

American Psychosis

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Reality is under assault. Verbal confusion reigns. Truth and illusion have merged. Mental chaos makes it hard to fathom what is happening. We feel trapped in a hall of mirrors. Exposed lies are answered with other lies. The rational is countered with the irrational. Cognitive dissonance prevails. We endure a disquieting shame and even guilt. Tens of millions of Americans, especially women, undocumented workers, Muslims and African-Americans, suffer the acute anxiety of being pursued by a predator. All this is by design. Demagogues always infect the governed with their own psychosis.

"The comparison between totalitarianism and psychosis is not incidental," the [psychiatrist Joost A.M. Meerloo](#) wrote in his book "The Rape of the Mind: The Psychology of Thought Control, Menticide, and Brainwashing." "Delusional thinking inevitably creeps into every form of tyranny and despotism. Unconscious backward forces come into action. Evil powers from the archaic past return. An automatic compulsion to go on to self-destruction develops, to justify one mistake with a new one; to enlarge and expand the vicious pathological circle becomes the dominating end of life. The frightened man, burdened by a culture he does not understand, retreats into the brute's fantasy of limitless power in order to cover up the vacuum inside himself. This fantasy starts with the leaders and is later taken over by the masses they oppress."

The lies fly out of the White House like flocks of pigeons: *Donald Trump's election victory was a landslide. He had the largest inauguration crowds in American history. Three million to 5 million undocumented immigrants voted illegally. Climate change is a hoax. Vaccines cause autism. Immigrants are carriers of "[t]remendous infectious disease."* The election was rigged—until it wasn't. We don't know "who really knocked down" the World Trade Center. Torture works. Mexico will pay for the wall. Conspiracy theories are fact. Scientific facts are conspiracies. America will be great again.

Our new president, a 70-year-old with orange-tinted skin and hair that Penn Jillette has likened to "cotton candy made of piss," is, as Trump often reminds us, "[very good looking](#)." He has almost no intellectual accomplishments—he knows little of history, politics, law, philosophy, art or governance—but insists "[\[m\]y IQ is one of the highest](#)—and you all know it! Please don't feel so stupid or insecure, it's not your fault." And the mediocrities and half-wits he has installed in his Cabinet have "by far the [highest IQ of any Cabinet](#) ever assembled."

It is an avalanche of absurdities.

This mendacity would be easier to repulse if the problem was solely embodied in Trump. But even in the face of a rising despotism, the Democratic Party refuses to denounce the corporate forces that eviscerated our democracy and impoverished the country. The

neoliberal Trump demonizes Muslims, undocumented workers and the media. The [neoliberal](#) Democratic Party demonizes Vladimir Putin and FBI Director James Comey. No one speaks about the destructive force of corporate power. The warring elites pit [alternative facts](#) against alternative facts. All engage in demagoguery. We will, I expect, be condemned to despotism by the venality of Trump *and* the cowardice and dishonesty of the liberal class.

Trump and those around him have a deep hatred for what they cannot understand. They silence anyone who thinks independently. They elevate pseudo-intellectuals who adhere to their bizarre script. They cannot cope with complexity, nuance or the unpredictable. Individual initiative is a mortal threat. The order for some employees of several federal agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's research service, the National Park Service and the Department of Health and Human Services, to restrict or [cease communication](#) with the press or members of Congress, along with the attempt to impose [10-year felony convictions](#) on six reporters who covered the inauguration protests, signals the beginning of a campaign to marginalize reality and promote fantasy. Facts depend solely on those who have the power to create them. The goal of the Trump administration is to create an artificial consistency that conforms to its warped perception of the world.

"Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations," [Hannah Arendt](#) wrote in "The Origins of Totalitarianism." "The force possessed by totalitarian propaganda—before the movements have the power to drop iron curtains to prevent anyone's disturbing, by the slightest reality, the gruesome quiet of an entirely imaginary world—lies in its ability to shut the masses off from the real world."

Trump's blinding narcissism was captured in his bizarre talk to the CIA on Jan. 21. "[T]hey say, is Donald Trump an intellectual?" he said. "Trust me, I'm, like, a smart persona."

"I have a running war with the media," he added. "They are among the most dishonest human beings on earth. And they sort of made it sound like I had a [feud with the intelligence community](#). And I just want to let you know, the reason you're the number one stop [in the new presidency] is exactly the opposite—exactly. And they understand that, too."

He launched into an attack on the media for not reporting that "a million, million and a half people" showed up for his inauguration. "They showed a field where there was practically nobody standing there," he said about the media's depiction of the inauguration crowd. "And they said, Donald Trump did not draw well. I said, it was almost raining, the rain should have scared them away, but God looked down and he said, we're not going to let it rain on your speech."

He has been on the cover of Time "like, 14 or 15 times," Trump said in speaking of his criticism of the magazine because one of its reporters incorrectly wrote that the president had removed a bust of Martin Luther King Jr. from the Oval Office. "I think we have the all-time record in the history of Time magazine. Like, if Tom Brady is on the cover, it's one time, because he won the Super Bowl or something, right? I've been on it for 15 times this year. I

don't think that's a record, Mike, that can ever be broken. Do you agree with that? What do you think?" [Editor's note: Photographs or drawings of Trump were [on the cover of Time 10 times](#) in the last year and a half and once in 1989.]

Trump's theatricality works. He forces the press and the public to repeat his lies, inadvertently giving them credibility. He is always moving. He is always on display. He has no fixed belief system. Trump, as he consolidates power, will adopt the ideology of the Christian right to fill his own ideological vacuum. The Christian right's magical thinking will merge seamlessly with Trump's magical thinking. Idiocy, self-delusion, megalomania, fantasy and government repression will come wrapped in images of the Christian cross and the American flag.

The corporate state, hostile or indifferent to the plight of the citizens, has no emotional pull among the public. It is often hated. Political candidates run not as politicians but as celebrities. Campaigns eschew issues to make people feel good about candidates and themselves. Ideas are irrelevant. Emotional euphoria is paramount. The voter is only a prop in the political theater. Politics is anti-politics. It is reality television. Trump proved better at this game than his opponents. It is a game in which fact and knowledge do not matter. Reality is what you create. We were conditioned for a Trump.

Meerloo wrote, "The demagogue relies for his effectiveness on the fact that people will take seriously the fantastic accusations he makes, will discuss the phony issues he raises as if they had reality, or will be thrown into such a state of panic by his accusations and charges that they will simply abdicate their right to think and verify for themselves."

The lies create a climate in which everyone is assumed to be lying. The truth becomes suspect and obscured. Narratives begin to be believed not because they are true, or even sound true, but because they are emotionally appealing. The aim of systematic lying, as Arendt wrote, is the "transformation of human nature itself." The lies eventually foster somnambulism among a population that surrenders to the magical thinking and ceases to care. It checks out. It becomes cynical. It only asks to be entertained and given a vent for its frustration and rage. Demagogues produce enemies the way a magician pulls rabbits out of a hat. They wage constant battles against nonexistent dangers, rapidly replacing one after the other to keep the rhetoric at a fever pitch.

"Practically speaking, the totalitarian ruler proceeds like a man who persistently insults another man until everybody knows that the latter is his enemy, so that he can, with some plausibility, go out and kill him in self-defense," Arendt wrote. "This certainly is a little crude, but it works—as everybody will know who has ever watched how certain successful careerists eliminate competitors."

We are entering a period of national psychological trauma. We are stalked by lunatics. We are, as [Judith Herman](#) writes about trauma victims in her book "Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror," being "rendered helpless by overwhelming force." This trauma, like all traumas, overwhelms "the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning."

To recover our mental balance we must respond to Trump the way victims of trauma respond to abuse. We must build communities where we can find understanding and solidarity. We must allow ourselves to mourn. We must name the psychosis that afflicts us. We must carry out acts of civil disobedience and steadfast defiance to re-empower others

and ourselves. We must fend off the madness and engage in dialogues based on truth, literacy, empathy and reality. We must invest more time in activities such as finding solace in nature, or focusing on music, theater, literature, art and even worship—activities that hold the capacity for renewal and transcendence. This is the only way we will remain psychologically whole. Building an outer shell or attempting to hide will exacerbate our psychological distress and depression. We may not win, but we will have, if we create small, like-minded cells of defiance, the capacity not to go insane.

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