

Opinion

The Trump Circus

The president has latched onto his supporters, and they onto him, in a symbiotic last-ditch shot at survival.



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A Trump rally on Monday in Johnson City, Tenn. Credit: Tom Brenner for The New York Times

It is a scene that has become all too common, and dare I say dangerously close to becoming mundane: Donald Trump said something outrageous at one of his political rallies and his supporters, those hopelessly beguiled by the bully, cheered.

This week, Trump trekked to Southaven, Miss., where he took the degenerate step of mocking Christine Blasey Ford, the woman who has accused Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault.

Trump [imitated and chided her](#):

Thirty-six years ago this happened. I had one beer, right? I had one beer ... How did you get home? I don't remember. How'd you get there? I don't remember. Where is the place? I don't remember. How many years ago was it? I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. What neighborhood was it in? I don't know. Where's the house? I don't know. Upstairs, downstairs, where was it? I don't know. But I had one beer. That's the only thing I remember.

It was a repulsively grotesque spectacle, and yet from the assemblage of thousands came applause and roars of approval for Trump.

It is at moments like these that I try to step back from the particulars, to create some distance, so that I can ask myself the larger, more profound questions. How did we as a country arrive at the point where this is even possible? And how are there so many Americans willing to accept Trump's corrosion of our culture and our discourse, to gleefully follow him as he plumbs the depths, probing for a bottom of acceptability that, in his world, seems to have been obliterated?

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There are multiple explanations, to be sure: racism, xenophobia, ethnic hostility, Islamophobia, nationalism, Fox News, reduced access to privilege, lingering anti-Obama sentiments, a pronounced distrust of media in particular and truth writ large.

But I believe there are two other explanations that are much more base: entertainment and ownership.

First, the entire Trump presidency is a show, and many Americans find it quite entertaining, viewing Trump as its antihero.

He is brash, unconventional, emotional, sometimes raging and sometimes funny.

His rock-and-charge rallies (he has held nearly two dozen since being elected) are simply an extension of that, only more raw and raucous. Trump brings the big show and the big media with their big cameras to places and people who feel forgotten and isolated, looked over by the bustling coasts and the urban centers.

He is their entree to power, a personification and articulation of anger and anti-intellectualism, a way to wrap their hatreds in humor.

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The rallies are part tent revival, part circus, part call-and-response game show. Like-minded people with look-alike faces populate them. They are orgies of sameness in which crowd dynamics produce and escalate a tornado of affirmation and acceptance until it is perfectly admissible to surrender any remaining morality to the mob.

It is a religious experience of conversion and immersion, a born-again baptism in which people emerge bound to one another and bound to Trump.

Trying to pry them apart from Trump, to make them somehow see the light and turn on him, is a time- and energy-wasting exercise. Trump is wielding a Jim Jones-level of influence and control over these people, and deprogramming the members of his cult would take more effort than most are willing to commit.

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Furthermore, Trump's supporters see Trump as theirs. He is their creation, their Frankenstein. They may not always agree in their hearts with what he does or says, but they will always support him publicly, in much the same way that a family unifies around a wayward child.

When the entire political world mocked Trump, they supported him. When everyone said that Trump didn't stand a chance of winning, they supported him. When everyone said that Trump was boorish, scandal-ridden and inexperienced, they supported him. And in the end, Trump became the president.

For them, Trump represents the most improbable of all ascensions, one fueled by their undying loyalty, and he represents their personal sentiments about society: a thumbing of the nose at the establishment, a rebuke of the authorities and the intellectuals, a disdain for inclusion and multiculturalism, and a willingness to fight for white power and its privileges and purity.

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Trump has latched onto them and they onto him in a symbiotic last-ditch shot at survival. Their mutual interdependence is not frivolously partisan, it is existentially necessary. And so, in that light, even the mocking of a woman recounting a sexual assault can't separate them.

There is nowhere that Trump goes, in policy or rhetoric, that they won't follow, because they have no way back from how far they've already gone. They've burned all the bridges they've crossed.

Trump's supporters are now part of his circus: nomads on the political landscape, having abandoned the traditional right as we knew it, for the fickle, ever-wavering, never-stable tent of Trumpism.

In this world, the aberrant and the monstrous don't offend but entertain.

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