Escape From the Trump Cult

Millions of Americans are blindly devoted to their Dear Leader. What will it take for them to snap out of it?

Alexander Hurst / December 14, 2018

On December 20, 1954, some 62 years before Donald Trump would be sworn in as president of the United States, Dorothy Martin and dozens of her followers crowded into her home in Chicago to await the apocalypse. The group believed that Martin, a housewife, had received a message from a planet named Clarion that the world would end in a great flood beginning at midnight, and that they, the faithful, would be rescued by an alien spacecraft.

Unbeknownst to the other "Seekers," three of their group—Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter—were not there to be saved, but to observe. Psychologists from elite institutions, they had infiltrated the pseudo-cult to study Festinger's recently elaborated theory of "cognitive dissonance." The theory predicted that when people with strongly held beliefs were presented with contrary evidence, rather than change their minds they would seek comfort and "cognitive consonance" by convincing others to support their erroneous views.

Festinger's prediction was right. When neither the apocalypse nor the UFO arrived, the group began proselytizing about how God had rewarded the Earth with salvation because of their vigil. His subsequent book, _When Prophecy Fails_, became a standard sociology reference for examining cognitive dissonance, religious prophecy, and cult-like behavior. What the three researchers probably never predicted, though, was that over half a century later Festinger's theory would be applicable to roughly 25 percent of the population of the United States and one of its two major political parties. Nor could they have foreseen that the country's salvation might well depend on its ability to deprogram the Trump cult's acolytes— an effort that would require a level of sympathetic engagement on the part of nonbelievers that they have yet to display.
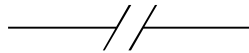
Personality cults are a hallmark of populist-autocratic politics. The names of the various leaders are practically synonymous with their movements: Le Pen, Farage, Duterte, Orbán, Erdogan, Chávez, Bolsonaro, Putin. Or if we were to dip farther back into history: Castro, Franco, Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin. Like religious cult leaders, demagogues understand the importance of setting up an in-group/out-group dynamic as a means of establishing their followers' identity as members of a besieged collective.

Trump, like the populist authoritarians before and around him, has also understood (or, at least, instinctually grasped) how indispensable his own individual persona is to his ultimate goal of grasping and maintaining power. Amidst his string of business failures, Trump's singular talent has been that of any con man: the incredible ability to cultivate a public image. Of course, Trump did not build his cult of followers—his in-group—ex nihilo; in many ways, the stage was set for his entrance. America had already split into two political identities by the time he announced his campaign for president in 2015, not just in terms of the information we consume, but down to the brands we prefer and the stores we frequent. And so with particularly American bombast and a reality TV star's penchant for manipulating the media, Trump tore pages from the us-against-them playbook of the European far right and presented them to a segment of the American public already primed to receive it with religious fervor.

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In an interview with *Pacific Standard*, Janja Lalich, a sociologist who specializes in cults, identified four characteristics of a totalistic cult and applied them to Trumpism: an all-encompassing belief system, extreme devotion to the leader, reluctance to acknowledge criticism of the group or its leader, and a disdain for nonmembers. Eileen Barker, another sociologist of cults, has written that, together, cult leaders and followers create and maintain their movement by proclaiming shared beliefs and identifying themselves as a distinguishable unit; behaving in

ways that reinforce the group as a social entity, like closing themselves off to conflicting information; and stoking division and fear of enemies, real or perceived.

Does Trump tick off the boxes? The hatchet job he has made of Republican ideology and the sway he holds over what is now *his* party suggest he does not lack for devotion. His nearly 90 percent approval rating among Republicans is the more remarkable for his having shifted Republican views on a range of issues, from trade, to NATO, to Putin, to even the NFL. Then there are the endless rallies that smack of a noxious sort of revivalism, complete with a loyalty "pledge" during the 2016 campaign; a steady stream of sycophantic fealty (at least in public) from aides in the administration and its congressional Republican allies; and an almost universal unwillingness by Republican congressional leadership to check or thwart Trump's worst instincts in any substantive way.

As for disdain, or disgust even, for nonmembers, who include "globalists," immigrants, urbanites, Muslims, Jews, and people of color? "I suppose that Old Man Trump knows just how much racial hate / He stirred up that bloodroot of human hearts," Woody Guthrie sang in 1950 about Fred Trump's discriminatory housing practices. Those words could just as easily apply to Fred's son Donald, as *The New York Times* details, about his birtherism, his view that dark-skinned immigrants come from "shithole countries," his frequent classification of black people as uppity and ungrateful, his denigration of Native Americans, his incorporation of white nationalist thought into his administration, his equivocation over neo-Nazis. The "lock her up!" chants of his rallies are less about Hillary Clinton individually, and more about who belongs and who doesn't, and what place exists for those who don't. In perhaps the pettiest form of their disdain, Trump's supporters engage in "rolling coal"—the practice of tricking out diesel engines to send huge plumes of smoke into the atmosphere—to "own the libs."

Trump sold his believers an engrossing tale of "American carnage" that he alone could fix, then isolated them in a media universe where reality exists only through Trump-tinted glasses, attacking all other sources of information as "fake news." In the most polarized media landscape in the wealthy world, Republicans place their trust almost solely in Fox News, seeing nearly all other outlets as biased. In that context, the effect of a president who lies an average of ten times a day is the total blurring of fact and fiction, reality and myth, trust and cynicism. It is a world

where, in the words of Rudy Giuliani, truth is no longer truth. "Who could really know?" Trump said of claims that Saudi prince Mohammed bin Salman had ordered the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. "It is what it is."

Reason rarely defeats emotion—or, as Catherine Fieschi, an expert on political extremism, told me, gut instinct. If it did, right-wing populist movements from Brexit to Bolsonaro would be on the retreat, not in the advance. Those caught in the web of Trumpism do not see the deception that surrounds them. And if scandals too numerous to list have not dented faith in Trump, those holding out for an apocalyptic moment of reckoning that suddenly drops the curtain—the Russia investigation, or his taxes—will only be disappointed. In all likelihood, the idea that Trump is a crook has been "priced in."

When presented with his actual record, which has often fallen short of what he promised on the campaign trail, Trump supporters time and again have displayed either disbelief or indifference. As a Trump supporter explicitly stated in reference to the president's many, many lies, "I don't care if he sprouts a third dick up there." What actually *is* doesn't matter; what does is that Trump reflects back to his supporters a general feeling of what *ought to be*, a general truthiness in their guts.

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Amidst the frenetic pace of disgrace and outrage, Trump's support remains stable among too large a chunk of the American public to just ignore. Trump, who insisted on the presence of voter fraud by the millions in an election he ultimately *won*, and a coterie of prominent Republicans spent the week after the 2018 midterms delegitimizing the very notion of counting all the votes in key races in Florida, Georgia, and Arizona. Trump's claim that he could shoot someone in the middle of Fifth Avenue and still retain the loyalty of his followers is jokingly referred to as the truest thing he's ever said, but it's less funny that 52 percent of them would hypothetically support postponing the 2020 election if he proposed it. What happens when a man who has already promoted political violence, and whose most hardcore supporters have shown their willingness for such violence, finds on election night two years from now that he has just narrowly lost? Do any of us truly believe that Donald J. Trump and his followers will simply slink away quietly into

the night?

So, how do we get those caught up in the cult of Trump to leave it?

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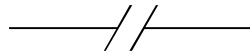
Daryl Davis has played the blues for over 30 years, including with the likes of Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis. He's also spent 30 years talking to Klansmen, over 200 of whom have quit the KKK as a result of their conversations, handing over their robes to Davis—who is black. "When two enemies are talking, they're not fighting," Davis told NPR in 2017. "I didn't convert anybody," he explained. "They saw the light and converted themselves."

Davis's success is more than a cute, feel-good story. It involved the real-world application of techniques that scholars advocate employing to help individuals leave cults. A 2011 study by the RAND Corporation concluded that, "Factors associated with leaving street gangs, religious cults, right-wing extremist groups, and organized crime groups" included positive social ties and an organic disillusionment with the group's beliefs or ideology. As psychologists Rod and Linda Dubrow-Marshall write in The Conversation, it's extremely difficult for people to admit they are wrong, and it's crucial for them to arrive at that realization on their own.

The debate over how to deal with Trump's anti-democratic following has largely avoided the question of engaging it directly. These days there is no shortage of articles and books dealing with radical-right populism, despots, democratic backsliding, and the tactics that authoritarian leaders deploy. Dozens of experts have pointed out that liberal democratic institutions need constant attention and reinforcement in order to be effective bulwarks. But most of the solutions on offer are institutional in nature: maintaining the independence of the judiciary, thwarting a would-be autocrat's attempts to grab hold of the levers of justice, maintaining a legislative check on executive authority, enshrining political norms more clearly into constitutions.

In their 2011 book, _Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Post-Communist Countries_,

Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik conclude that democratization in Eastern European nations like Croatia owed much to assistance from transnational pro-democracy networks, civil society, and energetic election campaigns run by a united opposition. In some ways this analysis offers us a modicum of hope: Trump, despite his desires, commands far less power over the political system than did any of the autocrats that Bunce and Wolchik studied, and the United States enjoys many of the elements they cite as critical, like robust civil society, energetic elections, and a mostly unified opposition. But at the same time, the very things responsible for the success of democratic transition are under near constant assault from Trump and his Republican abettors.

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Democracy, especially liberal democracy, has always been dependent on the trust and belief of the self-governed. It is one thing to implement tangible measures to prevent the decay of bedrock institutions, and when it comes to voting rights, elections, the courts, and restraints on executive power, we know what these measures should look like. It's another, far tougher thing to figure out how to maintain the legitimacy of these same institutions—and how to restore it once lost.

Javier Corrales, a political science professor at Amherst College and expert on the Chavez regime, has written that one lesson from Venezuela's experience is for the opposition to avoid fragmentation within the broader electorate and, when possible, polarization. When it comes to Trump, he told me that rather than pursuing impeachment, which could backfire by polarizing institutions and the general environment even more, "the opposition needs to focus on strengthening institutions of checks and balances, and embracing and defending policies that produce majoritarian consensus rather than just cater to the base. The more defections they can get from voters that would otherwise side with the illiberal president, the better. If the opposition can get the other side to split, they win."

When it comes to helping individuals leave cult-like groups, many sociologists agree: Positive social factors are more effective than negative sanctions. Lalich counsels using dialogue to ask questions and reinforce doubts, rather than "to

harp" or criticize. Testimonials from former cult members can be particularly helpful in fueling disillusionment, she says.

On a nationwide scale, this would probably look a lot like a field called "conflict transformation." John Paul Lederach, professor emeritus at Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, laid out the basics of conflict transformation in his 1998 book, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. He argued that outsiders should work with mid-level members of the community who could simultaneously engage ordinary people and their leaders. He also called for an "elicitive approach" whereby solutions were developed by people themselves, in accordance with their own specific cultural contexts.

Of the places in the world where conflict transformation has worked, Northern Ireland probably most approximates the United States, in the sense that it was part of a wealthy nation with a democratic tradition (though in the 1980s, Northern Ireland was in a far worse situation of political division and communitarian violence).

Maria Power, a researcher in conflict transformation studies at Oxford, sees strategies from Northern Ireland that could be deployed on the other side of the Atlantic. She cited the example of dialogue-building between Unionist and Republican women, who faced much tougher obstacles to reconciliation since they were "risking their lives" every time they met in East Belfast during The Troubles. She said that the peace effort in Northern Ireland hinged on incredibly tough, person-to-person groundwork carried out by dozens of organizations and ecumenical groups. She emphasized above all the importance of investing effort and time into building trust, first within, and then later between, identity groups.

Power said that conflict transformation in the United States would likely involve local, grassroots community development in the areas that Trump likes to hold rallies. "I don't mean that progressives should go to these communities and start knocking on doors," she explained, "that would be the worst thing that could happen to exacerbate tensions. I mean that there should be a focus on real community development in these areas."

Individuals would be led through a "single identity dialogue," a safe-space where

someone who has gained the community's trust can guide them through discussion of their identity, why they feel threatened, and why they feel the need to *otherize* those they see as different. This does presume some legitimacy to their fears; as *The Atlantic*'s Adam Serwer, among others, has <u>written convincingly</u>, Trumpism is not primarily a story of globalism's dispossessed, but rather one of identity politics. But there is reality, and there is perception, and the truth is that Trump voters *perceive* themselves as victims who have been culturally dislocated, disdained, and in danger of being left behind.

Power said that, in the mid-1980s, Northern Ireland had some 300 of these single-identity groups. She added that there was a tough balance to strike between allowing people "to become comfortable enough with their own place in society that other people don't seem to be a threat," and "dripping" in truth in such a way that avoided a reinforcement of their existing beliefs.

Only once that step had been undertaken on a local level were people able to have cross-community conversation, and eventually to engage with each other through social action projects—schemes to bring people together, not over political discussion, but in tasks beneficial to their communities. Power lamented that overall this is quite a long-term process, perhaps even a generational one.

That sentiment was echoed by Emma Elfversson, who researches peace and conflict at Sweden's Uppsala University. Elfversson told me that because trust in the state and institutions is often crucial to reconciliation, democratic backsliding in the U.S. is worrying. "Important work to overcome divides is done at the grassroots level—through NGOs, religious initiatives, social service programs, schools, at the workplace, etc.," she said, adding, "Civil society organizations that cut across identity borders can promote reconciliation and reduce conflict."

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Such an approach might seem fuzzy to those who seek to buttress qualitative observations with hard data, but there are concrete examples of places where community-based peace building <u>has been effective</u>. Fieschi thinks that the way to short-circuit populism is to create an environment where people can think. "Populism encourages every fiber of your being *not* to think," she told me. "In fact,

it pretty much posits that if you have to think you're not to be trusted. We need to create those spaces and times that offer the opportunity to exercise agency, to think things through."

The problem for the modern left is that none of this is emotionally satisfying. It's just hard, hard work. Push too hard, and you risk fostering even greater resentment and reaction. But let people off the hook, and the myths they perpetuate about race and national identity might never get punctured.

Above all, it also rings as profoundly *unfair*. Why should a group that still enjoys the momentum of historic privilege, and is still afforded outsize political weight, be handheld through an era of demographic change? And why should minority groups, who continue to suffer from oppression, be the ones to extend that hand?

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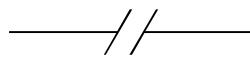
American politics, as Alexis de Tocqueville once observed, has often had a religious character to it, with the nation itself exalted in a messianic way. After the end of the Vietnam War, Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, two researchers of cults, wrote, "There is a recurrent sequence in American history in which sectarian (and sometimes rather authoritarian) religions emerge and elicit tremendous hostility." The decline of Cold War orthodoxy after Vietnam, the two noted, had produced a crisis in American civil religion, resulting in "the proliferation of cults as well as the growth of anticult demonology."

We can understand Donald Trump's rise as a civil religion giving way to its cultic expression. Con man, cult leader, populist politician: Trump is all of these, rolled into one. He has become all-encompassing, even to nonbelievers. We all feel the fatigue of merely existing in the Trump era, the rapid-fire assault on all of our political and social senses. We want immediate solutions to the Trump problem. We want to beat reason into his followers, until they recognize how wrong they are, or at the very least, submit. We want to blame them—justifiably—for perpetuating his sham.

I want these things. I want them in my *gut*. But I also know that the cult's pull is so

powerful that it risks destroying its opponents, by eliciting a counterproductive reaction to it. If we want to bring members of the Trump cult back into the mainstream of American life—and there will be plenty of those who say we should move on without them—resistance means not only resisting the lure of the cult and exposing its lies, but also resisting the temptation to punish its followers.

"When the cultic behavior is on a national scale, [breaking it up] is going to take a national movement," Lalich says. Such an approach promises no immediate gratification. But it also might be the only way to move forward, rather than continue a dangerous downward spiral. Andrés Miguel Rondón, a Venezuelan economist who fled to Spain, wrote this of his own country's experience of being caught up in an authoritarian's fraudulent promises: "[W]hat can really win them over is not to prove that you are right. It is to show that you care. Only then will they believe what you say."

Alexander Hurst @iamhurst

Alexander Hurst is a Paris-based writer, editor, and freelance journalist.