

Opinion | Trump's Most Durable Lie: Election Rigging

Frank Bruni

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On the long playlist of President Trump's self-pitying complaints, one tune has blared louder than any other: Elections are rigged — against Republicans generally and him specifically.

In 2016, he sang that song in advance of the actual voting, to discredit the Hillary Clinton victory that most polls and pundits predicted. In 2018, he sang it with an extra note of fear, no doubt realizing that Democrats' takeover of the House meant trouble — which soon came in the form of two impeachments. In 2020, he sang it operatically, a Pavarotti of paranoia, and it served as the menacing soundtrack for the unconscionable violence of Jan. 6, 2021.

He has never given it a rest, and with the midterms almost upon us, it has been roaring from speakers here, there and everywhere. Although the Supreme Court [stymied](#) him, President Trump sought to limit mail-in voting, claiming that it wasn't a vehicle for broader participation in elections but a scheme by which Democrats stole them. His administration has sued states for their voter rolls. His sycophantic F.B.I. director, Kash Patel, has [suggested a potential need](#) for federal agents at polling sites to ensure "election security."

What nonsense. And our saturation familiarity with it often numbs us to the revealing perversity of it. As much as anything else that Trump says or does, his insistence on corrupted elections reflects his dedication to fiction; his discipline and stamina in the service of a self-promoting lie; the willful gullibility of many of his supporters; and the inability of logic or evidence to pierce the armor of his and their delusions.

Go back to 2016, when it looked as if Clinton would beat him. Trump keened that nothing about the election had been fair and nothing about its results could be trusted. Then something miraculous happened. He won. And what do you know? That outcome *could* be trusted.

Well, not exactly: Clinton's advantage of nearly three million ballots in the popular vote was bogus, fraudulent, the rotten fruit of illegal voting and Democratic chicanery. But a party crooked and potent enough to tilt that tally that far in her favor somehow failed to master the more important math of the Electoral College, in which Trump's victory was of course legitimate and righteous.

Got it. Makes exquisite sense.

Trump didn't merely spout gibberish; he convened a panel to validate it. Anyone remember the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, better known as the "voter fraud commission"? Kris Kobach, then the Kansas secretary of state, took the wheel and proceeded to steer the effort absolutely nowhere. It

never found the proof of fraud that it promised, and it [sputtered to a stop](#) less than a year after it theatrically revved its engine.

Evidence (or the lack thereof) is no match for Trump's and his supporters' persecution complexes. The astonishing sum of \$787.5 million that Fox News [agreed to pay](#) Dominion Voting Systems in 2023 to settle a defamation lawsuit was tantamount to an admission that the networks' anchors and executives knew or suspected the bogusness of the stolen-election conspiracy theories, such as the corruption of Dominion's machines, that Fox promoted after Joe Biden's 2020 victory. But did that quiet Trump's protestations that he'd beaten Biden? Nope. Nor did his supporters seem any less receptive to being told that they'd been wronged.

They know what they know: The establishment is out to get them. And they never bother to explain how that establishment is at once so insidious and so inept. They never address the now-you-rig-it, now-you-don't inconstancy of Democrats, who apparently steal certain elections but nap through others. Republicans retained or won majorities in both chambers of Congress in 2016, one chamber in 2018, one in 2022 and both in 2024, when of course Trump also prevailed, beating Kamala Harris in the popular vote and the Electoral College.

I'd love to ask President Trump: How and why did Democrats and the Deep State let that happen? And if voter rolls are a mess, voting sites are poorly monitored and mail-in voting (which you use) is thievery's handmaiden, isn't your victory in 2024 every bit as suspicious as Biden's in 2020? Or will you tell me it's not, because you and your fellow Republicans are so much more ethical than Democrats?

Readers, feel free to take a pause to control your laughter.

Laughable is what all of this would be if it weren't such an ugly reflection of the state of American politics. Trump's persistence in attacking the voting process and all his related hokey, such as [calling Jan. 6 a "day of love,"](#) suggest the extent to which truth now matters less than the ardor, creativity and endless repetition of lies. Say something consistently enough, with a thick enough air of conviction, and it will sound true to those inclined to receive it that way.

That's partly because more and more Americans choose to believe whatever the leaders of their tribe tell them and whatever justifies their prejudices or bolsters their sense of victimization or entitlement. Such convenient credulity is especially pronounced in the MAGA movement, where any drubbing Republicans take in these midterms will almost certainly be dismissed as a hoax.

That leaves us in a dangerous place. Partisanship with blinders this thick threatens the health of a society, which depends on a measure of grace in losing and on voters as invested in democratic processes as in getting exactly what they want. Trump's chorus of "rigged" and "fraud" pulls them in the opposite direction. And the volume of that wretched music will only increase between now and the first Tuesday in November.

Image





Credit...Kam & Co./Getty Images

In *The Times*, Sam Anderson [insisted](#) that a great writer lives forever: “With all due respect to human mortality, the sands of time, the pearly gates, the grim reaper, the U.S. census, the proverbial fat lady who sings, the bucket we must all eventually kick and any other end-of-life deities you’d like to invoke — I am going to have to reject the news of Annie Dillard’s death. Thanks, but I’m good. Agree to disagree.” (Thanks to Kelly Murray of Allen, Texas, and David Schulz of San Francisco for nominating this.)

In *The Athletic*, Tim Spiers [watched](#) the Premier League soccer team Tottenham Hotspur botch another game. “The second half follows a now familiar pattern: misplaced passes, loud groans, players visibly shriveling and shrinking like spinach in a frying pan,” he wrote. (Perry Sailor, Longmont, Colo.)

In *The Daily Mail*, Rebecca English [monitored](#) the reaction to “Swan Song,” a new book by Earl Spencer, Princess Diana’s brother, that doesn’t flatter the monarch Diana married: “To the King’s supporters it is an act of revenge served so cold it comes with a layer of permafrost.” (Mark Metzdorff, Tigard, Ore., and Frank Magiera, Dudley, Mass., among others)

In *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dugan Arnett [introduced](#) his readers to the sport of dragon boating and the Schuylkill Dragons, a Philadelphia-area group of women, many in their 70s and 80s, with oars and attitude. One in particular caught his eye: “There is ‘Crazy Judy’ Gernon, a tattooed 81-year-old former Army brat who stands 5-foot-1 (‘and a half’) and has never met a sentence she felt couldn’t be enhanced with an expletive (or six). A while back, the team had to convince her to stop flashing people on the river.” (Sara Rimer, Philadelphia)

In *Salon*, Ashlie D. Stevens [admitted](#) that “good food packaging” can color her feelings about premade pasta sauce: “Give me an embossed jar with a hand-drawn garlic bulb, a wobbly little restaurant façade and typography that looks like it was commissioned by someone who owns several linen aprons, and I go full

Tex Avery wolf: eyes out, tongue unspooled, all higher reasoning suspended.” (Warren Blumberg, Palermo, Italy)

On the MS NOW website, Matthew Bartlett [torched](#) Trump’s recent vague promise to give all Americans except “high-income people” \$5,000 apiece: “Even if this pledge weren’t as mythical as his other promised checks, this inflationary approach to affordability is like trying to treat emphysema with a carton of Marlboros.” (Gertrude Kappel, Raleigh, N.C.)

In The Economist, an article without any byline [spotted](#) a contradiction in Trump’s goals: “Like many politicians, Donald Trump dreams of having his cake and eating it. In January he told his cabinet that he wanted to make houses more affordable, but also ‘to drive housing prices up for people that own their homes.’ A government that could do both would be a true cakeistocracy.” (Arturo Madrid, Barcelona)

In The Atlantic, Tom Nichols [analyzed](#) Trump’s announcement that his 250-foot-high triumphal arch would be attended by snipers and house sniper ammunition and drones: “Just imagine the sense of peace that visitors, tourists and schoolchildren would feel standing atop an ammo dump full of ordnance. But at least it might stop Chinese paratroopers or al-Qaeda frogmen from seizing Washington with a daring raid after they’d subdued suburban Virginia.” (Skip Crane, Greenville, S.C.)

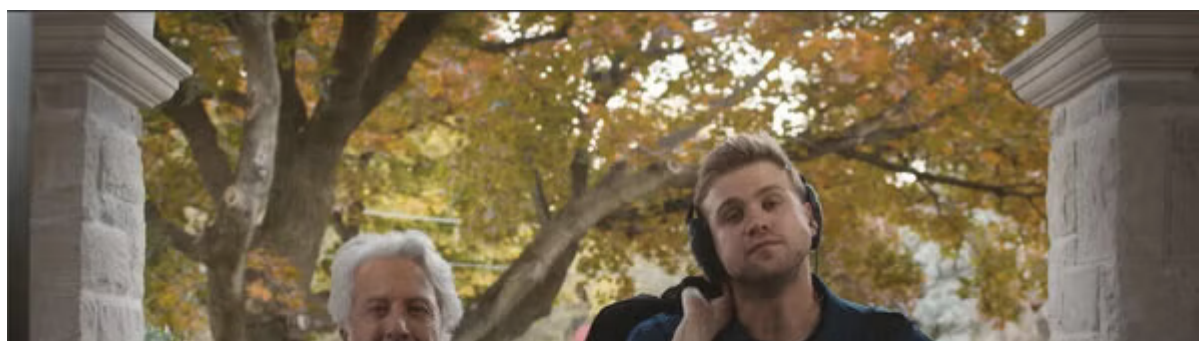
Also in The Atlantic, Will Oremus [summarized](#) the shortcomings of programs designed to flag the use of artificial intelligence in student papers: “Even otherwise accurate A.I. detectors such as Pangram can be easily fooled by ‘humanizer’ tools that introduce grammatical and stylistic quirks to evade detection. (Yes, this is dizzying: AI that makes your AI writing seem less AI, to escape other AI.)” (John P. Linderman, Westfield, N.J.)

And in The Seattle Times, Lynda V. Mapes [charted](#) her journey into the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska: “Over twining rivers and gray-visaged mountains we fly, peak after peak, until suddenly the land lies down, verdant and soft. Water pocks the tundra with lakes and ponds, marshes and rills. Streams rush to the sea, which shimmers blue where it meets the shore but is frosted white in the distance with pack ice.” (Neal Evans, Austin, Texas)

To nominate favorite bits of recent writing from The Times or other publications to be mentioned in “For the Love of Sentences,” please email me [here](#) and include your name and place of residence.

What I’m Watching, Reading and Listening To

Image





Dustin Hoffman (left) and Leo Woodall in “Tuner” Credit...Black Bear

I’m surprised that the movie “Tuner,” which hit theaters in May and has been streaming for about three months, didn’t get more attention. It has a small but terrific supporting performance by Dustin Hoffman, who doesn’t get many such showcases these days, as a piano tuner experiencing hearing loss and dementia. It has a clever conceit: Circumstances nudge his young business partner and protégé (Leo Woodall) to use his hypersensitivity to sound to crack safes — with unintended consequences. In its final stretch, “Tuner” trots out a preposterous coincidence and turns needlessly sadistic, but it’s otherwise packed with pleasures: intriguing characters, inventive editing, smart dialogue, eclectic soundtrack. Its director, Daniel Roher, gets a whole lot right, as [this review](#) by Johnny Oleksinski in The New York Post makes clear.

Last May I recommended a [post](#) in the sportswriter Joe Posnanski’s newsletter about his aging dog, Westley, whom Posnanski described with such love. Nearly five months later, Posnanski has said a final goodbye to Westley — and he chronicles that, beautifully, in [this update](#). Enter at your own risk, carrying tissues. (Thanks to Susanne Durling of Tucson, Ariz., for bringing it to my attention.)

As a dog person, I often fail to give cats their due. So for cat lovers unfamiliar with it, I’ll flag a 2024 book, “My Beloved Monster,” by Caleb Carr, that a few friends and one newsletter reader (Melanie L. Radley of Far Rockaway, N.Y.) have recommended. The monster in question is Carr’s cat Masha, and in [a review](#) in The Times, Alexandra Jacobs wrote that his tribute to her “is a loving and lovely, lay-it-all-on-the-line explication of one man’s fierce attachment.”

Also, today is apparently “a great time to be a guy who loves his cat,” according to the headline on [this article](#) by Sophia June in The Times last week.

Parting Songs: For its superb slow-burn vocal, Holly Cole’s cover of “[I Told Him That My Dog Wouldn’t Run](#).” For the enduring appeal of its lushly brooding tone, “[Under the Milky Way](#),” a rock classic by the Church. And for its sultry, catchy imitation of a James Bond movie theme (which makes sense, as it was used in the 2021 spy flick “The King’s Man”), “[Measure of a Man](#),” by FKA Twigs.

On a Personal Note

Image





Credit...Frank Bruni

Old episodes of “Sex and the City” are one of my precipice-of-sleep watches — undemanding, familiar fare for when I’m too tired to read but not quite relaxed enough to doze off. So I’m embarrassingly fluent in the show’s major plot lines and minor moments, including a scene between Miranda and her newly hired housekeeper, Magda, that often pops into my thoughts.

Magda wants to rearrange Miranda’s kitchen (and, really, life). Miranda is having none of it. She responds to an array of tea bags that Magda artfully lays out by laying down the law: Her morning beverage is coffee, sipped from her Harvard Law mug. That’s how she rolls. That’s who she is.

I’m also a coffee person, but it’s the mug part that I really relate to — the attachment that a person can develop to drinking a particular beverage from a particular vessel that seems particularly well suited to its job. I’d put my [First Lines Literature Mug](#) up against Miranda’s Ivy League chalice any morning of the week.

I bought it in June 2021, when I moved to North Carolina from New York; I arrived in my new home before all my stuff reached me, needed just a few glasses and plates and such to tide me over, and went online in a whimsical frame of mind. That’s how I stumbled across this mug, whose surface sports the opening phrases or sentences from two dozen celebrated novels. “Call me Ishmael,” of course. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” obviously. Also: “It was a pleasure to burn.” “A screaming comes across the sky.” (If you can’t match those words to their books, read on for the answers.)

While I liked the idea of combining classics and caffeine, I fell in love with the mug for other reasons. It holds what I consider an ideal measure of coffee, 14 ounces, enough for a real jolt but not so much that the brew grows cold before I’m finished. It has a pleasing heaviness that pegs it as something solidly made,

durable. It's kind of squat, which to me is kind of cute.

I've now amassed a set of four, mostly so that there can be a few in the dishwasher, unclean and unavailable, without my having to stoop to a lesser vessel. When I look at the lot of them, I realize they're not really attractive, the riot of prose presented in a bedlam of colors and fonts. But, well, they're mine. I've never seen one in anybody else's kitchen.

And over time, they've become a thread connecting one day, one month, one year, to the next. That's the point of rituals, which come in all shapes and sizes, from holiday bacchanals to daily beverages. They're repetition as reassurance, constancy in an inconstant world. That goes as well for the reading of a literary masterpiece across generations.

(*"Call me Ishmael"* = *"Moby-Dick."* *"Best of times"* = *"A Tale of Two Cities."* *"A pleasure to burn"* = *"Fahrenheit 451."* *"A screaming comes"* = *"Gravity's Rainbow."*)

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