

Trump, the Quintessential American

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The Nation/People Always Get the Leader They Deserve

Donald Trump is part of the peculiar breed Herman Melville described in his novel "The Confidence-Man," in which the main character uses protean personas, flattery and lies to gain the confidence of his fellow passengers to fleece them on a Mississippi River steamboat. "Confidence men," as Melville understood, are an inevitable product of the amorality of capitalism and the insatiable lust for wealth, power and empire that infects American society. Trump's narcissism, his celebration of ignorance—which he like all confidence men confuses with innocence—his megalomania and his lack of empathy are pathologies nurtured by the American landscape. They embody the American belief, one that Mark Twain parodied in "Pudd'nhead Wilson," F. Scott Fitzgerald excoriated in "The Great Gatsby" and William Faulkner portrayed in the depraved Snopes clan, that it does not matter in the crass commercialism of American society how you obtain wealth and power. They are their own justifications.



American culture is built on a willful duplicity, a vision we hold of ourselves that bears little resemblance to reality. Malcolm Bradbury wrote "that in America imposture is identity; that values are not beliefs but the product of occasions; and that social identity is virtually an arbitrary matter, depending not on character nor an appearance but on the chance definition of one's nature or colour." We founded the nation on genocide and slavery, ravage the globe with endless wars and the theft of its resources, enrich an oligarchic elite at the expense of the citizenry, empower police to gun down unarmed citizens in the streets, and lock up a quarter of the world's prison population while wallowing in the supposed moral superiority of American white supremacy. The more debased the nation becomes, the more it seeks the reassurance of oily con artists to mask truth with lies.

Trump, like most con artists, is skilled at manufacturing self-serving news and a fictional persona that feed the magical aura of his celebrity. The showman P.T. Barnum is the prototype of this strain of Americanism. In the 1830s, he exhibited Joice Heth, an elderly African-American slave who he claimed was the 161-year-old former nurse of George Washington. When Heth lost her novelty, Barnum announced that what he had been displaying was a robot. "The fact is, Joice Heth is not a human being," he wrote to a Boston newspaper, "... simply a curiously constructed automation, made up of whalebone, india-rubber, and numerous springs ingeniously put together and made to

move at the slightest touch, according to the will of the operator. The operator is a ventriloquist." The crowds, which at their height had collectively paid \$1,500 a week (then a huge sum) to see Heth, returned in droves to see the supposed machine. After Heth died in 1836 at age 79 or 80, Barnum sold tickets to her autopsy, which was viewed by 1,500 paying customers.

"[Barnum] began to demonstrate the countless variations he would master in his numerous publicity campaigns: the quick discovery, the barrage of rapid and unusual information, the maximum exploitation—all these he utilized almost immediately," Neil Harris wrote in "Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum." "It was during Joice Heth's tour that Barnum first realized that an exhibitor did not have to guarantee truthfulness; all he had to do was possess probability and invite doubt. The public would be more excited by controversy than conclusiveness. The only requirement was to keep the issue alive and in print. Any statement was better than silence."

Barnum, schooled in the wily deceits of Yankee peddlers and salesmen as a child in Connecticut, also built the first temples to celebrities, including, in 1841, the American Museum in New York City, which Twain called "one vast Peanut stand" and said he hoped "some philanthropist" would burn down. Barnum was the high priest of the polytheistic, secular religion of Americans and the creator of kitsch as an aesthetic, characteristics that define Trump. Trump built his own temples to celebrity and to himself, among them the Trump Taj Mahal casino in Atlantic City and Trump Towers in various cities. Trump, like Barnum, understood that celebrities and their relics function in American culture as totems and magical talismans. He, as did Barnum, caters to the vulgarity of the mob, elevating the salacious and the sleazy and claiming it is culture and art.

Confidence men are adept at peddling fictions designed solely to attract publicity and belittle their opponents. Trump's demand for Barack Obama's birth certificate or Sen. Elizabeth Warren's DNA test was not designed to uncover fact, but to belittle and entertain. The release of Obama's birth certificate and Warren's DNA finding did not puncture the lies. Old lies were replaced by new ones that again catered to the emotional yearnings of the mob. The tawdry rumor that Eliot Spitzer, the disgraced former governor of New York, wore black dress socks when he was having sex with prostitutes was given currency by the political operative and Trump confidant Roger Stone, cut from the same lump of clay as Barnum and Trump. "What kind of guy does it with his socks on?" Stone said to the New York Post.

In a documentary film about Spitzer by Alex Gibney titled "Client 9" Gibney interviews a prostitute, whose identity remains secret and whose words are read by an actor, who said she had numerous liaisons with Spitzer and denied he wore socks while having sex. Because of Stone's comments, however, Spitzer felt compelled to deny, in Gibney's film and in public, that he wore socks while having sex with prostitutes. The press had a feeding frenzy. Stone's lie won by being endlessly repeated.

Stone, in the midst of the self-generated furor, wrote an article on Tucker Carlson's The Daily Caller website that attacked those who questioned his assertion:

In his largely fictionalized movie, Gibney utilizes an actress to assert that Spitzer never wore droopy black socks in his romps with prostitutes. Supposedly the actress is mouthing the denial of a call girl that Gibney declines to identify by her real name. That's because Gibney has no source willing to put their name on this lie. Gibney is not a journalist or filmmaker; he's a left-wing propagandist with the same disregard for facts as Oliver Stone. Spitzer's black sock fetish was previously confirmed by The New York Post on April 24, 2008, when an FBI source confirmed the New York Democrat's passion for knee-high hosiery, which he declined to remove while engaging in paid-for sex. Gibney ignored this fact in his well-made-but-false movie.

Stone, like Trump, understands how to evoke images and emotional responses to overwhelm reality and replace truth. Such lies and pseudo-events, because they are so entertaining, are largely immune to deflation. Madison Avenue advertisers and publicists use the same tactics to saturate the landscape with skillfully manufactured illusions and false promises. The unmasking of the deceptions only adds to their allure and power.

An autobiography by Barnum, "Struggles and Triumphs," which was published in 1869, shamelessly details the sleights of hand and deceptions that made him very, very wealthy. He understood, as he wrote in the autobiography, that "the public appears disposed to be amused even while they are conscious of being deceived." This understanding underlies the popularity of entertainments such as professional wrestling and reality television shows, along with Fox News, all of which are premised on cons.

Con artists like Barnum, Trump and Stone exploit everyone and everything around them. When Barnum's prize elephant Jumbo was killed by a train, he fabricated a story about Jumbo sacrificing himself to save a baby elephant. He bought another elephant, who he named Alice, and had pictures taken of her standing next to the stuffed body of her martyred "husband." The deception was so outrageous and shameless that the public of that day, like a public that now gorges itself on reports of Spitzer wearing black socks while having sex with prostitutes, longed to believe it.

In our Barnumesque culture, those who create the most convincing fantasies in the cycles of nonstop entertainment are lionized. Those who puncture the fantasies with the prosaic truth are condemned for spoiling the fun. These pseudo-events and fabrications lift people up out of their daily lives into an Oz-like world of fantasy. They destroy a civil discourse rooted in verifiable fact, obliterating any hope of holding back the magical thinking that lies at the core of all totalitarian societies.

Barnum once asked E.D. Gilman, who had recently returned from the gold fields in California, to give a talk on prospecting, the wages prospectors earned, the equipment that was required and the living conditions. "While doing this," Harris wrote, "he was to pass his hand over a twenty-five pound lump of gold, implying it was from California. Gilman replied that this would be humbug, for seven ounces was the largest lump he had ever heard of. 'My dear sir,' replied the impresario, 'the bigger the humbug, the better the people will like it.' "

Thomas Low Nichols in a memoir described an incident when Barnum was in desperate need of a blackface entertainer after his white singer quit. All he could find to replace his white singer was a young, talented black boy who danced and sang. It was impossible for Barnum to present the genuine article, given the yearning for illusion and his shameless catering to racial prejudice. Barnum "blackened and wigged" the boy, Harris wrote, so he would pass for a make-believe African-American, "because the New Yorkers, who applauded what they supposed a white boy in a blackened face and wooly wig, would have driven the real negro from the stage and mobbed his exhibitor."

Trump, in a 2005 promotional video for a scam that made him about \$40 million, employs the familiar hyperbole of the con artist in declaring: "At Trump University, we teach success. That's what it's all about—success. It's going to happen to you. We're going to have professors and adjunct professors that are absolutely terrific—terrific people, terrific brains, successful. We are going to have the best of the best. These are people that are handpicked by me."

Only there was no university.

"The faux university also did not have professors, not even part-time adjunct professors, and the

‘faculty’ (as they were called) were certainly not ‘the best of the best,’ ” David Cay Johnston writes in “The Making of Donald Trump.” “They were commissioned sales people, many with no experience in real estate. One managed a fast food joint ... two other instructors were in personal bankruptcy while collecting fees from would-be Trump university graduates eager to learn how to get rich.”

“Among [an] investigator’s findings was that students who attended a ‘next level’ seminar ‘are taught to prey upon homeowners in financial turmoil and to target foreclosure properties,’ ” Johnston writes. “They were also instructed, on the first morning of the three-day course, ‘to call their credit card companies, banks, and mortgage companies and ask for an increase or extension of credit so that they may finance the ‘Gold Elite’ package purchase. Defendant Trump U will even ask attendees to call their bank during these one-on-one sessions while the [Trump] representative waits. The primary goal of the 3-day seminar appears to be more high-pressure sales tactics in an attempt to induce them into purchasing Defendant Trump U’s ‘Gold Elite’ package for \$35,000.”

Trump’s get-rich-quick schemes and seminars, including his books, were a con. His casinos were a con. His paid speeches on behalf of self-help gurus such as Tony Robbins were a con. Tales of his sexual prowess, spread by himself masquerading over the phone as a Trump spokesperson, were a con. His building projects were a con. Trump even had, Johnston writes, “imaginary employees.” Trump and his kleptocrats and grifters are today triumphant, and neither democratic norms or simply human decency will inhibit their pathological lust for more.

Perhaps it was inevitable that this poison would come to dominate our culture and our politics. It is the triumph of artifice. We live in an age when the fake, the fraudulent, the fabricated and the theatrical supplant reality. Trump’s manufactured persona was advertised on a reality television show. He sold this manufactured persona, as his ratings declined and he was in danger of being taken off the air, to become president. There are legions of agents, publicists, consultants, scriptwriters, celebrities, television and movie producers, wardrobe consultants, pollsters and television personalities dedicated to creating the myriad illusions that saturate the airwaves with Barnum-like lies. We can no longer tell the difference between illusion and reality; indeed when a version of reality is not verified on our electronic screens and by our reality manipulators it does not exist. The skillful creation of illusion and the manipulation of our emotional response, actions that profit the elites to our financial and political detriment, have seeped into religion, education, journalism, politics and culture. They solidify mob rule and magical thinking. Trump’s crass vulgarity, greed, unchecked hedonism and amorality, along with his worship of himself, are intrinsic to America, but his ascendancy, and the ascendancy of the character traits he personifies, represents cultural death.

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