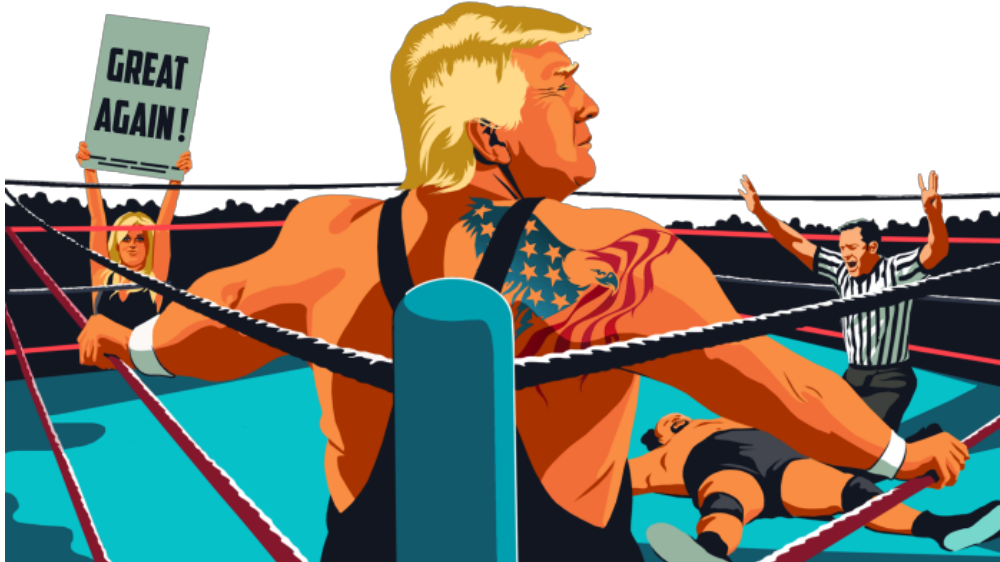


Life & Arts

The real reason Donald Trump lies

The president's greatest ambitions are neither financial nor political — they're psychological, writes Stephen Grosz



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We all lie, but we don't lie like [President Trump](#). He is the most extravagant, reckless, inexhaustible fibber of our era — the panjandrum of porky pies.

Because we all lie, we may be tempted to think we understand why Donald Trump does, or even that he lies for the same reasons we do.

He doesn't.

Last April, a 34-year-old woman I've been working with for several years told me that she hadn't been honest with me. "Not big lies," Ms A said, "I just couldn't tell you certain things." It took us some time to understand why she brought herself to her psychoanalysis in this particular way.

When she was a child, Ms A's parents saw her as an extension of themselves — they experienced her successes and failures as theirs. Ms A could not, for example, be sad or cry without making her much-loved mother unhappy and unsure of herself. She had to be sunny. As a child, Ms A discovered that lying to her parents allowed her to feel separate from them, self-contained, a bit free. Her deceptions felt more hers than the real world. Lying allowed her a private self. She lied to feel independent.

Most of us lie to avoid causing painful feelings in others, and ourselves. Sometimes, like Ms A, we lie to protect some sense of self.

Trump's lying is different. It's not just a departure from the norms of the presidency — it's a departure from the norm.

There are so many examples — The Washington Post's Fact Checker estimates that during the two years of his presidency, Trump has told some 7,600 lies — but let this one suffice. On Boxing Day last year, during an unannounced visit to Iraq, Trump spoke to US troops about a pay rise. "I got you a big one. I got you a big one." He continued, "They said: 'You know, we could make it smaller."

We could make it 3 per cent. We could make it 2 per cent. We could make it 4 per cent.’ I said: ‘No. Make it 10 per cent. Make it more than 10 per cent’.” The future pay rise is 2.6 per cent.

Think about what is happening here: a lie — easily discredited — is being made, with complete shamelessness, to people most of us would regard as heroes. When he told the troops about the pay rise, they must have gone wild. For the briefest moment, Trump will have been applauded, celebrated — but then what? How can someone be so oblivious to the consequences of deceit?

Born to parents who, by some accounts, left him feeling deserted and bereft, Trump has been a loner most of his life. At school and university, he seems to have made no friends he kept. While he does collect celebrities, for the most part his friendships seem to be perfunctory, fleeting. Averse to shaking people’s hands, phobic of germs — whatever the origins of his behaviour, many psychoanalysts would describe Trump’s way of relating as “avoidant”. “One of the loneliest people I’ve ever met,” biographer Tim O’Brien said in an interview. “He lacks the emotional and sort of psychological architecture a person needs to build deep relationships with other people.”

Given this apparent lack — and the effect his lying has on us — my view is that Trump may abuse the truth so we take notice of him, think about him, become emotionally involved with him. Because he’s in no one’s heart, he wants to be in all our minds. More and more, I’m convinced that his greatest ambitions are neither financial nor political — they’re psychological. He wants us never to take our eyes off him. A psychic imperialist, he aims to colonise our minds. He wants to dominate the external and internal landscape.

The word famous has its roots in the Latin *fama* — rumour, reputation, or renown. Initially, fame was linked to deeds, actions. Over the past hundred years, that link has been broken. Nowadays, if you’re discussed, you’re famous. Much of what presidents do isn’t very interesting — so Trump doesn’t bother. He does things to get people talking about him. Threats and rows get him attention. Shocking, melodramatic, confounding lies work too — he’d rather be infamous than forgotten.

Between 1980 and 1990 Trump spoke to some reporters pretending to be a “John Barron — spokesman for Donald Trump”. During these conversations, Barron would praise Trump — inflating his wealth and business success, describing how beautiful women were sexually attracted to Trump, and so forth. Whatever its beginnings, “John Barron” gives us a sense of the vehemence of Trump’s self-doubt, his craving to be famous.

“John Barron” is a fiction that Trump created because, I presume, he thought no one else would come to his defence or applaud him. This creation may well be the result of child-Trump being disregarded, neglected, unloved. In 2006 Trump and Melania named their only child Barron. I find this poignant — it suggests to me that Trump wanted to bring his imaginary friend to life. In giving his son the name Barron, he may have been trying to make his fiction real.

Does Trump’s invention feel to you — like it feels to me — a male thing? Let me pose a connection between Trump’s lying and masculinity.

Masculinity is complex. For the most part, all of us, male and female, start life loving our mothers. But love is not simple. When a boy loves his mother, he will empathise with her thoughts, feelings and desires. He identifies with her. At times, he will even wish to be her.

Because Trump’s in no one’s heart, he wants to be in all our minds

One classic study asked three-to-eight-year-old boys and girls whether they wanted to be fathers or mothers when they grew up. Unsurprisingly, boys four or older wanted to become fathers, and girls four or older wanted to become mothers. Three-year-old boys and girls were different. As expected, most of the girls wanted to become mothers. But, unexpectedly —

so did the majority of the boys.

In other words, for a period of his childhood, a boy will want to be a woman. And it is upon this

foundation — the desire to be a woman — that masculinity is built.

In our “girls like pink, boys like blue” world, a boy quickly learns that he is expected to feel whole and confident of his masculinity. His feelings may be conflicted, shifting, but he is expected to conceal this internal struggle from others as well as himself. A “sissy”, “mama’s boy” or “wimp” will be shamed and humiliated, sometimes assaulted. To have a masculine identity, a boy must reject what he once loved.

The upshot of all this is that a boy’s development leaves him with the fear that there is something feminine in him, that he’s not a real man — at any moment, he can be exposed as a fake.

Trump makes heavy use of this fear. To show you how, let me take you on what may seem like a digression — Trump’s love of professional wrestling.

Before throwing his hat into the political ring, Trump threw it into the wrestling arena. Between 1988 and 2013, he ran wrestling events, appeared ringside (notably in the *Battle of the Billionaires*), and was even inducted into the World Wrestling Entertainment Hall of Fame. Despite being presented as a competitive sport, professional wrestling is scripted. The competitors, results, pre-match and post-match interviews — all of it is make-believe. The broadcasters give their audience all the things you’d expect in a work of fiction: backstory, suspense, symbolism and so forth.

In wrestling, as in literature, names are never neutral. Naming a character is an essential part of creating them. There’s always a “face” (short for babyface, or hero) and a “heel” (villain). Hulk Hogan and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson are faces. Jake “The Snake” Roberts and Rick Rude are heels. Wrestling pits good against bad, a genuine he-man against a phoney rascal.

To emasculate his opponents, Trump uses this trope: “Low Energy Jeb”, “Mr Magoo” (Jeff Sessions) “Lyin’ James” (Comey), “Rat” (Michael Cohen), “Highly Conflicted Bob Mueller”. As part of his two-fisted swagger, Trump tweets in wrestling-speak: “Lightweight Marco Rubio was working hard last night. The problem is, he is a choker, and once a choker, always a choker! Mr. Meltdown.” It’s not just men — Trump labels groups of people as double-dealing wimps: “fake CNN”, “Fake news”, “Fake & Corrupt Russia Investigation”.

“It’s like a manhood thing — as if manhood can be associated with him — this wall thing,” leader of the House Nancy Pelosi said in December. The next day, publicly clarifying her private remark, she said, “there is no justification for this wall. It is not the way to protect our border . . . in terms of factual data.”

For Trump and many others — precisely because it is a manhood thing — the “factual data” doesn’t matter.

In professional wrestling, fact and fiction are worked together to create storylines that connect with the audience’s feelings. Wrestling’s good v bad, real v fake storylines provide clarity. What’s vital is this — fictional storylines can unleash genuine emotion. For the wrestling fan, as long as it feels true, it doesn’t matter that it’s fiction. Facts are beside the point. Feeling true is more important than being true.

Many of Trump’s big political lies work this logic. President Obama’s birth certificate, or, more recently, the invading caravan of “criminals and unknown Middle Easterners” — these storylines have been fact-checked and discredited. There may be data proving the wall isn’t the best way to secure the border, but for many Trump supporters, those facts are irrelevant. For his enthusiasts — especially those who share his anxieties — Trump’s lies feel truer than the truth.

Outrage at Trump’s duplicitousness is a dangerous pleasure, in a Trump-like way, self-satisfying — what Philip Roth called “the ecstasy of sanctimony”. While it is comforting that journalists are fact-checking Trump, this exercise too may be worse than pointless. If my analysis is correct, outrage and fact-checking will certainly not stop his dishonesty. These acts may even help Trump to have

