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UNDERSTANDING SUPPORT FOR TRUMP: IT'S ALL ABOUT UNACCEPTABLE ALTERNATIVES

By Stephen L. Bakke  August 10, 2017



Citizen Trump perceived an opening for a new kind of presidential candidate and rejected traditional political rules. His victory surprised most of us. He's often crude, coarse, and undignified. He can be impetuous, petty, and cruelly sarcastic. I've described him as a bully and chauvinist. But he keeps pushing, with noticeable results, to deliver on some of his promises, and he uses his "bad-boy charm" to occasional great advantage. There's something intangible that compels people, mostly conservatives, to be close to these events of history in the making.

From many, Trump receives only a barrage of bashing – some of it self-inflicted. Their disdain for Trump is palpable, and their ability to be objective about him has disappeared. Others put just as much energy into singing Trump's praises. And many more confused souls drift back and forth between disgust and approval regarding the President – often influenced by his daily controversies. He's an enigma, within an enigma.

So, what's behind the committed support that he enjoys?

Some pundits claim Trump's conservative supporters have joined "the dark side" – the wicked, evil and mean world of Donald Trump. Conservatives see problems, causes, and solutions differently from liberals, but are certainly not evil. Conservatives are usually optimistic and full of visions for policies to make things better for all economic, ethnic and racial groups. So, that doesn't seem to be a worthy explanation.

Some say Trump's very visible popularity is a symptom of eroding moral absolutes and standards of propriety. However, most Americans would agree that both presidential candidates exhibited at least some ethical and/or moral shortcomings. I don't think that's an adequate explanation.

Trump's emergence meant the age of nuanced governance is over. He brought an aggressive style of "counter-attack" using plain and simple language. Maybe conservatives are reacting

favorably to that approach. In spite of the apparent chaos and undiplomatic statements, many believe there's a method to Trump's "madness" – that he knows what he's doing. For some, that could be part of his appeal.

Conservative political comedian Evan Sayet suggests that Trump borrowed Alinsky's tactic of "personalized ridicule" from the liberals. Paraphrasing Sayet: *We tried dignity with Bush; we tried collegiality with McCain; we tried propriety with Romney. And it had no effect on the barrage of personal ridicule.* While many conservatives may find "fighting back for a change" subliminally satisfying, that wouldn't be the whole answer either.

Perhaps fear of existential threats is what enhanced Trump's popularity and helped turn the presidential election against the presumed Clinton juggernaut. He keeps reminding us of those threats, and is more inclined to strong deterrence than patient diplomacy and appeasement. That theory touches on policy priorities often popular with conservatives. Maybe that observation brings us closer to an explanation.

So, what's really behind Trump's support? Have we turned to the "dark side"? Are morality standards eroding? Do supporters like Trump's style of "attack" and "fight back"? Are we afraid of existential threats? Perhaps some of each. However, I believe the biggest reason is simply that conservatives are dedicated and resolute in their opposition to the Democrats' policy priorities.

In the final analysis, it's all about the unacceptable alternatives.