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Part Thriller, Part Whodunit: The Trump Indictment Is a Must-Read

Aug. 2, 2023



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The federal indictment issued this week against Donald Trump for his efforts to steal the 2020 presidential election has a literary quality to it. It reads like a movie script.

A lot of what's in it is information we already knew, but it's worth noting that the document is simultaneously comprehensive and streamlined, with a clear protagonist, Trump, as a brooding, plotting, maleficent force sowing chaos and destruction.

It makes this unprecedented moment in American history digestible and re-establishes the tension that we should all acknowledge about the magnitude of what took place after the last election: Trump engaged in one of the most sweeping and consequential voter suppression efforts in the country's history.

The indictment is the harrowing, true-life story of how a former president pushed our democracy perilously close to the edge and remains a threat to push it over.

Avid consumers of news and those of us in the news business can grow cold to this kind of development. We track revelations in real time. We read the stories and the books as they're written. We watch television interviews and listen to podcasts. For us, the indictment may feel anticlimactic, just a bit farther down judicial and political lines laid like parallel train tracks.

But in the milieu of what I call our "urgent incrementalism," with our appetite for granularity and comprehensiveness, we newshounds sometimes lose the perspective of the everyday citizen.

Most people don't follow each iteration of a story, not because they're uninterested but because they're distracted. Their lives are happening. They're trying to grab coffee for the commute, worrying about the rent getting paid, trying to remember if they signed the permission slip and nervously eyeing the fuel gauge as the indicator creeps toward E.

For that reason, the absorbable — and quite *absorbing* — summary that the indictment represents is crucial. Among other virtues, it isn't written in dense legalese. It's a drama that takes readers into Trump's thinking. It allows them to see not only what lies Trump is accused of telling, but also how he viewed the things he said at the time he said them.

People often talk about Trump lying for self-aggrandizement and about his thirst for others' lies meant to flatter him. All true, but that category of lies is on the frivolous end of the spectrum.

The indictment charges him with another category of lying: of trying to compel the actions of others. It highlights Trump's elite-level penchant for deceit.

It makes a convincing case that Trump wasn't misled by minions feeding his vanity, but was instead calculating, telling lies that he believed would pressure those minions to act in his interest. He seemed to constantly be scanning the room, searching for which confidants were offering the most useful fabrications, for those willing to commit to his election-denying craziness, for the kamikazes of false narratives.

Trump used the deception that he and his supporters were under lawless attack to justify a by-any-means-necessary counterattack. On Jan. 6, 2021, Trump directed his supporters to descend on the Capitol, imploring Republicans to “get tougher” and cast aside the strictures of convention, saying: “And fraud breaks up everything, doesn't it? When you catch somebody in a fraud, you're allowed to go by very different rules.”

That day, Trump would repeatedly, falsely, claim that fraud had led to his defeat.

The indictment also illustrates how Trump linked other people's fortunes to his own, creating a dependency, a symbiosis, in which there is peril in severance. Defending Trump becomes a form of self-defense for those who support him.

There's a biological phenomenon known as parasitism, a relationship in which a parasite benefits while its host is harmed. This is the relationship that many Republicans — both politicians and voters — find themselves in with Trump. But they have courted their own infection.

Trump is the clear villain of this story, but for his adherents, villainy is subjective.

In Donald Miller's book, “Hero on a Mission,” he posits that in stories, heroes and

villains have a similar background: They both start as victims. What separates them, he suggests, is how they process their pain.

Trump is the hero of Trump World because he mirrors and amplifies his devotees' collective psyche. He processes pain — often of his own invention — by inflicting it. He craves vengeance. He courts cruelty. He flouts the rules.

In the indictment, it is some of the secondary characters — the state officials, campaign staff members and White House lawyers who pushed back against Trump's plotting — who emerge as the antiheroes, providing much of the evidence arrayed against Trump.

According to the indictment, as one campaign adviser emailed in 2020 about the dubious efforts of Trump's "elite" legal team: "I'll obviously hustle to help on all fronts, but it's tough to own any of this," conspiracy theories "beamed down from the mother ship."

The indictment isn't a pleasant read, but it's surprisingly readable. It isn't entertainment, but it's a must-read document detailing one of the gravest threats the country has ever faced from a president. It most likely won't change minds or significantly alter political trajectories.

But it does make a clear and compelling case, and that is a service to the country in its own right.