

Trump's Rhetoric in the Oval Office: The Influence of the 45th President

Anyone who hopes to hold the office of President of the United States has a duty to act in a dignified, selfless manner and be clear in their respect and admiration for the people of the United States. A president's job is centered around public interest and maintaining an appropriate level of peace within and exceeding the nation's borders.

Many Americans, and people abroad, have formed expectations of how a president should act. However, the 2016 Presidential Election brought with it some significant and dangerous changes to the White House that, unfortunately, resonated with several demographics in the United States for a number of reasons.

Donald Trump is a very unorthodox president, embracing his brash, commanding and informal personality from his years as a business tycoon and reality television host. These characteristics along with his unabashedly xenophobic, racist and sexist beliefs and past actions ended up with him serving one term as president, which is still an alarming reality to so many people.

How did this kind of behavior, this kind of history, earn Donald Trump the highest power in the United States of America? What does his time in the White House mean for the future of the nation and the role of future presidents?

By utilizing what I have learned through readings, lectures and videos from our course this semester I hope to meaningfully analyze Donald Trump's use of language

surrounding the topics of race, gender and class. With a greater understanding of his diction we can determine how his actions and words influenced his supporters, presidential politics and the sociopolitical climate and culture that erupted as a response to his time in office.

In my opinion the greatest threat Donald Trump unleashed on America was his solidarity with and reinvigoration of bigots. People who were previously afraid to show their prejudice now had a prominent political figure sharing their prejudice publicly, defending them and their actions and overall opening doors for discrimination across the country.

Several political groups and ethnic subpopulations have been targeted by Trump through his speeches at rallies and also through policy. Mexicans and Latinx people were the main targets throughout the 2016 Election cycle, and Trump's attention has since moved to groups like Black Lives Matter and news outlets save for Fox News. Trump has been labelled a 'bully' for the ways which he talks about groups or people he doesn't like, but the consequences of this rhetoric are far worse than any playground name-calling.

In a chapter from "American Ethnicity: The Dynamics and Consequences of Discrimination" the authors, Adalberto Aguirre and Jonathan Turner, highlight the direct correlation between prejudice and discrimination, particularly in an American setting. If we use a group that Donald Trump has attacked and shown prejudice for in the past as an example, say the Latinx community, the role that prejudice plays in ethnic relations becomes quite clear.

According to the text prejudiced beliefs unfairly and inaccurately present certain aspects of an ethnic subpopulation (Aguirre and Turner). In Trump's speech announcing his candidacy for President of the United States back in 2015, the very first impression he gave for a Trump presidency, he claimed that Mexican immigrants were "bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" (Trump). Not only is this type of prejudice hurtful, but it directly separates the group in question from the majority and places them in scrutiny with that majority, "potentially making them easier targets for discrimination" (Aguirre and Turner).

Secondly, the negative aspects of a group highlighted in prejudice help to legitimize the discrimination of that group because these highlighted aspects make them "undesirable" (Aguirre and Turner). A database compiled of Donald Trump's history with race relations shows that just two months after his candidacy speech mentioned previously, two white men who beat and urinated on a Hispanic man stated that they were inspired by Donald Trump. Trump calls the incident a "shame," but also adds that his supporters are "passionate" (Desjardins). He did not seem to be too bothered by the fact that his words inspired a hate crime and using words like 'passionate' mitigates the severity surrounding the incident even more, almost sounding appraising.

Prejudices and stereotypes also arouse fear and anger towards the ethnic group, creating a tense environment between the majority and minority groups in question. There is almost no need to include statistics or evidence for this piece considering how prevalent violence and aggression towards Hispanic and Latinx people became during the wake of Trump's presidency, but for credibility's sake I will.

Brian Levin, the Director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism found that hate crimes have been steadily increasing across America since 2016, and in California crimes that specifically target Latinos increased by almost 80% between 2016 and 2018 (Anguiano).

This exact same time frame saw Donald Trump become President and his cracking down on illegal immigration from Mexico, spewing claims about immigrants taking jobs from hard-working Americans and the drugs and crime being brought across the border into the states.

The influx of these hate crimes put Latino Americans at higher risk of physical harm, and mental harm due to a lack of confidence in safety and protection from violence. Lisseth Rojas-Flores, a clinical psychologist and professor at Fuller Theological Seminary argues that mass violence acts like an earthquake, rippling out and affecting many people indirectly. "Incidents such as the El Paso shooting impact people far beyond those experiencing the violence firsthand", she says (Anguiano).

Lastly, Aguirre and Turner state that prejudice creates intolerance for diverging ideas and beliefs. This intolerance spans farther than the originally targeted ethnic group and cast discrimination on another subpopulation such as the disabled or elderly. This is a tad more difficult to call out and measure simply because of the multitude of factors that can lead to a group's marginalization.

A possible example of this attitude of general intolerance from prejudice could be found in the rigid belief systems of Trump's base. His most committed supporters and

organizations are not easily challenged in their beliefs, seemingly taking Trump's words as fact in most cases.

Each consequence of prejudice defined in Aguirre and Turner's writing is plainly visible in modern American society. But the values that Americans hold dear and true are in such stark contrast to the concepts surrounding prejudice that this becomes a uniquely American cultural dilemma.

"Most people feel they must justify their acts of discrimination; in a society like the United States, where cultural values emphasize equality and freedom, discrimination, which violates these values, has to be rationalized and made to seem appropriate. Prejudice is one mechanism for doing this because it makes the denial of freedom and equality seem acceptable "in this one case" since "after all, these people are so... [fill in the prejudice]" (Aguirre and Turner).

This quote outlines how values of equality are undermined when discrimination becomes commonplace. Preconceived notions and biases towards a subpopulation are perpetuated by certain people or groups with an agenda to delegitimize that subpopulation with the least general retaliation possible.

By associating the targeted demographic with a defiance of American values, the principles of freedom and equality that are meant to unite us, the discrimination and treatment of the people targeted can appear more understandable or justified. The values we hold synonymous with our privilege as a free and democratic nation are often held too close for some to realize how they are used against us.

As I previously referenced, Trump's behavior as president is unorthodox to the typical decorum of a president, but that's not to say it's completely removed from something we have seen before in presidential politics. Masculinity has very often been a selling point of presidents, as we saw explained and demonstrated throughout the years and various presidential campaigns in the Media Education Foundation's *The Man Card* documentary (2020).

Displaying brawn and ruggedness always nets you points with insecure, patriarchal men who wish for a return to the "good ol' days", which is why it's such a common tactic of campaigns of any kind.

Trump's brand of masculine characteristics is definitely on another level though, completely ditching any balance between diplomatic courtesy and manly authority, leaning much harder into the macho archetype; the tough, non-nonsense kinda guy. Many of his supporters recognize his differences to other politicians and this is definitely not by mistake (or by the stubbornness of the president to act more respectable).

Politicians generally don't perform too well in popularity contests, no matter who they are. The reputation of politicians is marred with distrust from the public, simply because of the position of power that politicians are in and their ability to shape communities to their wants. So when Donald Trump butts his way into presidential politics many saw this as a chance to deviate from the typical, shifty politicians they often heard about and saw on media reports.

Trump began to embrace the positive response to his more callous mannerisms, rarely shying away from making fun of political opponents or bragging about his accomplishments; generally dismissing important topics to talk about himself. For most

of his term this nonchalant attitude towards the responsibilities as president was nothing more than disrespectful and annoying, although on more than one occasion it was clearly more reckless and unsafe.

The severity of the coronavirus pandemic and loss of life that we have witnessed throughout the year has unfortunately given clarity to where Donald Trump's priorities and insecurities as president lie. For several months he seemingly refused to admit to the danger of the virus, and as the United States reached 140,000 coronavirus deaths Trump naively repeated his pipe dream, "it's like a miracle, it will disappear," in countless press conferences and briefings on measures to combat the coronavirus (Miller). Trump also downplayed the concerns that top infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci shared on the coronavirus calling him "a little bit of an alarmist" (Miller).

For months while discrediting these highly respected health officials and their concerns about the coronavirus, opting to spew his own uneducated ideas on how to combat the virus, Trump exhibited toxic masculine traits by never wearing a mask during a public appearance. Rather than show his supporters and the rest of America how they can protect themselves if they have to go out in public, he decided his reputation as a strong and competent leader was more important than the lives of his citizens.

According to an article by CNN Trump confided in his advisers that the image of him wearing a mask would "look ridiculous" and could "send the wrong message" to those whose votes he desperately wanted (Ben-Ghiat). Why would Donald Trump want to risk his own safety and project the idea that wearing a mask is not helpful to the

American people? Likely because he does not want to be seen as weak, or losing the battle to the coronavirus pandemic.

Will H. Courtenay describes a similar phenomenon, or more accurately a product of masculinity in our society, with a quote from another work by Kathy Charmaz.

“When a man does experience an illness or disability, the gender ramifications are often great. Illness “can reduce a man’s status in masculine hierarchies, shift his power relations with women, and raise his self-doubts about masculinity” (Charmaz, 1995, p. 268)” (Courtenay).

With these perceptions of his power and masculinity at stake, and not to mention the fact that he was up for re-election in November, it’s no wonder why Donald Trump would feel the need to portray himself as strong and in control of the coronavirus situation. The less concern he shows to the public, the more confident and meritorious he will appear to the voters, especially to other masculine voters who clearly would not want to stand in support of a man who admits defeat by covering his face with a mask.

Ultimately this is an instance of toxic masculinity, particularly Donald Trump’s ego-inflated masculinity, unfortunately taking precedence over more important matters, which is nothing new for this presidential term.

In this case the president's words and actions are dangerous because they can have deadly consequences for the health of many Americans. In other cases his words are dangerous because of the ignorance they perpetuate about the reality of poverty and the massive wealth gap in America.

Donald Trump has often tried to quantify his success as president with achievements made in the U.S. stock market. He tends to equate a good stock market to a good economy, though the two are entirely exclusive outlooks on the economic prosperity of two different Americas.

About this issue, Daniel Milan, managing partner of Cornerstone Financial Services says, "In one, investors are experiencing a prosperous and promising outlook. The other one, felt by millions of American workers, is fraught with economic loss and vast uncertainty" (Bond). While the wealthiest in America, say the top 5%, are seeing better figures than ever, the other 95%, the laborers who make those figures happen, are in a whole other world.

Especially now as the coronavirus rages on and continues to excessively affect the lives of those at the bottom of the economic food chain, causing greater strife and need for assistance than ever before. Due to CDC health guidelines calling for the mass shutdown of businesses unemployment rose to 20% between April and June of this year, the highest it has been since the infamous recession of the Great Depression in the 1930's (Bond).

This business boom is linked to Trump's massive 2019 tax cuts to the wealthy and to the handouts that he gave to businesses back in April. Before the American people received their first stimulus check in the mail Trump was focused on giving nearly \$3 trillion to help multi-million dollar businesses maintain their wealth amidst the pandemic (Stone). The research director of the Crew watchdog group, Robert Maguire scrutinized the president's actions saying,

“The Trump administration’s dealings with these and other big donors highlight why we need stringent oversight to make sure that the hundreds of billions of dollars sloshing around benefits the American people, and not the president’s donors and political allies” (Stone).

Even before this was the 2019 tax cuts that Trump issued, which pushed the tax rate for the top 0.1% below that of the bottom 50% for the first time ever (Rushe). This was touted as a benefit to the working American because it would cause wages to rise, but that never happened, because the ‘trickle-down’ economy structure only serves to inflate the wealth of the already wealthy.

The real issue taken with how Donald Trump speaks and acts on class disparity is that he simply doesn’t, at all. He grew up around wealth, and has spent his whole life in the realm of the elite, so it’s not a surprise that even as commander in chief his priorities lie with keeping his rich friends happy and most importantly, keeping everyone else poor.

In an interview with Chris Steele, Noam Chomsky laid out the reasoning for this massive disparity between the rich and poor and why it continues to widen.

“The bottom 70 percent or so are virtually disenfranchised; they have almost no influence on policy, and as you move up the scale you get more influence. At the very top, you basically run the show” (Chomsky).

It’s all about maintaining power, keeping it in your own hands. Donald Trump is very aware of the influence that the wealthy have, because they are supporting him financially in order to keep their influence. If he were to admit that there is a wealth gap

and that it has an effect on how our democracy functions, then he would be liable to changing that status and shifting the power.

I couldn't locate an exact excerpt or quote from our readings, perhaps it was mentioned in class, but when we began to talk about class statuses and the gap between them and why they are rarely spoken about, this is one of the realizations we came to. The realization that figures in power have created a social custom in which we do not disclose our finances to each other for sake of courtesy. Someone's finances are a private matter, strictly because if we discussed them freely with one another then we would all soon come to notice the realities and consequences of wealth disparity and rally for change, which is the last thing that people like Donald Trump want.

He has treated poverty as a non-issue, just another typical thing that presidents deal with and everything will be fine because he'll never see the consequences of his policy or words directly. This reluctance to discuss class and its impact on our society is not at all unique to Donald Trump's presidency or any political figure really. It's an unfortunate truth that most politicians simply do not want to be tangled in, so they treat it like it doesn't exist because that's far easier.

For the last four years, as the President of the United States, Donald Trump has pervaded every aspect of American life, touching upon our values, impacting countless communities, and shifting our economic landscape more than a few times. Some of his impact came from the actions he took or the words he said, and others, even more powerful, came from the actions he didn't take and the words he didn't say. Trump, his rhetoric as a leader, and his supporters will continue to influence our nation as the

traditional Republican platform seems to be seeing a revolution with 'Trumpism' at the head of the change.

Rep. Jim Banks of Indiana, the incoming chairman of the Republican Study Committee believes that 'Trumpism' is a beneficial future pathway for the Republican party saying, "If we're going to win the majority in 2022 and win the White House in 2024, our party has to look a lot more like Donald Trump than some of the Republican candidates in the past" (Brufke).

This is definitely a change that should be challenged at all costs. At risk of creating a new Republican party where each member and potential candidate is a Trump clone, the Democratic party has its work cut out for it. The Democratic platform itself has some identity finding to do. A strict stance on certain issues needs to be addressed and determined before the party can move to combat a new Trump era Republican party candidate in 2024.

We, as a nation, not just party platforms, should learn from what Donald Trump did to the moral compass of our nation, and undermined our values. We should never allow a president of his nature to test our democracy like he did ever again.

While Trump has clearly shaken up the Republican party to the degree that there was no platform in 2020 and lots of bigotry, how has he shaped the rest of the nation? Compared to 4 or 5 years ago, is America more divided on issues of race, gender and class because of Donald Trump's stint as the president? Or did the division come naturally from discussion of current events?

It may be impossible to confirm a statement that Donald Trump and his rhetoric has made America worse as president, though the evaluations of Trump's rhetoric and

the examination of their impact that are expressed throughout this paper may shed some light on the answer. Here's to hoping for a less eventful four years ahead of us!

Appendix

Anguiano, Dani. "It's Worse than Ever': How Latinos Are Changing Their Lives in Trump's America." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 7 Oct. 2019, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/06/latinos-trump-hate-crimes-el-paso.

Ben-Ghiat, Ruth. "Trump's Refusal to Wear a Mask Is the Most Revealing Thing." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 12 May 2020, www.cnn.com/2020/05/12/opinions/trumps-refusal-to-mask-is-the-most-revealing-thing-ben-ghiat/index.html.

Bond, Casey. "Stop Confusing The Stock Market With The Economy." *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 1 June 2020, www.huffpost.com/entry/stock-market-is-not-the-economy_l_5ed51666c5b6277cf3c9e0bc.

Brufke, Juliegrace. "New RSC Chairman Sees 'Trumpism' as Future." *The Hill*, The Hill, 19 Nov. 2020, thehill.com/homenews/house/526740-new-rsc-chairman-sees-trumpism-as-future.

Chomsky, Noam. *Occupy Reflections on Class War, Rebellion and Solidarity*. Zuccotti Park Press, 2013.

Courtenay, Will H. "Constructions of Masculinity and Their Influence on Men's Well-Being: a Theory of Gender and Health." *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 50, no. 10, 2000, pp. 1385–1401., doi:10.1016/s0277-9536(99)00390-1.

Desjardins, Lisa. "What Exactly Trump Has Said about Race." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 22 Aug. 2017, www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/every-moment-donald-trumps-long-complicated-history-race.

"Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations." *AMERICAN ETHNICITY: the Dynamics and Consequences of Discrimination*, by Adalberto Aguirre and Jonathan Turner, MCGRAW-HILL EDUCATION, 2018.

Miller, Hayley. "Trump Doubles Down On Claim Coronavirus Will Disappear: 'I'll Be Right Eventually'." *HuffPost* , HuffPost, 20 July 2020, www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-coronavirus-disappear-fauci_n_5f145992c5b6cec246c3c713.

Rushe, Dominic. "Trump's Tax Cuts Helped Billionaires Pay Less than the Working Class for First Time." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 9 Oct. 2019, www.theguardian.com/business/2019/oct/09/trump-tax-cuts-helped-billionaires-pay-less.

Stone, Peter. "Trump's Wealthy Friends Look to Cash in during Coronavirus Crisis." *The Guardian* , Guardian News and Media, 3 May 2020, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/03/trump-coronavirus-wealthy-friends-donors-backers.

Trump, Donald, "Full text: Donald Trump announces a presidential bid." *The Washington Post*, 16 June 2015,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/>