

DAVID OWEN

OCTOBER 28 2018, 12:01AM, THE SUNDAY TIMES

Trump floats above us all on a double bubble of narcissism and hubris

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I have been writing about hubris in relation to American presidents — and British prime ministers — for 15 years. Donald Trump's election in November 2016 prompted me to review that work. Hubris is not a medical term. It comes from ancient Greece and refers to overweening pride and, often, treating others with contempt.

Many people in America were all too ready to diagnose with great confidence the psychiatric illness narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) in their new president. But this came to an abrupt halt after the publication of a letter in The New York Times by Allen Frances, emeritus professor of psychiatry at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, and the man who had first defined NPD.

His letter made it crisply clear that Trump did not have the condition. "He may be a

world-class narcissist, but this doesn't make him mentally ill."



Donald Trump is both creative and destructive, intemperate and cool-headed — a deal-maker and a deal-breaker
SAUL LOEB/AFP/GETTY

There is a marked difference between NPD, a classified psychiatric illness, and narcissism, a personality trait. Narcissists train themselves from an early age to block out other voices, other opinions, so one of the few voices they trust is their own.

They are accustomed to listening to themselves talk, debating different sides of the same issue, finally reaching a decision about what to do and the best way to do it. Narcissism haunts many heads of government, military commanders and business leaders.

A common misconception is that hubris is indistinguishable from narcissism. "On the contrary," points out Nick Bouras, emeritus professor of psychiatry at King's College London, "narcissism is expressed with a blatantly attention-seeking, grandiose sense of

self-importance, a persistent and burdensome search for admiration and lack of empathy.”

He argues that narcissism and hubris are “fundamentally distinct, the latter characterised by overconfidence, overambition, arrogance and excessive pride”.

In my view, Trump as president displays both hubris and narcissism. Unlike almost all other presidents before him, he does not make a distinction between how he behaved as a candidate and how he behaves in office. This is in part a product of his narcissism, in that he sees himself as different, but it is also because he senses the depth of the public disillusionment with past presidents’ failures to live up to promises.

Trump has systematically set out to fulfil the policy commitments he espoused as a candidate, and he continues to use much the same language — to the press and his public and, notoriously, on Twitter.

Most presidents deliberately change in office. Trump’s inaugural address, which shocked some and delighted others, was not markedly different from his speeches on the campaign trail.

In many ways he is still on the campaign trail and continues to hold rallies in a style similar to that which he adopted as a candidate and with a frequency that appears to surpass those of almost all his predecessors. They are announced at short notice, which gives them the appearance of being spontaneous. Yet their locations are carefully chosen to mobilise Trump’s support base.

Trump’s words jar with many but they also chime with others. He has no intention of losing touch with the frustrations, anger and feelings of those people in the Rust Belt states who voted him into office against the odds.

He developed his skills through his television appearances, chiefly on *The Apprentice*. This, in turn, has helped him to develop a new political language that is simpler and more direct, and well suited to political rallies. Some claim that his poverty of language is not deliberate, but a sign of mental deterioration. It could be both. Few, however, can claim not to know where Trump stands on most issues.

He does not respect facts. Disobliging facts are disparaged or ignored. “Trump news” is

often a stream of consciousness, involving the misquoting of facts, the manipulation of evidence and playing on emotions. Yet it is foolish to ignore the research, intelligence, marketing skills and expert use of social media that lie behind Trump's technique.

Trump wants controversy — thrives on it — and is not a team player. He watches television news in the early evening as a boxer will watch videos of his fights to improve his performance. TV is meat and drink to him. It is no accident that he does not drink alcohol: he wants to be in control of himself and events at all times.

Trump is both creative and destructive; efficient and inefficient; thoughtful and unthinking; intemperate and cool-headed. He intends to be a deal-maker and a deal-breaker. As with all such people, there will be many predictions about him that will turn out to be wrong, but some will be right.

Why are the foreign policy elite in Washington, London and Berlin having so much difficulty in embracing Trump's approaches to trade, defence spending and foreign policy? It is not as if their own methods have been highly successful. Trump relishes the one-off initiative as well as the off-the-wall initiative. He is stirring the pot and forcing a response.

A more worrying fact about Trdump, which could be seen as a reflection of his character, is that he has spent time on the edges of bankruptcy. During his election campaign this was not widely acknowledged by the electorate. Indeed, some even took the turnaround in his fortunes as a positive.

Why did Trump escape criticism on his business record? The answers are complex, among them that his reputation as a businessman has been artificially boosted by *The Apprentice*. But it reflects a troubling neglect of temperament, character and trustworthiness in voters' and shareholders' regard for business as well as political leaders.

What about Trump's personality? It should, I believe, continue to be carefully evaluated, and linked to his performance. He has chosen to operate very differently from his predecessors, so he should not complain or think that he is being judged unfairly merely because he is scrutinised more than most.

As *The New Yorker* magazine noted in May 2017, in by far the majority of cases “the

history of besieged presidencies is, in the end, the history of hubris, of blindness to one’s faults, of deafness to warnings”.

Lord Owen was Labour foreign secretary in 1977-79 and a founder member of the Social Democratic Party. His book Hubris: The Road to Donald Trump is published by Methuen on Thursday at £19.99

Donald Trump

United States



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