


Substantial Disruption



There's Something About Donny

By Mike Tully

When I was involved in public speaking over the years, frequently before local community groups, I identified a phenomenon I called Tall White Guy Syndrome. Nearly every group was chaired or led by a Tall White Guy. I suppose it's natural that a culture historically led primarily by tall Anglo males would spawn groups that were led by one. Even informal associations mirrored this cultural pattern. In my university days, when many of my classmates were people I worked with in broadcasting, we'd take classes during the day, work in television or radio studios in the evening and weekends, and party in between. We explored "experimental television," which consisted of shooting a camera at a monitor to generate video feedback. That feature – our favorite special effect – didn't really have a practical use, but it livened up parties. We were young, hip, psychedelic media people and some members of our group considered one of us – a Tall White Guy – to be "our leader."

Another member of our group, who later became a journalist, was assigned to the other end of the totem pole. He was a nice guy and good friend, but for some reason he was considered by most of the group to be, well, a *schlemiel*. He was short, dark and Jewish. Not the Tall White Guy type at all. Yet, our TWG leader bonded more closely with him than any other member of our group. They made for an odd couple and the "leader" rationalized the relationship by saying: "Every Wally has his Eddie." (For non-fossilized readers who don't get the "Leave It To Beaver" reference, [click here](#).)

When I try to figure out why Donald Trump's most loyal followers stick with him despite the ongoing train wreck of his presidency, I keep coming back to the "Leave It To Beaver" metaphor. Trump, for them, is the friend you get tired of explaining, one who infuriates you with his inappropriate behavior and embarrasses you in front of your friends. Most of us have had a friend like that, somebody who talks too much, or drinks too much, or smokes too much, or has bad manners, or just believes in peculiar things. Yet we hang out with them because we enjoy sharing space with them, despite their flaws. Maybe it's [pheromones](#). Maybe it's something else. Maybe it's whatever was special about [Mary](#).

Commentators have tried their best. A Silicon Valley executive [interviewed Trump supporters](#) from around the country in early 2017. He heard about "political correctness" and "the wall." There was concern about immigration, not for economic reasons but because immigrants were just too "different." The immigration concern seems to merge a political issue (immigration laws and enforcement) with emotion (fear of the "other"). Some of the respondents were not issue-oriented. "I think subconsciously, part of the reason I supported him" said one respondent, "was a way to be in the in-crowd for once."

Bobby Azarian, writing for *Psychology Today* a few weeks before the 2016 election, addressed "[The Psychology Behind Donald Trump's Unwavering Support](#)." He identified four factors: (1) The "Dunning-Kruger Effect," which Azarian explains as, "Essentially, they're not smart enough to realize they're dumb." (2) Hypersensitivity to threats, a common characteristic of conservative voters, exacerbated by Trump's scapegoating of immigrants. (3) "Terror Management Theory," which basically means Trump manipulates them by scaring them. Finally, there is (4) "High Attentional Engagement," which, in the context of the election, simply meant that Trump held people's attention while Hillary Clinton failed to keep it.

Last December Azarian paid another visit to the psychology of Trump supporters and identified [five key traits](#): (1) "Authoritarian Personality Syndrome," which is what it sounds like. These individuals want to pledge allegiance to a strong leader. "The syndrome is often triggered by fear," writes Azarian, "making it easy for leaders who exaggerate threat or fear monger to gain their allegiance." (2) "Social dominance orientation," basically an us-versus-them view of the world. (3) "Prejudice." I don't think I need to elaborate on this one. (4) "Intergroup contact." Contact with individuals outside one's own group reduces prejudice against them. It's easier to be prejudiced against somebody you've never met and feel nothing in common with. As Azarian notes, "researchers found that support for Trump increased with the voters' physical distance from the Mexican border." (5) "Relative deprivation," which means "the experience of being deprived of something to which one believes they are entitled." That does not mean actual deprivation, just that the individual believes he or she is deprived whether or not that's the case. As the [old saying](#) goes, "when you're accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression."

These explanations have some merit, but I'm not sure they get to the heart of the matter. How, for example, would Azarian's observations explain those who not only want Trump to be president, but "[God Emperor](#)?" That's actually a thing and it seems a bit too demented to fit into any of Azarian's categories. Maybe it's all the categories firing at once, merging into an alchemy of political psychosis. Some issue-oriented supporters may drift away when, for example, they realize the wall will never get built, or that tariffs do more harm than good, or that Trump likes Putin a bit TOO much. But some will be there for him no matter what. He serenades them with tweets and bombast, blithely ignoring the fact that their number is shrinking. They will always be there. They can't help themselves. It might not make any sense, it might not be in their best interests, but they can't let go.

There's something about Eddie. I mean Donny.