

For Trump, the Political is Always Personal

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A senior consultant in Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation used to teach progressive leaders that there is--and should be--a difference between public and private values, that in private life, relationships are ends in themselves while for public actors, relationships are, and should be, more instrumental and transactional. Self-sacrifice is normal in personal relationships, while self-interest guides public action. For political leaders, personal gratification should take a backseat to public service. Of course, there is often a blurring of these boundaries, but, in general, when these domains get too confused, the consequences are usually disastrous. We see in Donald Trump an extreme example of what happens when someone in public is unable to have any guard rails between the pressures of his or her private psychology and public actions.

In Donald Trump's world, the political is *always* personal. Barriers between the two worlds, the sort of censors and self-restraint that effective leaders are obligated to exercise in public life, have completely collapsed. Instead, Trump's policies are suffused with his personal and private needs, defenses, and

insecurities. His tariff policies seek to punish Canada for being nasty and resistant to his bizarre agenda of making Canada our 51st state. He wants to hobble Ukraine because Zelensky was disrespectful to him. With Musk's help, he spins and distorts reality in order to punish the "deep state" that he felt sought to undermine him. He notoriously goes to extreme lengths to try to punish his prior and current political enemies, targeting lawyers, and journalists and threatening to primary disloyal legislators. His ignorance about policy reflects the fact that he recklessly acts on private impulses and not thoughtful reflection. He lies compulsively and continually, and always in the service of bombastic claims of perfection and self-exoneration. He frees criminals and criminalizes dissent, not out of high-minded principles but out of base impulses involving his personal narcissistic needs and vulnerabilities and not public interests.

Obviously, public figures and leaders are human beings with personal psychologies that invariably influence their public political actions. Effective leaders, however, learn to subordinate or at least sublimate personal psychological conflicts in the interests of being politically strategic, negotiating compromises, and focusing in a laser-like way on desirable political outcomes that serve a broader good. No one is saying that politicians leave their egos at the

door, but, instead, the best ones seek to restrain these egos in order to achieve their political goals.

Trump is the opposite. He acts (out) entirely on the basis of personal animus and internal conflicts and then, only retroactively, spins a tale that paints his words and actions as principled or visionary. He will act on a small-minded personal impulse like humiliating Zelensky in the Oval Office, but then argue that what was clearly an idiosyncratic personal response was *really* part of his efforts to singlehandedly solve Ukraine/Russian war and insure world peace. He feels slighted by other world leaders and, then reactively trash talks them in public, all the while implying that his derogatory language and claims are really part of his efforts to make America great again and to promote a high minded “America First” agenda without a hint of awareness that the real psychic motivation behind his actions involve making Trump “great” and “first.”

The nature of the psychological engine that drives Trump to so constantly leak his personal issues onto his public political postures, the real reasons he simply cannot keep the seamier sides of his psychology from flooding his actions as president, all stem from his core psychological makeup. Trump’s psychology is hiding in plain sight. He is driven to avoid or refute any situation, any moment, in

which he might potentially feel or be seen as one-down, inadequate, inferior, or otherwise a failure. He lives in dire fear of such feelings and instinctively, automatically, and desperately has to go out of his way to communicate the opposite. One doesn't have to be Freud to know this. We see it every day. We see it in Trump's constant clownish boasting and self-aggrandizing arrogance.

Everyone is so used to Trump's compulsive sense of grievance and defensive arrogance that it no longer seems to be as much the impairment that it actually is. No one blinks an eye when he makes remarks, barely concealed within his word salad, about "having the best words," being "the best President for black people since Abraham Lincoln," or knowing more about taxes, the military, climate change—well, pretty much everything—than the world's experts. Even when the conservative Murdoch-owned Wall Street Journal had the temerity to remark that the positive business sentiment seen months before the election had shifted in response to Trump's tariffs, Trump couldn't tolerate the implied criticism and fired back with this tweet: ""The Globalist Wall Street Journal has no idea what they are doing or saying," he [declared](#). "They are owned by the polluted thinking of the European Union, which was formed for the primary purpose of 'screwing the United States of America. Their (WSJ!) thinking is antiquated and weak, and very bad for the USA. But have no fear, we will WIN on everything!!!

My point here is that Trump has no choice, no freedom at all, to edit or censor remarks like these because the psychic threats they seek to mitigate—feelings of shame, inferiority and/or failure—are so threatening to him that they leave him no room at all to be cautious, modest, or to seek common ground. While all politicians, like all people, bring their personal psychologies into their public work lives, Trump's interior life is a clown car of neurotic conflicts that have seized control of his executive functions and shape his every public statement and action.