**Quo Vadis, Donald Trump?**

A Review of

*The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President*

by Bandy X. Lee (Ed.)


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Reviewed by

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*The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President* is a timely, provocative, and important book. It was edited by Brandy Lee, a Yale psychiatrist with a master’s degree in divinity, and consists of a collection of essays exploring the mental state of Donald Trump. Some of the contributors were participants in a 2017 conference held at Yale devoted to examining the mental health of the president. All of the contributors question the current commander in chief’s ability to function in that role.

The book repeatedly addresses the tension that exists between “the Goldwater rule” and the duty to warn responsibility for mental health providers established by the *Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California* (1976) decision of the Supreme Court of California. The Goldwater rule (instituted by the American Psychiatric Association after Senator Barry Goldwater successfully sued *Fact* magazine for defamation after it ran a special issue examining Goldwater’s mental stability) prohibits psychiatrists from diagnosing public figures unless they have personally examined and evaluated the person in question. However, the Tarasoff decision, subsequently affirmed by other courts, holds that mental health providers have an explicit duty to warn potential victims in the case of clear and imminent danger. The contributors to *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump* argue that Donald Trump presents a real and genuine risk to the country and the world and that psychiatrists, psychologists, and other mental health professionals are remiss if they don’t point out this danger. The Yale conference was titled “Does Professional Responsibility Include a Duty to Warn?”

Contributors to *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump* work hard to avoid specific DSM–5 labels for the president, instead focusing on the evidence supporting the presence of real and imminent danger. Brandy Lee’s introductory chapter is devoted to the duty to warn, and she notes,
Assessing dangerousness requires a different standard from diagnosing, so as to formulate a course of treatment. Dangerousness is about the situation, not the individual; it is more about the effects and the degree of impairment than the specific cause of illness; it does not require a full evaluation but takes into account whatever information is available. (p. 2)

Donald Trump’s behavior is often unpredictable and erratic, as well as seemingly self-defeating. He frequently comes across as a vulgar conman: For example, Trump University, which charged exorbitant fees, was clearly a scam, and many of us thought Trump’s salacious comments about grabbing women by their genitals would doom his presidential bid. We were wrong, and Trump’s enthusiastic supporters seem willing to forgive even his most egregious behavior.

Many people believed the gravitas associated with presidential power would reign in Trump’s worst excesses, but this has not occurred. In fact, several of the authors predict that Trump’s aberrant behavior is likely to worsen in the coming years of his presidency. As Herman and Lee note in the prologue,

> Power not only corrupts, but also magnifies existing psychopathologies, even as it creates new ones. Fostered by the flattery of underlings and the chants of crowds, a political leader’s grandiosity may morph into gross delusions of grandeur. Sociopathic traits may be amplified as the leader discovers that he can violate the norms of civil society and even commit crimes with impunity. And the leader who rules through fear, lies, and betrayal may become increasingly isolated and paranoid, as the loyalty of even his closest confidants must forever be suspect. (p. 7)

Many of the volume’s contributors are psychologists, most notable Philip Zimbardo, who coauthored a chapter with Rosemary Sword with the provocative subtitle “How the Leader of the Free World Has Proven Time and Again He Is Unfit for Duty.” Chapter authors avoid diagnosing Trump, but they do make a compelling case for “narcissism in extremis,” noting that Trump displays many of the behaviors associated with a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder, including “condescension, gross exaggeration (lying), bullying, jealousy, fragile self-esteem, lack of compassion, and viewing the world through an ‘us vs. them’ lens” (p. 26). The contributors bolster their argument that the president is unfit by citing numerous examples of dehumanization (“[Mexicans are] bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”), lying (“I won the popular vote if you count the millions of people who voted illegally.”), misogyny (“You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes. Blood coming out of her—whatever.”), paranoia (“Even your friends are out to get you: they want your job, they want your house, they want your money, they want your wife”), racism (“Look at my African American over here. Look at him!”), and self-aggrandizement (“I’m speaking with myself, number one, because I have a very good brain” and “I alone can fix it”) (pp. 33–36).

Tony Schwartz, coauthor of The Art of the Deal, contributed a short chapter devoted to Trump’s sense of self-worth. He notes, “[Trump] treated every encounter as a contest he had to win. . . . Many of the deals in The Art of the Deal were massive failures . . . but Trump had me describe each of them as a huge success” (p. 70).

Journalist Gail Sheehy, best known as the author of Passages (1976), has a chapter devoted in part to Trump’s total indifference to the truth. “He states what he wants to be true. If his
statement is proven false, he is unfazed, and confidently predicts that the facts will catch up with his belief” (p. 81).

Other authors, like psychiatrist Lance Dodes, address Trump using the lens of sociopathy. Dodes provides numerous examples of the president’s aberrant behavior that suggest sociopathy, including Trump’s mocking the disability of a handicapped reporter, sexually assaulting women, hinting that gun owners concerned about their second amendment rights might want to murder Hillary Clinton, personally degrading people who criticize him, terrifying minority groups, creating the scam Trump University, and a long history of cheating people he’s hired by not paying them what he owes.

Clinical psychologist John Gartner describes Trump’s narcissism (“Nobody knows more about [fill in the blank] than me”), antisocial personality disorder (Trump University), and paranoia (Obama’s birthplace, Scalia’s death, Ted Cruz’s father): “When you combine these three ingredients . . . you get a leader who feels omnipotent, omniscient, and entitled to total power, and who rages at being persecuted by imaginary enemies” (p. 97). Gartner concludes his chapter by noting, “History will not be kind to a profession that aided the rise of an American Hitler through its silence” (p. 107).

Other chapter authors describe Trump’s apparent delusions (e.g., adamantly maintaining it didn’t rain during his inaugural address, although thousands of people got wet); his belief that attending a military high school left him knowing more about military matters than “all the generals”; his admiration for brutal dictators like Bashar al-Assad, Saddam Hussein, Rodrigo Duterte, and Vladimir Putin; his lack of grace, dignity, and decorum (e.g., pushing aside the prime minister of Montenegro in order to get a front-row seat for a photo opportunity); his willingness to outright lie or embrace “alternative facts” when they serve his ends; and his pathological need to destroy or undo every positive thing President Obama accomplished during his 8 years in office. They also highlight Trump’s failure to understand the use of nuclear weapons as a deterrent (“If we have them, why can’t we use them?”), his enthusiastic embrace of waterboarding (and new methods that “go a lot further”), and his belief that five innocent African American teenagers should be given the death penalty for rape—even though DNA evidence conclusively documented their innocence. Authors do not mince their words in describing this president; for example, James Gilligan describes Trump as “impulsive, arrogant, ignorant, disorganized, chaotic, nihilistic, self-contradictory, self-important and self-serving” (p. 179). They describe his seemingly perverse relationship with his daughter Ivanka and the “Trump effect” (bullying of minorities in schools justified on the basis of Trump’s electoral victory). William Doherty writes that Trump’s presidency is “antitherapeutic—a lionizing of the unexamined life where personal insecurities are boldly projected onto the world, and where self-serving beliefs become public facts” (p. 210). Doherty sadly notes that with Trump’s ascendency, “the arc of the moral universe no longer seems to bend inevitably toward justice” (p. 211). Other contributors describe the depression and anxiety their patients experienced after Trump’s election, and some speculate about how his relationship with his father shaped the person he became.

Clinical psychologist Edwin Fisher wrote one of the more scholarly chapters, “The Loneliness of Fateful Decisions.” Fisher discusses John F. Kennedy’s 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the conflicting advice Kennedy received from his advisors, and the ways in which his decisions were shaped through his extensive social networks, his broad reading, and his understanding of history. This stands in marked contrast to President Trump. Fisher cites conservative columnist George Will, who wrote, “It is urgent for Americans to think and
The impulsive, ill-considered, narcissistic, reckless, and apparently intentional lies, threats, and bravado not only damage the country but may leave the president even more isolated. That President Trump might ever occupy the loneliness of deciding about a potentially catastrophic course of action is rightly our most urgent and greatest fear. (pp. 338–339)

*The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump* is a profoundly depressing book, and I found it left me even more disturbed about the Trump presidency than when I began reading. However, it is also a profoundly important book, raising critical issues for every mental health professional to ponder.

**References**

*Tarasoff v. Regents of University of California, 17 Cal. 3d 425 (Cal. 1976).*