

Substantial Disruption



The Cult of the Donald

By Mike Tully

Let me tell you, if Jesus Christ gets down off the cross and told me Trump is with Russia, I would tell him, "Hold on a second: I need to check with the president if it is true." That is how confident I feel in the president.

- [Mark Lee](#), Trump Supporter

Tennessee Senator Bob Corker, liberated by his decision to forego re-election, spoke of a reality that has not gone unnoticed but rarely has been admitted openly by elected officials: the cult-like aspect of the Republican Party. "(I)t's becoming a cultish thing, isn't it?" he [rhetorically asked reporters](#), adding, "it's not a good place for any party to end up with a cult-like situation as it relates to a president that happens to be of — purportedly, of the same party."

Donald Trump displays many characteristics of a cult leader. Political scientists and pundits are perplexed by Trump's rise and his apparent invulnerability to scandals and pronouncements that would destroy another political career. Perhaps they are looking in the wrong place and should analyze Trump as a cult leader, not a traditional politician.

Michael D. Langone, Executive Director of International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), lists [15 examples of behavioral patterns common to cults](#). While not all apply to a political movement, some resonate in the Trump base, such as "excessively zealous and unquestioning commitment to its leader." Cults punish dissenters, such as Congressman Mark Sanford [who lost his primary](#) after daring to question Trump. Negative information is denounced as "fake news" and the group has a "polarized us-versus-them mentality" – witness attacks on liberals, the "Hollywood elite," even professional football players. Also, "The leader is not accountable to any authorities." Consider Trump's denunciation of the FBI as a "den of thieves."

Religious author Reza Aslan, [writes in the Los Angeles Times](#), "There's been a cultish quality to President Donald Trump's most ardent supporters," adding, "the zeal of some of his followers seems increasingly akin to a full-fledged cult." Aslan defines a cult as a "deeply insular social group bound together by extreme devotion to a charismatic leader" that exhibits characteristics of such groups, which are "usually formed around an individual whom they've elevated to prophetic and near divine status." Several evangelical leaders are moths devoted to the flame of Trump, including an Ohio pastor who claims Trump receives divine revelations, stating, "I believe he receives downloads that now he's beginning to understand come from God." Aslan writes a cult leader's authority "comes from his self-ascribed role as the one true information source for his followers," such as Trump, who derides the news media as the "[enemy of the American people](#)." "One of the ways a cult leader maintains his unquestioned authority is by creating a siege mentality among his followers," notes Aslan, "and presenting himself as the antidote." Trump painted a dystopian image of America, then declared, "I alone can fix it." Aslan says some Trump supporters harbor an apocalyptic view, including that Ohio pastor who "declared that God personally told him that Trump's presidency was paving the way for the Second Coming," and a Florida preacher and Trump spiritual adviser who declared resisting Trump is "fighting against the hand of God."

Consider the words of writer Stephen Powell in a website called *The Elijah List* and [quoted at length](#) in *Charisma Caucus*, a website that bills itself as “Where Faith and Politics Meet.”

The Lord would say to President Trump, "Continue to be unstoppable, for I will make you unbreakable, for even when they plot, and scheme and shrewdly construct their ways against you, I will give you the upper hand. I will give you their next moves. The enemy will not outmaneuver you, Mr. Trump, for I am with you now in this time, in this hour, to move something forward which has been stuck for years.

Powell wrote "There is great momentum behind President Trump right now," adding, "It is a part of a spiritual movement, which in this case, is part of a move of God."

Bobby Azarian, writing in *Raw Story*, [identifies five key traits](#) among Trump supporters that include traits common to cult members. One is Authoritarian Personality Syndrome, a “belief in total and complete obedience to one’s authority.” Attorney General Jeff Sessions cites *Romans 13* as authority for Draconian and inhumane border policies that traumatize children. That passage is a [go-to citation](#) for authoritarians, including white supremacists. Social Dominance Orientation, related to Authoritarian Personality Syndrome, “refers to people who have a preference for the societal hierarchy of groups.” Azarian says Trump appeals to them “by repeatedly making a clear distinction between groups that have a generally higher status in society (White), and those groups that are typically thought of as belonging to a lower status (immigrants and minorities).” Azarian notes prejudice is part of Trump’s appeal: “There’s no denying that he routinely appeals to bigoted supporters.” This reflects the “us against them” aspect of cults, as does lack of intergroup contact. “(T)here is growing evidence that Trump’s white supporters have experienced significantly less contact with minorities than other Americans,” writes Azarian. Finally, he cites Relative Deprivation, “the experience of being deprived of something to which one believes they are entitled.” Trump plays on this by denouncing “elites” and immigrants as undermining his supporters, reinforcing the “us against them” mentality and cementing Trump’s cult-like status.

Joe Navarro, who has studied cult leaders for years, identified 50 traits of “the pathological cult leader” in an article for [Psychology Today](#). Nearly every trait applies to Donald Trump, beginning with the first: “He has a grandiose idea of who he is and what he can achieve.” He is also “preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, or brilliance” and “is arrogant and haughty in his behavior or attitude.” He likes to “bend rules and break laws” and “is hypersensitive to how he is seen or perceived by others.” He is “frequently boastful of accomplishments,” insists in “always having the best of anything,” and “when criticized he tends to lash out ... with rage.” “Anyone who criticizes or questions him is called an ‘enemy,’” writes Navarro. The pathological cult leader “habitually puts down others” and “doesn’t seem to feel guilty for anything he has done wrong nor does he apologize for his actions.” Donald Trump, Jr. was recently asked if the Republican Party had become a Trump cult. “If it’s a cult,” [he responded](#), “it’s because they like what my father is doing.” Of course. He alone can fix it.

Trump [admires authoritarian leaders](#), most recently the gluttonous psychopath who rules North Korea. Kim Jong-un, who has executed family members, sent tens of thousands of innocent people to gulags, and strapped individuals to artillery guns before blowing them to bits in public executions, was lauded by Trump as a leader who “loves his people.” Trump apparently believes Kim’s terrified subjects love him back. “He speaks and his people sit up at attention,” [he told](#) an interviewer. “I want my people to do the same.” He later said the latter comment was a joke, but I’ve seen the interview tape. Nobody laughed.

America has a megalomaniac president with a core of followers who believe his presidency is ordained by God, even though Trump is an adulterous grifter with the inability to tell the truth or accept responsibility for his actions. Trump, to his most devoted followers, is beyond sin and guilt, a quasi-deity whose word must not be questioned. Which brings up an interesting issue: how will they react if ongoing criminal and counter-intelligence investigations into Trump threaten his presidency?

“If Trump’s presidency deteriorates further,” writes, Aslan, “expect the religious fervor of many of his followers to reach a fever pitch. That poses a risk for the country,” he adds, “Because the only thing more dangerous than a cult leader is a cult leader facing martyrdom.”

It’s what Trump fears most – and he alone can’t fix it.

© 2018 by Mike Tully