

Title: President Trump: celebrity-in-chief and the desecration of political authority

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Abstract:

This article argues that Donald Trump’s persona and his dismissal of established conventions work to position him as a celebrity-in-chief who desecrates politics, political authority and the political scene. To pursue this, I draw on sociological and philosophical analyses of political authority developed by sociologists (including Lowenthal, Sennett and Arendt) alongside later work on political persona, celebrity and political appeal. I explore historical changes in the social function and appeal of role models and celebrity and reflect on how these changes have contributed towards a decline in political authority. The final section focuses on Trump’s early days in power in order to illustrate how he is represented and read as a rogue celebrity politician who has desecrated political authority. This is achieved through a critical engagement with Michael Wolff’s 2018 fly-on-the-wall account of life inside Team Trump entitled *Fire and Fury: Inside the White House*.

Keywords: Trump – authority - celebrity – persona - desecration- politics

Introduction:

This article argues that Trump's political persona and his dismissal of established political conventions underpins his position as a celebrity-in-chief who desecrates politics and the political scene. In this article, I focus on Trump's desecration of political authority itself and the gravitas with which this is commonly associated. I explore how, from the perspective of Trump's critics as well as from a theoretical perspective, conservative notions of authority (already under threat) has been further undermined. To pursue this, I draw on theories and debates about political authority developed by sociologists Leo Lowenthal and Richard Sennett and philosopher Hannah Arendt as well as later influential work on political persona, celebrity and political appeal. The article begins with a brief account of Trump's emergence on the political scene with reference to his celebrity and political persona. It then maps out definitions of politics and the political field and defines authority within a broad historical context. Against this backdrop I chart the decline in political authority and how this is related to changing social function of role models and celebrity. The final section focuses on Trump's early days in power to illustrate how he is represented and read as a rogue celebrity who has desecrated political authority. This is achieved through a critical engagement with Michael Wolff's 2018 reportage account of Trump entitled *Fire and Fury: Inside the White House*. Overall, I argue that Wolff's insider story of Trump's campaign and his early days in power typifies the public narrative of a rogue President whose persona undermines established conventions of political authority.

Trump, celebrity and popular appeal

Donald Trump's long-term political aide Sam Nunberg reputedly asked: 'Is Trump a good person, an intelligent person, a capable person?...I don't even know. But I know he's a star' (in Wolff 2018, p.22). Nunberg's statement invites us to consider the terrain of politics/celebrity in which Trump is situated. His statement implies an opposition between the good and able politician and the celebrity which highlights wider assumptions about the incompatibility of the serious world of politics and the frivolous world of celebrity. Is it celebrity or political gravitas which most commands respect, affiliation and trust in the current moment? Might it be both? Or can celebrity without gravitas, without political authority and possibly even without proven ability, triumph regardless? These questions

indicate the bounds of the media debate which currently locate President Trump as either a purposeful, capable political leader or as a clownish global celebrity but rarely unite the two.

While some have charted Trump's rise to power as the planned outcome of decades of political interventions on his part, others have suggested that he is, in fact, the accidental President; a man who inadvertently found himself in the White House as a direct consequence of a personal drive to maximise his celebrity brand. Historians Laderman and Simms (2017), for example, lay the groundwork for the first argument by stressing the consistency of Trump's political world view, his beliefs about America's purpose and promise and how his current approach to US foreign policy, in particular, is underpinned by long-held convictions. They track three decades of Trump's TV and press interviews and his social media pronouncements to suggest that the conventional view of Trump as a politically naïve 'modern day PT Barnum' is fundamentally mistaken (Laderman and Simms 2017, pp.5-6).

By contrast, journalist Michael Wolff's sensationalist exposé of the Trump campaign and the administration's early days in power proposes that Team Trump never expected to win or rather that '*losing was winning*' for Trump (2018, pp. 17-18 author's emphasis). By running for President, Trump would become globally famous and his daughter and her husband would become international celebrities and ambassadors for the family brand. In sum, Trump never intended to win but having won he has become the first reality TV president.

As Ouellette (2016) has indicated, widespread distinctions between celebrity and politics, reality entertainment and public ambition misconceive the significance of reality television, of celebrity and of Trump himself and how these can be mobilised in the capitalist project. Ouellette argues that Trump's flagship entrepreneur show *The Apprentice* does more than serve as a platform for the Trump brand:

...the programme established the rogue businessman as a... leader extraordinaire. While the competition hinged on entrepreneurialism and strategy, *The Apprentice* entertained... charitable organizations and elected officials... Thanks to reality TV, he is the embodiment of an enterprising subjectivity and a "no nonsense" approach to leadership that draws legitimacy from the market. (Ouellette 2016, p.650).

In other words, entertainment television is *political* and *The Apprentice*, specifically, worked in dialogue with the elite worlds of philanthropy and politics, as well as with the corporate world and show business. According to Franko (2006) *The Apprentice* conveys the business world as a highly centralised dictatorship with Trump as the authoritarian leader who teaches

that winning is everything. In her view the show is both a model of the social world (individualist and neoliberal) and a highly personal and biographical format featuring Trump as hero and captain of industry. Trump is arguably the personification of what Fisher called ‘capitalist realism’; that is the assumption that there is no imaginable alternative to current economic and cultural practices. Moreover, Fisher, writing in the immediate aftermath of the global financial downturn argued, ‘Over the past thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a “business ontology” in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business’ (2009, p.17 author’s emphasis). If society is to be run like a business, then the ideal president requires entrepreneurial qualities. Trump was already a ‘business celebrity’ before his show took off and one whose capacity for leadership was central to his persona (Guthey et al. 2009). This confluence of factors made Trump as eminently electable.

Trump’s success ‘works’ in celebrity terms because the Trump brand effectively knits together the different spheres, described above, to produce Trump as the ‘American President’ which is to say, Trump as the celebrity-in-chief (Walsh 2017). White House correspondent Kenneth T. Walsh (2017, p.2) has reflected on the degrees by which presidents ‘measure up’ as celebrities and successfully inhabit celebrity-in-chiefdom and how they come to embody ‘the most famous and powerful individual in our culture.’ Walsh (2017, pp.2-3) suggests three characteristics of the successful celebrity-in-chief: the ability to master the media (to become ‘iconic’, ‘larger than life’), the ability to define oneself in positive and distinctive ways (for example, as good, or courageous) and the ability to convey complexity in simple terms and to refresh the narrative of the American dream (see Wheeler 2013, p38). These characteristics, deployed effectively, allow characters such as Trump to unite the supposedly separate worlds of media, show business and politics, through the construction of a blended public persona which speaks to citizens, audiences and consumers (Marshall 1997, p.203). This blending has been neatly critiqued by Richard Sennett (1993, p. 261) in *The Fall of Public Man* ‘as a confusion of public behaviour and personality.’

Persona may be understood as a ‘projection and a performance of individuality’ aimed at an engagement with the collective (Marshall et al. 2019,p.3). Persona, which always has a ‘political dimension’, helps the political actor navigate their presence and engagement with the social and the collective (Marshall and Henderson 2006, pp.1-5; see also Marshall and Barbour 2015). Media management and public engagement is at the heart of persona because persona is a ‘strategic identity’ which is ‘imbued with politics at its core’ (Marshall and

Henderson 2016, p.1). In their introduction to the *Persona Studies* collection on Political Persona Marshall and Henderson (2016) outline the distinct but related scholarly conceptualisations of persona formation in relation to authenticity, celebrity culture, branding and commodification and finally the personal, the intimate and the biographical (see also Wheeler 2013, pp.25-7). For the purposes of this discussion my article focuses primarily on the biographical through its engagement with Wolff's account of Trump, his character and his behaviour.

Trump has certainly mastered the media, riding the wave of a changing media ecology through his self-presentation in social media and the 'legacy' media of television (see Marshall and Henderson 2016, pp.1-2, 11-14). Marshall and Henderson (pp.11-12) observe that Trump's high visibility has developed through nearly four decades of media appearances into an over-coded, stereotyped persona (unlikeable and unscrupulous but deserving of the public stage). Social media has further supported or re-angled Trump's political persona due to a digital performance which is simple, uncivil and unconventional (Enli 2017; Ott 2017). Trump's engagement with 'presentational culture' has arguably worked at the crossroads of the political public self and what Marshall (2010, p.45) has called the 'transgressive intimate self' which can accelerate the 'pathway to notoriety and attention.' This performance and its reception is emblematic of the shift in the structure of politics, political communication and popular culture in which digital culture 'transformed what had been a fairly stable structure of political and cultural legitimacy....' (Marshall 2019, p.2; see also Iosifidis and Wheeler 2016).

Trump's persona successfully negotiates the challenge of being both rich and 'relatable'. Wolff (p. 23) argued that Trump: '...looked for a license not to conform, not to be respectable. It was something of an outlaw prescription for winning...' Reportedly he had some understanding 'of his own essential nature' and how this might speak to voters who at first glance were worlds apart (Wolff p.23, see also Rademacher 2016, p.91). When asked by a foreigner what 'white trash' meant Trump replied: 'They're people just like me...only they're poor' (in Wolff p.23). I suggest that Trump's ability to pass as somehow *working class*, together with his vulgarian persona, set him apart from his political predecessors and current rivals whose familial and social networks were routed through political dynasties. His campaign and his personal rhetoric effectively distilled the complex reality of neoliberal competition, race and class rivalries and xenophobia into a simple story. Trump's aim to 'make America great again' was conveyed in unvarnished terms in his rally speeches where

he allied himself with the disenfranchised ‘majority’. He declared: ‘ “we’re on the rise...America will be dominant, proud, rich.”’ (in Hochschild 2016, p.223). His macho persona might be the vehicle through which to restore white male authority (Kellner 2016, p.26; Rademacher 2016). According to Trump, the appalling economic damage and distress experienced by many (ironically wrought by wave after wave of capitalist creative destruction) was eminently fixable and all without the strain of imagining a life beyond capitalism. Indeed, capitalist values were at the heart of his simple solution. Trump declared: “‘I’ve been greedy. I’m a business man...take, take, take. Now I’m going to be greedy for the United States”’ (in Hochschild 2016, p. 224). His words recall the famous monologue by corporate financier Gordon Gekko in the 1987 film *Wall Street* (USA, Stone) where the protagonist declared: ‘Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit...And greed... will... save... that malfunctioning corporation America.’

Trump’s words inspired pride and hope and revived a sense of futurity and inclusivity in economically and culturally marginalised people who felt that they had become strangers in their own land (Hochschild 2016). So too, Trump’s reclamation of the notion of greed as a positive and energizing life force is indicative of his ability to define himself *distinctively*, albeit with reference to a string of dubious virtues which might better be regarded as vices: greed, vulgarity, rudeness and the rhetoric of brute force. These may not have been ‘positive’ features, but they served to forge his particular brand of outsider conservatism. American conservatism is a ‘strong brand in the United States’ (Aberbach 2017, p.128). It remains politically and culturally central to American life despite its schisms, its growing inability to speak to certain demographics and the weakening of its core values during a period of growing secularisation. While in many ways Trump’s campaign was marginal to the mainstream of conservative funding, policy and alliance-building networks nonetheless his strong man celebrity persona chimed with those worried that they would be left behind in the wake of rapid global change (see also Rademacher 2016, pp. 95-97 for a discussion of Trump’s persona, ‘loss’ and the American success myth).

The US Election outcome fulfilled Trump’s prediction that his campaign would make him the most famous man in the world (Wolff, p.11) and the most powerful. Trump is the most famous *political leader* in the world and one whose every public move and pronouncement shapes and directs our understanding of what political leadership is and what political leaders do. Trump commands fascination because he is a political figure who breaks every rule of

decorum and civility. The dignities of high office seem to hold little attraction for him, government is a ‘swamp’, and earlier political leaders and their networks were either crusty and stuffy or effete and metropolitan. Either way, they were out of touch with the people they purported to serve. As celebrity-in-chief Trump promised to obliterate the compromised hurtful legacies of the self-serving establishment and inaugurate a new era of unabashed self-interest for the little people who had been pushed aside. Along the way, he enthusiastically insulted more conventional political rivals and the protocols, rituals and unspoken practices which had sustained the established political culture.

Politics, political authority and the media

Defining politics adequately is key to understanding the terrain in which I am situating this analysis of Trump’s putative insult to conventional political authority. Etzioni (2003, p. 89) defines the operations of politics in the following manner:

...political processes concern bridging power differences with society with those within the state, bridges that carry inputs both from society to the state (e.g., the results of elections) and from the state to society (e.g., Presidential speeches; legislation). The political realm also includes intrastate ...processes concerning the application, reallocation, and legitimation of power.

These processes, as Etzioni indicates, cross back and forth from state to society via elections, speeches and other forms of political communication and through legislation. The visible protagonists of these networks of power, action and communication are our electable and elected representatives, namely politicians. Politicians, as figureheads and as actors (as subjects with the power to make things happen), historically accrued to themselves both authority and gravitas. This was achieved through a consensus that the elected politician had a *legitimate* mandate to govern and that their contribution to the proper running of society was necessary and worthwhile. This mandate lends the politician authority. So let us consider what authority is and what it does with reference to standard, institutional and scholarly definitions.

Authority is ‘the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience’ and the authority figure is ‘a person who has or represents authority’ (ODE 2010 3rd edit). The President is specifically an *executive* authority who puts laws, policies and practices into effect albeit within a heavily determining governmental structure. The Presidency is

described as the chief *executive* office of the United States and its head is arguably the most powerful elected official in the world. The emphasis on the President's responsibility for the execution and enforcement of the laws created by Congress stresses the performative dimension of Presidential responsibility. As head of the Executive Branch the President has the authority:

...to negotiate and sign treaties, which also must be ratified by two-thirds of the Senate. The President can issue executive orders, which direct executive officers or clarify and further existing laws. The President also has unlimited power to extend pardons and clemencies for federal crimes, except in cases of impeachment.ⁱ

However, there are many subtleties involved in understanding authority when we move beyond dictionary and institutional definitions to consider its usage in lived contexts. This is especially the case when we consider its operation in the affective public sphere where politics, people and emotions collide (see Richards 2007; Yates 2015). Richard Sennett's case study on authority scopes out various overlapping and even competing definitions which all hold in common *a relation to power*. Sennett (1980, p.4, p.10) explores what he calls the 'social organisation of emotion', to define authority as an 'emotional expression of power' which forms bonds 'between people who are unequal'. He demonstrates that we are deeply conflicted about our relation to authority and its centrality to our emotional needs:

...most figures of authority do not arouse much enthusiasm because they do not deserve to. An intelligent person remains sane by rejecting the childish collages of strength and compassion which authorities present as pictures of themselves. Yet...our need for authority as such remains...Desires for guidance, security, and stability do not disappear when they are unsatisfied. (1980, p.16)

We may cleave to authority through fear of something worse or look up to it as a form of parental, mostly, paternal reassurance even when it may be punitive, disciplinary or even authoritarian. 'Of authority it may be said in the most general way that it is an attempt to interpret the conditions of power, to give conditions of control, and influence a meaning by defining an image of strength' (Sennett 1980, p. 19). Of key interest is Sennett's argument that 'the bond of authority is built of *images* of strength and weakness' and that 'Because of the seriousness of the authority's trade, he is a mesmerising figure' (Sennett 1980 p.120, my emphasis). This allows us to understand Trump's (insult to) authority in the context of the media and celebrity culture where image is crucial. The bonds with authority are multiple and complex, ambiguous and fluctuating to the extent that, even when we reject it, we define ourselves in relation to it. For Sennett (p. 20), the one consolation of our inability to bond

perfectly with authority is that it protects us from its worst excesses and so ‘we keep our freedom from those masters of illusion who promise us that history is over, and that the search can come to an end.’ This captures citizens’ ambivalence towards authority figures, suggesting that we may regard them with suspicion while simultaneously seeking reassurance that they can guide and protect us.

It’s been argued that where authority structures are missing or weak and public trust is wavering then unsavoury characters will make inroads into political spaces. Hannah Arendt (1956, p.403), reflecting on the social turbulence of the 1930s and 1940s, begins her celebrated treatise *Authority in the Twentieth Century* with the statement:

The rise of fascist, communist and totalitarian movements and the development of the two totalitarian regimes, Stalin’s after 1929 and Hitler’s after 1938, took place against a background of a more or less general, more or less dramatic breakdown of all traditional authorities.

Arendt contends that the 20th century decline in authority in the United States was governed by extensive shifts in social arrangements and attitudes which even applied to pre-political or proto-political structures such as the family:

The most extreme manifestation of this climate which....has been the.....gradual breakdown of the one form of authority which exists in all historically known societies, the decline of authority of parents over children, of teachers over pupils and, generally of the elders over the young. (Arendt 1956 p.403)

She outlined the conditions under which totalitarian regimes move in and these included their capacity ‘to take advantage of a general political and social atmosphere in which the validity of authority itself was radically doubted’ (1956 p.403). She usefully reminds us of what’s at stake, variously, for liberals and conservatives, when conventional political authority structures are superseded by the self-authorising head of state: ‘liberalism...measures a process of receding freedom, and *conservatism measures a process of receding authority*; both call the expected end-result totalitarianism...’ (Arendt p.414, my emphasis). This suggests that authority is essentially a conservative attribute. While liberals might be sceptical of paternal centralised authority, as citizens they may experience the decline of authority as the harbinger of disorder and extremism.

Sociologists Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman (1949) also showed how extremist leaders emerge in the context of this diminishing respect for conventional political authority. In their pioneering study of right-wing radio broadcasts and pro-fascist agitation in 1930s-1940s America the researchers offered a comprehensive analysis of the rhetorical strategies

of address made by male radical political leaders. These strategies focused on fear mongering, the fuelling of prejudice and a populist feeling of disempowerment and these remain pertinent today albeit conveyed through very different media platforms (Wheeler 2012:14). They describe the extremist persona and how it claims authority to represent the people in hard times:

...the agitator does not hesitate to advertise himself. He does not depend on a “build-up” manufactured by subordinates and press agents, but does the job himself [sic]. He could hardly trust anyone else to paint his self-image in such glowing colors. As the good fellow who has nothing to hide, whose effusiveness and garrulousness know no limit, he does not seem to be inhibited by considerations of good taste from openly displaying ...his opinions about himself... Part of the secret of his charisma as a leader is that he presents the image of a self-sufficient personality to his followers. (Lowenthal and Guterman 1949 p.118)

These agitators were very far from the national political scene, although some threatened to move into that space. The ‘little man’ act, which was part of the agitator’s personal appeal, involved stressing that he was, by definition, outside of the central mechanisms of power, outside of Washington. His exclusion from power rendered him all the wholesome and trustworthy. From this perspective, extremist leaders traded on declining trust in mainstream authority in order to insert themselves into the national conversation and to begin the journey to power. They also capitalised on the domestic nature of radio to help cultivate a new intimacy with political publics, an intimacy which would come to characterize the changing public sphere.

The wider backdrop to this extremist threat and its familiarisation via radio was a changing cultural cartography in which the authority of political actors and their command of public respect was in decline. The cultural map was being redrawn through the expansion of the mass media and mass entertainment which allowed for a different, potentially more personal, relationship to develop between audiences and public figures. Lowenthal, again reflecting on the early decades of the twentieth century, described the profound social changes in his study ‘Biographies in popular magazines’ (later re-titled ‘The triumph of mass idols’). His interest was in biographical coverage of socially prominent people and he drew the conclusion that the public was no longer willing to be guided by the exemplary lives of once esteemed leaders and opinion formers. There was a decline in popular investment in serious public figures connected to history and politics, to the forces of production and industrial capitalism. The period witnessed a concomitant rise in fascination with public figures’ (especially stars,

celebrities, sporting heroes) private lives, with their domestic arrangements and especially with their consumer practices and personal wealth (see also Sternheimer 2011; Wheeler 2013, p.9). While Lowenthal did not refer to the increasingly neglected and even disrespected public figures as *authority figures* it was clear that it was their authority which was at stake; industry titans, inventors and politicians were no longer the figures upon which citizens might choose to model behaviours and aspirations.

The culture of industrial capitalism and its mediation in political and popular communication had seemed to offer clear direction and values. Lowenthal referred to its figureheads as the ideal character types of private capitalism whose achievements were clear and measurable. Their success and social prominence were viewed as rewards for character, grit and individual progress built on grit, diligence and productivity (Illouz 2003, p.97). The celebrity or star took the centre ground as these individuals and their attributes increasingly fell from public favour (see Wheeler 2013, pp.33-59). Celebrity and consumerism came together to produce a new relation between public figures and their audiences.

The story of twentieth century politics is also one of decline in esteem and respect for political authority and a rising expectation that politicians align themselves with consumer and celebrity culture (Street, 2004 and 2012; Wheeler 2013). It is worth noting that in the new pantheon of heroes outlined by Lowenthal, the celebrity business leader attracted rather less condemnation than others he cites, perhaps because this figure continued to span the old and new worlds. The celebrity business leader was one of a growing number of hybrid figures who blended the formerly relatively distinct worlds of celebrity culture, politics, industry and business. Politics is increasingly populated by celebrity politicians and celebrities who intervene in politics. John Street notes that this creates anxiety among those concerned with democratic process:

.....either because the elected politician... impoverishes the relationship between representative and represented by marginalising issues of political substance in favour of irrelevant gestures and superficial appearances..... Or it is because the celebrity...boasts irrelevant qualities and superficial knowledge that do not justify their claim to 'represent'. (Street 2004, p. 439)

This restructured field of political representation came about due to the factors outlined above together combined with growing public 'cynicism' or 'political indifference' (Corner and Pels 2003, pp.5-7). The personalising of politics, the condensing of 'particular themes and emotions

in a spectacular display of character and style', the impetus to vote for persons rather than for parties and policies, is articulated within a shifting field of public/private relations which take into account a public loss of faith in conventional politics (Corner and Pels 2003, p.7). Corner and Pels (2003, p. 5) contend that for good or ill 'consumer consciousness' itself 'has brought about an end to deference'. The surrendering of private judgment to a public representative authority figure is no longer an option (see Schier 2011). This new perspective spurs public expectations that political leaders should undertake a balancing act. They should 'speak human' and make efforts to present their authentic selves even while retaining their authority as political actors (Van Zoonen 2006; Usher 2016; Wood *et al.* 2016). Social media has emerged as a platform enabling 'new models of persona construction' where political actors can work to build these connections and engage publics differently (Usher 2016, p. 38 and p. 23).

The Fire and the Fury: the desecration of authority

In 2018 Michael Wolff published his account of life in the Trump team during the campaign days and through the first 200 days of his presidency. The book was a *New York Times* bestseller. It's reported that *Fire and Fury* sold 1.7m copies worldwide in first three weeks of release and that Wolff secured seven-figure advances for a sequel together the sale of film and television rights. He was propelled into the book publishing world's top annual earners. Wolff claimed that his fly-on-the-wall account was only possible because Team Trump was too disorganised and naïve to exclude him. His very presence testified to a chaotic setup in which hiring, firing, mishaps and misdemeanours coalesced round the capricious figure of Trump himself. He described the organisational mayhem at the centre of power with unashamed glee and, much to the chagrin of his critics, presented his access to power as frictionless. Wolff claimed: 'In seven months I don't think I asked a question beyond, 'How's it going?'' and yet revelations fell into his lap (in Spangler 2018). Many of the details reported by Wolff remain unverified and the book is not without its critics. But the book's headline story of Trump's scandalous unsuitability for high office has remained mostly undisputed.

Fire and Fury is a page-turner; a political biography in the celebrity mode, conveying events in the West Wing through salty dialogue and pithy observations. The book chronicles how the Trump show-business caravan made the rocky transition to the West Wing and how established notions of political authority were decimated by Trump's elevation to power.

Trump's character is thoroughly scrutinised. The index includes multiple entries on his personal conduct and personality (a literary construction but one which many will recognise from his wider media performances). The appeal of Wolff's book lies precisely in its disclosure of the private life, attitudes and behaviours of Trump and his entourage.

The book's revelations were themselves an assault on presidential authority. Authority gives 'expression to rank, order, definition and, distinction and hides elements of human reality that disorient and disturb (Jones 1987, p.155). Consequently, authority acts as a stabilising force in society. The dominant discourse of authority places strict limits on the publicly expressible, hiving off the private and the personal from the political realm (Jones 1987 p. 165); Lukes 1987, p.65). By contrast, the popular *unauthorised* exposé is, of course, a form designed to give readers insight into the off the record 'elements of the human' which authority conventionally hides (Lukes *ibid.*).

Wolff's account begins by stressing Trump's low standing as a political outsider who failed to secure institutional Republican support and was never meant to win the election:

Winning presidential candidates...have, more than likely, spent a substantial part of their careers, if not their lives from adolescence, preparing for the role. They rise up the ladder of elected offices. They perfect a public face. They maniacally network... They cram... And they clean up after themselves - or at least, take great care to cover up. (Wolff, p.16).

Trump side-stepped the conventions of political career building and entered the White House with few political resources. He stood outside of party orthodoxy and so his relation to conventional authority, in this sense, is tangential. Inconstant political support is a central problem for presidents, and this problem is, above all, a problem of political authority. Schier (2011) has provided empirical evidence of the decline of political authority for American presidents since the mid-1960s, arguing that declining political capital lies at the core of the political authority problem faced by recent presidents. Authority is based not only on securing the public mandate but through 'regime support' from Congress, invested groups and associations, the party and the people which constitute the totality of political capital (Schier 2011, p.79). Long before Trump took office it seemed clear that 'regime support' would be difficult to secure and that any political capital he possessed would be accrued mostly through popular support arising from his celebrification. On the face of it, Trump seemed immune to the attractions of the legitimation that conventional authority affords.

Alongside institutional authority Trump seemed to lack the authority of the wise and/or good man. I began this article with Sam Nunberg's question: 'Is Trump a good person, an intelligent person, a capable person?.....' (in Wolff 2018, p.22). The insider reporter essentially demolishes any notion that Trump may be good or clever or capable. He relays rumours that the new President is illiterate, poorly informed, irrational and stubbornly opposed to any views developed through expertise, learning or research. He depicts him as unable to absorb complex ideas and incapable of turning aims into actionable points. Trump is depicted as capricious, inconsistent and juvenile:

Trump himself you could see ...as an energetic child, and whomever could placate or distract him became his favourite....although he was a person of many obsessions, much of what was on his mind had no fixed view...he had acquired almost no formal ...social discipline - he could not attempt to imitate decorum. (Wolff pp.70-71).

This personality and his closely aligned persona were far from presidential: '....Trump often spoke of himself in the third person. Trump did this. The Trumpster did that. So powerful was this persona, or role, that he seemed reluctant, or unable, to give it up in favour of being president – or presidential' (Wolff, p.22).

More favourably perhaps, in terms of political effectiveness, Wolff reports that while Trump was not built for detail, he was built for effective mass communication. Trump was 'postliterate - total television'; although he would never make the grade as an executive authority, he was the perfect populist politician by virtue of his personality and media savviness (Wolff p. 114). Trump's admirers considered his 'unmediated connection' (via his speeches, tweets, spontaneous phone calls to radio and TV shows) as revelatory and regarded him as a pioneer of a new, personal and inspirational politics.

Trump's physicality and his physical drive also marked him out as different; as essentially corporeal rather than cerebral (see Hall et al., 2016; Rademacher 2016). During the campaign he seemed indefatigable and his rude health was a point of personal pride. An admirer declared: 'he just keeps going....you hit Donald along the head, and he keeps going. He doesn't even know he's been hit' (in Wolff, p. 3). The campaign showcased Trump as 'an action figure' who '*performed*' relentlessly: 'This man never takes a break from being Donald Trump' declared his chief strategist (in Wolff, p115, his emphasis). As Angela Smith (2016, p.99) argues, this physicality is associated with traditional forms of masculine leadership:

...physical power came to be embodied in the war-heroes-turned-statesmen who have become political leaders in many countries over the years. Whilst there is no longer a need for physical power to be prominent in masculinity, this suggestion of physicality persists. Although most Western political leaders rise to that post through party political rather than military ranks, there is a broad expectation that our politicians will appear healthy.

Trump's physicality is also emphasised by reference to his uncontrolled appetites for women, food and home comforts; eating a pint of ice cream directly from the tub or tucking into cheeseburgers, grabbing women inappropriately or simply enjoying the familiar domestic security of life in Trump Tower. Importantly, as Sean Redmond (2016, p. 239) reminds us 'celebrities are first and foremost embodied individuals...and one of the key ways they communicate with fans and audiences is through the senses'. Trump's physical contrast with his predecessor Barack Obama could not have been greater. As Redmond (2010, pp. 92ff) argues, Obama's appeal lay not only in his engaging, articulate oratory but also in the fluid way he inhabited public/media space. Obama's somatic grace, his unworldliness, his superhuman, endlessly adaptive, qualities, his post-race relatability and his black man 'coolness', taken together, allowed him to connect with multiple constituencies (see also Wheeler 2012 and 2013, pp.89ff). Prior to Trump's arrival 'charisma in American politics had come to define an order of charm, wit and style – a coolness' (Wolff, p.46). Trump, on the other hand, was earth-bound and deployed the bombastic barstool bluster of a man who would remain inflexible and adamant whatever the circumstances.

Trump's private life and family values also contrasted unfavourably with those articulated by his predecessor. Candida Yates (2015, p.88), writing about the loss of 'paternal authority' in what she refers to as the 'post-familial era', has established one of the key affective grounds upon which male politicians make their play for the votes of the electorate. Looking at British political leaders since the 1990s she argues that their public display of 'hands on' parenting involves 'a self-conscious move toward a new emphasis on the discourse of fatherhood' which taps into 'parenting ideals' grounded in the ideas of emotional literacy (Yates 2015, p. 89). Obama also inhabited the public persona of the good father and supportive husband who was emotionally attuned to the needs of his family (Smith 2016). And his positioning as 'first father' segued nicely, in policy terms, with the launch of his 2009 Fatherhood Initiative to raise awareness and improve men's involvement in their children's lives (Lawrence *et al* 2013). In my view, this new man posture is not one of simply rejecting an outmoded authoritative paternal persona but of re-scripting it for the current moment to remain relevant,

contemporary and culturally on message. Wolff's report reinforced the wider media message that Trump was never going to fit this model and that he was resistant to social change. Trump's background, hosting TV wrestling shows and bankrolling beauty pageants, together with his alpha male persona in business and on TV, locked him out of the sober familial role model of *pater familias* and the novel one of the new man. Trump mobilised a darker, more combative masculinity (Rademacher 2016). Wolff suggested he was stranded in the 1950s: 'a Rat Pack type, a character out of *Mad Men*' (Wolff, p. 23). Wolff (p. 14) reminds readers that Trump was an absentee father to most of his children and an unfaithful husband despite an apparently contented third marriage to the woman he referred to as 'his trophy wife'. Trump's favourite sexual targets, alleges Wolff, included the wives of his friends and he supposedly had strategies to cajole these women into his bed while humiliating their husbands. Wolff (2018, p.13) also repeats Trump's notorious revelations about his strategies of sexual harassment leveraged by his celebrity status: 'I don't even wait. And when you're a star they let you do it. You can do anything....' For Wolff, the key difference between Trump's libidinousness and that of Bill Clinton, for example, was that the former didn't trouble himself to build the respectable front required to maintain the required image of authority.

Concluding remarks: inauguration, purity and dirt

On the 20th January 2017 President Elect Trump took centre stage in The Inauguration ceremony at the West Front of the US Capitol. The theme of the day was "Uniquely American," recognizing the symbolic importance of the event as 'a uniquely American expression [of its] constitutional system.'ⁱⁱ Trump's inaugural address as 45th President. explicitly attacked his predecessors who comprised a Presidents' club which would probably reject him as a member even if he had wanted to join. In dramatic contrast to Obama's acceptance speech which reached for unity and inclusion, not only by the authority vested in him through election but also by virtue of his 'seductive oratory', Trump's speech came across as dour and negative (see Redmond 2010, pp.89-90). Trump stressed the exclusion of ordinary people from the locus of power, prosperity, security and protection.

For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished – but

the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation’s Capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to Wolff, Trump did not enjoy his inauguration or the run up to it. He considered himself to have been snubbed by a disdainful and lofty Obama during their pre-ceremony meeting. It had proved impossible to secure the A List celebrities required to build a blockbuster spectacle and the irony was not lost on many that the best that could be done was to secure the sixteen year old reality TV music artist Jackie Evancho to sing the Star Spangled Banner. Evancho, still too young to vote and wary of expressing a political opinion, nervously warbled her way through the national anthem. Her media image of white femininity, purity and innocence made sense in the context of a ceremony conferring hallowed respect on the new incumbent of the highest public office; she was the hand-maiden to Trump’s conferment (see Biressi 2018). The politically non-aligned media cast aspersions over the whole event, implying that the public turnout had been disappointing and that the reception by the new president’s fellow elites on the ground was one of bemusement or even disgust. Trump’s menacing speech ‘became darker and more forceful when filtered through Trump’s disappointment’ and ‘wounded feelings’ (Wolff, p.44). Elsewhere it was reported:

Following Trump’s short and dire speech, [G.W.] Bush departed the scene and never offered public comment on the ceremony. But, according to three people who were present, Bush gave a brief assessment of Trump’s inaugural after leaving the dais: “That was some weird shit.” All three heard him say it. A spokesman for Bush declined to comment. (Ali 2017; see also Wolff, p.44)

The reference to excrement here is telling. The inauguration is a coronation of sorts. It is a ceremony bound up with the establishment of political authority in the person of the President as well as with the transfer of executive power. A coronation ceremony bears all the hallmarks of sanctity and God-given responsibility. But Trump is deemed unworthy in conventional terms. He would be celebrity-in-chief in the worst sense of this phrase: vain, undignified and a little too ‘show business’. Trump’s untidy and unwelcome arrival on the political scene, his celebrity persona conveyed via *The Apprentice* and *Fire and Fury* and his own use of social media, constructed him as confident, belligerent, ignorant, capricious and

self-serving. Through these and many other negative qualities, as outlined above, Trump desecrates the sanctity of political authority which conservatives hold dear and pollutes the role of president. It is little wonder that it is George Walker Bush, a conservative businessman, a political elite and a former president who smears Trump with metaphorical excrement. Wolff (above) had accused Trump of being juvenile, capricious and unable or unwilling 'to clean up' after himself when he has made a mess of his private life. This figuration was reinforced by the British anti-Trump protests in July 2018 when the President was represented by a balloon of an angry baby wearing diapers. Shit is disgusting because it's sticky, persistent, difficult to be rid of. It should be out of sight and out of mind. Sewage systems, like other silos for the waste we do not want to encounter, protect us from 'the force of the hidden and its role in political authority and social order' (Hawkins 2003 p. 41). It may be that Trump's contamination or desecration of authority is, in its own way, more productively an exposure of what authority hides and keeps to itself in the pursuit of power. Or at the very least, we might say, that for some, Trump's insult to conventional authority is part of his allure. As Gay Hawkins also reminds us (2003 p. 41) there is a 'hidden appeal' in the taboo and that 'desecration, defacement, and pollution' may accrue a power of their own.

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ⁱ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/the-executive-branch/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.inaugural.senate.gov/58th-inauguration/ceremony/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>