

Opinion | Trump Has Untethered Himself From Reality

Thomas B. Edsall

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Guest Essay

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By [Thomas B. Edsall](#)

Mr. Edsall contributes a weekly essay from Washington on politics, demographics and inequality.

Last Tuesday, President Trump demonstrated for the few who remain in doubt that his mind is trapped in a fictional world where he is the heroic savior of the nation, if not all mankind.

That day, Trump honored the men and women who braved death or died on Sept. 11, 2001, but most of all he honored himself, portraying himself as willing to lose life or limb during the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center.

Speaking at a [Tunnel to Towers Foundation](#) event honoring police officers, firefighters and other first responders, Trump recounted his memory of 9/11 and the days that followed. It has to be read in full to be truly reckoned with.

I want to just thank my people. I took a lot — I was building a big building in New York, and I took the whole crew down there right after this happened. And they were — they had no hesitation. Everybody went down with me. We went down as a big group of people. Wasn't too much we could do. I'll be honest. It was, it was raw.

Nobody had seen anything like it ever. We had other buildings. The United States Steel Building was creaking, really creaking, and we thought it was going to fall down. The truth is, it creaked a lot. It creaked. It still creaks, but it never came down.

And I'll never forget two firemen. We thought it was coming down on top of us, and two firemen, big strong guys. And I'm not the smallest guy in the world. They grabbed me under the arm, said, "Got to get out of here!" And they literally lifted me up. This is not easy to do. I'm big. They lifted me up and they started running with me. I said, "Fellas, I can run myself." But they were amazing. But they thought it was coming down. It didn't come down.

The words were barely out of Trump's mouth before the challenges to his version of events began.

At 6:30 p.m. that same day, CNN's Daniel Dale published "[Fact Check](#): Trump's Story About Being Carried Away by Firefighters After the 9/11 Attack," which begins:

President Donald Trump has for years told false or unproven stories about what he supposedly saw and did on 9/11 and soon after. As the 25th anniversary of the terror attack approaches, Trump told another story at the White House on Tuesday — in which he [claimed](#) to have been carried away by firefighters amid fears of an imminent building collapse at some point after the attack.

It's possible there are elements of truth in Trump's latest story, versions of which he has [told](#) before, but he hasn't provided any evidence for it. And some parts of his Tuesday account — which he delivered [at an event](#) honoring 9/11 first responders — are misleading at best. He was miles away from the World Trade Center on 9/11 and was not whisked out of any building near ground zero that day.

Trump, New York magazine's Nia Prater and Chas Danner wrote in "[Trump Repeats Disputed Yarn About His 9/11 Role](#)," "is telling iffy 9/11 stories again."

The president, Prater and Danner contended, "used his speech to repeat a questionable anecdote about his whereabouts and actions in the aftermath of the tragedy and later defended his recollection as questions arose."

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Trump himself quickly sensed the suspicions questioning the veracity of his comments and posted a defense of his remarks on [Truth Social](#) later last Tuesday night:

Everything I said was exactly accurate and, to prove the point, I am attaching clips of me there with numerous of my people, including my then Head of Security, Matthew Calamari, who has confirmed that very sad trip to Lower Manhattan, many times, to many different Journalists, but it's a story that just won't die. The Fake News doesn't want to listen, even when they know their story is false.

Trump acknowledged that he and his crew did not go to ground zero on the same day as the twin towers'

collapse, but claimed “I was there as soon as the Law allowed.”

Twenty-five years ago on Sept. 11, whatever else he was doing later, Trump was four miles away at Trump Tower, where he [called into WWOR-TV](#) to say that he could see out one window to the World Trade Center. He also took the time, on a day when nearly 3,000 people died, to mention that a building of his, 40 Wall Street, “was the second-tallest building in downtown Manhattan and it was actually, before the World Trade Center, was the tallest,” as my news-side colleague Katie Rogers noted last Tuesday. “And then,” Trump continued, “when they built the World Trade Center, it became known as the second tallest. And now it’s the tallest.”

As Rogers pointed out, “[It wasn’t.](#)”

A 2019 PolitiFact report, “[Donald Trump Says He Spent a Lot of Time With 9/11 Responders. Here Are the Facts.](#)” makes perhaps the most damning case against Trump’s claims. PolitiFact interviewed Richard Alles, a New York Fire Department battalion chief on Sept. 11, 2001, to check out similar claims about 9/11 that Trump made earlier:

Alles said he had no knowledge of Trump being at the site or sending 100 or so workers there to help.

“I was in a supervisory role with the Fire Department at the time,” said Alles, who said he was on the scene about 20 minutes after the second building collapsed. “I was there for several months — I have no knowledge of his being down there.”

If Trump had sent a crew of 100 workers, “there would be a record of it. Everybody worked under direct supervision of the Police and Fire Department and the joint commander for emergency services. Is there a chance he was ever down there by himself and I didn’t know it? It’s possible, but I know of no one who ever witnessed him there.”

In a Sept. 9 article, “[60 Posts in 10 Hours: How Trump’s Social Media Reflects His Version of Reality.](#)” my colleague in the newsroom Peter Baker provided crucial insight into Trump’s macho, almost fantastical, notion of himself.

Over Labor Day weekend, Baker wrote,

President Trump’s social media account roared to life. In what has increasingly become his weekend habit, he unleashed a daylong barrage of posts that put the bully in the modern bully pulpit.

There were images of Mr. Trump intimidating Canada’s prime minister with a hockey stick, personally bombing enemy targets and patrolling dark streets with killer robots. There were maps showing the United States taking over other countries, and maps renaming a state. There were attacks on the “Democratic Party” and tributes to himself as “the Greatest President of All Time!”

The 60 messages posted online over 10 hours and 41 minutes offered a window into Mr. Trump’s own unique reality, one anchored not in fact but in an expression of ego. For years, his social media feed was said to be a mirror of his id. But with A.I., it has become the manifestation of how he wants to be seen in a more visual, visceral way than ever before — as a warrior, as a conqueror, as a historical figure, as a younger and thinner and more muscular version of himself.

On Thursday, at the Republican midterm convention in Dallas, Trump [pushed his narcissistic fable-making](#) to the breaking point, telling the gathering:

Please raise your right hand. I pledge to the greatest president in the history of the United

States. That loves us so much he can't even breathe. That I will go out with my family, my friends, I'll do it any way — I don't care if I'm registered or not, I'm going to try to cheat like hell like they do. There's never been bigger cheaters. They don't care. I am going to go out and I'm going to get my friends, my family. And we are going to vote on Nov. 3.

Donald Moynihan, a professor of public policy at the University of Michigan, pointed out in an email that Trump's distortions of reality have an impact on much more than beliefs in his claims about what he was doing on Sept. 11:

Trump's loose relationship with reality extends to the issues that define our life, like inflation, public health, the war with Iran, our alliances or whether our elections are valid. For every seemingly harmless story where he inserts himself into the tableaux of history, there is a torrent of dark conspiracies that shape how we are governed.

At this moment, Americans are legitimately worried that the Supreme Court might grant Trump a license to threaten the integrity of the midterm elections because — not despite — of his long history of lying about election fraud.

Every time he insults another country or world leader, it feels less like a deliberate diplomatic strategy as his followers insist, and more like an indicator of the absence of such work, marking the indifference of a social media addict craving his next dopamine hit.

Craig Malkin, a lecturer in psychology at Harvard Medical School, argued in an email that Trump's narcissism on its own is not surprising: "Research on American presidents has linked narcissism with charisma, leadership and performance. Anyone who runs for president has to feel special enough to believe they should lead the country and, arguably, the free world."

Trump, however, is a special case, even among the few whose egos are large enough to prompt a bid for the presidency:

He keeps declaring that he's ended wars that haven't ended. He still demands that people accept that he won the 2020 election. He casts himself as either the triumphant hero or the innocent victim of nearly every major event.

He can't simply be a president who sometimes succeeds and sometimes fails. Increasingly, he can't acknowledge where he's gone wrong. He insists that he's always been right, regardless of the evidence or the consequences of his policies.

On April 30 of this year Senators Sheldon Whitehouse and Jack Reed, Democrats of Rhode Island, placed in the [Congressional Record](#) a statement by 36 prominent medical specialists questioning Trump's mental fitness for office: "We are compelled to warn of a president of the United States who is increasingly a danger to the public."

Acknowledging that they had not examined the president face to face, the specialists wrote:

We have closely followed his behavior and his statements over the past year. Objectively observable signs of serious medical concern include: marked deterioration in cognitive functioning, evidenced by disorganized and tangential speech, rambling digressions, factual confusions, unexplained sudden changes of course in strategic matters, both national and international, episodes of apparent somnolence during critical public proceedings.

Grandiose and delusional beliefs, including assertions of infallibility, imagery of himself as pope suggestive of a divine mission, being a mythical warrior hero, depicting himself as combat pilot — dropping feces on civilians, and claims that his decision-making authority is unlimited — with no need to consider domestic and international laws and constrained only by his "own morality."

The medical specialists did not hold back:

Severely impaired judgment and impulse control, reflected in reckless threats of violence, advocacy of lethal force against civilians, encouragement of extrajudicial actions by armed supporters, repeated threats and often actions — judicial, prosecutorial, police, military and by invoking emergency power — against political opponents and others who disagree with him.

Significant loss of self-control (disinhibition) and getting stuck on the same thoughts or actions, unable to let go or move on (perseveration), including seemingly compulsive, manic-like late-night communications — e.g., 150 social media posts in one night — fixation on perceived enemies, persecutory ideas and prolonged, disproportionate attacks on specific individuals and institutions.

The medical experts concluded that Trump's actions, rhetoric and general behavior,

reflect a rapidly worsening, reality-untethered, increasingly dangerous decline. If we were called upon under the 25th Amendment to judge the president's present ability to discharge the duties of his office, we would have to conclude that he lacks the capacity to do so.

For the reasons cited above, emphasizing that he presents a clear and present danger to our country and to the world, it is our expert opinion that Donald J. Trump is mentally unfit to be the president of the United States and that steps to remove him from office must be undertaken with the greatest urgency.

The reality, however, is that no action to remove Trump from the White House will happen until he does something so threatening and damaging that drumming him out of the White House becomes an inescapable necessity — no small comfort for a nation looking forward to 28 more months of an unstable man holding the presidency.

Thomas B. Edsall has been a contributor to the Times Opinion section since 2011. His essays on strategic and demographic trends in American politics appear every Tuesday. He previously covered politics for The Washington Post.

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