

How Trump Won:
Media and the Silent Majority
in the 2016 US Presidential Election

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Those who are clever in imagination are far more pleased with themselves than prudent men could reasonably be. They look down on people with a lofty air; they are bold and confident in argument, where others are timid and unsure, and their cheerful demeanor often wins the verdict of their listeners, for those whose wisdom is imaginary enjoy the favor of judges similarly qualified.

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

Abstract

Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign ended in victory because of two powerful forces: enormous media advantage gained through sensationalism and a strong coalition made up of evangelicals, pragmatic conservatives, and the silent majority. The work of Neil Postman sheds light on the underlying cultural foundation of Trump's media advantage. Parallels from the video game industry explain how intentional sensationalism played into Trump's success in the primary process. Evangelicals and pragmatic conservatives joined Trump's coalition in spite of his scandals, and Eric Hoffer's work helps explain his appeal to the silent majority. Ultimately, the patterns of Trump's victory yield significant learning opportunities for future political campaigns seeking to capitalize on the same cultural trends.

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Introduction

This is the end of the world, judging by the shocked outcry that followed Donald Trump's 2016 presidential victory.

The swell of rhetoric surrounding his campaign began on a note of hilarity in June of 2015,¹ and slowly shifted through alarm and outrage before settling on incredulous horror.² As Trump's degree of success grew, pundits ran short on superlatives and started digging into history, eventually dredging up quotes from 'prophets' like H. L. Mencken³ to express their disgust and indignation. Serious attempts to explain Trump's rise to prominence began cropping up around the time the laughter died off. Magazine editors, news anchors, freelance journalists, columnists, and other prominent figures in the public sphere proposed pet theories about Trump's rise and his chances of winning. Many doubted he would become the Republican candidate, and almost none expected him to go

¹Lindsay Kimble, "How Donald Trump Went from Political Joke to President-Elect," *People*, November 8, 2016, accessed April 11, 2017, <http://people.com/politics/donald-trump-timeline-to-presidential-nomination/>.

²Howard Kurtz, Media Buzz, *Fox News*, March 8, 2016, accessed April 1, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/03/08/media-warnings-against-donald-trump-shift-from-aggressive-to-apocalyptic.html>.

³G. Jefferson Price III, "The White House will be adorned by a downright moron," *Baltimore Sun*, November 25, 2016, accessed April 1, 2017, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bs-ed-mencken-trump-20161119-story.html>.

on to defeat the Democratic chosen one.⁴ After he secured the nomination, gross self-confidence settled into his opponent's camp;⁵ Trump's supporters remained hopeful, but almost no one who relied on traditional predictors and models placed their bets on his side of the table.⁶ On the eve of Election Day, one news agency hubristically declared Clinton's victory nigh-inevitable, pegging Trump's odds at a measly 1.6%.⁷

But all the models and theories of pollsters and political scientists came crashing down when the results became clear. As the impact of the outcome sank in, scholars and journalists alike sought to comprehend how such a candidate could have won. Scholars have not yet had sufficient time to regroup, rebuild, and process the event. Journalists, in contrast, unleashed floods of commentary as soon as they knew the outcome.

At first, it may seem prudent to wait for both elements of the post-mortem before issuing a verdict. In this case, though, the very character of the event seems to signal a total failure on the part of the formal social sciences to predict and explain political outcomes in the modern age. Better explanations may indeed be found in the assertions of

⁴Ruairí Arrieta-Kenna, "The Worst Political Predictions of 2016," *Politico Magazine*, December 28, 2016, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/the-worst-political-predictions-of-2016-214555>; James Downie, "Why Donald Trump won't be elected president," *Washington Post*, March 3, 2016, accessed April 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-donald-trump-wont-be-elected-president/2016/03/03/50dafd0e-e169-11e5-9c36-e1902f6b6571_story.html.

⁵Todd S. Purdum, "What Was Hillary Clinton's Real Downfall? Complacency," *Politico Magazine*, November 10, 2016, accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/hillary-clinton-loses-2016-complacency-214445>.

⁶Kenneth P. Vogel and Alex Isenstadt, "How did everyone get it so wrong?" *Politico*, November 9, 2016, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/how-did-everyone-get-2016-wrong-presidential-election-231036>.

⁷Huffington Post, Twitter post, November 7, 2016 (8:25 a.m.), accessed March 28, 2017, <http://twitter.com/huffingtonpost/status/795663593689808896>.

journalists and informal sociologists. To demystify Trump's victory, they point to media influence and simmering class conflict based on deep-seated resentment. Their observations and intuitions deserve rational consideration.

To be sure, dozens of factors—ranging from Trump's physical height⁸ to the large number of Republican candidates⁹—played some role in his ultimate victory, but two elements stand out from the rest: free publicity and the 'silent majority.'

To begin with, Trump's public persona played on the nature of television as a medium. Neil Postman's surprisingly philosophical *Amusing Ourselves to Death* illuminates the biases of televised public discourse and shines a light on how a character like Trump could so effectively dominate the national conversation. This mastery of television as a medium, demonstrated by the billions of dollars of free television coverage he received, afforded Trump unparalleled access to spread his message.

Of course, free coverage means nothing without an audience. As Eric Hoffer outlined in *The True Believer*, mass movements always center on a single individual—one charismatic leader who can offer hope to a frustrated and angry populace. Trump became the voice for a 'silent majority' of marginalized voters, and gave them a channel for their latent momentum. Together, these two elements boosted him to the front of the Republican primary and carried him onward to the White House.

⁸Nikki Schwab, "Who's Too Short to Be President?" *U.S. News*, July 8, 2015, accessed April 1, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/07/08/how-tall-are-the-2016-presidential-candidates>. For a more academic treatment, see Stulp, et. al, "Tall claims? Sense and nonsense about the importance of height of US presidents," *The Leadership Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (February 2013): 159-171.

⁹David Catanese, "The Biggest Republican Primary In 100 Years," *U.S. News*, July 2, 2015, accessed April 1, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/run-2016/2015/07/02/the-biggest-republican-primary-in-100-years>.

Trump and the Media

Explaining Trump's wild success with media coverage begins with a deep look at the fundamental nature of television as a medium for public discourse. Although the internet surged forward to rival it over the last thirty years, television remains the predominant medium, especially among older segments of the population.¹⁰ That bears certain consequences for American culture, which Postman described and lamented in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. His work lays the foundation for understanding how Trump so easily dominated our society's highways and byways of information, and how that mastery became such a massive boon to his campaign, especially during the primary.

Postman, Epistemology, and Television

Surprisingly philosophical in spite of its sensational title, Postman's book begins with a brief account of two dystopic visions. The first, proposed by George Orwell in his classic novel *1984*, assumes that a totalitarian state will erase history, condemn free thought, and break every independent will. The second, woven into the narrative of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, supposes instead that endless entertainment will displace any desire for history, that free thought will be too uncomfortable to be considered, and that individuals will willingly submit to self-imposed social uniformity that guarantees ignorance and bliss. Postman holds that Huxley's vision is already

¹⁰Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Michael Barthel, and Elisa Shearer, "Pathways to News," *Pew Research Center*, July 7, 2016, accessed April 18, 2017, <http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/pathways-to-news/>; Nielsen, "The Digital Age: Young Adults Gravitate Toward Digital Devices," October 10, 2016, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2016/the-digital-age-young-adults-gravitate-toward-digital-devices.html>.

becoming a disturbing reality, and he reflects on this point throughout his book.¹¹

He begins to make his case by arguing that “the concept of truth is intimately linked to the biases of forms of expression.”¹² He goes on to define epistemology as the ways in which people frame, understand, and process reality. Mediums of communication, he says, possess tremendous power to shape these ways of knowing when they become a society’s predominant mode of public discourse, whether the society realizes it or not. To illustrate his point, Postman describes the history of public discourse in America from its beginnings with the printed word in the eighteenth century through the introduction of the telegraph and the photograph and finally to the video camera.¹³

With this groundwork established, Postman attempts to show

that television’s way of knowing is uncompromisingly hostile to typography’s way of knowing; that television’s conversations promote incoherence and triviality; that the phrase “serious television” is a contradiction in terms; and that television speaks in only one persistent voice—the voice of entertainment.¹⁴

He adds several caveats to his invectives against television, admitting that new technologies always involve trade-offs¹⁵ and that seeking entertainment, in and of itself, is not necessarily a bad thing.¹⁶ He insists, however, that television crosses a line by

¹¹Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985; 20th Anniversary Edition, New York: Penguin Books, 2006), xix-xx, 110-111, 137-141, 155-156, etc.

¹²Ibid., 22.

¹³Ibid., 1-80.

¹⁴Ibid., 80.

¹⁵Ibid., 29.

¹⁶Ibid., 87.

presenting *all* subject matter as entertainment.¹⁷ He presents his concrete case for this in the second half of his book, which, after delving further into the underlying nature of television, describes its impact on news, politics, religion, and education.¹⁸

When considering Trump's election, the first two areas on that list bear the most importance. With regard to televised news coverage, Postman indicts television as a medium for annihilating context and promoting incoherence. Televised news, he says, has so accustomed Americans to

a world of fragments, where events stand alone, stripped of any connection to the past, or to the future, or to other events—that all assumptions of coherence have vanished. And so, perforce, has contradiction. In the context of *no context*, so to speak, it simply disappears.¹⁹

This, in part, explains how journalists—who wrote constantly of Trump's undesirable traits, lies, contradictions, and flip-flops—were ignored throughout his campaign.²⁰

(Another significant part of this disconnect can be attributed to blatant media support of Trump's opponent.²¹) However, as Postman illustrates throughout his chapter on televised news, the medium of television has always been acid to the philosophical foundations of logic and rationale. Even in his day, media professionals complained about the public's lack of interest in critical journalism that called out politicians for

¹⁷Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 87.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 99-163.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 110.

²⁰Jack Shafer, "Trump Was Not a Media Fail," *Politico Magazine*, November 9, 2016, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/donald-trump-wins-2016-media-214442>.

²¹Ken Silverstein, "This Election Has Disgraced the Entire Profession of Journalism," *Observer*, November 2, 2016, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://observer.com/2016/11/this-election-has-disgraced-the-entire-profession-of-journalism/>.

inconsistencies and falsehoods;²² the intervening thirty years of public discourse have certainly not made this situation any better, assuming Postman is correct.

He turns next to politics, and argues that the rise of the political commercial further degraded the quality of public discourse in America by squeezing life-and-death debates on foreign and domestic policy, complex social ills, and even the nature of government into twenty second video clips whose main goal is to win votes. Postman writes that commercials teach

that short and simple messages are preferable to long and complex ones; that drama is to be preferred over exposition; that being sold solutions is better than being confronted with questions about problems. . . . [A] person who has seen one million television commercials might well believe that all political problems have fast solutions through simple measures—or ought to. Or that complex language is not to be trusted, and that all problems lend themselves to theatrical expression. Or that argument is in bad taste, and leads only to an intolerable uncertainty.²³

The parallels between these expectations and the televised persona of Donald Trump are inescapable. From the very beginning of his campaign, Trump's policy prescriptions received criticism for being shallow, naïve, and simplistic.²⁴ His patterns of speech took fire for being childish and immature.²⁵ He became the target of ridicule for refusing to back up his platform with rational arguments—or even to offer more details on their

²²Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 108-110.

²³Ibid., 131.

²⁴For example: Reid J. Epstein, "Meet the Candidate: Donald J. Trump," Washington Wire, *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2015, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/06/16/meet-the-candidate-donald-j-trump/>.

²⁵Jack Shafer, "Donald Trump Talks Like a Third-Grader," *Politico Magazine*, August 13, 2015, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/donald-trump-talks-like-a-third-grader-121340>.

execution.²⁶ But each of these tactics capitalized on the biases Postman identified as endemic to television. To dominate public discourse, Trump pushed them to their limits, far beyond what Postman's less reflective contemporaries advised,²⁷ and added an additional element to the mix: sensationalism.

Sensationalism in Marketing

In the midst of Postman's historical account of typography, he relates several key points in the rise of modern advertising. At first, he says, those who issued advertisements wrote them in the form of propositions to a rational audience, which could be expected to respond according to rationally-considered needs and opportunities. As an example, he describes an advertisement placed by Patrick Henry in a Boston newspaper for dental services in 1768. Postman writes that such advertisements "intended to appeal to understanding, not to passions" throughout the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries. In the late 1890s, however, things began to change. Advertisers adopted slogans and images, and by the beginning of the twentieth century "advertisers no longer assumed rationality on the part of their potential customers. Advertising became one part depth psychology, one part aesthetic theory. Reason had to move itself to other arenas."²⁸

Postman revisits this shift away from reason in his chapter on politics, where he asserts that most economic philosophies in the classical liberal or capitalist heritage rely

²⁶David A. Fahrenthold, "Republican candidate Donald Trump's platform: Because I said so," *Washington Post*, August 1, 2015, accessed April 3, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-trump-platform-because-i-said-so/2015/08/01/4684802c-36f7-11e5-9739-170df8af8eb9_story.html.

²⁷Ted Klein and Fred Danzig, *Publicity: How to Make the Media Work for You* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 29-37.

²⁸Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 59-60.

on a free market where rational individuals interact on rational grounds in voluntary exchanges to satisfy individual needs. This “capitalist engine,” he writes, suffers from the rise of television commercials, which have “made linguistic discourse obsolete as the basis for product decisions. By substituting images for claims, the pictorial commercial made emotional appeal, not tests of truth, the basis of consumer decisions.”²⁹

Although he proceeds to elaborate on the implications of this for political campaigns (as described in the previous section), the practice of marketing evolved far beyond Postman’s modest description with the advent of computing and the internet (the importance of which he underestimated³⁰). Marketing fills the modern world and has become a business in and of itself, serving the needs of individuals and businesses which want an edge in their unique markets. In some cases, unconventional techniques produce spectacular results.

For example, in the entertainment industry (ironically enough), video game company Rockstar became infamous in 1997 with the release of *Grand Theft Auto*, its first major title. At the time, violence in video games often earned disapproving remarks and condemnation from conservative sources, both in America and elsewhere. A game based on living a life of murder, theft, and robbery could not expect to meet with the approval of prevailing authorities—but that was the whole point. Political actors in Britain, France, and Germany condemned the game prior to its launch. Brazilian

²⁹Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 127.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 161.

authorities banned the game outright.³¹ It even received a negative mention in the UK House of Lords. All of these actions served to fuel the game's publicity, and by 1999 it had sold over one million copies. The mastermind behind this scheme was Max Clifford, a so-called "specialist in scandal" hired by Rockstar in 1997. He had worked behind the scenes to bring the game to the attention of newspapers, conservative activists, and even individuals like Lord Campbell of Croy, the man who vilified it before his peers in Parliament.³² Earlier in his career, Clifford had earned notoriety as a publicist for comedian Freddie Starr, whose name returned to common usage after the headline "Freddie Starr Ate My Hamster" appeared in *The Sun*. Clifford had falsified the story, but it became a sensation and boosted Starr's career back into the spotlight.³³

Rockstar's exploitation of controversy continued as it released sequels to its first major hit. The 2001 World Trade Center attacks, hitting less than a month before the release of *Grand Theft Auto III*, delayed the production schedule while developers scaled back inflammatory gameplay elements, over-the-top violence and sexual content. Even so, the game met with an even higher degree of moral outrage than previous installments. Australian authorities banned the game and activist Jack Thompson filed a lawsuit against the developers. Notoriety again fueled sales, and within two months the game

³¹Rus McLaughlin and Lucas M. Thomas, "IGN Presents the History of Grand Theft Auto," *IGN*, May 6, 2013, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/05/06/ign-presents-the-history-of-grand-theft-auto-2>, 1.

³²Chris Kohler, "How *Grand Theft Auto* Jacked the House of Lords," *Wired*, March 27, 2012, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2012/03/grand-theft-auto-jacked/>.

³³"Profile: Max Clifford," *BBC*, March 23, 2009, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/7923415.stm>.

became the top-selling title of 2001.³⁴

In 2005, a misstep occurred involving a sexually explicit mini-game that the developers had planned, designed, and then cancelled, but forgot to remove from the game's source code.³⁵ Other than that, nothing changed very greatly for Rockstar until late 2013, when it released *Grand Theft Auto V* under another storm of criticism. This time, the studio had constructed and implemented a fully interactive torture scene into the game's storyline.³⁶ In spite of the controversy (or perhaps because of it), the game sold over 45 million copies by early 2015,³⁷ and set a world-record for the highest release day sales for a video game at \$800 million.³⁸

Rockstar is far from being the only beneficiary of intentional provocation, however. Much smaller developers have employed similar tactics to boost sales numbers, crossing lines with much more than just game content. In the early 2000s, prior to releasing *Shadow Man 2*, games company Acclaim put out an announcement claiming

³⁴McLaughlin and Thomas, "Grand Theft Auto," 2.

³⁵Ibid., 4.

³⁶Alex Hern, "Grand Theft Auto 5 under fire for graphic torture scene," *Guardian*, September 18, 2013, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/sep/18/grand-theft-auto-5-under-fire-for-graphic-torture-scene>, via <http://archive.is/R8HHp>, snapshot as of September 20, 2013; Hayley Tsukayama, "Here's what makes torture in video games worse than on TV," *Washington Post*, September 20, 2013, accessed April 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2013/09/20/heres-what-makes-torture-in-video-games-worse-than-on-tv/?utm_term=.64ed9733dc06.

³⁷"Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc. Reports Strong Results for Fiscal Third Quarter 2015," Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc. press release, February 3, 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=2013202>.

³⁸Juliette Garside, "Grand Theft Auto 5 sees biggest ever first-day takings for a video game," *Guardian*, September 19, 2013, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/sep/19/grand-theft-auto-5-first-day-record>.

the company wanted to pay the family members of recently-deceased individuals for advertising space on the tombstones of their loved ones. They called it, jokingly, “deadvertising.” Predictably, such morbid proposals generated outrage, particularly from churches. Word spread and the game sold far better than it otherwise would have. The same pattern repeated itself twice more: first with a tennis game, which Acclaim planned to advertise by training pigeons to fly onto the field at Wimbledon to disrupt tennis matches with the game’s logo painted on their wings, and again with a game called *Turok 4: Evolution*, when word went out that Acclaim would offer cash and prizes to individuals who changed their legal names to Turok at the time of release. In the tennis case, the controversy provoked a response from Wimbledon officials and garnered the attention of the BBC. Every time, the free publicity boosted game sales.³⁹

Each of these schemes came from the minds of Frank PR, a marketing firm founded and operated by Andrew Bloch.⁴⁰ The company’s most controversial stunt for publicity came in late 2002, before the release of *Burnout 2: Point of Impact*. In order to market the high-speed racing game, Acclaim announced that it would pay any speeding fines issued in the UK on release day. The announcement had the desired effect: news organizations picked up the story almost immediately. Officials from the UK Department of Transport condemned the action, stopping just shy of calling it illegal and heavily implying that the company could be held criminally liable if any injuries came about as a result of the plan. From the start, however, Acclaim had planned to retract the statement

³⁹Leon Hurley, “When Games PR Stunts Went Mad,” *Kotaku UK*, December 11, 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.kotaku.co.uk/2014/12/11/games-pr-stunts-went-mad>.

⁴⁰Ibid.

the day before the game's release. According to Bloch, each of his firm's plans received careful strategic consideration before implementation to make sure the company's profits would not end up in the red—or its employees in jail.⁴¹

Perhaps the purest expression of this firestorm-based marketing strategy comes from the game *Hatred*, produced in 2014 by a Polish studio called Destructive Creations. The game, a top-down shooter focusing on graphic violence, tells the story of a serial killer who slaughters most of his hometown's inhabitants before annihilating himself and the rest of the citizenry by blowing up a nuclear power plant.⁴² The game generated controversy in the gaming world because it seemed purpose-built to justify negative stereotypes of the industry and the communities around it. The firestorm stayed within the gaming community itself, for the most part, but the publicity it generated in that sphere made it a best-selling title on the online games platform Steam.⁴³ In a blog post responding to criticism, the developers wrote,

We wish to thank all of our haters and all upset press for a great marketing campaign they've done for us. A week ago, we were a little company from the middle of nowhere, just some guys making some game. Today everyone heard about 'Hatred' and us.⁴⁴

⁴¹Hurley, "PR Stunts"; The Register, "UK Govt slams 'irresponsible' speed camera refund stunt," *Register*, October 4, 2002, accessed April 5, 2017, https://www.theregister.co.uk/2002/10/04/uk_govt_slams_irresponsible_speed/.

⁴²Eddie Makuch, "Gameplay Trailer for Mass-Murdering Shooter Is Beyond Brutal," *GameSpot*, October 17, 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/gameplay-trailer-for-mass-murdering-shooter-is-bey/1100-6423001/>.

⁴³Matt Liebl, "Despite controversy, Hatred is a Steam 'Top Seller,'" *GameZone*, June 1, 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.gamezone.com/news/despite-controversy-hatred-is-a-steam-top-seller-3417142>.

⁴⁴"The first storm resisted," *hatredgame.com*, October 21, 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://destructivecreations.pl/inny-wpis-2/>.

Similar examples show up in dozens of other arenas—some intentional, some spontaneous. Trump, however, became the first American presidential candidate to successfully employ the strategy.

Trump’s Sensationalism and Primary Success

From the very beginning, Trump’s active disdain for political correctness⁴⁵ earned him front-page coverage. Focusing on the early stages of Trump’s campaign provides the best examination of this, because sensationalism played its strongest role early on. In combination with Trump’s prior name recognition, it pulled his campaign out of the tabloid pages and into the mainstream news. Later in the primaries, it kept him at the front of the crowd and underscored his name in the minds of voters.⁴⁶ Once he won the Republican nomination, however, it became a liability, and his fortuitous positioning as the leader of an unlikely coalition had to carry him against his Democratic opponent in the end.⁴⁷

At the start, though, Trump’s brash and aggressive bearing won him headlines in major papers across the United States. After laying the groundwork for a serious

⁴⁵“Politically correct: conforming to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters of sex or race) should be eliminated.” *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “politically correct,” accessed April 7, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/political%20correctness>.

⁴⁶Nicholas Confessore and Karen Yourish, The Upshot, *New York Times*, March 15, 2016, accessed April 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/upshot/measuring-donald-trumps-mammoth-advantage-in-free-media.html>.

⁴⁷Alex Isenstadt, Eli Stokols, Shane Goldmacher, and Kenneth P. Vogel, “Inside Trump’s Stunning Upset Victory,” *Politico Magazine*, November 9, 2016, accessed April 8, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/donald-trump-wins-2016-214438>.

campaign,⁴⁸ he built pressure for his campaign announcement and issued a rambling 40-minute speech in which he accused Mexican immigrants of being rapists and drug dealers.⁴⁹ Pundits and commentators descended in droves.⁵⁰ They kept coming back for more as Trump's ostensibly racist comments earned him widespread condemnation and brought down severe business consequences, ranging from the loss of broadcasting deals with the Miss Universe Organization⁵¹ to the removal of his fashion line from Macy's department stores⁵² to the Professional Golfers' Association of America pulling a major event from one of his courses.⁵³ In the midst of all of this, his poll numbers stood firm.⁵⁴

⁴⁸Daniel W. Drezner, "A very important memo to Donald Trump," *Washington Post*, April 22, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/04/22/a-very-important-memo-to-donald-trump/>.

⁴⁹Ben Terris, "Donald Trump begins 2016 bid, citing his outsider status," *Washington Post*, June 16, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/donald-trump-is-now-a-candidate-for-president-of-the-united-states/2015/06/16/5e6d738e-1441-11e5-9ddc-e3353542100c_story.html; Alexander Burns, "Donald Trump, Pushing Someone Rich, Offers Himself," *New York Times*, June 16, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/17/us/politics/donald-trump-runs-for-president-this-time-for-real-he-says.html>.

⁵⁰For instance, see Alexander Burns, First Draft, *New York Times*, June 16, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/06/16/choice-words-from-donald-trump-presidential-candidate/>; Adam B. Lerner, "The 10 best lines from Donald Trump's announcement speech," *Politico*, June 16, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/06/donald-trump-2016-announcement-10-best-lines-119066>; etc.

⁵¹Alan Rappoport, First Draft, *New York Times*, June 29, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/06/29/nbc-to-donald-trump-youre-fired/>.

⁵²Alan Rappoport, First Draft, *New York Times*, July 1, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/07/01/macys-drops-donald-trumps-fashion-line-over-immigrant-remarks/>.

⁵³Brendan Prunty, "P.G.A. Moves Event From Donald Trump Golf Course," *New York Times*, July 7, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/08/sports/golf/pga-moves-event-from-trump-golf-course.html>.

⁵⁴Daniel Victor, "Donald Trump's Lousy Week (Except for the Polling)," *New York Times*, July 2, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/03/us/politics/donald-trumps-lousy-week-except-for-the-polling.html>; Dana Milbank, "Donald Trump is the monster the GOP created," *Washington*

Only a few enlightened writers noticed how he might actually benefit from the excessive media attention.⁵⁵

Around the middle of July, as the seriousness of Trump's presidential run set in, other contenders began seeing him as a nuisance, eating up valuable television space with a doomed campaign. Republican Party leaders worried that he might take his voter base away from the party with an independent campaign once he 'inevitably' lost in the primaries.⁵⁶ The depth of their concerns foreshadowed the mass movement that eventually rallied behind him, but in spite of obvious signs,⁵⁷ many Republicans stayed in denial about his chances in the primaries until his wide-scale success on Super Tuesday.⁵⁸

In the meantime, Trump kept the spotlight by saying one outrageous thing after another. First he attacked nearly two dozen different individuals and institutions in a single speech at a rally in Arizona.⁵⁹ Then he criticized John McCain, insinuating that

Post, July 8, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/donald-trump-is-the-monster-the-gop-created/2015/07/08/5b0bb834-259b-11e5-aae2-6c4f59b050aa_story.html.

⁵⁵For example, Alyssa Rosenberg, Act Four, *Washington Post*, June 29, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2015/06/29/hollywood-is-giving-donald-trump-exactly-what-he-wants/>.

⁵⁶Michael Barbaro, Maggie Haberman, and Jonathan Martin, "Can't Fire Him: Republican Party Frets Over What to Do With Donald Trump," *New York Times*, July 9, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/10/us/politics/donald-trump-republican-party-debate.html>.

⁵⁷Nicholas Fandos, "Donald Trump Defiantly Rallies a New 'Silent Majority' in a Visit to Arizona," *New York Times*, July 11, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/us/politics/donald-trump-defiantly-rallies-a-new-silent-majority-in-a-visit-to-arizona.html>.

⁵⁸Ben Schreckinger, "Trump's Super Tuesday win sets off GOP alarm bells," *Politico*, March 2, 2016, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/03/super-tuesday-donald-trump-220106>.

⁵⁹Philip Rucker, "Trump's trash talk: The 23 people and institutions he slammed in a single speech," *Washington Post*, July 13, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/13/trumps-trash-talk-the-23-people-and-institutions-he-slammed-in-a-single-speech/>.

McCain's five years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam made him a loser instead of a hero.⁶⁰ *New York Times* pundit Nate Cohn asserted that this marked a pivot into decline, saying, "His support will erode as the tone of coverage shifts . . . to reflecting the chorus of Republican criticism."⁶¹ When Trump's poll numbers did not immediately confirm his prediction, he doubled down, saying it might just be a delayed response.⁶²

In his performance at the first GOP debate in Cleveland, Ohio, Trump reiterated his refusal to pledge his support to the eventual Republican nominee, regardless of who it might be.⁶³ In spite of this, and in spite of his heated interaction with Megyn Kelly, the Fox News moderator, his victory over the other candidates on stage was undeniable.⁶⁴ The media made hay out of his 'history of flippant misogyny' and the subsequent exchanges with Kelly for days afterward⁶⁵ before moving on to cover various attacks on

⁶⁰Jonathan Martin and Alan Rappoport, "Donald Trump Says John McCain Is No War Hero, Setting Off Another Storm," *New York Times*, July 18, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/us/politics/trump-belittles-mccains-war-record.html>.

⁶¹Nate Cohn, The Upshot, *New York Times*, July 18, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/21/upshot/the-trump-campaigns-turning-point.html>.

⁶²Nate Cohn, The Upshot, *New York Times*, July 27, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/upshot/dont-be-misled-by-the-new-poll-results-for-donald-trump.html>.

⁶³Adam Nagourney, "Donald Trump: 'I Will Not Make the Pledge at This Time,'" *New York Times*, August 6, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/republican-debate-election-2016-cleveland/i-will-not-make-the-pledge-at-this-time/>.

⁶⁴Michael Barbaro, "Donald Trump Steals the Show, Mixing Politics and Pizazz," *New York Times*, August 7, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/07/us/politics/donald-trump-steals-the-show-mixing-politics-and-pizazz.html>; Karen Tumulty and Philip Rucker, "Trump roils first debate among GOP contenders," *Washington Post*, August 7, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/donald-trump-dominates-raucous-republican-debate/2015/08/06/b8a5f0e6-3c79-11e5-8e98-115a3cf7d7ae_story.html.

⁶⁵Karen Tumulty, "Trump's history of flippant misogyny," *Washington Post*, August 8, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-history-of-flippant-misogyny/2015/08/08/891f1bec-3de4-11e5-9c2d-ed991d848c48_story.html; Jonathan Martin and Maggie Haberman, "Hand-Wringing in G.O.P. After Donald Trump's Remarks on Megyn Kelly," *New York Times*, August 8, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/us/politics/donald-trump->

Trump⁶⁶ (as well as the somehow important detail that he got called for jury duty⁶⁷).

Negative publicity only seemed to feed his poll numbers.⁶⁸

The next headline moment of the campaign came in early September when Trump caved to Republican demands and signed the pledge.⁶⁹ Somehow even this became a victory for him instead of a humbling moment. And, of course, news cameras recorded every moment.⁷⁰ In the middle of September, after the second GOP debate, hosted by CNN, pundits noted how much time the cameras spent lingering on Trump or splitting

disinvited-from-conservative-event-over-remark-on-megyn-kelly.html; Jeremy W. Peters and Daniel Victor, "Megyn Kelly Says She Won't Be Cowed by Donald Trump," *New York Times*, August 10, 2015, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/11/us/megyn-kelly-says-she-wont-be-cowed-by-donald-trump.html>.

⁶⁶Ed O'Keefe, "Jeb Bush on Donald Trump's immigration ideas: 'A plan needs to be grounded in reality,'" *Washington Post*, August 17, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/08/17/jeb-bush-on-donald-trumps-immigration-ideas-a-plan-needs-to-be-grounded-in-reality/>; Joshua Partlow, "For Mexicans, Trump's bid is getting scarier," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/for-mexicans-the-donald-trump-candidacy-is-getting-scarier/2015/08/18/b603af1b-b06f-4cd9-a3af-82401e85f363_story.html; Jose A. DelReal and Ed O'Keefe, "Jeb Bush attacks Donald Trump, calls him a long-term Democrat," *Washington Post*, August 19, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/08/19/jeb-bush-attacks-donald-trump-calls-him-a-long-term-democrat/>.

⁶⁷Liam Stack, "Donald Trump Called to Jury Duty in Manhattan," *New York Times*, August 14, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/15/nyregion/donald-trump-called-to-jury-duty-in-manhattan.html>; James C. McKinley Jr. and Andy Newman, "Jury Duty for Donald Trump: 'Amazing,' 'Really Good' and Done in a Day," *New York Times*, August 17, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/18/nyregion/jury-duty-for-donald-trump-amazing-really-good-and-done-in-a-day.html>.

⁶⁸Philip Bump, The Fix, *Washington Post*, August 20, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/08/20/donald-trump-is-a-legit-candidate-these-new-polls-prove-it/>.

⁶⁹Maggie Haberman, First Draft, *New York Times*, September 3, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/09/03/donald-trump-signs-loyalty-pledge-to-republican-party/>.

⁷⁰Chris Cillizza, The Fix, *Washington Post*, September 3, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/09/03/donald-trump-just-won-again/>.

the screen between him and another candidate in heated exchanges.⁷¹ The entire debate, it seemed, centered on Trump.⁷² At that point, a few voices in journalism began trying to deflect critics who charged the media with fueling Trump's rise in the Republican field. Notably, Chris Cillizza of the Washington Post argued that "Trump is getting the attention deserving of a front-runner."⁷³ Although he admitted no other candidate would likely get *as much* coverage as Trump if they exchanged poll numbers, his argument failed to account for the feedback effect. A rise in polls prompts more media attention, which in turn leads to bandwagoning as voters lean toward the candidate that seems most likely to win. Trump merely kick-started the cycle by making himself eminently worth covering—which, Cillizza admitted, he most certainly was.⁷⁴

Another major spike came when Trump argued for the deportation of Syrian civil war refugees.⁷⁵ Later in October, polls showed him trailing just behind Ben Carson for a

⁷¹Chris Cillizza, The Fix, *Washington Post*, September 17, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/09/17/the-12-faces-of-donald-trump-at-the-cnn-debate/>; Frank Bruni, "An Overdose of Donald Trump at the G.O.P. Debate," *New York Times*, September 16, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/opinion/an-overdose-of-donald-trump-republican-gop-debate.html>.

⁷²Jonathan Martin and Patrick Healy, "Candidates Use Second G.O.P. Debate to Taunt Donald Trump," *New York Times*, September 16, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/us/politics/candidates-use-second-gop-debate-to-taunt-trump.html>; David A. Fahrenthold, "Fiorina emerges in GOP debate, but Trump still dominates conversation," *Washington Post*, September 16, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-tonights-republican-debate-its-still-all-about-the-outsiders/2015/09/16/b670b674-5c6f-11e5-8e9e-dce8a2a2a679_story.html.

⁷³Chris Cillizza, The Fix, *Washington Post*, September 15, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/09/15/can-we-please-stop-blaming-the-media-for-donald-trump/>.

⁷⁴Chris Cillizza, The Fix, *Washington Post*, September 15, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/09/15/can-we-please-stop-blaming-the-media-for-donald-trump/>.

⁷⁵Jenna Johnson, "Donald Trump: Syrian refugees might be a terrorist army in disguise," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017,

week or two, which triggered another media storm.⁷⁶ Trump's subsequent performance in the third Republican debate won less media attention, as more stories focused on the antagonism between the candidates and the CNBC hosts.⁷⁷

In mid-November, however, a bloody attack by Islamic terrorists in Paris left more than 125 dead,⁷⁸ completely overshadowing the impact of the fourth GOP debate three days earlier.⁷⁹ In the ensuing weeks, Trump again gained notoriety for reinforcing his stance on anti-terrorism policy.⁸⁰ He indicated support for measures as draconian as

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/09/30/donald-trump-syrian-refugees-might-be-a-terrorist-army-in-disguise/>; Jess Bidgood, First Draft, *New York Times*, September 30, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/09/30/donald-trump-dives-into-policy-details-then-returns-to-unleashing-barbs/>.

⁷⁶Jonathan Martin and Dalia Sussman, First Draft, *New York Times*, October 27, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/10/27/poll-watch-ben-carson-edges-ahead-nationally-in-timescbs-news-poll/>; Philip Bump, The Fix, *Washington Post*, October 27, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/10/27/ben-carson-passes-donald-trump-in-a-new-poll-but-thats-not-the-main-story/>.

⁷⁷John Koblin and Ashley Parker, "Ratings Winner for CNBC Is Ammunition for G.O.P.," *New York Times*, October 29, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/30/us/politics/ratings-winner-for-cnbc-is-ammunition-for-gop.html>; Trip Gabriel, "Donald Trump and Ben Carson Underwhelm Iowa Republicans in Debate," *New York Times*, October 29, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/30/us/politics/trump-and-carson-underwhelm-iowa-republicans-in-debate.html>; Philip Rucker and Jenna Johnson, "GOP candidates tangle with one another—and CNBC—in a chaotic debate," *Washington Post*, October 28, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/at-gop-debate-candidates-play-offense/2015/10/28/fa055882-7da2-11e5-afce-2afd1d3eb896_story.html.

⁷⁸Victoria Shannon, "Paris Attacks: What We Know and Don't Know," *New York Times*, November 15, 2015, accessed April 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/world/europe/paris-attacks-what-we-know-and-dont-know.html>.

⁷⁹Jonathan Martin, "In Presidential Campaign, It's Now Terrorism, Not Taxes," *New York Times*, November 15, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/16/us/politics/national-security-thrust-into-center-of-presidential-race.html>.

⁸⁰Alan Rappeport, First Draft, *New York Times*, November 16, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/11/16/donald-trump-repeats-call-to-inspect-mosques-for-signs-of-terrorism/>; Maggie Haberman, First Draft, *New York Times*, November 16, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/11/16/trump-questions-whether-syrian-refugees-are-trojan-horse/>; Jenna Johnson, "Donald Trump promises to 'bomb the hell out of ISIS' in new radio ad," *Washington Post*, November 18, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017,

mandated registration for all Muslims in the United States, provoking the obvious comparisons to Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler.⁸¹ Fair or not, this comparison followed Trump even beyond his eventual inauguration.⁸²

In early December, another terrorist attack struck a Christmas party in San Bernardino, California, leaving 14 dead.⁸³ Trump reacted with a call to halt all Muslim immigration into the country,⁸⁴ even as his campaign began to gain a reputation for violence.⁸⁵ The New York Times reported that crimes against American Muslims and mosques had risen noticeably since the previous month's Paris attacks, as well.⁸⁶ Russian

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/11/18/donald-trump-promises-to-bomb-the-hell-out-of-isis-in-new-radio-ad/>.

⁸¹Vaughn Hillyard, "Donald Trump's Plan for a Muslim Database Draws Comparison to Nazi Germany," *NBC News*, November 20, 2015, accessed April 11, 2017, <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/trump-says-he-would-certainly-implement-muslim-database-n466716>.

⁸²Dave Urbanski, "Trump-Hitler comparisons continue after Inauguration Day — but experts call such notions unfounded," *TheBlaze*, January 23, 2017, accessed April 11, 2017, <http://www.theblaze.com/news/2017/01/23/trump-hitler-comparisons-continue-after-inauguration-day-but-experts-call-such-notions-unfounded/>; Charlotte England, "Donald Trump using Adolf Hitler's 'Mein Kampf' playbook, says world expert on Nazi leader," *Independent*, February 8, 2017, accessed April 11, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/adolf-hitler-donald-trump-mein-kampf-bluffed-way-to-power-nazi-leader-germany-fuhrer-us-president-a7568506.html>.

⁸³Mark Berman, Elahe Izadi, and Wesley Lowery, "At least 14 people killed, 17 injured in mass shooting in San Bernardino, Calif.; two suspects killed in shootout with police," *Washington Post*, December 2, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/12/02/police-in-san-bernadino-calif-responding-report-of-shooting/>.

⁸⁴Jenna Johnson and David Weigel, "Donald Trump calls for 'total' ban on Muslims entering United States," *Washington Post*, December 8, 2017, accessed April 12, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2015/12/07/e56266f6-9d2b-11e5-8728-1af6af208198_story.html.

⁸⁵Stephanie McCrummen, "Cheers, a punch, a slur. What it's like in the crowd at a Donald Trump rally.," *Washington Post*, December 17, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/cheers-a-punch-a-slur-what-its-like-in-the-crowd-at-a-donald-trump-rally/2015/12/17/ff5bcf76-a4fa-11e5-ad3f-991ce3374e23_story.html.

⁸⁶Eric Lichtblau, "Crimes Against Muslim Americans and Mosques Rise Sharply," *New York Times*, December 17, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017,

president Vladimir Putin helped Trump's notoriety with an informal endorsement,⁸⁷ and Trump received substantial mention in the mid-December Democratic presidential debate.⁸⁸ In the midst of all this, his poll numbers continued to rise, despite dropping just below Senator Ted Cruz's in the first weeks of December.⁸⁹ Pundits kept insisting that he would not win the Republican nomination, in spite of all the free press afforded him by various media outlets.⁹⁰ In fact, by that point Trump had already accumulated more coverage on some news stations than the entire Democratic presidential field combined.⁹¹

In early 2016, the sixth GOP debate showcased Trump's continued feud against Cruz. Journalists declared their exchange a draw.⁹² A few days later, American news

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/18/us/politics/crimes-against-muslim-americans-and-mosques-rise-sharply.html>.

⁸⁷Andrew Roth, "Putin says Trump is 'absolute leader' in U.S. presidential race," *Washington Post*, December 17, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/putin-no-major-gaps-with-washington-over-efforts-to-end-syria-conflict/2015/12/17/a178255e-a431-11e5-8318-bd8caed8c588_story.html; Alan Rappoport, First Draft, *New York Times*, December 17, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/12/17/vladimir-putin-praises-donald-trump-sealing-a-long-distance-bromance/>.

⁸⁸Abby Phillip, "Why Donald Trump dominated the Democratic presidential debate," *Washington Post*, December 19, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/12/19/why-donald-trump-dominated-the-democratic-presidential-debate/>.

⁸⁹Nick Gass, "Trump hits a new high in national poll," *Politico*, December 14, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/12/poll-trump-new-high-216741>.

⁹⁰Nate Cohn, The Upshot, *New York Times*, December 15, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/15/upshot/how-trump-could-win-and-why-he-probably-wont.html>.

⁹¹Callum Borchers, "Donald Trump has gotten more nightly network news coverage than the entire Democratic field combined," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/07/donald-trump-has-gotten-more-nightly-network-news-coverage-than-the-entire-democratic-field-combined/>.

⁹²Jenna Johnson, "Six debates in, Donald Trump shows more polish and control," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-night-was-a-good-one-at-the-republican-debate/2016/01/15/e9fda4f6-bb43-11e5-b682-4bb4dd403c7d_story.html; Steven Shepard, "Who won the first Ted Cruz-Donald Trump duel?" *Politico*, January 15, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/who-won-the-first-ted-cruz-donald-trump-duel-217833>.

agencies had a field day while the British Parliament, acting based on a petition with more than 570,000 signatures, debated whether or not to ban Trump from the United Kingdom. In the end, the MPs decided not to satisfy the request, contenting themselves with insults and self-congratulation.⁹³ Trump scored another endorsement a day later, this time from Sarah Palin, former governor of Alaska and vice presidential candidate for John McCain's failed 2008 presidential campaign.⁹⁴ This marked another strategic move in Trump's attempt to secure his lead on Cruz.⁹⁵ Palin's disjointed endorsement speech drew ridicule from pundits for its rambling, incoherent nature, which—of course—only served to make it all the more sensational.⁹⁶ Perhaps the most emblematic moment of Trump's entire campaign came on January 23, when he claimed he could stand on Fifth Avenue in New York and shoot someone without losing any support.⁹⁷

⁹³Stephen Castle, "British Have a Go at Trump but Shy Away From a Ban," *New York Times*, January 18, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/world/europe/donald-trump-british-parliament-debate.html>; Griff Witte, "U.K. Parliament debate: Donald Trump gets pummeled by the British," *Washington Post*, January 18, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/british-parliament-set-to-debate-banning-donald-trump/2016/01/18/7351d87a-ba14-11e5-85cd-5ad59bc19432_story.html.

⁹⁴Daniel Strauss and Ben Schreckinger, "Sarah Palin endorses Trump for president," *Politico*, January 19, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/sarah-palin-endorses-donald-trump-2016-217983>.

⁹⁵Maggie Haberman, First Draft, *New York Times*, January 20, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/01/20/trump-drafts-palin-in-cruz-fight-a-tactic-with-risks-for-both-sides/>.

⁹⁶Chris Cillizza, The Fix, *Washington Post*, January 20, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/01/20/sarah-palins-rambling-remarkable-and-at-times-hard-to-understand-endorsement-of-donald-trump/>.

⁹⁷Ali Vitali, "Trump Says He Could 'Shoot Somebody' and Still Maintain Support," *NBC News*, January 23, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/trump-says-he-could-shoot-somebody-still-maintain-support-n502911>; Kristen East, "Trump: I could 'shoot somebody' and I wouldn't lose voters," *Politico*, January 23, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/donald-trump-shooting-vote-218145>; Jenna Johnson, "Donald Trump: They say I could 'shoot somebody' and still have support," *Washington Post*, January 23, 2016,

Trump shocked the entire political world near the end of January, however, by pulling out of the seventh GOP debate when he learned that Megyn Kelly would be moderating it. The unorthodox move proved to be counter-intuitively strategic, however, as Trump held a fundraiser for veterans instead and pulled substantial amounts of coverage for his own private event.⁹⁸ In fact, analysis by Politico showed that Trump dominated social media mentions during the debate.⁹⁹

February began with another firestorm centered on the frontrunner's approving remarks regarding waterboarding and other forms of torture. On a CNN talk show, and then later at the eighth GOP debate, he affirmed the use of such methods to elicit information from terrorists and other enemies of the state, insisting that reviving their use would demonstrate strength to America's enemies.¹⁰⁰ He stood by his position when challenged on it later, as well.¹⁰¹ Surprisingly, however, Trump—his polling lead secure

accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/01/23/donald-trump-i-could-shoot-somebody-and-still-have-support/>.

⁹⁸Maggie Haberman and Nick Corasaniti, "Donald Trump, in Feud With Fox News, Shuns Debate," *New York Times*, January 26, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/27/us/politics/trump-feud-fox-debate.html>; Michael Barbaro and Nick Corasaniti, "Donald Trump Takes to Solo Stage Instead of G.O.P. Debate," *New York Times*, January 29, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/29/us/politics/donald-trump-gop-debate.html>; Ben Schreckinger and Anna Palmer, "Donald Trump declares victory over Fox and GOP debate," *Politico*, January 28, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/gop-presidential-debate-donald-trump-declares-victory-218380>.

⁹⁹Nick Gass, "Trump wins night on search and social," *Politico*, January 29, 2016, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/blogs/live-from-des-moines/2016/01/donald-trump-social-search-engine-218391>.

¹⁰⁰Theodoric Meyer, "Trump stans by proposal to revive waterboarding," *Politico*, February 7, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/02/donald-trump-waterboarding-torture-218901>.

¹⁰¹Jenna Johnson, "Donald Trump on waterboarding: 'Torture works,'" *Washington Post*, February 17, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/02/17/donald-trump-on-waterboarding-torture-works/>.

and undeniable—made much less of a stir at the debate,¹⁰² except to accuse the GOP establishment of packing the arena with hostile attendees.¹⁰³ The controversy over torture made headlines again shortly afterward when Trump repeated a supporter’s profane attack on Cruz.¹⁰⁴

In the next debate, on February 13, Trump became something of a punching bag for the other candidates, but this still left him as the center of attention in spite of his comparatively poor performance.¹⁰⁵ The real notable incident in February came later on, when the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, after a trip to Mexico, offered remarks to reporters which indicted Trump for focusing on building walls over building bridges.¹⁰⁶ Trump fired back, condemning the idea that religious leaders could question the faith of public leaders and suggesting that the Vatican would make a tempting target

¹⁰²Aaron Blake, The Fix, *Washington Post*, February 6, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/02/06/winners-and-losers-from-the-new-hampshire-republican-debate/>.

¹⁰³Daniel Strauss, “Trump: Crowd at GOP debate was filled with donors and lobbyists,” *Politico*, February 7, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/02/donald-trump-republican-debate-donors-lobbyists-218892>.

¹⁰⁴Daniel Strauss, “Donald Trump calls Ted Cruz the P word,” *Politico*, February 8, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/02/donald-trump-calls-ted-cruz-the-p-word-218984>.

¹⁰⁵Chris Cillizza, The Fix, *Washington Post*, February 13, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/02/13/winners-and-losers-from-the-8th-republican-debate/>.

¹⁰⁶Jenna Johnson and Philip Rucker, “Pope Francis joins a chorus of world leaders in condemning Donald Trump,” *Washington Post*, February 18, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/pope-francis-joins-a-chorus-of-world-leaders-in-condemning-donald-trump/2016/02/18/560063b4-d665-11e5-9823-02b905009f99_story.html; Jim Yardley, “Pope Francis Suggests Donald Trump Is ‘Not Christian,’” *New York Times*, February 18, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/19/world/americas/pope-francis-donald-trump-christian.html>.

for Islamic terrorists.¹⁰⁷ A week later, in the last February debate, Senator Marco Rubio tore into Trump over and over in what seemed to be a last-ditch attempt to break the billionaire's win streak. Trump, who had just come off of winning the New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada primaries, hardly scored any hits on his opponents in return, but the desperation in their approach spoke for itself.¹⁰⁸

On Super Tuesday, Trump cleaned house, winning seven of the eleven GOP primaries. Once the results became clear, he celebrated with a massive press conference at his Mar-A-Lago estate in Florida. All the major networks broadcast the event live.¹⁰⁹ From then on, his lead only grew stronger. In mid-March, Rubio dropped out of the race after losing his home state primary to Trump,¹¹⁰ leaving Ted Cruz as the billionaire's only serious opponent. Cruz dropped out in early May following a string of primary losses that left him no route to the nomination.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷Nick Gass, "Trump goes to war with the pope," *Politico*, February 18, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/02/pope-francis-donald-trump-not-a-christian-219432>.

¹⁰⁸Chris Cillizza, The Fix, *Washington Post*, February 25, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/02/25/winners-and-losers-from-the-10th-republican-presidential-debate/>; Karen Tumulty and Robert Costa, "Marco Rubio mocks and spars with Donald Trump in 10th GOP debate," *Washington Post*, February 25, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/marco-rubio-mocks-and-spars-with-donald-trump-in-houston-debate/2016/02/25/ac475b2c-dc07-11e5-891a-4ed04f4213e8_story.html; Maggie Haberman, First Draft, *New York Times*, February 26, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/02/26/at-republican-debate-donald-trump-falls-into-the-line-of-fire/>.

¹⁰⁹Shane Goldmacher, "Trump takes 7 Super Tuesday states, Cruz takes 3," *Politico*, March 2, 2016, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/03/super-tuesday-trump-cruz-rubio-carson-kasich-220058>.

¹¹⁰Eli Stokols, "Rubio suspends presidential campaign," *Politico*, March 15, 2016, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/03/rubio-suspends-presidential-campaign-220827>.

¹¹¹Katie Glueck and Shane Goldmacher, "Ted Cruz drops out of presidential race," *Politico*, May 3, 2016, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/05/ted-cruz-drops-out-of-presidential-race-222763>.

Throughout his campaign, Trump also earned attention for his innovative and flamboyant use of Twitter. In contrast with traditional candidates, who often assigned the role to interns or staffers, Trump controlled his account himself and spent hours each day composing messages and interacting on the social media platform. Bands of loyal followers ganged up on detractors to defend Trump's insults and self-aggrandizing pronouncements.¹¹² To catalog the former, the New York Times built an interactive list describing Trump's 325 targets in his own words, and continued to update it past his inauguration and into the first few months of his presidency.¹¹³ One scholarly analysis credited Trump's Twitter success to "de-professionalisation and even amateurism."¹¹⁴ On at least one notable occasion, Trump's Twitter feed became the focus for broadcast news stories, blurring the lines between the two mediums.¹¹⁵

Dozens of press conferences, rallies, and TV show appearances filled the gaps between Trump's major scandals. Each one drew large TV audiences and boosted show ratings. By late July, when he formally accepted the Republican nomination at the

¹¹²Amber Phillips, The Fix, *Washington Post*, December 10, 2015, accessed April 19, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/10/reading-6000-of-his-tweets-has-convinced-us-donald-trump-is-a-social-media-master/>; Michael Barbaro, "Pithy, Mean and Powerful: How Donald Trump Mastered Twitter for 2016," *New York Times*, October 5, 2015, accessed April 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/us/politics/donald-trump-twitter-use-campaign-2016.html>.

¹¹³Jasmine C. Lee and Kevin Quealy, The Upshot, January 28, 2016, updated March 28, 2017, accessed April 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/28/upshot/donald-trump-twitter-insults.html>.

¹¹⁴Gunn Enli, "Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election," *European Journal of Communication* 32, no. 1 (2017), 55.

¹¹⁵Sophie Tatum, "Pictured with taco bowl, Trump proclaims, 'I love Hispanics!'" *CNN*, May 6, 2016, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/05/politics/donald-trump-taco-bowl-cinco-de-mayo/>.

Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Trump's position as the center of attention could not be more secure, and his coalition to seize the presidency had formed around him. That never would have happened if he had remained in the fringe, as in 2000 and 2012. Sensationalism, however, pushed him to the front and kept him there—and the numbers put that fact beyond reasonable doubt.

Trump's Media Advantage and Impact

As noted earlier, Trump amassed a substantial advantage in free media coverage over his Republican competitors and over the Democratic field as well. As early as December 2015, the sheer size of that advantage became, ironically, part of the cacophony of news stories about him.¹¹⁶

In the spring, shortly after Rubio's withdrawal, the New York Times issued an analysis of Trump's advertising budget compared with the value of his free media coverage. Through February 2016, Trump spent less than \$10 million on purchased advertising, but received nearly \$2 billion in free media.¹¹⁷ By August, his opponent Hillary Clinton almost matched him in monthly free coverage, falling short by a mere \$20 million per month¹¹⁸—but even so, Trump finished the election with an estimated \$5

¹¹⁶Callum Borchers, "Donald Trump has gotten more nightly network news coverage than the entire Democratic field combined," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2015, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/07/donald-trump-has-gotten-more-nightly-network-news-coverage-than-the-entire-democratic-field-combined/>.

¹¹⁷Nicholas Confessore and Karen Yourish, The Upshot, *New York Times*, March 15, 2016, accessed April 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/upshot/measuring-donald-trumps-mammoth-advantage-in-free-media.html>.

¹¹⁸Carl Bialik, "Clinton Has Nearly Caught Up To Trump In Media Coverage," *FiveThirtyEight*, August 9, 2016, accessed April 19, 2017, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/clinton-has-nearly-caught-up-to-trump-in-media-coverage/>.

billion to Clinton's \$3.25 billion in free media, according to MediaQuant's election post-mortem. Even though all of these numbers are rough estimates with many caveats, they demonstrate the tremendous advantage generated by Trump's antics. As MediaQuant's analyst Mary Harris wrote for the report,

I hesitate to use the term "free media", because Donald Trump earned his media coverage. He earned it from his bombastic and insulting statements, he earned it from pulling in massive crowds to his rallies, and he earned it from winning primary after primary. Whether by design or accident, he bypassed paid advertising to bask in the attention and validation of a 24-hour news cycle.

Harris goes so far as to say that Trump's coverage numbers now define a new benchmark for *ubiquitous media coverage*, against which future candidates, personalities, and trends can be measured.¹¹⁹

Trump's own words indicate that his media advantage came about by design. In his book *The Art of the Deal*, Trump describes his strategies to generate publicity and seize headlines. "One thing I've learned about the press is that they're always hungry for a good story, and the more sensational the better," he writes.¹²⁰ He continues,

I'm not saying that they necessarily like me. Sometimes they write positively, and sometimes they write negatively. But from a pure business point of view, the benefits of being written about have far outweighed the drawbacks. It's really quite simple. If I take a full-page ad in the *New York Times* to publicize a project, it might cost \$40,000, and in any case, people tend to be skeptical about advertising. But if the *New York Times* writes even a moderately positive one-column story about one of my deals, it doesn't cost me anything, and it's worth a lot more than \$40,000.¹²¹

¹¹⁹Mary Harris, "A Media Post-Mortem on the 2016 Presidential Election," MediaQuant, November 14, 2016, accessed April 19, 2017, <http://www.mediaquant.net/2016/11/a-media-post-mortem-on-the-2016-presidential-election/>.

¹²⁰Donald Trump and Tony Schwarz, *The Art of the Deal* (New York: Random House, 1987), 39.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 39-40.

Here Trump captures the essence of the Max Clifford style of publicity—the core of what made *Grand Theft Auto*, *Hatred*, and Acclaim’s various games into surprising successes. He understands that “even a critical story . . . can be very valuable to your business,” and that getting “a lot of attention” by itself “creates value.”¹²² This phenomenon also goes by the axiom “There is no such thing as bad publicity.” During the presidential race and in the ensuing analysis, several writers commented on the apparent determination of the Trump campaign to test that axiom to its limits.¹²³ It was a point made most succinctly by Matt Taibbi in *Rolling Stone*: “Trump found the flaw in the American Death Star. It doesn't know how to turn the cameras off, even when it's filming its own demise.”¹²⁴

Basic human psychology may be partly to blame for the axiom’s peculiar impact in modern electoral politics. Various studies, beginning the work of Polish-born psychologist Robert Zajonc, have documented and elaborated upon what he called the *mere exposure effect*. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman described this effect as “the link between the repetition of an arbitrary stimulus and the mild affection that people eventually have for it.” Its impact on the human decision-

¹²²Trump and Schwarz, *Art of the Deal*, 40.

¹²³Neal Hartman, “Trump’s rhetoric may topple adage that there’s no such thing as bad publicity,” *The Conversation*, January 26, 2016, accessed April 19, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/trumps-rhetoric-may-topple-adage-that-theres-no-such-thing-as-bad-publicity-52523>; Mary Harris, “A Media Post-Mortem on the 2016 Presidential Election,” *MediaQuant*, November 14, 2016, accessed April 19, 2017, <http://www.mediaquant.net/2016/11/a-media-post-mortem-on-the-2016-presidential-election/>; Carl Bialik, “Clinton Has Nearly Caught Up To Trump In Media Coverage,” *FiveThirtyEight*, August 9, 2016, accessed April 19, 2017, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/clinton-has-nearly-caught-up-to-trump-in-media-coverage/>; etc.

¹²⁴Matt Taibbi, “How America Made Donald Trump Unstoppable,” *Rolling Stone*, February 24, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/how-america-made-donald-trump-unstoppable-20160224>.

making process, he says, springs primarily from the sense of cognitive ease humans get from the repetition.¹²⁵

Whatever impact these factors had upon the electorate, Trump's success in distributing his message cannot be understated. This message, for better or worse, reached the ears of anyone who watched televised coverage of the campaign, reached the eyes of anyone who read print or online newspapers, and reached the hearts of those who, in November, cast their votes for him.

Trump's Coalition

For all his success in cultivating his media presence and spreading his message far and wide, however, Trump could not have won without earning those same votes. Increasing polarization in American politics destined nearly half of his audience to hate and fear him, and among the remainder, strong voices protested his popularity from the beginning. In spite of such strong opposition, Trump constructed a winning coalition from three distinct groups: evangelical Christians, pragmatic conservatives who could not stomach the thought of a Clinton presidency, and the so-called 'silent majority.' Only the last group truly believed in Trump's message, but once he won the Republican nomination, evangelicals and conservatives had no better choice than to join him.

It should be noted, of course, that a lot of overlap existed between the three groups. Many non-evangelical conservative leaders enthusiastically supported Trump; some evangelicals fell in line for reasons other than policy-driven pragmatism; and the philosophical themes that made Trump an antihero held sway across all three groups to a

¹²⁵Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 66.

greater or lesser degree. But the groups, at heart, were well-defined segments of the voting population, each of which followed its own unique path to the ballot box in November.

The Evangelical Component

By intention or by accident, Trump laid religious groundwork for his 2016 campaign as far back as 2010 and 2011. Prior to his canceled 2012 run, he publicly reversed many of his views on social issues to line up with prevailing conservative orthodoxy¹²⁶ and openly declared his faith in God and the Bible.¹²⁷ In mid-May 2011, Reverend Paula White organized a meeting with over two dozen evangelical leaders and pastors,¹²⁸ including Drs. Darrell and Belinda Scott. At an appearance with her husband in late October of 2016, Belinda reminisced about the meeting:

So we're sitting there with other officials, other spiritual leaders, and in walks Mr. Donald J. Trump. He walks in the room six and a half years ago and this is what he said: "I've invited all y'all here to simply ask for prayer." Prayer! "I want you all to pray because I'm thinking about running for the presidency of the United States."¹²⁹

She described the event in a little more detail, then related how Trump reached out to her

¹²⁶David Brody, The Brody File, *CBN News*, March 31, 2011, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://blogs.cbn.com/thebrodyfile/archive/2011/03/31/evangelical-leaders-say-donald-trump-may-find-support-from-social.aspx>.

¹²⁷David Brody, The Brody File, *CBN News*, April 11, 2011, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://www1.cbn.com/thebrodyfile/archive/2011/04/11/exclusive-donald-trump-to-brody-file-i-believe-in-god>.

¹²⁸David Brody, The Brody File, *CBN News*, May 13, 2011, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://www1.cbn.com/thebrodyfile/archive/2011/05/13/exclusive-details-inside-donald-trumps-prayer-meeting-with-christian>.

¹²⁹Belinda Scott, "Darrell Scott – Liberty University Convocation" (video of event, Liberty University Convocation, Liberty University, October 28, 2016), accessed April 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WfABLhTbOQ>.

and her husband at the beginning of his 2016 campaign: “Fast forward it six and a half years later . . . when Michael Cohen said that ‘The boss is thinking about running.’ We said, ‘Running where?’ He said, ‘Running for president.’ My husband immediately said, ‘Count me in.’”¹³⁰

After the first few months of Trump’s campaign, as he moved ahead in polls, the seriousness of his candidacy sunk in and he earned a place in various election-related events organized by evangelical and other Christian leaders. At the Values Voter Summit in Washington in September 2015, he placed fifth in a straw poll among evangelical activists, behind both Rubio and Cruz. A few days later he convened a group of preachers and televangelists at Trump Tower for many of the same reasons as the 2011 meeting. Darrell Scott attended the meeting, actively defending Trump against the few individuals who challenged him on his insulting demeanor.¹³¹ Within a week, his poll numbers among the general population of white born-again evangelicals had surpassed those of soft-spoken Ben Carson and the other Republican candidates.¹³²

Trump’s ascendancy did not go unopposed among evangelicals, however. From the start, a separate faction harshly criticized him and his followers. Russell Moore, the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist

¹³⁰Belinda Scott, “Liberty University Convocation.”

¹³¹Ben Schreckinger, “Donald Trump’s saving grace: Televangelists,” *Politico*, September 30, 2015, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/09/donald-trumps-evangelicals-televangelists-214250>.

¹³²Nick Gass, “Trump believes he has great appeal for evangelicals,” *Politico*, October 2, 2015, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/10/donald-trump-evangelicals-his-appeal-214371>.

Convention, soon joined the front lines of what became a vicious battle between pro-Trump and anti-Trump evangelicals. In mid-September 2015, Moore penned an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, arguing that Trump's moral character invalidated him for the presidency and pointing out the obvious parallels to President Bill Clinton's philandering and impeachment.¹³³ He spoke out again after the meeting at Trump Tower, telling *Politico* that Trump's evangelical supporters were "prosperity gospel types, which are considered by mainstream evangelicals to be heretics."¹³⁴ In December, after Trump suggested closing the border to all Muslims, Moore wrote an editorial for the *Washington Post* which criticized the idea and argued that Christians concerned about their own religious liberties should extend their advocacy to the rights of Muslims as well.¹³⁵ An informal, unscientific survey by *WORLD Magazine* in early January indicated that Trump held barely any support among evangelical leaders.¹³⁶

His campaign kept rolling, however, and that same month Trump marked off another box on his checklist to appeal to evangelicals: he made an appearance at Liberty University's thrice-weekly Convocation on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and spoke to the

¹³³Russell Moore, "Have Evangelicals Who Support Trump Lost Their Values?" *New York Times*, September 17, 2015, accessed April 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/opinion/have-evangelicals-who-support-trump-lost-their-values.html>.

¹³⁴Ben Schreckinger, "Donald Trump's saving grace: Televangelists," *Politico*, September 30, 2015, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/09/donald-trumps-evangelicals-televangelists-214250>.

¹³⁵Russell Moore, "Russell Moore: Why Christians must speak out against Donald Trump's Muslim remarks," *Washington Post*, December 8, 2015, accessed April 21, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/07/russell-moore-people-who-care-an-iota-about-religious-liberty-should-denounce-donald-trump/>.

¹³⁶J. C. Derrick, "Rubio widens lead in latest *WORLD* survey," *WORLD*, January 21, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, https://world.wng.org/2016/01/rubio_widens_lead_in_latest_world_survey.

school's students about his candidacy.¹³⁷ The school, founded by Jerry Falwell Sr. in 1971, became further embroiled in the battle later that month when Liberty's president, Jerry Falwell Jr., personally endorsed Trump¹³⁸ and spent a weekend campaigning with him ahead of the Iowa primary.¹³⁹ The endorsement provoked harsh criticism from other leaders in the anti-Trump wing of the evangelical cohort, including Russell Moore, who tweeted his disapproval.¹⁴⁰ Dozens of Liberty alumni voiced their own surprise, concern, and embarrassment over the endorsement, as well.¹⁴¹ Perhaps the most personal criticism came from Falwell's inner circle: Mark DeMoss, then-chair of the executive committee of Liberty University's governing board and a close friend of the late Falwell Sr., did an interview with the *Washington Post* to air his objections to Trump's candidacy and the younger Falwell's endorsement.¹⁴²

The conflict turned the school into a microcosm of the larger rift among evangelicals. On Super Tuesday, Trump did poorly in the precinct that covered Liberty's

¹³⁷Jose A. DelReal, *The Fix*, *Washington Post*, January 18, 2016, accessed April 21, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/01/18/trump-received-a-glowing-welcome-at-liberty-university-but-not-everyone-was-convinced/>.

¹³⁸Tessa Berenson, "Evangelical Leader Jerry Falwell Jr. Endorses Donald Trump," *Time*, January 26, 2016, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://time.com/4194164/jerry-falwell-jr-donald-trump-evangelical/>.

¹³⁹Philip Elliott, "Donald Trump and Jerry Falwell Jr. Campaign in Iowa," *Time*, January 30, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://time.com/4201357/donald-trump-jerry-falwell/>.

¹⁴⁰Eliza Collins, "Christian leaders balk at Falwell's Trump endorsement," *Politico*, January 26, 2016, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/jerry-falwell-jr-endorses-trump-218238>.

¹⁴¹J. C. Derrick, "Liberty alumni trash Trump endorsement," *WORLD*, January 26, 2016, accessed April 21, 2017, https://world.wng.org/2016/01/liberty_alumni_trash_trump_endorsement.

¹⁴²Philip Rucker, "Jerry Falwell Jr.'s Trump endorsement draws objections from his late father's confidant," *Washington Post*, March 1, 2016, accessed April 21, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/03/01/jerry-falwell-jr-s-trump-endorsement-draws-objections-from-his-late-fathers-confidant/>.

campus, winning barely 8% of the primary vote in the shadows of Cruz (33%) and Rubio (44%).¹⁴³ Two months later, DeMoss resigned from the board under pressure from fellow board members, who took issue with his criticisms of Falwell.¹⁴⁴

Over the summer, as Trump became the official Republican nominee, the university's internal conflict died away to a whisper while students enjoyed their break. Trump continued to push for the evangelical vote, hosting a large meeting of social conservatives in June (where Falwell introduced him on stage).¹⁴⁵ The billionaire scored again later that week when Focus on the Family founder James Dobson issued a statement affirming Trump's faith and calling him a born-again Christian. Dobson later said Paula White had been the driving force behind Trump's conversion.¹⁴⁶ Theologian and ethicist Wayne Grudem joined the Trump train in late July when Trump locked in the nomination.¹⁴⁷ For a little while, things looked good for social conservatives as Trump

¹⁴³State of Virginia Department of Elections, *2016 President Republican Primary*, Elections Database, March 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/78477/>.

¹⁴⁴Jessie Pounds, "DeMoss resigns from Liberty University Board of Trustees," *News & Advance*, May 6, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, http://www.newsadvance.com/news/local/demoss-resigns-from-liberty-university-board-of-trustees/article_14cec502-13f5-11e6-9e96-cf2931e93bb7.html; Jamie Dean, "More details emerge in Liberty, DeMoss split," *WORLD*, May 18, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, https://world.wng.org/2016/05/more_details_emerge_in_liberty_demoss_split.

¹⁴⁵Elizabeth Dias, "Inside Donald Trump's Private Meeting With Evangelicals," *Time*, June 20, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://time.com/4375975/donald-trump-evangelical-conservative-leaders-meeting/>.

¹⁴⁶Lincoln Mullen, "Just Another Sinner, Born Again," *The Atlantic*, June 29, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/06/trump-born-again/489269/>; Trip Gabriel and Michael Luo, "A Born-Again Donald Trump? Believe It, Evangelical Leader Says," *New York Times*, June 25, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/us/politics/a-born-again-donald-trump-believe-it-evangelical-leader-says.html>.

¹⁴⁷Wayne Grudem, "Why Voting for Donald Trump Is a Morally Good Choice," *Townhall.com*, July 28, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://townhall.com/columnists/waynegrudem/2016/07/28/why-voting-for-donald-trump-is-a-morally-good-choice-n2199564>.

made serious steps to communicate a strong pro-life message.¹⁴⁸

A few days into October, however, the storm hit. The Washington Post uncovered footage of Trump from 2005 in which Trump unknowingly bragged into a live microphone about his fame and his sexual exploits.¹⁴⁹ In the evangelical world, the news hit deeper than it did in the wider arena of public discourse, largely due to the lingering Christian emphasis on morality and righteousness when choosing public leaders. Those who already supported Trump against Clinton mostly stuck with him,¹⁵⁰ Russell Moore launched another Washington Post editorial condemning Trump and his evangelical followers,¹⁵¹ and—surprisingly—Wayne Grudem pulled back from his previous statement, issuing an apology and calling on Trump to withdraw.¹⁵² WORLD Magazine issued an editorial in the same vein near the end of October.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸Jennifer Harper, “Donald Trump assembles Pro-Life Coalition to take his campaign message to values voters,” *Washington Times*, September 29, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/sep/29/donald-trump-assembles-pro-life-coalition-to-take-/>.

¹⁴⁹David A. Fahrenthold, “Trump recorded having extremely lewd conversation about women in 2005,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html.

¹⁵⁰Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “‘Still the best candidate’: Some evangelicals still back Trump despite lewd video,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/08/still-the-best-candidate-some-evangelicals-still-back-trump-despite-lewd-video/>.

¹⁵¹Russell Moore, “If Donald Trump has done anything, he has snuffed out the Religious Right,” *Washington Post*, October 9, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/09/if-donald-trump-has-done-anything-he-has-snuffed-out-the-religious-right/>.

¹⁵²Wayne Grudem, “Trump’s Moral Character and the Election,” *Townhall.com*, October 9, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://townhall.com/columnists/waynegrudem/2016/10/09/trumps-moral-character-and-the-election-n2229846>.

¹⁵³Marvin Olasky & The Editors, “Unfit for power,” *WORLD*, October 29, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, https://world.wng.org/2016/10/unfit_for_power.

Meanwhile, at Liberty University, conflict continued to grow. Falwell publicly reaffirmed his support for Trump, insisting that the footage surfaced as the result of a conspiracy to give Republican establishment figures an escape route from their endorsements and commitments.¹⁵⁴ Students began to fight back. A petition began to circulate on October 12 with a statement titled “Liberty United Against Trump.”¹⁵⁵ That same day, Falwell again defended Trump on a CNN talk show, refusing to say that a conviction for sexual assault would be a deal breaker in his support of the billionaire.¹⁵⁶ On the 13th, he fired back at the petitioners, congratulating them for speaking their minds but pulling out all the stops to discredit them and minimize their message.¹⁵⁷ As the story grew, journalists found it difficult to approach the topic, since members of the board of trustees and the school’s faculty refused to speak on the record about the conflict.¹⁵⁸ The three students who initiated the petition drive wrote an editorial for the *Washington Post*,

¹⁵⁴Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “‘We’re all sinners’: Jerry Falwell Jr defends Donald Trump after video of lewd remarks,” *Washington Post*, October 10, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/10/jerry-falwell-jr-the-gop-establishment-could-be-behind-donald-trump-video-leak/>.

¹⁵⁵Alex Rohr, “Liberty University students start petition against Trump,” *News & Advance*, October 12, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, http://www.newsadvance.com/news/local/liberty-university-students-start-petition-against-trump/article_8a3bbe5c-90f1-11e6-af41-e3a65df0645c.html.

¹⁵⁶CNN, Twitter post, October 12, 2016 (5:20 p.m.), accessed April 22, 2017, <https://twitter.com/CNN/status/786360879025643533>.

¹⁵⁷“Falwell releases statement about student group against Trump,” *News & Advance*, October 13, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, http://www.newsadvance.com/townnews/politics/falwell-releases-statement-about-student-group-against-trump/article_4095eb36-9193-11e6-afd0-c32541127726.html.

¹⁵⁸Jenna Lifhits, “Liberty University Trustees Remain Silent as Campus Opposition to Trump Grows,” *Weekly Standard*, October 20, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/liberty-university-trustees-remain-silent-as-campus-opposition-to-trump-grows/article/2004982>; Brandon Ambrosino, “How Trump Is Dividing Jerry Falwell’s University,” *Politico Magazine*, October 27, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/10/trump-evangelical-falwell-liberty-university-christian-conservatives-214394>.

claiming they had collected more than 2,000 signatures and reiterating their objections. They also said they felt compelled to speak out because of the example set by DeMoss's forced resignation; as students, they were the only voices left.¹⁵⁹ Falwell kept up his attack, even openly accusing them of wanting to help Clinton win the presidency.¹⁶⁰

At the same time, the scandal was wreaking havoc in the Trump campaign. Chances of winning seemed remote at best. Trump doubled down on his sensationalist tactics, dragging out all of the Clintons' dirty laundry for the second debate against the Democratic nominee in mid-October.¹⁶¹ Wayne Grudem struck a fatalistic note in his final editorial on the 19th as he grudgingly advised evangelicals to vote for Trump on the basis of pragmatic policy concerns.¹⁶²

When the dust settled, it seemed the pro-Trump faction had prevailed. Exit polling showed that, nationwide, over 80% of white evangelical or born-again Christians cast their votes for Trump.¹⁶³ On Liberty's campus precinct, Trump got 85% of the vote, but a

¹⁵⁹Dustin Wahl, Paige Cutler, and Alexander Forbes, "Liberty University students: Trump is the antithesis of Christian values," *Washington Post*, October 25, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/liberty-university-students-trump-is-the-antithesis-of-christian-values/2016/10/25/3b90630a-9a08-11e6-b3c9-f662adaa0048_story.html.

¹⁶⁰Jerry Falwell Jr., Facebook post, November 4, 2016 (6:51 p.m.), accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/jerrylamon.falwell/posts/10102931453935168>.

¹⁶¹Alex Isenstadt, Eli Stokols, Shane Goldmacher, and Kenneth P. Vogel, "Inside Trump's Stunning Upset Victory," *Politico Magazine*, November 9, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/donald-trump-wins-2016-214438>.

¹⁶²Wayne Grudem, "If You Don't Like Either Candidate, Then Vote for Trump's Policies," *Townhall.com*, October 19, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://townhall.com/columnists/waynegrudem/2016/10/19/if-you-dont-like-either-candidate-then-vote-for-trumps-policies-n2234187>.

¹⁶³Jon Huang, Samuel Jacoby, Michael Strickland, and K. K. Rebecca Lai, "Election 2016: Exit Polls," *New York Times*, November 8, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/08/us/politics/election-exit-polls.html>.

minority of anti-Trump voters remained, almost evenly divided among independent candidate Evan McMullin (156 votes, 5%), Hillary Clinton (140 votes, 4%), and Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson (137 votes, 4%).¹⁶⁴ The pragmatism of Wayne Grudem and Jerry Falwell carried the vote against the principles of Russell Moore and Dustin Wahl.

Pragmatism cannot explain Trump's evangelical appeal in the primaries, however. A different force operated there. For more than thirty years, since before Postman's astute observations on the topic, televangelism soaked into the character and understanding of America's Christian population at large. After preparing himself by watching forty-two hours of Robert Schuller, Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell Sr., Jim Bakker, and Pat Robertson, Postman offered this observation:

There is no great religious leader . . . who offered people what they want. Only what they need. But television is not well suited to offering people what they need. It is "user friendly." It is too easy to turn off. . . . As a consequence, what is preached on television is not anything like the Sermon on the Mount. Religious programs are filled with good cheer. They celebrate affluence. Their featured players become celebrities. Though their messages are trivial, the shows have high ratings, or rather, *because* their messages are trivial, the shows have high ratings.¹⁶⁵

In other words, it is no coincidence that modern televangelists like Paula White and Darrell Scott rallied behind Trump. His mastery of television as a medium—his showmanship—drew them, and their followers, into his sphere as a matter of course. Under that light, Falwell Jr.'s comparison of Trump to his father takes on a different

¹⁶⁴State of Virginia Department of Elections, *2016 President General Election*, Elections Database, November 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/80871/>.

¹⁶⁵Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 121.

meaning, as well. As an entertainer, Trump merely followed in the footsteps of the late televangelist, heeding the call of “a medium that requires them to fashion performances rather than ideas.”¹⁶⁶

In that respect, Trump’s early popularity among evangelicals sprung from the same source as his generalized popularity among older generations, and it was by no means universal. Strong voices fought against it. When he became the Republican nominee, however, he also became the last best hope for the remainder of evangelicals, even those who abhorred his character.

The Pragmatic Conservative Component

Trump’s nomination also made him the last best hope for a wider population of conservatives who abhorred his political ideology. From the start, he earned the opprobrium of pundits on the right for his disdain for civil liberalism and free market economics.¹⁶⁷ For a while, publications like the *National Review* treated Trump as a free lesson in the shifting values of the conservative base; he would come and go like all other radically anti-establishment candidates, and that would be that. The only important task would be to learn from his popularity and adopt elements of his approach to promote true conservative principles further down the line.¹⁶⁸ Near the end of 2015, when Trump’s

¹⁶⁶Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 91.

¹⁶⁷Isaac Cohen, “Donald Trump’s Surprisingly Progressive Past,” *National Review*, July 10, 2015, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/421043/donald-trumps-surprisingly-progressive-past-isaac-cohen>; Jonah Goldberg, The G-File, *National Review*, September 5, 2015, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/g-file/423607/no-movement-embraces-trump-can-call-itself-conservative-jonah-goldberg>; Jim Geraghty, “The Words Trump Doesn’t Use,” *National Review*, September 10, 2015, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/423819/words-trump-doesnt-use-jim-geraghty>.

¹⁶⁸Ian Tuttle, “Donald Trump and the Republican Party’s ‘Mad as Hell’ Moment,” *National Review*, July 20, 2015, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/421407/donald->

dominance showed no signs of dissolving, the National Review began asking just how deep those demographic and ideological shifts truly went.¹⁶⁹

Late in the primary process, as Trump's rise among the ranks of the Republican Party hopefuls continued, a loose coalition of party leaders, conservative power brokers, and pundits scrambled to oppose his nomination.¹⁷⁰ Many of them acted on the pragmatic concern that Trump could never succeed against any reasonable Democratic candidate in the general election.¹⁷¹ Others spoke out on principle, insisting that they would not even vote for Trump if he won the nomination.¹⁷² The National Review convened a symposium of conservative thought leaders to issue a broadside attack on Trump that

trump-republican-party-anger; Rich Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru, "Trump Wrongs the Right," *National Review*, October 5, 2015, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/425010/trump-wrongs-right-rich-lowry-ramesh-ponnuru>.

¹⁶⁹Charles C. W. Cooke, "Trump, the Anti-Constitutional Authoritarian – Liberty Lovers, Beware," *National Review*, December 8, 2015, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/428208/trump-anti-constitutional-authoritarian-charles-c-w-cooke>.

¹⁷⁰Jonathan Martin and Maggie Haberman, "'Never Trump' Movement Dealt Setback After Super Tuesday," *New York Times*, March 2, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/03/us/politics/donald-trump-republican-nomination.html>; Ryan Grim, Nick Baumann, and Matt Fuller, "At Secretive Meeting, Tech CEOs And Top Republicans Commiserate, Plot To Stop Trump," *Huffington Post*, March 7, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/aei-world-forum-donald-trump_us_56ddb38e4b0ffe6f8ea125d.

¹⁷¹Alexander Burns, Maggie Haberman, and Jonathan Martin, "Inside the Republican Party's Desperate Mission to Stop Donald Trump," *New York Times*, February 27, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/donald-trump-republican-party.html>; George F. Will, "In case of Donald Trump nomination, break glass," *Delaware Online*, April 28, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://www.delawareonline.com/story/opinion/columnists/2016/04/28/case-trump-nomination-break-glass/83659112/>.

¹⁷²Peter Wehner, "Why I Will Never Vote for Donald Trump," *New York Times*, January 14, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/14/opinion/campaign-stops/why-i-will-never-vote-for-donald-trump.html>; David French, "Why I Changed My Mind and Joined the #NeverTrump Movement," *National Review*, March 2, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/432237/donald-trump-why-i-cant-vote-trump-nevertrump>; William Wichterman, "Never Trump. Not Even In A General Election Against Hillary," *Daily Caller*, March 10, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://dailycaller.com/2016/03/10/never-trump-not-even-in-a-general-election-against-hillary/>.

warned of dire consequences for conservatism should he win the nomination.¹⁷³

Most of these objections failed as that uncomfortable possibility slowly transformed into a terrifying reality. Dennis Prager, writing in the *National Review*, explained why: “[If Trump] is the Republican nominee, he will be the only alternative to the Left’s further ruining America for another four years.”¹⁷⁴ Some held out hope for a contested convention until the moment the delegates cast their votes,¹⁷⁵ but others caved and endorsed Trump months before the convention. For example, House Speaker Paul Ryan, the embodiment of the Republican establishment, said in early May that he could not endorse and support Trump, who by then had forced his last remaining opponent, Ted Cruz, out of the running.¹⁷⁶ His reluctance stemmed from serious concerns over Trump’s commitment to conservative principles. Less than a month later, however, under mounting pressure, Ryan reconsidered and endorsed the presumptive nominee.¹⁷⁷

Among self-styled true conservatives, the story was no different. The libertarian-

¹⁷³“Conservatives against Trump,” *National Review*, January 21, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/430126/donald-trump-conservatives-should-stand-against-him>.

¹⁷⁴Dennis Prager, “Trump Is Nasty and Probably Stupid, Too – but Better than Hillary,” *National Review*, March 29, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/433358/donald-trump-nasty-unintelligent-better-hillary>.

¹⁷⁵Kyle Cheney, “Chaos erupts on GOP convention floor after voice vote shuts down Never Trump forces,” *Politico*, July 18, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/never-trump-delegates-have-support-needed-to-force-rules-vote-225716>.

¹⁷⁶Jennifer Steinhauer and Alexander Burns, “Paul Ryan Says He Is ‘Not Ready’ to Endorse Donald Trump,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/us/politics/paul-ryan-donald-trump.html>.

¹⁷⁷Emmarie Huetteman and Maggie Haberman, “Speaker Paul Ryan, After an Awkward Courtship, Endorses Donald Trump,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/03/us/politics/paul-ryan-donald-trump.html>.

leaning Freedom Caucus, which prided itself on its principled style of political engagement, shied away from direct opposition to Trump for pragmatic reasons,¹⁷⁸ and National Review pundits (including the acclaimed classical liberal thinker Thomas Sowell) emphasized Trump's narrow advantage as the lesser of two evils for conservative voters.¹⁷⁹ Even Ted Cruz, who had so blatantly snubbed Trump in his speech at the Republican National Convention in July,¹⁸⁰ endorsed the billionaire in late September.¹⁸¹

This rocky path to unity among Republicans and conservatives took another turn in October, however, with the same scandal that rocked the evangelical contingent. Within a few short days of the Washington Post story, droves of high-ranking conservatives publicly abandoned Trump. Several went so far as to demand his withdrawal so they could put up a new nominee.¹⁸² Paul Ryan came close to reversing his

¹⁷⁸Tim Alberta, "Inside Trump's Conquest of America's Most Conservative Districts," *National Review*, August 15, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/438984/donald-trump-house-conservatives-how-he-conquered-them>.

¹⁷⁹Conrad Black, "Trump Is Winning," *National Review*, September 13, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/439986/donald-trump-conservative-winner>; Thomas Sowell, "Our Political Predicament," *National Review*, September 20, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/440183/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-are-terrible-choices-voters-must-choose>.

¹⁸⁰Shane Goldmacher, Katie Glueck, and Matthew Nussbaum, "Cruz burns Trump," *Politico*, July 21, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/rnc-2016-donald-trump-unity-225915>.

¹⁸¹Katie Glueck and Burgess Everett, "Cruz: I'm voting for Trump," *Politico*, September 23, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/trump-rival-cruz-to-throw-support-to-gop-nominee-228584>.

¹⁸²Jonathan Martin, Maggie Haberman, and Alexander Burns, "Lewd Donald Trump Tape Is a Breaking Point for Many in the G.O.P.," *New York Times*, October 8, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/09/us/politics/donald-trump-campaign.html>; Alex Isenstadt, "GOP panics as outrage with Trump boils over," *Politico*, October 8, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/donald-trump-comments-women-gop-republican-reaction-229329>.

already hesitant endorsement.¹⁸³ Trump, struggling to manage the chaos, fired back at Ryan and doubled down on his egocentric campaign style,¹⁸⁴ while his supporters defended him and put pressure on their elected representatives to stand by their chosen leader.¹⁸⁵ Things seemed very bleak.

Then FBI Director James Comey dropped a bombshell less than two weeks before the election: the FBI was reopening its investigation into Hillary Clinton's private email server.¹⁸⁶ Trump jumped on the opportunity, shifting the public debate off of his dismal prospects and onto Clinton's character.¹⁸⁷ Hope flooded back to the Trump campaign,¹⁸⁸ even though national polls still predicted his loss by a narrow margin.¹⁸⁹ Paul Ryan reversed course again just before the election, throwing his voice firmly behind the

¹⁸³Jake Sherman and John Bresnahan, "Inside Ryan's decision to (almost) dump Trump," *Politico*, October 11, 2016, accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/paul-ryan-donald-trump-229571>.

¹⁸⁴"Trump rips Ryan, 'disloyal' Republicans for shunning his campaign," *Fox News*, October 11, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/10/11/trump-rips-ryan-disloyal-republicans-for-shunning-his-campaign.html>.

¹⁸⁵Maggie Haberman, "For G.O.P. Candidates, Renouncing Donald Trump Carries Dire Risks," *New York Times*, October 10, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/us/politics/republican-reaction-trump.html>.

¹⁸⁶"Full Text: FBI letter announcing new Clinton review," *Politico*, October 28, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/full-text-fbi-letter-announcing-new-clinton-review-230463>.

¹⁸⁷Ben Schreckinger, "Trump on Weiner email bombshell: 'Boy, did I call that,'" *Politico*, October 29, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/donald-trump-anthony-weiner-fbi-230494>.

¹⁸⁸Shane Goldmacher, "Donald Trump's soaring spirits," *Politico*, November 2, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/trump-confident-2016-230642>.

¹⁸⁹Steven Shepard, "National poll: Clinton leads Trump by 2 points," *Politico*, October 29, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-abc-wapo-poll-230488>.

Republican nominee.¹⁹⁰

By midnight on November 8, it was all over. Trump had won, the worst case scenario had been averted, and conservatives—after a few moments of revelry¹⁹¹—could return to their criticisms and objections.¹⁹² With the crisis past, the Freedom Caucus soon reasserted its principles by blocking the passage of an amendment to Obamacare.¹⁹³ Pragmatism had carried the day when the very survival of conservatism seemed to be at stake; as the existential crisis receded into the past, these conditional chunks of the Trump coalition dissolved back into their constituent elements.

The Silent Majority

The final component to Trump's winning coalition also proved to be the largest and most influential. Many of the themes embodied by this so-called 'silent majority' were reflected in the pragmatism of evangelicals and conservatives, but this group took it to an extreme born from years of economic stagnation and grinding cultural warfare. Early on, observers correctly pointed out that they were neither a majority nor silent,¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰Rebecca Morin, "Ryan: Vote Trump," *Politico*, November 5, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/ryan-urges-voters-to-choose-trump-230803>.

¹⁹¹Deroy Murdock, "Trump's Triumph Is One for the Ages," *National Review*, November 10, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/442099/donald-trumps-election-win-america>.

¹⁹²"President-Elect Trump," *National Review*, November 9, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/442017/donald-trump-elected-conservative-advice-how-govern>.

¹⁹³Kyle Cheney, John Bresnahan, and Rachael Bade, "Republicans yank Obamacare repeal bill," *Politico*, March 24, 2017, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/03/obamacare-repeal-votes-congress-236459>.

¹⁹⁴Philip Bump, The Fix, *Washington Post*, December 18, 2015, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/18/donald-trumps-silent-majority-isnt-a-majority/>.

rendering their name a total oxymoron; but even so, it was the group that rallied around Trump in 2015, secured his nomination, and pushed him to surprising narrow victories in states like Pennsylvania, Florida, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.¹⁹⁵

Mere ‘economic stagnation and grinding cultural warfare’ do not encompass the background of Trump’s movement, however. The well from which he drew ran down into an aquifer of resentment and frustration that had been growing for decades. Through Trump, this body of people found an outlet uncapped by the rules and requirements of polite political discourse. They found an antihero to blow up all the villains and systems that had caused the decline of their entire way of life. They found someone to channel their anger.

Understanding Trump’s appeal to this previously undiscovered voter base requires a grasp of the sociology of mass movements. Eric Hoffer, a mid-twentieth century philosopher and sociologist, wrote eloquently on the topic in his 1951 book *The True Believer*. Applying his insights to the Trump campaign uncovers striking parallels.

Hoffer begins by describing the most important feature of a mass movement: “Those who would transform a nation or the world cannot do so by breeding and captaining discontent. . . . They must know how to kindle and fan an extravagant hope.” Hoffer dismisses demographic analysis, saying the only relevant attribute is a willingness to “proceed recklessly with the present, wreck it if necessary, and create a new world.”

¹⁹⁵Kenneth P. Vogel and Alex Isenstadt, “How did everyone get it so wrong?” *Politico*, November 9, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/how-did-everyone-get-2016-wrong-presidential-election-231036>; Shane Goldmacher and Ben Schreckinger, “Trump pulls off biggest upset in U.S. history,” *Politico*, November 9, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/election-results-2016-clinton-trump-231070>.

This stems, he says, from intense discontent, a feeling of empowerment, big dreams for a better world, and disregard for (or ignorance of) the barriers in the way.¹⁹⁶

The first element, discontent, springs largely from weakness. Several years after writing *The True Believer*, Hoffer—in an article describing the state of Asia after World War II—wrote that, although power corrupts,

it is perhaps equally important to realize that weakness, too, corrupts. Power corrupts the few, while weakness corrupts the many. Hatred, malice, rudeness, intolerance, and suspicion are the fruits of weakness. The resentment of the weak does not spring from any injustice done them but from the sense of their inadequacy and impotence. They hate not wickedness but weakness.¹⁹⁷

In modern America, that sense of impotence arises among those who feel that they have lost the freedom to live as they choose. To many, the American Dream—that resonant image of self-made prosperity—is dead, as Trump declared at the very start of his campaign.¹⁹⁸

There are as many unique reasons for this as there are individual Trump voters, but various themes and patterns do exist. As Matt Stoller wrote for *The Atlantic*, “Americans feel a lack of control: They are at the mercy of distant forces, their livelihoods dependent on the arbitrary whims of power.”¹⁹⁹ Stoller pointed to increasing economic centralization and monopolization as the predominant causes of this feeling of

¹⁹⁶Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (1951; repr. New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 18-20.

¹⁹⁷Eric Hoffer, “The Awakening of Asia,” *The Reporter*, June 22, 1954.

¹⁹⁸“Full text: Donald Trump announces a presidential bid,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2015, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/>.

¹⁹⁹Matt Stoller, “How Democrats Killed Their Populist Soul,” *The Atlantic*, October 24, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/10/how-democrats-killed-their-populist-soul/504710/>.

impotence. Glenn Greenwald assigned blame to “prevailing institutions of authority in the West” that “have relentlessly and with complete indifference stomped on the economic welfare and social security of hundreds of millions of people.”²⁰⁰ Rob Hoffman chalked it up to “liberal activism that came to dominate the cultural landscape and claim victory after victory in the social arena, whether the issue was abortion or gay marriage or transgender rights, always accompanied by that same disdain for right-wing views as worthy of the Stone Age.”²⁰¹ Charles Murray explained it as a result of class divisions that evolved since the 1960s and a corresponding decay of American social unity, ending in the invisible destitution of the working class.²⁰²

All of these accounts, taken together, build a fairly comprehensive obituary of the American Dream, as seen by any given member of the silent majority. But that only tells part of the story. Before a hero can arise, there must be a villain. As Hoffer writes, “[T]he genius of a great leader consists in concentrating all hatred on a single foe.”²⁰³ Trump’s mass movement came with a ready-made villain: the liberal elite.

He could hardly have asked for a better one. Dozens of commentaries, from both left and right, paint a picture of the illiberal left as a self-righteous, sneering, disdainful,

²⁰⁰Glenn Greenwald, “Democrats, Trump, and the Ongoing, Dangerous Refusal to Learn the Lesson of Brexit,” *The Intercept*, November 9, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2016/11/09/democrats-trump-and-the-ongoing-dangerous-refusal-to-learn-the-lesson-of-brexite/>.

²⁰¹Rob Hoffman, “How the Left Created Trump,” *Politico Magazine*, November 20, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/how-the-left-created-donald-trump-214472>.

²⁰²Charles Murray, “Trump’s America,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017.

²⁰³Hoffer, *Believer*, 87.

stuck-up bunch of city-dwellers with screwed-up priorities and an even more screwed-up picture of reality. It is a case made most clearly (albeit profanely) by Cracked.com's

David Wong:

Blacks riot, Muslims set bombs, gays spread AIDS, Mexican cartels behead children, atheists tear down Christmas trees. Meanwhile, those liberal Lena Dunhams in their \$5,000-a-month apartments sip wine and say, "But those white Christians are the *real* problem!" Terror victims scream in the street next to their own severed limbs, and the response from the elites is to cry about how men should be allowed to use women's restrooms and how it's cruel to keep chickens in cages.²⁰⁴

Caitlin Flanagan echoed the sentiment in *The Atlantic* when she wrote about liberal late-night comedy shows and "the conviction that they and their fans are intellectually and morally superior to those who espouse any of the beliefs of the political right."²⁰⁵ Jack Shafer, writing for *Politico* about Hollywood and the Golden Globe awards, described how Meryl Streep "portrayed herself and her glamorous colleagues as poor, pitiable, put-upon artists who have been traumatized by the election of a non-Democrat to the White House." He continued: "Streep's real message was as narcissistic as any Trump performance. Look how virtuous and sensitive I am! Cheer for me to show how virtuous and sensitive you are! The audience obliged."²⁰⁶

With respect to villainy, The Democratic Party played right into Trump's hands by nominating the walking, talking embodiment of everything Trump's silent majority

²⁰⁴David Wong, "How Half Of America Lost Its F**king Mind," *Cracked.com*, October 12, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.cracked.com/blog/6-reasons-trumps-rise-that-no-one-talks-about/>.

²⁰⁵Caitlin Flanagan, "How Late-Night Comedy Fueled the Rise of Trump," *The Atlantic*, May 2017, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/05/how-late-night-comedy-alienated-conservatives-made-liberals-smug-and-fueled-the-rise-of-trump/521472/>.

²⁰⁶Jack Shafer, "Hollywood's Victim Complex," *Politico Magazine*, January 9, 2017, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/01/hollywoods-victim-complex-214613>.

detested. One of the most iconic moments in Clinton's campaign came in September 2016, when she attacked Trump's supporters, calling them a "basket of deplorables."²⁰⁷ To the billionaire's followers, it only further vindicated everything they already believed about Clinton and the other villains in Washington, D.C. When it came to campaigning, Clinton took victory for granted in several states where Trump ultimately upstaged her, like Michigan and Wisconsin. She never so much as set foot in either state after securing her party's nomination.²⁰⁸

Even the Republican Party inadvertently made itself part of the band of villains arrayed against Trump. The fight to oust him from the party earned him even greater approval ratings among his supporters.²⁰⁹ An attack by Mitt Romney just after Super Tuesday provoked stinging repudiation from the ranks of Trump's primary voters.²¹⁰ In their minds, not only had the liberal elite been driving the country into the ground, Romney and his friends had *let them do it*.

²⁰⁷Amy Choizick, "Hillary Clinton Calls Many Trump Backers 'Deplorables,' and G.O.P. Pounces," *New York Times*, September 10, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/us/politics/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables.html>.

²⁰⁸Todd S. Purdum, "What Was Hillary Clinton's Real Downfall? Complacency," *Politico Magazine*, November 10, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/hillary-clinton-loses-2016-complacency-214445>.

²⁰⁹Trip Gabriel, "The More Donald Trump Defies His Party, the More His Supporters Cheer," *New York Times*, February 17, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/18/us/politics/the-more-trump-defies-his-party-the-more-his-supporters-cheer.html>.

²¹⁰Chris Cillizza, The Fix, *New York Times*, March 3, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/03/03/mitt-romney-is-attacking-donald-trump-as-a-phony-and-a-fraud-thats-great-news-for-trump/>; Michael Barbaro, Ashley Parker, and Jonathan Martin, "Rank and File Republicans Tell Party Elites: We're Sticking With Donald Trump," *New York Times*, March 4, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/05/us/politics/donald-trump-republican-party.html>.

Trump's opposition included mainstream news agencies like the New York Times, which issued biased coverage of the election even as it handed Trump millions of dollars in free publicity. For example, the Times only ran an article about Clinton's "basket of deplorables" comment when Republicans voiced their objections to it. After the vice presidential debate, one Wall Street Journal author noted the obvious partisanship of sites like Vox, CNBC, and CNN,²¹¹ and just before the election Ken Silverstein wrote in the Observer that "major outlets and Washington political reporters" had "all but openly worked on Clinton's behalf."²¹² After the election, the Times' publisher and executive editor penned a letter to their readers, offering an awkward semi-apology for biased coverage, although they never used the word "apology."²¹³

Jack Shafer, attempting to defend his profession from accusations of failure, wrote after the election, "The press succeeded in exposing Trump for what he was. Voters just decided they didn't care." Later in the same piece, he complained that "it says something sordid about the American voter that they would ignore the correct verdict on him."²¹⁴ He took for granted that journalists took on the role of judge and jury, without

²¹¹James Taranto, Best of the Web, *Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/clinton-keen-1475691058>.

²¹²Ken Silverstein, "This Election Has Disgraced the Entire Profession of Journalism," *Observer*, November 2, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://observer.com/2016/11/this-election-has-disgraced-the-entire-profession-of-journalism/>.

²¹³Arthur Sulzberger Jr. and Dean Baquet, "To Our Readers, From the Publisher and Executive Editor," *New York Times*, November 13, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/us/elections/to-our-readers-from-the-publisher-and-executive-editor.html>.

²¹⁴Jack Shafer, "Trump Was Not a Media Fail," *Politico Magazine*, November 9, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/donald-trump-wins-2016-media-214442>.

asking what that meant for the whole concept of unbiased journalism.

Shafer did correctly identify the character of Trump's campaign, however. In the same piece, he wrote,

[T]he Trump victory wasn't a mere expression of disdain or revenge, or an endorsement of the lesser of two evils. However negative Trump is . . . he was selling a positive vision about greatness and restoration to voters. He slung praise upon a constituency that was starved for the respect of a plain-speaking candidate . . . For these people he conveyed dignity and the rescue of lost honor. He delivered their payback. He embodied their grievances.²¹⁵

In other words, Trump offered hope instead of merely "captaining discontent." In order to lead a mass movement, Hoffer wrote, one "must master the art or technique of sharing hope, pride, and, as a last resort, hatred with others."²¹⁶ Trump shared all three.

Hoffer's most insightful notes, however, explain why Trump became an antihero rather than a conventional hero. After outlining how hatred helps to solidify a mass movement, he writes: "It is startling to see how the oppressed almost invariably shape themselves in the image of their hated oppressors." As examples, he takes Hitler's Germany and Communist Russia. The former, he says, forced democracies to become "zealous, intolerant, and ruthless." The latter, he implies, forced the West to become conspiratorial, expansionistic, and Machiavellian.²¹⁷ By extension, the villainy of Trump's opponents molded him in their own image, as Shafer realized at the Golden Globe Awards.²¹⁸

²¹⁵Shafer, "Media Fail."

²¹⁶Hoffer, "Awakening."

²¹⁷Hoffer, *Believer*, 90.

²¹⁸Shafer, "Hollywood."

Hoffer continues by listing the necessary attributes an aspiring leader must possess in order to stand at the helm of a mass movement.

Exceptional intelligence, noble character and originality seem neither indispensable nor perhaps desirable. The main requirements seem to be: audacity and a joy in defiance; an iron will; a fanatical conviction that he is in possession of the one and only truth; faith in his destiny and luck; a capacity for passionate hatred; contempt for the present; a cunning estimate of human nature; . . . unbounded brazenness which finds expression in a disregard of consistency and fairness; . . . [and] a capacity for winning and holding the utmost loyalty of a group of able lieutenants.²¹⁹

The list reads almost like an ad hoc description of Trump. The similarities grow stronger as Hoffer continues: “The quality of ideas seems to play a minor role in mass movement leadership. What counts is the arrogant gesture, the complete disregard of the opinion of others, the singlehanded defiance of the world.” Finally, Hoffer argues that some amount of charlatanism “is indispensable to effective leadership. There can be no mass movement without some deliberate misrepresentation of facts.”²²⁰

Together, these patterns combined to crown Trump king of the silent majority. As Hoffer predicted, Trump absorbed the very philosophy of the elites he and all of his followers hated so strongly and launched a counteroffensive in the most brutally authentic way he could. The Federalist’s David Ernst described that philosophy this way:

Postmodernism is the source of the emphasis that our culture puts on authenticity, and the scorn it directs towards phoniness. After all, if the only one true thing in the world is that all truth and morality are relative, then anyone who pretends otherwise is either an idiot or a fraud. Hence the contemporary appeal of the

²¹⁹Hoffer, *Believer*, 105-106.

²²⁰*Ibid.*, 107.

antihero, and the disappearance of the traditional hero.²²¹

Trump grasped, as did Ernst, that “protesting an accusation from the Left that you’re not a racist, sexist, etc. on its own terms is a recipe for failure.” Trump opted to “neutralize the charge by *denying* its very premises, and in so doing, deny the power of the accuser to render any judgment in the first place.” Ultimately, Ernst wrote, “what Trump’s enemies failed to grasp was that he wasn’t winning because of the crazy things he was saying, but because of the phony outrage and affected condescension it provoked.”²²²

Trump broke all the rules of the political game and did it with all the charisma of a bull in a china shop—which was exactly the charisma he needed to become the champion of the silent majority. He scored highest among voters whose outlook for the future seemed darkest²²³ and he scored lowest in bastions of the liberal elite like Washington, D.C.²²⁴ The voters that Clinton took for granted gave her, and everything she stood for, the middle finger by voting for Trump.²²⁵

²²¹David Ernst, “Donald Trump Is The First President To Turn Postmodernism Against Itself,” *The Federalist*, January 23, 2017, accessed April 24, 2017, <http://thefederalist.com/2017/01/23/donald-trump-first-president-turn-postmodernism/>.

²²²Ibid.

²²³Jon Huang, Samuel Jacoby, Michael Strickland, and K. K. Rebecca Lai, “Election 2016: Exit Polls,” *New York Times*, November 8, 2016, accessed April 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/08/us/politics/election-exit-polls.html>.

²²⁴Trump lost the District of Columbia to Clinton by a margin of 88.7%. “2016 Presidential Election Results,” *Politico*, December 13, 2016, accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/2016-election/results/map/president>.

²²⁵Michael Gerson, “Donald Trump and the politics of the middle finger,” *Washington Post*, February 18, 2016, accessed April 24, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/donald-trump-and-the-politics-of-the-middle-finger/2016/02/18/6124ad50-d664-11e5-b195-2e29a4e13425_story.html.

Conclusion

From start to finish, Trump's campaign provoked outrage, disgust, applause, incredulity, horror, loyalty, and—in its best moments—profound introspection. For some, his victory represents the breakdown of the American political process, the backwardness of the Right, and the impending death of the polity. For others, it represents the shattering of oppressive political correctness, the rebuke so long deserved by the American left, and a resurgence of hope for a better future. As scholars, philosophers, and sociologists continue to dissect the chaos, strategists and planners are already absorbing the lessons of the past twenty months to prepare for the next election cycle.

Chief among these lessons should be the message Neil Postman tried to communicate in 1985: that every medium of communication fundamentally alters the understanding of its users. It applies to the internet no less than it does to television, but as long as television dominates public discourse in America, Trump's tactics will prove invaluable to those who can follow in his footsteps. Sensationalism will remain a powerful force for gaining and keeping advantages, particularly in a postmodern culture.

Trump's second lesson follows the first, and it strikes at the heart of both conservatism and liberalism. American society craves authenticity, and that desire will only grow more powerful as the millennial generation takes over from Generation X and the Baby Boomers. Even a liar can succeed, so long as he avoids hypocrisy. Political polarization and pragmatism will cooperate with populist appeal to create winning coalitions, and the candidates that can best capitalize on those forces will win the opportunity to shape the future of their nation.

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