



How Not to Fall for Trump's 'What He Believes' Nonsense

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You've probably noticed that Donald Trump has announced that he's holding a press conference Monday in which he'll release a 100-page report which shows both that the 2020 election in Georgia was "stolen" and that all charges against him and his criminal associates should be dropped. In other words, he's responding to the charges by doubling down on the Big Lie. This isn't surprising. Trump only has one gear — all-in and over-the-top. But as Clark Neily says in this post at CATO, "Being an inveterate liar is a major liability in litigation."

He also has an apt description of who Trump is. These are all points we've made before. But it's a tight and concise run-through.

America has seen its fair share of lying politicians, but Donald Trump is in a class of his own. He appears to view literally any interaction with another human being as an opportunity to be exploited and a game to be won. In Trump's world, rules are for chumps, norms are for losers, and the truth is whatever you can get another person to believe — nothing more. And of course, history makes clear that this approach has been quite effective at advancing Trump's interests in certain settings — preening on the set of a game show, for example, or spinning up a fawning, frothing crowd at a campaign event.

But not only will those antics not work in a courtroom, they will backfire. Given the nature of the allegations against him, Trump will *have* to take the stand even though he has a right not to, and given *his* nature, he will lie to the jury just like he has lied to everyone else his entire life.

I note this because Trump's press conference seems to presage a new and insipid public debate about what Donald Trump *really* believes. We'd be remiss if we didn't note that it's actually irrelevant what Trump believes. Believing the bank owes you money isn't a defense for robbing the bank. But that's not the core point. Trump's current antics are like a liar's version of a fake insanity defense in which the defendant makes a spectacle of bizarre behavior to prove his case. Surely, we're supposed to be thinking, or rather doubting, he wouldn't go back to the well, provide yet more evidence for the prosecution, unless he somehow truly believe this stuff.

But Trump doesn't think of truth or lies the way you or I do. Most imperfect people, which is to say all of us, exist in a tension between what we believe is true and what is good for or pleasing

to us. If we have strong character we hew closely to the former, both in what we say to others and what we say to ourselves. The key to understanding Trump is that it's not that he hews toward the latter. It's that the tension doesn't exist. What he says is simply what works for him. Whether it's true is irrelevant and I suspect isn't even part of Trump's internal dialog. It's like asking an actor whether she really loved her husband like she claimed in her blockbuster movie or whether she was lying. It's a nonsensical question. She was acting.

It's the same with Trump. It's a nonsensical question. As Neily accurately puts it, for Trump every interaction is simply a game to be won. Getting into what Trump really "believes" is simply condemning yourself to operating with Trump's never ending scam. At a basic level he doesn't believe anything. He's just playing a game and hoping that you will play it along with him.