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Trump's Opponents Need to Portray him as the True Enemy of the Nation



Trump and Pence street art. Photograph Source: thierry ehrmann – [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

A sheriff in Texas was once trailing badly in his re-election campaign. He met with his political friends to discuss how he might regain the lead. After examining different options, he himself came up with a suggestion on how to damage his opponent. “Why don’t we say that he commits bestial acts with pigs?” he asked. His friends shook their heads dismissively, saying that everybody would know that the accusation was untrue. “I know that,” replied the sheriff, “but let’s hear him deny it.”

This old American political fable was told to me by my father, Claud Cockburn, who was a journalist in the US in the late 1920s and 1930s. But its cynical message remains true

today and goes to the heart of Donald Trump's tactics that won him the White House almost four years ago and are fuelling his rebound in the polls today, making it all too possible that he will be re-elected as president on 3 November.

As the story about the Texas sheriff shows, Trump's political box of tricks is not new, but he has updated its contents and is expert at using them. Trump says something outrageous and often untrue, such as claiming that the dreadfully establishment Joe Biden is a radical socialist hand-in-glove with rioters and looters. The charge is attention-grabbing and guaranteed to dominate the news agenda, while Biden is forced onto the political back foot as he rebuts the charge. He is lured onto political terrain favourable to Trump where the focus is on racial fears and hatreds and attention is diverted away from Trump's calamitous handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Politicians like Trump and the present generation of populist nationalist leaders such as Viktor Orban in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey and Narendra Modi in India, employ similar tactics. In the House of Commons this week, Boris Johnson accused Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour Party, of being an IRA supporter, eliciting a furious chapter-and-verse denial from Starmer that he had ever had any sympathy for the IRA. As always, it is easier to tell a lie than rebut it and a rebuttal necessarily involves restating the accusation.

An advantage for Trump is that his opponents underestimate his political skills because they are contemptuous of his crudity, ignorance and mendacity. But his ability to manipulate information needs to be, and is, greater than leaders like Orban, Erdogan and Modi because he faces a mostly hostile American media, while they have largely stamped critical news outlets out of existence. His critics abuse him as a former reality TV host without realising that his long experience of successfully pursuing ever-higher ratings for his show has honed his media expertise to a level they cannot match. He knows how to say something so shocking that news editors will not be able to ignore it, regardless of whether it is true or false. He long ago learned how to give an impression of spontaneity and authenticity that always outscores pre-scripted remarks.

Trump has instinctively understood the great problem of information in the internet age. This is not, as is often imagined, primarily "fake facts", but is rather the sheer volume of facts, the great porridge of information, that is now available to everybody. A successful politician must shout louder than ever to attract attention, must never be boring and remember that dullness is never news. Trump's tweets may sound maniacal but they work perfectly as news headlines that jump off the page or off the TV or computer screen.

Compare Trump's utterances with those of Biden, or of Hillary Clinton four years ago, and see why they fail to compete.

Democrats tend both to underestimate Trump as a political operator and, at the same time, demonise him as evil made flesh to the point that they are blinded by hatred to his strengths and weaknesses. Given the record of his dysfunctional, corrupt and incompetent administration, it is extraordinary how often his enemies have failed to land a punch that drew real political blood. Remember "Russia-gate" and the impeachment process that were supposed either to bring Trump down or to hole him below the waterline so that he would capsize come election day? Yet this giant offensive failed so dismally that "Russia" and "impeachment" were scarcely mentioned during the Democratic convention that chose Biden as candidate.

Much attention is rightly given to the division between left and right within the Democratic Party as a reason why it has been such an ineffective opponent of Trump. The party establishment often appeared more determined to defeat Bernie Sanders as a potential presidential candidate than to drive Trump from power. They got their way when Biden became the nominee. But the triumph of the traditional elite within the Democrats creates a weakness not often considered. Biden and his section of the party belong to what has been described as "the residual elites", the old political, military and media establishment that were the self-confident rulers of America in the second half of the 20th century. Detesting Trump and all his works, they dream of returning to the years of their youth, when the institutions which they led fought the Cold War against the Soviet Union. Look at the alacrity with which these remnants of what were once the unchallenged powers-that-be in America (and their allies abroad) have sprung to arms to wage a new cold war in opposition to supposed threats from Russia, China and Iran.

In opposing Trump, much of the Democratic leadership and Washington elite disappeared down memory lane. Trump was to be unmasked and impeached as a Russian proxy, illegitimately elected through the Kremlin's subterranean efforts. Russia's capabilities were absurdly exaggerated, doubtless to the joy and amusement of Vladimir Putin. Hillary Clinton needed no foreign agency to lose the election against Trump, as all accounts of her disastrous campaign make clear.

Opponents of Trump in America are not alone in their frustration, since populist nationalist governments from Brazil to Israel, Hungary to India and Turkey to the Philippines never seem to be displaced once they have seized the levers of power.

A common feature of this failure is that the Trumpian regimes (though many predate Trump) have been able to monopolise patriotism at a time when the nation state remains the primary focus of communal loyalty within countries. They have been able to pose successfully as patriotic saviours of the nation, despite doing untold damage to their countries because their opponents have let them do so.

Left-wingers in former imperial powers like Britain, France and the US see home-grown nationalism as tainted by colonialism and racism. They sympathise more decisively with self-determination for ex-colonies and subject races. As Jeremy Corbyn predictably found out, this approach is a certain recipe for electoral defeat. Well-educated metropolitan liberals, for their part, view nationalism as old-hat prejudice in a globalising and interdependent world.

Nationalism, which can be good or bad, is the glue that binds together the disparate coalitions of interests that back Trump-type regimes. Effective opposition to them must also hold together a loose coalition of powerful but divergent forces by seizing back the patriotic card and portraying the Trumpians as the true enemies of the nation.

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