

## Malignant Narcissists and Divisive Fabricators: Psychological Characteristics of Two US Presidents in a Tensely Divided 21<sup>st</sup> Century America

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### Abstract

The media and mental health experts have scrutinized former President Donald Trump's personality characteristics even before the 2016 presidential election. Laypersons, psychological experts, and some politicians ascribe a narcissistic personality disorder to Mr. Trump. The present analysis opines that Mr. Trump's pattern of observed behavior in the public arena is consistent with extreme narcissism if not a narcissistic personality disorder. Psychology and psychoanalytic literature discuss Trump's ascension and the dynamics of a mutually reinforcing relationship with his supporters through the lens of large-group regression. Large-group regression can occur when a large group responds to threats, conflicts, or crises affecting its identity by regressing to primitive modes of expression. Group identification with exploitative, narcissistic leadership may supplant individual identity. This article posits that a large segment of American society, particularly those who identify as liberal/progressive/Democrat, has demonstrated countervailing forces or expressions of large-group regression. These manifestations include affective, cognitive, and behavioral features such as fear, anxiety, loathing of Trump and his supporters, splitting and projection, and uncivil behavior toward his supporters. It is contended that an increasingly polarized political environment associated with a pathologically narcissistic former president who is seeking re-election, a divisive and dishonest pattern of behavior by the current president, which has primarily been shielded or minimized by the media and overlooked by the mental health field, may be associated with an intensified large-group regression by those on both the political right and the political left with a potential outcome of increased schism and violence. This paper expands on these issues, recommends further research on large-group regression in democratic societies, and concludes that American society needs more temperate, unifying national leaders that can help to moderate the highly polarized views and intense emotions so that a more stable, tolerant, and democratic society may be maintained.

**Keywords:** Malignant Narcissism; US Presidents; Large-Group Regression; Political Personality; Fabrication

### Introduction

Recent psychological literature has characterized former US President Donald J. Trump as manifesting a narcissistic personality disorder. As of July 7, 2023, the search terms "Trump" and "narcissism" yielded 4,600,000 results on Google and about 22,000 results using the Google Scholar search engine. As of June 21, 2023, Psychology Today, the world's largest online mental health and behavioral science destination, listed more than 80 blog posts by mental health professionals addressing Trump and narcissism. Many additional blog posts addressed other critical analyses of Mr. Trump's personality or behavior. Lachmann [1] reported that a group, "Duty to Warn", founded by psychotherapist Dr. John Gartner, gathered almost 60,000 signatures of mental health professionals on a petition stating that "Trump

manifests a serious mental illness that renders him psychologically incapable of competently discharging the duties of...President...and (should be) removed from office". Psychological and psychoanalytic journal articles (e.g. [2-5]) and books (e.g. [6]) also focus on this topic, and the broader topic of narcissism and large-group regression (See, for example [7-10]).

This article will examine how the construct of large-group regression, applied in the psychological literature to explain and contextualize the popularity of Trump and the dynamics of Trump's relationship with his supporters, may also apply to a large segment of American society (Democrat/liberal/progressive) that has been impacted by the 2016 election of Mr. Trump and his years in office, and by his intention to seek reelection in 2024. This article will also focus on the current president's personality and political personality. There are few published studies concerning Mr. Biden's personality, using indirect methods of analysis, and there is a paucity of psychological literature that addresses the president's habitual pattern of "storytelling", "spinning yarns", "fabricating" or lying, and the potential implications concerning his personality and role as the president. Therefore, this article will also focus on the current president's personality and political personality characteristics, including his history of repeatedly fabricating, embellishing, distorting, or lying to the public and demonizing his political opponents, further contributing to the widening political and social-cultural chasm in American society. It is essential to note that the analyses offered here are inferential.

This paper will first address the topic of President Trump and narcissism and large-group regression. It is suggested that events, such as the riot in the US Capitol by Trump followers on January 6, 2021, which was motivated to prevent the certification of Mr. Biden, illustrate the potential for grave danger that may manifest through large-group regression in association with a severely narcissistic leader. Subsequently, this article offers a framework in which large-group regression might manifest without an individual demagogic, narcissistic leader, particularly in democratic societies. It is postulated that a large segment of American society has been intensely affected by their perceptions of Trump and his followers. Projection of the large group's anxiety, fears, and loathing onto members of the out-group, rationalization of primitive or aggressive behaviors, and influence of the large group's culture help explain varying forms of aggression toward "all things associated with Trump". As such, American society is believed to be impacted by the ongoing synergistic repercussions of large-group regression in two opposing segments of society. The paper will conclude with recommendations for increased research on how large-group regression may manifest in democratic societies and the need for more temperate, centrist leaders who may help bridge the schism between the two major political parties in the US.

### **Trump's behavior is consistent with narcissistic personality disorder**

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association [11]) lists the following diagnostic criteria of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD): 1) a grandiose sense of self-importance; 2) preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love; 3) belief that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions); 4) requires excessive admiration; 5) has a sense of entitlement (unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations); 6) is interpersonally exploitative; 7) lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others; 8) is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her; 9) shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes. At least five of these criteria must be met to satisfy the diagnosis. Like other personality disorders, the above features reflect a pervasive pattern of behavior that begins by early adulthood and are present in various circumstances. A grandiose dimension of narcissism is manifested in grandiosity, superiority, entitlement, exploitativeness, and antagonism. Vulnerable narcissism, which shares the trait of antagonism and an attitude of entitlement with grandiose narcissism, is manifested in hypersensitivity to criticism and rejection, distrust of others, and a broad range of negative emotionality. NPD shares some features with Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) which, like NPD, is a "Cluster B Personality Disorder" in the DSM-5. Both personality disorders share a lack of empathy, sensitivity, or concern for the needs of others, as well as manipulative, exploitative interpersonal behaviors.

Malignant narcissism (See [7,12-14]), although a descriptive term rather than a DSM diagnosis, is considered a “toxic” combination of NPD, ASPD, paranoia, and sadism. Some of the specific characteristics include an extremely exaggerated concept of self and unrestrained self-centeredness that is pursued aggressively without moral or ethical restrictions, a sense of entitlement and superiority, devaluation of others, severe limitations of the capacity of non-exploitative emotional investment in others, ego-syntonic aggression directed against others or self, and significant antisocial behavior [15]. Malignant narcissism is central to severe and destructive psychopathology that may manifest in inhumane, even genocidal, actions perpetrated by historical figures such as Hitler and Stalin. However, it is essential to note that a broad spectrum of dysfunctional behavior exists in persons with malignant narcissism [7]. Some mental health writers believe that Trump manifests malignant narcissism [16], while some refer to Trump as an extreme narcissist [2], and others note that some mental health professionals will not offer a clinical opinion in the absence of an interview with the person in question [17].

Based on the extant literature and observation of Mr. Trump’s public statements, pronouncements, actions, and reactions to others and events before, during, and after his presidential term, as described briefly below, the current author concurs that he displays many features consistent with a narcissistic personality disorder. However, it is essential to note that the previously-referenced blogs and articles and the current inferences are based on indirect analyses since none are based on direct psychiatric or psychological interviews with Mr. Trump.

Numerous examples consistent with a narcissistic personality disorder have emerged over the years preceding, during, and following President Trump’s presidential term. He has claimed to know more than anyone else about multiple subjects; he has referred to himself as “...a true stable genius”; he referred to his actions, including those whose propriety has been called into question, as “perfect”. He claimed that he was the only one who could fix our problems. Beyond projecting himself in extremely grandiose ways, he has scorned, derided, belittled, and, in various ways, attacked the credibility, value, and worthiness of people who disagree with or criticize him. When he perceived previous supporters, aides, confidantes, and news outlets as disloyal to him, as having criticized him or questioned his judgment, he turned against them publicly with vitriolic insults. His efforts to defend against perceived betrayal (by aides, even high-ranking subordinates, and cabinet members) were reflected in cruelty and a severe lack of empathy designed to humiliate and perhaps psychologically “destroy” the “*other object*”, i.e. the enemy or offenders. Kernberg [18] described wishes to humiliate others as a sadistic tendency reflecting a less severe form of hatred. Mr. Trump let it be known that he was dismissing members of his cabinet, hurling insults, and yelling at his generals, “you’re a bunch of dopes and babies”. He berated his Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, “it’s your f\_\_ing fault,..., you’re weak..., you should f\_\_king resign”. There appears to be no middle ground, nuance, or integration of the “good” and “bad” characteristics of others. Others are either good and loyal to him or bad and against him. His public behavior appears consistent with a pathological quality of narcissistic defenses such as splitting, denial, distortion, and projection.

### **Large-group regression**

Briefly, large-group regression (See [7-10] for a more comprehensive discussion of this subject) may develop in varying degrees when a large-group identity is threatened, which might involve external threats to the safety and security of a nation or trauma resulting from war, devastation, or natural occurring disasters. Large-group regression can also develop through the experience of threats within a society to the cohesiveness, identity, and stability of the society. Such threats may be experienced during significant social/cultural or political upheaval, extreme institutional changes, economic crises, particularly job and economic security depreciation, an influx of new immigrants, etc. When a group’s identity is threatened, the perceived order and stability become more fluid and chaotic. Large-group regression aims to protect, repair/restore, and maintain the large-group identity. According to Volkan [8], one significant sign of largegroup regression involves “rallying around the leader”. A political leader may appeal to assuage or repair the group’s anxieties, fears, despair, resentment, and anger and help the group stabilize and progress. A highly narcissistic leader may exploit the group’s

emotional instability through a process that feeds the leader's pathological needs. In some circumstances, the leader may give voice to a segment of society with pre-existing or readily awakened prejudicial resentments to defend against and rationalize their dissatisfactions or grievances. The narcissistic leader may stir primitive defense mechanisms of splitting and projection to distinguish "us" and "them". The latter ("them"), which may constitute external groups or specific sub-groups within the society, may be identified as enemies trying to spoil, ruin, and assume control over the "us" group. A severe societal split may occur. A malignant narcissistic leader may intentionally inflame the perceived assault on society's purity, perhaps moral values or religion, and appeal to a fantasized earlier period of glory or goodness. Those people among the masses who identify with the leader, who believe that the leader is the only one who can fix societal problems, and especially those who already are disposed towards prejudiced, racist, or nativist attitudes, resonate with the leader's sense of superiority and entitlement. The pathological needs and aspirations of the narcissistic leader can become enmeshed with those of his followers. The leader-follower relationship is reciprocal. The leader has power over others and represents the large group's identity. Denial, projection, and projective identification may enable some followers to overlook and others to revel in the leader's pattern of aggression, rule violations, and corrupt practices.

Various psychologists [4,5] apply the framework of large-group regression to explain Trump's popularity in his bid to become president and during his tenure as President of the United States. Extensive literature provides comprehensive analytical theses on this subject, which will receive very brief attention here. In a thorough explication, Connolly [6] referred to Trump as an "aspirational fascist", "not a Nazi", but one who "pursues crowd adulation, hyperaggressive nationalism, white triumphalism, a law-and-order regime giving unaccountable power to the police, a militarist, and a practitioner of a rhetorical style that regularly creates fake news and smears opponents to mobilize support for the Big Lies he advances". Rudden and Brandt [4] asserted that Mr. Trump employs a tactical propagation of a dependency regression among his followers which inflames their intense wish for a strong leader who will "fix" their problems. This tactic also allows them to share in his fantasized power.

The riot in the US Capitol by Trump followers on January 6, 2021, which was motivated to prevent the certification of Mr. Biden, justify and amplify earlier analyses and predictions by some mental health experts of Mr. Trump's intentional efforts to inflame his followers, reflecting a manifestation of large-group regression. As of June 2023, ongoing investigations of Trump's alleged role in overturning the 2020 election continue. In December 2022, a U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee to Investigate the January 6<sup>th</sup> Attack on the United States Capitol [19] issued its final report resulting from an 18-month-long investigation. Findings included that Trump and some of his associates had devised "a multipart plan to overturn the 2020 presidential election" (p. 8). The panel also accused Trump of inciting insurrection and conspiracy to defraud the United States. Whether President Trump bears legal responsibility for the riot at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, will be determined in a court of law. An NBC News Poll [20] found that more than one year after that event, 45% of Americans surveyed opined that Trump is "solely" or "mainly" responsible for the rioters that overtook the Capitol building, albeit that percentage declined compared to the NBC poll taken days after the attack. Whether it was a riot or assault on the Capitol intended to stop the certification of the 2020 presidential election, the chant of some rioters, "hang Mike Pence", attests to the grave dangers that can occur through large-group regression even in a democratic society.

### **Large-group regression in reaction to Trump's 2016 election win**

Primitive regressive behavior typical of large-group regression may occur even without an individual narcissistic, demagogic leader. Support for this idea will be presented below. Notably, there is a schism in the current US society. Large-group regression may have been occurring in recent years not only under Trump's presidency but also through an influential array or, better, an alignment of various structures and large-group cultures and identities in American society, such as political parties (i.e. Democrat party), news media, big tech/social media, the entertainment industry, certain large corporations, academia, united with a common ideology, i.e. liberal/progressive,

with their associated political and social biases. It is offered here that such an influential alignment can not only counter or at least present a formidable resistance to a narcissistic, demagogic leader but, through group regression, exhibit such influence in a potentially detrimental, noxious way against the opposing political party, the party leadership, and people in society who are identified with that political party or ideology. Kernberg [7] states, “As part of mass psychology, the participants feel powerful and secure and united in the free, unconstrained, and personally irresponsible participation in aggression against outside, feared, hated, and depreciated groups who are perceived as threatening the mass movement”. It is conjectured here that this mass psychology may apply to people on the political left who take license to act in a highly uncivil manner to the “others”.

While Trump’s election win over Hillary Clinton in 2016 was greeted with jubilation by his supporters, other Americans were shocked and panicked. House Democrats from at least ten states objected to the certification of Trump in January 2017. Mrs. Clinton and other leaders in the Democrat party declared that Trump was an “illegitimate” president [21]. Mrs. Clinton stated about Trump, “He knows he stole the 2016 presidential election”. Congresswoman Maxine Waters (D-CA) called Trump an illegitimate president and stated she would not cooperate with him. The same Rep. Waters spouted a conspiracy theory that votes were switched from John Kerry to George Bush in 2000, and that voters were purged from voter rolls. The late renowned civil rights leader Rep. John Lewis stated, “I don’t see Trump as a legitimate president”. Rep. Lewis, Rep. Nadler, and former US President Jimmy Carter stated that Russian interference led to Mr. Trump’s election. The unfounded allegation that Trump “stole the election” and refusal to accept his legitimacy suggests denial and distortion of reality characteristic of large-group regression.

One should consider that there exists a large segment of the American public that, perceiving a grave threat posed by President Trump to the very foundations of America as a democratic society, responded to the experience of trauma with regression, characterized by a degree of splitting, reality distortion, and anger, and a wish to oust him from office. Umbrasas [22] provides a detailed analysis concerning the manifestation of large-group regression by Democrats. He notes that, like other regressed groups, Democrats behaved in psychologically primitive ways, employing splitting, projection, and magical thinking. Umbrasas documents the emergence of “psychopolitical criminality” by ordinary persons manifested through aggression with verbal attacks, harassment, and physical violence, on and off college campuses perpetrated against identifiable Republicans, including youth or supporters of Republicans. Such incidents were minimized, rationalized, and even praised by some Democrats.

Not-so-well-sublimated aggression toward Trump and his family emerged in various cultural and political contexts. Following President Trump’s inauguration, his then-10-year-old son, Barron, was the subject of mockery on Twitter. Katie Rich, a “Saturday Night Live” writer, tweeted, “Barron will be this country’s first homeschool shooter”. Ms. Rich, suspended from Twitter, apologized, and Twitter restored her account. The comedian Kathy Griffin brandished an authentic-looking figure of a severed head of Mr. Trump. The Public Theater in New York staged an adaptation of Julius Caesar in which a Trump-like character in the role of Caesar gets stabbed to death.

Representative Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) encouraged supporters to confront Trump administration officials [23]. Ms. Waters told a crowd, “Let’s make sure we show up wherever we have to show up...If you see anybody from that cabinet in a restaurant, in a department store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd, and you push back on them, and you tell them they’re not welcome anymore, anywhere”. Indeed, Trump officials were confronted at restaurants. White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders was denied service at a Lexington, Virginia restaurant because she worked for Trump.

After President Trump’s State of the Union Address on February 4, 2020, then Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, tore up her copy of President Trump’s address. She told reporters she tore up the copy “because it was a courteous thing to do considering the alternative. It was such a dirty speech”. She also said that the speech was a “compilation of falsehoods”.

Recently, Rhode Island State Senator Joshua Miller, a Democrat in the state senate for nearly two decades, was caught on surveillance footage keying a car with a 'Biden Sucks' bumper sticker [24]. Senator Miller shifted the blame to the vehicle's owner and said, "he's one of the gun nuts" and that he, the senator, had been stalked in recent months by people opposed to his political activities. However, the Cranston Police Department reported no record that Senator Miller reported any incidents of being stalked. The state senator, perhaps projecting aggression onto the vehicle owner, rationalized keying the owner's vehicle.

### **"Trump derangement syndrome" or large-group regression?**

The term "Trump Derangement Syndrome" (TDS) is described in Wikipedia as "a pejorative term, usually for criticism or negative reactions to former...president Donald Trump that are perceived to be irrational and presumed to have little regard towards Trump's actual policy positions, or actions undertaken by his administration" [25]. Trump supporters have mainly used the term to discredit criticism of his actions...by suggesting that his opponents are incapable of accurately perceiving the world. CNN's Fareed Zakaria [26] defined TDS as "hatred of President Trump so intense that it impairs people's judgment". Chris Cillizza [27], CNN's editor-at-large, described TDS as "the preferred nomenclature of Trump defenders who view those who oppose him and his policies as nothing more than blind hatred of those who preach tolerance and free speech". Still, others, more recently, use the term in a derogatory fashion against extremist Trump supporters and as a description of Trump himself. Cillizza notes insightfully that "presidential derangement syndromes" reflect the "polarization" and "national self-sorting" currently operating in the US. In an article published in *Psychology Today*, Whitley [28] describes TDS as a "folk category" of mental disorders rather than a professionally recognized disorder. Still, Whitley does not entirely discount the argument that some people are so disturbed and distressed by Trump's speeches, tweets, policies, and behavior that their cognitive, affective, and behavioral functioning might be adversely affected, and they may need mental health support. He advises that further research is needed "to investigate the extreme social phenomena, such as Beatlemania or the like. This will shed light on the reality of this emerging folk category that has been labelled by many as "Trump Derangement Syndrome". It is questionable whether an accurate comparison can be made between TDS and Beatlemania. Whereas Whitley called for further research, research exists on "celebrity worship", e.g. see Brooks [29] for a systematic review of 62 published academic studies of factors associated with celebrity worship, such as personality, cognitive, psychological well-being, relationships with others, feelings about the self or the world. Brooks identified directions for further research in this area.

Although not a clinical disorder, TDS appears to be consistent with the construct of large-group regression as discussed thus far. Extreme, polarized, emotionally-based, non-integrated perceptions of former President Trump operate among his detractors and supporters. As indicated earlier, there has been a significant decrease in respect, civility, and tolerance toward the former president, his associates, and his supporters.

### **President Biden's personality characteristics**

Compared to the proliferation of articles written by mental health professionals concerning Mr. Trump's personality, few studies and commentaries have been published concerning Mr. Biden's personality. A study by Griebie and Immelman [30] utilized a methodology in which Mr. Biden's personality characteristics were assessed indirectly by extrapolating and interfusing information from biographical sources and media reports to form a composite personality profile. The profile was rated using the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria [31] and linked with other personality-based models. The results of the analyses, all of which were within normal limits, suggested that Biden's personality is primarily consistent with the Outgoing/gregarious pattern, secondarily with the Accommodating/cooperative pattern, and lower characteristics on the Ambitious/confident pattern. The Outgoing pattern maps well onto the Extraversion dimension of the Five-Factor Model of personality. The overall personality configuration on the MIDC indicates the *conciliatory extravert* subtype. A strong affiliation motive typifies this subtype. Persons with such a profile are animated, uninhibited, gregarious, and demonstrative. They express their feelings openly and have an ardent drive for approval; they seek attention and strongly need validation. They see

themselves as popular, socially desirable, and charming. While politically skilled at gauging public mood and sentiment, they are prone to periodic emotional outbursts. The Accommodating pattern maps well onto the Agreeableness domain of the FFM. The interpersonal style associated with this pattern is cooperative, reliable, and considerate of others. Persons with such a profile prefer to yield or placate rather than dominate or be overly assertive. When disagreements occur, such persons attempt to smooth things over, sometimes at the cost of conceding. They tend to be submissive and eschew expressions of power. Their moods tend to be mild-mannered, and they avoid tension and interpersonal conflict. The Ambitious/confident pattern is positively correlated with the Extraversion and Conscientiousness domains of the FFM and negatively correlated with Neuroticism. Persons with more robust characteristics of this pattern are self-assured, confident, bold, clever, and persuasive. They use their wit, charm, and persuasiveness to win others over to their cause. They have a prevailing mild-mannered mood. Biden's personality style, as rated in the Griebie and Immelman [30] study, is characterized by "flexibility, compromise, and an emphasis on teamwork". The composite profile suggests a leadership style as a function of responsiveness to constraints, openness to information, and motivation. His presidency was anticipated to be conciliatory, i.e., "a uniter, not a divider".

Book, *et al.* [32] conducted a study using the HEXACO to evaluate the personalities of Biden and Trump based on their public personas. Eighteen researchers who authored articles using the HEXACO served as raters. In response to a question concerning political orientation, 11 raters indicated their political orientation as left, two as politically center, and five omitted a response to the question. Results included that Biden was rated average on Honesty/Humility, although lower, below the norm, on the Sincerity facet. He received moderate ratings on Emotionality, with higher ratings on the Sentimentality facet. Biden received high ratings on Extraversion, high ratings on the Boldness and Sociability facets, and moderate ratings on Self-Esteem and Liveliness. He received moderate ratings on Agreeableness with high ratings on Flexibility and moderate ratings on Forgiveness, Gentleness, and Patience. He obtained a moderate rating on Conscientiousness, a high rating on Diligence, and moderate ratings on Organization, Perfectionism, and Prudence. He was rated as moderate on Openness to Experience, low on the Creativity facet, and moderate on Aesthetic Appreciation, Inquisitiveness, and Unconventionality facets. Biden's profile suggests that "As a collegial leader, Biden's *personal political style* is expected to be that of a "good listener" with the ability "to see both sides of issues"; a "willingness to 'take a back seat' in the policymaking process, having an impact without seeming to control or to interfere with others"; and a preference for using 'consensus-building and group maintenance techniques' (Hermann, 1987, p. 169)".

The foregoing (indirect) analyses suggest a substantial degree of convergence between the results of the studies by Griebie and Immelman [30] and Book, *et al.* [32]. Both studies characterize Biden as having a high level of Extraversion, moderate levels of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, and, as a leader, a preference for listening well and considering multiple points of view, for flexibility and compromise, and use of teamwork and consensus-building rather than power and dominance. This paper will now turn to two primary foci which characterize Mr. Biden's personality and political style in some ways that differ substantially from the results of the previous studies. President Biden's chronic history of fabrications, misrepresentations, and divisiveness before and during his presidency is of notable import to how he exercises his role as the Commander-in-Chief.

### **President Biden's history of fabrications and misrepresentations**

President Biden has a long history of making numerous untrue statements, dating back to 1987 when he stated during a rally that he "... went to law school on a full academic scholarship...(and) ended up in the top half of my class"; that he "graduated with three degrees from undergraduate school"; that he "was the outstanding student in the political science department" [33]. Biden placed 76<sup>th</sup> of 85 students in his graduating law class. During that rally, a supporter "politely" asked Mr. Biden about his background in law school. Mr. Biden snapped at the supporter, "I think I have a much higher IQ than you do", and "I'd be delighted to sit down and compare my IQ to yours if you'd like, Frank" [34]. Over a few decades, Mr. Biden has been caught plagiarizing from a law review article [35] and plagiarizing passages from someone else's speech. Mr. Biden falsely claimed to have been arrested during the 1970s when attempting to visit Nelson Mandela, who was in prison then [36]. Mr. Biden falsely claimed that the "first time" he got arrested was at a "civil rights protest" - he was never arrested.

He claimed to have served as a “liaison” to Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir during the Six-Day War - a false claim, and Ms. Meir was not the Israeli Prime Minister during the Six-Day War. He claimed without evidence that he was “raised in the Puerto Rican community of Delaware”. During a rally of Democrats, he falsely claimed to have spoken with the “inventor” of insulin [37]. During the rally, he also incorrectly stated that his son, Beau, died while serving in Iraq [37]. He claimed, with no available evidence, that his grandfather was an “All-American football player” at Santa Clara University. He claimed he had a “house burn down with my wife in it”, and they “almost lost a couple firefighters” - a highly exaggerated and distorted claim. He claimed he “could have been an All-American” football player - he played for part of one semester in his freshman year at college. He claimed he “almost walked on to an unnamed NFL team and thought he ‘could make it in the pros.’” He falsely claimed that he hit a baseball 368 feet “off the wall” at his second Congressional baseball game - he went 0 - 2. He claimed he was “shot at” overseas - no such thing happened. He falsely claimed he was “appointed to the [Naval] Academy in 1965” - he graduated from the University of Delaware in 1965. He falsely claimed to have gone to and spent time speaking with worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, where Robert Bowers was accused of murdering 11 Jewish worshippers. He claimed that during his tenure as vice president, he pinned a Silver Star on a Navy captain in Afghanistan who had carried a mortally wounded comrade out of a ravine and who resisted receiving a medal for his actions, which statement was rated Mostly False by Politifact [38]. During a speech in July 2022 on climate change, President Biden described emissions from oil refineries near his childhood home in Delaware. He stated, “That’s why I and so damn many other people I grew up with have cancer and why for the longest time Delaware had the highest cancer rate in the nation”. As per Dr. Keven O’Connor, Mr. Biden’s physician, Mr. Biden has a history of nonmelanoma skin cancers removed with Mohs surgery before he started his presidency [39]. Dr. O’Connor said the lesions were completely excised, with clear margins.

Many of President Biden’s spoken mistruths and misleading claims concern his job performance as president of the US, e.g. concerning gas prices, the deficit, inflation, and the border situation. Suffice it to say that Kessler [40], writing an analysis in the Washington Post of various statements or claims made by President Biden, assigned a “Bottomless Pinocchio” rating. That category was established during Trump’s presidency for “false or misleading statements repeated so often that they became a form of propaganda”.

The preceding examples are only some of the numerous lies, mistruths, or fabrications told by Mr. Biden. Mr. Biden has told lies that are big and small. His false claim that he “used to drive an 18-wheeler”, sometimes with a woman he calls “Big Mama”, may be considered a small lie or tale. His lies about his educational background are more significant. His false claim that there was no Covid-19 vaccine available before he assumed the office of President of the United States is more extraordinary still [41]. Indeed, he received a Covid-19 vaccine in December 2020. He subsequently stated that only 3.5 million Americans received the first dose of the Covid vaccine when he took office. 19 million Americans had received the first dose when President Trump left office. Biden made additional misleading claims about Covid vaccines, saying, incorrectly, that the Trump administration “failed to order enough vaccines”, that there was “no real plan to vaccinate most of the country” when he took office, that vaccinations “nearly doubled” on his watch, that the economy will create 7 million jobs this year if his full Covid-19 relief plan becomes law [42].

One of President Biden’s most severe instances of failure to keep his word was his declaration to the American public that the US military would remain in Afghanistan until all American citizens who wanted to leave could do so [43]. Hundreds of Americans seeking an escape from the Taliban were left behind, awaiting diplomatic efforts to return them to the US. Additionally, the US evacuated approximately 3% of the 78,000 Afghans who worked for the American government and qualified for the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program. Further, President Biden’s claim that top US generals did not tell him that the Taliban would quickly overtake Afghanistan upon US troop withdrawal was contradicted by Gen. Mark Milley and Gen. Kenneth McKenzie [44]. The generals recommended keeping 2,500 US troops in Afghanistan ahead of the complete US withdrawal in August. President Biden denied receiving such advice during an interview with ABC News on August 19, 2021. The Taliban quickly seized power in August, and the US withdrawal was marked by chaos and violence at Kabul airport. Thirteen US service members and at least 170 Afghans were killed in an attack by a suicide bomber at the airport.



It is widely assumed that politicians, like a used car salesman or a tabloid journalist, tell lies or distort the truth [45] and that successful politicians are artful at lying. Politicians may lie when they see a benefit to doing so and believe they can get away with it, and they justify their dishonesty as a necessary part of the job [46]. Even though a degree of dishonesty or distortion of the truth may fall under the rubric of political discourse, the American people expect their president to be honest with them. Lying and deception occur in various ways, for multiple motives, and with varying degrees of self-awareness. Akhtar [45] states that “lying invariably involves a self-object scenario, however deeply buried under narcissistic grounds that might be (p. 3)”. Thus, lying occurs within an interpersonal context and is motivated by self-interests, even when concealed. Akhtar lists the following six categories of motives for lying, which may overlap; social, narcissistic, psychopathic, pathological, life-saving, and occupational lies or deception. Common motivations for lying identified by Watson [47] include lies to avoid punishment, to avoid shame and maintain self-esteem, to protect another person, to manipulate another person for material gain or to inflict harm, as an act of aggression, for the enjoyment of duping someone, to gain a sense of power, to preserve autonomy, to fashion a sense of identity, and to maintain self-deception. Lying and deception are particularly associated with several personality disorders, including borderline, antisocial, narcissistic, histrionic, and compulsive personality disorders. In persons with narcissistic personality disorder, self-deception and other-deception are employed to buttress grandiosity, which protects one’s vulnerable self-esteem and may defend against a depressive state [47]. The self-enhancement and exaggeration of talents and achievements in narcissistic personalities are unconsciously motivated and driven by an effort to conceal feelings of shame and inferiority.

The empirical literature includes studies of the personality correlates of lying, including different motivations for lying. In a study of the associations between self-serving motivations and other-oriented motivations for lying and personality domains as measured by the HEXACO, McArthur, *et al.* [48] found that Honesty-Humility was significantly correlated inversely with overall lying frequency and seven of the 11 motivations. Honesty-Humility also uniquely (negatively) predicted lying for several self-centered motivations, i.e. to avoid negative evaluation, to avoid punishment, to heighten self-presentation, to obtain a reward, and compulsive lying. Lying frequency was also inversely associated with Conscientiousness and uniquely (negatively) predicted lying for several self-serving reasons. Although it is only conjecture, the finding by Book, *et al.* [32] that Biden’s rating was below the norm on the Sincerity facet of Honesty-Humility, in conjunction with the results by McArthur, *et al.* [48], suggests the possibility that the raters in the study by Book, *et al.* detected some tendency for disingenuousness on the part Mr. Biden.

It appears without question that Mr. Biden is a habitual fabricator or liar. It is questionable whether President Biden is aware of his blurring of boundaries between honesty and falsehood, when and whether his lies reflect more self-deception or other-deception, whether his mistruths reflect consequential defects in his ego functioning, and what implications may follow. Despite the reality that he has attained the highest political stations that can be achieved in America, the “Walter Mitty” type self-enhancement conveyed by many of his fabrications suggests unresolved psychodynamic conflicts. Perhaps Mr. Biden has an underlying vulnerability to perceived threats to his narcissistic image of being, or need to be, physically and intellectually superb. On various occasions, Mr. Biden has challenged others to a “push-up” contest when faced with questions concerning his physical or mental fitness. During the 1987 rally referred to earlier, a supporter “politely” asked Mr. Biden about his background in law school. Mr. Biden snapped at the supporter, “I think I have a much higher IQ than you do”, and “I’d be delighted to sit down and compare my IQ to yours if you’d like, Frank” [34].

There appears to be a curious lack of curiosity and significance attached to Mr. Biden’s chronically fabricated or distorted self-enhancement on the part of laypersons, the media, and mental health professionals. Possible personality correlates with President Biden’s history of habitual lying, distortions, or misrepresentations of reality, have not received attention in the mental health literature. The New York Times [49] referred to President Biden as a “Storyteller in Chief” who “spins yarns”. The article primarily described Biden’s use of storytelling and embellishment to connect with his audience, albeit the article briefly mentioned that his “storytelling” sometimes veers off into falsehood. The chronicity of Mr. Biden’s falsehoods may cast doubt on his ability or willingness to be truthful with the public in his duties as the president of the United States. However, media outlets and mental health professionals have minimized Mr. Biden’s

history of false statements. A blog post in Psychology Today [50] focused on one particular “false memory” and suggested that “Biden has demonstrated a common memory error” and that Biden has reconstructed memories consistent with memory theory. Regarding Biden’s history of plagiarism, Portmann [51], drawing upon biblical sources, recommends that Biden be forgiven of this sin. Many people are forgiving, especially when someone admits their error or misdeed and expresses remorse. However, the critical issue concerns the underlying motivations and the implications of Mr. Biden’s fabrications or misrepresentations.

Given Mr. Biden’s history of stating mistruths and giving misleading information, it is conceivable that he would misrepresent or lie about more serious and consequential situations where the stakes are much higher than whether he drove an 18-wheeler. For example, considerable evidence counters his claim that he knew nothing of his son’s foreign business deals that netted millions of dollars from countries such as Ukraine and China, e.g. [52-54]. The relative paucity of reality checks and minimization by significant others, including family and friends, political allies, the media, and even mental health professionals, to his habitual fabricating, misrepresenting, or lying may reinforce the president’s false beliefs or belief that he can get away with lying.

### **President Biden as a divisive leader**

At the outset of his presidency, Mr. Biden stated that he would work for all Americans and that he would work as hard for those who did not vote for him as for those who voted for him. Yet, his repeated diatribes against “MAGA Republicans” suggests he considers other *non*-MAGA Republicans respectable and worthy fellow citizens with differing political ideas about how best to serve our nation’s interests. Instead, President Biden has gone on record smearing Republicans as a group. For example, while campaigning in Virginia in 2021, President Biden stated, “The Republican Party nationally stands for nothing. Not a joke. Nothing” [55].

On September 1, 2022, two months before the midterm elections, President Biden gave a primetime speech entitled “The Continuing Battle for the Soul of the Nation”. The address was delivered at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pa. The background was lit in deep red, and the president was flanked by two Marines who stood at attention behind the president, an image at odds with the delivery of a speech by a leader in a free nation. During his “non-political” speech, President Biden excoriated “MAGA Republicans” more than one dozen times. His statement that most Republicans are not MAGA was immediately followed by saying, “The Republican party today is dominated, driven, and intimidated by Donald Trump and the MAGA Republicans” [56]. His demonization of so-called “MAGA Republicans” was reflected in his words, “MAGA Republicans look at America, they see carnage, and darkness, and despair...they embrace anger, they thrive on chaos, they live not in the light of truth, but in the shadow of lies”.

In a rally and fundraiser several days before his September 2 speech, Mr. Biden tried to portray Republicans as the “ultra-MAGA” party [57]. He stated, “What we’re seeing now is either the beginning or the death knell of an extreme MAGA philosophy”; “It’s not just Trump, it’s the entire philosophy that underpins the – I’m going to say something, it’s like semi-fascism”. Mr. Biden also said in the same speech, “I respect conservative Republicans”, saying afterward, “I don’t respect these MAGA Republicans”. Whether President Biden aimed to drive a wedge between so-called MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans, his statements are a study in contradictions. His stated respect for non-MAGA Republicans or conservative Republicans has been belied by repeated demagoguery, such as the false accusation that Republican-led states are instituting “Jim Crow 2.0” voting laws. Mr. Biden’s statement that “democracy works only if we respect the rule of law” was undermined by his failure to condemn the assassination plot on Justice Kavanaugh, the fire bombings of pro-life-crisis-pregnancy centers, and the comparison by DNC adviser Kurt Bardella of Republicans to “a domestic terrorist cell”. It would serve the interests of America if Mr. Biden heeded his own words, “Democracy works only if we respect our legitimate political differences”. He could model “the willingness to see each other not as enemies but as fellow Americans”.

Mr. Biden’s history of divisive comments includes his campaign speech in Virginia in 2012 to an audience that included many African-Americans. Then-Senator Biden, referring to Mitt Romney and the Republicans’ policies, stated, “they gonna’ put y’all back in chains” [58].

### **President Biden's modeling of prosocial behavior and empathy**

Palmer [59] suggested that President-Elect Biden “will have no difficulty consistently modeling prosocial behaviors that are his second nature and will “bring us together to create a better country”. She also stated that “he can demonstrate listening with empathy and then acting with compassion”. However, President Biden has sometimes displayed poor tolerance when challenged by ordinary citizens. In response to being accused by an Iowa voter of improper dealings with Ukraine, Biden called the voter a “damn liar”. He also challenged the Iowa voter, who questioned his age and mental fitness, to a push-up contest. In February 2020, during an exchange with a student, President Biden hurled at the student the statement, “you’re a lying dog-faced pony soldier” [60]. In March 2020, during a tense exchange with a factory worker concerning second amendment rights, Biden told the worker, “You’re full of shit”, and told the worker to “stop being a horse’s ass” [61]. Unaware that he was speaking with an open mic, Biden referred to a reporter as a “stupid son of a bitch” [62].

During a ceremony in August 2021 at Dover Air Force Basis for the Gold Star families whose loved ones were killed in the suicide terror attack at the Kabul airport, it was not lost on the families that President Biden checked his watch at least two times [63], and, reportedly, many times during the ceremony. The father of Jared Schmitz, who was killed at Kabul Airport, stated, “I found it to be the most disrespectful thing I’ve ever seen”. Mr. Schmitz also reported that he showed a picture of his son to the president and said to the president, “that’s Jared Schmitz, don’t forget that name and don’t forget the name of the others; you need to spend some time learning their stories”. Biden reportedly snapped back, “I know their stories”, and then Biden spoke again about his son, Beau (who served in the military and later died of cancer). President Joe Biden’s history of personal tragedy with the loss of his wife and daughter and, more recently, his son, Beau, should not be diminished. Mr. Schmitz’s words to President Biden also suggested that Mr. Schmitz perhaps blamed the president for the soldiers’ deaths. Still, in that tense moment, with an intensely grieving parent, the empathy that was called for seemed to have been lacking from the president.

In April 2023, during his talk with children on “Take Your Child to Work Day”, President Biden stated that he has “six grandchildren. And I’m crazy about them. And I speak to them every single day. Not a joke”. On Father’s Day 2023, President Biden issued a proclamation stating that his father “taught me that, above all, family is the beginning, middle and end - a lesson I have passed down to my children and grandchildren”. He added that “family is life’s greatest blessing and responsibility”. However, Mr. Biden has not acknowledged his seventh grandchild, four-year-old Navy Joan Roberts, born from Hunter Biden’s out-of-wedlock relationship with Lunden Roberts. DNA testing in 2019 established Hunter Biden’s paternity. Hunter Biden and Ms. Roberts recently reached a settlement concerning support and other legal arrangements concerning his daughter, which include that Navy Joan will not carry the Biden family name. President Biden has yet to acknowledge his seventh grandchild. Whether or not Hunter Biden wishes to be involved in his daughter’s life, President Biden, thus far, has not acted as a model of genuine care, compassion, respect, and honesty by acknowledging and embracing this grandchild. “The president’s cold shoulder – and heart – is counter to every message he has sent for decades, and it’s out of sync with the America he wants to continue to lead” [64]. After much public criticism, President Biden acknowledged his seventh grandchild on July 28, 2023 [65].

### **President Biden's leadership style**

The personality profile results in the studies by Griebie and Immelman [30] and Book, *et al.* [32] characterized President Biden’s leadership style as conciliatory. At the outset of his presidency, Biden stated, “If you’re ever working with me, and I hear you treat another colleague with disrespect, talk down to someone, I promise you, I will fire you on the spot”. However, current and former Biden aides reported to Axios [66] that the president has displayed a hair-trigger temper with aides, hurling insults such as “God dammit, how the f—k don’t you know this?” “Don’t f—king bulls—t me!”, “Get the f—k out of here!”. Some aides expressed being fearful of the president’s wrath. Some aides reportedly are intentionally accompanied to meetings by colleagues to avoid being a focus of the president’s temper. A former chief of staff mitigated this report, stating that the president is not trying to embarrass people; instead, he (the president) “wants to get to

the right decision” and that people who worked for him like that “he challenges them and gets them to a better decision”. In his 2012 book, “The Payoff: Why Wall Street Wins”, Jeff Connaughton, a former Biden campaign aide, described Biden as an “egomaniacal autocrat” who was “determined to manage his staff through fear” [67].

The study by Griebie and Immelman [30] indicated that people with personality profiles similar to the profile rating for President Biden may be prone to periodic emotional outbursts. Everyone, including national leaders, is expected to lose their temper occasionally. Still, the personality profile results in the studies by Griebie and Immelman and Book., *et al.* [32] characterized President Biden’s personality style as easygoing, poised, and patient, which does not match the descriptions of his interactions with his aides as reported to Axios. It is, of course, not known how often Mr. Biden might lash out at some of his aides and whether such behavior occurs less frequently than suggested by the Axios article.

### **Discussion**

Recent history suggests large-group regression can catalyze in democratic societies, including the US and other modern Western nations. Mass movements and large-group regression occur in specific contexts that share some similarities across different societies and have unique elements. These elements are intricate as they must be connected with the society’s social and political history, its history of government, e.g. monarchy, democracy, oligarchy, authoritarianism, or totalitarianism, current actual or potential constraints on national leaders and governments, the relative degree of freedom and individualism exercised by the citizenry, how the society has dealt with previous major conflicts or crises, and sources of current dramatic threats experienced by the society or segments of the society. In Western cultures, including the US, conservative and liberal national camps compete to control governmental legislative authority, representing their constituents’ needs, wishes, values, and beliefs. Broadly, conservative and liberal camps have divergent views on the role of government, economic, and social/cultural views, and may diverge on foreign policies. This has been a long-standing phenomenon. However, what has been changing is the growing schism and animosity within Western societies between conservative and liberal political groupings. Currently, in the US, there are multiple “hot-button” issues, such as abortion, climate change, government intervention in health-related matters and disinformation, gender identity change in minors, and medical interventions, such as hormone replacement therapy or surgery, to align their body with their gender identity. There has been a coarsening of relationships and decreased civility across people with differing views on political and hot-button social or cultural issues.

The current article brings a new perspective regarding society in the United States. It is contended that large-group regression exists in two broad segments of American society to some extent. There has been a shift from the traditional political mechanisms of argument, debate, and use of hyperbole to sharper depreciation, reductionism, and vilification of political opponents and ordinary citizens. CNN contributor Dean Obeidallah stated that Trump supporters are no different than bin Laden supporters [68]. Parens [69] refers to these as defenses in the service of “malignant prejudice” designed to distort reality. As suggested above, uncivil behavior has been displayed by more extreme progressive and conservative politicians and their followers. Former President Trump is a unique political figure. His political campaign and presidency were characterized by rhetoric and demagoguery not seen in American society before. His supporters and opponents have bestowed upon him loved or admired and hated feelings, respectively. Millions of Americans perceive Trump as a danger, whereas millions perceive him as a hero. Thus, he has become an intense focus of his supporters and opponents, especially those who fear and hate him. This paper concurs with the opinion of many psychologists and other mental health professionals that Mr. Trump has displayed a pattern of public behavior consistent with extreme or pathological narcissism. However, this paper also concurs with Umbrasas [22] that a large segment of American society, particularly those who identify as liberal/progressive/Democrat, has demonstrated countervailing forces or expressions of large-group regression.

The current article also focuses on President Biden’s long fabrication, misrepresentation, lying history, and divisiveness, particularly during his presidency. To date, it does not appear that President Biden has demonstrated a high degree of the positive leadership traits predicted by Griebie and Immelman [30] and Book., *et al.* [32]. The mental health literature has not addressed the possible personality

correlates of Mr. Biden's long-standing pattern of fabrication. It is questionable whether President Biden is aware of his blurring of boundaries between honesty and falsehood, when and whether his lies reflect more self-deception or other-deception, how his mistruths might reflect defects in his ego functioning, and what implications may follow. A glaring example of such concern was his denial that the top US generals gave him specific information and advice concerning the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Gen. Mark Milley and Gen. Kenneth McKenzie directly contradicted President Biden's denial. It is conceivable that President Biden would misrepresent, distort, or lie about other serious and consequential matters with high stakes. In contrast to Griebie and Immelman's [30] analysis that Biden's presidency was anticipated to be conciliatory, i.e. "a uniter, not a divider", President Biden has exhibited divisive, intemperate rhetoric concerning Republicans. His reductionist, deprecatory comments about Republicans belie his stated respect for them.

The presidency of Donald Trump may have stimulated renewed and expanded interest in large-group regression. The understanding of constructs in psychology continues to evolve from continued research. There is a need for further research into the manifestation of large-group regression in democratic societies. It is essential to understand how demagoguery and the relationship between a highly narcissistic leader may affect society in a democracy. It also is important to note that there are restraints on the powers of presidents and prime ministers in democratic societies. In a parliamentary democracy, a political party might not survive a motion of no confidence. In a constitutional republic, such as the US, there is a balance of powers, challenges to a president's re-election to a second term, and a two-term limit in the US.

When people on the political left or the right, including mental health professionals, express that America will not survive or be ruined if a Republican or a Democrat is (re)elected president, it signals a deeply divided nation with certain distortions of reality. These distortions are partly predicated by disinterest in hearing and trying to understand the other's viewpoint and actively avoiding examining the "other's" perspective. This writer notes a need for more temperate and unifying leaders.

A Harvard-Harris poll of 2,068 registered voters online from July 19-20, 2023 [70], found that 7 in 10 voters say the country needs "another choice" other than Biden and Trump. Most Democrats, Republicans, and Independents say they would consider a moderate independent candidate if a Biden-Trump rematch exists. Nearly two-thirds of voters say Biden should not run for a second term, and almost 60% said the same for Trump.

The No Labels movement was launched a decade ago but has recently garnered increased public attention. Its goals include helping America develop a "more perfect Union" and a united front around the beliefs and values that its citizenry can share. No Labels supports centrism and bipartisanship. Its views include that politicians must become untethered from anger and divisiveness that interfere with reaching such lofty goals. No Labels include Democrats, Republicans, and independents who have different political opinions over policies but share "a commitment to respect those differences, and to find areas of common ground so we can move the country forward" [71]. No Labels will consider supporting a Unity ticket to run for president in 2024 if most Americans do not want to vote for either candidate of the two major parties. It is too early to know what successes this movement may achieve; however, given the Harvard-Harris poll results noted above, the timing might be ripe for this organization to impact American society positively.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the dynamics and synergism of two US presidents' personalities in the climate of political and social divisions. Mental health professionals have identified former President Trump's personality as pathologically narcissistic and galvanizing primitive defense mechanisms of splitting and projection among the masses of his followers. It is contended that the mental health field has overlooked potentially troubling aspects of President Biden's personality, including habitual fabrication and divisiveness that may undercut his credibility and public trust. Indications of large-group regression have manifested among the masses on both the political right and the political left. American society needs more temperate, unifying national leaders to help moderate the highly polarized views and intense emotions so that a more stable, tolerant, and democratic society may be maintained.

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