



## The Don

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## Abstract

### Chapter 3

#### Trump and the Heroic Gods and Monsters of American Satire

*Since the turn of the nineteenth century, Americans have been judging presidential aspirants and occupants in the light of heroes of the Republic. This holds true in particular for George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt (FDR) who have been at the top of scholarly rankings as great presidents since 1948. On the flip side, voters have been equally prepared to denounce aspirants and occupants as monsters unworthy of the office held by such greats. Donald Trump has received both the praise and blame of this mode of rhetoric from satirists who are the focus of this discussion. American political satirists are as concerned as other Americans with the qualities of the person who wants to be president and they use the same cultural resources in their judgements. To that extent, their concerns match that of Max Weber with the Faustian nature of political power, that ‘whoever becomes involved with politics, that is to say, with power and violence as a means, “has made a pact with satanic powers”.*

### 3

## Trump and the Heroes and Monsters of American Satire

Mark Rolfe

### Satire, The United States, and Donald Trump

Since 1964, an enthroned George Washington has greeted visitors to the National Museum of American History in the capital of the United States. This huge 12 tonne statue completed by Horatio Greenough in 1840 depicts Washington as another Zeus. It first sat in the rotunda of the Capitol building where sightseers since 1865 have looked up to find the first president sitting with Roman gods in a ceiling fresco created by Constantino Brumidi. Such neo-classical renderings of Washington are no longer fashionable but even these days “his popular image remains that of a demigod”.<sup>1</sup> Such is the hero worship lodged permanently in the American imagination that every year millions of tourists flock to Mount Rushmore in South Dakota where they marvel at the sixty-foot-high sculptures of Washington as well as of Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln that were carved out of the side of a mountain.

Since the turn of the nineteenth century, Americans have been judging presidential aspirants and occupants in the light of the heroes of their republic, in particular Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt (FDR), who have been regarded at the top of scholarly rankings as great presidents since the notion of such a table was

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<sup>1</sup> Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 8–9.

created in 1948. On the flipside, voters have also been prepared to denounce some aspirants and occupants as monsters, unworthy of the high office held by such greats.

The focus of this chapter is on Donald Trump and the humour surrounding his suitability for the presidency that described Trump as a god-sent hero saving the nation or as a monster threatening democracy. All the associated humour reflected and reinforced an identity crisis that was at the centre of American politics, because central to the struggle was Trump himself.<sup>2</sup> The 2016 election demonstrated that American political identities had become more racialised and polarised than in the past. This made for “more divisive and explosive” conflict over the meaning of America<sup>3</sup>. Many comedians were embroiled according to their views of Trump’s fitness for office through the common use of a language of heroes and monsters that has a long history in the republic. As both presidential aspirant and occupant, Trump has received mixed rhetoric of both praise and blame from comedians.

Despite their differences over Trump, these comedians were just as concerned as other Americans with the qualities of the person who desires or occupies the presidency. After all, humour has “cultural meaning” according to the society from which it is drawn<sup>4</sup>, so comedians use the same cultural resources for their judgements as the rest of the population for theirs. As this chapter argues, the rhetoric of heroes and monsters corresponds with the ideals of American Exceptionalism and is found in American political satire, which is here connected to political humour.

Like their compatriots, American political satirists have often articulated through this language a very traditional concern with the tremendous power of the presidency and with political leadership more generally. To some extent, they correspond in a more hyperbolic fashion with the more intellectual disquiet that Max Weber had with the Faustian nature of political power. As he wrote, “whoever becomes involved with politics, that is to say, with power and violence as a means, ‘has made a pact with satanic powers’”.<sup>5</sup> Political office tantalises candidates with power and the potential for violence in the world, as Weber so vividly reminded us with Faust’s warning of the “Golem-run-amuck” in *Sorcerer’s Apprentice*.<sup>6</sup> Throughout their nation’s history, Americans have constantly reminded themselves of the monster a president might become with the tremendous powers of the nation’s highest office and their interminable dilemmas over choices of presidential aspirants and occupants has been expressed through a recurring pattern of lurid analogies to gods, heroes, and monsters.

The heroes are founded on mythologized versions of American political figures and are free-floating signifiers of virtue supposedly lighting the political path to a bright American future. They are examples of myth as collective memory that I’ll come to

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<sup>2</sup> Sides, Tausanovitch and Vavreck, *The Bitter End*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, *Identity Crisis*, 369–376.

<sup>4</sup> Billig, *Laughter and ridicule*, 187.

<sup>5</sup> Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, xxxix.

<sup>6</sup> Yair and Soyer, “The Golem Narrative in Max Weber’s Work”.

later. The monsters are similarly varied figures derived from religious commitments, fantastic creatures, and humans such as Hitler. They are free-floating signifiers of the wickedness that will descend on the nation if a Gollum-like figure runs amok. This was, of course, the anxiety of many comedians about Trump both before and after the 2016 election.

In Weberian terms, the legitimacy of the American president is based on the “hope of reward” or the “fear of vengeance” from those lawfully controlling the means of violence. The general point here is that presidential aspirants must be taken on trust during elections. We cannot know the future of their terms in office. But even then, we are ever watchful of their actions for signs of arrogance and betrayal of power. Obviously, such things are matters of contention, dispute, and high emotion, which have been evident in the hyperbolic hortatory and admonitory rhetoric that has featured in American politics since the beginning of the republic.

We should therefore see the satirists discussed here as prominent rhetors upholding American political and moral conventions with their warnings or endorsements to citizens of presidential aspirants and occupants. Here, their use of the language of heroes and monsters conforms to notions of satire as an idiom or mode of political and moral critique that not only fits within a larger social context but is “impassioned rhetoric that claims to serve the public good” and demands some sort of “cultural, social or political change” in the future.<sup>7</sup> In other words, one cannot neatly separate American political satire from American political rhetoric; both express conflict over the political and social order. Accordingly, I use in this chapter a range of satirists in the belief that satire is intended to be persuasive, but I also mention some non-satiric rhetors to show common rhetorical resources.

In this case, the satire and rhetoric is about Donald Trump and the decisions voters had to make about his election in 2016 and then about his presidency. Satirists mobilised the intemperate satire and indignant passions in the public spaces of free expression and opposition that Robert Phiddian has argued to be important and stabilising political developments in Anglophone societies over the last three centuries. Satire has been a valid form of “rhetorical aggression” that released “potentially disruptive public emotions” like contempt, anger, disgust, and fear. This form of catharsis has thus prevented “recourse to violence or oppression”.<sup>8</sup>

This rhetorical approach helps us understand what has been called the humour taste culture or humour regime of a society. Kuipers defined the latter as a discursive regime of “unwritten rules stipulating who can joke about what” and “declar[ing] some topics off-limits”,<sup>9</sup> which specify boundaries, power relations, and the voices that have authority to jest. Rhetorical engagements within a society determine the existence of such regimes and involve not only humour but also the rhetoric or meta-discourse about the humour as well as the more general rhetoric of a society, which includes its

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<sup>7</sup> Phiddian, *Satire and the Public Emotions*, 3, 6. See also Griffin, *Satire*, 36–38.

<sup>8</sup> Phiddian, *Satire and the Public Emotions*, 3–9, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Kuipers, “The politics of humour in the public sphere”, 69.

agreed goods and evils. To be specific, gods, heroes and monsters in this chapter are some of the agreed goods and evils held in common in the United States.

Another way of describing the American humour regime and its agreed goods is to recall what Louis Rubin labelled in 1973 “The Great American Joke”. American humourists have repeatedly pointed “to putative social or moral failings in society”<sup>10</sup> by exploring the gap between the “big promise” of the Declaration of Independence and the ideals of liberty, equality, and self-government, on the one hand, and the difficult reality of politics, on the other.<sup>11</sup> One can add to this list references to the Founding Fathers, the early republic, and the great presidents of the past that help to pose some distance between contemporary practice and sacred but betrayed ideals. American comedians can easily resort to such references. Bill Maher basically appropriated the Founding Fathers to his liberal side of politics in one of his attacks on members of the Tea Party in 2011:

Now that they've finished reading the Constitution out loud, the tea baggers must call out that group of elitist liberals whose values are so antithetical to theirs. I'm talking of course about the Founding Fathers who, the teabaggers believe, are just like them. But aren't. One is a group of exclusively white men who live in a bygone century, have bad teeth and think of blacks as three-fifths of a person, and the other are the Founding Fathers. Now I want you teabaggers out there to understand one thing: while you idolize the Founding Fathers and dress up like them, and smell like them, I think it's pretty clear that the Founding Fathers would have hated your guts. And what's more, you would've hated them. They were everything you despise. They studied science, read Plato, hung out in Paris and thought the Bible was mostly bullshit.<sup>12</sup>

In a segment of her series *I Love America*, Sarah Silverman is in a hall of presidential wax figures that come alive at night, as in the film *Night At The Museum*. From the disturbing discussion and sometimes crude and lascivious banter, she does conclude that America was founded and run by “assholes” and has “a spotty history”. But they did do some good. She is reassured by the Lincoln figure which, in effect, recycled the Great American Joke: “It's true, America was never really right, but in glimmers and moments we aspire to be, and I believe we will be again, because we love America, and I know you do too”.<sup>13</sup> Most pertinent to this chapter, all the other presidents applaud when Silverman unplugs the Trump figure, clearly demonstrating Trump's difference from them and his unworthiness for the top job.

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<sup>10</sup> Condren, “Between Social Constraint and the Public Sphere”, 81.

<sup>11</sup> Rubin Jr, “The Great American Joke”, 116.

<sup>12</sup> Davis, “Bill Maher To ‘Teabaggers’”.

<sup>13</sup> Silverman, “I love you America”.

Silverman is ambivalent about America, which is an imperfect country in her view, but she still upholds American ideals, including the beliefs of the Founding Fathers. For instance, she thought of the addition of 'In God We Trust' to the courts and the currency as "a product of fear mongering Red Scare 1950's McCarthyism [which goes against] our founding fathers' insistence of separation of church & state".<sup>14</sup> Moreover, she resorts to monster talk about Trump (see below).

The main point about the Great American Joke is its endurance. If one turns to American literary history, explained Rubin about the joke, one finds that "the writers have been dealing with it all along the way", including Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Joseph Glover Baldwin, Henry Melville, and Henry James who explored this essence of "American humor"<sup>15</sup>. For instance, Twain quipped, "There is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress".<sup>16</sup> The continuity of such jests about the stereotypical politician who is unlike the Founding Fathers is evident in the 1992 comedy entitled *The Distinguished Gentleman* starring Eddie Murphy. The lead character was a conman named Thomas Jefferson Johnson, his name thus drawing an implicit contrast with the upright third president. "There is only one place for people like him", mocked the trailer about Johnson, and that is Congress, where he can "do to Congress what Congress has been doing to you!"<sup>17</sup>

## A 250-year rhetorical tradition

The continuity of topics used in The Great American Joke since the beginning of the republic confirms with satire the conclusion that Andrew Robertson made more generally with American political rhetoric, that between 1790 and 1990 "the context of political debate has changed very little ... it is easier to find new means of saying something than to find something new to say".<sup>18</sup> The same goes for the language of heroes and monsters, due to the never-ending need since the early republic to persuade the mass of ordinary voters in a representative democracy.

The presidential victory of Thomas Jefferson in 1800 marked a triumph of the first Republican Party over the Federalist Party of George Washington and John Adams in a fervid time, when both parties claimed to be the true heirs of the revolution; when oppositional politics was feared; and when, paradoxically, political parties were also generally scorned as vehicles for selfish interests and ambitions over the public good. This was especially the case as the young republic progressed during the three

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<sup>14</sup> Silverman, "In God We Trust' Was Added to Our Courts & Currency. It Was a Product of Fear Mongering Red Scare 1950's McCarthyism & Went against Our Founding Fathers' Insistence of Separation of Church & State. In God We Trust Also Replaced E. Pluralibus Unum ('from Many, One') as Our Motto".

<sup>15</sup> Rubin Jr, "The Great American Joke", 110.

<sup>16</sup> Twain, *Mark Twain At Your Fingertips*, 65-66.

<sup>17</sup> Trailer Chan, *The Distinguished Gentleman* trailer.

<sup>18</sup> Robertson, *The Language of Democracy*, 9.

decades to the 1820s from what has been called a “demi-aristocratical democracy” of gentlemen into a somewhat more inclusive political society with a white male franchise.<sup>19</sup> This evolution may surprise those who thought the American colonists rose against the British in 1776 with a fervent belief in democracy. Only hindsight blessed the insurrection with this sacred value. The framers of the constitution in 1787 actually thought of democracy as participatory politics and rule by the ignorant *demos*, as the received wisdom had been since Plato, and therefore treated democracy as an unwelcome reminder of ancient turbulent Athens that hovered over their gestation of the new political society.

The election of 1800 marked a divide when rhetoric became more hortatory with the growing two-party system that was helping to organize and channel politics. That is, the rhetoric became more excited and exaggerated in attempts to mobilise people. It also became more admonitory with warnings of the wrong choice of political party putting the country’s future at stake. Both aspects resulted in a reliance on invective and antithesis, especially at elections, based on the contrasts between parties and their leaders. In the process, the language of gods, heroes and monsters and public emotions like fear and anger were common to political rhetoric and political satire expressing hopes and dreams for the future.

If this language seems somewhat fantastical and epic, then that is because of the bubbling imagination excited by American Exceptionalism. One need only turn to the popular Jon Stewart as a recent exponent of American Exceptionalism as well as the American Joke. While at the helm of *The Daily Show*, he often referenced the constitution and its framers, including Washington and Jefferson, when criticising presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama for abuse of power with military drones; the corrupting influence of political donations; or their failure to match Lincoln. While Stewart sometimes took direct aim at American Exceptionalism, such as his disdain for the bombing of Syria in 2013,<sup>20</sup> nevertheless he has some very traditional views:

The truth of the American experiment is that government is messy. ... But we have an exceptionalism that we have taken for granted, and we get lost in the symbolism of who we are rather than the reality. The reality of who we are is still remarkable.<sup>21</sup>

Like Silverman, Stewart finds America to be imperfect, but his opinion is not at odds with recent iterations of American exceptionalism because of his belief in the great ideals that mark America as unlike any other nation. We must understand this concept of exceptionalism, though, as largely a post-war umbrella term under which has been gathered several concepts that have various historical pedigrees. Americans have not always used “exceptionalism” when speaking of their nation. The

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<sup>19</sup> Robertson, *The Language of Democracy*, chapter 1.

<sup>20</sup> The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, “Syria and American Exceptionalism”.

<sup>21</sup> Marchese, “Jon Stewart Is Back to Weigh In”.



term only arose in the 1920s among communists and was subsequently picked up by others during the Cold War in order to legitimize United States actions. Furthermore, Americans have not always bundled it with other terms such as American Creed and Manifest Destiny into one neat patriotic package that, as some believe, began with the arrival of the Pilgrims and Puritans of the seventeenth century. Actually, the usage of these terms grew unevenly together in stages over the decades to what it is today.

Yet these terms all stem from a widespread faith in providentialism, a “belief that God intervenes in human history” and has a special plan for the United States.<sup>22</sup> This idea of divine involvement in the nation’s course has taken various forms over the generations, revealing a shifting, contingent and polyvalent concept. Nonetheless, providentialism has been a leading component of American identity since the seventeenth century. By 2018, 78 per cent of Americans across the political spectrum agreed their nation had “a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world”.<sup>23</sup>

We can say with confidence that from the beginning of the republic, Americans spoke naturally of the creation of their nation as a major event in world history. God had a leading role as director of this drama. From the 1790s, both critics and admirers placed the American and French Revolutions with ancient Athens in a narrative about the rise of democracy and thereby cast America as not only an ideal democracy for all Americans, but also as a universal message for all mankind.<sup>24</sup> President Thomas Jefferson assured the governor of Delaware in 1802 that Republicans were like all Americans in wanting “the success of representative government” and were not “acting for ourselves but for the whole human race”. He saw that the eyes of the world were “fixed on us with anxiety as their only hope”.<sup>25</sup> But Jefferson did have limits to such thoughts.

It became commonplace among Americans to acclaim “the genius of the Constitution” and, by implication, of its creators. However, Jefferson was disturbed enough by this trend in 1816 to warn against people treating the Constitution “like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched. They ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human”. His words were in vain as America had by then entered an evangelical revival known as the Second Awakening. Hence, “nearly everything took on a religious cast”<sup>26</sup>, especially the constitution. Moreover, Jefferson’s Federalist opponents had triumphed in boosting the constitution “as a crucial stepping-stone to the achievement of America’s auspicious destiny” that was favoured by Providence.<sup>27</sup>

Such heroic ambition for the nation had been built into the presidency as the head of state and supreme symbol of the nation. Throughout its history the presidency

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<sup>22</sup> Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Gallup Poll, *U.S. Position in the World*.

<sup>24</sup> Dunn, *Setting The People Free: The Story of Democracy*, 91–92.

<sup>25</sup> Jefferson, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Lepore, *These Truths*, 201.

<sup>27</sup> Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States*, 145–146.

has been an imaginative construction by Americans projecting the nation onto the authority of the office. That began with Washington. From the moment of death in 1799, he was treated as a “secret or semi-supernatural” being and was “more the projection of the will of God than of an individual personality”.<sup>28</sup> His hagiographers in the following decades encouraged this view. As part of this idolisation, most of his contemporaries and others after them acclaimed him as a man above partisan politics, such was his concern for all Americans and his supposed disdain for partisan politics. Other founders like Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams knew that was not the case. In the words of one historian, Washington was “an illusionist” who combined “discerning statesmanship with the partisanship of a chief executive who had a political agenda”.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, Washington successfully mastered like no other president the then popular notion of the Patriot King. This improbable idea from early eighteenth century Britain thrived amongst Americans until the 1830s.<sup>30</sup> This Patriot King was concerned only with the public good of the people and was above the despised parties and factions. Yet this unlikely concept sprang from the hypocrisy and partisan prejudices of Henry St John, Lord Bolingbroke, a British aristocrat who thought the opposing party of Whigs were not acting in accordance with his Tory understanding of the national interest. This one-sided attitude was reflected in how Federalist Washington regarded opposing Republicans led by Jefferson in the 1790s. Nevertheless, Washington was untouched by any association with partisan grime in the public mind. The demand for presidents to be both above politics but mired in politics through the parties that get them elected has remained one of the defining paradoxes of the American presidency, which is anchored in position as both head of government and head of state.

The framers had found in their classical education plausible proof of the Patriot King in Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus (519 BCE – 430 BCE), the stoic Roman aristocrat who was ploughing his farm when the senate nominated him dictator, which was a type of limited monarchy sanctioned for a short duration to deal with a crisis. In this case, it was an invasion. After the crisis was over, he returned to his plough and did not yearn for political power, thus supposedly proving how an upright character could and should resist ambition for politics. He seemed to the American framers to be historic evidence of a Patriot King. Conversely, they feared the rise of another Julius Caesar, who was proof from antiquity that a dictatorship could bring about tyranny and the downfall of a republic.

The power of this hindsight was evident in the consequences to their evolving hostility to George III during the revolutionary war. With growing zeal, the framers exaggerated his powers as a despot, ascribing to him the power to make war, to be the commander-in-chief, to choose his ministers, and to veto bills of parliament. In fact, the king had none of these powers and was a more limited monarch than

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<sup>28</sup> Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ferling, *The Ascent Of George Washington*, 538.

<sup>30</sup> Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party*, 29.

they imagined. Nevertheless, their solution was to give these imagined powers to the presidency but to limit the office with the existence of congress, the judiciary, the states, and the constitution. Ironically, the framers created a limited kingship with more powers than the British king against whom they had revolted. It is no wonder Americans through the decades have careened between hopes for another lofty Cincinnatus who disdained power and the fears of another debased Caesar who threatened with tyranny. Overwrought anxieties are easy to find in allegations of kingship, which continued to have negative connotations in America as it did in ancient Republican Rome.



Figure 1: Unknown artist, “King Andrew the First”, 1832, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington.

President Andrew Jackson (1829–1837) was denigrated as a king by contemporaries and depicted in cartoons with ermine, crown and sceptre while trampling the constitution. He was responsible for the populist turn that has “shaped American politics ever since”<sup>31</sup> and which readily revives fears of a demagogue taking power. FDR was favourably compared to Jackson as a president looking after “the common man”. But he was just as easily denounced as a dictator.<sup>32</sup> Democrats and writers at *The New York Times* damned George W. Bush for acting like a king, just as Republicans complained Obama was “acting like King Barack”.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Lepore, *The Story of America*, 147.

<sup>32</sup> Lawrence, “Contrasting Americas ‘Two New Dealers’”, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Daly, “Obama to designate new national monuments in Colorado, Hawaii and Illinois”.

During the nineteenth century Lincoln was not viewed as the secular saint of the republic that we know today. Indeed, come the civil war, Southern newspapers denounced him as a despot, tyrant, murderer of women and children, a monster, gorilla, ape, beast, and savage because of the horrendous bloodshed he supposedly caused.<sup>34</sup> Because of this perceived sin, actor John Wilkes Booth calmly recited *sic semper tyrannis* ["thus always to tyrants"] when he pulled the trigger of the gun that shot President Lincoln.<sup>35</sup> The phrase is historically associated with Brutus, one of the leading assassins of Caesar.

When heroes and villains are imagined at each other's throats in ultimate battles for America, then we witness the retelling of old morality tales over the delegation of power to a president and a rerun of the concerns of Weber. These stories entail narratives of great struggles between heroes and monsters. This was no less so during the 2016 presidential campaign, which agitated with metaphors of the monstrous and the heroic coming from the political class, the media, and comedians as they weighed the prospect of the candidates having power. The problem for many Americans participating in that election was whether Trump or Clinton was the scarier prospect.

## Antagonists of Trump the monster

Some were very clear on this matter. For instance, Democratic Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid denounced Trump as a "Frankenstein monster" built by the GOP from ugly racist politics.<sup>36</sup> A similar view issued from neo-conservative author and columnist Robert Kagan.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, Trump incited audiences by describing Hillary Clinton as "a monster". Her legacy was "death, destruction, chaos and weakness", a prospect that enraged his fans into shouting, "Lock her up" and "Kill her!"<sup>38</sup>

Just like other Americans, humourists used various monster tropes about Trump after his bid for the presidency was launched in June 2015. In July, Bill Maher recognised Trump's advantage in being "like Godzilla" in that he says all sorts of ridiculous things but "everything they throw at the monster makes him stronger".<sup>39</sup> In line with widespread fears of the malice stirred by Trump, Stephen Colbert found that the GOP convention in July 2016 was "a great performance. It really fired up the room and finally answered the question, 'What if Frankenstein's monster was in charge of the angry mob?'"<sup>40</sup> He was alluding to the demagoguery, rabble-rousing and race

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<sup>34</sup> Cronin, "Fiend, Coward, Monster, or King", 35-61.

<sup>35</sup> Crockett, "John Wilkes Booth", 40.

<sup>36</sup> Kludt, "Harry Reid".

<sup>37</sup> Kagan, "Trump is the GOP's Frankenstein monster".

<sup>38</sup> Diamond, "Trump escalates attacks on Clinton's character".

<sup>39</sup> Real Time with Maher, *Real Time with Bill Maher: Monologue - August 14, 2015*.

<sup>40</sup> The Late Show With Stephen Colbert, "Donald Trump Accepts The Republican Nomination".

baiting that have spurred an abiding fear about populism in America and that have been recurring motifs about Trump's behaviour.

In August 2016, satirist/columnist Alexandra Petri of *The Washington Post* imagined a scene of Trump as an "apocalyptic sludge monster" spitting out the remains of advisers as they try to capture him with a net, rather than pivoting "to be *more* presidential, not less".<sup>41</sup> Just a couple of weeks before the election, Amy Schumer alienated a section of her Tampa audience after calling Trump an "orange, sexual-assaulting, fake-college-starting monster".<sup>42</sup> Two hundred people left the auditorium in disgust.

The monster trope also took another, more modern form against Trump and overlapped with the racist and demagogic charges against him. Starting in 2015, many critics cited his retweets of neo-Nazis and their photos of Nazi soldiers as well as his encouragement of violence at his rallies as proof of his fascist sympathies. *Vanity Fair* resurrected a 1990 interview with Ivana Trump in which she claimed her husband had a book of Hitler's collected speeches by his bed.<sup>43</sup> In March 2016, *Huffington Post* headlined a photo "This Donald Trump Rally Looks Like A Scene From Nazi Germany" because of all the raised right arms.

These events triggered anti-Trump comedians and commentators alike. Documentary maker Ken Burns, neo-conservative Robert Kagan, liberal Nobel Prize winner for economics Joseph Stiglitz, Barack Obama<sup>44</sup>, and conservative columnist Ross Douthat, amongst others, worried that Trump was a fascist threatening democracy.<sup>45</sup> Comedian Louis C.K. let fly in a stern email that Trump "is Hitler" and that America was becoming like "Germany in the 30s. Do you think they saw that shit coming? Hitler was just some hilarious and refreshing dude with a weird comb over who would say anything at all".<sup>46</sup> Bill Maher used the *Vanity Fair* article as a comic pretext on his show to claim a translation of Hitler's speeches revealed an exact likeness to Trump's speeches.

Thank you, we're going to make Germany great again! That, I can tell you, believe me! Germany doesn't win anymore. England, France, America, they're laughing at us. The Treaty of Versailles, a terrible deal! ... We don't conquer anymore. We don't annex territory. When I'm Fuhrer, Germany is going to annex again. There's going to be so much annexing, you'll get sick of annexing. And look, I love the Jews. Nobody loves the Jews more than me. But, folks, either we have a Fatherland, or we don't. So, we're going to have to

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<sup>41</sup> Petri, "Donald Trump, in monstrous form".

<sup>42</sup> Smith, "Amy Schumer pens open letter to fans who left Florida show after Trump jokes".

<sup>43</sup> Brenner, "7 Takeaways from Vanity Fair's 1990 Profile of Donald Trump".

<sup>44</sup> Arkin, "Obama called Trump a 'fascist' during phone call, Sen. Kaine says in new Clinton film".

<sup>45</sup> Douthat, "In Search of American Fascism".

<sup>46</sup> Stein, "Louis C.K. on Trump: 'The guy is Hitler. And by that I mean we are being Germany in the 30s'".

build a camp. And I will make the Jews pay for it. When I'm done with them, they'll be saying 'Merry Christmas,' that I can tell you.<sup>47</sup>

Hitler appeared on the *Conan O'Brien Show* in order to distance himself from Donald Trump. Looking remarkably like Sarah Silverman in a Fuehrer's outfit, he complained about "comparisons to Trump" that "bums me out, you know what I mean? Sometimes I watch him and I'm like, 'Is that how people see me?' And I have to be honest, Trump, he's starting to make me rethink some of the things I've done".<sup>48</sup>

Also in March, *Saturday Night Live* mocked Trump supporters as ordinary suburban Nazis, white supremacists and Klansmen who sweetly intone, "The guy's a winner"; "He's authentic"; and "I think he can make America great again".<sup>49</sup> In a May parody of news in *The New Yorker*, Andy Borowitz had Trump promising House Speaker Paul Ryan "that he would try to sound slightly less like the former German Chancellor Adolf Hitler". In this case, the challenge was "to sound somewhat less like Hitler to please congressional Republicans while still sounding enough like Hitler to avoid alienating his key constituencies of Nazis and white supremacists".<sup>50</sup> Like many comedians, Borowitz insinuated that the awful Trump had an awful constituency. Stephen Colbert figured out the tortured reasoning of Trump's statements using his *Figure-it-out-atron* and found it led to the conclusion that Donald was a Nazi.<sup>51</sup>

There was no letup on the tropes of Hitler and fascism after Trump became president. Steve Bannon was the manager of the campaign from August 2016, the chief strategist to President Trump, and the main writer of the infamous inaugural address known as the American Carnage speech. This "Goldman Sachs worm-tongue", Samantha Bee explained to Trump through the television camera, "is filling you with more Nazi code than Enigma. Are you the only 70-year-old man in America who doesn't watch the History Channel?".<sup>52</sup> On the first *Saturday Night Live* of Trump as president, Aziz Ansari thought there was a "tiny slice" of Trump voters excited that they "don't have to pretend [they're] not racist anymore"; with that he imitated a Nazi salute.<sup>53</sup> In 2018, Conan O'Brien compared Trump voters to Nazis: "A Nazi prison guard has been sent back to Germany after years of living in the United States. After a long manhunt, authorities found him hiding at a Trump rally".<sup>54</sup>

The monster trope could take more fantastic forms with the help of Hollywood. During the first weeks of the Trump presidency, Jon Stewart used a variation of the dictator/emperor angle with a Star Wars metaphor for evil: "... the full Palpatine, with

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<sup>47</sup> Real Time with Bill Maher, "Episode 379 Transcript".

<sup>48</sup> Team Coco, "Adolf Hitler Hates Being Compared To Donald Trump".

<sup>49</sup> Saturday Night Live, "Voters For Trump Ad - SNL".

<sup>50</sup> Borowitz, "Trump Promises Paul Ryan That He'll Sound Slightly Less Like Hitler".

<sup>51</sup> The Late Show with Stephen Colbert "This Diagram Explains Trump's Response to Orlando".

<sup>52</sup> Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, "Coronation Street".

<sup>53</sup> Saturday Night Live, "Aziz Ansari Stand-Up Monologue".

<sup>54</sup> Team Coco, "A Nazi Prison Guard Was Found Hiding At A Trump Rally".

the lightning coming out of the fingertips and the [in voice] ‘fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate’”.<sup>55</sup> In 2017, Stephen Colbert invited on his show actor Andy Serkis to read President Trump’s tweets in his voice of Golum from *Lord of The Rings*. By implication, the presidency was The Precious that was liable to corrupt Trump, in what amounted to another rendering of Weber’s warning from Faust. Almost a year later in June 2018, Josh Brolin read Trump’s tweets as his character Thanos from The Avengers movies.<sup>56</sup> This character could destroy life in half the universe, an exaggerated version of the capacity of the president to unleash nuclear war. Colbert reprised a depiction of Trump as Thanos to describe his absurd behaviour at the Republican National Convention of 2020.<sup>57</sup>

## Supporters of Trump the hero & Godsend

Conservative leaders and comedians clearly disagreed with monstrous portrayals of Trump. But in the clamour and fury of partisan difference, they couldn’t resist their own lurid versions of the language of heroes when indulging absurd fantasies about Trump. This would explain the conservative political action committee that paid for a 55-foot billboard video in Times Square that rendered Trump as a muscular Superman pumping his fist into the air during mid-flight as a would-be saviour of the nation. Following this Hollywood theme that included depicting The Donald as Rambo, conservative comedian Steve Crowder produced a humorous animated series *Super Trump*. In one episode, the Superman-like hero battles the corona virus with punches and fight-sound frames reminiscent of the old Batman television series (“blam!, pow! “boobs”) before being infected by “the China virus from China”. But Trump was revived by intravenous drips of Coca Cola, rose on the third day, and the virus “cried like a little infectious bitch – and the Cuomo brothers too”. He then “knocked them all” unconscious and threw them to Mars.<sup>58</sup> The lame humour in this cartoon laughed with Trump in all his idiosyncratic glory rather than at him.

Before and after the 2016 election, conservative white evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell Jr, Ralph Reed, and Lance Wallnau countered the harangue of Trump as another Hitler in two ways. First, Wallnau converted much of the white evangelical community to the idea that Trump was another King Cyrus on a mission from God<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, “Jon Stewart Reads Trump’s Next Batch Of Executive Orders”.

<sup>56</sup> The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, “Josh Brolin Reads Trump Tweets As Thanos”.

<sup>57</sup> The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, “America: Endgame (RNC Edition)”.

<sup>58</sup> Crowderbits, “SUPER TRUMP: The Attack of The ChinaVirus! (The Animated Comic!) | Louder With Crowder”.

<sup>59</sup> Levin, “Trump Declares Himself ‘King Of Israel,’ The ‘Second Coming Of God’”.

who had “given this man an anointing for the mantle of government in the United States”.<sup>60</sup> Cyrus had freed the Jews from their Babylonian captivity.

Similarly, *Saturday Night Live* alumnus Dennis Miller thought Trump was a sort of “unwieldy, cloddish, God-send” and was “the last man standing. When I look up it’s like Fess Parker swinging a musket on the Alamo”.<sup>61</sup> Miller had parodied Hollywood and mythic history, confusing Davy Crockett with the actor who played him, and the hordes of Mexicans with Democrats who were all attacking America in one last climactic battle. Nevertheless, Miller is not so different to the millions of Trump followers who believe he was sent by God to battle real demons and rapacious paedophiles in a struggle for the soul of America. Of course, Trump is cunning enough to encourage such devotion. After appearing before a Manhattan judge on fraud charges in 2023, Trump reposted a drawing by a fan of himself next to Jesus in the courtroom.

Wallnau wrote the book *God’s Chaos Candidate: Donald J. Trump and the American Unraveling* and elsewhere he had a surprisingly profane way to exalt the tool of chaos with divine purpose: “Trump is Heaven’s Miley Cyrus wrecking ball to the spirit of Political Correctness”.<sup>62</sup> Wallnau and his evangelical ilk loved the chaos that Trump was causing. So did many right-wing comedians. On his Fox show that has sometimes outrated Colbert, Greg Gutfeld admired Trump because “No typical politician could be this crazy ... and this savvy”.<sup>63</sup> “Trump’s chaos should make you chuckle, not choke”. He “wasn’t a politician” who lies to your face; “Trump looks you in the eye and then he winks. ... you know that he’s just playing a game. It’s a salesman lie. He’s just real and they’re not”.<sup>64</sup>

For Gutfeld and for Crowder the chaos strategy worked, for instance against Iran and North Korea. Gutfeld ridiculed the Iran deal concluded by Obama as “unraveling faster than a mummy on a merry-go-round”.<sup>65</sup> Crowder knew Trump was often “blasted as crazy and reckless” when dealing with countries like North Korea and Iran but Crowder reconciled this erratic behaviour with the excuse that “maybe you need a little bit crazy, maybe crazier than the other guy in some of these countries” in order to get things done.<sup>66</sup> For similar reasons, conservative comedian Evan Sayet thought Trump was “America’s first wartime president in the Culture War”. He “may be crass but he fights”. He discarded “the rules of dignity, collegiality and propriety” that inhibited right wing leaders like Mitt Romney, George W. Bush, and John McCain

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<sup>60</sup> Wallnau, “Prophetic Prayer Sent to Donald Trump”.

<sup>61</sup> The Dennis Miller Option, “S2 E63: Ann Coulter on Trump and Democratic Presidential Hopefuls”.

<sup>62</sup> <https://lancewallnau.com/meeting-donald-trump-an-insiders-report/>

<sup>63</sup> Gutfeld, *The Gutfeld Monologues*, ep. 45 and ep. 57.

<sup>64</sup> Fox News, *Lori Loughlin’s daughter Olivia Jade reportedly upset that parents ruined her influencer career*, <https://www.foxnews.com/transcript/lori-loughlins-daughter-olivia-jade-reportedly-upset-that-parents-ruined-her-influencer-career>, 21 March 2019

<sup>65</sup> Fox News, *E81 – Gutfeld on Trump withdrawing from Iran deal*, <https://www.facebook.com/FoxNews/videos/1043971842418037/?v=1043971842418037>

<sup>66</sup> Crowder, “America’s Done Apologizing! Ben Shapiro, Blaire White, Ryan Bader Guest | Louder With Crowder”.



but which never constrained the left. They had engaged “in a knife fight” for over 60 years. So, Trump was “defeating the left using its own tactics”.<sup>67</sup>

In the second tactic countering Trump’s opponents, evangelical leaders and far right media led a sustained effort in converting Republican flocks to the idea that Trump was another Churchill. Essentially, The Donald was another iteration of this British hero because he was saving Western civilization from a great evil, although in this case it was a domestic, not international, wickedness in the form of the American left. This tactic also meant that his various actions could be defended as on the same scale as the great Briton and the great presidents. For instance, less than a month before the 2020 election, Sean Hannity on Fox News compared Trump’s COVID-19 response to the leadership of Churchill in 1940 and of FDR in 1933.<sup>68</sup>

Anne Coulter is a media pundit who laces her savage critiques of liberals with satire. Like Miller, she thought the Democrats were destroying America and Trump was a hero saving America. Hence, she described his 2016 Republican convention speech as Churchillian.<sup>69</sup> In keeping with this view, she derided liberal depictions of Trump as Hitler with “Remember That Time Trump Invaded Poland?” Yet she was just as guilty of absurdities, such as when she decried “the total war against the president, like nothing this country has experienced before”.<sup>70</sup>

*The Babylon Bee*, an evangelical version of *The Onion* satirical website, was equally dismissive of the comparisons to Hitler with headlines such as “Man Frequently Compared To Hitler Recognizes Jerusalem”.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, it played the old communist monster card with “CNN Apologizes to Stalin, Mao After Comparing Them to Trump”.<sup>72</sup> With a reputation over decades for a satirical wit lambasting liberals, Rush Limbaugh was a practitioner of insult comedy like Miller.<sup>73</sup> Over the decades as well as during the Trump presidency, he denounced the “communist” left and demarcated what he called their anti-Americanism from the true America of his listeners; after all, he said, “liberals seek to undo American greatness”.<sup>74</sup>

## The blasphemy of Trump compared to great presidents

All these fantasies about Trump’s greatness are preposterous to his comedic critics. To them, he is not in the league of the great presidents and is intent on destroying

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<sup>67</sup> Sayet, “My Turn: Evan Sayet: Trump may be crass, but he fights”.

<sup>68</sup> Jarvis, “Sean Hannity Compares Trump’s COVID Response to FDR and Churchill”.

<sup>69</sup> Coulter, “Trump’s speech today was Churchillian, only better. You can tell by the spluttering hysteria on TV about @realDonaldTrump”.

<sup>70</sup> Coulter, Excerpt from *Resistance Is Futile: How the Trump-Hating Left Lost Its Collective Mind*.

<sup>71</sup> The Babylon Bee, “Man Frequently Compared To Hitler Recognizes Jerusalem”.

<sup>72</sup> The Babylon Bee, “CNN Apologizes To Stalin, Mao After Comparing Them To Trump”.

<sup>73</sup> Heer, “Donald Trump’s Comedic Genius”.

<sup>74</sup> Limbaugh, “I’m Not Selling Out Conservatism. It’s Branding, Dude”.

the standards they upheld. This was apparent most of all when media revealed the president wished to have his visage carved into a side of Mt Rushmore next to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. Seth Meyers was sure that “the other presidents would be weirded out having Trump next to them [on Rushmore]. They’d all scoot over to one side of the mountain like passengers on the F train after a dude takes a dump”.<sup>75</sup> Jimmy Fallon thought Trump’s ridiculous ambition of Rushmore was “sort of like Dr. Fauci saying it’s his dream to play center for the Los Angeles Lakers”. “If he wants something carved into rock that looks like him, the orange hue of the Grand Canyon is a much better option”.<sup>76</sup>

The political sacrilege of elevating Trump into the ranks of the greats was evident when Andy Borowitz castigated the Republican Party for having “gone from Abraham Lincoln to Sarah Palin to Donald Trump. No wonder they don’t believe in evolution”.<sup>77</sup> Likewise, Samantha Bee sideswiped Republicans as the “party of Lincoln” who opposed slavery and pursued the civil war but had “completed its long journey from ‘A house divided cannot stand’ to ‘You should see how huge my pocket Donald looks when I masturbate with my totally normal-sized hands’”.<sup>78</sup> The House Divided speech was one of Lincoln’s most famous public addresses and Bee’s comparison is clearly meant to ridicule Trump’s rhetorical incompetence and vulgarity compared to the sixteenth president. After Trump gave a speech at Gettysburg in 2016, Stephen Colbert was harangued on his show by a cartoon ghost Lincoln who gave a crass, short version of the Gettysburg Address. The skit emphasised the coarseness of Trump by having his words coming from the mouth of the great man.<sup>79</sup> With the similar intention of presenting a jarring comparison, Bob Garfield extensively parodied this address into the sort of inept and nasty speech that Trump would have delivered on the occasion and emphasised his inadequacy for the greatest office in the nation.

FOURSCORE and seven years ago, our fathers – and also, our mothers. I love mothers, too, because we need our mothers – brought forth on this continent a huge nation, a great, amazing country dedicated to the proposition that we can beat any weak losers who are bad, bad guys and totally overrated, believe me ...

I would have negotiated, and I wouldn’t have risked the country over a few slaves, who some of them might be good people – I had some nice African American ladies working for me, and they were very dependable ladies – but it’s dumb to risk the whole country for political correctness. It really is. The blacks love me, by the way ...

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<sup>75</sup> Late Night with Seth Meyers, “Trump Signs Sham Executive Orders, Takes Credit for Obamacare: A Closer Look”.

<sup>76</sup> The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, “Trump Dreams of Adding His Face to Mount Rushmore”.

<sup>77</sup> The New Yorker, “Andy Borowitz: The End of Trump”.

<sup>78</sup> Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, “R.I.P. GOP (Part 1)”.

<sup>79</sup> The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, “Abraham Lincoln’s Ghost Responds To Trump’s Gettysburg Address”.

Heroes don't get killed. Heroes win. Then they kill the families of the losers. It's a beautiful, beautiful thing. Maybe a casino, too. So, why dedicate? Why consecrate? Why hallow this ground? Only a very stupid person would consecrate it. What we need to do is rezone it.<sup>80</sup>

## The language of heroes and monsters and renewal of the American jeremiad

Anti-Trumpers deployed against The Donald a mythic Lincoln, just as his supporters deployed the mythic Churchill favoured by the American right, but it needs unpacking. Both sides of the humour divide over Trump trade in myths like the rest of their compatriots. After Lincoln was assassinated on Good Friday in 1865, he was mourned by only one part of the country as a martyr and was often depicted as a Saviour or man-of-destiny assisted by angels. This apotheosis was the culmination of the providential thinking mentioned earlier, which turned Lincoln into God's scourge of the horrible sin of slavery when he publicly adopted emancipation in late 1862.



Figure 2: D.T. Wiest, "In Memory of Abraham Lincoln: The Reward of the Just", ca. 1865. priJLC\_POL\_002726, The Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

<sup>80</sup> Garfield, "Donald Trump".

However, it was only near the end of the nineteenth century that Lincoln was transmuted from flawed and abused Republican politician into “secular deity”<sup>81</sup>, in the manner described earlier with Washington. This was mainly due to keen publicity by a few people who evangelized his cause through biographies and newspaper articles. They “helped invent the Lincoln we know today”.<sup>82</sup> By 1900, he had joined a malleable “invented tradition”<sup>83</sup> of select, great presidents that form a non-partisan pantheon of greats embodying the ideals of the republic and are used by Americans engaging in partisan battles over the presidency. These presidents became myths, not in the sense of falsehoods, but in becoming ideologically marked narratives that are normal political features of any community and are adapted over time.<sup>84</sup> Thus, satirists and non-satirists alike have renewed the American jeremiad that has been alive for centuries<sup>85</sup>, to mourn some perceived loss of America and to want for better times in the future with a return to past principles and leaders. With it, imagination has continued to reign over judgements of pretenders to the American throne.

Political monsters are also characters in American myth-making that figure prominently in post-moral humour. The American cultural habit of comparing people to Hitler seems to not only augment the linguistic resources that signify the monstrous but also, if we follow one scholar, fill a void left by the country’s retreat since the war from belief in Satan and public unanimity in religious beliefs.<sup>86</sup> Compared to the past, Americans are now less inclined to blame the devil as the instigator of some evil. Since the 90s, various surveys reveal not only a decline in Christianity in America<sup>87</sup> but also a fluctuating belief that the devil is a real being rather than a symbol of evil.<sup>88</sup> Authors of another report were perturbed by a survey suggesting the confusion and loss of understanding among Americans about basic spiritual concepts.<sup>89</sup> Most Americans live in a far more flexible, plural, and relative moral universe with competing claims to truth.

Paradoxically, Americans have also clung to Hitler and the Nazis as an unquestioned standard of evil that can be used in many areas of life, thereby diluting and making ambiguous the original historical Nazis. That is why both sides of politics have used Hitler as a symbol of supreme evil and as a means for Americans to compare and discredit each other without substantial support for the claim. Plenty on the right saw Obama as another Hitler due to his reform of the health care system and a host of other

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<sup>81</sup> Zarefsky, “The Lincoln-Douglas Debates Revisited”.

<sup>82</sup> Zeitz, *Lincoln’s Boys*, 4.

<sup>83</sup> Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 21.

<sup>84</sup> Flood, *Political Myth*, 11

<sup>85</sup> Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, chapter 1.

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, “Just Like Hitler”.

<sup>87</sup> Mitchell, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace”.

<sup>88</sup> Hendershott, “What, the Devil?”.

<sup>89</sup> Cultural Research Center, “American Worldview Inventory 2020”.

spurious reasons. There was no need to critically analyse how Obamacare fitted these absurd claims. The Fuhrer was monstrous and so was Obama; it was as simple as that.

Similarly, there was no need to critically compare President Trump to Hitler's quick founding of a dictatorship by the end of March 1933, only two months after election, with the aid of an emergency decree and an Enabling Act. Nor did Trump have, like Hitler, a paramilitary army of 750,000 storm troopers that helped to arrest more than 100,000 communists, social democrats, unionists and others for gaol, the new concentration camps, torture, or murder. Trump did not ban, as did Hitler, political parties and trade unions nor bring under Nazi control almost all voluntary organisations and clubs. Unlike America after 2016, telling "disrespectful humour" in thirties Germany could get people arrested and sometimes imprisoned.<sup>90</sup>

Notwithstanding Trump's flirtations with neo-Nazis and white supremacists, especially after the Charlottesville incident of 2017, we do not need concepts of fascism to portray him. That frames the Trump phenomenon as something foreign that is making inroads into American democracy. Rather, Trump and some of his followers comprise America Redux, a home-grown brew of racist and authoritarian blasts from the past that were not buried as so many had hoped with the election of Obama. Authoritarianism has thrived to varying degrees in various parts of America at various times. While Americans have feared dictators or kings at the national level, many of them have often been sanguine about oligarchies at the state level dominated by one-party and backed by popular support during the eras of slavery and segregation. These regimes also restricted the franchise according to class and race and tyrannised and terrorised sections of the population with guns and lynchings. More recently, an authoritarian attitude, more so than demographics, has been a determinant of strong attraction to Trump.<sup>91</sup> The more favourably voters rated Trump, the more authoritarian they were and the more likely they were to favour punishment of those they disliked and considered undeserving.

Robert Phiddian has outlined the central importance and civilising influence of satire to public spaces of expression in the competitive party systems of modern "Western" democracies. It is possible, however, that American political satire has become more closely aligned with political identity since Trump contended for the presidency in 2015. This would be an extension of the widely noted greater sorting of Democrats identifying as liberals and of Republicans identifying as conservatives than was the case for most of the twentieth century. Partisan identity is the primary driver, according to some scholars, determining views of issues, ideology and even the tendency to follow the views of party leaders like Trump. Partisans can be more like members of a sports team with an emotional investment in its success, which is why "polarization can take on such deeply affective negative responses to partisans of the other party".<sup>92</sup> They are very effectively engaged and mobilised by anger, which is one

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<sup>90</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich in Power 1933-1939*, 106.

<sup>91</sup> Smith and Hanley, "The Anger Games".

<sup>92</sup> Benkler, Faris and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*, 306.

of the public emotions expressed by satire. The question for further research is whether satire is cathartically expressing or casually coarsening these public emotions in a polarised and divided America.

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