HOW TRUMP SOMEHOW WON THE WAR OVER "HONESTY"

And what Hillary Clinton should learn in defeat.

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My first work in journalism was as a fact checker, and the job taught me lots of useful things. I learned that our memories are wildly unreliable. I saw how cartoonish and selective most

M I learned that our memories are wildly unreliable. I saw how cartoonish and selective most journalism—especially opinion journalism—tends to be. A third lesson: what seemed factually obvious to me wasn't always obvious to someone else. If I describe *Hamlet* as a play about a merry prince falling back in love with life, you're entitled to regard that as a nutty reading, but you can't call it demonstrably *wrong*. That two-thirds of people see **Nobuyuki Kayahara's** dancer as spinning clockwise doesn't make them more correct than the third that sees her spinning counterclockwise. Inference isn't fact.

Which brings us to **Donald Trump** and his relationship to the truth. Now, Trump is not doing well. His debate with **Hillary Clinton**, which he could have won with a show of cool, instead triggered a sustained (and still on-going) self-immolation. His behavior this past week—feuding with a former Ms. Universe in 3 a.m. tweets, wallowing in **Bill Clinton's** infidelities, and suggesting that he might dismiss the election results if he loses—has been depraved. A whiff of demoralization is in the air among his supporters—to whom he gave an overdue voice and then betrayed with his self-absorption. Nevertheless, despite all this, and despite all the flaws of Trump, which even his fans would acknowledge—the impulsivity, bullying, offensiveness, and avarice—the Republican nominee is likely to preserve an edge over Clinton on one surprising front: honesty. It's not just Trump supporters who view him as the more "honest" of the two candidates. Many undecideds do, too. Trump doesn't lead bigly among voters on perceptions of trustworthiness, but he leads nevertheless.

On the face of it, this is bizarre. While no one would call Clinton a slave to truthfulness—she changes stories (about her e-mail, about the White House travel office, about her health) and has come up with a tall tale about facing sniper fire—most of her sins are of lawyerly deception. Trump, on the other hand, dwells in a class of his own. He'll deny things that happened and refer to things that didn't happen. He'll say he knows people he doesn't know and that he doesn't know people that he does know. He'll double down on things even after being proven wrong. As Trump laughingly told his butler after being called out on a made-up story about whether his estate in Mar-a-Lago was connected to Walt Disney, "Who cares?" How, then, could anyone see him as honest?

VIDEO: Donald Trump Defends His Stance on the War in Iraq

The simplest explanation is that many Americans see Trump as telling small lies and big truths, while they see Clinton as telling small truths and big lies. Notice that when Trump supporters are interviewed about his honesty, they don't praise him for the consistency of his stories or his fastidiousness with details. They say, "He tells it like it is." As his fans see it, Trump gets in the most trouble not when he lies but when he is truthful—about illegal immigration hurting the native-born worker, about crime going up, about cops being falsely accused of bias, about Muslim immigration being a threat, about trade deals doing more harm than good, about globalism being dangerous, about climate change being nonsense, or about smart people having "good genes" that they pass on.

Most Clinton voters would view such so-called straight talk as just another set of lies—bigger and more dangerous ones than his re-writes of personal history—about the world. Their take: illegal immigration doesn't cause crime or cost Americans jobs. Crime has been going down for decades. Cops disproportionately mistreat African-Americans. Muslims and refugees pose a negligible threat to safety. Trade helps us all in the long run. Increased global integration is the path to peace. Climate change is established science. And the idea that people genetically pass on gifts like intelligence might be, as the Huffington Post put it, the "most horrible thing that Donald Trump believes" of all.

But regardless of which set of beliefs is more in line with reality—and I'll get back to that question— we're talking about two kinds of honesty or lies. There's the simple question of honesty about

demonstrable facts, like whether so-and-so did or didn't do something, and here Trump is by far the bigger sinner. Then there's the more complex—and some would say more important—question of honesty in observing and making sense of the world. Here, the answer is less clear.

W hat we really have is a dispute over narratives. Every person has a system of belief, said Aldous Huxley, although he used the more refined term "metaphysic," and the only choice we have is between one that "corresponds reasonably closely with observed and inferred reality and one that doesn't." Clinton supporters and Trump supporters both feel their side's metaphysic is the less delusional one, and the beliefs of the other come across as so at odds with reality that "lie" is often the only word that seems fitting, especially in a time of partisan frenzy. Good faith is rarely assumed. It can't just be that the dancer looks different.

The plurality of voters who give Trump the edge in honesty over Clinton isn't huge—merely 41 percent to 31 percent—but what accounts for it is that Trump's narrative is riskier and less hemmed in by convention. This is why Trump speaks so much of "political correctness." Defined broadly, political correctness is the orthodoxy—based on a shared metaphysic—of polite society. Hillary Clinton, who weighs every word and position with care, adjusting frequently and as needed, is its leading political manifestation. Donald Trump, who says whatever pops into his head, is its leading political scourge. Because staying in sync with prevailing orthodoxies tends to require constraint of thought and expression, defiance looks more honest—and usually is.

Honest doesn't mean correct, however, and we still face the question of which beliefs among Trump and Clinton supporters are most in or out of line with reality. This is a vast question that could take up many books. But neither side has a monopoly on realism. That human activity is likely responsible for rising global temperatures is accepted by a majority of climatologists, earth scientists, and meteorologists, according to multiple peer-reviewed studies, and most of those who reject the scholarship of climate change, including Trump, show little familiarity with the literature. On the other hand, the idea that intelligence is partly heritable, condemned by the Huffington Post as a belief in "eugenics," is equally in line with scholarly consensus. That undocumented immigrants don't usually "steal" jobs is true, but economists on both left and right acknowledge the downward wage pressure that illegal immigration exerts on low-skilled workers, and ordinary people can see the strain it places on schools, hospitals, and courts. That crime has been in decline for decades is true, but so is the spike in homicides across major cities this year.

I highlight these issues because, for a long time now, those who lean left have been growing in confidence in their worldview, and Trump's rise has strengthened this trend. Liberals see so-called conservatives as being blatantly irrational—rejecting Darwin's theory of evolution, turning a blind eye to even the raw numbers on climate change (let alone whether it's human-caused), coming up with tax plans that bear no resemblance to real-life numbers—and start to feel that the nation's political fights are increasingly ones of reality versus fantasy. (As an aide in the **George W. Bush** White House infamously told the journalist **Ron Suskind**, people like reporters were confined to the "reality-based

community," while those in politics can "create our own reality.") The rise of Trump thus starts to look like a culmination of a trend on the right, which, as **Franklin Foer** described more than a decade ago

in *The New Republic*, has in many ways embraced the postmodernism of the academic left and come to view even empirical disputes as ones of ideology.

The danger, however, is one of hubris among the "reality-based" community. In 2010, Cato Institute scholar **Julian Sanchez** used the term "epistemic closure" to describe the closed system of conservative thought. Increasingly, though, it's as much a malady on the other side. Journalists overwhelmingly lean left and, when seeking expert views or studies, turn to the academy, which overwhelmingly leans left (even as a legitimacy crisis is hitting the social sciences). Dissenting opinion from the consensus often isn't argued against, but simply ignored. *The New York Times* now freely employs loaded words like "demagogy" and "lie" in even straight news coverage of Trump. Fact-checking outfits hammer Trump on statement after statement, confident in their own grasp of truth, and rarely pause to examine their assumptions. It's dangerous.

Barring major upheaval, Trump isn't going to win this election. The events of this past week have ensured his loss. But if his rise has taught us anything, it's surely that our elites have been guilty for a long time of massive blind spots, and they can't be explained away by writing off half of Americans as deranged. Election winners should always show graciousness in victory, of course, and the same would be true for Clinton. But this year, the most important part of graciousness will be epistemological humility. Most of us strive to live in the reality-based community, and most of us fall short. The delusions aren't just on the other side. And as crazy as it may seem to call Trump honest, it is less crazy than we think.

Why Is Donald Trump Always Leaning on Lecterns?