The paranoid style of Donald Trump


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The headline moment of Wednesday’s final US presidential debate was Republican candidate Donald Trump’s pledge to keep the world “in suspense” about whether or not he would accept the outcome of the November 8 election. Given the recent track record of US elections, his reticence might be forgiven. After all, many Americans — including the official United States Commission on Civil Rights — believed that George Bush stole the 2000 election.

The loser in 2000, Al Gore, was a Democrat, which may be why Donald Trump didn’t mention the precedent. Or he may not have been thinking about 2000 at all. Donald Trump has always maintained that the 2016 elections are “rigged” against him. That may be Trump’s paranoia talking, or even his ego. But that doesn’t mean he’s wrong.

Donald Trump is a billionaire businessman, but he is a political outsider. That was abundantly clear in the Republican Party primaries, during which the entire party leadership united against his candidacy. Against the odds, he won anyway.

Now competing in the general election against Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton, Trump once again finds the national political class united against him. That’s not paranoia. That’s reality. It’s hard to find anyone with any kind of official title who will speak on the record in favor of Trump.

But nearly half of the American population says they’re going to vote for him, and he could still win the race.

The 2016 election was supposed to be Hillary Clinton’s election, “her turn” to take the spotlight after narrowly losing the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination to Barack Obama. Unfortunately for Clinton, she has never been as popular with the people as she is with the politicos. The frumpy underfunded socialist Bernie Sanders gave her a serious run for the Democratic nomination.

Whether because of her transparent sense of entitlement, her lack of commitment to any particular political values, or perhaps simply her gender, most people just don’t like Hillary Clinton. Clinton has the second-highest disapproval rating of any major party presidential candidate in the history of political polling.

Donald Trump has the highest.

The first presidential debate, held on September 26, was Trump’s big opportunity to convince people that he wasn’t all that bad, and he blew it. Americans are willing to accept that candidates say extreme things in the primaries that they later pull back from in the general election. Trump never pulled back.

Hillary Clinton’s quip that Trump had neither prepared for the debate nor prepared to be president was right on the mark. It was clear throughout the first debate that Trump had done no practice at all, relying on his experience as a reality TV star to make up for his lack of preparation. It didn’t.

Trump needed a solid performance in the first debate to convince the American people that he was not just a protest candidate but a potential president. He patently failed to deliver. September 26
was Donald Trump’s opportunity to become a serious candidate for the presidency of the United States, and he blew it.

Disaster and debacle

Two days before the second debate Trump allowed himself to be side-swiped by the surprise release of a 2005 recording on which he made lewd, thoroughly sexist comments about women in Hollywood. A professional public relations manager could have made much of the strategic timing of the release. But the Trump campaign is thoroughly unprofessional.

The proper response to the video would have been to apologize and move on. Trump’s response was to point out that Bill Clinton was more sexist in office than Trump was as a TV star. That may be true, but Bill Clinton is not running for president in 2016. Donald Trump is.

In the debate Trump went on the offensive against Hillary Clinton, threatening that if he is elected president he would appoint a special prosecutor to investigate her actions as Secretary of State. It was an obviously desperate act. If anyone is likely to face prosecutions after the election, it is Donald Trump.

The second debate was a debacle for Donald Trump and cemented the nation’s impression of him as a jerk and a buffoon. These days very few Americans feel comfortable supporting Donald Trump without apologizing for him. But that doesn’t mean they won’t vote for him.

The paranoid style

In November, 1964 the eminent presidential historian Richard Hofstadter published one of the most famous essays in American letters, on “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” In this essay Hofstadter ridiculed the “conspiratorial fantasies” of disgruntled outsiders who feel that their country has been taken away from them. The disgruntled outsider of 1964, Barry Goldwater, lost to Lyndon Johnson in the biggest landslide in modern American history.

Four years later President Johnson, beset by protests and mired in Vietnam, refused even to run for reelection.

Trump may lose to Clinton, but if he does it won’t be by the 62-38 margin of 1964. America’s political establishment may be dead set against Trump, but in 2016 the American people are dead set against the political establishment. Most polls give Clinton a solid lead, but this year’s polls are almost certainly clouded by what sociologists call “social desirability bias.” It’s no longer respectable to say you support Trump, even if you do.

Whoever wins the election, one thing is clear: the person making history in 2016 is not Hillary Clinton. She may be the first female candidate of a major American political party, but for good or for bad the person of the year is undeniably Donald J. Trump. It is Trump who will win, lose, or draw this election. Hillary Clinton is as much a spectator as the rest of us.