

The Ego Experiment

Part 1: Collective Trouble

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The highest-placed individual in the most cultivated age and population of the world, he has not the merit of common truth and honesty. He is unjust ... egotistic and monopolizing ... He is a boundless liar. ... all his bulletins, are proverbs for saying what he wished to be believed ...

Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on Napoleon was published in *Representative Men* (1850), which Emily Dickinson called "a little granite book you can lean on." Though full of particular observations, Emerson, as usual, meant to be generally instructive.

Here was an experiment, under the most favorable conditions, of the powers of intellect without conscience. Never was such a leader so endowed and so weaponed; never leader found such aids and followers.

Donald Trump, like Napoleon, is a malignant narcissist, which is generally understood to include extreme paranoia and sadism. It's hard to make the case that the aggression inherent in this condition is acceptable in a volatile world.

He was thoroughly unscrupulous. He would steal, slander, assassinate, drown and poison, as his interest dictated. He had no generosity, but mere vulgar hatred; he was intensely selfish; he was perfidious; he cheated at cards; he was a prodigious gossip, and opened letters, and ... rubbed his hands with joy when he had intercepted some morsel of intelligence concerning the men and women about him ...

The very idea of boundaries is alien to a narcissist. Others are simply food for the ego and never considered when absent. How many Americans would allow their daughters to be alone with the President of the United States?

His manners were coarse. He treated women with low familiarity. In short, when you have penetrated through all the circles of power and splendor, you were not dealing with a gentleman, at last; but with an impostor and a rogue.

Trump is a dictator at heart. He has no idea what democracy is — believing, even to this day, that what he moronically tweets is law. Even if you wish to believe that he's not a malignant narcissist, it's hard to argue that his egotism is garden-variety. It's on display every day: the voracious hunger for admiration, the lack of empathy, the barrage of lies, the Mussolini scowl. You needn't be a linguist to feel the manipulation in every *I*, *me*, and *mine*.

Men found that his absorbing egotism was deadly to all other men. ...
So this exorbitant egotist narrowed, impoverished and absorbed the power
and existence of those who served him ...

Unfortunately, the problem is not so much personal as societal. It's comforting to believe that Trump is a freak who was pushed into power by racists, but in fact he is an accurate representation of what America has become.

... if Napoleon is France, if Napoleon is Europe, it is because the
people whom he sways are little Napoleons.

Trump is the illogical conclusion of our forty-year glorification of bullying. Americans are famous for it. We no longer challenge the powerful because we envy them. It all began with "greed is good" propaganda in the '80s. Reagan's cult of exploitation changed behavior in every corner of society. If we had continued to effectively prosecute white-collar crime, for instance, Trump might have been jailed decades ago for tax fraud, charity fraud, or a hundred other things. Nearly every American dysfunction can be traced to this shift from fighting for David to appeasing Goliath. The primary legislative response to the bankruptcy epidemic, for example, was to put the screws to the consumer. We are ill-prepared for global warming because we continue to subsidize Big Oil and its culture of denial. Americans pay more for drugs than anyone else because we encourage Big Pharma to price-fix and dominate the airwaves. Well before Trump breached the oval office, an international survey revealed that narcissism is part of the assumed national character of Americans. While a small minority actually meet the criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder, many others are on the spectrum or are dedicated enablers.

As both parties shifted to the right, political bullying accelerated — to the extent that tone-deaf egotists have a clear advantage in winning primaries. In 2016, powerful Democrats worked tirelessly to ensure that populist hero Bernie Sanders could not win. Voters were eventually forced to choose between a saber-rattling disciple of Henry Kissinger and media-obsessed Trump, who deftly pandered to Bernie's populists. Anyone who dared support an un-anointed candidate was relentlessly pilloried. 2020 is shaping up to be a rerun, with a ramrod of the Wall Street bailout standing in for the militarist.

Egotism saturates our culture. It sends cascades of shaming and scolding through social media. It drives the bullying in identity politics and political correctness. Every platform and medium and legitimate cause must fend off megalomaniacs or be defined by them. Many organizations and individuals are worn out by the endless damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't manufactured crises of those who will never get over themselves. Apologists for this kind of behavior, including some psychologists and historians, make a good living by claiming that crushing others has some evolutionary benefit. I'm not buying it. No one who has wasted decades trying to live or work with toxic egos *should* buy it. In Darwin's "survival of the fittest," "fittest" means "most adaptable" — not "biggest and strongest," as the bullying class would have it.

In any case, competition is not the law of the jungle; it is an aspect of jungle life. Cooperation is at least as common, particularly within each species. Further, intra-species competition is seldom across the board. Often the pattern is to cooperate in obtaining food while competing for a mate. In *Making Things Work*, Yaneer Bar-Yam explains how, in any effective system, cooperation is essential. Sports leagues provide the best analogy: teams and individuals compete, but the system relies on collaboration at every level. Clear, enforceable rules adjust the balance. In much the same way, it is not cutthroat capitalism that "made America great," but *regulated* capitalism.

Trump can only *feign* cooperation. His most effective trick is to mimic warmth and candor — oozing compliments in order to gain the confidence of his victims. Former FBI director James Comey said it best: “Trump eats your soul in small bites.” The president’s true nature comes through in the hatred he cannot conceal for any rule- or law-making body. Not surprisingly, law enforcement agencies bear the brunt of his contempt. He now claims, inevitably, to be the country’s chief law enforcement officer.

Trump will continue to propagate brutality. Recent reports show that children now use Trump’s words to discriminate and bully on the playground, for example. But Trump also presents daily teaching moments — opportunities to learn first-hand that colossal egotism never works for anyone in the long-term. Not for the crusher or the crushed. Not for the nation or the world. France’s “intellect without conscience” experiment failed. Such experiments *always* fail. Every leader who can be profiled as a malignant narcissist left his country in shambles.

And what was the result of this vast talent and power, of these immense armies, burned cities, squandered treasures, immolated millions of men, of this demoralized Europe? It came to no result. All passed away like the smoke of his artillery, and left no trace. He left France smaller, poorer, feebler, than he found it; and the whole contest for freedom was to be begun again.

Narcissism is essentially pathological insecurity. Many behaviors are expressed, but two of the most identifiable are character assassination and playing the victim. Hardly a day goes by that we don’t see dramatic displays of both from the president. It’s breathtaking. He honestly believes we should pity him even as he stabs hardworking civil servants in the back.

When isolated, as they often become, narcissists are relatively harmless. It’s the legions of enablers — so-called “flying monkeys” — that do the real damage. Why are there so many of them? Why are they so zealous? Apparently, there’s just something irresistible about trying to obtain the approval of someone who is incapable of giving it. It’s very much like a romantic obsession — perhaps it’s the same thing. In any case, the pandering played out during the impeachment as Kabuki tragedy: senator after senator committing career suicide, just to buy a little more throne time for an ego who will, in the end, sacrifice everyone. The Republican Party is a disease.

The astonishing scope of the malignancy sets us up for further disasters. We can expect to endure aberrational Trumps, as we always have. But dime-a-dozen Trumps and their flying monkeys are transforming the United States into an authoritarian wasteland from which talent is already fleeing. Sooner or later, it will find itself isolated. Disunity will finish us in the end. The Confederacy lost the Civil War largely because of its emphasis on state’s rights. The individual states never learned to properly coordinate the war effort. Our piecemeal response to Covid 19 looks much the same. But it’s worse than that: we cannot work together at any level, thanks to habitual, petty bullying and score-settling. Ralph Waldo issued a final warning in 1850:

Every experiment, by multitudes or by individuals, that has a sensual and selfish aim, will fail. ... As long as our civilization is essentially one of property, of fences, of exclusiveness, it will be mocked by delusions. Our riches will leave us sick; there will be bitterness in our laughter, and our wine will burn our mouth. Only that good profits which we can taste with all doors open, and which serves all men.