

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2020/21

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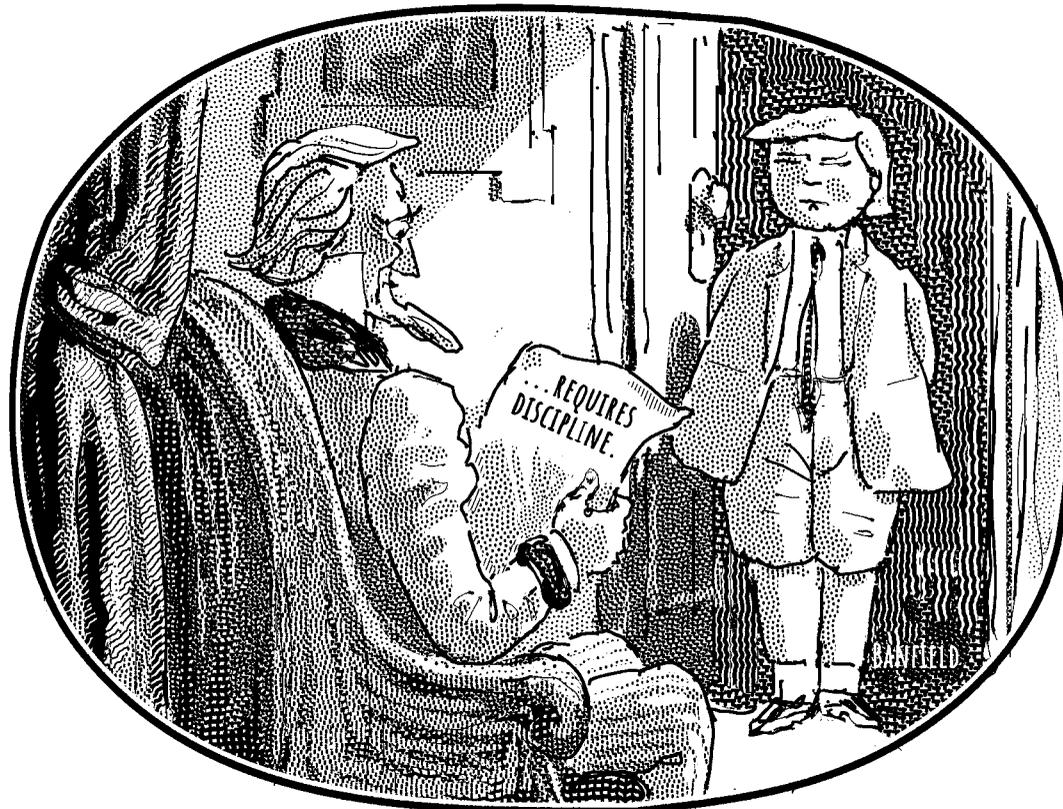


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Essay by William Voegeli

## “YOU’RE FIRED!”

*Understanding Trump’s defeat.*



**B**ASEBALL HALL-OF-FAMER VERNON “Lefty” Gomez often said, “I’d rather be lucky than good.” The Occam’s Razor interpretation of the 2020 presidential election is that President Donald Trump was neither lucky nor good enough a politician to secure a second term. His bad luck, in particular, was compounded. The worst pandemic in a century beset the country on his watch, causing a public health crisis that, in turn, generated severe economic and social dislocations. And it did so over the eight months preceding Election Day, the worst possible time for Trump, because the crisis was the dominant question before the nation just as voters were deciding how to mark their ballots.

There’s more to be said on the subject, but we must first acknowledge the possibility that there’s less to be said. Trump’s many vociferous critics take the position that the pandemic was not a catastrophe that befell America but a consequence of its government’s—and, above all, its president’s—derelictions. In this view, the novel coronavirus would have been far less devastating to America but for

Trump’s failures of omission and commission, which both warranted and guaranteed his defeat at the polls. “Make no mistake,” said the 2020 Democratic Party platform, “President Trump’s abject failure to respond forcefully and capably to the COVID-19 pandemic—his failure to lead—makes him responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans.”

I argued in these pages last year that such accusations were highly dubious (“Knowing, Choosing, Doing,” Summer 2020). I continue to think so. The world’s COVID-19 death rate has now surpassed 250 per 1,000,000, which means that the disease has caused the death of one out of roughly every 3,700 humans who were alive when the pandemic started in 2020. The mortality rate in Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, the U.S., France, and a dozen other countries—large and small, rich and poor, Old World and New—is four to six times as high as the global rate. In 13 additional nations—Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland among them—the COVID-19 mortality rate is three to four times as high as the global rate.

It would be an extraordinary coincidence if this large, varied group of nations each wound up with leaders guilty of essentially the same abject failure to respond to a global crisis. A less tortured, tendentious explanation holds that the details of national policy and the quality of national leadership are only two of several factors determining how severely the coronavirus affected a particular country and, further, that these two variables do not account for very much of the difference between one nation’s COVID-19 death rates and another’s.

It is politically useful to contend that every dreadful episode has a specific malefactor who can be blamed for suffering and death. But such accusations rest on a more basic assumption, childish but comforting: we live in a world that can, and therefore must, be rendered gentle. In it, bad things happen only because of some identifiable villain’s wicked or stupid actions. Modernity—science and technology yielding ever-increasing health, prosperity, and longevity—presents not just an aspiration but an entitlement.

## Surf's Up

A VERY DIFFERENT BUT EQUALLY TIDY explanation for the 2020 election is that debating what President Trump did or did not do is beside the point. In this view, the coronavirus pandemic would have so damaged *any* sitting president's electoral prospects that no degree of political or administrative virtuosity would have yielded a different outcome. A politician needs to be a good surfer, the adage goes, but even the most proficient surfer must first catch a good wave. Instead, Trump's candidacy was dead in the water, so beset that it made no difference how he acquitted himself.

The problem with this assessment is not that it's wrong, though it may be, but that it resists confirmation or refutation. Political science is not nearly scientific enough to compare the 2020 returns with those from a simulated election in a control-group America that did not have a pandemic. Nor do international comparisons illuminate. Emmanuel Macron, elected president of France in 2017, and Boris Johnson, who became prime minister of the U.K. in 2019, contended with the pandemic in 2020 knowing that their next election lay beyond the horizon. The same is true in other countries where COVID-19 has been especially virulent. Trump's singular misfortune was to confront a public health crisis at the same time he was confronting his political opposition in a national election.

We can, then, neither prove nor disprove the Lefty Gomez interpretation of the 2020 election, which holds that the pandemic was so damaging to an incumbent seeking a second term that nothing Trump did, failed to do, or could have done would have yielded a different outcome. What we can do, in the manner of social scientists, is treat this proposition as a "null hypothesis." That is, if our working assumption is that Trump's words, actions, choices, or omissions did not have a decisive causal effect on the election's final outcome, how does the evidence supporting this explanation stack up against the evidence calling it into question? That frame, I submit, directs us to the more equivocal explanation that Trump's bad luck *and* his shortcomings as a politician combined to prevent his re-election.

The relative importance of each factor, luck and skill, in explaining Trump's defeat will be clearer to historians looking back at 2020 from the vantage point of some future decade than it can be to those attempting to make sense of the election in its immediate aftermath. We can begin a first draft by noting that for an incumbent president to seek but

fail to secure a further four years in office is unusual, but not *that* unusual. America has had 59 presidential elections, 33 of which saw a sitting president on the general election ballot. Those incumbents have batted .667: 22 won their elections and 11 were defeated. In six other elections, though, the incumbent sought his party's nomination, at least for a while, but ended up not receiving it. (The only such president in living memory is Lyndon Johnson, who abandoned his unofficial but manifest re-election campaign in March 1968. But it occurred rather often in the 19th century, when political conventions were gatherings where decisions were made, rather than just ceremonially ratified. Un-nominated incumbents from those years include John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, Andrew Johnson, and Chester Arthur. Pierce is the only one of those five who was seeking re-election; the rest were vice presidents who became president after an incumbent's death.) Add these six to the equation, and there are 22 successful incumbents compared to 17 unsuccessful ones, which reduces the incumbents' winning percentage to .564.

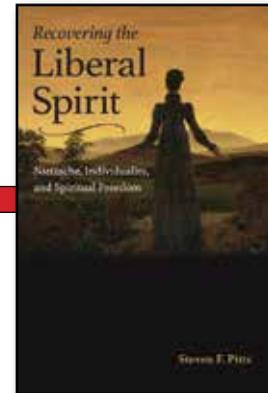
## Electoral Math

THE 16 PRESIDENTS WHO PRECEDED Trump in failing to secure four more years in office include some who are obscure, and others whom historians have treated more respectfully than voters did at the time, including both John Adams and John Quincy Adams, as well as William Howard Taft. At first glance, the one-term president most resembling Trump is Herbert Hoover. Neither businessman had run for any public office prior to winning the presidency, and each was defeated when seeking re-election in the middle of a national crisis.

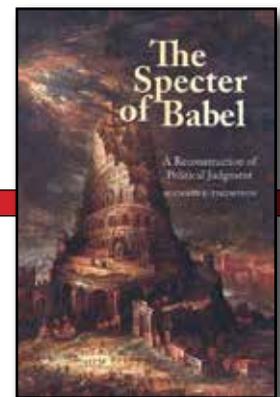
One obvious difference, however, bears on the question of whether Trump's political skill made or could have made a difference in his quest for a second term. In 1932 Hoover was buried in a landslide, winning only 11.1% of the Electoral College vote and 39.7% of the popular vote, four years after he had received 58.2%. Though many predicted, and hoped for, a similar repudiation in 2020, Trump did not lose in a landslide. He received 46.9% of the popular vote in 2020, having won in 2016 with 46.1%. (Third-party candidates accounted for 5.7% of the vote in 2016, but a more typical 1.8% in 2020. Thus, Trump received 48.9% of the ballots cast for either the Republican or Democratic nominee in 2016, and 47.7% of such votes in 2020.)

In other words, the Great Depression obliterated Hoover's popularity, while the

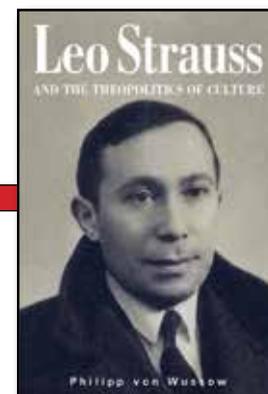
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Great Pandemic left Trump's in basically the same place where he began. (The returns do not, of course, reflect the further growth in Trump's unpopularity between Election Day 2020 and Inauguration Day 2021.) And this was so despite the fact that 21.71 million more votes were cast in the 2020 presidential election than in 2016, a robust 15.9% increase. Trump received 11.23 million *more* votes in losing the 2020 election than he had in winning the previous one. (Hoover, by contrast, received 15.76 million votes in 1932 after getting 21.43 million in 1928, 5.67 million fewer, and did so in an electorate that grew by 8%.)

Joe Biden won the presidency with 81,268,867 votes, 51.3% of the total and 7,052,120 more than Trump received, a margin equal to 4.4% of the national total. This victory looks narrower when one considers Michael Barone's point that Democratic presidential nominees have come to fare significantly better in the national popular vote than in the Electoral College mostly because "for the first time in our history, the largest state in the Union—New York from 1820, California from 1964—votes at one end of the political spectrum rather than near the center." Last year, Biden received 63.5% of California's 17.50 million votes, giving him a margin in that one state of 5.10 million.

This is a 21st-century phenomenon. After voting slightly more Democratic or slightly more Republican than the rest of the country in the presidential elections from 1964 through 1996, California has gotten bluer with every election. In 2000 Al Gore's California margin was 5.7 percentage points larger than in the rest of America: he received 53.5% of the votes cast in California compared to 47.8% outside it. That difference grew to 6.7 points for John Kerry in 2004, 9.0 for Barack Obama in 2008, 10.2 for Obama in 2012, and 15.1 for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Indeed, Clinton's California margin of 4.27 million votes over Trump was *half-again* as large as her national margin of 2.87 million votes. Like Gore, that is, she ran behind her Republican opponent in the country beyond California.

Biden's California advantage was slightly smaller than Clinton's: 13.7 percentage points better than he did in the rest of the country. It was her second-best state, in terms of voting percentage, and his fifth-best. (This ranking leaves out the District of Columbia, where each Democratic nominee received more than 90% of the vote.) Unlike Clinton, Biden won more popular votes than Trump outside California—1,948,299 more. Thus, California accounted for "only" 72.3%

of his national margin against Trump. If the other 49 states and the District of Columbia constituted a separate country, Biden would have received 49.8% of its votes compared to Trump's 48.4%.

As is well known by now, Biden's victory in the Electoral College depended entirely on securing narrow victories in five states—Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—and one congressional district, Nebraska's second, all of which Trump himself had narrowly won in 2016. (Nebraska, like Maine, awards two electoral votes to the presidential candidate with the most votes statewide, then one electoral vote per congressional district, based on which candidate receives the most votes within that district. Everywhere else in America, electoral votes are awarded on a statewide, winner-take-all basis.) Across the rest of the map, Trump won the same states in 2020 that he did in 2016, and also lost all the same states that he did then. Biden's smallest margins of victory came in Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin, and the Nebraska district, totaling 65,009 votes out of

### Trump committed the classic gambler's mistake of interpreting a hot streak as proof of his own infallible judgment.

the 12.02 million that were cast in those four jurisdictions. Collectively, they accounted for a total of 38 electoral votes, the exact number by which Trump fell short of an Electoral College majority and a second term. In other words, Trump would have won by flipping the votes of 32,506 people who ended up supporting Biden: 11,046 in metropolitan Omaha; 10,341 in Wisconsin; 5,890 in Georgia; and 5,229 in Arizona. That number of votes represents 0.27% of the ballots cast in those jurisdictions, and 0.02%—one out of every 4,872, to be exact—of those cast nationwide.

#### A Very Stable Political Genius?

**O**NE WAY TO MAKE SENSE OF THE FACT that, despite the pandemic, Trump nearly won the 2020 election is to posit that he was a far better politician than he's usually given credit for: not good enough to overcome Lady Luck's mood disorder in 2020, but still able to come surprisingly close. Unlike Herbert Hoover, Trump kept his base intact from one election to the next, and held

his own with voters who stayed home the first time he ran but cast ballots the second. Trump's silver medal is also shinier than those of the two more recent incumbents who failed to win re-election: Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush. Carter saw his share of the popular vote decline from 50.1% in 1976 to 41.0% in 1980, and Bush went from 53.4% in 1988 to 37.4% in 1992.

There's a complication, though. To say that Trump's political ability allowed him to finish a respectable second to Biden despite the pandemic strongly implies that Trump would almost certainly have won a clear, decisive victory if the pandemic had never occurred. No counterfactual question can ever be settled, but there are good reasons to treat this proposition as doubtful, at the least. I draw your attention to the Real Clear Politics average of seven different polls asking whether people approved or disapproved of Trump's performance as president, cited earlier in this issue by Andrew Busch. In them, Trump had a net positive rating on January 26, 2017, less than one week after his inauguration. At the time, during his "honeymoon," 44.3% of respondents approved of Trump and 44.2% disapproved. From that day forward until Election Day 2020, he was "underwater," with a net disapproval rating as small as 2.4% and as large as 21.1%. For a few days at the end of March 2020, when a frightened nation realized the gravity of the coronavirus pandemic and hoped for the best from Washington, Trump's disapproval rating hovered between 49% and 50%. Otherwise, from March 17, 2017 until November 3, 2020, a majority of Americans disapproved of him every day he was in office.

This sustained unpopularity is especially striking in view of the strong economic growth from 2017 until the spring of 2020, when the pandemic disrupted all sorts of business activity. Not only was the unemployment rate historically low in 2018 and 2019, but the economy expanded in ways especially beneficial to low-income workers. And voters were cognizant of these facts despite 2020's travails. To repurpose one more data-point from Professor Busch, as late as September 2020 56% of Americans believed that they were better off than they had been four years previously, according to Gallup's polls. (Only 32% said they were worse off.) Ronald Reagan, who made this question famous, won re-election in a landslide even though only 44% declared themselves better off in 1984. Similarly, George W. Bush won re-election in 2004 with 47% describing themselves as better off, and Barack Obama did so eight years later when the figure was 45%.



For Trump to lose while these predecessors won argues that voters either did not believe that there was a strong connection between Trump's governance and their own improved circumstances, or that the improvements were not great enough to justify renewing the package deal of Trump's policies and Trump's persona. The same September Gallup poll found that 49% of Americans agreed with Trump on the issues they considered most important, compared to 46% who agreed with Biden. But 49% thought Biden possessed "the personality and leadership qualities that a president should have," where only 44% ascribed those qualities to Trump.

Taken together, this evidence does not prove but does support a two-part theory about 2020. First, the pandemic was damaging to Trump's re-election chances, but not decisive in itself. Voters' awareness of the progress on other fronts since 2017 did not vanish after the coronavirus began spreading, suggesting that enough Americans were disposed to contextualize the public health crisis—and stipulate any president's limited ability to mitigate it—for Trump to have won. Second, however, the pandemic combined with Trump's chronic unpopularity was too much to overcome on Election Day. Trump never amassed the reservoir of good will, of people who remained skeptical but were willing to extend him the benefit of the doubt, for his campaign to withstand an exogenous jolt like COVID. Having won his first presidential election because an imposingly large number of contingencies had broken just right, Trump was left with only one path to re-election: running the table *again*. That proved to be far too hopeful. As Tip O'Neill lamented in the later stages of Jimmy Carter's hapless one-term presidency, "Poor bastard—he used up all his good luck in getting here."

#### Addition, Not Subtraction

**T**HE HARDEST THING ABOUT ANALYZING a national election, for those who write for or read journals such as this one, is to remember that very few voters write for or read journals such as this one. The ballot turned in by the political obsessive, agitated because there are only three C-SPAN channels, counts the same as the one cast by a citizen who votes despite finding politics boring, baffling, noxious, or absurd. Making sense of an election requires those with the time and inclination to form complex informed political opinions, to see the contest through the eyes of others, people whose rough-and-ready political views are assembled more casually. Many Americans in the latter group, which is much larger, arrive at judgments about a

president that amalgamate his policies with his rhetoric and style.

After the election, the *Atlantic's* Elaine Godfrey spoke with some Republican women in the Phoenix suburbs. The shift to Biden by a significant number of such voters was crucial to his narrow victory in Barry Goldwater's state. Godfrey described her subjects as conservatives—they favored low taxes and limited government, and were dubious about progressive aspirations like universal Medicare or free public college. Their misgivings about today's GOP extended to the tone of conservative talk radio and the Tea Party, but Trump was the catalyst. For many defectors, Godfrey notes, "it came down to the president's personality," including what she called his "bullying" and "insult comedy." One woman told her, "People talk about [voter] enthusiasm, but there should also be a revulsion

metric.... The important thing with Republican women is just how revolted they are by Donald Trump."

Eighteen months after being elected president, Ronald Reagan told the graduates of Eureka College, his alma mater, "[E]ven now I wonder what I might have accomplished if I'd studied harder." Given how close he came to re-election despite the pandemic, one must wonder what Donald Trump might have accomplished if he'd governed—the nation and himself—more rigorously. Yes, he was elected once, an astounding achievement. But Trump then committed the classic gambler's mistake of interpreting a hot streak as proof of his own infallible judgment.

It was, rather, his good fortune to run against an unusually large number of impressive, plausible candidates for the 2016 GOP nomination. As a result of this traffic jam, and

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the party's resulting collective-action problem in clearing the field for just one candidate to oppose Trump, he became the nominee despite a majority of Republican primary voters preferring someone else. Then, after winning the nomination, he enjoyed the same windfall as Barack Obama in 2008: the biggest obstacle between each man and the Oval Office was the under-talented but over-rated Hillary Clinton. Biden's victory in 2020 adds credibility to the take by the *Wall Street Journal's* James Taranto: in the perfect storm that was the 2016 election, Donald Trump was the only Republican who could have defeated Hillary Clinton, and Hillary Clinton was the only Democrat who could have lost to Donald Trump.

It was a serious mistake for Trump to conclude that he had found these winning lottery tickets lying on the sidewalk because of his own acumen, but also an understandable one. Trump spent 16 months after his famous 2015 escalator ride hearing every political expert in the world pronounce that he was wasting his time and making a fool of himself. Most men with a tenth his self-regard would have responded to ultimate victory the way Trump did—by concluding that the “experts” were idiots, and that he knew more about politics than the lot of them.

The resulting hubris led Trump to spend four years ignoring or disdainful the fundamental rule that democratic politics is about effecting net additions and avoiding net subtractions. The imperative for a president seeking re-election is that new recruits to the coalition that provided his previous victory must outnumber defectors from it. This is an exacting challenge. Politics is hard because you can't please all the people, all the time. Every decision—about policy, personnel, or presentation—is going to elicit some constituents' disapproval or anger. It's not even realistic to think that each such decision can be more popular than unpopular. But a president's choices taken together, his body of work, must all be made with the goal of bringing in more voters than he lets out.

While acting on this rule is never easy, the principle itself is simple. And it is especially simple to understand why it was crucial to Trump's situation after November 2016, when 53.9% of the electorate voted against him. In this circumstance, it was of the highest urgency to avoid *gratuitous* affronts to any sliver of the electorate that might conceivably have come around to voting for Trump's re-election. The fact that an unusually large number of voters opposed Trump in 2016, and would never support him no matter what he did, made it all the more important to extend every consideration and courtesy to any

voter who was the slightest bit receptive to giving him a second term.

But Trump could not or would not restrain himself, “digging into a pointless lie about the size of his inauguration crowds” to start his presidency, as Philip Klein put it in the *Washington Examiner*. Thereafter, Trump diminished his authority and reduced his appeal by repeatedly “punching down at non-entities he should have ignored,” in the words of *National Review's* Andrew McCarthy. It gratified his most enthusiastic supporters to have a commander-in-chief who was also talk-show-host-in-chief, firing off tweets that derided politicians, journalists, actors, or athletes who had offended him. But every hour, every utterance, after Election Day 2016 should have been guided by the realization that Trump's share of the vote had proven barely big enough to win one national election, making it almost certainly too small to win another. It was imperative to appease rather than antagonize the Undecideds and Amenables, like

Activists and thinkers  
who wanted to advance  
President Trump's cause  
found themselves having  
to design and assemble the  
plane even as they were  
required to fly it.

the women in suburban Phoenix, in order to make his re-election prospects less precarious. But Trump's unbreakable habits of the mouth all worked in the opposite direction.

#### Trump Fatigue

**P**OLITICS IS MAJORITARIAN IN A WAY that business is not. A business that prospers by catering to one segment of the market might wisely decide that it makes more sense to deepen than to broaden its appeal, strengthening ties to loyal customers instead of revising its brand to acquire new ones. A politician cannot think this way, especially one who barely managed to win office in the first place. When faced with trouble Trump would always “recede into the comfort of his adoring base,” to quote McCarthy again, which may be good business but was very bad politics.

Trump's business experience included years in show business, a background whose

value to a presidential politician had already been demonstrated by Ronald Reagan. But unlike Reagan, Trump never developed a sense for when to exit the stage, to leave the public wanting more by strategically limiting his prominence. Instead, he resembled Theodore Roosevelt who, in the famous judgment of his daughter Alice, wanted to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral.

According to Trump's own account, he learned about being a public figure by spending time, beginning in the 1980s, with his “great friend,” George Steinbrenner, principal owner of the New York Yankees. And what did he learn? Trump's take-away, according to one report, was “good publicity, bad publicity, as long as it's publicity.”

Whatever the abstract merits of this credo, it causes rather than solves problems for a U.S. president, already the world's most famous person. Steinbrenner's bombast and self-generated turmoil, like hiring and firing manager Billy Martin five times, served to sell tickets and boost television ratings from 1982 through 1995, a period when the Yankees never appeared in the World Series, their longest absence since Babe Ruth first donned pinstripes. President Trump, however, was not fighting the Mets, Knicks, and Giants for space on the back cover of the *New York Post* and *Daily News*. Nor did a succession of four chiefs of staff in a four-year term, along with similar rates of turnover elsewhere in his administration, advance any governmental or political objectives.

Campaigning for his former vice president, Barack Obama voiced a criticism that struck the bullseye Trump had painted on himself:

With Joe and Kamala [Harris] at the helm, you won't have to think about them every single day. There might be a whole day where they [won't] be on TV. There might be a whole day where they don't tweet some craziness. You won't have to argue about them every day. It won't be so exhausting. Just having a normal president.

I strongly suspect that examination of 2020's exit polls, focus groups, and other data will eventually make clear that Trump Fatigue played a significant factor in the election's outcome. “Four more years” seemed redundant to some voters, including some who might have supported him, because by November 2020 it felt as if Trump had *already been* president for eight years. A second term, though consistent with the letter of the 22nd Amendment, would have violated its spirit.



The worst problem caused by Trump's over-exposure was that it closed off his one realistic avenue to re-election. The way to triumph despite chronically high disapproval ratings would have been to implicitly acknowledge swing-voters' misgivings, and then appeal to them by demonstrating that the alternative—the other party and its nominee—was even more problematic. Such campaigns had succeeded for other sitting presidents with “high negatives,” most notably Harry Truman in 1948 and Richard Nixon in 1972.

But Trump's hyper-visibility, little of it unsought, precluded any such approach. Instead, it guaranteed that the 2020 election would be a referendum on Donald Trump, *the* frame most advantageous to the Biden campaign—whose standard-bearer emerged from his basement occasionally to affirm that he was still a person other than Trump, and then retreated despite offering little additional guidance about his intentions. In the circumstances afforded Biden, by events and his opponent, this was a winning strategy.

In the Real Clear Politics average, Trump's approval rating as voters went to the polls on Election Day was 45.9%. The final numbers showed that he received 46.9% of the vote, an indication that nearly everyone who approved

of him voted for him, but almost no one else did. Trump could have won despite engendering strong opposition if his base had been larger. Or, he could have won if a significant number of voters outside his base had chosen him as the less bad option. What he could not do was win with the base he had *and* the aversion to him from nearly everyone else.

### Advantage, Gipper

**L**AST YEAR, BEFORE BOTH THE PANDEMIC and the election, Steven Hayward wrote in these pages (“The Ronald and the Donald,” Spring 2020) that President Reagan “too often...assumed a defensive crouch, trying to explain why his administration's record satisfied liberal demands.” The “pugilistic” Trump, by contrast, “never concedes an inch to his critics, and throws back a roundhouse punch every time.”

Hayward's two-volume study, *The Age of Reagan* (2001-09), is deeply respectful but also advances a number of judicious criticisms. In light of the 2020 election, however, this more recent comparison is less persuasive than the books' assessments. Yes, it is important for an embattled president to concede nothing and fight hard. But it is no less important to fight smart. In the wake of

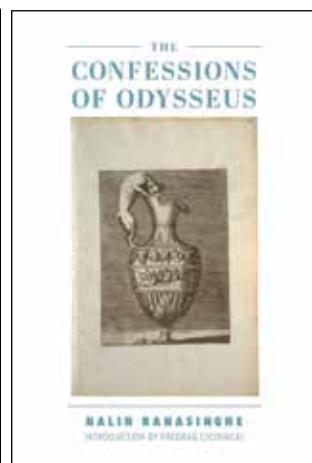
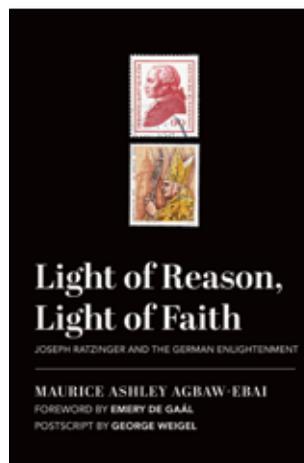
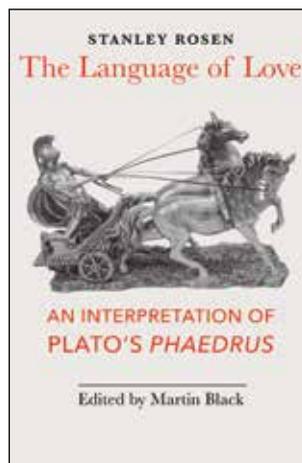
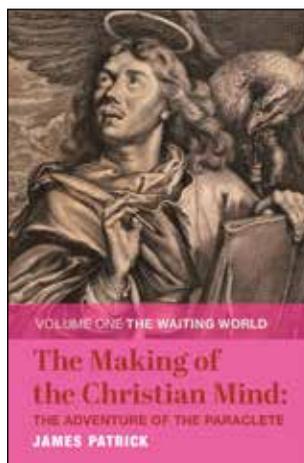
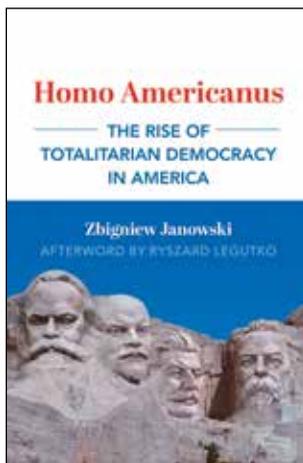
Trump's tumultuous term, concluding in his defeat, Reagan's boxing stance looks less like a defensive crouch and more like Muhammad Ali's “rope-a-dope,” forcing opponents to dissipate their strength while conserving his own for the decisive moment. Trump's incessant flailing, by contrast, left him looking too many times like...well, a dope.

What's more, Reagan's calculated restraint followed the advice of an earlier Republican president about catching more flies with a drop of honey than with a gallon of gall. Andrew McCarthy wisely observes that, fierce partisans aside, “most Americans... like to like their presidents.” Understanding this to be both true and important, Reagan went out of his way to make it easy for people to like him and hard to dislike him. In the service of no apparent purpose, Trump routinely took the opposite approach. It should surprise no one that amiability played better at the box office. On the election scorecard, Reagan won a formidable victory in 1980, and then four years later a smashing one, compared to Trump's shocking but narrow victory in 2016, which was followed by a somewhat less narrow and altogether less shocking defeat.

That Reagan and Trump were cut from different cloth explains part of the differ-

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ence between the former's purposeful geniality and the latter's self-indulgent bellicosity. But only part. In several respects, fortune favored Reagan more than Trump. A sharp recession occurred early in Reagan's first term, for example, followed by an economic expansion that was reaching escape velocity as the 1984 campaign was underway. Three successive Soviet leaders died while Reagan was president, ultimately bringing to power a fourth with whom, as Margaret Thatcher said, the West could do business. Even the attempt on Reagan's life in March 1981, not ordinarily the paradigm of a lucky break, enhanced his political standing and established a unique bond of affection between him and the American people. New York's Democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who had been a Labor Department official who happened to be present in the White House the day John Kennedy was murdered, wrote after Reagan survived his assassin's bullet, "In the history of the office has any man ever so triumphed over danger and pain and near death? We are surely proud of him."

Reagan's situation was different, and more favorable, in another quite fundamental sense. *National Review* celebrated its 25th anniversary in December 1980, the month after Reagan's election. Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign had brought a new generation of conservative activists into the Republican Party. The Heritage Foundation was created in 1973, and similar think tanks sprang up in the following years. There was, in short, what the *New Yorker's* Nicholas Lemann calls a "governing infrastructure" of conservative ideas, proposals, and personnel by the time Reagan took office. It did not simply carry all before it. Hayward's biography shows that some of Reagan's most diffi-

cult battles were intra-party fights against ranchist Republicans still seeking to restore the status quo ante Goldwater. But the Gipper had ammunition for such fights, reserves of arguments, policies, and precinct workers able to further his goals.

Thirty-six years later, Trump confronted a very different reality. He was the avatar of a work-in-progress synthesis of nationalism and populism that had already achieved political success in Eastern Europe, Israel, Great Britain, and other nations. As of 2016, however, few of the steps needed to refine these ideas and adapt them to America's particular requirements had been completed or even begun. In this regard, Trump found himself "a victim of his own success," in the words of the Conservative Partnership Institute's Rachel Bovard, "refashioning the Republican Party's electoral coalition and transforming the policy landscape much faster than existing institutions could adapt or new ones could emerge." Even if his management style had not tended, as Bovard puts it, "to seed chaos and rivalries," disarray and discord were inevitable. Trump officials, like the activists and thinkers who wanted to advance the president's cause, found themselves having to design and assemble the plane even as they were required to fly it.

The difference between leading an established and an emerging political movement defined Reagan and Trump's respective capabilities but also shaped their duties. Reagan's greater and more evident discipline derived not only from personal qualities but from his political circumstance as the leader with custodial responsibility for a political movement that had nurtured him, rather than the other way around. Failure would not only have damaged Reagan's historical reputation but impaired

conservatism's ability to shape America's future beyond the end of his presidency.

Trump could and should have been a more conscientious president. Even if he had, though, his political responsibilities would have differed from Reagan's. It is still not clear what "Trumpism" means, but increasingly clear that Trumpism is the best name for whatever America, plus nationalism, plus populism equals. Boasts can be justified even if they're not dignified and, to date, Trump would be within his rights to say of Trumpism, "*Le mouvement, c'est moi.*" Conservatives could and did debate how Reagan's decisions aligned with conservatism's fundamental principles. Such disagreements, while often vigorous, were never unintelligible. But no higher authority can maintain that the inchoate assortment of ideas and attitudes that is, at present, Trumpism means anything more than or different than what Donald Trump says it means.

If the combination of nationalism and populism that has proven formidable elsewhere is to have an American political future after January 2021, it will need more disciplined thinkers to flesh out and integrate its strongest ideas. Whether or not this fallow period lasts as long as the one between Goldwater's 1964 defeat and Reagan's 1980 victory, the work of fashioning policies, arguments, and political strategies will be of the same kind. If and when the resulting, more mature political movement is at some point lucky and good enough to exercise the power conferred on Donald Trump in 2016, it will then need a more disciplined political practitioner to safeguard its progress and integrity.

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