

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد      بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم      از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

by PATRICK COCKBURN  
28.07.2020

## *The Media Manipulator: Why Trump's Distractions May Not Save Him This Time*



Photograph Source: Tyler Merbler – [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

Donald Trump has fallen far enough behind in the polls as to raise the hopes of the world that it will soon see the back of him as US president come the election in 100 days' time. Given his calamitous handling of the coronavirus pandemic, the decline in his popularity is scarcely surprising.

Yet Trump has always shown a Dracula-like ability to rise from the political grave. The writer and politician Conor Cruise O'Brien once wrote of the similarly amazing ability of the Irish taoiseach, Charlie Haughey, to survive scandals and crises. "If I saw Mr Haughey buried at midnight at a crossroads with a stake driven through his heart," said O'Brien, "I should continue to wear a clove of garlic round my neck, just in case."

The secret of Trump's survival is his skill in using and manipulating the media to his own advantage. He may sound crass but he is expert at changing the topic of the hour so that today's damning revelation becomes tomorrow's old news. By outrageous antics he dominates the news agenda and, whatever his failings, he is never dull.

This latter skill may not seem politically significant but the news business is all about what is new, interesting and entertaining. Trump's utterances and tweets may sound eccentric or crazed but they are really news headlines geared to giving him gigantic publicity, often from newspapers and television networks that loathe him. Journalists understand that they are dancing to his tune, but there is not much they can do about it.

Critics correctly attribute his supreme ability to stay centre stage to his 14 years in the role of an all-powerful business mogul in the reality-television show *The Apprentice*. Yet the tone of the criticism is dismissive, as if starring year after year in an immensely successful television show is easily done. Of course, nothing is "real" about reality television: a single hour on air of *The Apprentice* was edited out of 300 hours of footage, producing an artificial end product.

The reasons the producers cast Trump as a business genius – though his hotels and casinos had gone bankrupt six times – help explain his political success. Several years ago, Richard Levak, a psychologist who consulted for *The Apprentice*, gave an interview to *The New Yorker* magazine in which he explained why Trump's personality was appropriate for the show. He said the traits that got Trump the job had been "the energy, the impulsiveness, the inability to articulate a complete thought because he gets interrupted by emotions, so when he speaks it's all adjectives – 'great', 'huge', 'horrible'." But what made Trump so magnetic to audiences, according to Levak, and this remains true to this day, was Trump's willingness to transgress and to break the rules.

His shambolic spontaneity and unexpectedness have hitherto made his television appearances compulsively interesting. "That somebody can become that successful while also being that emotionally undisciplined – it's so macabre that you have to watch it," said Levak. "And you keep watching for the comeuppance. But it doesn't come."

But maybe Trump's comeuppance is with us now in the shape of the coronavirus. People find his political box of tricks less enticing when he suggests that they inject themselves with disinfectant to cure infection.

Not everything about Trump is distinct to America. Aside from his unique capacity to manipulate the media, he has most of the characteristics of populist, nationalist, and

authoritarian rulers everywhere. There is the same xenophobic demonisation of minorities at home and of foreigners abroad; law and order are lauded when applied to others and ignored by himself and his lieutenants; elected representatives, experts and the well-educated are treated with similar disdain. Over everything, there is the same smell of corruption, militaristic bombast and willingness to use violence.

Trump is at his most dangerous when he is cornered and at risk of losing power. He seeks confrontation at every turn: in the US, his racism is more blatant, witness his willingness to deploy federal agents against protesters in Democratic-run cities like Portland, Oregon and Chicago, presumably in order to provoke clashes that will strengthen his law-and-order credentials. Abroad, the freshly brewed Cold War against China escalates by the day. Traditionally, US presidential elections on 3 November are preceded by dire warnings that the occupant of the White House is planning to stage 'an October surprise' by covertly provoking some game-changing crisis. These Machiavellian conspiracies have seldom actually happened, but on this occasion they might well do so.

Even a concocted crisis should not make a decisive impact in the face of the appalling reality of the pandemic, with 142,000 Americans already dead and four million known to be infected. Trump's abrupt about-turn away from down-playing the illness as a hoax inspired by his enemies probably comes too late, as he wears a mask for the first time and cancels the Republican convention in Jacksonville, Florida, that was to nominate him for a second term.

Trump still has options. By resuming White House briefings about the pandemic, he will focus attention on himself and marginalise Joe Biden. He remains a ferociously effective campaigner and he is fighting in Biden, as in 2016, a lack-lustre Democratic Party candidate.

The Democrats' strategy of assuming that Trump would self-destruct failed four years ago because, among other things, it created a vacuum of information that Trump filled with slanders about Hillary Clinton. But these advantages may matter less than they would in any other year because Trump's real opponent is not Biden but the coronavirus – and his campaign is being crippled by his failure to bring the epidemic under control or convince Americans that its ravages are being exaggerated. At his renewed press briefings, he is visibly at sea as he spews out an endless list of ill-assorted actions by the federal government to combat the virus. His claims of world-beating American success

sound dangerously deranged when set against graphs showing infections soaring past the four million mark and deaths rising above a thousand a day.

Trump may go but he is unlikely to go quietly. The pandemic may sink him but it also gives him unprecedented opportunities to muddy the waters and stir up hatred and division come election day. In urban areas, for instance, where the Democrats have strong majorities, the polling stations are traditionally manned by elderly retired volunteers, who are vulnerable to coronavirus. If they do not turn up on election day, then polling stations will be closed to the benefit of Trump who is already trying to delegitimise postal voting. Many voters may be simply too frightened of the virus to leave their homes to cast a ballot.

It is difficult to think of a single word to describe the all-embracing mess in America this summer. But Conor Cruise O'Brien did coin one – GUBU – appropriate to the present extraordinary circumstances in the US. It is an acronym of the words grotesque, unbelievable, bizarre and unprecedented – which were used by Haughey to describe the arrest of a double murderer who was found hiding in the house of the Irish attorney general in Dublin.

**CounterPunch 27.07.2020**