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Building a (Great) Wall: A Semiotic Analysis of the Rhetoric of President Donald J. Trump

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Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

English: Rhetoric and Professional Writing

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	2
PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC	2
AMERICAN IDENTITY	4
AMERICA-FIRST POLICY, RACE, AND MILITARY UNDER TRUMP	6
METHODOLOGY	8
WHO IS DONALD J. TRUMP? IT DEPENDS ON WHO YOU ASK.	11
TRUMP SUPPORTERS – WHO ARE THEY?	20
AMERICA FIRST POLICY	26
THE ISSUE OF RACE	35
MILITARY RELATIONS	43
CONCLUSION	49
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	50

Introduction

Politics is often a controversial topic that tends to polarize rather than unify. When it comes to politics in the United States, many form an opinion about presidential candidates that is not likely to change as the winning candidate transitions into the presidency and throughout their elected term. Political party preferences, actions, looks, speeches and stances on issues are all ways citizens decide how they stand with or against a president or presidential candidate. The president represents and speaks for the United States, and thus is an influential figure who can be both beneficial and damaging. In today's world, presidents are visible on social media, television, and in numerous news reports. Hence, what they do and what they say becomes acceptable to do and say for a lot of civilians. While there are differences in presidential candidates according to their policies, speeches and everything that makes up their ethos, the majority of the first forty-four presidents have been very similar. All were men above the age of forty-three years old with past experiences in politics who used fairly similar language and followed the same general rhetoric to appeal to audiences.

That pattern changed when Donald J. Trump entered into the field of candidates for the presidential election to take place in 2016. A man with no political background announced he wanted to "make America great again" with discriminative and divisive language. Trump is someone nobody imagined running for what is now viewed as one of the most important positions in United States government. Nobody would have imagined he would actually have been elected to the Oval Office. Many have attempted to provide answers to the question of how and why Donald J. Trump was elected forty-fifth president of the United States. This is one of the goals of my research: to find out how and why Trump became President Trump and how his ideology was appealing to the American people. The way Trump speaks, and the way people

interpret what he says is an interesting subject of study since it was such an anomaly that he was elected and gathered so much support amidst just as much rejection by those who saw him as not worthy of the presidency. He is an abnormality as a presidential candidate and a rhetorical oddity since so many of his messages to the United States were ones of ignorance and bigotry rather than understanding and inclusion, the expected rhetoric of a president.

How did his rhetoric influence his supporters? Why were people drawn to Trump? Who were the kinds of people that were his supporters? What messages were his language and rhetoric communicating? My research addresses these questions and attempts to understand the ways in which Trump talked about America and its people and how his supporters interpreted his language.

Literature Review

Presidential Rhetoric

What is important to recognize for this specific body of work is the prevalence of the traditional rhetorical role of the president and the expected rhetoric of genres which accompany it. To be president of the United States of America comes with traditions which have mostly stayed the same with small variations over more than two hundred years. *The Rhetorical Presidency* by Jeffrey Tulis, published in 1987, was a revolutionary text that explained the rhetorical role of the president over time and its shift. Tulis explains that there is an “Old Way” (1789-1900) of presidential rhetoric addressed to Congress, a “Middle Way” (1900-1913) consisting of a hybrid of internal and external appeals to Congress and the American people at large, and a “New Way” (1913-present) in which the president regularly and directly engages the people. *The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency* came six years ahead of Tulis’ publication with

similar ideas. What is most important here is the idea that presidential rhetoric and the role of the president has shifted from traditional methods of communication solely with Congress into relying on the approval of the people. Now, presidents hope to convince the people with their speeches to put pressure on Congress to pass their ideas and legislation.

Since its publication, there have been numerous reiterations and new scholarly insight into *The Rhetorical Presidency*, including “The Rhetorical Presidency in Retrospect” and new editions published by Tulis himself. In this article, Tulis reflects on his work more so as a window into the American constitutional order as a whole and not just as a reflection on rhetoric or the president (481). Mary E. Stuckey also wrote her own additions and thoughts on Tulis’ *Rhetorical Presidency* called “Rethinking the Rhetorical Presidency and Presidential Rhetoric” discussing what factors will need to be taken into account as scholarship on the rhetorical presidency – and presidential rhetoric -- moves forward (38). In it, she focuses on discussing the future of the rhetorical presidency in terms of race, sexuality, and gender and how these factors should be considered when thinking about the rhetorical roles of the president. She uses Obama as an example, citing his “post-racial” presidential campaign to exemplify how he fit the traditional white, heteronormative role of the president (42). She argues Obama de-emphasizes the historical impact of being the first Black president by his reluctance to address racial issues head-on and instead emphasizing the unity of America.

Stuckey considers the uses of rhetorical devices within presidential elections in “American Elections and The Rhetoric of Political Change: Hyperbole, Anger, and Hope in U.S. Politics.” In this article, she discusses how presidents can play a role in political change and specifically how Donald Trump was more of a symptom of a lack of partisan rhetorical order and a “harbinger of political change to come” (669). She mentions how political realignment versus

change was a large debate when Trump was elected in 2016 but it was too early to call. All of these pieces focus on the change which can be made at the level of the presidency based on presidential rhetoric but focused more on the presidency as an institution. Each propose a way of looking at the rhetorical role of the president and how it has evolved and might evolve over time.

What I find to be interesting as well is the role of genre in expected rhetorical situations in which a president must perform. In my research, I find differences in the way Trump speaks or behaves in situations such as incidents that call for a national speech in response to a tragedy or a national event. As pointed out by Charles Zug in “The Rhetorical Presidency Made Flesh: A Political Science Classic in the Age of Donald Trump,” Trump’s presidency “could help reveal the habits of thought that the overwhelming majority of us take for granted” through his own actions (368). Therefore, understanding the traditional rhetoric enacted by most other presidents is crucial to understanding why President Trump was so revolutionarily different.

Few scholars have written on Trump’s tendency to focus on political incorrectness. Kirsten Theye and Steven Melling discuss this idea in “Total Losers and Bad Hombres: The Political Incorrectness and Perceived Authenticity of Donald J. Trump.” They discuss why Trump’s refusal to be politically correct, or in other words, to reject the traditional rhetorical roles of the presidency, was attractive to his supporters. Their research into how citizens were reading Trump’s ethos and giving him credibility was something which informed my own research.

American Identity

There has also been much scholarly work on the American identity and how Americans perceive and act out their identities. One of the large bodies of work which talks about American

identity is *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* by Samuel Huntington. Huntington contests America's identity is not actually a "nation of immigrants" but of European settlers, influenced by Protestantism and English heritage (59, 68). He also points out America's identity as a country is outlined in the American's Creed written by William Tyler Page in 1917. He points out challenges to this English Protestant identity and the need to conform to the American Creed. Many have argued that this body of work is narrow-minded and problematic. Carson Holloway writes, "It seems, then, that the problem of the preservation of American cultural identity is rooted in the very culture that Huntington wishes to preserve" (106). I find it important to point out this work, however, because it points to ideologies which it seems Trump and his supporters tend to hold about America.

Another work that has informed my own research and is important to mention is the anthology *Signs of Life in the USA* by Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon. Many of the pieces included in the anthology informed much of my research in understanding how Americans perceived their own identities and through what things they perceived them. For example, "What Makes Superman So Darned American?" by Gary Engle discusses how Superman's immigrant and orphan background make him able to speak deeply to the American character (745). He pointed out immigrant could be defined as a European coming over on the Mayflower or an immigrant coming from other countries such as Mexico, China, Ireland, Germany and the list goes on. Other pieces in the anthology discuss being an other in America, how celebrities are perceived by the American population, and how America is a nation that at its foundations is divisible due to political beliefs and identities. This anthology is a good example of how American identity is much more diverse than Huntington perceives it to be, involving immigrants in the American identity as a whole.

You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric is a body of work published by Vanessa Beasley in 2011. She discusses how the president shapes the country's notion of a national identity in which people living in the United States must work to bring together many people of many different backgrounds in such a diverse country. According to a review of the work by Sarah Hoffman, Beasley finds that "presidents often link identity with civil religious themes, which has sometimes made it possible for presidents to exclude certain people from the national community because they do not possess the proper American ideals" (303). This is an important finding, especially with regard to President Trump and his effect as leader of the nation as 45th President of the United States.

America-First Policy, Race, and Military Under Trump

Most scholarship on Trump consists of discussions around his racist rhetoric and his immigration policies and are relatively recent scholarly articles. "Understanding White Racial Sovereignty: Doing Research on Race and Inequality in the Trump Era (and Beyond)" by Jamel K. Donner addresses the Trump presidency as a reaction to the Obama administration and declares the Trump presidency as a white nationalist project. While my research addresses some of the reactions and policies enacted by Trump in response to Obama and his rhetoric around Obama, the idea of the Trump presidency as a white nationalist project is more extreme. "Multicultural Incorporation in Donald Trump's Political Rhetoric" by Corinne Sugino talks about the "revitalization of racial anxieties" and the "contradiction between Trump's overt racism and claims to inclusion" as he tries to construct his version of the American people (191). Corinne argues that through the contradictions of Trump's rhetoric, he creates a vision of the American people which "harmonizes his white racial fantasy with a denial of his racism" (191).

Each of these works point out the exclusive and white-centered language Trump tends to use throughout his campaigning and presidency.

“The Normalization of Exclusion Through a Revival of Whiteness in Donald Trump’s 2016 Election Campaign Discourse” by Frank Austermuehl argues that Trump’s “openly abusive, hateful, and nativist discourse” is what actually caused Trump to win the presidency. While this is one possible reason for Trump’s victory and election, it seems there is more to his victory than meets the eye. Immigration policies and Trump’s claim to put America first were some of the decisive factors which may have influenced voters and is discussed in other articles as well. In “When Gaps Become HUUUUGE: Donald Trump and Beliefs About Immigration,” the authors discuss Trump’s policies and beliefs around immigration as communicated by his policies and his statements about immigrants. Their research suggests Trump’s language around immigrants did not cause negative attitudes in his supporters but rather revealed them (786).

“What Makes America Great? Donald Trump, National Identity, and U.S. Foreign Policy” by Hilde Restad is one of few scholarly articles that discuss Trump’s “America first” agenda and how it affects American foreign policy. During the Trump administration, continuity and change in American foreign policy became a large discussion. This article suggests that “how one decides upon continuity vs. change depends on the underlying narrative of nationhood with which one begins” (21). This article, too, argues there existed an underlying “discord” within the American people in order for Trump to have been elected (36).

Lastly, there is not much scholarship on Trump’s rhetoric and language around the military other than on some of the military policies such as the ban on transgender people in the military and foreign policy. “The Military and the Constitution Under Trump” by Kori Schake most closely pertained to my research and was an influence on how to interpret some of the actions

Trump took as commander-in-chief. Schake points out the importance of the United States military rebuking Trump's attempt to use military force and domestic law enforcement against protestors at Lafayette Square in the summer of 2020. Her work points out ways Trump did not understand the ethics of the military and how his actions were so pivotal in American civil-military relations.

Considered together, these works point out the existence of a traditional rhetorical role of the president and the expectations that come along with that role. These articles point out how Trump's rhetoric was so different from that of past presidents in larger ways. American identity is also a key piece in understanding how and why Trump was elected and also how he might have played into prejudice and discord which already existed within the American population. My research aims to focus on Trump's ethos as president, how his background may have influenced his character, why his supporters supported him, how he communicated his beliefs and ideas about America, race, and the military, and how his supporters were influenced by his rhetoric.

Methodology

This project examines the rhetoric of Donald Trump from his announcement of his presidential campaign on June 15, 2015, during his four years as President of the United States until January 20, 2021, when his successor, Joe Biden, was inaugurated. I analyze trends in the rhetorical devices and language he uses and how his language affects public opinion, expression and behavior. The lens I have used to analyze, discuss, and draw conclusions from Trump's time as a presidential candidate and president is semiotics. Semiotics is a type of rhetorical criticism developed simultaneously on different continents by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and

American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and is the study of signs and their meaning (Borchers and Hundley 137). This type of rhetorical analysis is especially useful in analyzing Trump's rhetoric because semiotics points to the fact that "all social behavior is political in the sense that it reflects some personal or group interest" (Maasik and Solomon 10).

Using semiotics allows me to interpret not only what Trump says but how and why his supporters interpret his words and messages the way they do. It allows one to ask why audiences have interpreted a message in a specific way and also helps to explain the polarization which happens with Trump. Behaviors are encoded in ideologies, or "worldviews that express the values and opinions of those who hold them," and can be revealed through this rhetorical analysis method (Maasik and Solomon 10). In other words, our own desires, preferences, life experiences and kinship of ideas show through what people say and what they do. The political behavior described earlier by Maasik and Solomon is a part of "politics," another name for the constant clash of ideologies in society which compete with one another (10). Cultural mythologies are important in semiotics because "how you interpret something is very much a product of who you are, for culture is just another name for the frames that shape our values and perceptions" (Maasik and Solomon 18). People tend to attach meaning to Trump's words in polar opposite ways, so semiotics is a useful way of looking at Trump's rhetoric and why particular signs are interpreted so differently.

Due to the nature of the type of research I have conducted, I have used a blend of academic, peer-reviewed sources and credible news reports. The academic sources I have chosen focus primarily on the early years of Trump's presidency, for knowledge about general presidential rhetoric and to ground my research in rhetorical methods. Because his presidency ended during the timeline of writing my thesis, not many academic sources are available that

focus on the last year or two of his administration. Since Donald Trump used Twitter to disseminate messages he wanted to send to the public, Twitter is another source I expected to rely on quite heavily. However, because he was banned from Twitter after the capitol insurrection, it was more difficult to access popular Tweets and Twitter threads as I was writing this thesis in Spring 2021. I have used scripted and unscripted speeches he's made, comments to journalists, and any speeches that have been broadcast to United States citizens and to the world.

I have focused on his supporters and how they interpreted Trump's rhetoric. In studying the ways in which his supporters were using their own experiences and backgrounds to back Trump, even through what came across as non-presidential rhetoric, I have attempted to understand why Trump had so many supporters, who they were, and why they interpreted his rhetoric in positive terms. Understanding who his supporters were thus informs who his supporters were not and reveals the difference in why people believed and reacted in the ways they did. People who did not support Trump made it clear from the beginning that they did not find Trump to be presidential and they disliked his disruptive nature. This is what his supporters were drawn to, but it was very repelling to people who did not support him. It was also more interesting to me to study and understand who his supporters were and how he ended up winning the presidency in 2016 and even how he landed the large number of votes he got in 2020.

This thesis will not be a political science analysis since I will be focusing on how people spoke about, interpreted and interacted with Trump's language rather than his political policies and how they have impacted the United States and the rest of the globe. I will not be performing historical research on the impact of his presidency as it is too early to do so, and this paper focuses on language rather than policy. Only time and scholarship will tell what happens with the legacy Trump leaves as his presidency solidifies itself in history.

Who is Donald J. Trump? It depends on who you ask.

When Trump announced he was running for president in 2015, I thought it was a joke, or at the very least I thought he was not serious about it. At the time, several unusual people claimed they would run for president and never followed through did not run a big enough campaign for it to attract a sufficient number of supporters. As it turns out, I am not the only one who thought this way, as discovered by The Washington Post (Drezner). I did not know much about Donald Trump other than the fact he was a rich celebrity with an orange-tinted complexion. I did not even really know what he was famous for other than for having a lot of money. Many people in my generation and younger likely had a similar perception of him when he came into the picture as a possible candidate for president.

Older generations likely thought of Donald Trump as a celebrity who had money with a vague sense of him being involved in real estate and casinos. He was sort of famous for being famous. He was known for his scandalous divorces and his presence on *The Apprentice* as the man who announced, “you’re fired!” each week. Fox News viewers also came to know him for his calls into the morning show *Fox and Friends*. Now, many people only know Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States of America. A man that the majority of people used to see as a self-made billionaire businessman and celebrity is now largely seen as the boisterous, unruly leader of America. He became famous through his father’s wealth and a reality show where he brutally fired people every week.

As I saw people interpreting him in so many different ways, I wanted to explore how and why people had these different understandings. So much of the initial differing interpretations of Donald Trump came from the fact that so many people experienced him in different ways. Some

had no clue who he was, and some knew his entire personal and life history. Some experienced him through the books he wrote or through the reality television show he was the star of. Some never saw his show or read his books or had any interaction prior to his candidacy. Therefore, people interpreted Trump and his rhetoric in different ways due to their past experiences and their ideologies.

All of these interpretations are why I find it important and worthwhile to figure out who Donald Trump really is and the kinds of things he is associated with. I want to take a look at some of the objective facts of who he is, although each person's experiences will override these facts due to the way they interpret them. We have to go back quite a bit to when Trump was born to Frederick (Fred) Christ Trump and Mary MacLeod Trump in 1946 ("Donald Trump"). His father, Fred, was a well-off businessman who built homes, apartment units, and rowhouses using federal loan guarantees designed to stimulate the construction of affordable housing. He was later investigated for deliberately overestimating the cost of construction to receive larger loans and keep the difference ("Donald Trump"). For some residents of New York city, Trump's family name was already associated with fraud and deceit through the acts of his father. However, that reputation was not large enough to be known over the entire country, so it was mostly those closer to Fred Trump who began to interpret Donald Trump through their own lenses.

According to *The Atlantic*, the first quotation of Donald Trump's to ever appear in *The New York Times* was Trump responding to a charge alleging racial bias at his family's real-estate company. Trump was quoted as saying, "We have never discriminated, and we never would" (Graham et al.) However, as *The Atlantic* points out, "Trump has assembled a long record of comments on issues involving African Americans as well as Mexicans, Hispanics more broadly,

Native Americans, Muslims, Jews, immigrants, women, and people with disabilities” (Graham et al.) The charge against Trump’s real-estate company came in 1973 after Fred Trump refused to offer housing to a 33-year-old black woman named Maxine Brown saying, “Take the application and put it in a drawer and leave it there” (Mahler and Eder). Donald Trump was president of the company at the time and was named as a defendant, therefore linked to charge.

Maxine Brown was not the only one denied as a potential tenant and was part of a long list of discrimination complaints. Trump’s responses have always been denial or declaring victory over the lawsuits filed against him and his family. His responses serve to show a lack of empathy for those around him and for the potential tenants who were denied housing due to their skin color. By denying he knew about the situations and by declaring “the government couldn’t prove its case” and boasting that he made a minor settlement without admitting any guilt, the implicit meaning behind his words reveal the importance he puts on his image. Rather than admitting guilt and trying to rectify any wrongs, Trump remains in denial. Even then, his denial sends the message that he does not care about the situations of these people and wants to uphold an image of white superiority more than to care for people of color and treat them as equals.

One of the first instances of his racist remarks besides the charge against his family’s real-estate company, was the instance of the Central Park Five in 1989. Trump took out advertisements calling for the death penalty for four black youths and a Hispanic youth who were accused of a brutal rape in New York and later exonerated (Dawsey; Graham et al.). These were full-page advertisements declaring “Bring back the death penalty. Bring back our police!” Later, they were acquitted when the “real rapist admitted attacking the jogger and his DNA was matched to the crime” (Campbell). In this instance, Trump can be seen for what he truly believes, and people can get an insight into his ideology. This includes believing in the death

penalty, that people should be punished an eye for an eye by claiming those who murder should be executed, and that he was more willing to believe five youths of color were to blame for this crime over anybody else. The fact that he was willing to spend \$85,000 on full-page ads to back up his beliefs signified his values (Campbell). Therefore, his actions can be interpreted as signifying his distaste against people of color and revealing just how passionate he was about convicting them.

Donald Trump attended New York Military Academy, a private boarding school; Fordham University in the Bronx; and the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in economics ("Donald Trump"). Trump was set to be well-off, endowed with the wealth of his father. Donald Trump did not have to experience hardship or lack of money. He followed suit in the shadow of his father's businessman persona with a degree in economics and upon his graduation, Trump began working full-time for his father's business, helping to manage the rental housing ("Donald Trump"). In 1974, he became president of a conglomeration of Trump-owned corporations and partnerships, which he later named the Trump Organization ("Donald Trump").

Donald Trump expanded the business by investing in luxury hotels and residential properties around the time his father passed away in 1981. Many people began to get to know Trump through his book, *The Art of the Deal*, a book ostensibly authored by him in 1987. Trump created a narrative that he was the only one who authored the book, when in fact, he had a ghost writer named Tony Schwartz. The book added to the narrative Trump created for himself as a successful businessman. In it, he discusses how to make business deals and earn money to become a billionaire using his own experiences. Trump wanted to be perceived as a smart, successful businessman who knew how to negotiate and get rich. In the book, he described how

he got a very small loan from his father and built his life off it. The reality was, though, that he relied heavily on loans, gifts, and other financial assistance from his father, as well as his father's political connections in New York City ("Donald Trump"). Some audiences viewed Trump as the traditional "underdog" and icon of the American dream of someone coming from the nothing and becoming something. They only saw and believed the narrative Trump created for himself. From birth, through his schooling, and even through his career, Trump was given opportunity after opportunity through his father to become wealthy. He never had to worry about whether he would have a job later in life and never had to worry about food on the table or a roof over his head like many Americans faced and still face today.

In 2004, Trump premiered a reality television series called *The Apprentice*, which featured teams of contestants competing in business-related projects with a single contestant winning a lucrative one-year contract as a Trump employee ("Donald Trump"). As the Encyclopedia Britannica states, "The Emmy-nominated show, in which Trump "fired" one or more contestants on a weekly basis, helped him to further enhance his reputation as a shrewd businessman and self-made billionaire." It does not matter that reality television shows are heavily produced and edited, what happens on the television becomes a sort of reality for audiences. For reality television, self-promotion is the key to success. For self-promotion, one must "craft a notable persona, say whatever will set you apart and garner attention, break the rules of the game wherever possible, choose your message, and repeat it clearly and often" (Theye and Melling 332). Audiences saw Trump doing all of these every day throughout the media, saying whatever came to mind and putting on his own reality show as a presidential candidate and even as president.

Francine Prose calls reality television “a dash of casual brutality, a soupçon of voyeurism” and explains this interpretation by audiences as a realization that “average joes” or amateurs have been chosen for these shows because of their fragility and instability (223, 225). So, reality television is not a “scripted fiction but an improvisation... that doles out consistent and frequently reinforced lessons about human nature and... reality” (Prose 225). Prose also explains the pull of these shows, describing a “jittery, adrenalized buzz that produces a paradoxically tranquilized numbness in which our defenses relax and leave us more receptive to the ‘information’ we are receiving” (225). So, psychologically, the pull of reality television is quite strong and creates a blurry line between reality and fiction. Whether he intended it or not, Trump created a narrative for himself as a brutal businessman in a world where “average joes” competed to win the chance to work with him.

Prose goes on to suggest the guiding principles of reality television are flighty individualism, a society in which no one can win unless someone else loses, the conviction that altruism and compassion are signs of foolishness and weakness, solitary striving as above mutual aid, belief that certain circumstances justify secrecy and deception, and the invocation of a common enemy to solidify group loyalty (226). If we pay close attention, many of these messages are strikingly similar to the ideas presented by Donald Trump’s rhetoric as president. She goes so far as to say reality television is a parody of a heartless democracy in which everyone always votes for himself (226). It is apparent Trump brought some of the virtues and principles of reality television with him into his campaign and presidency.

Jake Brennan states perhaps this type of television is a way for us to live vicariously through others, or because we want our faces to stand out among the ever-growing crowd because the world’s population is exploding (Brennan 729). *The Apprentice* gave Trump a large

dose of fame besides the name his father created for the Trump family. In thinking about how people perceive Trump as someone who is famous and who has been famous for no other reason than his wealth, reality television could be an explanation for his notoriety. It creates non-celebrities who have gained exposure for “shocking people in new and ‘interesting’ ways” (Brennan 729). He states that for these stars, shocking people is one of the only ways to consistently get attention (Brennan 729). Perhaps this is why Trump makes bold and outrageous statements even as president: the taste of the limelight is still a strong pull. As Brennan states, “after fame, reality seems so mundane” (732).

Maasik and Solomon put Donald Trump in the category of “figures magnified to larger-than-life proportions not because they are really larger than life but precisely because they aren’t outstanding at all” (721). They go on to say that since these figures and their “outsized popularity” seemingly rest on a combination of fascination and contempt, they have become anti-icons (721). Since this source was written before Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, I find it interesting to note that even after his years as president, the public view of him still seems to remain a mixture of fascination and contempt. He became a figure magnified to larger-than-life proportions and leaves a legacy as an anti-icon.

While Trump experienced much success in his life, he also experienced failures and bankruptcies. Particularly during the recession of 1990, he faced many troubles. He had to surrender his airline, sell the *Trump Princess*, his superyacht, and take out second or third mortgages on nearly all of his properties. On top of this, three casinos owned by him and Plaza Hotel in New York went bankrupt (“Donald Trump”). Later, in 2009 the Trump Hotels and Casino Resorts went bankrupt after accumulating unmanageable debt (“Donald Trump”). Despite the bankruptcies, he remained on top and was able to keep most of his wealth. During

the primaries, Trump always pointed out that he never filed personally, and he used bankruptcy laws to get richer (Winter). What most would consider a failure, Trump wore proudly as a badge of honor rather than a badge of shame, as it would have been for most people. He saw bankruptcy as a tool to get richer rather than something to be ashamed of or to take as a failure.

One of the things that put him in the political spotlight was “‘birtherism,’ the false charge that the nation’s first black president, Barack Obama, was not born in the United States” (Graham et al.) It is also listed as one of thirteen examples of Trump being racist in a Huffpost political article from 2019 (O’Conner and Marans). Trump’s allegations against Obama not being born in the United States were a revealing factor of his true beliefs about other races. Trump even stated he sent people to Hawaii to investigate if Obama was actually born there or not (O’Conner and Marans). This action signals a sense of distrust in Obama which both Trump and most of his supporters shared. These claims were an attempt to illegitimate Obama’s presidency and likely would not have happened if Obama was white, considering forty-three presidents before him never had to deal with someone claiming they were not an American. Trump was the perpetrator of this false and racist theory and even still continues to insinuate that Obama is not American. “I don’t know where he was born,” he was recorded saying at the Conservative Political Action Conference in February 2015 (O’Conner and Marans). These claims that Obama is not American reveal the underlying ideology of Trump: that white people are the true Americans.

As we now know, Trump made his candidacy announcement speech from Trump tower in 2015, riding on the escalators to where he spoke on the issues he believed he would affect as President of the United States. As a man already above the majority of the nation in wealth, the fact that he made his speech from Trump Tower put him above others physically and

metaphorically. It just so happened, much of his audience was looking for someone they considered mighty and strong to jump start a richer America and put the country above all the others. While these, what could be called “fans” wanted someone rich, most people likely identified themselves with Trump as someone who was not a politician and was ready to make changes to “drain the swamp.” Marie-Agnès Parmentier calls this “human brands” in the case of reality television. She defines it as, “the set of associations that a group of people beyond the individual's social network identify with a particular person” (iv). There are people who felt like victims of the traditional government and they wanted to believe Trump was standing up for them and would create a better government by getting rid of all the “evil” politicians.

Even Trump’s name was a signifier to audiences whether they were consciously aware or not. To trump something is “to get the better of” as defined by Merriam Webster (“Trump”). His name signified strength to his supporters. There is a certain power to a one-syllable name and this bluntness either signified strength and power for his supporters or it signified the idea of an autocrat who was very loud and boisterous to those who did not support him. Therefore, how you perceive Trump signifies how you see his name through the connotations created through personal experiences and understanding of who he is as a person. Trump himself knows the power of his name because he sells it to be used in licensed and management deals. An article from the Washington Post states, “President Trump’s last name has been licensed to at least 50 different licensing or management deals according to an... analysis of his financial disclosures from 2015 and 2016” (Williams and Narayanswamy).

Working to continue his businesses, Donald Trump opened Trump Tower in 1983. Trump Tower is “an office, retail and residential complex” structured as a 58-story building in New York which eventually contained Trump’s Manhattan residence and the headquarters of the

Trump Organization (“Donald Trump”). Trump built his ethos and authenticity as an atypical presidential candidate from the moment he decided he would make the announcement that he was running for president from his very own tower in New York city. Trump tower stood as another signifier for strength, power and wealth. A large majority of the attendees at Trump’s announcement speech were paid to attend so Trump could ensure the message he wanted to send to America. He wanted a roaring crowd of supporters from the beginning and illuminated himself as a celebrity to look good in front of everyone else. His reality TV background and the influences of the grand businesses started by his father did not fall away when he decided to run for president.

Trump Supporters – Who Are They?

In order to understand how Trump’s rhetoric spoke to his audiences, we first have to understand who those audiences were. Who are the people who supported Donald Trump as president and as a presidential candidate? What lenses are his supporters looking through? In other words, how are they using their own life experiences to interpret what Trump was saying to Americans? There are a couple studies which have come to some conclusions about characteristics of Trump supporters. One article points out supporters tend to share valuing the characteristics of authoritarianism. Most also seemed to share a sense of relative deprivation (Pettigrew 108, 110). While a stereotype of Trump supporters exists, there still remains a nuance of supporters who are harder to comprehend. Not all Trump supporters are identical in the reasons they support Trump, but many of them share certain qualities.

While a sweeping statement cannot be made about all of Trump’s supporters as a whole, there are a few identifiable traits about his main group of supporters. There exists a core group of about thirty percent of the voter demographic which supports Trump no matter what. By taking

the demographics reported by exit poll data in *The New York Times* in 2016 and 2020, I have been able to identify the commonalities within his core supporters. Over fifty percent of white, heterosexual male voters over the age of forty-five without a college degree voted for Trump in both 2016 and 2020 (Andre et al. and Huang et al.). The majority also identified as white, born-again Christians (Andre et al. and Huang et al.). Over eighty percent considered themselves to have conservative and Republican political affiliations and tended to live in a small city or rural area (Andre et al. and Huang et al.). I believe these demographics are revealing as to who Trump's core group of supporters tended to be. In both elections, these were the contributing demographics to the majority of Trump's votes.

The demographics of these supporters effect their life experiences and thus would affect their perception of Trump in similar ways. As another article in *The New York Times* points out, many of Trump's supporters tend to hold authoritarian viewpoints. Ingraham writes, "many Republican voters hold strong authoritarian and anti-democratic beliefs, with racism being a key driver of those attitudes" (Ingraham). While this is not true of all of Trump's supporters, the majority of his strong supporters are more likely to hold these values and beliefs than those who are not strong supporters.

Thomas F. Pettigrew's research, "Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters" talks about how prejudice is one of the characteristics to be found in Trump supporters. He states outgroup prejudices, not only anti-immigration but all outgroups in general, characterize dedicated Trump followers (109). He also says Trump's followers loved his frank, unconcealed use of prejudice against immigrants, believing his words to be breaking with political correctness (109). USA Today Network conducted interviews of Trump supporters from every state to find out who they were. They recorded responses and transcribed them to their

website with pictures of each person holding a sign with a word or phrase adding to why they support Trump. These interviews of Trump followers support the statements made by Pettigrew.

One of his voters, Joshua Grad, said, “I think Donald Trump makes for a good candidate due to the destructive capability of the disease I like to call political correctness” (USA Today Network). Another voter named Rachel Quade stated, “since 9/11, I’ve always... been upset with the fact that people seem to be able to come into our country, sneak into our country so easily. People are coming in, we don’t know who they are, what their intent is, what they’re bringing with them. It’s scary” (“Trump Nation”). While it is impossible to claim these two people speak for all of Trump’s followers, many of the voters who were interviewed make similar claims. I would deem it safe to say these primary sources likely have similar opinions and stances as others who voted for Trump.

We can see in both of these statements the general disregard for what many would consider “political correctness” – that is, avoiding language or behavior that could exclude or insult groups of people. Kirsten Theye and Steven Melling discuss Trump’s style of rhetoric as utilizing shock and spectacle to his advantage and wholeheartedly embracing conspiracy theories as he transitioned from reality television to politics (322). During a Fox News interview with Megyn Kelly in August 2015, Trump states, “I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct... this country doesn’t have time [for political correctness]” (Chow). Theye and Melling point out how Trump’s bashing of political correctness creates a rhetorical situation in which his “outlandish style” is not a problem but a solution (323). It’s obvious many of Trump’s supporters thought this way as well. Some key words and phrases I have identified throughout the USA Today interviews are that Trump “speaks his mind” “doesn’t mince words”

“tells the facts” “says what others won’t say” is “forthright” and even that they liked that he’s a “flip-flopper” since it shows he is “open to changing his mind” (“Trump Nation”).

So besides political correctness and the support of the manner in which Trump spoke, his supporters also liked his policies on immigration. Pettigrew uses the concept of relative deprivation to explain why so many people thought in similar ways about immigration policies. Britannica defines relative deprivation as “persons who could be much worse off than they are but still feel deprived in comparison with even more fortunate groups” (“Psychological Factors”). So, as Pettigrew puts it, Trump’s supporters were often feeling deprived *relative* to their hopes and expectations (111). “Trump loyalists were assumed to have lost their jobs to Mexico and China and to be understandably angry” (Pettigrew 110). However, his supporters were not aware of the true reason behind job loss at the time: automation. Of course, these beliefs can be attributed to Trump’s claims in his very first candidacy announcement speech when he says, “there are no jobs, because China has our jobs and Mexico has our jobs” (“Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech”).

Other statements from the USA Today interviews included, “we got to... stop this massive illegal immigration,”¹ “I support Donald Trump because immigration is a humongous issue,”² and “we should build a wall and stop illegal immigration coming across our southern border, along with stopping drugs from coming across and temporarily stop the immigration of Muslims coming into this country until we can vet them”³ (“Trump Nation”). Prejudice, relative deprivation and economics come together for the beliefs of Trump’s supporters. They make claims about the perceived issues of losing jobs to the abundance of illegal immigrants, believing

¹ William G. Frazier

² Zach Broullire

³ Teri Venner

the illegal immigrants are bringing drugs and crime into the United States. It is clear in these statements that many supporters believe immigrants are not Americans, likely not believing America is a nation of immigrants or is known as the Melting Pot. He states, “I want American first policy...” saying that every policy should be working for American people, even the immigration policies (“Trump Nation”).

Trump’s supporters wanted an untraditional president, someone without a political background and someone who would “drain the swamp” and create a different political atmosphere since they believed the current and past ones did not work. Trump supporters tended to think the government was crooked and corrupt and that traditional politicians themselves were to blame. Trump actions and language became the signs that pointed to the differences in him that were not prevalent in past presidents or presidential candidates. As one supporter states, “It’d just be nice to see someone from outside of Washington coming into a completely crooked and rigged system” (“Trump Nation”). They saw the fact that he was, in their eyes, “a successful businessman” and “not a politician” (“Trump Nation”). Likely, the fact that he was not a traditional politician was appealing for a lot of voters who were ready to try something new in the government. Trump’s wallet and his reputation preceded him as someone who was not going to sugarcoat anything and who was there to get things done. In addition to someone who was not a politician, he was also seen as a strong leader (“Trump Nation”).

His perceived authenticity came from the fact that Trump identified himself as an outsider from the very beginning. He used language that was not traditional political rhetoric in multiple senses and repeatedly bashed and insulted many areas of the government. This resulted in him sounding like a person “who has rejected the conventions of electoral politics altogether—someone who’s opted out of the whole charade” (Theye and Melling 329). Many of

his supporters liked the idea of “what you see is what you get,” as Hillary Clinton pointed out while campaigning against him (Gearan). Little did she know, this would actually be a positive for his supporters. As Theye and Melling also point out, Trump’s relatability is huge for his voters. Not only do many of them like and relate to the fact that they cannot completely comprehend all the ins and outs of being a politician, but they also like the fact that he “embellishes” his stories much like many Americans do every day (330). Statements his non-supporters see as lies and spreading false information, his supporters perceive as embellishments or mistakes just like every other non-politician.

For his supporters, Trump’s Twitter account also furthers his authenticity and relatability. From the date Trump announced he was going to run for president (June 16, 2015) until the day of Joe Biden’s inauguration (January 20, 2021), Trump tweeted 34,416 times (Brown). “His ability and eagerness to speak directly to the people, without the polishing of public relations people and without the fact-checking and skepticism of the media, help build his authenticity” (Theye and Melling 331). In those tweets, he had the ability to express his bold opinions without a filter and at any moment. He made many typographical errors and utilized entirely capitalized words that made it obvious many of his tweets were not vetted before he posted them. His supporters likely felt like Trump was speaking directly to the American people without allowing anyone to control his speech or censor his language. They had access to him any time he wanted to send out a Tweet.

As we now know, Trump did not win re-election for president in 2021. The New York Times put out an article with research to find out who the people were who voted for Trump in 2016 and who those people were who were not voting for him a second time. There were many different reasons, including topics such as his handling of the coronavirus pandemic, his

handling of the protests which ensued after the death of George Floyd, his stance on police brutality, his handling of the tariffs he put on China and the fact that he “does not behave the way a president ought to act” (Miller et al.) Many of his supporters saw his behavior as a candidate but “expected him to act with more decorum in office” (Miller et al.) This article points to the demographic of his supporters that voted for him for two reasons during his first campaign: 1) he was a Republican, and 2) Trump was not Hillary Clinton. While many did not support Biden during the 2020 campaign, most who voted for Trump the previous election were affected by his conduct in office and saw the chance for a more traditional president who might be less divisive and more compassionate. In some groups, the Trump brand became more popular, others became the opposite by the end of his term.

The themes analyzed for this project include Trump’s policies and statements around America-first ideas and his language and beliefs around race and around the United States military. They are not completely discreet entities and do include overlap in some cases. For example, the way people view immigration issues can be connected to racism. Trump’s language around race coincides with his beliefs about the military and immigration. However, the themes create a better understanding of Trump’s rhetoric and contradictory nature.

America First Policy

During the primary election of 2016, Donald Trump dominated media with his announcement of officially running for President of the United States. Citizens soon found out just how much they were going to be seeing of Trump all over news outlets and social media websites. Twitter became Trump’s favorite form of social media and favorite form of communication to the citizens of the United States from the time he was running for president and throughout his presidency. One of his tweets from March 15, 2016 serves to sum up the

large policies Trump touts throughout his campaign: “I will bring our jobs back to America, fix our military and take care of our vets, end Common Core and ObamaCare, protect 2nd A, build WALL” (@realDonaldTrump). Donald Trump’s closing statement for his presidential announcement speech was, “if I get elected president, I will bring [the American dream] back bigger and better and stronger than ever before, and we will make America great again” (“Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech”).

According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of the American dream is, “a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful.” What is interesting to note is the difference ideologies make in the interpretation of this common phrase of the American dream. As stated by Restad in “What Makes America Great? Donald Trump, National Identity, and U.S. Foreign Policy,” there seems to have existed an underlying “discord” within the American people in order for Trump to have been elected in the first place (36). America’s identity and the American dream were already difficult to define, and it was up to the president to do so. Trump’s idea of American identity seemed to stem from a similar one as Huntington’s, the idea that America is made of English Protestants and is not really a nation of immigrants (59, 68).

To Trump and many of his supporters, the American dream only applied to people were white, and born and raised in America with western Christian religious values. While this is not an explicit bias that his supporters would say out loud, it is an implicit bias, or an unconscious attitude or stereotype. The imagined picture of the American dream and American citizens excluded all other ethnicities and religions, even those born in the United States. However, the dictionary definition states, “anyone in the U.S.” Trump’s definition of the American dream and his idea of making America great again were based off specific cultural values he held. He used a

lot of phrases and buzz words many people, mostly Republicans, used commonly like “end common core” “protect the Second Amendment” “reduce our debt” “strengthen our military, take care of our vets” and “stop illegal immigration” (“Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech”). Saldaña et al. point out, “His campaign’s motto, “Make America Great Again,” implicitly proposed a turn back to the better past, where immigrants were not as present and socially salient as they are today” (793). Thus, the connotative meaning in this statement pointed to the past as a better America and simultaneously created an understanding that Trump meant to rid America of what he believed was holding it back.

As part of his America-first agenda, one of the large, overarching policies that was important not only to Trump but also to his supporters was the topic of immigration. To Trump, immigrants were not Americans and were taking American jobs and so needed to be deported. Before Trump, Obama enacted immigration policies which consisted of wide-scale deportation and detention of immigrants in similar ways as Trump (Lind; Skrentny and Lòpez 66-67, 69). During Obama’s first years as president, the number of illegal immigrants were skyrocketing. During the Trump administration, the numbers had calmed down, but Trump decided there was still an immigration issue despite the lower numbers (Lind). While the Obama administration did deport immigrants, the separation of families was not a common practice as it was during Trump’s administration (Lind).

Different political groups perceived this deportation in different ways during both administrations. For the most part, Democrats saw Obama and Trump deporting illegal immigrants as a way the United States closed its borders. Yet, most Republicans did not see the deportation numbers or did not think it was enough. They saw America as a country with open borders despite all the actions taken by Obama and past presidents to try and tackle illegal

immigration. Likely Trump's rhetoric around building a wall became a symbolic sign, something which has no intrinsic meaning unless given it by a culture, which indicated the importance of keeping out immigrants from Mexico so they would not take the jobs of Americans (Borchers and Hundley 127).

The lack of knowledge about immigration numbers and policies and the blind trust many of Trump's supporters tended to have in his statements allowed Trump to take control of the exigence of the situation. He saw the dislike many Republicans had for Obama and used it entirely to his advantage on this policy topic. Since immigration was an important topic during the Obama administration, for many people it was still fresh on their minds. Many likely thought Obama did not handle the issue well and wanted a new president to come in and fix it. As stated earlier, his supporters said things like, "I support Donald Trump because immigration is a humongous issue" thinking about immigration during Obama's presidency ("Trump Nation").

The statement that became a chant and a sign of Trump and his rhetoric on the topic of immigration was his statement that he would "build a great, great wall" and he "will have Mexico pay for that wall" (Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech). In semiotics, a sign is defined as "the smallest unit of meaning comprised of a signifier and a signified" (Borchers and Hundley 137). This statement from his campaign announcement became a huge signifier for many things throughout his presidency. For many of his supporters, it signified getting rid of Mexicans who were now seen, as Trump states, "people that have lots of problems... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" (Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech). The wall also signified jobs for Americans under the impression that illegal immigrants were taking all the available jobs. Trump's proposed immigration plan in 2015 stated, "any immigration plan must improve jobs, wages and security

for all Americans” (Diamond and Murray). In his opening speech Trump says, “there are no jobs, because China has our jobs and Mexico has our jobs” (“Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech”). Thus, the wall made sense to him and his supporters as a way of keeping out illegal immigrants.

Trump’s background in construction, owning buildings, and managing finances was likely a draw for his supporters and signified he would be able to build a literal wall very well. He often repeated, “nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I build them very inexpensively” (“Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech”). Many people saw Trump as a completely capable businessman who could build an actual wall along the southern border of the United States and keep out illegal immigrants. It is important to note, Trump and his supporters did not lobby to build a wall along the Canada-America border, only the border between America and Mexico. This is another revelation of the implicit bias within Trump and his supporters of keeping a white America. Canadians are thought of as white and therefore can be Americans in Trump’s eyes.

Some of his supporters and non-supporters saw the wall Trump kept talking about as a metaphor or a symbol. Janssen Willhoit, a Vermont Republican delegate, talks about how it might be “a matter of semantics” since in the past the Republican party believed in having the fence and he wonders if a fence is the same thing as a wall (“Donald Trump’s Mexico Wall”). There was already a fence along the border, however, Trump wanted a to build an “impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful, southern border wall” (“Donald Trump’s Mexico Wall”). The wall was a literal sign of separation of the United States from Mexico that many supporters wanted to see. The wall reflected how many of Trump’s supporters viewed who Americans were and for most people, immigrants from Mexico, illegal or legal, could not be American citizens.

Trump also stated he would make Mexico pay for this wall after stating, “[Mexico is] beating us economically” (“Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech”). This was another way he made Americans out to be the victims. America was the victim of Mexico sending over “rapists” and “criminals” and if Trump had Mexico pay for the wall, ultimately America would come out on top. The country would not be out a penny and would be rid of illegal immigrants all in one.

Especially on the topic of immigration, his words communicate an intolerance for race and illegal immigration from people of color, reiterating his idea of what it looks like to put America first. He discriminates against them by calling all immigrants criminals and rapists and puts this image into the minds of his supporters. Trump therefore uses a scare tactic, or fear, to motivate supporters to vote for him. His fear tactics are not directly threatening his audiences, instead speaking to an ideology they already hold within themselves. Their own experiences and beliefs about who Americans should be and what America should look like were able to be controlled by their fear of immigrants as criminals and rapists. They also feared a loss of jobs to people who they believed did not belong in America in the first place. The overall state of American consciousness was that supporters had this idea of relative deprivation, believing they were worse off than they could have been.

Many of the individual interviews conducted by USA Today mentioned this idea of patriotism and American first policies. One of his supporters states, “Donald Trump is very patriotic, he’s 100 percent American for America...”⁴ (“Trump Nation”). Many of his supporters had this same view of Donald Trump and his policies and it was a reason they really liked him. Most likely, they identified as their ideal of who an American is, and they felt like they were

⁴ Barry Fixler

being put first instead of people abroad⁵ (“Trump Nation”). Another one of his supporters states he believes Trump will bring “more jobs and more opportunities for the American” that were lost to Mexico and “everywhere else” (“Trump Nation”). Trump made it clear how he was going to put America first by enacting a Muslim ban, shutting down borders and putting large taxes on imports to prioritize “American-made” items.

Soon-to-be President Trump not only spoke about immigration concerning Mexico but used very divisive language for other countries in his announcement speech. He spoke about China and Japan saying “they beat us all the time” about trade deals and manufacturing (Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech). His use of the verb “beat” reminded his audience of things such as fights, sports, or races in which one person must win and “beat” their opponent. He later used key words like “ISIS” and “Middle East” that many people associated with the idea of terrorists due to the events of September 11, 2001 and President Bush’s speeches. ISIS is also a widely known terrorist organization which had fairly recently been active and in the years prior. Thus, an association with “terrorists” having better economies than the United States was created through Trump’s rhetoric and could instill a fear into his supporters who want America to be better than “terrorists.” He later speaks about Iraq, knowing the Kairos, or timeliness, of the Iraq war from the time of Obama’s terms as president, and says “the enemy took [the Humvees]” (“Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech”). Rather than implying “enemy” here as he did earlier in his speech, Trump says it outright and vividly creates the Other mentality of Americans being the good guys and other countries being the “bad guys.”

Trump lets everyone know how he truly feels about other countries and how he thinks America should view them saying, “they are not our friend, believe me” (“Donald Trump’s

⁵ “Less abroad and more home.” – Tim Petrillo

Presidential Announcement Speech”). To audiences who hold the same beliefs as Donald Trump, this statement is very powerful and solidifies the image of America versus all other countries. If the other countries are not friends to the United States, the connotation here is that other countries are the enemies. Trump’s idea of “making America great” comes out in the words he chooses and how he tries to set America apart from other countries. He thinks in terms of economics and Us versus Them saying, “our enemies are getting stronger and stronger by the way, and we as a country are getting weaker. Even our nuclear arsenal doesn’t work” (“Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech”). For Trump and his supporters, the nuclear arsenal he refers to comes with great significance and power. If, as Trump claimed, America could not defend itself with nuclear weapons, how could America think it was a great country?

Shortly after Trump was inaugurated, he enacted a series of executive orders which “prohibited travel and refugee resettlement from select predominately Muslim countries” (“Muslim Travel Ban”). He had called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” during his campaign, and he followed through with discriminatory executive orders (Tharoor). Trump had stirred up ideas that people from Islam and Muslims were terrorists Americans should be afraid of. However, “there was little to no evidence refugees and immigrants from the targeted countries posed a greater security risk than the overall population [of America]” (Tharoor). The Muslim ban gave Trump supporters, and possibly Trump himself, a false sense of security against a made-up enemy. In fact, “No person accepted to the United States as a refugee, Syrian or otherwise, has been implicated in a major fatal terrorist attack since the Refugee Act of 1980” and Trump’s travel ban would not have affected any major Islamic terrorist attacks in America in recent years (Levenson). Thus, the Muslim ban came down to

Trump's promises he made as a candidate to satisfy the xenophobia and religious hostility of many of Trump's supporters.

One of the large issues that ensued due to the way Trump talked about immigrants and America-first policies was the bullying, not only of children, but of adults to other adults. According to the Washington Post, "the president's rhetoric has changed the way hundreds of children are harassed in American classrooms." The article states, "At least three-quarters of the attacks were directed at kids who are Hispanic, black or Muslim." This harassment is also from kids who do not support Trump against those who do support him (Natanson et al.). The discord and environment for harassment and the rejection of "political correctness" perpetuated by Trump caused people, especially young, white Americans, to find it okay to attack others over differences in skin color, ethnicity, religion and political beliefs. As a student states, "It's gotten way worse since Trump got elected... the president says it... Why can't [classmates]?" (Natanson et al.).

Trump's election brought about support from racist groups such as the Proud Boys, Neo-Nazis and many other white nationalist hate groups. According to an article by the Guardian, white nationalist hate groups have increased 55% throughout the Trump era, as well as a surging racist movement (Wilson). The concept of America-first as perpetuated by Trump created a climate in which racism was able to flourish, taking advantage of the discord already prevalent in American society. In the next section, this will be seen clearly in many other ways such as the handling of Trump's rallies like in Charlottesville, his policies and even Black Lives Matter protests.

The Issue of Race

Related to this patriotic-looking American-first policy, there Trump also used rhetoric that emboldened racist groups and elevated white supremacist attitudes or ideology. While there was a taste of this racism throughout the American-first policies and attitudes of Trump and his supporters, he was also blatantly racist in other ways. Even before he became president, his words and his actions reflected that of someone who thought less of races that were not white.

On the campaign road in 2016, Trump “made a passionate pitch to African American and Hispanic voters, whom he described as living in poverty in neighborhoods that are more dangerous than war zones” (Johnson). He stated, “What do you have to lose?” over and over again to the crowds at his rallies. He continued, “it is a disaster the way African Americans are living, in many cases, and, in many cases the way Hispanics are living... I'll bring jobs back. We'll bring spirit back. We'll get rid of the crime. You'll be able to walk down the street without getting shot” (Johnson). While he may be intending it to sound like he wants to support African Americans and Hispanics in America, he is making these statements to majority white crowds. His words do not support his actions, especially after he already stated he wanted all illegal immigrants deported because they were taking American jobs.

While some of the supporters in these rally crowds were African American or Hispanic, Trump was actually “doubling down on insults, fear and stereotypes that set our community back and further divide our country,” as stated by Marlon Marshall, Clinton's director of state campaigns and political engagement (Johnson). Trump’s pitch to voters of color in 2016 was asking voters what they had to lose. This statement suggested these people already did not have much in their lives to look forward to or to hold dear. It assumed all of them were poor and could only gain or improve since they were already at rock bottom. His statement also assumed white

people *did* have things to lose and thus should more carefully consider who they will be voting for. However, his statement connotated black voters and Hispanic voters did not really need to consider the pros and cons of a presidential candidate. Trump uses fear and stereotypes which many of his supporters likely agree with. Most of his supporters thought they could not walk down the street where people of color lived without getting shot. Thus, it was an easy statement to believe, and they wanted Trump to “fix” the crimes.

During his presidency, Trump made multiple racially charged comments and remarks in response to situations and events that took place. Two articles use the verb “attack” to describe the way Trump reacted to athletes protesting against racial injustice by kneeling during the national anthem (Dawsey; Schaefer 10). San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick was the first athlete to popularize not standing for the national anthem in August 2016 saying, “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color” (Tatum). This signifier, not standing for the national anthem, launched America into a controversial division over its meaning due to differing cultural mythologies. Some people only saw blatant disrespect of the country when players refused to stand. These people likely held more nationalistic beliefs, finding American pride to be one of their important values. Others saw someone standing up for long-time oppression, calling awareness to an issue so changes could take place. These people likely held a different value, believing in the importance of equality over nationalistic pride.

Trump was one of the formers who saw it as disrespect to a good country saying, “that’s a total disrespect of our heritage. That’s a total disrespect for everything we stand for” (Schaefer 10). At a rally in September 2017, Trump suggested the team owner’s response should be, “Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, he’s fired!” (Schaefer 10). Trump’s reiteration of the

importance of America tugs on the nationalism and pride of many of his supporters. He states, “You have to stand proudly for the national anthem, or you shouldn’t be playing, you shouldn’t be there. Maybe you shouldn’t be in the country” (Schaefer 10). Trump’s ideology is firmly rooted in nationalism for the country itself over the worries of the people his country is oppressing. Football is considered the most popular spectator sport in America, so not only does the national anthem represent America, so does American football. Despite the fact Kaepernick is an American football player, Trump is able to overlook his ethos as an American football player and see his actions as disrespect for the country rather than standing up for his rights.

For many people, “politicizing” the sport and this pointed calling-out of an America that oppresses black people and people of color brought shame and discomfort. Therefore, Trump, who likely felt this shame and discomfort, lashed out in anger. His supporters saw his behavior as president and thought it acceptable to do the same. In the article titled, “Whiteness and Civilization: Shame, Race, and the Rhetoric of Donald Trump,” Schaefer points out that in “taking the side of whites who have been confronted with their complicity in a system of racial disparity, [Trump] assures them that rather than feeling ashamed, they should take revenge on those who have sought to challenge their sense of ease” (10). The comments made by Trump, and as he held his stance throughout the years, showed the true nature of what he valued: a prideful, white America over an America that stood against oppression.

In 2018, Trump and lawmakers were discussing protecting immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador and African countries as part of a bipartisan immigration deal when Trump retorted with his question (Dawsey). He asked, “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” (Dawsey). He then went on to suggest “the United States should instead bring more people from countries such as Norway” and that “he would be open to more

immigrants from Asian countries because... they help the United States economically” (Dawsey). His language signifies his belief in stereotypes and bias, and he continually centers his opinions on what would be best for him and for his version of America. However, what he thinks is best for America does not include other races or ethnicities as is made clear in his actions and his rhetoric. The reason he said he would be more open to Asians was likely due to the stereotype of Asians being smarter than average people, likely thinking they would add something of value to America. When his behavior or language is not outright racist, he is at the very least insensitive to differences between people.

Many of Trump’s rallies while he was on the campaign trail got very rowdy and very aggressive due to the nature of his supporters. A “Unite the Right” rally which took place in Charlottesville was one of those rallies. In fact, many people were injured, and one woman ended up dead by the end of the event (Parker). In response to the Charlottesville rally came one of his infamous quotes, “You had some very bad people in that group, but you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides” (Kessler). He claimed there were peaceful protestors on both sides, saying that there were people “quietly protesting” the statue’s removal which proved untrue. Trump made it out to be a statue protest that went wrong and ignored the fact that the rally was “explicitly organized by a group of white supremacists and neo-Nazis as a celebration of white nationalism” in which people who attended yelled, “Jews will not replace us!” and other antisemitic statements (Parker). In the instance of the Charlottesville rally, Trump finally condemned right-wing hate groups saying, “those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs, including the KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other hate groups that are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans” (Kessler). This statement against his other statement of there being “very fine people on both sides” created a confusing narrative. Yet

another instance of Trump's contradictions, creating more code confusion. This confusing narrative allowed for supporters and non-supporters alike to create their own version of what happened based on details they saw and things they chose to believe and value.

In general, Trump still refused to condemn the white supremacist groups which followed him, claiming he knew nothing about the groups (O'Connor and Marans). Trump's refusal to condemn the white supremacists allowed his followers and the supremacist groups themselves to continually support him in very harmful ways. His silence and his lack of retribution against these heinous crimes committed by people who were waving his name on flags showed Trump's support of these ideas. His silence perpetuated the idea that these acts were acceptable and that he was okay with having dangerous white supremacist groups support him as long as he had supporters. It is important to note Trump's silence, as it called out the *différance*, "to know what something is, you must know what it is not" (Borchers and Hundley 128). Most traditional presidents would have condemned the supremacist groups from the beginning in an effort to unite the divisions in the American people. The idea that Trump could be accepting of the crimes, the hatred and the white supremacist ideas is shown in his lack of condemning their actions and also reveals his untraditional presidential role.

Most of his supporters likely believed similarly, although not to the extent of the KKK and Neo-Nazi groups, in that they thought whether consciously or subconsciously, white people were who belonged in America. There existed also a more niche group of his supporters who hated these white supremacist groups and supported Trump insofar as his policies were concerned. Even then, Trump's policies many times reflected his beliefs of white people being Americans and how he gathered support from voters. Referring back to his American-First

policies, one can see these ideologies and the support from voters even in his promise to build the wall along Mexico's border.

In May 2020, the death of George Floyd by a police officer who pressed his knee into his neck as Mr. Floyd said he could not breathe brought on protests all over the nation. President Trump, former president Obama and Joe Biden all made statements in response to the crime. The timing of when each person made their statement is important to note, as Trump was the last one to formally say anything about what had happened. People who did not support Trump saw his slow response as communicating the situation as unimportant and not worthy of speaking about, whereas his supporters likely saw a thoughtfulness in waiting to talk about the situation. Besides when he made his speech, Trump's actual words communicated a lack of understanding despite his statements saying, "I understand the hurt. I understand the pain" (Astor). While most of his words were seemingly in support of the situation, it was clear his ulterior motive was that he wanted the riots to stop. He stated, "The looters should not be allowed to drown out the voices of so many peaceful protesters" (Astor). The words "the looters" served as a divisive sign, creating a sense of good and evil in the situation and thus creating more division. Biden and Obama's statements centered around justice for George Floyd, never once mentioning "looters" and thus signifying a true support and sense of grief for what happened.

It is interesting to note in the 2020 election, Trump gained more ethnic minority voters than he did in the 2016 election. According to a couple sources, Trump had anywhere from eight percent to 18 percent of Black voters (Collins; Ostfeld and Garcia). Therefore, about 85 percent of Black voters voted for Biden in 2020 and 15 percent voted for Trump. Both articles discussed how the Black vote for Democrats had been lessening since 2008, but it was not attributed as the sole reason Trump had more votes in 2020. Trump's claim that Democrats wanted to use

socialist agendas and ideas to run America was effective in minority circles such as Venezuelan-Americans whose families experienced communism under Fidel Castro's regime (Nagesh). Some minority groups liked his job policies and abortion stance as well (Nagesh). Therefore, it came down to cultural values or cultural mythologies for some of Trump's supporters. Based on their own life experiences, people were still willing to follow Trump out of fear that America would become a communist society or because they held job or abortion policies to the highest value.

While it is a mixture of reasons, one of the reasons Trump got more votes seemed to be Trump's appeal as an outsider once again. His refusal to be politically correct and to defy authority painted Trump as a strong leader in the eyes of many of his supporters. Sam Fulwood III conducted the Black Swing Voter Project in 2020 and stated, "I think [Trump's strong leadership] resonates with a great number of, particularly young, African-Americans, who already feel that the establishment is weighted against them. So his rhetoric taps into their antipathy. They don't like him, they don't like his policies, but they like the idea that he sticks it to the establishment" (Nagesh). This is a really good description, explanation and example of how semiotics plays into those who support Trump. The persona Trump painted of himself as a strong, politically incorrect politician appealed to those who felt like perhaps they wanted to do so themselves. Trump became their way in to do that.

Stephanie Muravchik suggested, "[Trump] says things like, 'never show fear, it's all about strength' - when he got Covid and then recovered, he whipped off his mask. That may seem absurd and childish to some, but it reads differently in these communities" (Nagesh). Muravchik also provides a really good semiotic explanation of how Trump is viewed by some ethnic minorities. Where his behavior can be read as childish and absurd by other politicians who would

never act in the manner he does, his supporters saw him as human and as someone who had strength, and no fear of what others thought of him. He became more of an empowering figure than he was for people who did not support him. Through their own experiences, strength was defined in an entirely different way.

For the majority of his presidential campaign and presidency, Trump refused to make any statements condemning the white supremacist groups that supported him and campaigned for him. The riot at the Capitol in 2021 was a recent example of the consequences of his not condemning rioting and racist groups. While he told the protestors to “go home in peace,” he also told them “we love you, you’re very special” (Subramanian). In doing so, Trump created a sort of code confusion. He created ambiguous signs and a struggle to determine the meaning behind his statements. The contradictions are apparent as he told a group of people who broke into the Capitol building, stole items and harmed others that they were very special. His ambiguous statements led to different interpretations as citizens heard what they want to hear, and Trump’s supporters did the same based on their intrinsic values and experiences. The question everyone asked at the time was “What would have happened if they were people of color?” Would Trump have still told them he loved them and said they were very special? These questions call out the true nature, motivations and belief system of Trump and his supporters.

Overall, Trump’s language around race is and was almost always othering. His complete discomfort being around African Americans and other ethnic minorities was seen in the ways he spoke about them. From his actions of denying he knew anything about discrimination in his family’s real-estate business, to claiming Obama was not born in the United States, to refusing to condemn white supremacist groups which publicly supported him, Trump’s actions signified his beliefs in a white America. His statements signified he did not much care for people of color

being equal or having the same rights and he also did not believe they could live the same lifestyles as other Americans. His language around race and around American-first policies revealed how Trump and most of his supporters believed America should be a white America. These analyses will be helpful moving into Trump's rhetoric around the military and how he believed in strength and military relations.

Military Relations

One of the titles the president inherits is that of "Commander-in-Chief" of the United States military. Leading the military has a sense of strength to it that pretty much no president would not want to embrace. In "The Military and the Constitution Under Trump" Kori Schake points out, "Presidents crave pictures of themselves with troops, routinely pander to military audiences, amass endorsements from veterans and their service groups, and enlist officers in uniforms rather than civilians in suits to justify their decisions on wars" (32). Trump is no different, talking about the military from the moment he announced his campaign and surrounding himself with military equipment in photo-ops. Schake says because the American military is the most popular American institution, every president tends to use the military for political purposes (32). I would argue the political position of the president and the identity of commander-in-chief create the possibility to use the military for political gain. Not only that but the American military also connotes strength, nationalism and pride, all things the president would want to emulate as leader of the country and the military.

On the campaign road in 2015 and when he came into office, Trump touted about the American military and loved the strength it meant for the country and for himself. He was eager to promote the military from the moment he announced he was running for president. Trump

stated, “I love the military, and I want to have the strongest military that we’ve ever had, and we need it more now than ever” referring to his perceived threats of ISIS and foreign countries against America. Later in the same speech he said, “We need a leader that... can bring back our military, can take care of our vets. Our vets have been abandoned” implying past presidents, particularly Obama, were not strong leaders and did not take care of the military or military veterans (“Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech”). Even just in these couple statements, Trump attempts to set himself apart and at the top by his claims that he will be the best and create the best military.

In his campaign speech specifically, it is notable that Trump kept associating a stronger military for America with the threat of ISIS. In fact, he stated specifically, “Nobody would be tougher on ISIS than Donald Trump” and then went into how he would find a “General Patton” and make the military “really work” (“Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech”). Here, Trump pulls on the persona he has created for himself as a great leader full of strength as well as being outside of the cliché political role. His supporters likely perceived him as a stronger leader than a traditional president who followed the traditional rhetorical roles and background.

According to an article in *The Washington Post*, one thing has always been clear, Trump loves a big show of American military force (Jaffe and Johnson). At a rally in Iowa in 2016, he stated in front of the crowd in regard to Islamic state terrorists, “You gotta knock the hell out of them — Boom! Boom! Boom!” punching his fist with each “boom” (Jaffe and Johnson). His words and the pumping of his fist signified to his supporters a very strong leader who was ready to go to war. His behavior was not that of a typical presidential candidate and was especially opposite from that of his predecessor Barack Obama. While Obama promised to end America’s

wars and worried publicly about escalation, Trump proposed bombing and use of military force throughout his campaigning and even into the first years of his presidency, overly proud of the strength of the military. His punching the air is reminiscent of a strong leader or a fighter, accentuating the power of his words even more so. In this moment, it is easy to see how his rhetoric is bombastic in multiple ways. Trump's support for the military is tied to his America first outlook and also tied to his fascination with military pomp and circumstance.

The beginning of Trump's presidency and campaign trail began with his high hopes for increasing military spending and budgeting as well as, as he stated, taking better care of war veterans. His message seemed to be that he would care for the country through bettering the military and showing even more respect to military personnel than any president had ever shown before. Therefore, he garnered much support from military personnel and generally patriotic voters who valued the military. They were all in for a president who would support and improve their military. When it came to military policy, Trump was particularly contradictory not only in his words but also later in his actions. On the campaign trail, "[Trump] promised to strengthen the military — in hopes that it would never have to take action. He pledged an "America First" mentality that would keep the United States out of another expensive, deadly war — but also promised to "bomb the s---" out of the Islamic State" (Jaffe and Johnson). These contradictory statements let supporters and non-supporters alike hear what side of the argument they wanted to hear once again and created code confusion, leaving the meaning behind his words ambiguous.

Most of Trump's supporters, in accordance with many Republican party values, likely heard him talking about building up the military and also promising protection from terrorism where non-supporters saw a man of contradictions and instability with access to America's military and the nuclear codes. Trump's rhetoric and actions concerning the military became a

mixture of contradictions by the time the end of his presidency came around. At the beginning, he would not stop boasting about America's military power and arsenal, and he promised to increase the military budget and take care of veterans. By the end, many of his supporters who liked his original promises did not see them fulfilled and were turned off by his mockery of those who served.

John McCain was one of Trump's earliest victims of disrespect. In 2015, Trump said he did not consider McCain a war hero since he was captured (Goldberg). Supporters overlooked his statements, perhaps believing as Trump did about this specific situation involving McCain or not understanding the situation. Or they chose to see the performatively patriotic side of Trump rather than his contemptuous opinions (Goldberg). When McCain died in August 2018, Trump was quoted as saying, "we're not going to support that loser's funeral" (Goldberg). Trump also referred to "former President George H. W. Bush as a 'loser' for being shot down by the Japanese as a Navy pilot in World War II" (Goldberg). Trump cancelled a visit to the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery near Paris in 2018, claiming the helicopter could not fly in the rain and the Secret Service wouldn't drive him there when he was actually worried about his hair and did not consider it important to honor the war dead (Goldberg). Trump said, "Why should I go to that cemetery? It's filled with losers" and in a separate conversation that same trip, "referred to the more than 1,800 marines who lost their lives at Belleau Wood as 'suckers' for getting killed" (Goldberg).

Trump's use of the terms losers and suckers when referring to war veterans completely disrespected one of the most respected institutions in America. Trump's beliefs were made clear in his comments about military war veterans. He tended to believe the military was bound to him only and not the constitution. This was made apparent by his statements and actions at Lafayette

Square, threatening to use the military as a force to quell civil unrest. This action split his supporters, and many chose between the respect of the military as an institution and the pompous showboating of Trump's idea of the military when they voted in the 2020 election.

In "The Military and the Constitution Under Trump," Schake goes on to say the main difference with Trump and his use of the military versus that of past presidents is he attempted to use the military domestically to suppress political protest protected by the First Amendment in the case of the protest at Lafayette Square in June of 2020 (32-33). Many journalists and scholars who have written about Trump tend to mention the Charlottesville rally and the incident at Lafayette Square as the two biggest revelators of Trump's true character. After the killing of George Floyd, protestors gathered at Lafayette Square and were tear gassed and forcibly removed after Trump threatened military discipline. Citizens saw Trump as fearful and avoidant of the protests at the time. He wanted to paint himself as the strong and dominant Donald Trump he had worked so hard to create over his lifetime by doing a photo-op in front of the church many were protesting nearby.

In the images that resulted, he was hoping to project strength and control amid political unrest and instead got backlash and outrage. The photos amidst protestors made Trump appear self-indulgent and overly political and he came unprepared to say anything or make any actions to rectify the unrest other than his earlier threatening statements (Rucker and Parker). This was one of the instances that would turn his supporters away from him. Rucker and Parker state, "The smoky images of largely peaceful protestors choking on chemical irritants juxtaposed with the president's photo op prompted the opposite of his intended effect, generating widespread sympathy for the protestors." Some of his supporters still wanted to believe the moment was a historic and positive moment and continued to deny Trump did anything wrong. They believed

the narrative Trump was intending to spin of himself as a strong president arriving to dispel the unrest and to stand up against the vandalization of places of worship.

In addition, the inclusion of the military in this issue became a large problem. To remain unbiased in the center of this domestic political debate, the military had to disassociate from Trump after violating the norm of being uninvolved in partisan politics. “The only other instance in which the military has publicly dissociated itself from the White House during Trump’s presidency arose when he mused about ‘good people on both sides’” talking about the Charlottesville rally (Schake 33). The military disassociated with Trump in order to maintain their integrity as apolitical, “understanding that it is crucial for maintaining professionalism and objectivity across politically divergent administrations” (Schake 35). Trump had no choice but to concede and make a rhetorically traditional statement at the West Point graduation rather than his normal approach of being politically incorrect and not conforming to the rhetoric of the presidential office.

Retired Admiral James Stavridis, the former top officer at NATO, stated Trump will have "a very mixed legacy" and he will be remembered as a very political commander-in-chief (Bowman). Trump’s ideas and rhetoric surrounding the military as an idea and an institution starkly contrasted with his statements that many in the military were “losers and suckers.” Where he once had stable support from the military, his statements cost him many supporters whose experiences in and around the military caused them not to vote for him again. His erratic behavior and insults which initially drew in many supporters looking for an unconventional president ultimately pushed them away at re-election.

Conclusion

President Donald J. Trump used very divisive, racist and stereotypical language throughout his campaign and his presidency. Many of his supporters were first attracted to the idea of a president who would “drain the swamp” and loved that he was not a typical politician and used language which was not considered politically correct. All of his language and actions were signifiers of an outsider as a political candidate and later as a president. His supporters included not only white supremacist groups and white supporters but also more unexpected voters from any background who perceived Trump as someone who would make their lives better in unconventional ways. People’s cultural mythologies and cultural values, whatever they held in the highest regard, came to influence the way they voted in both the 2016 and 2020 elections. Unfulfilled promises by the end of Trump’s presidential term and the continual chaos and division which ensued as a result of his language and unprofessional treatment of the presidency caused many of his supporters to turn away from him. The ambiguous statements and signs left citizens to create their own meanings and stories of Trump and it was apparent by the election of Joe Biden that the country was ready to move forward to a traditional president. Biden, who had a political background and had already served as vice president four years earlier under Obama, was a candidate who fulfilled the traditional rhetorical role of a president, ultimately garnering the win in 2020. Trump’s first term came to an end and only time will tell if Americans decide they want another untraditional president in the future.

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@realDonaldTrump. "I will bring our jobs back to America, fix our military and take care of our

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