Let me read an essay I have written about the recent election. That will keep me from rambling. Then Peter can lead our discussion. I will speak as a psychiatrist, not a political pundit. In my training I was told never to sit between my patient and the door, so the patient wouldn’t feel trapped. I have located four exits from this room, in case I feel a need to escape.

Let me begin with a couple of basic statements about how people think, particularly in the setting of a political campaign:

WE DO NOT SEE THINGS AS THEY ARE; WE SEE THINGS AS WE ARE.

WE ARE FAR MORE LIKELY TO BELIEVE ANYTHING WE WANT TO HEAR, RATHER THAN THINGS WE DO NOT WANT TO HEAR. This is called “confirmation bias” and obviously applies as much to me as to anyone else, although I was trained and certified to be objective about human behavior and mental functioning. A recent cartoon showed a wife asking her husband how to know if the News was “true.” He responded, “If I believe it, it is true.”

In the judgment of many people, Mr. Trump’s election was a surprise, as I think it was to Mr. Trump himself. Soon after November 8 I saw a cartoon with two frames. In the first the crowd was outside his window, celebrating his election with balloons and banners. Mr. Trump was standing very confidently in his office using his Smartphone, saying, “Well, now that I am the big winner, what do I do next?” In the second frame he appears terrified, saying “Wait, you’re telling me they expect me to govern this country?” I will try to help you understand why Mr. Trump really does not feel appropriately terrified.

All of you have read many newspaper and magazine columns trying to explain how Mr. Trump prevailed in the election, and you have heard many TV voices telling you how it happened. There is no one determinant for all of the millions of his votes. Almost everyone agrees that he did not win because he had highly developed proposals or innovative policies to clearly define his positions. There have been multiple theories advanced—from political manipulation and gerrymandering; to regional economic conditions; to geographic characteristics of the population; to demographic factors (many of which are paradoxical, such as
the fact that well over fifty percent of white women voted for Mr. Trump); to frustration with the Establishment; to religious factors (Franklin Graham, son of Rev. Billy Graham said the Trump victory was an answer to the prayers of millions of Christians and proves that God still works miracles); to a reaction against President Obama and a fear that Secretary Clinton would be more of the same. Other paradoxes are that Secy Clinton won in fewer than 500 counties, but those counties account for 64% of the economic activity of our country. Mr. Trump won in over 2600 counties which have the other 36% of our economic activity. Also the Midwest and South, which embraced Mr. Trump, are more dependent on large governmental programs—agricultural and industrial loans, soil conservation, crop price supports, poverty programs, and others—than are the coastal areas where Secy Clinton had her majority. But these commentaries have not encompassed the psychological issues which I believe are also key factors in the election outcome.

For you to accept the validity of my observations, you need to believe that humans take positions and make choices based on emotional factors of which they are not fully conscious.

More than any previous election, this one was dominated by the various media—the widely-viewed long-running reality TV show on which Mr. Trump was the star, playing an autocratic executive role; the many hours of unpaid TV publicity for Mr. Trump presented as “news”; the ubiquitous propagation of “social media” messages (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc) which carried much “fake news” such as stories of the Clintons owning a company which supplied weapons and ammunition for ISIS, Pres. Obama and Secy Clinton having started the ISIS conflicts, Secy Clinton being part of murder plots, and many fake articles that were favorable to Mr. Trump, including one that indicated the Pope had endorsed Mr. Trump. We will never really know the origins of such fabrications. These fraudulent articles appeared to be just as authentic as postings by NYT or WP to the unsophisticated reader, and likely influenced some votes. Mr. and Mrs. Joe Average in the Midwest or South do not read political columnists.

While Mr. Trump attempts to project the image of an “Aw shucks” neighborhood buddy, I contend his presentations and displays were carefully crafted, packaged, and marketed to catch the eye of the casual, vaguely-informed voter. How better
to grab your attention than to be seen on the News arriving in his own plane or helicopter with his name emblazoned above his head? And then go on to claim he is the only one who fully comprehends things and is the only one who can fix them. One interpretation is that he was trying to emulate our childhood image of Superman appearing out of the sky and solving all our problems. He repeatedly assured us that there are simple solutions to very complex issues, and that he was the only one to understand them and make the problems go away.

The name Trump is a power word in our vocabulary. All of us have played many card games where the trump cards determine the winner. All other things being equal, if his name were Amos Swartzentruber or Giuseppi Frattoroli, both of whom I know, I believe he would not have been as successful. Mr. Trump would have you believe his name connotes total, outstanding, fantastic, stupendous and sensational business acumen and fabulous, absolutely the greatest, bigly and massive unbelievable wealth, to use some of his superlatives.

While I do not believe Mr. Trump has the same goals as the Third Reich in Germany in the 1930’s, I must point out that his campaign used some of the same strategies. You will recall that Hitler’s closest advisor was Joseph Goebbels, who had a Ph.D. in psychology. Mr. Trump’s raucous, demonstrative rallies were reminiscent of Hitler’s enormous gatherings. Hitler also appeared out of the clouds in his plane to come to his rallies. Of course, nowadays all candidates arrive by plane, but not with the fanfare and media attention Mr. Trump received. Like those Germans who targeted Jews and “other undesirables”, Mr. Trump also identified groups of people we must fear and reject—Muslims and Mexicans—and insisted we must oust the current ineffectual and perverse government leadership. His slogan of “Make America great again” smacks of the exclusiveness and superiority of Hitler’s alleged matchless Aryan race.

Mr. Trump’s approach was to assume that many voters are irrational. He’s right. Therefore, facts do not matter, and you can say whatever you want. That way, you will never be wrong. With fewer facts it is easier to bend reality.

A few words about his physique are apropos. Taller men are accorded more status than shorter men, which probably helped him eliminate some of his opponents in the primary race. A person with a wider face is more likely to be chosen than one with a narrow face. Lincoln is an exception but he compensated
with his height and his beard. And of course in our culture, a male is more likely to be chosen than a female.

Mr. Trump is a master of identity politics. All of our lives we compensate for our own perceived deficiencies and lack of status by assuming the behaviors, speech patterns, hair styles and clothing, musical choices, thinking, and opinions of people more powerful and competent than we. A toddler can say he is Daddy by sitting in his father’s chair at the dinner table. A little girl can say she is Mommy by putting on her Mother’s slippers. This unconscious process continues throughout our lives, with the objects of our adulation constantly evolving—from parents, to older siblings or cousins, to older schoolmates, to teachers, to coaches and sports figures, to movie and TV stars, to rock musicians, to military officers, to political leaders, even political pundits. And it is natural for us to always identify with the more aggressive and competent people.

The more self-affirming we become as we mature, the less dependent are we on such a borrowed identity. However, it is very difficult for people who are in poverty or chronically unemployed to be self-affirming, and they have more need for a powerful hero as a model with whom to identify.

Now I would like to speak about the image that Mr. Trump has projected. A commonly-accepted descriptor of his character structure is Alpha Male. This term was first used in designating the dominant male in a group of higher primates—chimpanzees, gorillas, and apes. But this label has come to be used to describe certain human males also and has an agreed-upon cluster of characteristics. Alpha Male is not a psychiatric diagnosis, but is a role in our social order, a sociological term. I will list some of its characteristics. It is a more distinctive state than Type-A personality, but has many of those qualities. And I would note that many human females are attracted to Alpha Males. You men will remember in high school how you wondered why it seemed some of the “nice girls” were always attracted to the “bad boys.” Mr. Trump has said if you are a star, a woman will let you do anything you want.

Commonly accepted characteristics describing an Alpha Male are:

Dominating and in control; much hostility and aggressiveness; very competitive; achievement-oriented; never bows down to others except to manipulate; is revengeful; has no need for close friends; cool, calm and composed; a born leader;
incredibly confident, never doubting himself; doesn’t back away from challenges; not fearful of failing because he can always blame someone else; doesn’t need the open approval of others; takes care of the people close around him but lacks a sense of empathy for others; good sense of humor but easily irritated; not concerned about tomorrow, because he is too busy working today; doesn’t care about pleasing people; bold and fearless; an astounding sense of entitlement and privilege; tends to be very stubborn because giving in is weakness; maintains a consistent identity; the past is gone, now is what is important; no drunkenness, because then he wouldn’t be in control; the major question about himself is “Where do I stand in relation to other people?”; constant attention to his image; little respect for the rules because they don’t apply to him; and self-driven, doesn’t need a boss and won’t accept one.

Females are always secondary for an Alpha Male, and he believes they should feel lucky to have him. They must fit into his goals and wishes. Mr. Trump’s marital and sexual history, and owning a Beauty Pageant, confirm this quality. I will mention his Grandfather Trump who came at age 16 from Germany to New York City and later went on to the Yukon Territory at the time of the gold rush at the end of the 19th century. He made a fortune establishing restaurants, hotels and brothels. He then returned to Germany at age 35, but was persona non grata because he had avoided his military obligation. He was stripped of his citizenship, was fined for most of his assets, and put on a boat for NYC, with the stipulation he would never be permitted to enter Germany again. He sounds like an Alpha Male. So maybe there is a genetic factor to this condition.

Mr. Trump could have written the book on this identity, since he fits the picture so completely. In many ways, he is a package that is truly “larger than life” and “one of a kind.” He certainly does not see himself as one of the common people. At least President Clinton’s handlers taught him to say he “feels our pain.”

Other Presidents who had some of these features were Eisenhower, certainly Kennedy, Reagan, and Clinton.

Now I will make an assertion and ask some questions. A propagandized people will not usually make election choices that are most beneficial for all citizens. Would you say that the Germans choosing Hitler was good for them? Do you believe the average Russian citizen is better off under Putin, who is very popular?
Did Castro help Cuba keep up with modern developments and opportunities? Will the new President in the Philippines bring benefit to the masses? All these leaders would qualify as Alpha Males.

To summarize, it is my professional opinion that Mr. Trump achieved a winning edge, not because he presented a well-defined, coherent platform supported by his party, but because of his image, style, and theatrics, plus a somewhat flawed opponent.

I would like to hear your reactions and discussion.

Meanwhile, I would ask you to ponder the psychological symbolism of Mr. Trump’s appearance, with his bulky dark suits, his distinctive hair style and coloring, and his extra-long brilliant red neckties.

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