

Satires 2: What's Wrong with Donald Trump?

(A polemic by Bea Groves-McDaniel, July 2026. Part of the 'Satires' series of writings.)

There is a scene in Mary Trump's *Too Much and Never Enough* (2020) that I find myself returning to. She describes a family gathering in the early 1990s, watching her uncle Donald arrive and immediately begin working the room in the way he always did: demanding attention, dispensing with it when he didn't receive it immediately, and retreating into predictable aggression when neither was forthcoming. He was already a grown man in his forties, already a billionaire (or so the family mythology claimed), already a fixture of New York tabloids, and what Mary noticed was not cruelty in the conventional sense. Cruelty, she came to understand, requires a certain cognitive and emotional effort. What she was watching was something more fundamental: a man whose default setting, when the world failed to deliver what he believed he was owed, was to diminish, mock, or destroy whatever stood in the way. He was having, as Geordies often say about their kids, a 'paddy' in public.

The scene did not end, of course. It has been playing out in public for forty years, on a scale and with consequences that a family gathering in Queens could not have anticipated. But the pattern was established early, and it has not fundamentally changed. He is the same person who refused to visit his brother's grave because it was raining and who told his niece she was not attractive enough to deserve more than a standard inheritance.

None of this is metaphor. It is simply who he is, at the deep-in-the-bone level, demonstrated repeatedly across decades, and yet somehow insufficient to prevent him from becoming President of the USA. Twice. The world, it seems, has a sense of humour.

Let us be clear from the outset: this is not a clinical assessment. **The Goldwater Rule** exists for good reason, and I have no intention of violating it. What I am interested in is the behaviour patterns, consequences, and the question of how a man who displayed these tendencies so openly, so repeatedly, (and so documentably) managed not merely to survive American politics but to become its defining figure.

That question has an answer, and it is not flattering to the rest of us.

The Ascent: How Did This Happen?

The standard account of Trump's rise focuses on 2015 and the announcement speech in which he described Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists. This is accurate but insufficient.

Trump had been a public figure for four decades before that moment. He had been a tabloid fixture, a bankrupt casino operator (how do you bankrupt a *casino*? It defies the basic economics of sucker optimism), a serial liar about his wealth (Forbes estimated his net worth at \$450 million in 1982; he told them it was \$500 million annually in income, which is not how wealth works), a man who settled racial housing discrimination lawsuits, and the face of a reality television show that celebrated bullying as entertainment.

Americans knew who he was. Or rather, they knew a version of who he was, and many of them did not care. Or perhaps they were amused in a schadenfreude manner? Or perhaps they just wanted to give US politics the finger?

What made 2016 different was not Trump changing but the soil he grew in changing. The financial crisis of 2008 had shattered whatever remained of the social contract in large swaths of the American heartland's consciousness. A generation of workers whose jobs had been exported, whose pensions had been looted, and whose towns had been hollowed out was ready to believe that any disruption was better than the stable misery they were already living. Obama's election, meanwhile, had triggered a racial panic that the Republican establishment had been stoking for years but could not fully control. The dog had caught the car, and now what was it going to do with it?

A woman who had spent three decades preparing for the presidency, who had an unimpeachable command of policy, who had been a senator and a secretary of state, was running against a man who could not keep a sentence together, and the 'but her emails' operation succeeded not because of what Hillary Clinton had done but because of what a large portion of the electorate already believed about women who sought power. The fixer, it seems, is always more believable than the person being fixed.

Trump was not a Republican in any ideological sense. He was a vessel for rage, and the Republican Party discovered, somewhat to its own surprise, that rage was willing to follow wherever Trump pointed it. So, the party of free trade became the party of tariffs. The party of family values embraced a man who had paid hush money to a porn star. The party of Christian morality turned out in record numbers for a man who could not name a Bible verse and had never set foot in a church except for photo opportunities (one suspects he found churches disappointing on account of the absence of a green room and the presence of other humans who were not there specifically to admire him). The transformation was not ideological. It was a host/body takeover, and the host discovered it could not eject the parasite.

John Kelly, a retired Marine general who served as Trump's chief of staff, later described the experience as "*the most unprofessional environment I have ever worked in*" and said Trump was "*the most flawed person*" he had ever encountered. Other generals who served in the administration said similar things, privately at first and then, after leaving, more publicly. The pattern was consistent: those who worked closest to him understood most clearly that he was not fit for the office. And yet he held it for four years and then won again. Even with Trump's overt lunacies on display. One begins to suspect that the problem is not with the generals.

The Justification of Hatred

Trump's political method depended on the construction of enemies. This was not subtle or coded. In his first campaign he attacked Mexican immigrants. In his second term he launched mass deportations, separated children from parents at the border (and then, because the cruelty apparently needed to be particularly thorough, lost track of many of those children's parents), and banned transgender people from military service. He rolled back protections for disabled students, for LGBT+ federal workers, for anyone whose existence conflicted with a particular vision of American normality that had more to do with nostalgia for a country that had never quite existed than with any coherent political philosophy.

The interesting question is not whether these attacks happened (they did; they are documented and they are not seriously disputed even by his defenders) but how they were justified within a political framework that claimed to value individual liberty and limited government. The answer is that the justification was always contingent and always convenient. The same man who called for small government when it suited him had no hesitation whatsoever in using the full weight of federal power

against the people he had designated as threats. Principles, it turns out, are like toilet paper: useful when convenient, disposed of without ceremony when circumstances change.

Consider the patterns. When an NFL quarterback knelt during the national anthem to protest police violence against Black Americans, Trump called the player a "*son of a bitch*" and demanded his firing. When white supremacists marched in Charlottesville chanting "*Jews will not replace us*," Trump said there were "*very fine people on both sides*." When white nationalist and Islamophobe Stephen Miller built the family separation policy, Trump defended Miller as a patriot. When his own supporters attacked the Capitol on January 6th, he told them he loved them and that they were special. One does not have to believe in the fundamental goodness of humanity to find this sequence, shall we say, instructive.

The justification for hatred under Trump was **never a philosophy**. It was a reflex. When he needed a group to blame for whatever was bothering his supporters, he reached for the nearest available minority. The economy struggled: it was the fault of immigrants. COVID deaths mounted: it was the fault of China and, by extension, Asian Americans (one should note that this was a pandemic that killed thousands of Americans but his response was to call it a hoax, suggest injecting disinfectant, and then claim credit for the vaccine that he had actively undermined). When he lost an election, the culprit was Dominion voting machines, antifascists, and Black and Latino voters in cities he had never bothered to campaign in. The pattern is as consistent as it is exhausting to enumerate.

What made this work politically was the deliberate cultivation of a media ecosystem that would amplify his framing and protect him from correction. Fox News was central to this, but it extended well beyond Fox. The creation of an information environment in which his supporters could live entirely inside a reality bubble shaped by his preferences meant that fact-checking was not merely ineffective; it was reframed as evidence of elite contempt. **The more he lied, the more fact-checking became proof that the facts were rigged against him.** It was, in its own perverse way, a masterpiece of the liar's dilemma: if you control the epistemological framework, the content of specific claims becomes almost irrelevant.

Fascism, Ideology, or Something Else?

The question of whether Trump is a fascist has generated an enormous corpus of literature and a fair amount of furious heat. I want to sidestep the definitional debate about fascism in favour of something more empirically useful: **what did he actually do, and what did he try to do?**

He attempted to use the Justice Department to overturn an election. He pressured state officials to 'find' votes he did not have. He incited a mob to attack the Capitol while Congress was certifying the election results. He kept classified documents in an unsecured location (at a golf club, because, of course, at a golf club) and refused to return them. He rewarded loyalists and punished critics within the federal government with a thoroughness that would have impressed a Soviet apparatchik. He expressed admiration for authoritarian leaders (anyone heard of Putin?) and contempt for democratic institutions.

Is this fascism? By some definitions, yes. By others, no, because fascism traditionally involves a mass mobilising ideology and a revolutionary project. Trump has shown little interest in ideology beyond his own aggrandisement. He is not, heaven knows, going to read Jason Stanley. What he has shown is a consistent preference for power exercised without constraint and an understanding of democratic institutions primarily as obstacles to his will. He has a shark-like instinct for the sort of ethnic and cultural nationalism that has historically preceded some very dark chapters.

The more useful observation is that whether or not he is a fascist by some technical definition, he has consistently displayed the **behavioural markers** that historians and political scientists associate with

authoritarian populism. He attacks the press as an enemy. He attacks the judiciary as politically motivated when it rules against him. He attacks elections as rigged when he loses them. He rewards loyalty over competence in appointments. He shows no attachment to constitutional norms except when they serve his interests. **These are not ideological positions. They are behavioural patterns.**

Jason Stanley, in *How Fascism Works* (2018), argued that fascism is less a specific ideology than a set of political techniques. By that measure, Trump employs fascism's methods while remaining, at his core, something more hollow: **a man whose political convictions begin and end with himself**. He is not a true believer in any system, including the authoritarian one he seems to admire. He is a predator operating in a particular historical moment that has given him unusual access to institutional power. A donkey who has somehow wandered into a cathedral and believes, on no evidence whatsoever, that it belongs there.

What Do the Assessments Say?

Mary Trump's *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man* (2020) is the most intimate account we have. Her central argument is that Donald Trump is, in essence, a construction of a family system designed to protect a lying, cruel patriarch and to channel all available attention and resources to the son who showed the most promise as that patriarch's replacement.

Donald was chosen, she argues, not because he was the ablest (his brother Robert was widely considered more genuinely intelligent) but because he was willing to do **whatever** his father, Fred, required, and because he was the most spectacularly empty vessel available. This is the sentence that should keep you awake at night: Fred Trump chose Donald specifically because Donald was the son he could most easily shape, and shaping turned out to mean hollowing out.

The clinical terminology she uses carefully is in some ways the least important part of her account. What matters more is the consistency of the pattern she describes. The person who:

- demanded loyalty oaths from his staff,
- who could not admit error,
- who lied compulsively even when the truth would have served him better,
- who reduced every interaction to a transaction in which he extracted something from the other party, and
- who was incapable of genuine intimacy or friendship,

...is recognisable not just to family members but to dozens of former employees, journalists, and associates who have described essentially the same characteristics from the outside. It is not one person seeing him clearly. It is everyone who was not incentivised to look away.

Other observers have added texture. Bob Woodward (hardly a partisan opponent) documented in *Fear* (2018) an administration in which senior officials genuinely believed they were managing an unstable and dangerous man. John Kelly's description of Trump as "*mechanistically*" incapable of acknowledging error is consistent with what every serious person who worked for him has said. The pattern is not complicated. It is simply widely documented. There is a word for this when many independent observers reach the same conclusion about the same person over decades: it is called evidence.

The Goldwater Rule, for those unfamiliar with it, holds that it is unethical for psychologists to offer professional opinions about public figures they have not personally evaluated. I honour that rule here. What I am describing is not diagnosis but documented behaviour and the observations of people who knew him over decades, including professionals who are entitled to

speak about what they saw. The question is not whether Donald Trump has a personality disorder. The question is what we do with the overwhelming evidence that the man is, by every available measure, **dangerously unsuited to power**. And the uncomfortable corollary: what does it say about a political system that his unsuitability was not merely tolerated but actively leveraged as a qualification?

The Part That Should Trouble Us Most

Here is the thing that I keep returning to.

Trump's behaviour is not mysterious. It is not ambiguous. It does not require insider knowledge or specialised psychological training to understand. You simply have to pay attention to what he says and does, over time, and resist the temptation to explain it away. The man who:

- called for suspending the Constitution,
- praised dictators,
- suggested injecting disinfectant,
- called veterans who died in war losers and suckers,
- groped women,
- defrauded students at his fake university,
- stiffed contractors,
- lied about his assets to avoid taxes,
- paid hush money to silence a porn actor,
- separated children from their parents at the border and then lost track of them,
- refused to concede an election he manifestly lost,
- incited an attack on the Capitol,
- appropriated classified documents and showed them to people who should not have seen them,
- described immigrants as poisoning the blood of the country,
- banned transgender people from serving in the military,
- withdrew the United States from the Paris Climate Accord;
- dismantled environmental protections,
- packed the federal judiciary with ideological extremists,
- attempted to bribe a foreign leader for political dirt on a rival,
- was found liable for sexual abuse.
- was convicted of falsifying business records,
- has been accused by more than two dozen women of sexual misconduct,

...and who has described all of this as evidence of his fitness for office: this man won a presidential election. **And then he won another one.**

The question is not what is wrong with Donald Trump. The question is what is wrong with a political system, a media environment, an opposition, and a citizenry that made his ascent not merely possible but, at a certain point, almost inevitable.

That a man with his documented history could be elected, re-elected, and treated as a victim by tens of millions of people tells you something about the institutional failures, the epistemic collapse, and the deep reservoir of cruelty that exists within apparently functional democracies. Trump is a symptom. The disease is the soil he grew in. And that soil is not unique to America, though America is where it has produced its most alarming harvest.

The facts are not in serious dispute. The interpretation is where the argument lives. And on the facts, there is simply no intellectually honest place to land except this: it should never have happened, and

it is happening again.

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Further reading recommended: Rutenberg, Jim. *The Media Today* and the extensive reporting from The Atlantic, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and CNN's documentation of the Trump years. The facts are not in serious dispute. The interpretation is where the argument lives.
