feelings of awe-inspiring strength and importance. The more controversy, the more fighting, the more bridges burned, the better. Trump's messaging brings disruption which both energizes his base and threatens principles of democracy.

Look no further than Trump's actions on Jan. 6th, which, upon deep analysis, reveals glaring questions about what Trump hoped to achieve by inciting this attack. Did he truly believe that his goon squad would storm the capitol and stop the process of democracy? Did he believe that the election would be overturned, after Mike Pence informed him that he would ratify the results? Would the military standby indefinitely while a mob of Trump's supporters terrorized the Vice President and U.S. Senators? If the vote did not occur on Jan. 6th, would the House just decide to cancel its duties and allow Trump to remain president? Of course not. The attack on the capitol never once had a chance to succeed, yet Trump supported it emphatically. Even further, what political benefit could Trump derive from inciting this attack? Did he think that the Democrats would not go for a second impeachment? Did he believe that the millions of moderate voters who he had courted with his Law & Order messaging for so long would approve of this attack? Again, the answer is clearly no. Trump knew these realities as well as anyone else, yet he still decided to support and defend the attackers. Therefore, I contest, Trump's action on that day served just one motive which also happens to be the focus of this thesis: to send a message.

Trump's actions on Jan. 6th served as one billboard that encompassed all of the messaging strategies I have discussed in this paper. He notified his enemies that he was out for revenge, and that he would stop at nothing to get it. This was a threat to the Democrats who had impeached him, who had opposed his policies, who had called him out for his shortcomings, and

who had clearly defeated him in the election. This was a message to the RINOs, who had abandoned the Trump-controlled GOP, to put them on notice that their Congressional and Senate seats were not safe, and that their opposition had but a target on their back (both literally and figuratively). Trump intended to threaten opponents, and to attack his opposition in the most literal sense of the word. Trump's message on Jan. 6th was one of strength, power, authority, revenge, anger and destruction, all of which are themes I have discussed in this paper. He aimed to punish those who had beaten him, to signal that this defeat would not go unanswered. It was also a message to his supporters, even those beyond the base that did not approve of his actions. It was a reminder that Trump would not die silently in the night, and that the Trump movement would rear its head again when the time arrived. Trump valued the opportunity to send a message to his supporters and his opponents on Jan. 6th more than he valued upholding American Democracy. Here we see how the premise that *democracy only works when those in power want it work*, rings true.

The message that Trump sent on Jan. 6th was strikingly similar in the messages he had been sending throughout his time in office. It was one of fear, anger, revenge, punishment, disruption, and retribution. These are emotions his base has felt for a long time, much longer than just the 2020 election. The unfortunate reality is that this message worked, as it always has in Trump's political career. In the weeks following Jan. 6th, the GOP has come full circle on Trump with a wide majority of Republicans acquitting him on the charges of impeachment and an alarming number supporting his fraudulent election claims or openly supporting his reelection bid. While Trump faces a significant messaging crisis by losing one of his most important media platforms, twitter, he has found ways to remain newsworthy through his children, his various super PACs, and the opening of the Office of the Former President. I think this is simply a bump in the road for Trump, and I would be surprised if he does not find his way back on twitter before

the 2024 election. With the likelihood that his preferred messaging medium will remain intact, his grip on the GOP firm, and with his base agitated and spiteful about the “stolen” election, it begs the question what exactly did Trump lose by his actions on Jan. 6th? In my opinion, not much.

Anyone who says that Trump’s political career is over, is either stupid or delusional. If there is anything to be learned from my analysis of Trump’s messaging techniques, it’s that Trump has crafted an impenetrable bond between himself and his base through skilled messaging strategies that I have identified in this work among many others. Trump’s messaging gives him authority, creates fear, perpetuates lies, enables division, encourages violence, breaks norms, condones hate, diverts attention and ultimately has secured the power which Trump wields so dangerously. Trump’s bond with his base not only wins elections, it muzzles dissidents in the GOP and protects Trump from legal culpability for any action, out of fear of the right-wing mob. In the 2020 election, Trump faced arguably the biggest national crisis in our nation's history since Pearl Harbor with COVID-19, causing catastrophic economic fallout and unemployment, all in conjunction with massive civil unrest... and the Democrats barely won.

There is nothing, N-O-T-H-I-N-G, Trump himself can do to sever this bond; not an admission of sexual assault, not bigotry, not corruption, not even a plot to overthrow the government will shake this connection, and we need to stop pretending like something will. Critical reporting does not work on Trump. Writing scathing opinion pieces in the New York Times about Trump's last offense is a useless waste of energy. Trump’s base does not believe facts, they do not trust reporting, they do not need or want a perfect hero, and their opinion of Trump does not shift around his actions. Pointing out Trump’s scandals and flaws does nothing but further fuel his cause. Many people have made the argument that Democrats have to beat Trump at his own game; yes, that means hurling insults and slanders that cut as deep as Trump’s

own attacks. It means Antagonizing Trump about anything and everything; his looks, his hair, his children, his wives. I agree to the extent that the Democratic party seriously needs a messaging overhaul that focuses on ideological victories and long term narratives instead of policy initiatives. However, beating Trump “at his own game” is a frightening prospect in light of the messaging strategies I have identified here. The psychological manipulation that *is* Trump’s game, is not a policy I advocate the Democrats to accept. Post-truth politics, false narratives, deceit, Incitement and all of these harmful manipulative strategies must be avoided at all costs or our Democracy will crumble; one party operating without objective Truth is enough to test democracy, two is enough to kill it.

The sad reality is that it may be too late to create a paradigm shift in the eyes of Trump’s base. The lines in the sand are too deep, the false realities are too real, and the noose is too tight. It is time to sound the alarm. Trump represents the biggest threat to Democracy that we have ever seen, not only through his blatant support of subversion, but through the precedents of corruption, plunder, and psychological manipulation that we are only just beginning to understand. Therefore, I believe the only escape from Trump is to prosecute him to the fullest extent of the law for his crimes, or else he will be back in 2024 employing the same strategies I have mentioned in this analysis. The prospects for this actually happening are increasingly slim.

What is even more frightening about this analysis, is that there is nothing inherently special about Trump’s messaging strategies; they can be repeated by anyone who takes the time to study and adapt them. In each strategy I discussed, charisma and personality were minor factors if at all. Many current and future politicians will possess the same aggression, arrogance, and desire that Trump has. Up and coming Trumpism cultists like Josh Hawley and Marjorie Green Taylor have already begun to adopt Trump’s methodology of brashness, conspiratism, and Gaslighting that is so important to his messaging strategy. While they are still shadowed by

Trump himself, they stand ready to pick up the Trump movement whenever he is no longer capable. Some might use my own argument against me to say that if Trump's emotional connection is so strong and unique, how can it just be transferred to an heir of the movement? While Trump does indeed hold a personal connection, he has been able to wield his base to vote for pro-Trump candidates in subordinate elections. Furthermore, Trump has made his base much more politically involved, and I have no reason to believe that this trait will easily disappear in the absence of Trump. For this reason, it is not difficult for me to believe that Trump's base will crave another leader when he hangs up his MAGA hat, and an endorsement from Trump combined with the use of these familiar and empowering messaging strategies will keep the momentum moving.

A discussion that is often left out of this discourse on Trump and how we move on, is what is the impact on Democratic voters? We know that Trump's base is disenfranchised. We know that they are angry and that Trump is their vessel to exercise that anger. And we know that Trump played right into their insecurities during the last four years, leaving a trail of division in his path. But what is the psychological impact on the left, who have been called "weak" and "soft" for the last four years, who have been ragdolled by their president, who have been told that social justice is communism, that white supremacy is acceptable, that climate change isn't real, that what they call oppression is just their innate sensitivity, and who have been deprived of any real ideological victories since the start of the Trump era. Is electing Joe Biden, the accused sexual assailant, establishment politician, blundering "crazy-old uncle" really a victory? It didn't feel like it to me. Democratic voters are beginning to experience some of the same societal currents that Trump's base did: economic fallout from the pandemic, discontent with government (manifested by police brutality), a scarring four years of a President who labeled them as "radical," and a suffocating lack of spine from elected leaders both Republican and Democrat, all

have created an authority crisis on for the left which parallels that of right. Perhaps even worse, the continued lack of accountability for the Trump administration, who embarrassed the seat belonging to the leader of the free world, and who conspired to overthrow Democracy, pushes this group of voters in the direction of insecurity that is strikingly similar to where Trump's base once was. Democratic voters are increasingly shunned or left disappointed by their own party's lack of empowerment. Are Democrats equally vulnerable to disenfranchisement and demagoguery? It is too early to say for certain. However, we must acknowledge that radicalism may not always be a GOP issue and we should not treat it as such. We have certainly begun to see some strains of this in the violent acts committed during BLM protests. Yes, they were few and far between compared to the peaceful protests going on at the same time, and the violence was also sometimes sparked as a response to police escalation. This is not a charged remark but a fact; political violence is bad for democracy and an alarming trend for both the left and the right. There seemingly has yet to be a clear spearhead of the disenfranchised left, but tensions are building and some parallels indicate disturbing possibilities.

This point is not made to blame Democrats or pardon Trump and his base; instead, I believe it is critical to recognize that we are at a dangerous and radical crossroads in America where demagogues of the post-truth brand have an opportunity to seize destructive power. This belief makes this thesis of ever more importance. To understand how to stop extremist demagoguery, we must first develop an intimate understanding of how it works. What is clear, is that the anti-demagogue, pro-truth movement I am desperately calling for needs to satisfy certain conditions that rival that of Trump's messaging like demonstrating hope through comradeship instead of fear, creating an inclusive American identity instead of one defined by identity, re-affirming trust in government by purging institutions of dangerous insurrectionist, and re-establishing objective truth that withstands lies.

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the “borders” from China - against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News new narrative is disgraceful & false! " *Twitter*, 18 Mar. 2020, 7:46 a.m., www.thetrumparchive.com/?results=1&searchbox=%22save*+%2B+live*%22.

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@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump) "I’m not running against Sleepy Joe Biden. He is not even a factor. Never was, remember 1% Joe? I’m running against the Radical Left, Do Nothing Democrats & their partner, the real opposition party, the Lamestream Fake News Media! They are vicious & crazy, but we will WIN! <https://t.co/ltdHSmaMYT> ." *Twitter*, 16 May 2020, 11:00 a.m., www.thetrumparchive.com/?retweet=%22false%22&searchbox=%22enemy+of+the+people+%7C+Fake+News+%2B+opposition+party%22&results=1.

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NEVER FORGET! " *Twitter*, 24 Dec. 2020, 6:06 p.m.,

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@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump) "Many people are saying that the Iranians killed the scientist who helped the U.S. because of Hillary Clinton's hacked emails. " *Twitter* , 8 Aug. 2016, 6:45 p.m.,

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@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump) "Of course there is large scale voter fraud happening on and before election day. Why do Republican leaders deny what is going on? So naive! " *Twitter*, 17 Oct. 2016, 8:33 a.m.,

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fraudulent version of my conversation. Witch Hunt! " *Twitter*, 27 Dec. 2019, 12:13 p.m., www.thetrumparchive.com/?results=1&searchbox=%22remember%22.

@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump) "Sadly, it looks like Mexico's Police and Military are unable to stop the Caravan heading to the Southern Border of the United States.

Criminals and unknown Middle Easterners are mixed in. I have alerted Border Patrol and Military that this is a National Emergency. Must change laws! " *Twitter*, 22 Oct. 2018, 8:37 a.m., www.thetrumparchive.com/?results=1&searchbox=%22caravan+%2B+middle%22.

@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump). "The call to the Ukrainian President was PERFECT.

Read the Transcript! There was NOTHING said that was in any way wrong. Republicans, don't be led into the fools trap of saying it was not perfect, but is not impeachable. No, it is much stronger than that. NOTHING WAS DONE WRONG!" *Twitter*, 10 Nov. 2019, 2:43 p.m., www.thetrumparchive.com/?searchbox=%22perfect%22.

@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump) "The Caravans are made up of some very tough fighters and people. Fought back hard and viciously against Mexico at Northern Border before breaking through. Mexican soldiers hurt, were unable, or unwilling to stop Caravan.

Should stop them before they reach our Border, but won't! " *Twitter*, 31 Oct. 2018, 8:37 a.m., www.thetrumparchive.com/?results=1&searchbox=%22caravan+%2B+middle%22.

@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump) "The Do Nothing Democrats and their leader, the Fake

News Lamestream Media, are doing everything possible to hurt and disparage our Country. No matter what we do or say, no matter how big a win, they report that it was a loss, or not good enough. The Enemy of the People! " *Twitter*, 5 May 2020, 12:55 p.m., www.thetrumparchive.com/?retweet=%22false%22&results=1&searchbox=%22enemy+of+the+people%22.

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@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump) "These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever! " *Twitter*, 6 Jan. 2020, 6:01 p.m.,

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@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump) "The Swine Flu (H1N1), and the attempt for a vaccine by the Obama Administration, with Joe Biden in charge, was a complete and total disaster. Now they want to come in and take over one of the “greatest and fastest medical miracles in modern day history.” I don’t think so! " *Twitter*, 11 Dec. 2020, 7:22 a.m.,

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@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump). "They do stories so big on Elizabeth "Pocahontas"

Warren's crowd sizes, adding many more people than are actually there, and yet my crowds, which are far bigger, get no coverage at all. Fake News! " *Twitter*, 27 Aug. 2019, 6:04 p.m., www.thetrumparchive.com/?searchbox=%22crowds%22.

@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump) "They (his handlers) ripped Sleepy Joe off the stage yesterday when he got lost in a 'mental fog'. A disaster. Very little reporting on this! " *Twitter* , 27 Oct. 2020, 11:35 a.m.,

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@realDonaldTrump (Donald J. Trump). "When a Kennedy loses a Democrat Primary in Massachusetts, by a lot, it just shows how far LEFT that party has gone. Joe Hiden' will never be able to hold them back." *Twitter*, 2 Sept. 2020, 12:34 p.m.,

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