

Book review

Dangerous charisma: The political psychology of Donald Trump and his followers

Jerrold M Post with Stephanie R Doucette

London: Pegasus Books

2019, 352 pages

ISBN13: 9781643132877 (eBook)

Within the context of the ongoing January 6 Committee hearings in the United States, which is the congressional inquiry into the Capitol riot that occurred on 6 January 2021 (Zurcher, 2022), a review of the book, *Dangerous charisma: The political psychology of Donald Trump and his followers*, could not be better timed. The lead author of the book, the late Jerrold M Post, is viewed as the pioneer (or, as he himself phrased it, the “founding father” in the field of political personality profiling (Post & Doucette, 2019).²⁶ He furnished many helpful profiles, inter alia those of Menachem Begin, Anwar Sadat, Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini. Post’s co-author is Stephanie Doucette, a scholar in political psychology.

At first glance, the book appears to be a case study on narcissism, but there is more to it. This analysis of Donald J Trump, the 45th president of the United States of America, is written in a language understandable for the academic and the layman alike. There are some ‘juicy’ bits for the Trump haters, and detailed analyses for scholars who want an in-depth understanding of Trump and his followers. The well-structured text consists of five sections. The first section is an introductory part comprising the Preface and Introduction, followed by Part 1, covering Chapters 1 to 6. The third section is Part 2, “The political psychology of Trump’s followers”. Section four refers to Part 3, “Trump’s impact”, and lastly, section five, is the Epilogue to the book.

The Preface, written by Post, gives background on how he became involved in political personality profiling in the Central Intelligence Agency after completing his studies to become a psychiatrist. He offers knowledge to how he and an interdisciplinary team from cultural anthropology, political, organisational and social psychology, and political scientists interested in leadership developed a method for creating political personality profiles. He emphasises that a political personality profile aims to provide policymakers with an understanding of psychological issues that affect the political leadership, decision-making and negotiations of and by a head of state. This includes, among other things,

leadership considerations, such as strategic decision style, crisis decision style, negotiation style, management style and core attitudes. Academics and scholars interested in political personality profiling will find this chapter helpful because Post opens the door to the methodology and themes used slightly. He highlights the ethical challenges he faced when he was accused of violating the Canons of Ethics of the American Psychiatric Association and the vital role health care professionals, such as psychiatrists, play in society. According to Post, they have a moral responsibility to inform and warn political decision-makers when concerns are raised about the psychology and mental stability of a person in an important role, such as the president of a country.

In the introduction, the authors provide a theoretical background on the powerful tie between leaders and their followers, explicitly referring to charismatic leader–follower relationships, charismatic cults and the two forms of charismatic leaders: the destructive and the reparative. They use the metaphor of some crucial aspects of the leader’s psychology acting as a key that fits and unlock vital elements of the psychology of the followers. In the case of Trump, they specifically addressed this lock-and-key relationship by drawing upon the emerging understandings of the psychology of narcissism. They describe two broad types of narcissists that are interacting here. The first (Trump) is a “mirror-hungry personality”, who focuses on the glorious self and is hungry for confirming and admiring responses to counteract their inner sense of worthlessness and lack of self-esteem. The second (the follower) is the “ideal hungry personality” who also has an inner sense of worthlessness and lacks self-esteem but counters it by latching onto individuals they admire for prestige, power, beauty, intelligence or moral stature, manifesting as a narcissistic symbiosis of shared psychosis.

In the third section, Part 1, Post and Doucette (2019) discuss the charismatic leader with a chapter focusing on describing the narcissist in his or her purest form as described by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). They link the diagnostic criteria for narcissism and Trump’s conduct. Various examples illustrate where he demonstrated “no capacity to empathize [*sic*] with others”, from his own family to the crowds of Texas after Hurricane Harvey, where he was more interested in the size of the crowd than the suffering of the people. In Chapter 2, the authors identify a pathway through Trump’s past that might have influenced him. They explain the role of his paternal grandfather, his entrepreneurial father, and how the apparent lack of a solid paternal relationship with his mother laid the foundations for problems with trust, underlying insecurity, difficulties with appraising reality, and issues with empathy. Chapter 3 highlights how Trump, in line with the characteristics of a narcissist seeking the spotlight, depicts himself as successful despite failures portraying delusions of grandeur. His obsession with his ‘brand’ of Donald Trump is highlighted, and it is described how he continuously desired recognition and the importance of keeping his name in the newspapers. The role of relationships in the life of a narcissist is portrayed in Chapter 4, referring to Trump’s relationship with his former and current spouse and children. Chapter 5, aptly titled *King Donald*, illustrates how dreams of glory preoccupy the narcissist and when these dreams are achieved, it consumes the narcissist, such as Donald Trump, who actually did not believe he would win the election. When he did, he tried to rule America like a kingdom. Referring to Trump’s political personality, the authors discuss in Chapter

6 his intellect, the lack of books in his office, and his lack of intellectual curiosity other than expected from a president. They mention incidents in the media where he proved his lack of knowledge and inability to retain information. They view Trump's grammar and vocabulary lower than that of any other recent president. All these links well with how the characteristics of narcissists can limit their information processing abilities as they focus on how a situation affects them rather than how it affects the country. As with the lock-and-key analogy, some interesting metaphors are used. Trump's "Swiss Cheese Conscience" (Post & Doucette, 2019) implies he has strong moral prohibitions, but he cannot satisfy his own needs without prohibition, pouring through the holes of the cheese, justifying his actions while condemning those of others.

Part 2 (section four) deals with the political psychology of Trump's followership, while Chapter 7 lays the theoretical foundation for understanding the charismatic leader-follower relationship. The discussion on the "Trump phenomenon", its stability and the psychological power of Trump's followership is worth reading. It specifies how the hypnotic pull of a charismatic leader is compelling for the ideal-hungry followers seeking a hero to rescue them while the leader draws energy from their response. In turn, followers will uncritically follow their leader's call for violence, which seems to have happened on 6 January 2021. Trump's charismatic relationship with his followers is described as "destructive reparative" as he, like Adolf Hitler, "pulls his followers together as he extorts hatred to an external enemy" (Post & Doucette, 2019). Trump's relationship with his followers differs, for example, from that of Mahatmas Gandhi and Martin Luther King and their followers described as a "reparative" relationship. Chapter 8 discusses Trump's relationship with the public group The Tea Party, whose members are mainly white, elderly, white, angry and small business owners who care more about economic problems than about social issues. Trump's chant of making America great again and portraying him as the "voice of the outsider" resonated well with this group. In Chapters 9 and 10, references are made to how Trump divided the Republican Party and investigated why people in the party followed him. Rhetorical appeals of "make America great again", "build the wall", "drain the swamp" and that Trump is a businessman and "not a politician" resonated well with his supporters in the Republican Party, comprising mostly the white working class with low-paying jobs, gun ownership advocates, and those in the rural areas who have been overlooked in United States politics. Chapter 11 discusses how Trump's rhetoric contributed to an increase in hate crimes and how right-wing extremists believed that Trump was one of them. In line with being a destructive reparative leader, Trump and his followers' use of "splitting" between good and evil and "with us" or "against us" is discussed. This polarisation is used in his speeches, and Trump draws his energy from the crowd. Both leaders and followers tend to hide their insecurities and lack of self-esteem by pointing out the weaknesses and moral flaws of others and setting the leader as the saviour and the one that must be respected. Post and Doucette (2019) describe this dynamic interaction as follows, "[t]here is a quality of mutual intoxication in the leader's reassuring his followers which in turn reassure him." Following this, is an interesting discussion on The Unexpected Followers in Chapter 12 speculating why women and some minorities supports Trump.

The fourth section, Part 3, consists of Chapters 13 to 16, which discusses the outcome of

Trump's presidential election on the mental health of the American nation, the reaction from the political left, and the effect of Trump's "America First" foreign policy on foreign relations. This section ends with Chapter 16, which asks some questions about the future. It is especially Chapter 16 that illustrates the value of a well-researched political personality profile, and the authors speculate (predict in scientific terms) in 2019 how Trump would react should he lose the election in 2020 (which he did). They expected that would he lose: he would not accept defeat, he would overstep presidential political authority, he would not honour the results of the election, blame the results on voter fraud through the defence mechanism of projection, and that the interregnum between the election and the inauguration of the new president will be a time of particular vulnerability where his supporters might react with violence. All predicted here was cause for the January 6 Committee hearings.

In the fifth and final part, the Epilogue, Post and Doucette (2019) state that the book was not meant to capture every moment of Trump's life or his presidency but that they wanted to give readers a clear understanding of the political personality of both Trump and his followers. They also highlight a few incidents after completion of the book, such as gun rights, environmentalism, hunting, immigration, "draining the swamp", his lack of empathy, his paranoia and his continuous use of rhetoric.

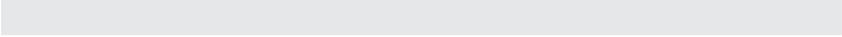
It would be safe to say that putting Donald J Trump accurately in his historical, political and cultural context and indicating how these factors shaped and constrained him illustrates the utility of the political personality profile for politicians and decision-makers. Despite the complex and demanding subject of political personality profiling, Post and Doucette (2020) managed to integrate several elements to build and unravel the puzzle of who Donald J Trump is. Firstly, they emphasise the uniqueness of each individual in that people are a product of the complex interaction of various facets in life. Secondly, each individual should be analysed in his or her unique context to understand him or her.

Lastly, in the current international arena, rogue leaders related to superpowers influence the balance of the global system with widely differing individual agendas and psychologies. Therefore, this book is a must-read for intelligence officers and diplomats dealing with political leaders who often draw support through their charisma. With the unfortunate loss of Post due to Covid-19, one hopes that Stephanie Doucette will continue to produce similar products as Post did.

Piet Bester²⁷ 
Stellenbosch University

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Author.
- Post, J. M., & Doucette, S. R. (2019). *Dangerous charisma: The political psychology of Donald Trump and his followers*. London: Pegasus Books.
- Zurcher, A. (2022, June 9). January 6 Committee: Former President Trump actions to be focus of hearings. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61735605>



Endnotes

- ²⁶ No page numbers are given for direct quotes as the electronic version of the book was reviewed. Page numbers might change based on the reader's selection of font size.
- ²⁷ Piet Bester grew up on a farm in the Orange Free State. After matriculation, he did national service (conscription). Piet joined the South African Defence Force, attended the South African Military Academy, obtained various degrees, and completed the University of Johannesburg's Doctoral Programme: Leadership in Performance and Change. He is also a registered Industrial Psychologist and completed various military courses, including the Joint Senior Command and Staff Programme and Security and Defence Studies Programme, including a Post Graduate Diploma in the Management of Security at the University of the Witwatersrand. Piet is currently a senior lecturer at the University of Stellenbosch's Faculty of Military Science. His research interests include leadership, integrity, performance enhancement, test construction, and national security.

