

## And then there is Trump

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The once impeached US President, now defeated, continues to challenge a system that he has successfully portrayed to millions as rigged

- \* It is a time of unprecedented loss of faith in the system, occasioned by four decades of growing social disparities and retreating welfare
- \* Privilege lurks on the blind side of all egalitarian republican orders
- \* Since the 2008 financial meltdown put an end to the illusions of boundless prosperity, politics has been waged in the intersection of the economic and cultural fault lines

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Three weeks after he was declared the loser in his re-election bid, US President Donald Trump remained hunkered in his bunker, rarely venturing out of the White House except for frequent rounds of golf. While world leaders discussed coordinated responses to the coronavirus pandemic at the virtual G20 summit

hosted by his close ally, Saudi Arabia, Trump was out with his buddies on the golf greens. He remained unmindful of a second surge of viral infections just then reaching a lethality far in excess of the first.

Mental health experts willing momentarily to waive the norm against diagnosis at a distance read a degree of self-absorption, even narcissism, as part of the once impeached and now defeated president's being. Where they have not ventured is in seeking the political purposes that these personality traits serve at this juncture in US history. Trump gained more votes than any other candidate in US presidential history, except the man he lost to. That he motivated many millions of the otherwise indifferent electorate to turn out is sufficient indication that the purpose he espouses is widely shared, though fractionally in the minority, today.

It is a time of unprecedented loss of faith in the system, occasioned by four decades of growing social disparities and retreating welfare. The surly public mood is reflected in the many who are prepared to repeat Trump's laughable claims of large-scale voter fraud with a straight face. But even while discounting that possibility, there are multiple signals conveyed in his graceless and mean-spirited reaction to defeat.

First among these is the denial of the defeat itself, since Trump had beaten the public opinion polls by keeping his losing margin under four points, against their forecast of an eight-point deficit in the nationwide vote. And second, by winning over 74 million votes, Trump had established himself as the choice of those who mattered, those of virtue whose ownership over the nation was now threatened by the rabble.

In his second appearance before the US public after being certified the loser, Trump ventilated his grievances at what he called the "rigged election" and the sustained campaign waged by a variety of actors — pharma and tech companies and the media — to ensure his defeat. Big pharma, he snivelled, had delayed announcing the positive vaccine tests from his signature initiative in dealing with the global pandemic, "Operation Warp Speed". Big tech had unfairly targeted his social media messaging for rigorous fact-checks, when his opponent

got away with much worse. And the media had of course badgered him from day one with false allegations of misconduct, while ignoring all his epochal achievements.

Solipsism is a philosophical doctrine which holds that an individual can know nothing with any certainty, except his own mind. In a more mundane sense, it is the belief that the entire world revolves around the sense of self an individual might possess. Solipsistic individuals could often transit, through imperceptible stages, into a posture about his interests alone being of consequence to how the world functions. Rage and resentment are the reaction when the world declines to comply. Solipsism could be a behavioural disorder and also an expression of privilege, a sense of exception that an individual may claim to set him aside from the rest. Beyond the individual, it could represent the perception of an entire class of citizens who have just got accustomed to living in a cocoon of privilege.

Equal rights and equality before the law have been a basic premise of all republican political orders. Where the republican order is one of unconditional commitment to the ideal, it resists the recognition of any differences. Yet, post-modernist politics insists on the right to be different, which compels the republican order to respond with a recognition of differences in identity, while still insisting that there can be no differences of rights. Equality is a universal entitlement.

Privilege lurks on the blind side of all egalitarian republican orders. It is a difference of rights that assumes the outward façade of merit and capitalist enterprise, in turn portrayed as the keys towards progress and the general good. More than any other capitalist economy, the US has been reticent in its embrace of welfarism as an operational philosophy. The high taxes that welfarism necessitates on the wealthy and the culture of dependence it ostensibly promotes among those less fortunate are seen as deeply debilitating to the spirit of enterprise.

The deindustrialisation decades since the 1980s have been a time of the erosion of collective strength among the working population and the devaluation of the dignity of work. White privilege remained intact through such mutations of

welfarism as the doctrine of “personal responsibility”, which narrowed the scope of collective responsibility for an individual’s well-being. Through these years of shared culpability in a regime of growing inequality, culture became one of the main terrains of battle between the two parties, with race, gender, sexuality and identity acquiring a new political salience.

Since the 2008 financial meltdown put an end to the illusions of boundless prosperity, politics has been waged in the intersection of the economic and cultural fault lines. Though hamstrung for much of his two terms by recalcitrant majorities of the right wing in Congress, Barack Obama sought as the first black president to gently nudge the US into a belated recognition of the irreversible changes wrought by the civil rights and immigration reforms of the ’60s. With all his economy with the truth, his verbal crudeness and ostentatious contempt for political niceties, Trump represented the backlash. And judging by the votes he secured and the aftermath of the bitter and contentious election campaign, that backlash has not yet spent itself.



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