

The Trump Mystique: A Closer Examination

By Don Sutherland

Since he launched his Presidential campaign on June 16, 2015, New York City real estate magnate Donald Trump has differentiated himself from his rivals from his proposing hardline policies that would test political, social, and even constitutional constraints, and his engaging in harsh rhetoric directed at Mexicans and Muslims. Yet, as of now, Trump remains atop the polls for the Republican Party's nomination.

Often, a prominently-publicized gaffe or a disastrously-conceived policy idea leads to a candidate's plunging into an existential crisis. During such crises, candidates are confronted with a significant erosion of support that, if left unchecked, could lead to the destruction of their campaigns. So far, Trump has evaded such a fate. He has done so all the while proclaiming to often adoring crowds that he is pursuing a 'politically incorrect' campaign.

His pledge to build a wall along the United States-Mexico border, promise to deport undocumented immigrants and Syrian refugees, call to suspend the immigration of Muslims to the United States, and critique of Senator John McCain's prisoner of war experience, along with his characterization of immigrants from Mexico have not brought about that kind of crisis, much less the collapse of his campaign. That his policy ideas are incompatible with some of the most basic principles, such as an absence of religious tests, that have pervaded the nation's historic experience and social progress has seemingly not mattered.

This outcome has confounded pundits and frustrated his fellow candidates. Reflecting those sentiments, Washington Post Chief Correspondent, Dan Balz, [observed](#), "Those already drawn to Trump have shown remarkable willingness to accept the worst and continue to support him."

Why has Trump remained seemingly immune to the laws of political campaigns? Management theory can, perhaps, provide part of the explanation.

Trump fits the framework of a charismatic leader. In discussing such leaders in their "Toward a Behavioral Theory of Charismatic Leadership in Organizational Settings," Professors Jay Conger and Rabindra Kanungo wrote:

The term charisma often is used in political science and sociology to describe a subset of leaders who "by the force of their personal abilities are capable of having profound and extraordinary effects on followers" (House & Baetz, 1979, p.399). Followers perceive the charismatic leader as one who possesses superhuman qualities and accept unconditionally the leader's mission and directives for action (Willner, 1984).

...the greater the discrepancy of the goal from the status quo, the more likely followers will attribute extraordinary vision to the leader. By presenting an idealized goal to followers, a leader provides a challenge and a motivating force for change... Since the idealized goal represents a perspective shared by the followers and promises to meet their hopes and aspirations, it tends to be within the latitude of acceptance in spite of the extreme discrepancy.

If one takes a look at Trump's message, one finds that he is offering a well-defined problem statement, simple diagnosis, succinct aspirational vision, and a convincing rationale for his candidacy. His message portrays an America that has lost its greatness, is under threat from abroad and within, and in which many people are struggling. He argues that this predicament is the result of ineffectual and weak leadership, a message that seeks to delegitimize both Republican and Democratic political rivals while rendering governance experience (which Trump lacks) a decided liability. He consistently promises to "make America great again." Afterward, he points to his successes in building a far-reaching real estate empire, authoring a book on leadership, and his accumulating enormous wealth to build the case that he alone possesses the 'right stuff' to lead the country back to greatness.

This narrative is both basic and powerful. The nation has lost its greatness. People are suffering and their future is bleak. That greatness and the wellbeing of the nation's people can still be restored. Trump will do so. No one else can.

That message appeals strongly to the needs, hopes and aspirations of his audiences. It tightly binds his candidacy to their fate. As a result, Trump has nurtured a mutually-reinforcing relationship between himself and his audiences. He has essentially fused his candidacy and his supporters into a unified political movement. By doing so, he has effectively transformed his audiences into followers who unconditionally accept his message.

That outcome has inoculated Trump from the consequences that would typically imperil his candidacy on account of his noted lack of governance experience, harsh rhetoric, and increasingly extreme policy ideas. That fusion of Trump and his followers into a unified movement has become so intense that external criticism of Trump often strengthens his followers' commitment to his candidacy. In turn, that dynamic provides Trump with even greater latitude to go to rhetorical and policy extremes.

Nevertheless, as unshakeable as Trump's core support currently appears, such loyalty can erode over time. One possible threat to that loyalty would be a change in some significant aspect of the economic, social, or national security environment responsible for the anxiety, fear and dissatisfaction of his supporters into which Trump has skillfully tapped. Another would be an emergent recognition--perhaps brought about by a series of self-inflicted errors--that causes Trump's followers to reappraise his actual leadership capacity. A third would be a divergence of Trump's basic message from the needs, hopes and aspirations of his followers.

The first factor would diminish the perceived need for Trump's leadership. The second would reposition him as less than extraordinary, making alternative candidates viable, if not attractive substitutes. The third would push him toward irrelevance. Any one of those factors, by itself, could shatter the Trump mystique and, in doing so, bring the Trump movement to an abrupt end.

For now, Trump maintains a [large lead](#) over the Republican field. But the final chapter—whether his movement will prove to be little more than a fad that ultimately flamed out or something more enduring—has yet to be written.

[**Author's Guess:** Barring the onset of an economic downturn, a significant body of data pointing to an imminent downturn, or some other non-economic event that displaces the economy/jobs from their typically having the largest influence on how the electorate votes, the large misalignment between what Trump offers and the kind of policies required to address the needs of the electorate will become more evident. That development will erode the rationale for Trump's candidacy and bring about the downfall of his campaign. Whether or not that discovery process will occur during the Republican primary process or afterward during the general election campaign remains to be seen.]