

# The Trump Complex: Its Source and Its Consequences

## 2020

Thomas A. Burns Ph.D.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

### **Introduction**

All humans are aware that they have some limitations, weaknesses, insecurities. It is a matter of degree and whether the personality that contains these negative components is strong and healthy enough to function capably and responsibly. Most individuals either are endowed “naturally” with enough skills, talents, or features – or they develop these aspects of themselves – so they are able to significantly compensate for or overcome their less favorable characteristics. And most individuals are raised in familial and social environments where their positive attributes are supported and confirmed so that their negative aspects are both de-emphasized and contained. The result is that in most instances relatively balanced personalities emerge that are able to successfully engage the challenges of adulthood.

Of course, the reality is that the condition of individual personalities range along a continuum from very well balanced to very poorly balanced with most of us being located in the “adequately balanced” center of the bell curve.

Unfortunately, Donald J. Trump exhibits a great many of the characteristics of a poorly balanced personality. And, while this situation may not be so significant if he had remained in private life where the effects of his impaired personality would be limited in scope, his complex of weaknesses and defensive coping mechanisms have the potential to have profoundly negative consequences for America when – as occurred – he becomes the President of the United States.

Many experts in the areas of personality studies, clinical psychology, and psychiatry have commented on Trump’s personality weaknesses and have offered “official” diagnostic prescriptions. These observations are valuable, but too often they highlight certain characteristics while not offering a full picture of the overall complex that is involved, and especially not the overall complex described in terms that most educated people can consume and understand. I offer the following as a contribution to this more general goal.

### **The Root Problem**

Pervasive insecurity and very low self-esteem lie at the core of the Trump personality “problem.” And unfortunately these weaknesses have persisted through most of Trump’s life from childhood to the present. All the rest of who Trump is and how he behaves stems from this fundamental “impoverished” core. The negative effects of Trump’s early experiences in childhood and adolescence

– especially the consequences of his father’s constant attacks which belittled Donald for his basic lack of ability and his failure to meet expectations – became deep seated. And, unfortunately, these effects were not offset by either the early input of truly supportive individuals and events or later as a consequence of positive early adult experiences. Trump’s clinical psychologist niece, Mary, describes his mother as narcissistic and weak and his father as a sociopath, raising the question of whether there is a genetic component operating here. Whatever the source, Trump was drawn to manifest the sociopathic model that his father exhibited while narcissism runs through the core of his personality. The ultimate result: Trump adopted a complex of unproductive coping mechanisms that he has relied upon throughout his life. These mechanisms prop him up in the short term and in his limited private and business environment, but unfortunately they severely limit his ability to operate in a complex, diverse, and demanding administrative job like the U.S. Presidency.

### **The Failure Theme**

Failure is intolerable for Trump since any evidence of it in his life justifies his father’s core criticism of him as weak and stupid – a LOSER. And unfortunately there has been a great deal of evidence of failure: 1) consistently average to poor academic performance, 2) being sent away as a teenager to a military boarding school – amounting to rejection by his family, 3) many failed business ventures, 4) six bankruptcies throughout his business career – many requiring his father or his family’s wealth to bail him out, 5) refusal eventually by all major financial institutions to invest in or support his commercial enterprises, and 6) two failed marriages. And now Trump finds himself on the potential threshold of failing to be re-elected to what is his pinnacle achievement – the Presidency of the United States. This likely eventuality looms as a result of the exposure of Trump’s misdeeds surrounding his impeachment and his incompetency in managing the Covid 19 and subsequent economic crises. Failure – being a loser – is the underlying theme throughout Trump’s life – start to finish, and he is desperate to avoid a terminal colossal defeat – “losing” the Presidency.

### **The Defensive Coping Complex**

From adolescence, Trump has incorporated a number of coping mechanisms to protect his fragile underlying sense of self and to promote an image of himself as capable and successful. This complex comes across as an interlaced mixture of narcissism and sociopathy, and it stems from his underlying and pervasive low self-esteem as well as possible genetic factors.

#### **I. Claim Superiority and Success**

Trump is constantly announcing publicly how intelligent he is – “a stable genius.” He touts his graduation from the Wharton School of Business as proof of his

elite status as a business man in spite of the fact that at least one of his Wharton professors has referred to Trump as one of the poorest students he ever had. Trump also tries to gain status for himself by associating himself with his uncle who was a professor at MIT even though familial “association” alone is no basis for such a claim. Trump frequently asserts that he is a very successful billionaire business man – high on the list of Forbes wealthiest individuals even though he has six business bankruptcies to his “credit,” and many doubt that he is a billionaire at all. Moreover, many suspect that most of the wealth that Trump has accrued is largely the result of illicit and illegal/criminal activity [more on this later]. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump repeatedly announced to crowds “Only I can do it,” and “I have the Best words.” Trump has even announced that he is so important and powerful that he could shoot someone on the street in view of law enforcement and not even be arrested. Finally there is the entire set of facts that attest to Trump’s need to be viewed as highly masculine: his need to emphasize his height and to force people to him in his hand shaking, his trophy wives, his “locker room” talk about his ability to fondle women, and his multiple affairs while married. All of this in spite of the claims of several women that Trump forced himself sexually on them and the evidence that Trump threatened and/or “bought” the silence of many of these women.

Both individually and especially collectively, these self celebratory behaviors reveal that Trump is very concerned that he will not be seen by others as superior, strong, competent and successful; so he has to go out of his way in his statements and actions to claim these characteristics himself for himself. Such behavior is itself highly suggestive that Trump actually doubts that he possesses any of these traits. In short, Trump has the need to inflate his own image exactly because his own sense of himself is so poor.

Trump’s own claims of superior status are matched by his need to be constantly surrounded by individuals who bestow elaborate praise on his every move. He cannot tolerate to be overshadowed by individuals with real expertise, competence, or achievement; so he keeps a bevy of sycophants in tow to glorify all of his actions and decisions. The unfortunate result: Trump claims to already “know it all” and isolates himself from input and information from really capable individuals, input that may be of vital importance for developing strategic plans to address the concerns and security of the country. His need to be affirmed as the consummate leader is so great that he literally fails to be adequately informed. One example: Trump pays little attention to his daily security briefings – an essential component on the schedule of every president. It is more important to watch TV, applaud all who praise him, and immediately react/suppress any suggestion of criticism. In Trump’s case, success is to be achieved in a “show” of success, not as a result of really doing the work. For

Trump, impression is everything, and managing it “successfully” is the ultimate cover up for any and all actual failures and inadequacies. And the “show” must go on if Trump is to be able to hide from his diminished sense of self worth.

## II. Deny All Failures/Negatives – Project Onto Others

In an effort to distance himself from all criticism, Trump simply refuses to accept any involvement or responsibility. Any problem is the fault of someone else, and wherever possible he will claim an opponent is the cause. 3 am tweets from a man who is an insomniac are Trump’s way to get ahead of the news cycle and try to direct any media discussion in his favor. Trump is always reacting and projecting to others anything negative that touches on him. Trump is so sensitive to criticism because criticism for him means failure. Trump’s self-esteem is so fragile that any indication of weakness or failure must be rejected to literally protect himself from himself. Immediately denying all negatives is the flip side of claiming all positives – whatever the facts may actually support.

Claim all positives and reject all negatives are two components in the Trump defensive complex, and these defensive coping mechanisms lead directly to his constant need to lie. At the point of being in the office of the Presidency for three and a half years, independent fact checking sources have tallied over 20,000 lies for which Trump is personally responsible. He remains the child always claiming either that “Johnny did it” when he is caught with the broken cookie jar in his hand or “Look what I did it” after he grabs the blue ribbon from his opponent and waves it for on-lookers. Lying is the Trump norm to the point where nothing he says can be regarded as reliable.

Equally important is the fact that Trump is inconsistent literally from one moment to another, from one discussion to another, from one individual to another. He contradicts himself all the time, and when attempts are made to call him on it, he just denies that he ever said or did THAT – forget the audio-video evidence. It is success in managing his image in the moment that is critical for Trump. He MUST look good NOW – thus the blond comb-over hairdo for a natural brunette. Impression is everything, and everything is a show. Serious questions exist as to whether Trump lives in the real world or in the alternate reality “show” that he wants to produce, and whether he tends to confuse the two. One thing is certain: Trump must be the highly approved center around which all else revolves. He must be confirmed all the time if he is to be able to suppress his underlying fragile sense of self worth. Lying and inconsistency be damned!

## III. Cheat and Circumvent the Law – Trump’s Descent into Criminality

Trump’s constant need for acclaim on the one hand and his dependency on denial on the other is also the ultimate source for Trump’s decent into unethical

behavior. Noteworthy in this regard is Trump's cheating in late adolescence: paying to have someone else take his college entrance exams and having his sister do his homework and write his papers. And cheating continues to the present – Trump's reported golfing behavior. But involvement in illicit activities escalated significantly as Trump a) moved into his adult business enterprise period, b) continued to fail financially, and c) adopted the Roy Cohn bully model for dealing with others. In this time frame, Trump and his enterprises desperately sought to avoid successive bankruptcy failures. To address this situation, Trump and his business entities relied on outright financial fraud to stay afloat – “cooking the books” to minimize their debts and maximize their assets in their submissions to banks and insurance companies. When most banks and insurers finally refused Trump's applications, further escalation occurred in the nature and scope of Trump's involvement in criminal activities.

At this point, Trump was forced to look elsewhere to acquire the financial resources that he required, and this search resulted in his enterprises becoming engaged in money laundering for Russian oligarchs. In addition, as reliance on these kinds of criminal activities increased and became the norm over the years, Trump became the equivalent of a crime boss heading up a crime family enterprise which itself expanded into a crime syndicate. There is a good deal of evidence [US Justice Department – Southern District of New York, and the New York State District Attorney's Office] that this is the progression that occurred as Trump's real estate enterprises and his connections to Deutsche Bank became established avenues for Russian oligarchs to launder billions of dollars in assets illegally gained mostly from the plundering of Russia's natural resources.

Since Trump and his enterprises became involved in these major criminal activities, Trump's need to hide has greatly intensified – now not just from his low self esteem but also from the unethical and illegal activities that he adopted to avoid failure and maintain his cover. In this process, Trump has rendered himself extraordinarily vulnerable to being exposed and ultimately to being prosecuted, found guilty, put in prison, and rendered a destitute pauper.

If Trump had been more astute, he would have recognized that if he sought public office – much less the Presidency – he would come under the magnifying glass of the media and risk exposure. But Trump lives in the moment and remains desperate to prove that his image as a great success is accurate. So, he has pursued the Presidency and succeeded – at least in gaining a first term – however abysmal his performance has been. In seeking a second term, Trump has put himself on the really BIG stage, and he is in a position to either fulfill his ambition to become “King” [more on this later] or fail in the greatest way possible

– to be “FIRED” by the American public from the Presidency, and to be designated the penultimate LOSER.

Whether Trump is successful or not in his re-election bid, from cheating in academia to syndicated money laundering, it all constitutes layers of cover up so Trump can claim success, deny failure, and protect his weak sense of self.

#### IV. Attack All Opponents into Submission

Gaining, holding onto, and using power of all kinds to control others is a major move Trump employs to hide his weaknesses and to thereby protect himself. In middle adolescence, this is the approach of the Bully in social interaction. Most such bullies learn or are forced to give up this mode of behavior before early adulthood. But some individuals manage to sustain this basic adolescent mode of operation into adulthood where it can be institutionalized in hierarchical military or corporate structures. And a few – like Trump – revert to it in adulthood after failing to gain and sustain power by following the more normative competitive path in business. For Trump, this occurred when in relatively early adulthood he adopted the Roy Cohn approach to dealing with opponents of all types. This unrelieved attack mode of the bully became and continues to be Trump’s core orientation for relating to challenging people.

Attacks begin with name calling – the attempt to demean others with pejorative epithets. They escalate through mockery and false attributions of misdeeds to implied threats to direct legal threats to full blown legal battles. And if this “schedule” proceeds to actual legal contests, they are delayed by so many procedural moves that the substantive issues rarely get addressed before the financial resources of opponents are exhausted and they give up. This is the process that Michael Cohen – as Trump’s long time private attorney – describes in his testimony before Congress and in his recent book.

This is the daunting attack sequence in one form or another that opponents know that they face – including any members of Congress who “step out of line.” And it is the sequence that Trump has employed repeatedly to deny Congress access to the records of his activities that would expose his unethical and/or criminal behavior. Attack, demean, deny, and delay – the adult bully at work abusing both the individual and the system. And for Trump, all of this effort is designed to hide the facts, to avoid being held responsible for his substantive misdeeds, and to protect his image as a successful entrepreneur and President. Under the operative banner of attack, control and hide, Trump has managed to convert the Republicans in Congress and the Republican Party into the Party of Trump. And, as astonishing as it may seem, Trump’s supporters refuse to recognize the reality of Trump and are instead willing to ride the image wave of

Trump as the outsider super hero bringing the “nasty” government to heel. It is not just Trump that is hiding.

#### V. Require Absolute Loyalty

A correlate of the Bully Attack mode is Trump’s requirement of absolute loyalty from all around him. Unmitigated agreement and praise for Trump as “the great leader” is the only way to avoid attack and dismissal. And this rule applies to everyone throughout the diverse and supposedly separate institutions of government – not just to staff and cabinet members. Those who do not obey are removed from their positions and replaced by loyalists, many of whom have virtually no qualifications for the positions to which they are appointed. No matter, if they are not confirmed, just appoint them under the “Acting” title or do not assign anyone at all to the vacated position and so degrade the non-conforming department or institution. Refuse what is in effect the Trump loyalty “pledge” and you either hide and do nothing to call attention to yourself or your actions, or you suffer the attack, dismissal, and perfunctory replacement routine.

FBI Director James Comey is the most obvious example of this process at work publicly, but there are so many career professionals in so many departments that have “failed” the Trump loyalty test and been removed that they are almost uncountable after three and a half years of the Trump Loyalty Presidency. Attorney General William Barr is the most outstanding example of a previously respected head of the Justice Department who has converted himself into a flagrant Trump loyalist. But the list is long of prominent Republicans who have become Trump loyalists after originally characterizing Trump as a total political fake and flake: Lindsey Graham, Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Kellyanne Conway, Nikki Haley, etc. Demanding loyalty from others – and getting it – has proven a very effective way for Trump to protect himself from criticism and to prop up his frail underlying sense of self.

#### VI. Seek Absolute Authority

Trump is all about instilling fear in others in order to control these others. This is the place to which his bully attack mode and demand for loyalty lead. Wielding control, Trump can avoid having his weaknesses and criminality discovered; and total control is total such protection. No surprise then that Trump is an admirer of the political model provided by other authoritarian rulers – Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un, Recep Erdogan, etc. Autocrats, dictators, and despots all fit this model which is fundamentally anti-democratic and – given the Constitution of the United States – particularly anti-American. But under the banner of “Drain the Swamp,” Trump has managed to significantly undermine most of the institutions and departments of the federal government: the Department of Justice – including the FBI, Homeland Security, the State Department, the

Education Department, the EPA, the Department of Commerce, and the Treasury Department. And with his appointments to the federal court system, Trump is seeking support for his view of absolute authority for the executive.

The overall trend in Trump's actions in his first term has been 1) to suppress a free media – referring to it as “the enemy of the people,” 2) to consolidate power in the Presidency, 3) to deny the authority of Congress to control spending and determine both policy and the law, 4) to ignore/circumvent the law wherever possible, and 5) to control the entirety of the Judicial Branch of government from law enforcement to and through the court system. These efforts constitute the classic opening set of moves that all populist authoritarians have pursued in the past to convert democratic governments into autocracies.

If Trump is successful in seeking a second term as President, it is rather clear that he will continue his efforts to become “President for Life,” like other phony Presidents in the Putin mold. And as President for Life, Trump will not just be above the law; he will be the law. He will be in total control, and with his family and his devoted loyalist associates he will be free to rule the nation as the supreme oligarch claiming devotion to his country while he ignores climate change, empties the federal treasury, and lets the planet “burn” and “drown.”

Under this scenario of a potential Imperial Presidency for Trump, American democracy risks being entirely corrupted, and Trump's entourage will eventually end up – like the regimes of most dictators – fleeing the country that they have sucked dry – all to accommodate Trump's ability to avoid being exposed as the nation's biggest LOSER.

### **Conclusion**

Hopefully this effort to describe Trump's underlying and fundamental low self-esteem as the basis for the many interconnected elements in his defensive coping complex will prove useful for some readers. It is important to understand who Trump is as a “damaged” personality and what “tools” he is willing use to hide his weaknesses and to seek to fulfill his desired image of greatness. Hopefully also, once the complex that is Trump is exposed, the public will realize the grave threat – authoritarianism – that Trump poses for being able to sustain democracy in America and the institutions that support it.

For readers who reject low self esteem as the key source for Trump's behavioral complex, the complex alone – whatever its source – with its egotistical, abusive, deceitful, unethical, inconsistent, autocratic, illicit, and likely criminal features should be sufficient both to expose Trump's incompetence and to reject Trump as a candidate who qualifies for the role of President of the United States.