

Substantial Disruption



Attracting Flies

By Mike Tully

When I was an attorney for a major urban school district I walked into a conversation among our clerical staff, Rosemary, Shelby, and Jean just in time to hear Jean say, “You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” Without missing a beat, I said, “Oh, I recommend shit.” They looked at me, startled, and Jean asked, “What?” “Well,” I said, “if you want to catch flies...” I relate this story not to celebrate my vulgar comment, which sparked laughter – life’s greatest reward – but because it’s an appropriate metaphor for the Trump phenomenon. He was never offering honey; he pedals shit – and his followers love him for it.

Trump promised a new health care system that would be cheaper than and superior to the Affordable Care Act (ACA). While he and congressional republicans tried to eliminate the ACA, which would deny affordable health care to millions of Americans, many of them Trump supporters, he never proposed a replacement – because he didn’t have one. Trump promised to reduce the cost of pharmaceuticals, but abandoned the effort. He promised that his tax reform bill would stimulate investment and promote hiring and wage growth. Unfortunately, the legislation omitted incentives that would compel corporations to, for example, use their income tax break to do that and most of it went to stock buy-backs, shareholder dividends, and executive pay. Wall Street thrived; Main Street, not so much. Trump’s foreign policy has been a dangerous fiasco, with the President unable to withdraw from Afghanistan, abandoning the Iran nuclear accord without a plan to replace it, and toadying up to despots while alienating our allies. The Trump presidency has been a litany of broken promises and failures, yet his base voters continue to love him. Why?

Part of the reason lies in his appointment of conservative judges, especially those who want to overturn *Roe v Wade*. Some Trump supporters would vote for the devil himself if he promised to use government to restrict a woman’s right to make her own reproductive health decisions. But they are a sub-set. What of the millions who are actually worse off because of Trump’s policies? Why do they forgive his lies and failures and continue to support him? The answer: they never really wanted, nor expected, the honey. They crave the other stuff.

Some of it lies in the politics of resentment. Trump knows that many rural voters, especially the white ones, resent what they perceive as a bias in both major political parties toward coastal elites and a reluctance to curtail tax dollars spent on those whom they consider undeserving. “Donald Trump’s message really tapped into that sentiment,” professor Katherine J. Cramer [told Scientific American](#). “What I heard him saying was: You are right, you are not getting your fair share, you should be angry, you are a deserving, hardworking American and what you deserve is going to people who don’t deserve it. He pointed his finger at immigrants, the Chinese, bad trade deals, Muslims, uppity women. He gave people concrete targets, and it was a way of sparking anger and mobilizing support.”

This is related to identity politics and animosity toward certain social groups. In [a recent Vox essay](#) entitled “Trump support is not normal partisanship,” Lilliana Mason, John V. Kane, and Julie Wronski noted that the President’s winning coalition was not characterized by conservative republicans as much as it was driven by resentful white people. “When support for a party’s candidate comes from active hatred for certain social groups (as we have found in the case of President Trump),” they write, “this fundamentally changes how political candidates construct their campaign strategy and messaging.” They argue that this new “normal” is not about candidates identifying those who support their issues, “but finding people who actively hate and want to harm the other side.” They see this consequence for the political environment: “The chance for national cross-partisan coalitions recedes as this type of politics proliferates.”

The new politics lies in phrases such as “own the libs,” meaning action that provokes and irritates the social and political opposition. “Owning the libs' is one of those phrases to have emerged over the last few years that vacillates between earnestness and irony,” [wrote conservative columnist Jonah Goldberg](#). “For people who use it earnestly, it means to do something, usually symbolic and petty, that infuriates liberals out of proportion to the deed to make fools of them. For instance, wearing a MAGA hat to a feminist poetry reading at a co-op bookstore in Berkeley. It's a form of taking the culture war to the enemy.”

None of this promotes good governance. Instead, it’s a form of anarchistic catharsis, the political equivalent of screaming in a train station. Warriors of the new cultural politics don’t focus on issues that actually matter to them, such as health care, education, and the environment. The issue that galvanizes them is immigration and they love the way Trump has boiled immigration policy into a toxic mix of cruelty and banishment. Trump punishes “the other” and “owns the libs” in the process, which makes his followers feel good. He peddles a powerful drug and they are unlikely to detox in time for the election.

Trump’s opponents would like to reach these voters with promises of affordable health care, better jobs and a cleaner environment, but that’s a fool’s errand. They don’t want the honey; they want what Trump is pushing. The emotional relief is too compelling. They will never escape the allure of Trump.

He draws them like flies.