

I helped write the manual for diagnosing mental illness. Donald Trump doesn't meet the criteria

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NICHOLAS KAMM/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Diagnosing President Donald Trump’s alleged mental disorder has become a popular pastime, [not just among mental health professionals](#) but also among politicians, journalists, pundits, comedians, and ordinary people gathered at coffee breaks. Trump’s consistently bizarre sayings and doings have [triggered a bill](#) to establish a commission “on presidential capacity” and a suggestion that the president be removed from office [via the 25th Amendment](#) on the grounds that he is mentally unfit to be president. A [recent Time poll](#) indicates that many Americans think that Trump is unfit for office. I also believe we made a terrible mistake electing him. But Trump’s disagreeable traits in no way indicate that he is mentally ill. Instead, they reveal him to be the ruthless self-promoter he has always been, now poorly cloaked in fake populist clothing.

Before I go any further, you should know that I am a lifelong political inactivist, shamefully missing in action from the tumultuous political events of the last 50 years. It took the travesty of a Trump presidency to get me fully engaged.

Confusing Trump’s behavior with mental illness unfairly stigmatizes those who are truly mentally ill, underestimates his considerable cunning, and misdirects our efforts at future harm reduction. And the three most frequent armchair diagnoses made for Trump — narcissistic personality disorder, delusional disorder, and dementia — are all badly misinformed.

Trump is an undisputed poster boy for narcissism. He demonstrates in pure form every single symptom described in the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#) (DSM) criteria for narcissistic personality disorder, which I wrote in 1978. But lots of successful people are extremely narcissistic without being mentally ill — think most celebrities, many politicians, and a fair percentage of writers, artists, lawyers, doctors, and professors. To qualify for narcissistic personality disorder, an individual’s selfish, unempathetic preening must be accompanied by significant distress or impairment. Trump certainly causes severe distress and impairment in others, but his narcissism doesn’t seem to affect him that way.

My long experience with psychiatric diagnosis has taught me a recurring and painful lesson: Anything that can be misused in the DSM will be misused, especially when there is an external, nonclinical reward for doing so. We decided to include narcissistic personality disorder in the DSM-III 40 years ago purely for clinical reasons. We never imagined it would be used as ammunition in today’s political warfare.

It’s also important to note that narcissistic personality disorder holds a fragile place in the diagnostic universe. It came quite close to being eliminated when the fifth edition of the DSM was published in 2013, and will be excluded from the forthcoming revision to the

International Classification of Diseases, a set of codes used by physicians and other health care providers to classify diagnoses, symptoms, and procedures.

Some presidential observers base their diagnosis of delusional disorder on Trump's being an avid consumer and creator of conspiracy theories. He learned his art from a master: [his mentor, Roy Cohn](#), who was the brains behind Sen. Joseph McCarthy's attempt to control our government through Communist witch hunts in the 1950s. Conspiracy theorists are a dime a dozen, while those with delusions are more rare. Up to [half of all Americans](#) believe in strange conspiracy theories. They are wrong, but not delusional. Having a delusion means being a minority of one.

Confusing Trump's behavior with mental illness unfairly stigmatizes those who are truly mentally ill, underestimates his considerable cunning, and misdirects our efforts at future harm reduction.

Also keep in mind that Trump's conspiracy theories have been, and continue to be, essential to his political success. His [long-standing claim](#) that President Obama was not born in the United States launched Trump's presidential run, his "crooked Hillary" claims helped win him the election, and "fake news" holds his base in his thrall. Trump is [crazy like a fox](#).

The dementia diagnosis is based on the supposed poverty and perseveration in [Trump's current speech patterns](#) compared to his earlier ones. I would attribute this to the number of stump speeches Trump has given. Abraham Lincoln could find creative ways of repeatedly saying the same thing, but Trump has never achieved Lincoln's eloquence. He uses the same words over and over again because they successfully work up the crowd.

Convincing proof that Trump is not demented is his undiminished creative and canny skills at blaming, bare-knuckle political fighting, and self serving.

Buried in the noisy debate about Trump's mental health is the misinformed and noxious assumption that mental illness somehow automatically disqualifies someone for high leadership position. If this were policy, Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill both would have been lost to history due to their battles with depression.

Assigning psychological disorders to Trump is not only wrong but futile. Vice President Pence, the Cabinet, and Congress would never [invoke the 25th Amendment](#) because it would amount to political suicide for everyone concerned and for the Republican Party. Any psychological fitness exam would also be inherently biased and unreliable. My guess is that Trump will eventually be removed from power, but via the appropriate investigative and political process, not a psychiatric evaluation.

I believe that Trump is a mirror of the American soul, a surface symptom of our deeper societal disease. He may not be crazy, but we certainly were for electing him. We mustn't waste this Trumpian dark age. If we don't learn from it, we will keep making the same mistakes.

Allen Frances, M.D., was chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Duke University and [he] also chaired the task force responsible for revising the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. He is the author of "Twilight of American Sanity: A Psychiatrist Analyzes the Age of Trump" (William Morrow, September 2017).

Portrait of Man In It for Himself

In a new book, John R. Bolton portrays Donald Trump as a president who sees his office as an instrument to advance his own personal and political interests over those of the nation.



John F. Kelly, left, with John R. Bolton in 2018 outside the Oval Office. Credit...Tom Brenner/The New York Times

Peter Baker, *The New York Times* National Edition, June 19, 2020, A1, A18.

One day in the summer of 2018, John R. Bolton commiserated with [John F. Kelly](#) over the burdens of working for President Trump. Mr. Kelly, then the White House chief of staff, had just had another argument with the president in trying to stop him from using the power of his office to punish a political foe. It did not go well.

“Has there ever been a presidency like this?” Mr. Kelly asked plaintively.

“I assured him there had not,” Mr. Bolton recalls in his new book.

That is self-evidently true and yet it bears repeating every once in a while. After more than three years of the Trump presidency, it has become easy to forget at times just how out of the ordinary it really is. The normalization of Mr. Trump’s norm-busting, line-crossing, envelope-pushing administration has meant that what was once shocking now seems like just another day.

Which is why Mr. Bolton’s damning book stands out even among the proliferation of volumes about this president. In 494 pages, the former national security adviser

becomes the first person with daily access to Mr. Trump's Oval Office to catalog the various ways that he has seized the presidency to suit his own needs, much to the consternation of not just liberal critics but a lifelong, left-bashing, conservative stalwart like Mr. Bolton.

The portrait he draws in "[The Room Where It Happened](#)," due out Tuesday, is of a president who sees his office as an instrument to advance his own personal and political interests over those of the nation. That is what got Mr. Trump impeached in the first place, but the book asserts his [Ukraine](#) scheming was no one-off. The line between policy and politics, generally murky in any White House, has been all but erased in Mr. Bolton's telling.

Decisions on trade, foreign policy, national security, law enforcement and other issues are fashioned through the prism of what it will mean for Mr. Trump. Other presidents at least maintained the notion that there was a difference between presidential duty and campaign imperative, but as Mr. Bolton describes it, Mr. Trump sees little need for pretense.

"Throughout my West Wing tenure, Trump wanted to do what he wanted to do, based on what he knew and what he saw as his own best personal interests," Mr. Bolton writes in the book. At another point he adds, "I am hard-pressed to identify any significant Trump decision during my tenure that wasn't driven by re-election calculations."

In this portrayal, an "erratic," "impulsive" and "stunningly uninformed" Mr. Trump could make "irrational" decisions and "saw conspiracies behind rocks." In an interview to promote his book, [Mr. Bolton told ABC News](#) this week that he had concluded that Mr. Trump was not "fit for office" and did not have "the competence to carry out the job."

He added, "There really isn't any guiding principle that I was able to discern other than what's good for Donald Trump's re-election."

Beyond withholding security aid to a war-torn Ukraine unless its leaders incriminated his Democratic foes, Mr. Trump also [sought to intervene in criminal investigations](#) of major firms in [China](#) and Turkey to "give personal favors to dictators he liked," according to Mr. Bolton — all part of what he described as "obstruction of justice as a way of life." Likewise, Mr. Trump was "pleading" in a meeting with President Xi Jinping of China to help him win re-election by buying [American agricultural products](#), which he thought would bolster him in farm states.

Other presidents have pursued what they saw as their own best interests or were driven by re-election calculations, even in the farm arena. The grain embargo imposed against the Soviet Union by Jimmy Carter to protest the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan was lifted by Ronald Reagan in deference to American farmers who formed a key voting bloc. Other presidents kept the domestic reaction in mind when making foreign policy decisions.

And other presidents exploited the power of their office for political reasons. Even before Richard M. Nixon and the wide array of abuses that fell under the rubric of Watergate, John F. Kennedy [ordered the C.I.A. to wiretap American reporters](#), while the

agency under Lyndon B. Johnson [infiltrated the 1964 campaign](#) of his Republican challenger, Barry Goldwater.

But what Mr. Bolton argues is that Mr. Trump's personal and political interests are the essential elements of this particular presidency, that to him the rules that governed other presidents in the post-Watergate era are meant to be broken. That has been ever clearer in the months since Mr. Trump was acquitted in his Senate impeachment trial: He has ousted officials who testified for House prosecutors, fired quasi-independent inspectors general who angered him and publicly pressured the Justice Department to go easy on his associates who have been convicted of crimes.

Mr. Trump's defenders say that he is simply exercising control over the executive branch in keeping with an expansive but constitutional interpretation of his power and that he has every right to demand loyalty and to make decisions with his political future in mind. As with the Ukraine case, they say, he has legitimate reasons for his actions, even if they may look unseemly at times. They argue that his supporters want him to break glass in Washington.

As for Mr. Bolton, Mr. Trump and his allies dismiss his account as another tell-all by another disgruntled employee grinding an ax — “the Washington swamp's equivalent of revenge porn,” as Peter Navarro, the president's trade adviser, put it.

“Bolton's book, which is getting terrible reviews, is a compilation of lies and made up stories, all intended to make me look bad,” [Mr. Trump wrote Thursday on Twitter](#) after news accounts about the memoir. “Many of the ridiculous statements he attributes to me were never made, pure fiction. Just trying to get even for firing him like the sick puppy he is!”

Mr. Bolton, by his own account and those of other White House officials, actually [resigned last September](#) before the president later claimed to have fired him. And Mr. Trump, who has compiled a long record of false and misleading statements, offers a contradictory defense against his former aide, claiming that Mr. Bolton's account is both “made up” and classified at the same time, without explaining how it could be full of national secrets if it is “pure fiction.”

The White House effort to stop Mr. Bolton from publishing his memoir on the grounds that it contains classified information goes to the book's larger theme of turning the office into a tool for Mr. Trump's own gain. In short, the president has turned a process meant to safeguard the nation's secrets into a political cudgel against an adviser turned critic.

Mr. Bolton [submitted his book to the National Security Council](#) for prepublication review in December as required of a former official and participated in an extensive, monthlong process with a career employee, making the changes requested until there were no more requests.

But after the career employee completed the review, which would have normally cleared the book for publication, Mr. Trump's political appointees, led by Robert C. O'Brien, his new national security adviser, stepped in. They ordered a new review and insisted there was more classified information still in the manuscript. Exactly what, they have not disclosed publicly, but Mr. Trump claimed this week that every conversation with him

was “[highly classified](#),” a fanciful notion that goes well beyond what most of his predecessors asserted.

With Mr. Trump vowing to block Mr. Bolton’s book from seeing the light of day, the Justice Department then [went to court twice this week](#) to stop the book’s distribution, a move that four former White House lawyers from Republican and Democratic administrations said had no precedent that they could think of. While no president enjoys revelatory books by former aides, they are a cross many have borne without employing the Justice Department as a weapon to punish perceived transgressors.

Not that Mr. Trump’s usual critics are all that sympathetic to Mr. Bolton, harshly blaming him for not testifying during House impeachment hearings last year and instead holding his information back for [his \\$2 million book](#). But some have seized on the material in the book, however belated, as confirmation of Mr. Trump’s politicization of the office.

Mr. Bolton, who served in three previous Republican administrations, makes clear that Mr. Trump is like no other president of his acquaintance. Consumed by his enemies, Mr. Trump seeks to use his power to strike back. He badgers Attorney General William P. Barr to prosecute former Secretary of State John F. Kerry for talking to Iran in supposed violation of the Logan Act. After an irritating leak, he tells his White House counsel to instruct Mr. Barr to “arrest the reporters, force them to serve time in jail and then demand they disclose their sources.”

And he ordered Mr. Kelly, his chief of staff, to strip security clearances for Trump critics like John O. Brennan, the former C.I.A. director under President Barack Obama. Mr. Kelly, a retired four-star Marine general, told Mr. Trump it was “not presidential” and complained to Mr. Bolton that it was “Nixonian.” Mr. Bolton, no fan of Mr. Brennan, agreed with Mr. Kelly.

“I thought there was a case against Brennan for politicizing the C.I.A., but Trump had obscured it by the blatantly political approach he took,” Mr. Bolton writes. “It would only get worse if more clearances were lifted. Kelly agreed.”

In the end, many of Mr. Trump’s exhortations go nowhere. Mr. Kerry has never been prosecuted, reporters have not been arrested and it remains unclear whether Mr. Brennan’s clearance was actually revoked as the president said it was. His defenders say Mr. Trump’s critics make too much of flamboyant outbursts that actually do not result in action, that he is more bark than bite.

But Mr. Kelly is now gone. Mr. Bolton is now gone. And Mr. Trump faces a 137-day sprint to Election Day that will decide whether he should keep control of the instruments of state for four more years.

Peter Baker is the chief White House correspondent and has covered the last four presidents for The Times and The Washington Post. He also is the author of five books, most recently “Impeachment: An American History.” @peterbakernyt

Opinion

The Real Donald Trump Is a Character on TV

Understand that, and you'll understand what he's doing in the White House.



By James Poniewozik

Mr. Poniewozik is the chief television critic of *The Times* and the author of *Audience of One: Donald Trump, Television and the Fracturing of America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

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On Sept. 1, with a Category 5 hurricane off the Atlantic coast, an angry wind was issuing from the direction of President Trump's Twitter account. The apparent emergency: Debra Messing, the co-star of "Will & Grace," had tweeted that "the public has a right to know" who is attending a Beverly Hills fund-raiser for Mr. Trump's re-election.

"I have not forgotten that when it was announced that I was going to do *The Apprentice*, and when it then became a big hit, Helping NBC's failed lineup greatly, @DebraMessing came up to me at an Upfront & profusely thanked me, even calling me 'Sir,' " [wrote](#) the 45th president of the United States.

It was a classic Trumpian ragetweet: aggrieved over a minor slight, possibly prompted [by a Fox News segment](#), unverifiable — he has a long history of questionable tales involving [someone calling him "Sir"](#) — and nostalgic for his primetime-TV heyday. (By Thursday he was lashing Ms. Messing [again](#), as Hurricane Dorian was lashing the Carolinas.)

[James Poniewozik answered questions about this essay on Twitter: [part I](#), [part II](#)]

This sort of outburst, almost three years into his presidency, has kept people puzzling over who the "real" Mr. Trump is and how he actually thinks. Should we take him, to quote the famous [precept of Trumpology](#), literally or seriously? Are his attacks impulsive tantrums or strategic distractions from his other woes? Is he playing 3-D chess or Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots?

This is a futile effort. Try to understand Donald Trump as a person with psychology and strategy and motivation, and you will inevitably spiral into confusion and covfefe. The key is to remember that Donald Trump is not a person. He's a TV character.

I mean, O.K., there is an actual person named Donald John Trump, with a human body and a childhood and formative experiences that theoretically a biographer or therapist might usefully delve into someday. (We can only speculate about the latter; Mr. Trump has [boasted on Twitter](#) of never having seen a psychiatrist, preferring the therapeutic effects of “hit[ting] ‘sleazebags’ back.”)

But that Donald Trump is of limited significance to America and the world. The “Donald Trump” who got elected president, who has strutted and fretted across the small screen since the 1980s, is a decades-long media performance. To understand him, you need to approach him less like a psychologist and more like [a TV critic](#).

He was born in 1946, at the same time that American broadcast TV was being born. He grew up with it. His father, Fred, had one of the first color TV sets in Jamaica Estates. In “The Art of the Deal” Donald Trump recalls his mother, Mary Anne, spending a day in front of the tube, enraptured by the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953. (“For Christ’s sake, Mary,” he remembers his father saying, “Enough is enough, turn it off. They’re all a bunch of con artists.”)

TV was his soul mate. It was like him. It was packed with the razzle-dazzle and action and violence that captivated him. He dreamed of going to Hollywood, then he shelved those dreams in favor of his father’s business and vowed, according to the book “TrumpNation” by Timothy O’Brien, to “put show business into real estate.”

As TV evolved from the homogeneous three-network mass medium of the mid-20th century to the polarized zillion-channel era of cable-news fisticuffs and reality shocker-tainment, he evolved with it. In the 1980s, he built a media profile as an insouciant, high-living apex predator. In 1990, he [described](#) his yacht and gilded buildings to Playboy as “Props for the show ... The show is ‘Trump’ and it is sold-out performances everywhere.”

He syndicated that show to Oprah, Letterman, NBC, WrestleMania and Fox News. Everything he achieved, he achieved by using TV as a magnifying glass, to make himself appear bigger than he was.

He was able to do this because he thought like a TV camera. He knew what TV wanted, what stimulated its nerve endings. In his campaign rallies, he would tell The Washington Post, he knew just what to say “to keep the red light on”: that is, the light on a TV camera that showed that it was running, that you mattered. *Bomb the [redacted] out of them! I’d like to punch him in the face!* The red light radiated its approval. Cable news aired the rallies start to finish. For all practical purposes, he and the camera shared the same brain.

Even when he adopted social media, he used it like TV. First, he used it like a celebrity, to broadcast himself, his first tweet in 2009 promoting a “Late Show With David Letterman” appearance. Then he used it like an instigator, tweeting his birther conspiracies before he would talk about them on Fox News, road-testing his call for a border wall during the cable-news fueled [Ebola and border panics](#) of the 2014 midterms.

When he was a candidate, and especially when he was president, his tweets programmed TV and were amplified by it. On CNBC, a [“BREAKING NEWS: TRUMP TWEET”](#) graphic would spin out onscreen as soon as the words left his thumbs. He would watch Fox News, or Lou Dobbs, or CNN or “Morning Joe” or “Saturday Night

Live” ([“I don’t watch”](#)), and get mad, and tweet. Then the tweets would become TV, and he would watch it, and tweet again.

If you want to understand what President Trump will do in any situation, then, it’s more helpful to ask: What would TV do? What does TV want?

It wants conflict. It wants excitement. If there is something that can blow up, it should blow up. It wants a fight. It wants *more*. It is always eating and never full.

Some presidential figure-outers, trying to understand the celebrity president through a template that they were already familiar with, have compared him with Ronald Reagan: a “master showman” cannily playing a “role.”

The comparison is understandable, but it’s wrong. Presidents Reagan and Trump were both entertainers who applied their acts to politics. But there’s a crucial difference between what “playing a character” means in the movies and what it means on reality TV.

Ronald Reagan was an actor. Actors need to believe deeply in the authenticity and interiority of people besides themselves — so deeply that they can subordinate their personalities to “people” who are merely lines on a script. Acting, Reagan told his biographer Lou Cannon, had taught him “to understand the feelings and motivations of others.”

Being a reality star, on the other hand, as Donald Trump was on “The Apprentice,” is also a kind of performance, but one that’s antithetical to movie acting. Playing a character on reality TV means being yourself, but bigger and louder.

Reality TV, writ broadly, goes back to Allen Funt’s “Candid Camera,” the PBS documentary “An American Family,” and MTV’s “The Real World.” But the first mass-market reality TV star was Richard Hatch, the winner of the first season of “Survivor” — produced by Mark Burnett, the eventual impresario of “The Apprentice” — in the summer of 2000.

Mr. Hatch won that first season in much the way that Mr. Trump would run his 2016 campaign. He realized that the only rules were that there were no rules. He lied and backstabbed and took advantage of loopholes, and he argued — with a telegenic brashness — that this made him smart. This was a crooked game in a crooked world, he argued to a final jury of players he’d betrayed and deceived. But, hey: At least he was open about it!

While shooting that first season, the show’s crew was rooting for Rudy Boesch, a 72-year-old former Navy SEAL and model of hard work and fair play. “The only outcome nobody wanted was Richard Hatch winning,” the host, Jeff Probst, would say later. It “would be a disaster.” After all, decades of TV cop shows had taught executives the iron rule that the viewers needed the good guy to win.

But they didn’t. “Survivor” was addictively entertaining, and audiences loved-to-hate the wryly devious Richard the way they did Tony Soprano and, before him, J.R. Ewing. More than 50 million people watched the first-season finale, and “Survivor” has been on the air nearly two decades.

From Richard Hatch, we got a steady stream of Real Housewives, Kardashians, nasty judges, dating-show contestants who “didn’t come here to make friends” and, of course, Donald Trump.

Reality TV has often gotten a raw deal from critics. (Full disclosure: I still watch “Survivor.”) Its audiences, often dismissed as dupes, are just as capable of watching with a critical eye as the fans of prestige cable dramas. But when you apply its mind-set — the law of the TV jungle — to public life, things get ugly.

In reality TV — at least competition reality shows like “The Apprentice” — you do not attempt to understand other people, except as obstacles or objects. To try to imagine what it is like to be a person other than yourself (what, in ordinary, off-camera life, we call “empathy”) is a liability. It’s a distraction that you have to tune out in order to project your fullest you.

Reality TV instead encourages “getting real.” On MTV’s progressive, diverse “Real World,” the phrase implied that people in the show were more authentic than characters on scripted TV — or even than real people in your own life, who were socially conditioned to “be polite.” But “getting real” would also resonate with a rising conservative notion: that political correctness kept people from saying what was really on their minds.

Being real is not the same thing as being honest. To be real is to be the most entertaining, provocative form of yourself. It is to say what you want, without caring whether your words are kind or responsible — or true — but only whether you want to say them. It is to foreground the parts of your personality (aggression, cockiness, prejudice) that will focus the red light on you, and unleash them like weapons.



Credit/Illustration by Erik Carter; Photograph by Al Drago for The New York Times

Maybe the best definition of being real came from the former “Apprentice” contestant and White House aide Omarosa Manigault Newman in her memoir, “Unhinged.” Mr. Trump, she said, encouraged people in his entourage to “exaggerate the unique part of themselves.” When you’re being real, there is no difference between impulse and strategy, because the “strategy” is to do what feels good.

This is why it misses a key point to ask, as [Vanity Fair recently did](#) after Mr. Trump’s assault on Representative Elijah E. Cummings and the city of Baltimore in July, “Is the president a racist, or does he just play one on TV?” In reality TV, if you are a racist — and reality TV has had [many racists](#), like [Katie Hopkins](#), the far-right British “Apprentice” star the president [frequently retweets](#) — then you are a racist *and* you play one on TV.

So if you actually want a glimpse into the mind of Donald J. Trump, don’t look for a White House tell-all or some secret childhood heartbreak. Go to the streaming service Tubi, where his 14 seasons of “The Apprentice” recently became [accessible to the public](#).

You can fast-forward past the team challenges and the stagey visits to Trump-branded properties. They’re useful in their own way, as a picture of how Mr. Burnett buttressed the future president’s Potemkin-zillionaire image. But the unadulterated, 200-proof Donald Trump is found in the boardroom segments, at the end of each episode, in which he “fires” one contestant.

In theory, the boardroom is where the best performers in the week’s challenges are rewarded and the screw-ups punished. In reality, the boardroom is a new game, the real game, a free-for-all in which contestants compete to throw one another under the bus and beg Mr. Trump for mercy.

There is no morality in the boardroom. There is no fair and unfair in the boardroom. There is only the individual, trying to impress Mr. Trump, to flatter Mr. Trump, to commune with his mind and anticipate his whims and fits of pique. Candidates are fired for giving up advantages (stupid), for being too nice to their adversaries (weak), for giving credit to their teammates, for interrupting him. The host’s decisions were often so mercurial, [producers have said](#), that they would have to go back and edit the episodes to impose some appearance of logic on them.

What saves you in the boardroom? Fighting. Boardroom Trump loves to see people fight each other. He perks up at it like a cat hearing a can opener. He loves to watch people scrap for his favor (as they eventually would in his White House). He loves asking contestants to rat out their teammates and watching them squirm with conflict. The unity of the team gives way to disunity, which in the Trumpian worldview is the most productive state of being.

And America loved boardroom Trump — for a while. He delivered his catchphrase in TV cameos and slapped it on a reissue of his 1980s Monopoly knockoff Trump: The Game. (“I’m back and you’re fired!”) But after the first season, the ratings dropped; by season four they were nearly half what they were in season one.

He reacted to his declining numbers by ratcheting up what worked before: becoming a louder, more extreme, more abrasive version of himself. He gets more insulting in the

boardroom — “You hang out with losers and you become a loser”— and executes [double](#) and [quadruple](#) firings.

It’s a pattern that we see as he advances toward his re-election campaign, with an eye not on the Nielsen ratings but on the polls: The only solution for any given problem was a Trumpier Trump.

Did it work for “The Apprentice”? Yes and no. His show hung on to a loyal base through 14 seasons, including the increasingly farcical celebrity version. But it never dominated its competition again, losing out, [despite his denials](#), to the likes of the sitcom “Mike & Molly.”

Donald Trump’s “Apprentice” boardroom closed for business on Feb. 16, 2015, precisely four months before he announced his successful campaign for president. And also, it never closed. It expanded. It broke the fourth wall. We live inside it now.

Now, Mr. Trump re-creates the boardroom’s helter-skelter atmosphere every time he opens his mouth or his Twitter app. In place of the essentially dead White House press briefing, he walks out to the lawn in the morning and reporters gagle around him like “Apprentice” contestants awaiting the day’s task. He rails and complains and establishes the plot points for that day’s episode: Greenland! Jews! “I am the chosen one!”

Then cable news spends morning to midnight happily masticating the fresh batch of outrages before memory-wiping itself to prepare for tomorrow’s episode. Maybe this sounds like a TV critic’s overextended metaphor, but it’s also the president’s: As [The Times has reported](#), before taking office, he told aides to think of every day as “an episode in a television show in which he vanquishes rivals.”

Mr. Trump has been playing himself instinctually as a character since the 1980s; it’s allowed him to maintain a profile even through bankruptcies and humiliations. But it’s also why, on the rare occasions he’s had to publicly attempt a role contrary to his nature — calling for healing from a script after a mass shooting, for instance — he sounds as stagey and inauthentic as an unrehearsed amateur doing a sitcom cameo.

His character shorthand is “Donald Trump, Fighter Guy Who Wins.” Plop him in front of a camera with an infant orphaned in a mass murder, and he does not have it in his performer’s tool kit to do anything other than smile unnervingly and [give a fat thumbs-up](#).

This is what was lost on commentators who kept hoping wanly that this State of the Union or that tragedy would be the moment he finally became “presidential.” It was lost on journalists who felt obligated to act as though every modulated speech from a teleprompter might, this time, be sincere.

The institution of the office is not changing Donald Trump, because he is already in the sway of another institution. He is governed not by the truisms of past politics but by the imperative of reality TV: Never de-escalate and never turn the volume down.

This conveniently echoes the mantra he learned from his early mentor, Roy Cohn: Always attack and never apologize. He serves up one “most shocking episode ever” after another, mining uglier pieces of his core each time: progressing from [profanity about](#)

[Haiti and Africa](#) in private to publicly telling four minority American congresswomen, only one of whom was born outside the United States, to “[go back](#)” to the countries they came from.

The taunting. The insults. The dog whistles. The dog bullhorns. The “Lock her up” and “Send her back.” All of it follows reality-TV rules. Every season has to top the last. Every fight is necessary, be it against Ilhan Omar or Debra Messing. Every twist must be more shocking, every conflict more vicious, lest the red light grow bored and wink off. The only difference: Now there’s no Mark Burnett to impose retroactive logic on the chaos, only press secretaries, pundits and Mike Pence.

To ask whether any of this is “instinct” or “strategy” is a parlor game. If you think like a TV camera — if thinking in those reflexive microbursts of adrenaline and testosterone has served you your whole life — then the instinct is the strategy.

And to ask who the “real” Donald Trump is, is to ignore the obvious. You already know who Donald Trump is. All the evidence you need is right there on your screen. He’s half-man, half-TV, with a camera for an eye that is constantly focused on itself. The red light is pulsing, 24/7, and it does not appear to have an off switch.

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The Reality TV President Finds His Format in the [Press] Briefing Room

The coronavirus briefings have given Donald Trump a regularly scheduled reality show again — or, rather, a create-your-own-reality show.



The daily coronavirus briefings have given President Trump something he hasn't had since "The Apprentice": a regular TV show in which he plays an executive in control. Credit...Erin Schaff/The New York Times

James Poniewozik, *The New York Times* National Edition, March 31, 2020, A11.

"I've gotten to like this room," President Trump said March 23 in the White House briefing room.

If the walls had ears, they'd have been surprised to hear it. Until recently, the Trump administration had all but done away with formal press briefings, and the president preferred to talk to reporters amid the helpful din of a helicopter or in a Fox News studio.

But the briefing room has one amenity that Donald Trump, suddenly without rallies and travel appearances amid a pandemic, cannot resist: a camera.

Mr. Trump became a prime-time star through TV, a political figure through TV and a president through TV. But he has not, as president, had what he had with NBC's "The Apprentice": a regular TV show in which he plays an executive in control.

Now, the coronavirus briefings have given him a new, live and unfiltered daily platform before a captive national audience. True to his résumé, he has conducted them as a kind of reality TV, or rather, create-your-own-reality TV.

In this reality — often subject to later fact-checking by the press or to backpedaling by staff — help and needed equipment are always [just around the corner](#). [Accurate reports](#) of his conflicts with governors over federal support are “fake news.” And [no one could have anticipated](#) a pandemic like this, despite warnings, [playbooks](#) and public-health infrastructure intended to do exactly that.

The daily coronavirus briefings, increasingly timed to run live on cable and broadcast right around the evening news, are a journey. The president begins them by soberly reading statements. (On Thursday, he gave the roll call of the G20 leadership.) He can be expansive — even, astonishingly, praising the media — and he can be peevish. (“I want them to be appreciative,” he said Friday of American governors.)

In its short life, for all its dead-serious subject matter, the program has developed the structure, rhythm and characters of a weekly reality show.

There’s drama and intrigue, such as the reports that the president might [be at odds](#) with staffers like Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. There’s the appearance of the protagonist, Mr. Trump, flanked by lieutenants, to announce the day’s topics and story lines.

And there’s the concluding “Apprentice” boardroom-style conflict in the Q. and A. session, in which friendly journalists are praised, and those who ask questions he doesn’t want to answer are [“terrible.”](#) After which Mr. Trump leaves the set and his public-health officials climb into the producer’s chair to edit his comments and their

Mr. Trump’s critics have said that his briefings are simply campaign rallies in another form. The two things do have elements in common: the litanies of grievances, the insulting of reporters and political rivals, the self-aggrandizement and selective history.

As at his rallies, Mr. Trump’s digressions can defy both science and syntax, like [his observation](#) on how children tend to be less seriously affected “by this pandemic, by this disease, this — whatever they want to call it, you can call it a germ, you can call it a flu, you can call it a virus, you know, you can call it many different names, I’m not sure anybody even knows what it is.” (It is a virus.)

The key difference is that Mr. Trump’s campaign rallies are for the faithful. They speak to and galvanize his base, and lately have been broadcast only on Fox News. The briefings are something that Mr. Trump hasn’t had since he declared Leeza Gibbons the winner of his final “Celebrity Apprentice” in 2015: a TV show aimed at a [wide mass audience](#).

Mr. Trump, [numbers-obsessed](#) even in more ordinary times, went on Twitter to boast that his briefings on a deadly catastrophe had boffo ratings.

Because the “Ratings” of my News Conferences etc. are so high, “Bachelor finale, Monday Night Football type numbers” according to the [@nytimes](#), the Lamestream Media is going CRAZY. “Trump is reaching too many people, we must stop him.” said one lunatic. See you at 5:00 P.M.!

His audience — stuck at home, in their living rooms, with their screens — is looking for a red cross, not red meat. They’re afraid for their lives and their jobs. They want information, action, a reason to believe things will get better.

There is no greater asset to a salesman or a politician than an audience that wants to believe. If you want to believe, here’s what you can see: The president of the United States, at a podium, backed by a team of officials and experts, doing something — or at least saying something, at length, which in the visual language of TV reads as the same thing.

It is not only viewers at home who want to have faith. On March 17, when Mr. Trump struck a somber note after minimizing the virus for weeks, CNN’s Dana Bash said that he was being “the kind of leader that people need, at least in tone.”

A week later, he was at a Fox “virtual town hall” saying, “We lose thousands and thousands of people a year to the flu — we don’t turn the country off,” and announcing his urge to reopen the economy on Easter. (The host, Bill Hemmer, hosanna’ed that it would be “a great American resurrection.”)

And for Mr. Trump, the briefings allow him to turn his pandemic response from a serial narrative, in which he’s held accountable for his cumulative action or inaction over time, into an episodic production, in which all that matters is what happened in the latest installment.

Every episode, in this production, wipes the slate clean, like a sitcom restoring the status quo. All those comments about how the coronavirus is like the flu and about how the cases will soon go down to zero and about not wanting to receive infected cruise-ship passengers because [“I like the numbers being where they are”](#)? That’s last season.

What matters, as the briefings frame it, is the next thing, the new rhetoric, the latest drama. “Will the president be there?” asked CNN’s Wolf Blitzer, teasing the March 25 briefing. “Will Dr. Fauci be there?”

There has been some counterprogramming, especially the live-morning briefings by Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York, who has emerged as the default Democratic response. (The presumptive opposition nominee, Joseph Biden — whose media strategy has seemed premised on the idea that people simply want a chance to turn off The Trump Show — [has struggled to break through the noise](#), being limited to the equivalent of [FaceTime calls](#).)

Mr. Cuomo’s briefings are part tough talk, part pep talk. His tone is both more dire than the president’s and more emotional — a kind of virtual New York backslap next to Mr. Trump’s outer borough pitchmanship. On Friday, he asked a National Guard group to imagine a day, a decade hence, when they will remember how hard they worked and

how many people they still couldn't save, then concluded: "So I say, my friends, that we go out there today and we kick coronavirus's ass!"

But it's the president who's able to seize prime time, abetted by networks who — knowing that his briefings have made objectively false claims — fall back on the easy answer that when the president speaks during an emergency, that is by definition news. (It's true: If the president is spreading misinformation, deliberately or otherwise, in a public health crisis, that is absolutely news. That doesn't mean that airing it live is a service.)

Mr. Trump's career has always been based on the premise that appearance is everything. That may be proving effective for him now, as measured by his cable ratings and his [rising poll numbers](#). But there are limits to this media strategy; you can't simply give a disease a mean nickname or dismiss it as if it were Don Lemon or Nancy Pelosi.

You can go a long way, in TV and politics, producing a successful reality show. A virus, ultimately, produces its own reality.

James Poniewozik is the chief television critic. He writes reviews and essays with an emphasis on television as it reflects a changing culture and politics. He previously spent 16 years with Time magazine as a columnist and critic. [@poniewozik](#)

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