



Trump, the toxic leader

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Toxic leaders: “leaders who engage in numerous *destructive behaviors* and who exhibit certain *dysfunctional personal characteristics*¹. To count as toxic, these behaviors and qualities of character must inflict some reasonably serious and enduring harm on their followers and their organizations. The intent to harm others or to enhance the self at the expense of others distinguishes seriously toxic leaders from the careless or unintentional toxic leaders, who also cause negative effects”².

Sounds familiar? Indeed, as it is how we might define Trump’s performance as President of the United States since his arrival six months ago at the White House: abuses of power and position, promoting himself at the expense of his subordinates³, narcissism, manipulation, intimidation, need for power, leading in a very coercive manner, excluding critical followers, black & white vision, negative (hateful) worldview, reinterpreting facts and realities⁴, manipulating media (“fake news”), etc.

Veldman developed a typology of toxic leaders⁵.

The Cold Fish: the ends justifies the means. So any decision and action is justifiable in terms of the results desired.

The Snake: the world serves me in the endeavour to satisfy my personal needs like greed, status and power.

Glory Seeker: personal glory and public visibility at any cost, regardless of whether I have made any real and meaningful contribution.

Puppet Master: absolute, centralised control over everything and anyone, under all circumstances.

Monarch: ruling the organisation as if it is my kingdom. All of its assets are available for my personal use.

Clearly based on leaks, interviews in the press...
President Trump fits a mix of the five categories.

¹ See Struye de Swielande, T., “Essay on the decision-making process and the ideology to come of the Trump presidency”, Commentary Paper, n°44 – Chaires Baillet Latour - CECRI, 19 December 2016; “It’s the Leadership, Stupid!”, Commentary, n°50, June 2017.

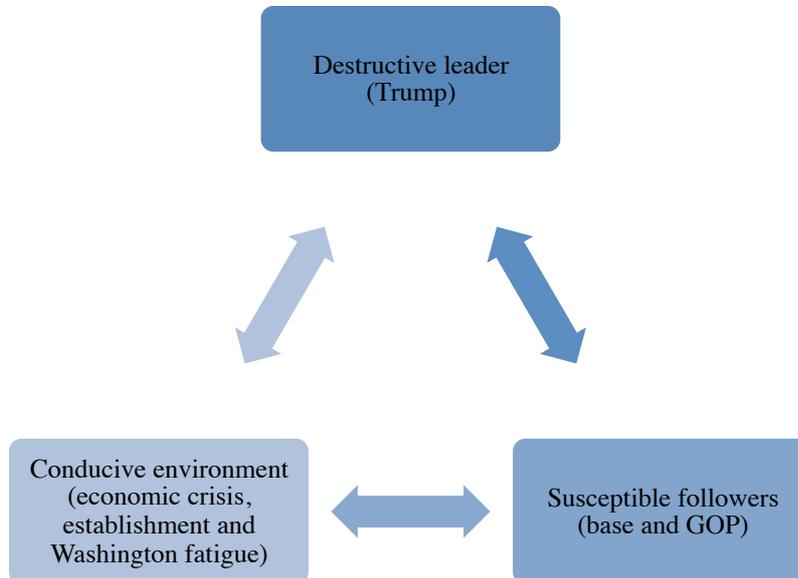
² Lipman-Blumen, J., *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p. 44.

³ Aubrey, D., “The effect of Toxic Leadership”, Strategy Research Project, United States Army war College, 2012, p. 1-2.

⁴ See Andreasen, S., Simon. S., “Is Trump Scheming to Kill the Iran Deal?”, *The Washington Post*, August 2, 2017.

⁵ Veldsman, T., “How Toxic Leaders Destroy People as Well as Organisations”, *The Conversation*, January 14, 2016.

During his campaign “America First” Trump was already a toxic leader, presenting alternative discourse and vision, exploiting, as toxic leaders do, four basic needs (need for authority, need for security, need to feel special, need to belong) and two main fears (fear of ostracism, fear of powerlessness)⁶. Trump was able to manipulate this unique opportunity into forming a ‘toxic triangle’, as developed theoretically by Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser⁷:



Six month into office, despite his insults, provocative tweets, his many failures, etc., he still has the support of his base and from the Republican party (almost no checks and balances). This support is based on two categories of followers. Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser distinguish the ‘**conformers**’, who comply with destructive leaders out of fear, and the ‘**colluders**’, who actively participate in the destructive leader’s agenda⁸.

The latter will probably always follow Trump, and is mainly composed of the majority of his base influenced by the alt-right. We can observe the conformers type of followers among some members of the Republican party, who are afraid to be too critical towards the President, because submitted to threats and because they have in their line of vision the primaries for the 2018 mid-term elections with pro-Trump candidates.

We can also find one other reason: the Grand Old Party is obsessed with achieving its goals and objectives, and the process forgets its values. Jeff Flake, a Republican senator from Arizona, wrote for *Politico* a very enlightening analysis in this regard: “Too often, we observe the unfolding drama along with the rest of the country, passively, all but saying, “*Someone should do something!*” without seeming to realize that that someone is us. And so, that unnerving silence in the face of an erratic executive branch is an abdication, and those in positions of leadership bear particular responsibility. (...) But where does such capitulation take us? If by 2017 the conservative bargain was to go along for the very bumpy ride because with

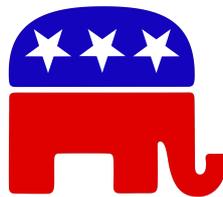


⁶ Lipman-Blumen, J., *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005.

⁷ Padilla A., Hogan R., Kaiser R., “The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments”, *The Leadership Quarterly* , 18, 2007, p. 180.

⁸ “Follower-centred Perspectives on Leadership”, Chapter 3, p. 66.

congressional hegemony and the White House we had the numbers to achieve some long-held policy goals—even as we put at risk our institutions and our values—then it was a very real question whether any such policy victories wouldn't be Pyrrhic ones. If this was our Faustian bargain, then it was not worth it. If ultimately our principles were so malleable as to no longer be principles, then what was the point of political victories in the first place?"⁹



This immobility may have far reaching consequences not only on the image of the country abroad but also on American democracy itself. Trump, as a toxic and dysfunctional leader, has already infected and damaged the pillars of the American democracy (the independence of the Judicial authority and the FBI, the media and even the Congress) by promoting dissenting behaviors: “As toxic leaders advance and are rewarded for their achievements, subordinate leaders are incentivized to adopt their toxic values as a means of attaining power and promotion” (The Mooch is probably a good example)¹⁰.

In fine, leaders who absolve themselves from any responsibility cannot effectively lead others; in other words, with leadership comes responsibility. President Trump has taken no responsibility in any of the errors made by the administration in the last six months. The media, Republicans, Democrats, Washington and any and every other category of actors have been blamed in tweets, interviews or speeches. A toxic leader can be competent in the short term if he delivers. In the long term the effect will be negative, because of the negative impact on the institutions, advisers...



Instead of continuously passing the responsibility on to someone else, President Trump should be a courageous leader and understand the real sense of “the buck stops here”. As Paul Waldman wrote in the *Washington Post* on August 1, 2017: “It has been entertaining to watch the ongoing soap opera of this White House — the infighting, the backstabbing, the firings, the general air of chaos — but it’s important to remember that the biggest problem it has is the man who sits in the Oval Office”¹¹.

⁹ Flake, J., “My Party Is in Denial About Donald Trump”, *Politico*, August 1, 2017.

¹⁰ The Scaramucci interview in the *New Yorker*, which was not initially condemned or criticized by President Trump.

¹¹ Waldman P., “President Trump is now directly implicated in trying to cover up the Russia scandal”, *The Washington Post*, August 1, 2017.