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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

“Why Does Donald Trump Have So Much Trouble with the Truth? A Brief Update”

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Why does Donald Trump have so much trouble with the truth? Not long after the beginning of Trump’s presidency, I weighed in with some thoughts on the matter, as part of H-Diplo’s “America and the World – 2017 and Beyond” series.¹ In that essay, I made two primary claims. First, with Trump it is difficult to distinguish deception from self-deception. Second, deception in the Trump case appears to be as much a bottom-up phenomenon as a top-down one, insofar as partisan polarization has paved the way for the misinformation that Trump thrives on.

With Trump having incited an assault on the U.S. Capitol with false claims of a stolen election, it seems an opportune time to revisit the issue of his disregard for the truth. The safest claim to make is that Trump is in a league of his own when it comes to misleading the public. As of October 2020, when the bulk of this essay was written, PolitiFact had rated fully 72% of Trump’s statements either “mostly false,” “false,” or “pants on fire.” Only 13% of his statements qualified as “true” or “mostly true.”² According to the Washington Post’s Fact Checker team, Trump made a staggering 16,241 false or misleading claims during his first three years as president, averaging fifteen misleading claims per day.³ The burden of proof, obviously, is on anyone who wants to describe Trump as anything but a font of misinformation.

An important question that Trump’s record raises is how was he able to get away with it as long as he did. Even those among us who have been most bullish about presidents’ ability to mislead the public have been at a loss to explain Trump, his utter disregard for the truth, and the relatively limited political punishment he faced over the course of his presidency.⁴ In this vein, a recent piece of scholarship by Sarah Maxey makes a timely contribution.⁵ In “Limited Spin,” Maxey asks, “Under what conditions are members of the public willing to hold presidents accountable for what they say about military action?” To answer this question, the article skillfully brings to bear a set of methods that have not featured prominently in the debate on democracy and deception thus far: survey experiments. Maxey’s findings are striking. All else being equal, we should expect presidents to be politically punished for misleading the public. All else is not equal, however. First, if an intervention ends successfully, the political costs associated with misinformation are attenuated. Second, Republican presidents are rewarded by their core supporters when they stretch the truth whereas Democratic presidents are punished by theirs. The latter result is of direct relevance to the current political moment. Maxey underlines the connection, “As a Republican leader primarily

¹ John Schuessler, “Why Does Donald Trump Have So Much Trouble with the Truth?” *H-Diplo* | ISSF Policy Series, “America and the World – 2017 and Beyond” (28 February 2017), pp. 1-6.

² PolitiFact, “Donald Trump’s file,” <https://www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump/>. Accessed on 19 October 2020.

³ The Washington Post Fact Checker Staff, *Donald Trump and His Assault on Truth: The President’s Falsehoods, Misleading Claims and Flat-Out Lies* (New York: Scribner, 2020).

⁴ For an argument that democratic leaders regularly resort to deception, see John M. Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁵ Sarah Maxey, “Limited Spin: When the Public Punishes Leaders Who Lie about Military Action,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, First Published 25, September 2020.

concerned with maintaining his base of support, Trump may be exactly the type of president for whom the politically relevant costs of misinformation are minimized.”⁶

Partisan polarization shielded Trump from the full consequences of trafficking in misinformation. That is the bad news for democracy and the marketplace of ideas. Is there a silver lining, however? Consider the likely outcome if Trump had attempted to use deception to generate broad support for war, as some of his predecessors did. Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and George W. Bush – the three presidents featured in my book *Deceit on the Road to War* - strategically deployed deception to overcome pockets of domestic resistance to wars they considered to be in the national interest.⁷ All three used deception to forestall debate, to minimize controversy. The goal was to maximize domestic support for war. With Trump crudely using misinformation in order to widen partisan divisions, can readers imagine a scenario where he could have successfully pivoted and generated broad support for war? This is not just a hypothetical question. This past September, Trita Parsi of the Quincy Institute of Responsible Statecraft asked whether the Trump administration was preparing an “October surprise.” Specifically, Parsi charged that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was preparing the ground for a confrontation with Iran, using the “snapback” of United Nations sanctions as a pretext to justify attacking and confiscating Iranian cargo ships in international waters. “If or when Iran retaliates,” Parsi wrote, “Pompeo will get his October surprise. Iran’s actions will be cast as an act of aggression that necessitates a firm and decisive response. Suddenly, less than six weeks before the crucial November elections, the United States will be in a new war.”⁸ With October come and gone, the United States is not at war with Iran. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the gambit that Parsi describes succeeding politically. Trump has just been too ham-handed and partisan in his use of misinformation to pull off the “blame-shifting” tactics that past presidents have used to head off debate and pave the way for war.⁹

Trump, in short, is a divider, not a unifier, which is essential to understanding why he has been able to traffic in misinformation with relative impunity and yet could only rally so much support around his priorities. For critics of Trump’s ‘America First’ foreign policy, that is all to the good. For those of us, however, who welcomed the more open debate about America’s role in the world that coincided with Trump’s term in office, the fact that he was a fatally flawed messenger represents a missed opportunity to coax American grand strategy in a more prudent direction.

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⁶ Maxey, “Limited Spin,” 24-25.

⁷ Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War*. On Roosevelt, see also John M. Schuessler, “The Deception Dividend: FDR’s Undeclared War,” *International Security* 34:4 (Spring 2010), 133-165.

⁸ Trita Parsi, “Is Mike Pompeo Preparing an October Surprise?” *Responsible Statecraft*, 16 September 2020; <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/09/16/is-mike-pompeo-preparing-an-october-surprise/>.

⁹ On blame-shifting, see Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War*, 3-4, 14-16.