

Is Trump a Conservative Only by Accident?

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By Alfie Kohn

Perhaps you've heard it said that Donald Trump is all about ego, not ideology. The reason many conservatives were so slow to warm up to him, on this view, is that they realized he's not really one of them. He is driven not by any political or philosophical principle but by his desperate need for attention and approval. Thus, as one columnist suggested hopefully after the election, he may "tilt in whatever direction, and toward whichever constituency, is the surest source of applause."

If that were literally true, if Trump were a demagnetized compass needle, then it is just by chance that he is in fact governing from the extreme right, that the American Conservative Union pronounced his cabinet "the most conservative of any Republican president." And instead of slashing funding for social needs and the environment in order to funnel an additional \$54 billion to the military (even though the U.S. already spends more on soldiers and weaponry than the next seven or eight countries combined), he might just as well have done the reverse.

Merely to propose this scenario, though, is to expose its

implausibility. And while the man's wealth may help to explain his animosity toward redistribution and regulation, it appears that something else is going on. That something else is his psychological profile. It does indeed affect the direction in which his needle points, but it is not politically neutral. Put differently, Trump's conservative beliefs don't simply exist alongside what many have described as his character disorder. Rather, those beliefs are determined by it – and therefore far from accidental.

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It is true that before he ran for his very first public office – the presidency of the United States – Donald Trump showed no particular interest in various issues that matter to social conservatives. Indeed, he supported abortion rights and at one point identified as a Democrat. But the basic tilt to the right was already there in many other respects: his outspoken support for capital punishment, his attitudes about race, and his worshipful regard for power. More than a quarter-century ago, he was characteristically emphatic in declaring that he believes “very strongly in extreme military strength” and that he “wouldn't trust anyone...[including] our allies.”

As I've argued elsewhere, Trump has an indiscriminate need to triumph over people and, indeed, to construe all relationships (between individuals or between groups) as adversarial. Life for him is not about succeeding but about doing so at someone else's expense. As a rule, such competitiveness simultaneously reflects and reinforces a fundamental distrust of others. People who need to come out on top are desperately trying to prove their own worth, but victories fail to slake that thirst. Competition exacerbates the insecurity that gave rise to it, so the more they win, the more they need to win.

For most people who fit this profile, struggles for dominance take place in corporate boardrooms or on playing fields. But when such an individual finds himself in politics, the psychological need may express itself in militarism and a preoccupation with law and order. Thus, it makes perfect sense that Trump has chosen to surround himself with generals (whom he has appointed even to nonmilitary posts) – and,

incidentally, billionaires. When you fish in these pools, you don't catch many progressives.

"We have to start winning wars again," Trump said recently, to justify swelling the military budget. He gives the appearance, as one journalist put it, of being "fascinated with raw military might" – a fascination best viewed through a psychological lens. This is someone who needs to feel powerful, to humiliate those around him, to puff up his masculinity – which in turn helps to explain his view of women as prizes to be won, objects to be admired (primarily for their physical features) and even groped at will.

Trump's psychology also meshes perfectly with his commitment to nationalism, which is "different from isolationism" in that it "demands engagement but on ruthlessly competitive terms." This springs not only from his need to beat (indeed, humiliate) those he encounters but also from a deep-seated fear of the Other. Hence his need to demonize immigrants, to paint all Muslims as evil. The (racist) policies reflect the (pathological) psychology. The same man who is a self-described germaphobe – who says he feels "much better after I thoroughly wash my hands, which I do as much as possible" – talks endlessly of building a beautiful wall to keep out foreigners. This is a textbook case study almost too perfect to be true.

One of the defining characteristics of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, from which many observers believe Trump suffers, is an inability to empathize. This, of course, is consistent with his competitiveness, his need to defeat others, his taunting and bullying. He doesn't try to understand *why* someone might be criticizing his decisions or questioning his actions; he simply flies into a rage. This absence of empathy – as well as of sympathy and the capacity for what psychologists call "perspective taking" (the capacity to imagine others' points of view) – might help us to make sense of his willingness, indeed his enthusiasm, for cutting social welfare programs.

The general premise that certain personality features may underlie political positions is not new. A 2003 review of multiple studies –

featuring 88 groups of subjects from a dozen countries – found that specific psychological characteristics were associated with political conservatism. Among them: an intolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity, anxiety about death and loss, and low scores on a well-studied attribute known as “openness to experience.”

Another fascinating study even suggested that certain personality features observed in very young children predicted their political beliefs 20 years later. Preschool children who were described as “feeling easily victimized, easily offended, indecisive, fearful, rigid, inhibited, and relatively over-controlled and vulnerable” were more likely to be politically conservative at age 23.

If certain personality features are correlated with political views, then a more extreme psychological profile may be correlated with more extreme politics. Consider that the clearest examples of truly narcissistic heads of state tend to be dictators. Democracy, after all, involves checks and balances; it requires collaboration, compromise, consensus. The capacity to engage in such processes isn't merely outside of Trump's skill set; it's beyond what his psychological makeup allows. (It may not be coincidental that some of the additional billions he is proposing to add to the Pentagon's budget would come from programs devoted to diplomacy and foreign aid.)

A dangerous, self-reinforcing loop is created as other autocrats in the world recognize in him a kindred spirit and give him the approval he desperately needs. (Recent headline: “Authoritarian Leaders Greet Trump as One of Their Own.”) By contrast, democratic heads of state are put off by his petulance and peremptory demands, and, since anything less than adulation makes him livid, he reacts the only way he can – with insults, taunts, vindictiveness.

In sum, it's not quite accurate to say that Trump is all about ego rather than political convictions. He has political convictions all right, but they're defined *by* his ego. That's why it's so important to understand how this man is damaged in order to understand the damage he can do.

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