

# Donald Trump and his Exploding Plastic Inevitable

BY STASH LUCZKIW

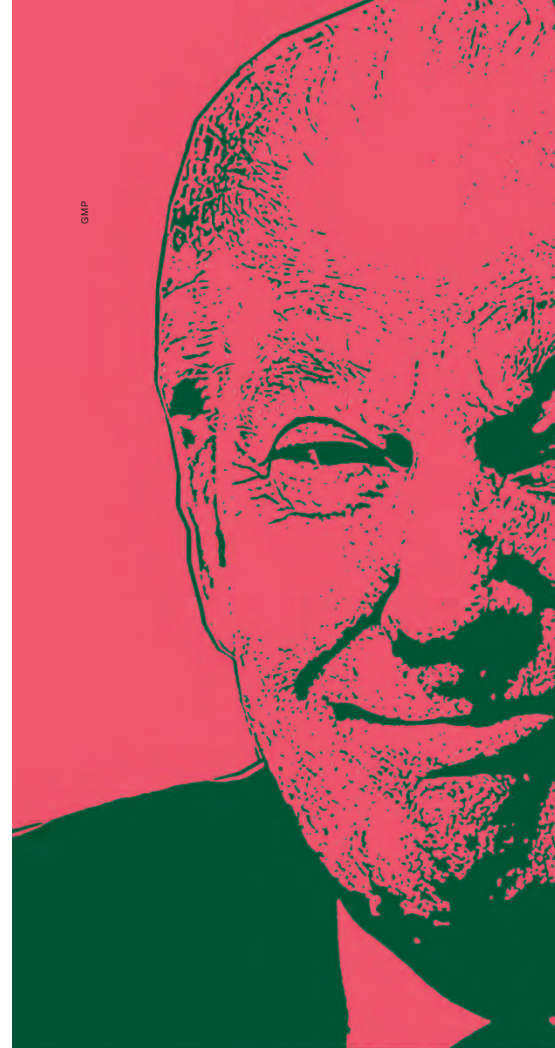
Pop-politics is nothing new. But when traditional content is combined with new forms and revolutionary technology, one can expect a sea change. The Trump movement exhibits all the symptoms of such a shift as it taps into America's hopes and fears.

In the early 1960s Andy Warhol scandalized the art world with a series of paintings depicting his comfort food: cans of Campbell's soup. He was young, provocative and didn't seem to care what critics thought of him. In fact, the more he was excoriated by them, the more he and his artwork seemed to thrive.

Years later, especially after his death in 1987, Warhol came to be recognized as a seminal figure in 20th century art. His early images of soup cans, dollar bills and Coke bottles – derided as gimmicky when first shown – are now considered original American adaptations of iconography. (Warhol grew up in a family of Ruthenian immigrants near Pittsburg, Pennsylvania and attended a Byzantine Rite Catholic church full of icons.) The serial repetition of these images through new silk-screening techniques allowed him to adapt traditional approaches in a wholly novel way. Simultaneously, Warhol adapted the technique to revive the waning Western tradition of portraiture, extending beyond silk-screens and using film to “screen test” subjects' expressions over time as they posed.

So after an initial shock, the Pop Art movement championed by Warhol became an integral part of the American cultural landscape. And Warhol's affected shallowness – “I am a deeply superficial person” – became as recognizable an American artistic trope as Ernest Hemingway's machismo.

Analogously, American politics has undergone its own confrontation with superficiality. TV had a huge impact on the 1960 presidential election, when JFK's heartthrob splendor highlighted Dick Nixon's five-o'clock shadow during the first televised debate in Unit-











A gallery visitor studies *Dollar Signs*, 1981, by Andy Warhol.

ed States history. No matter what may have been said, a watershed was crossed: from then on a national politician needed to be at least presentable on TV. Within a couple of decades many Americans were scandalized by the fact that an actor, Ronald Reagan – whom many remembered from his B movies and Chesterfield cigarette ads – had been elected president.

But Americans adjusted to that too. Soon it became a prerequisite that a national politician in any democratic country had to appear regularly in front of the media and transmit a modicum of charisma. Each US president had his own more or less successful style: Lyndon Johnson's Texas swagger served him well in his landslide victory against Barry Goldwater, a figure who was simply beyond the pale for most Americans. A resurrected Nixon benefitted from the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968 to win against the lukewarm Hubert Humphrey, and then honed his image as a scrappy survivor to beat George McGovern in 1974. Jimmy Carter's southern gentlemanly smile and soft-spoken sincerity worked only for one term. Reagan's avuncular firmness combined with a boyish sense of humor seduced the nation. (To wit: "My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes..." during a sound check in

1984.) George Bush Sr. may not have been very charismatic, but he won against the eminently forgettable Michael Dukakis – and he jumped out of airplanes. Then came the baby-boomer-in-chief, Bill Clinton, whose slick intelligence rejuvenated a moribund Democratic Party. George Bush Jr. came across as an affable good ol' boy to both working classes and the establishment elite. And Barack Obama is both loved and hated for his cool demeanor, which often veers toward disparaging or condescending aloofness. (And let's not ignore the black origins of the slang "cool," nor, for that matter, the entrenched inability of many Americans to embrace a black president.)

Whatever secret ingredient any given president may have, there is one indispensable ingredient. He (or she) must be able to project an appealing image to the masses on an almost daily basis. Gone are the days when the commander-in-chief could hole up in his study for days or weeks to contemplate his next move. In a government "of the people, by the people and for the people" who are addicted to their TV screens, computers and smartphones – all calibrated to a 24-hour news cycle – an aspiring candidate needs to emit a continuous flow of appeal in order to get elected.

Enter "The Donald" – another straw-haired scandal-monger who has mastered the art of pop. A con-



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vergence of factors has led to the prospect of Donald Trump actually winning the Republican nomination, and possibly even beating Hillary Clinton, who at this stage looks poised to win the Democratic nomination. These factors include: brand recognition, authenticity, entertainment and fear – all of which have become hallmarks of the current American zeitgeist.

The Trump brand has given the GOP frontrunner a head start. The only other Republican candidate with as much name recognition was Jeb Bush. But whether it was due to his brother's legacy or his own dearth of charisma, Jeb didn't even get a chance to rev his engine before he petered out. Trump has long been associated with glitz (some would consider it kitsch), glamour (a trifecta of sexy brides), wealth and success – all of which he advertises unabashedly. In an age where "branding" has come to resemble hagiography, the sound of "Saint Donald" is sounding less absurd by the minute. In fact, from certain angles his golden comber begins to look like an iconic halo.

Love him or hate him, Trump's most distinctive characteristic is his candor. He calls them like he sees them, and seems to have no qualms about publically insulting anyone who stands in his way. In other words, he is "authentic." Let's leave aside the more recondite notions of authenticity developed by various existen-

tial philosophers and most recently by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who would no doubt categorize Trump's antics as a "trivialization of authenticity"; Trump the presidential candidate is the product of a cult of authenticity whose most garish manifestation is reality TV and social network confessionals. It doesn't matter that the aim of "being real" on TV or of "expressing yourself" on Facebook may have some ulterior motive – e.g., to promote your endeavors or simply to stave off an encroaching sense of emptiness – what matters is that you show your hidden crannies and own up to them courageously. Because the courage required to expose yourself publically is a virtue that supersedes what in the past may have been considered a backhanded expression of the sin of pride.

And let's not confuse authenticity with honesty. Even if you know Trump is flat-out lying or indulging in hyperbole, he rarely engages in the kind of dissimulation for which politicians are castigated: Reagan's "I don't remember" in the Iran-Contra hearings (though later revelations about incipient Alzheimer's disease redeemed him with many); Bill Clinton's "I never inhaled" or "I did not have sexual relations with that woman"; Bush Jr.'s more subtle "Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraqi regime continues to possess and conceal some of

**Trump's third wife  
Melania poses in front  
of a vintage US flag.**





The USA Freedom Kids caused a stir when they performed at a Trump rally in Pensacola, Florida.

the most lethal weapons ever devised”; or even Obama’s professorial pettiffoggery when he defends his foreign policy inaction. Trump may be perfectly capable of similar and even bigger lies, but that is beside the point. Because the truth he embodies lies in the authenticity of his presentation and presence. When he says “American doesn’t win anymore,” it doesn’t matter what he is referring to specifically or how he defines victory. What matters is that we know what he means, we recognize the spirit in which he says it, and we feel that he feels it *with* us. There is a mutual sympathy.

As far as entertainment is concerned, Trump is hands down the most entertaining figure in this presidential race. Stand-up comedian Louis C.K., in an open letter to his fans (and anyone else), urged people to stop voting for Trump. He likened the phenomenon to “a big hit off of a crack pipe. Somehow we can’t help it... We know that if we vote for Trump our phones will be a reliable source of dopamine for the next four years. I mean I can’t wait to read about Trump every day. It’s a rush. But you have to know this is not healthy.” Trump is certainly more of an attention-getter than any of the other candidates. In fact, people tune into videos or live footage of his rallies just to see how many protesters get thrown out, how Trump will berate them

(“Get a job!” or “Go home to mommy!”) and whether any physical violence will befall them. At one point during a March 7 rally in North Carolina, right after yet another demonstrator was escorted out, he asked the huge crowd a rhetorical question: “Are Trump rallies fun?” The answer is they are certainly more fun than any of the other candidates’ rallies – unless, of course, you are so offended and appalled that your fun button gets jammed. At another rally in St. Louis on March 11, he noted that the presence of disruptive protesters “adds to the flavor, makes it more exciting.” He even added, “Isn’t this better than listening to a long boring speech? You can hear that from the other candidates, they don’t say anything anyway.” Later that day, a rally scheduled in Chicago was cancelled due to clashes between protesters and Trump supporters.

From the perspective of entertainment and ratings, this is much better than ordinary real TV, because the reality being broadcast has the potential of affecting not only the lives of every single American, but also the geopolitical balance of the world. Already media executives and ordinary people alike are salivating at the prospect of a Trump-Clinton race in terms of sheer entertainment value.

And yet, the biggest factor behind Trump’s candi-



Ronald Reagan promoting cigarettes in a 1952 ad.

dacy having become a veritable movement is fear. The engine of American society has always been fueled by fear – of tyranny, of a lawless uncharted continent, of ruthless newcomers determined to succeed and supplant the natives, and especially of failure. Trump knows how to stoke that engine as well as any presidential candidate in memory. Today, there is fear of terrorists, fear of Mexican immigrants, fear of jobs fleeing south of the border, or all the way to China. The solution is isolationism: build a wall, literally and politically. But most of all there is fear of losing. Indeed, he often refers to his adversaries as losers, lightweights or choke artists. And Trump is touching a nerve among the people who stand to lose the most in America's current evolutionary trajectory: white lower-middle-class males who feel they have been left behind. Trump has empowered that fear and turned it into anger.

As we approach the Republican nomination there

are bound to be more confrontations. Trump supporters, fearful of losing even more as America's perceived decline continues, will inevitably clash with those who fear that Trump is merely the spokesman for people who loathe all that Obama stands for, who clumsily disguise an ingrained bigotry with attacks against straw men like Obamacare, the Islamic State, Bashar al-Assad, Iran or the Dodd-Frank Act. Inevitably, the crowbar of mutual fear will crack open American society's inherent fissures even wider.

However, for all Trump's popularity among Republican voters, it is still unlikely that he will win the presidency. The crucial factor is demography. For the past three decades the Latino population has been an increasingly important voting block in presidential elections. Culturally, Latinos would seem to be natural Republicans – conservative, hard-working, anti-entitlement, and oriented around a traditional family struc-





ty's present state of bankruptcy, the first lines of defense against a demagogue no longer hold. Because he's loud and rich and famous, because he's run his campaign like a reality TV show, because he's horribly compelling and, yes, sometimes even right, Trump has come this far without many endorsements or institutional support, without much in the way of a normal organization, clearing hurdle after hurdle where people expected him to fall.

"But the party's convention rules, in all their anachronistic, undemocratic and highly-negotiable intricacy, are also a line of defense, also a hurdle, also a place where a man unfit for office can be turned aside.

So in Cleveland this summer, the men and women of the Republican Party may face a straightforward choice: Betray the large minority of Republicans who cast their votes for Trump, or betray their obligations to their country.

"For a party proud of its patriotism, the choice should not be hard."

But if Trump wins enough delegates in the primaries, such talk might turn out to be a pointless exercise in hand-wringing and wishful thinking. No other candidate can manage to gain any traction in the face of the Trump movement, and suggestions by old-guard Republicans to machinate a salvific alternative have been drowned out by all the fun being had at The Donald's rallies. Moreover, as long as a significant portion of Republicans continue to antagonize the growing Latino population, there will be little hope of regaining the White House in the near future, and Republican numbers in Congress may also begin to dwindle.

A Washington Post/ABC News poll conducted in early March indicates that in a head-to-head contest, Hillary Clinton would beat Trump 50% to 41% among all voters. Clinton would manage to get 14% of the registered Republican voters and Trump would get 9% of the registered Democrats. Clinton would win the independents 48% to 39%. Yet despite the massive political machine behind her and her current lead in the polls over both Bernie Sanders and Trump, Hillary could still lose either the primary or the election. Her hardcore supporters are not that numerous, and, as Trump has observed, "they have no fervor." Most people would vote for Clinton by default, because notwithstanding her lack of charisma and perceived opportunism she is definitely the most experienced candi-

ture. As Ronald Regan once quipped: "Latinos are Republicans. They just don't know it yet." But Republican hostility to immigrants and even tacit racism has consistently estranged Latinos, who have tended to vote overwhelmingly for Democrats. In the 2012 presidential elections 71% of them voted for Obama. Since 1980 the only Republicans who have managed to do relatively well with Latinos (more than 35%) have been Ronald Reagan and George Bush Jr., respectively former governors of California and Texas, both of whom showed a deep appreciation of Mexican immigrants.

The bottom line is that numerically, Trump simply cannot win by relying on white male votes alone.

The Republicans, however, have two viable conservative Latino candidates: Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz. (Former president Jimmy Carter has remarked that he believes Ted Cruz would be much more dangerous than Trump because the New York businessman "has proven already he's completely malleable," whereas the Texas Senator is not malleable. "He has far-right wing policies he'd pursue if he became president.") Already there is a "Stop Trump" movement among old-guard Republicans, but there doesn't seem to be any resonance with voters in the primaries. And the logic of a Latino-friendly candidate escapes them.

Inevitably the outcome of a Trump victory in the primaries will be an unprecedented split in the Republican Party. There has been talk of a brokered convention. Ross Douthat a conservative columnist for *The New York Times* has advocated using the byzantine convention rules to block Trump, whom he deems unfit.

"What Trump has demonstrated is that in our present cultural environment, and in the Republican Par-



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date, or because it's time for a woman, or because there is no better alternative, or simply to prevent Trump from getting into the White House.

Still, even if Trump does not win either the Republican nomination or the presidential election, the US has crossed a watershed. Pop-politics has taken hold. Others will learn from Trump's strengths and mistakes, and we can expect similar political campaigns in the future, ones that circumvent traditional party filters and aim directly at a visceral connection with the populace.

Imagine another charismatic and provocative public figure, with the capacity to raise money, one who appeals to a broader demographic cross-section, maybe even has a winsome smile, a wicked sense of humor, and is both tough and cool and all the other stuff we want in a leader; one who can offer comfort food in the form of sound bites, insisting how "we're gonna make American great again, we're gonna take back the country, and we're gonna win." And along with the comfort food we are entertained by how he or she crushes enemies and triggers that rush of fear that moves us to invest him or her with our hopes. Such a candidate, to pilfer Louis C.K.'s description of Trump, "pulls you towards him, which somehow feels good or fascinatingly bad." It would be a perversely winning formula. And such a candidate would be so unstoppable, that he or she might be able to take advantage of any seriously dysfunctional aspects of the American political system

and fashion the republic as he or she sees fit, molding it like some incendiary Play-Doh in the name of democracy...

Such is the meaning of the Trump movement. He is the harbinger of a veritable shakeup in the American political landscape, a captivating cloud formation on the horizon. But he's nothing new. In fact, his pop-politics is in essence just tried-and-true populist bombast. But just as the Pop Art movement – which telegraphed certain sea changes in American society – can be interpreted as a modern variation on iconography and portraiture utilizing new techniques and technologies, so the Trump movement's run-of-the-mill populism will be blown up and out of proportion by the internet revolution. Trump himself may be too hated by too many people to become president, but his ascendancy augurs a test for the American system of checks and balances. It forces us to ask ourselves the question: Can someone like Trump be a strong enough leader to change a system designed to prevent such leaders from taking power? Can America's institutions withstand the Exploding Plastic Inevitable that Americans find so irresistible?

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STASH LUCZKIW is a US-born social and political analyst.