

An Inch Becomes a Mile: Donald Trump's Escalation of Victimhood Rhetoric

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Introduction

On November 15th, 2022, Donald Trump formally announced that he was running for President in the 2024 election cycle. However, the nation he was addressing had significantly changed compared to the one he addressed on June 16th, 2015, when he came down Trump Tower's escalator to announce his 2016 candidacy. Much of this change can come down to his words and the actions they inspired and enabled, as seen by the January 6th Insurrection and numerous other examples of far-right domestic terrorism. While there is a large body of established research that fully described the methods Trump used in winning the 2016 election, current research has been focusing on how his words caused the rise of political extremism during and after his presidency. This paper seeks to contribute to this ongoing discussion by using established methodologies of rhetorical analysis to posit that *Donald Trump radicalized his supporters by leveraging ongoing social pressure to create a shared identity of hate and violence.*

Literature Review

Before diving into Trump's rhetoric, we must first consider the audience he regularly speaks to. In her paper "Obama, Trump, and Reflections on the Rhetoric of Political Change," Denise Bostdorff points out that Trump's appeal in 2016 did not come from the working-class demographic his campaign claimed to be advocating for, as "average Trump supporters were actually more affluent than average Clinton supporters" (Bostdorff, 2017). Similar contradictions existed in religious communities, as Trump held more than 80% of the white evangelical Christian vote despite clearly violating multiple principles of Christian morality (Bostdorff,

2017). Bostdorff explains these contradictions by focusing on the cultural shift during the Obama presidency and that since Trump's voter base was more likely to live in zip codes that were not racially or culturally diverse (i.e., all white), they were highly resistant to cultural changes. These changes ranged from the legalization of gay marriage and the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell to the simple fact that Barack Obama, the leader of the free world, was black" (Bostdorff, 2017). Thus, Bostdorff argues that Trump's success came from his portrayal as the figurehead of a reactionary force seeking to reverse the expansion of civil rights and normalization of what they saw as perverse.

Trump introduced his rhetoric to this audience through the vehicle of "felt powerlessness." In "The Art of Masculine Victimhood: Donald Trump's Demagoguery," Paul Johnson describes this "felt powerlessness" as the supposed limits placed on Trump's supporters because of "otherness- whether in the form of alien ideas, political institutions, or other people" (Johnson, 2017). According to Johnson, these limits were the efforts of cultural movements to remove, reform, and restrain the structural privilege that Trump's voter demographics had. For example, Trump used the example of politically correct social norms during the first 2016 GOP primary debate to declare that the American identity had been lost and forgotten, immediately followed by tying "this collapse in judgement to American economic humiliation, repeating the line from his announcement speech that 'We don't win anymore. We lose to China. We lose to Mexico'" (Johnson, 2017). By using this hyperbolic language to portray American humiliation and oppression, Trump could assert himself as the answer to the nation's "lack of authoritative, masculine leadership" and thereby strengthen his parasocial relationship with his supporters. Thus, Johnson argues that Trump's success came from his use of hyperbolic language that defined the removal of structural privilege as a vehicle for oppressing those who supported him,

thereby enabling the feelings of powerlessness his supporters felt and allowing them to believe he was the ultimate answer to their problems.

The hyperbolic language Johnson described was analyzed by Orly Kayam in “The Readability and Simplicity of Donald Trump’s Language.” Using three types of readability analysis of ten different transcripts, Kayam concluded that Trump “speaks on a fourth-to-fifth grade level” and purposely uses shorter sentences than other 2016 candidates, who collectively scored an average of four to five grades higher (Kayam, 2018a). This simplified language allowed Trump to position himself as an anti-intellectual relatively easily, as rejecting advanced linguistic guidelines implicitly supported his rejection of the academic, scientific, and political establishment (Kayam, 2018a). Thus, Kayam argues that Trump’s success came from his use of simplified language that allowed him to reach the widest audience possible and capitalize on already-existing anti-intellectualism in America.

To explain how Trump’s success was sustained throughout his presidency. Casey Kelley introduced one last factor to consider in “Donald J. Trump and the Rhetoric of Ressentiment.” Kelley describes resentment as a feeling that “arises when emotions are powerful but must be suppressed because they cannot be acted upon” (Kelly, 2020). Trump cultivated this emotion in a few different ways, leading to an endless cycle of rage and an ongoing desire for political extremism. First, he constantly refocused on the same incidents he claimed were personal slights against him, and the same key economic issues he claimed were ruining America. He then made it purposefully difficult for one to remove themselves from this focus by building more and more hurdles for success to be achieved, whether it was blaming new “enemies,” claiming his hands were tied, or shifting the goalposts of his policy ideas (Kelly, 2020). Using both of these tactics, Trump created the perception of an enemy so powerful that no individual act of fighting,

resistance, or revenge would be enough to defeat it (Kelly, 2020). Thus, Kelly argues that Trump's success came from trapping them in a constant state of resentment, a state where they must unite under his banner to stand a chance of saving themselves.

By combining the factors these four authors wrote on, one can begin to understand how Trump's delivery and style allowed him to successfully introduce the rhetorical strategy discussed in this paper: His success came from using simplified, hyperbolic language that fueled reactionary, anti-intellectual sentiments among privileged groups, sentiments that were commonly expressed as feelings of resentment. These feelings and sentiments were the circumstances Trump purposefully created to simultaneously instigate the process of radicalization through victimhood and assert himself as the only figurehead his supporters could unite under if they wanted their voice to be heard.

Methodology

Dramatism: Pentadic Analysis

Developed by Kenneth Burke, analysis through dramatism seeks to understand "what is involved when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it" (Burke, 1969). Specifically, Burke focuses on the humanity behind rhetoric and the motives attributed to a rhetorical artifact (Dunn, 2018). With this view, a rhetorical artifact is no more than public performance, and the speaker is no more than an actor who uses their performance to achieve an end result (Nelson, 1983). Like any performance, the original intent of the actor is not explicitly known, nor is it important when compared to what impression it made on the audience. Thus, dramatic analysis focuses on what various audiences may conclude as possible motives behind a given rhetorical artifact (Dunn, 2018). It is also important to note that, under this analysis, the

actor should not be associated with the previous biases of the speaker playing the role.

Dramatism centers on the *actions* of the actor, not the subjective *reputation* of the speaker (Nelson, 1983).

There are two main components to a dramatic analysis. First, five specific components of a rhetorical artifact must be summarized and detailed. These five elements, commonly referred to as the pentad, focus on the overall questions one might have when describing a rhetorical artifact: “what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)” (Burke, 1969). Further rhetorical scholarship has detailed how these elements can be described in multiple ways. Specifically, they can be derived from the artifact itself (internal labeling) or described from the outside context surrounding the artifact (external labeling) (Tsikata, 2019). Second, these five elements are analyzed to find ratios that help establish potential motives. In their summary of this concept, Christopher Darr and Harry Strine state the following: “The scene-act ratio, for example, grounds an act in its scene. So, for example, a person might portray her actions as the only option, given the setting. OR scene might serve as a justification for future action. Similarly, the scene-agent ratio might portray the agent as a product of his or her environment” (Darr & Strine, 2008). Whatever ratios are prominent help convey the worldview the rhetor is trying to persuade the audience towards (Peterson, 2018). With this repeated process, it is possible for many artifacts of rhetoric to show the change in rhetorical tactics in a specific protest group over a large span of time.

The Guilt-Redemption Cycle

Initially released in 1961, Burke’s *The Rhetoric of Religion* provided another layer of detail to this framework of dramatism; while pentadic analysis established the process of describing the motives of a communicator, this new concept, the Guilt-Redemption cycle,

provides a method of analyzing how a message can be received and how messages can influence human behavior.

Burke's Original Framework. Burke starts by establishing the concept of Order, which can be separated into two different categories: the natural Order (what would today be described as scientific laws and theories) and the socio-political Order, the “structures in which people can give or receive orders, in which orders can be obeyed or disobeyed...” (Burke, 1970). He establishes the basis for the socio-political Order off Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which detailed the principle of those in a civilization surrendering their sovereignty to a governing body in order to ensure their protection (Burke, 1970). Glantz notes that this type of Order, while commonly recognized as established law, is more often made up of “implicit and unstated... social norms and expectations” (Glantz, 2007). Thus, the primary type of Order one is governed by is not that of the government, but that of the culture, which can rapidly fluctuate over time and be applied differently by every individual in a society.

Once Order is established, Guilt must follow. Guilt can be defined as the turmoil created when Order is violated. In other words, when someone is confronted about breaking the established laws and social norms of a society, their conscience creates the desire to restore the elements of order that have been broken (Shultz, 2000). Since Order is communicated through language, its standards require perfection; it is, therefore, impossible to escape the feelings caused by Guilt, as none of us can be perfect (McManus, 2007). It is also important to note that since Order is determined on a societal level, and since Guilt is created as a result of society's reaction to violations of Order, Guilt can be directed at entire groups of people that collectively are outside the boundaries of social norms (Shultz, 2000). (As such, any time the term “individual” is referenced in this section, the same concept could be applied to an entire social

group or class.) However, this “omnipresent, all-encompassing, all-inclusive” Guilt also implies Redemption since Guilt’s purpose is to motivate the restoration of Order (Burke, 1970; Glantz, 2007).

There are two main ways for Redemption (the restoration of Order) to occur: mortification and victimage (Glantz, 2007). Burke defines mortification as the “subjugation of the passions and appetites... an extreme form of ‘self-control’” where an individual sacrifices the parts of themselves (thought patterns, behaviors, etc.) that led to the violations of Order (Burke, 1970). Since Order can be broken by either “saying yes to Disorder, or disobediently saying no to Order,” mortification could result in either action or inaction (Burke, 1970). Once mortification is complete, Guilt will disappear as the individual is accepted back into society. As this requires the individual to go against his own impulses, mortification is the harder of the two modes of Redemption to accomplish (Burke, 1970). However, under the definition of mortification, it is also possible for someone else to sacrifice themselves for another, acting as the Redeemer to rectify the violation of Order (Burke, 1970).

Victimage is defined as “finding some other party that can represent one’s guilt, and then attacking the guilt in that other form” (Church, 2009). This act of scapegoating tends to occur when the violated Order pertains to social norms, as those who violate them will likely engage in “symbolic combat” for their behavior to be accepted and thus have the violation disappear (Billings, 2015). (The victims, in this case, would be those who believe the individual’s behavior is against social norms.) It may also be impossible to find a singular victim that would relieve the individual of their Guilt. When that happens, the individual may use “fragmentary victimage,” or the use of multiple victims that individually would not suffice, as a combined complete sacrifice

for all attention to be shifted off their violation. If the victims are not satisfactory, society's attention will not be diverted from the individual, and their Guilt will remain (Billings, 2015).

Regardless of the path taken, mortification and victimage will ultimately lead to Redemption, which can be experienced in vastly different ways. Using mortification, the individual could be "symbolically reborn," as their potential change in behavior may lead to a distinct difference in their personality, identity, and vision (McManus, 2007). Using victimage, the individual's guilt may be suppressed once society's spotlight and scrutiny are moved away from them and towards the scapegoat (Billings, 2015). However, as established earlier, since humanity cannot achieve the standards of perfection outlined in Order, the cycle will eventually repeat itself, as Redemption ends up "reaffirming the underlying principle of Guilt" (Burke, 1970).

An Additional Element: Shame. Although not initially conceptualized by Burke, the additional concept of Shame seems to follow the same cycle as Guilt, although the difference in definition between the two terms is crucial. According to Lynd,

Shame is defined as a wound to one's self-esteem, a painful feeling or sense of degradation excited by the consciousness of having something unworthy of one's previous idea of one's own excellence. It is, also, a peculiarly painful feeling of being in a situation that incurs the scorn of others. (Lynd, 1999).

Guilt, as a feeling, compelled individuals to change parts of themselves to live within the standards of Order. Shame, on the other hand, does not seek to inspire change but instead forces individuals to confront their true nature instead of the hypothetical vision of themselves all humans have (Lynd, 1999; Shultz, 2000). In this way, Shame is a complex emotion to express

since it requires an admission that the individual is not who they claimed to be. Instead, Shame is typically processed with “a desire to hide, cover up, or sink into the ground,” along with the potential for radicalization since one’s vision of the ideal world cannot be maintained once the world turns against them (Lynd, 1999; Shultz, 2000).

Two notable conclusions can be drawn from the concept of Shame being applied to the Guilt-Redemption cycle. First, victimage can be inspired by either Guilt or Shame but has stark contrasts in motivation depending on which is being used. In the case of Guilt, an individual uses victimage because they believe their violation of Order should be a violation and, as such, their act be ignored in favor of focusing on another target. However, if Shame is used, this individual rejects the entire premise of Order being correct. They are not attempting to “buy in” to the fundamental assumptions of society; instead, they are using other victims to reject the concept that their mode of behavior should be against Order in the first place. Thus, this corresponds well to the notion of “symbolic combat” as mentioned earlier and can be exemplified by Burke’s description of religious zealots attempting to institute a theocracy with the establishment of a new socio-political Order:

For it seems that, even if one believes in the idea of a perfect, supernatural, super personal victim, by identification with whose voluntary sacrifice one can be eternally saved, there is still the goat to look for victims here on earth as well, who should be punished for their part, real or imaginary, and blocking the believer’s path to felicity, or perhaps in threatening to send him on his heavenly way too soon. (Burke, 1970)

The Problem with the Guilt-Redemption Cycle. Although the previous sections have demonstrated the usefulness of the Guilt-Redemption cycle, its use comes with a significant danger that must be detailed before this paper continues. First, we must acknowledge that this

analysis is based on the first three chapters of the biblical book of Genesis. With this cycle, Burke claimed that this principle, which is fundamental to Christianity, is also “fundamental to language and therefore fundamental to humanity” (Maddux, 2006). From the secular nature of this paper (and therefore the lack of an ultimate sacrifice such as Jesus Christ), this means that Guilt, which is fundamental to society, can never fully be eliminated.

The danger enters when this conclusion is interpreted into action. Since it is fundamentally true that Guilt is unavoidable, why should anyone bother continuing to follow Order? As the cycle repeats over and over, an individual can likely be conditioned to accept the suffering that feelings of Guilt cause them. After all, they have no agency to avoid Guilt, as it is impossible for them to be perfectly within the bounds of Order for their entire life (Maddux, 2006). This desensitization could cause an individual to disregard social norms and only be concerned with the bounds of the law (if they are concerned in the first place), leading to the most extreme behaviors that can exist in a society.

On the other hand, authoritarian figures may use this opportunity of eternal guilt to assert themselves into a position of power, for as Christ is the ultimate redeemer for the Christian mythology, a powerful authoritarian who can fundamentally reshape the boundaries of Order is the ultimate redeemer for a secular society (Maddux, 2006). Thus, these rulers can demand submission under the pretense that they can make Guilt go away by changing Order. (Whether this assertion is true depends on the ruler’s actions once they have power over Order.) Thus, the Guilt-Redemption cycle presents a clear path to the failure of democratic systems and the radicalization of the masses.

Analysis: Applying the Methodology to Trump's 2016 Campaign

Pentadic Components and Ratios

As discussed in the literature review, Trump used manufactured cultural issues and hyperbolic language to make his supporters feel that America (and, therefore, Americans) were oppressed. This oppression was characterized, according to Trump, by the resignation of America to political forces attacking American ideals. Using Burke's pentadic components, we can see how this narrative was emphasized:

- Trump's agent can be broadly referred to as what he claims are "oppressive political forces." This could refer to enemies within the country (i.e., Hillary Clinton, Antifa, Marxists, etc.) or a foreign power (i.e., Mexico, China, Iran, etc.).
- Trump's scene is typically modern-day America, although he sometimes uses his version of historical and cultural context from the past decade to characterize the present.
- While very specific to their context, Trump's act and agency follow an overall trend that places each into their own category. Trump's act can broadly be described as "attacking American ideals," while the agency can broadly be described as "attacking institutions of structural power and inequality." It isn't necessary to look at the specific details (ex., what the attack is and how it is being accomplished) as the repeated trend becomes the main pathway etched into the audience's mind.
- Finally, Trump's purpose revolves between three choices: either these forces are trying to destroy America, the American people, or Trump himself. Either way, Trump groups all three options together so tightly that they all have the same consequences: the nation will fall into ruin if these people accomplish their goal.

Looking at the above factors, it becomes clear that Trump relies on the purpose-scene ratio to motivate his followers. This becomes obvious when looking at an aggregate of Trump speeches all at once: they may have different opponents mentioned, and those opponents may be doing different things, but they all have the same purpose and are acting on the same scene. One significant benefit Trump receives from choosing a purpose-scene ratio is that it allows him to separate his supporters from reality. Those who didn't initially believe in Trump's narrative would see the tropes he used as meaningless contradictions. (After all, Trump simultaneously proclaimed America as strong and weak and portrayed his enemies as both unintelligent college kids and the brilliant deep state.) In contrast, those who did believe would see these tropes as essential to their political worldview, as they believed they were forced into being oppressed and could overcome these political forces (Johnson, 2017).

Order, Guilt, and Shame

The purpose-scene ratio ties directly into the moral framework Trump built using the Guilt-Redemption cycle. Whether Trump and his supporters like it or not, the norms that make up the socio-political Order do not remain constant; they will constantly shift according to the desires of hegemonic thought. Although difficult to detail, this order is exemplified by the changing social conditions under the Obama Administration, as Trump's slogan of "Make America Great Again" is so broad that its meaning can apply to any individual aspect of Order that his supporters find offensive. Thus, when Trump's supporters objected to these conditions, they contradicted Order and immediately encountered Guilt. Guilt started as societal pressure for those who objected to Order to stand down and accept the changes. However, as Guilt increased due to Trump's laundry list of ideological violations of Order, it manifested into real-life consequences (jobs lost, families broken apart, etc.).

It is important to note here that Guilt, when applied at the societal level, must create labels. These labels then expand dramatically, encompassing both those who hold extreme positions and the moderates who silently consent to those positions. This expansion is how all Trump supporters were placed into the same ideological label. It didn't matter whether someone supported every position Trump espoused or not; all that mattered was that they were willing to support Trump *despite* the objections they held to his most extreme positions. Guilt was followed by Shame, as the hegemonic norms of Order asserted themselves as being righteous and Trump's supporters as bigots or, as Hillary Clinton said, a "basket of deplorables" (Reilly, n.d.). Trump's supporters now had to contend with the accusation that even though many of them were evangelical Christians, they were the least righteous people in America.

To summarize up to this point, Trump was able to unite all his supporters under one common identity using the purpose-scene ratio and repurposing the Guilt and Shame placed upon them by the socio-political Order. This identity they shared was for those that "might consider themselves aggrieved, grudge-holding, treated unfairly, powerless, and humiliated by economic misfortune and other global forces outside of their control" (Kelly, 2020). By uniting under this identity, Trump solidified a voter base that believed they needed to do whatever was necessary to recover a previous state of American identity, one where they were at the top of structural inequality. They saw themselves as righteous citizens who were deprived of what they deserved, and as such, they had a right to be angry. They had a right to use this anger to fight back to their rightful place. They had the right to rejoice in the pain they inflicted on others, and they had a right to channel all of their anger into Trump's candidacy (Johnson, 2017; Kelly, 2020).

Redemption and Victimage

As stated in the previous section, Guilt and Shame applied to the broad label of Trump's supporters, regardless of their individual ideological positions. While it is true that Redemption could only come when these supporters were accepted back into the socio-political Order, this ideological diversity manifested itself in the methods each category of political identification (independents, moderate Republicans, and far-right Republicans) would attempt to use to achieve their goal. Trump's rhetoric not only encompassed these methods; it effortlessly chained them together to help foster a rhetorical pipeline that would eventually enable political violence and stochastic terrorism.

Independents and moderate Republicans were the groups most sensitive to the social pressure associated with Guilt, as they were used to the climate of previous presidential election cycles where, although there were stark differences between candidates, all people were treated with basic dignity and respect. That was not possible in 2016; as stated earlier, when they allied with Trump, they implicitly agreed with all his political prescriptions, even if they explicitly objected to many of them. Independents and moderate Republicans were not ready for the Shame attached to this agreement; they were not ready to accept the moral dilemma they placed themselves into. Thus, their preferred method of Redemption was victimage, their target being actors on the economic stage, both domestic and international. Trump helped these moderates cloak their support in his populist veneer by dedicating significant portions of his speeches to these actors, as shown by these examples taken from his acceptance speech at the 2016 Republican National Convention:

- “A number of these reforms that I will outline tonight will be opposed by some of our nation’s most powerful special interests. That is because these interests have rigged our political and economic system for their exclusive benefit” (*Full Text*, 2016).
- “When innocent people suffer, because our political system lacks the will, or the courage, or the basic decency to enforce our laws – or worse still, has sold out to some corporate lobbyist for cash – I am not able to look the other way” (*Full Text*, 2016).
- Our horrible trade agreements with China and many others, will be totally renegotiated. That includes renegotiating NAFTA to get a much better deal for America – and we’ll walk away if we don’t get the deal that we want” (*Full Text*, 2016).
- “Excessive regulation is costing our country as much as \$2 trillion a year, and we will end it. We are going to lift the restrictions on the production of American energy. This will produce more than \$20 trillion in job creating economic activity over the next four decades” (*Full Text*, 2016).

Trump also made the process of dissociating from his radical positions markedly easier by portraying himself as the only solution to the massive number of problems he described, being able to provide the success that he claimed was present under a previous Order and connecting the reduction in American economic success to the creation of the Guilt and Shame his supporters were feeling. He outright said as much during the RNC speech:

I have joined the political arena so that the powerful can no longer beat up on people that cannot defend themselves. Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it... On January 21st of 2017, the day after I take the oath of office,

Americans will finally wake up in a country where the laws of the United States are enforced... I'm With You, and I will fight for you, and I will win for you. (*Full Text*, 2016)

This was Trump at his most presentable; he understood that this specific speech, the one where he accepted the Republican nomination, would be primarily watched by the least radical members of his voter base, and he needed to target them in the most straightforward way possible. By starting his speech with a cherrypicked vision of American desolation, a vision that took a quarter of his total speech to convey, his solutions sounded much more acceptable, and he seemed like a more acceptable nominee to these demographics (*Full Text*, 2016).

On the other hand, far-right Republicans were unwilling to publicly respect the changing definition of Order that happened under Obama's presidency. They were looking to redefine Order in their own image, one that sees violence as the path to righteousness when used on those they deem morally degenerate. Thus, while they were also using victimage as the pathway toward Redemption, their targets were focused on the broadest possible category: everyone who was against them, everyone who changed the definition of Order, and everyone who placed Guilt and Shame upon them. Simply put, they were using the Redemption process as a complete rejection of Shame, Guilt, and Order.

Trump fueled this thinking by providing these far-right supporters with a priority list of targets to attack, disparage, and threaten. These targets included the following:

- Hillary Clinton: "Yet Hillary Clinton is proposing mass amnesty, mass immigration, and mass lawlessness. Her plan will overwhelm your schools and hospitals, further

reduce your jobs and wages, and make it harder for recent immigrants to escape from poverty” (*Full Text*, 2016).

- President Obama: “has used the pulpit of the presidency to divide us by race and color” (*Full Text*, 2016).
- Undocumented Immigrants: Using an anecdote about a woman killed by an undocumented immigrant as “One more child to sacrifice on the altar of open borders” (*Full Text*, 2016).
- Documented Immigrants: Blaming them for corporate greed by saying, “Decades of record immigration have produced lower wages and higher unemployment for our citizens, especially for African-American and Latino workers” (*Full Text*, 2016).
- Refugees, primarily from Syria: “I only want to admit individuals into our country who will support our values and love our people” (*Full Text*, 2016).

Here’s where the problem lies: the examples listed for all three groups, from radical to independent, came from the same speech. By successfully pandering to each group, Trump effectively creates a pipeline whereby the enlightened centrist can start and finish the journey to alt-right thought in less than 90 minutes. The more times Trump does this, the easier it is to move his audience’s Overton window directly into fascist ideology.

Trump’s Effectiveness

Trump’s rhetoric was effective in the short term because it relied on the circular nature of media discourse. By violating the norms of political correctness, Trump was able to generate a media firestorm that would expose more and more Americans to his messaging (Kayam, 2018b). Moreover, by being constantly blasted across the airwaves, Trump was able to build an entirely

different vision of America, one that pulled his supporters away from reality and into his own stylized narrative with his constant repetition of the purpose-scene ratio:

There were not simply two different kinds of public into which Americans were divided as they went to the polls, but two competing universes of discourse. Within one universe of discourse much of what Trump said – its misogyny and boastfulness – was shocking. To those enfolded within his discourse of vernacular folksiness, however, this discourse was acceptable. (Montgomery, 2017)

Trump's rhetoric also allowed the wealthiest and culturally benefited Americans to feel the pain of the economically misfortunate. Although this pain resulted from cultural issues, it was so heavily cloaked in economics that the average moderate bought Trump's message on the economic issues alone (Kelly, 2020). It didn't matter that most of Trump's advocated policies would hurt those who were economically victimized. The more people that felt this pain, the less it could be defined, the more conceptual it became, and the easier it was to spread (Kelly, 2020). It also didn't matter how this pain was felt, as Trump marketed himself as the one who could reshape Order when put into power, thereby satisfying the radicals when Order is changed and satisfying the moderates and independents when the Guilt and Shame are removed.

The reasons for Trump's rhetoric being effective in the long-term have to do with how resentment complicates the guilt-redemption cycle. As stated earlier, victimage does not have to depend on an individual scapegoat; fragmentary victimage allows for the sacrifice of as many people as needed for Redemption. Yet by cultivating resentment, it is possible for the list of victims needed for Redemption to become practically insatiable. The more targets Trump painted for his supporters and the more personal slights he introduced during his speeches, the narrower the metaphorical pie of Redemption's slices became. Since this rhetoric was repeated so often, it

also created a new moral framework for Trump's supporters where, since their identity was now forged through feeling victimized, they were locked into their current position in the socio-political Order. Under this moral framework, it became morally good to be a victim, since you would be on the right side of demonized virtuousness, and it became morally good to exercise violence against those seen as moral degenerates, since they were what fueled anger and maintained the supposedly oppressive system (Kelly, 2020). This ultimately reinforces the idea that, for Trump's supporters, the Guilt-Redemption cycle can never fully complete itself, as there is only the appearance of progress on an everlasting road to glory.

Discussion: Trump's Use of Victimhood Rhetoric in 2022 and its Implications Today

This everlasting road continues more than seven years after Trump's candidacy, as he was still out on the campaign trail as a former President endorsing candidates for the 2022 midterm elections. Seven years of continuing down the previously described pipeline from moderate to fascist thought can be easily proven when looking at how Trump engages his base today compared to before his presidency. In this section, Trump's RNC speech will be compared to his campaign rally in Pennsylvania on September 3rd, 2022, the first campaign rally after the FBI searched his Mar-a-Lago residence and confiscated classified documents.

The similarities between these two speeches cannot be denied: both start with Trump describing how he wants the audience to envision America as a political dumpster fire. Within the first two minutes of his Pennsylvania speech, he fit in a cavalcade of these qualities:

Our country is going to hell. This election is a referendum on skyrocketing inflation, rampant crime, soaring murders, crushing gas prices, millions and millions of illegal aliens pouring across our border, race and gender indoctrination perverting our schools,

and above all, this election is a referendum on the corruption and extremism of Joe Biden and the radical Democrat party. (*Trump Speaks*, 2022).

Although Trump did immediately follow this statement with an encouragement for his supporters to “get out and vote,” there are many instances in this speech where there is an implied endorsement of violence. He claims that the country is “being destroyed through people who got into office through cheating and through fraud” while repeating his 2020 election conspiracies that directly led to the attack on the Capitol on January 6th (*Trump Speaks*, 2022). He says that the Democrats are “against God” to rile up the Christian nationalists in the crowd before going further and saying they are against the Constitution (*Trump Speaks*, 2022). He finishes his speech by saying, “We will not yield... We will never give up... the tyrants we are fighting do not stand even a chance because we are Americans and Americans kneel to God and God alone” (*Trump Speaks*, 2022). When you have the de-facto leader of a political party claiming that his opposition is destroying the country, against the founding documents of said country, against the religious beliefs that the majority of his audience wants to impose as law; when he declares that they will not fall to this oppression, and declares that the peaceful means of acquiring power are being manipulated by the opposition to isolate his movement of liberation, it naturally leads the audience to believe that a violent revolution is necessary. It doesn’t matter that no explicit endorsement of violence was made; Trump is calling for violence but leaving plausible deniability in case he is arrested for inspiring the acts that will happen because of what he says.

Another critical difference in Trump’s rhetoric is his focus on the American educational system. One of the claims made in Trump’s introduction was that there was “race and gender indoctrination perverting our schools” (*Trump Speaks*, 2022). This starkly contrasts 2016’s rhetoric, where American public schools were instead described as “failing” due to measured

educational outcomes (*Full Text*, 2016). The contrast only grows more prominent as Trump explains his full position:

Our children are captive to unhinged Marxist educators who are pushing inappropriate sexual, racial and political material on our children from the youngest possible age... no teacher should ever be allowed to teach transgender to our children without parental say-so... We will get critical race theory the hell out of our schools... We will restore patriotic education to our schools, and we will teach our children to love their country, honor our history, and to always respect the American flag. (*Trump Speaks*, 2022)

By outright lying and exaggerating what is being taught in American public schools, Trump bypasses any concerns his audience may have about their children being raised to think for themselves. Nothing that they believe can be questioned by their children, even though their generation was the one that questioned almost every choice their elders made during the Cold War. Teaching children that racism is bad becomes Critical Race Theory. Teaching them that some people don't identify with how they were born is brainwashing them into being transgender. Teaching children how America has made bad choices is unpatriotic and disrespectful, and all of it gets slapped with the label of Marxism. Just as Trump has led his followers down a pipeline of radicalization, so will Trump-supporting parents lead their children.

Then there is Trump's outright endorsement of Chinese authoritarian Xi Jinping over Pennsylvania's Senator-Elect John Fetterman. That sentence alone sounds absurd, yet it actually happened when Trump described a supposed conversation he had with Xi over the punishment for drug dealing in China and the United States. Keep in mind that Trump is "calling for the death penalty for drug dealers" (*Trump Speaks*, 2022):

[Xi said] ‘We immediately catch the drug dealer. We give him quick trial’... ‘If the drug dealer is guilty, he is immediately executed. So we have no drug problem’... Fetterman supports taxpayer-funded drug dens and the complete decriminalization of illegal drugs, including heroin, cocaine, crystal meth, and ultra-lethal fentanyl... Compare that to president Xi of China, a little different, would you say? (*Trump Speaks*, 2022)

While it is true that Trump spoke positively about many authoritarian leaders during his 2016 campaign and presidency, it goes one step further when said authoritarian leaders are compared to American politicians by normalizing authoritarian figures, actions, and policies within American institutions. In this sense, Trump is priming his audience to go even further down the rabbit hole with him; if he can get enough people to accept valuing authoritarians over those with whom they politically disagree, he can push a Republican-led legislature to give him the authoritarian power he desires.

When putting all the pieces together of Trump’s latest rhetoric, it is clear why Pentadic Analysis and the Guilt-Redemption cycle must be simultaneously used to measure Trump’s (and more broadly, the Republican party’s) rhetoric going forward. Over the course of seven years, Donald Trump’s rhetoric has helped the American right has taken off its mask of civility. Its leading political figure is pushing for the whitewashing of history and the indoctrination of children, is endorsing authoritarians over the opposing political party in the hopes that he will normalize the possibility of his autocracy and is willing to walk directly up to the line of outright endorsing political violence against anyone who doesn’t fall into line with him. One week after he announced his 2024 candidacy, he dined with two of the most prominent antisemites in modern politics, and while that did provoke almost every major leader in the Republican Party to condemn him, there is every reason to suggest that five to ten more years of this rhetoric would

shift the Overton window to making this type of behavior as politically acceptable, perhaps even politically advantageous (Basu, 2022).

By empowering the feelings of resentment and fueling the victimhood complexes of his supporters for so long, Donald Trump has tipped the scales when it comes to the achievability of American fascism. Right now, the Republican party is in the beginning stages of committing a cultural genocide against transgender adults and children, as defined by the United Nations Genocide Convention, and it is the exact outcome one would expect when using a demonized minority group for acts of victimage (Austin, 2022). This attempt cannot go farther, and the only way to prevent it is to stop everyone who spreads or believes this rhetoric from achieving power. The writing is on the wall: if they succeed, the Order that we currently know will be thrown out the window and replaced with the whims of those who want the harshest forms of structural inequality they can implement. This paper helps to explain the root of the problem and where the GOP's rhetoric is likely headed; it is now up to the American public to do something about it.

Conclusion: The Foreboding Rise of Ron DeSantis

This paper has shown how Trump used the purpose-scene ratio and the Guilt-Redemption cycle to create a rhetorical pipeline that would normalize fascist thought over time. Although Trump has piloted this approach with the MAGA movement, it is increasingly likely that the torch will be passed to Ron DeSantis, the current governor of Florida and the most promising standard-bearer for the future of the Republican Party. Although he copied Trump's methods, he has the façade of intellectual superiority present in previous Republican presidential candidates (McCain, Romney, etc.). Thus, although Trump normalized this rhetoric over time, DeSantis can normalize it through delivery alone. This normalization has shown great success in Florida during the 2022 midterms:

[DeSantis had] the most lopsided victory by a Republican gubernatorial nominee in Florida history and a gap that dwarfed Trump's own Sunshine State win in 2020...

DeSantis had turned once-solidly blue counties red, won over a majority of Latino voters and carried on his coattails Republican candidates up and down the ballot and in every corner of the state. (Contorno, 2022)

While DeSantis has not yet launched his 2024 presidential campaign, it has been reported that he is actively strategizing for a potential shot at the GOP nomination (Contorno, 2022). He has purposely attempted to stay away from commenting on far-right, white nationalist and Nazi-aligned political controversies, silently enabling the shift that has already happened to continue under his watch (Chait, 2022). Even if he doesn't participate in 2024 and stands aside for Trump's shot at a second term, a presidential run from him in 2028 also has significant potential. All of this is to say that although Trump's rhetorical strategy will be modified in the future to keep appealing to moderates as it gets more and more extreme, it has no chance of going away anytime soon unless the Democratic party thoroughly crushes it. Given the resistance provided by democratic voters in the 2022 midterms, it is a distinct possibility, but the future remains uncertain.

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