



Trump Derangement Syndrome: Old Wine In A New Bottle

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I was tinkering with an old Jaguar last weekend and found that one of the coolant hoses had cracked. Personally, I blame Trump.

Why not? It seems that the topic of the week has been “Trump Derangement Syndrome.” I’ve been trying to figure out what that really means and how it manifests.

Surely, thoughtful dialogue or critique of the man or his policies can’t be “derangement.” Our old friend Webster defines “deranged” as: 1) mentally unsound; 2) disturbed or disordered in function, structure, or condition; or 3) wildly odd or eccentric.

And yet here we are. There are literally hundreds of Internet and social media platforms dedicated to Trump-related anxiety and fear. So many in fact, that the mere existence of so many is for some less-than-critical thinkers proof in itself that the president is the treasonous reincarnation of Hitler by way of Ming the Merciless. *Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.*

To be honest I don’t believe “derangement” is quite the right word. Presidents have been the subject of vitriol and outright hatred for a long, long time. What’s different this time around is the amplification of social media and – *paging Adam Schiff* – a fair degree of sock puppetry and sponsorship manipulating that media.

Many of the people freaked out about Trump are too young to remember Richard Nixon. Now *there* was a president you could be anxious about. (Especially if like me you were only one year short of being drafted and shipped off to Vietnam.)

Of course, as I’ve said in this space previously, Nixon also laid the groundwork for spying on reporters that would later become one of the great unreported stories during the Obama

administration. I often wonder what the world would've looked like if social media had been invented during the Nixon regime, or even earlier.

Then: No Talking Back, No Sharing

Before the Internet and social media, information was a one-way street. The “cool” medium of television involved a passivity on the part of the viewer.

When Alabama Gov. George Wallace pledged “segregation now and segregation forever” at his inauguration it upset most right-thinking people, but counter-speech was slow in coming and minuscule.

Similarly (and whether accurate or not), when Walter Cronkite reported his opinion that the Vietnam War was unwinnable it spurred public opinion against the war, so much so that the issue propelled Eugene McCarthy to within striking distance of incumbent Johnson.

Television news footage had previously shown people not yet old enough to vote to chant, “Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” Once that sentiment began to take hold with potential voters, Robert Kennedy appropriated McCarthy’s platform to change course and came out against the war.

But before social media, discourse and dialogue were still in the hands of the elite who could afford printing presses or broadcast operations. It’s a fair guess to say that now more people comment, complain, support or ridicule President Trump on the Internet in one day than watched William F. Buckley on *Firing Line* in a month.

With engagement comes attachment. For too many people the opportunity to speak fosters a compulsion to do so. Following that comes an investment of ego that quickly disintegrates into online “flame wars” where the political becomes the personal. It is no longer enough to say “you are wrong.”

The infusion of self-worth into political viewpoint now requires one to say “you are evil.” Faux moral high ground has replaced patriotism as the last refuge of the scoundrel.

A History of Political Hatred

A casual look at history tells us that vilification of a president is not new nor does it require a rational or truthful basis. It is well documented that in the 1800 election between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, being called “an orange orangutan” would’ve been pretty mild stuff:

“Jefferson’s camp accused President Adams of having a “hideous hermaphroditical character, which has neither the force and firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman.” In return, Adams’ men called Vice President Jefferson “a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father.”

The Cato Institute’s Trevor Burrus points out that JFK faced unfair attacks given that even in 1960, many Americans felt that “Catholic values are fundamentally at odds with American values and that Catholics are beholden to a “foreign despot.”

Richard Nixon of course, was an easy and popular target, especially among counterculture thought leaders such as Saturday Night Live and The National Lampoon.

The difference between then and now is that in all of the cases above, the pre-social media dynamic controlled the flow of information. People might have gathered to watch SNL together or pass copies of The National Lampoon between each other, but the act of sharing samizdat leaves no record and adds no dialogue to the public discourse.

It's my hypothesis that Donald Trump is not history's most hated man, but instead, the hatred expressed towards him is republished and distributed on a scale never seen before.

Denial and Obsession

In no way does my hypothesis disregard or minimize the magic power that Donald Trump has to drive normally rational people into foaming-at-the-mouth diatribes, rants and rumormongering. This is where I seem to think that "Trump *Obsession Syndrome*" is a far more accurate descriptor.

I arrived at this theory by looking at the psychology of leftists who are still in complete and utter state of denial that Trump won the election.

"The Electoral College is unconstitutional and unfair!" they bleated. "She got more votes!"

Then the impossible could only be explained by inventing a dark, shadowy foreign entity with the power to bend reality. Fifty years ago, they would've blamed "the Zionist Conspiracy." Today, of course, it had to be Russia. It just had to be. There's no other explanation for how "the most qualified candidate ever" was defeated by a "short-fingered vulgarian."

The Democrats scrambling for self-assuring explanations finally deteriorated into blaming white women for being "controlled" by their husbands or alternatively, just plain racist. (FUN FACT: On Election Day, more than 10,000 women visited the gravesite of Susan B. Anthony and left "I Voted" stickers on her tombstone. But in fighting for women's voting rights in the late 19th century, Anthony called black men "ignorant" and vehemently opposed the 15th Amendment which gave the vote to black men.)

The psychological component is clear and palpable. Some of YouTube's most popular videos are collections of left-leaning broadcasters losing their minds as the election results came in.

Now, because the barrier to entry in speaking your mind has been virtually eliminated, dozens of Facebook groups have coalesced to express their sheer hatred for Trump. (For clarity's sake, I want to go on the record as saying that I would defend the right of these people to do so with every fiber of my being.)

Where things get weird – and perhaps explaining the word "derangement" – is that I have witnessed normally intelligent people insert Trump into social media threads that have no rational connection to politics, let alone Trump. Sharing a recipe for apple pie? I heard Trump hates apples. Showing off your new house? Trump is raising middle-class taxes. He's everywhere!

The frequency, the constant drumbeat of social media posts about Trump is remarkable. One attorney I know whose law firm has represented *The New York Times* (no surprise) posts hysterical tirades about Trump at least three times a day if not more.

One wonders if he is actually trying to persuade others or instead trying to comfort himself. Even the respected Psychology Today has recognized that Trump is living rent-free in millions of heads:

“Donald Trump is in the therapy room and he is blowing it up. Counselors, clinicians, and life coaches report that their clients are showing up with exacerbated experiences of ‘paranoia, hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, intrusive thoughts, somatic complaints, difficulty concentrating and sleeping, and nightmares.’ The therapists aren’t exempt, either; some say they just can’t stop thinking about Trump.”

Of course, Trump thrives on the attention and I suspect a sadistic joy on his part in knowing that so many of his detractors are presenting symptoms of mental illness. In that light, I have to wonder aloud whether I’m wrong: *Perhaps everybody is deranged.*