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The Man Who Would Be King

Age: A portion of human history distinguished
by certain characters real and mythical

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

Early in Donald Trump's run for the world's most powerful office, an unusual dispute swirled around the word *normal*. To his supporters, *normal* meant bland, phony, corrupt. "He's the grizzly bear in the room," declared Newt Gingrich gleefully. "He's not normal"—meaning he's exciting, authentic, the real deal.¹ From the opposing camp, Hillary Clinton, warning against extremist political behavior, vowed, "My campaign is not going to let Donald Trump try to normalize himself."²

Trump knew exactly what he was doing. He was bending the process to his will, separating himself from the other aspirants for the nomination, cowing the Republican establishment, breaking rules to his advantage, and beating the odds.

The 2016 election was the most surprising upset since Truman beat Dewey in 1948. Only a few Cassandras had taken Trump seriously. After the New Hampshire primary, the first of a long stretch of the unlikely insurgent's victories, Eliot Cohen, a professor of political science and veteran of past Republican administrations, published an essay titled "The Age of Trump."³

"How on earth," Cohen begins, "did this happen?" Conserva-

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tive analysts, he notes, have offered some explanations—economic stagnation, “shifting class structure,” “existential anxiety about . . . a robot-driven economy,” and “liberal overreach in social policy.” They have also acknowledged “Trump’s formidable political skills, including a visceral instinct for detecting and exploiting vulnerability that has been the hallmark of many an authoritarian ruler. These insights are all to the point, but they do not capture one key element. Moral rot. Politicians have, since ancient Greece, lied, pandered, and whored. They have taken bribes, connived, and perjured themselves. But in recent times—in the United States, at any rate—there has never been any politician quite as openly debased and debauched as Donald Trump.”⁴

After Trump laid waste to the field of competitors and clinched the Republican nomination, Jonathan Freedland, a British journalist writing in *The Guardian*, positioned the Trump juggernaut within a global contagion of populism and nativism: “This rage at the system—the fuming insistence that democracy is failing to deliver for the people it’s meant to serve, that the system that bears its name is no longer truly democratic—powers not just Trump but many of the populist movements now making waves around the world.”⁵

Freedland’s headline, “Welcome to the Age of Trump,” echoed Cohen’s. By election day, the expression had long since gone viral.⁶ For decades the flamboyant real estate mogul had emblazoned his name on tall buildings around the world. Now his brand personalized a global era. Classifying distinct periods of the American saga with presidents’ names has been a custom among biographers to honor presidents who were in their

graves.⁷ Trump, nearly a year before he was inaugurated, had the pleasure of seeing his name celebrated for years and possibly decades to come.

Never mind that the phrase Age of Trump was meant to imply dark and dangerous times ahead. His detractors who coined it would have to live with his apotheosis and their gloom.

Trump denigrates the intellectual elites while proclaiming that he is one of them—only smarter. He has often bragged of being “a sort of genius.” At a campaign rally, Trump rhapsodized on his brilliant career by declaring, “I went to an Ivy League school! I’m very highly educated. I know words. I have the best words.”⁸

For nearly half his life, Trump had flirted with mounting a crusade to the White House. The Great Recession at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century presented him with a long shot. Radical conservatives blamed the troubled economy on a bloated and corrupt American government that had neglected a largely white middle class while coddling other ethnic communities. The result was a movement that skewed the Republican Party’s center of gravity toward the far right, energizing populists and nativists. The leaders dubbed their crusade the Tea Party, a travesty in itself. The original Tea Party, in 1773, was a seminal event uniting what would be an independent American republic; its sham namesake incited the opposite.⁹

It took two presidential election cycles for the movement to

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gain control. In 2008 and 2012, the GOP nominated moderate, experienced, reputable candidates, John McCain and Mitt Romney, respectively. Yet Barack Obama—a new face but a candidate with venerable virtues—was able to defeat both challengers.

In 2016 Hillary Clinton's campaign sailed into a perfect storm while Trump had the wind at his back, aided by the most unlikely couple: the president of Russia (who knew exactly what he was doing) and the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (who apparently did not).

Much to the dismay of political veterans, Trump's instincts and tactics served him well. Conventional wisdom held that he was his own worst enemy. In fact, he was appealing to a critical mass of Americans who were frightened of the future, disillusioned with the present, nostalgic for the past, and disaffected with politics as usual. He gleefully broke rules of etiquette, separated himself from the other aspirants for the Republican nomination, and made it clear that he was going to remake the presidency in his own image: iconoclastic, boastful, self-reliant, pugnacious, and disruptive.

Trump was doubling down on a procedural paradox of American self-rule: a presidential election should be a dignified process, but in reality, it is politics as war by other means. The word *campaign* itself originated from the French for an army on the march in the seventeenth-century Wars of Religion. Modern times have added more martial jargon: attack ads, money bombs, battleground states, and—a new phrase and an ominous innovation—the weaponization of social media.

The ordeal of the political campaign has always left wounds on those citizens who voted for the loser. The winner has typically seen it in his own interest, as well as the nation's, to restore civic peace.

Not Trump. His presidency has been an escalation of his campaign. Armed with the powers of office, he has given no quarter to his fellow citizens and public officials who oppose him.

In the days and weeks that followed his election, Trump presented himself as a tough, cocky new CEO, bent on a hostile takeover.¹⁰ He set his sights on his recent predecessors. And his attacks were personal. His animus toward Barack Obama was most obvious, but he also belittled George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, and Jimmy Carter for their “failures” of domestic policy and diplomacy.¹¹

Trump's habit of blanket disparagement goes further back than recent presidents. He spurned the role of the United States as master builder of the liberal international order left to him by twelve commanders in chief—six Republicans and six Democrats in the aftermath of World War II. In place of the American Century, Trump proclaimed a new stance and what he thought was a new catchphrase, America First.

At the Republican National Convention on July 21, 2016, Trump gave an interview to David Sanger and Maggie Haberman of the *New York Times*. When Sanger remarked that the go-it-alone policy sounded like Charles Lindbergh's America

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First, Trump reacted as though he had never heard the phrase, then, on the spot, made it his own tagline. He seemed oblivious of the slogan's disrepute. "To me," Trump said, "America First is a brand-new modern term. I never related it to the past."¹² His ignorance of the motto's implication of anti-Semitism and appeasement of dictators, if genuine, clearly displayed Trump's combination of unabashed anti-historicism and ahistoricism.

The past, in Trump's view, is not prologue; it is either irrelevant or enemy territory. His iconic predecessors are, for him, rivals to outshine. Less than two years into the job, he asserted, "Nobody's ever done a better job than I'm doing as president."¹³ That includes the founders. His jealousy of their mythic stature has been palpable in his instinct to disparage their legacies.

After a few months on the job, he let it be known to some of his golf partners that the White House was "a real dump."¹⁴ He prefers to live in edifices that he owns and decorates at will, mostly with icons to himself. Instead, as president he must live with portraits of his stern-faced precursors, including at least six portraits of George Washington.

Trump is one of the noisiest of our presidents, but when it comes to the founders, he prefers to give them either the silent treatment or a gratuitous jab. One such incident occurred in a news conference in September 2018. The storm over his second Supreme Court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh, was at its peak.

While dismissing the reporters' sharp questions, Trump suggested that "if we brought George Washington here and we said we have George Washington [for the Court], the Democrats

would vote against him; just so you understand, and he may have had a bad past. Who knows? He may have had some—I think—accusations made. Didn't he have a couple things in his past?"¹⁵

Misdirection and insinuation are among Trump's favorites ploys. In this case, he impugned the father of the nation, leaving the audience to puzzle over a rhetorical question that was both snide and murky. As the House of Representatives was preparing to impeach him in late 2019, Trump endorsed an encomium from Fox News's Lou Dobbs: "He's got me down as the greatest president in the history of our country, including George Washington and Abraham Lincoln."¹⁶

Trump has, however, approved of one previous president as a kindred spirit. The White House press corps has a tradition of asking a new president whom among his forebears he most admires. Stephen K. Bannon, Trump's Svengali at the time, convinced him to pick Andrew Jackson, the first antiestablishment president. Jackson campaigned as a champion of the common man and scourge of the corrupt autocracy.¹⁷ When the forty-fifth president moved into the Oval Office, he brought with him a portrait of the seventh. Whether by chance or as Bannon's put-down of the liberal elites, Old Hickory had a special distinction of his own: he was the first president who was not one of the nation's founders.

Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Mad-

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ison, and James Monroe were present at the creation of the United States. They were, in fact, among the primary creators. The sixth president, John Quincy Adams, had been at his father's side in Europe during the American Revolution. As a young man, he served as an envoy in his own right and as secretary of state before assuming the presidency.

Those six presidents, along with America's man for all seasons, Benjamin Franklin, are the protagonists of this book. Their joint legacy has been important in every stage of American history, but it is especially relevant in the current one. The founders put their individual and shared morals to work in the public arena, establishing the foundation of the freedom that is our national birthright.

The Founding Fathers of the American republic valued their own heritage as children of the European Enlightenment.¹⁸ The movement emphasized the sovereignty of human beings, the capacity of individuals to reason, to seek knowledge, and to live by ethics based on honesty, tolerance, and empathy.

They forged these high-minded abstractions into tools for liberating their lands and liberalizing their governance. As a prominent American historian, Henry Steele Commager, put it, "The Old World imagined, invented, and formulated the Enlightenment; the New World—certainly the Anglo-American part of it—realized it and fulfilled it."¹⁹

The founders were men of affairs: landed farmers, lawyers, journalists, publishers, preachers, educators, scientists, physicians, and a retired soldier who had looked forward to a pastoral life on the banks of the Potomac River. When they renounced their allegiance to the British Crown, they designed an architecture of governance that the world had never seen.

The founders were not just lighting lamps: they were playing with fire, and they knew it. They were cautious optimists, not utopians. Nor were they saints or angels (most did not believe in such beings). Some of their failures cast dark clouds onto our day and as far as the eye can see into our own future. Race was the most intractable. Four centuries after the first slaves were forcibly brought to British America as chattel, their descendants have had to endure President Trump's dog whistles, watch him repress their right to vote, and hear him condone homegrown Nazis and other white supremacists.

The founders were not determinists, expecting that the arc of history, by itself, would bend toward equality, justice, liberty, and peace. Realization of those ideals required constant, judicious, and ethical human agency. Progress was fragile, susceptible to human weakness or malevolent strength.

The founders were acutely aware that their unique construct and valiant determination would be sorely tested. They knew that the customary instrument for maintaining order and exercising

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magisterial power was tyranny. Republics of the past had been fleeting anomalies, favored by idealists but not by most rulers who relied on the state's monopoly of violence to ensure their subjects' submission.

In the sweep of history, most of the leaders of tribes or nations or empires were ruled by the grizzly bear's instincts. Modern dictatorship is not a new normal: it is an ancient system making a comeback.²⁰

John Adams was a fervent student of history and the founder most inclined to prophecy and mood swings. When gloomy, he feared that the republic would last only a few decades. He had trepidations that future Americans would not be up to the job—or, worse, that they might tack toward autocracy. He worried that a full-blooded demagogue could undermine the American experiment.²¹

A hoary adage defines journalism as the first draft of history. But those who have made history often have had their own drafts. First come the ideas; then comes the debates, often blood-spilled; then the words, first chiseled in stone, later handwritten on parchment; then, finally, the laws and institutions are created. Only when those rules and their means of enforcement have been established does the intended nation become a reality, with a government that begins to function.

The Declaration of Independence was a calculated act of hubris. The founders proceeded as if the United States of Amer-

ica were up and running. But the independence they sought was not yet theirs; it was left to their ragtag Continental Army to defeat the mightiest military in the world.

The signers were determined to wrest their homeland from Britain, but it would take seven bloody, crisis-ridden years to accomplish that goal. The self-evident principles they were fighting for might have been crushed. The founders were trying to do something almost unimaginable, something that would take a long, long time. Their bold, hazardous, and speculative venture needed fervent goals to match the bold chances they were taking.

The Declaration of Independence was meant to sing, to lift Americans' resolve and courage for what was to come. Moreover, the founders were taking personal responsibility for what they had already done and what they would do if they won the war. Had the revolution failed, they would have signed their death sentences. That gave their moral weight to the responsibilities they passed to their descendants.

The framers of the Constitution, however, had a different purpose. Whereas the Declaration of Independence was a secular psalm heralding timeless truths, the Constitution set perimeters for the inevitable, ongoing arguments about what those truths meant and how to turn them into laws.

The law of laws—the preeminent commandment—held that no one was above the law. The revolutionary generation maintained a crucial consistency through six administrations—spanning forty years, from 1789 to 1829—to solidify and extend that secular commandment into the twenty-first century. Now, under Trump, we can hear the tablets cracking.