

# President Donald J. Trump: "YOU'RE FIRED!"

## *Portrait of Man In It for Himself*

In a new book, John R. Bolton portrays Donald Trump as a president who sees his office as an instrument to advance his own personal and political interests over those of the nation.



John F. Kelly, left, with John R. Bolton in 2018 outside the Oval Office. Credit...Tom Brenner/The New York Times

Peter Baker, *The New York Times* National Edition, June 19, 2020, A1, A18.

One day in the summer of 2018, John R. Bolton commiserated with [John F. Kelly](#) over the burdens of working for President Trump. Mr. Kelly, then the White House chief of staff, had just had another argument with the president in trying to stop him from using the power of his office to punish a political foe. It did not go well.

“Has there ever been a presidency like this?” Mr. Kelly asked plaintively.

“I assured him there had not,” Mr. Bolton recalls in his new book.

That is self-evidently true and yet it bears repeating every once in a while. After more than three years of the Trump presidency, it has become easy to forget at times just how out of the ordinary it really is. The normalization of Mr. Trump’s norm-busting, line-crossing, envelope-pushing administration has meant that what was once shocking now seems like just another day.

Which is why Mr. Bolton’s damning book stands out even among the proliferation of volumes about this president. In 494 pages, the former national security adviser

becomes the first person with daily access to Mr. Trump's Oval Office to catalog the various ways that he has seized the presidency to suit his own needs, much to the consternation of not just liberal critics but a lifelong, left-bashing, conservative stalwart like Mr. Bolton.

The portrait he draws in "[The Room Where It Happened](#)," due out Tuesday, is of a president who sees his office as an instrument to advance his own personal and political interests over those of the nation. That is what got Mr. Trump impeached in the first place, but the book asserts his [Ukraine](#) scheming was no one-off. The line between policy and politics, generally murky in any White House, has been all but erased in Mr. Bolton's telling.

Decisions on trade, foreign policy, national security, law enforcement and other issues are fashioned through the prism of what it will mean for Mr. Trump. Other presidents at least maintained the notion that there was a difference between presidential duty and campaign imperative, but as Mr. Bolton describes it, Mr. Trump sees little need for pretense.

"Throughout my West Wing tenure, Trump wanted to do what he wanted to do, based on what he knew and what he saw as his own best personal interests," Mr. Bolton writes in the book. At another point he adds, "I am hard-pressed to identify any significant Trump decision during my tenure that wasn't driven by re-election calculations."

In this portrayal, an "erratic," "impulsive" and "stunningly uninformed" Mr. Trump could make "irrational" decisions and "saw conspiracies behind rocks." In an interview to promote his book, [Mr. Bolton told ABC News](#) this week that he had concluded that Mr. Trump was not "fit for office" and did not have "the competence to carry out the job."

He added, "There really isn't any guiding principle that I was able to discern other than what's good for Donald Trump's re-election."

Beyond withholding security aid to a war-torn Ukraine unless its leaders incriminated his Democratic foes, Mr. Trump also [sought to intervene in criminal investigations](#) of major firms in [China](#) and Turkey to "give personal favors to dictators he liked," according to Mr. Bolton — all part of what he described as "obstruction of justice as a way of life." Likewise, Mr. Trump was "pleading" in a meeting with President Xi Jinping of China to help him win re-election by buying [American agricultural products](#), which he thought would bolster him in farm states.

Other presidents have pursued what they saw as their own best interests or were driven by re-election calculations, even in the farm arena. The grain embargo imposed against the Soviet Union by Jimmy Carter to protest the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan was lifted by Ronald Reagan in deference to American farmers who formed a key voting bloc. Other presidents kept the domestic reaction in mind when making foreign policy decisions.

And other presidents exploited the power of their office for political reasons. Even before Richard M. Nixon and the wide array of abuses that fell under the rubric of Watergate, John F. Kennedy [ordered the C.I.A. to wiretap American reporters](#), while the

agency under Lyndon B. Johnson [infiltrated the 1964 campaign](#) of his Republican challenger, Barry Goldwater.

But what Mr. Bolton argues is that Mr. Trump's personal and political interests are the essential elements of this particular presidency, that to him the rules that governed other presidents in the post-Watergate era are meant to be broken. That has been ever clearer in the months since Mr. Trump was acquitted in his Senate impeachment trial: He has ousted officials who testified for House prosecutors, fired quasi-independent inspectors general who angered him and publicly pressured the Justice Department to go easy on his associates who have been convicted of crimes.

Mr. Trump's defenders say that he is simply exercising control over the executive branch in keeping with an expansive but constitutional interpretation of his power and that he has every right to demand loyalty and to make decisions with his political future in mind. As with the Ukraine case, they say, he has legitimate reasons for his actions, even if they may look unseemly at times. They argue that his supporters want him to break glass in Washington.

As for Mr. Bolton, Mr. Trump and his allies dismiss his account as another tell-all by another disgruntled employee grinding an ax — “the Washington swamp's equivalent of revenge porn,” as Peter Navarro, the president's trade adviser, put it.

“Bolton's book, which is getting terrible reviews, is a compilation of lies and made up stories, all intended to make me look bad,” [Mr. Trump wrote Thursday on Twitter](#) after news accounts about the memoir. “Many of the ridiculous statements he attributes to me were never made, pure fiction. Just trying to get even for firing him like the sick puppy he is!”

Mr. Bolton, by his own account and those of other White House officials, actually [resigned last September](#) before the president later claimed to have fired him. And Mr. Trump, who has compiled a long record of false and misleading statements, offers a contradictory defense against his former aide, claiming that Mr. Bolton's account is both “made up” and classified at the same time, without explaining how it could be full of national secrets if it is “pure fiction.”

The White House effort to stop Mr. Bolton from publishing his memoir on the grounds that it contains classified information goes to the book's larger theme of turning the office into a tool for Mr. Trump's own gain. In short, the president has turned a process meant to safeguard the nation's secrets into a political cudgel against an adviser turned critic.

Mr. Bolton [submitted his book to the National Security Council](#) for prepublication review in December as required of a former official and participated in an extensive, monthslong process with a career employee, making the changes requested until there were no more requests.

But after the career employee completed the review, which would have normally cleared the book for publication, Mr. Trump's political appointees, led by Robert C. O'Brien, his new national security adviser, stepped in. They ordered a new review and insisted there was more classified information still in the manuscript. Exactly what, they have not disclosed publicly, but Mr. Trump claimed this week that every conversation with him

was “[highly classified](#),” a fanciful notion that goes well beyond what most of his predecessors asserted.

With Mr. Trump vowing to block Mr. Bolton’s book from seeing the light of day, the Justice Department then [went to court twice this week](#) to stop the book’s distribution, a move that four former White House lawyers from Republican and Democratic administrations said had no precedent that they could think of. While no president enjoys revelatory books by former aides, they are a cross many have borne without employing the Justice Department as a weapon to punish perceived transgressors.

Not that Mr. Trump’s usual critics are all that sympathetic to Mr. Bolton, harshly blaming him for not testifying during House impeachment hearings last year and instead holding his information back for [his \\$2 million book](#). But some have seized on the material in the book, however belated, as confirmation of Mr. Trump’s politicization of the office.

Mr. Bolton, who served in three previous Republican administrations, makes clear that Mr. Trump is like no other president of his acquaintance. Consumed by his enemies, Mr. Trump seeks to use his power to strike back. He badgers Attorney General William P. Barr to prosecute former Secretary of State John F. Kerry for talking to Iran in supposed violation of the Logan Act. After an irritating leak, he tells his White House counsel to instruct Mr. Barr to “arrest the reporters, force them to serve time in jail and then demand they disclose their sources.”

And he ordered Mr. Kelly, his chief of staff, to strip security clearances for Trump critics like John O. Brennan, the former C.I.A. director under President Barack Obama. Mr. Kelly, a retired four-star Marine general, told Mr. Trump it was “not presidential” and complained to Mr. Bolton that it was “Nixonian.” Mr. Bolton, no fan of Mr. Brennan, agreed with Mr. Kelly.

“I thought there was a case against Brennan for politicizing the C.I.A., but Trump had obscured it by the blatantly political approach he took,” Mr. Bolton writes. “It would only get worse if more clearances were lifted. Kelly agreed.”

In the end, many of Mr. Trump’s exhortations go nowhere. Mr. Kerry has never been prosecuted, reporters have not been arrested and it remains unclear whether Mr. Brennan’s clearance was actually revoked as the president said it was. His defenders say Mr. Trump’s critics make too much of flamboyant outbursts that actually do not result in action, that he is more bark than bite.

But Mr. Kelly is now gone. Mr. Bolton is now gone. And Mr. Trump faces a 137-day sprint to Election Day that will decide whether he should keep control of the instruments of state for four more years.

**Peter Baker is the chief White House correspondent and has covered the last four presidents for The Times and The Washington Post. He also is the author of five books, most recently “Impeachment: An American History.” @peterbakernyt**

# The Real Donald Trump Is a Character on TV

Understand that, and you'll understand what he's doing in the White House.

James Poniewozik, *The New York Times* Online Edition, September 6, 2019.

On Sept. 1, with a Category 5 hurricane off the Atlantic coast, an angry wind was issuing from the direction of President Trump's Twitter account. The apparent emergency: Debra Messing, the co-star of "Will & Grace," had tweeted that "the public has a right to know" who is attending a Beverly Hills fund-raiser for Mr. Trump's re-election.

"I have not forgotten that when it was announced that I was going to do *The Apprentice*, and when it then became a big hit, Helping NBC's failed lineup greatly, @DebraMessing came up to me at an Upfront & profusely thanked me, even calling me 'Sir,' " [wrote](#) the 45th president of the United States.

It was a classic Trumpian ragetweet: aggrieved over a minor slight, possibly prompted [by a Fox News segment](#), unverifiable — he has a long history of questionable tales involving [someone calling him "Sir"](#) — and nostalgic for his primetime-TV heyday. (By Thursday he was lashing Ms. Messing [again](#), as Hurricane Dorian was lashing the Carolinas.)

[James Poniewozik answered questions about this essay on Twitter: [part I](#), [part II](#)]

This sort of outburst, almost three years into his presidency, has kept people puzzling over who the "real" Mr. Trump is and how he actually thinks. Should we take him, to quote the famous [precept of Trumpology](#), literally or seriously? Are his attacks impulsive tantrums or strategic distractions from his other woes? Is he playing 3-D chess or Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots?

This is a futile effort. Try to understand Donald Trump as a person with psychology and strategy and motivation, and you will inevitably spiral into confusion and covfefe. The key is to remember that Donald Trump is not a person. He's a TV character.

I mean, O.K., there is an actual person named Donald John Trump, with a human body and a childhood and formative experiences that theoretically a biographer or therapist might usefully delve into someday. (We can only speculate about the latter; Mr. Trump has [boasted on Twitter](#) of never having seen a psychiatrist, preferring the therapeutic effects of "hit[ting] 'sleazebags' back.")

But that Donald Trump is of limited significance to America and the world. The "Donald Trump" who got elected president, who has strutted and fretted across the small screen since the 1980s, is a decades-long media performance. To understand him, you need to approach him less like a psychologist and more like [a TV critic](#).



He was born in 1946, at the same time that American broadcast TV was being born. He grew up with it. His father, Fred, had one of the first color TV sets in Jamaica Estates. In “The Art of the Deal” Donald Trump recalls his mother, Mary Anne, spending a day in front of the tube, enraptured by the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953. (“For Christ’s sake, Mary,” he remembers his father saying, “Enough is enough, turn it off. They’re all a bunch of con artists.”)

TV was his soul mate. It was like him. It was packed with the razzle-dazzle and action and violence that captivated him. He dreamed of going to Hollywood, then he shelved those dreams in favor of his father’s business and vowed, according to the book “TrumpNation” by Timothy O’Brien, to “put show business into real estate.” As TV evolved from the homogeneous three-network mass medium of the mid-20th century to the polarized zillion-channel era of cable-news fisticuffs and reality shocker-tainment, he evolved with it. In the 1980s, he built a media profile as an insouciant, high-living apex predator. In 1990, he [described](#) his yacht and gilded buildings to Playboy as “Props for the show ... The show is ‘Trump’ and it is sold-out performances everywhere.”

He syndicated that show to Oprah, Letterman, NBC, WrestleMania and Fox News. Everything he achieved, he achieved by using TV as a magnifying glass, to make himself appear bigger than he was.

He was able to do this because he thought like a TV camera. He knew what TV wanted, what stimulated its nerve endings. In his campaign rallies, he would tell The Washington Post, he knew just what to say “to keep the red light on”: that is, the light on a TV camera that showed that it was running, that you mattered. *Bomb the [redacted] out of them! I’d like to punch him in the face!* The red light radiated its approval. Cable news aired the rallies start to finish. For all practical purposes, he and the camera shared the same brain.

Even when he adopted social media, he used it like TV. First, he used it like a celebrity, to broadcast himself, his first tweet in 2009 promoting a “Late Show With David Letterman” appearance. Then he used it like an instigator, tweeting his birther conspiracies before he would talk about them on Fox News, road-testing his call for a border wall during the cable-news fueled [Ebola and border panics](#) of the 2014 midterms.

When he was a candidate, and especially when he was president, his tweets programmed TV and were amplified by it. On CNBC, a [“BREAKING NEWS: TRUMP TWEET”](#) graphic would spin out onscreen as soon as the words left his thumbs. He would watch Fox News, or Lou Dobbs, or CNN or “Morning Joe” or “Saturday Night Live” ([“I don’t watch”](#)), and get mad, and tweet. Then the tweets would become TV, and he would watch it, and tweet again.

If you want to understand what President Trump will do in any situation, then, it’s more helpful to ask: What would TV do? What does TV want?

It wants conflict. It wants excitement. If there is something that can blow up, it should blow up. It wants a fight. It wants *more*. It is always eating and never full.

Some presidential figure-outers, trying to understand the celebrity president through a template that they were already familiar with, have compared him with Ronald Reagan: a “master showman” cannily playing a “role.”

The comparison is understandable, but it’s wrong. Presidents Reagan and Trump were both entertainers who applied their acts to politics. But there’s a crucial difference between what “playing a character” means in the movies and what it means on reality TV.

Ronald Reagan was an actor. Actors need to believe deeply in the authenticity and interiority of people besides themselves — so deeply that they can subordinate their personalities to “people” who are merely lines on a script. Acting, Reagan told his biographer Lou Cannon, had taught him “to understand the feelings and motivations of others.”

Being a reality star, on the other hand, as Donald Trump was on “The Apprentice,” is also a kind of performance, but one that’s antithetical to movie acting. Playing a character on reality TV means being yourself, but bigger and louder.

Reality TV, writ broadly, goes back to Allen Funt’s “Candid Camera,” the PBS documentary “An American Family,” and MTV’s “The Real World.” But the first mass-market reality TV star was Richard Hatch, the winner of the first season of “Survivor” — produced by Mark Burnett, the eventual impresario of “The Apprentice”— in the summer of 2000.

Mr. Hatch won that first season in much the way that Mr. Trump would run his 2016 campaign. He realized that the only rules were that there were no rules. He lied and backstabbed and took advantage of loopholes, and he argued — with a telegenic brashness — that this made him smart. This was a crooked game in a crooked world, he argued to a final jury of players he’d betrayed and deceived. But, hey: At least he was open about it!

While shooting that first season, the show’s crew was rooting for Rudy Boesch, a 72-year-old former Navy SEAL and model of hard work and fair play. “The only outcome nobody wanted was Richard Hatch winning,” the host, Jeff Probst, would say later. It “would be a disaster.” After all, decades of TV cop shows had taught executives the iron rule that the viewers needed the good guy to win.

But they didn’t. “Survivor” was addictively entertaining, and audiences loved-to-hate the wryly devious Richard the way they did Tony Soprano and, before him, J.R. Ewing. More than 50 million people watched the first-season finale, and “Survivor” has been on the air nearly two decades.

From Richard Hatch, we got a steady stream of Real Housewives, Kardashians, nasty judges, dating-show contestants who “didn’t come here to make friends” and, of course, Donald Trump.

Reality TV has often gotten a raw deal from critics. (Full disclosure: I still watch “Survivor.”) Its audiences, often dismissed as dupes, are just as capable of watching with

a critical eye as the fans of prestige cable dramas. But when you apply its mind-set — the law of the TV jungle — to public life, things get ugly.

In reality TV — at least competition reality shows like “The Apprentice” — you do not attempt to understand other people, except as obstacles or objects. To try to imagine what it is like to be a person other than yourself (what, in ordinary, off-camera life, we call “empathy”) is a liability. It’s a distraction that you have to tune out in order to project your fullest you.

Reality TV instead encourages “getting real.” On MTV’s progressive, diverse “Real World,” the phrase implied that people in the show were more authentic than characters on scripted TV — or even than real people in your own life, who were socially conditioned to “be polite.” But “getting real” would also resonate with a rising conservative notion: that political correctness kept people from saying what was really on their minds.

Being real is not the same thing as being honest. To be real is to be the most entertaining, provocative form of yourself. It is to say what you want, without caring whether your words are kind or responsible — or true — but only whether you want to say them. It is to foreground the parts of your personality (aggression, cockiness, prejudice) that will focus the red light on you, and unleash them like weapons.



Credit/Illustration by Erik Carter; Photograph by Al Drago for The New York Times



Maybe the best definition of being real came from the former “Apprentice” contestant and White House aide Omarosa Manigault Newman in her memoir, “Unhinged.” Mr. Trump, she said, encouraged people in his entourage to “exaggerate the unique part of themselves.” When you’re being real, there is no difference between impulse and strategy, because the “strategy” is to do what feels good.

This is why it misses a key point to ask, as [Vanity Fair recently did](#) after Mr. Trump’s assault on Representative Elijah E. Cummings and the city of Baltimore in July, “Is the president a racist, or does he just play one on TV?” In reality TV, if you are a racist — and reality TV has had [many racists](#), like [Katie Hopkins](#), the far-right British “Apprentice” star the president [frequently retweets](#) — then you are a racist *and* you play one on TV.

So if you actually want a glimpse into the mind of Donald J. Trump, don’t look for a White House tell-all or some secret childhood heartbreak. Go to the streaming service Tubi, where his 14 seasons of “The Apprentice” recently became [accessible to the public](#).

You can fast-forward past the team challenges and the stagey visits to Trump-branded properties. They’re useful in their own way, as a picture of how Mr. Burnett buttressed the future president’s Potemkin-zillionaire image. But the unadulterated, 200-proof Donald Trump is found in the boardroom segments, at the end of each episode, in which he “fires” one contestant.

In theory, the boardroom is where the best performers in the week’s challenges are rewarded and the screw-ups punished. In reality, the boardroom is a new game, the real game, a free-for-all in which contestants compete to throw one another under the bus and beg Mr. Trump for mercy.

There is no morality in the boardroom. There is no fair and unfair in the boardroom. There is only the individual, trying to impress Mr. Trump, to flatter Mr. Trump, to commune with his mind and anticipate his whims and fits of pique. Candidates are fired for giving up advantages (stupid), for being too nice to their adversaries (weak), for giving credit to their teammates, for interrupting him. The host’s decisions were often so mercurial, [producers have said](#), that they would have to go back and edit the episodes to impose some appearance of logic on them.

What saves you in the boardroom? Fighting. Boardroom Trump loves to see people fight each other. He perks up at it like a cat hearing a can opener. He loves to watch people scrap for his favor (as they eventually would in his White House). He loves asking contestants to rat out their teammates and watching them squirm with conflict. The unity of the team gives way to disunity, which in the Trumpian worldview is the most productive state of being.

And America loved boardroom Trump — for a while. He delivered his catchphrase in TV cameos and slapped it on a reissue of his 1980s Monopoly knockoff Trump: The Game. (“I’m back and you’re fired!”) But after the first season, the ratings dropped; by season four they were nearly half what they were in season one.

He reacted to his declining numbers by ratcheting up what worked before: becoming a louder, more extreme, more abrasive version of himself. He gets more insulting in the

boardroom — “You hang out with losers and you become a loser” — and executes [double](#) and [quadruple](#) firings.

It’s a pattern that we see as he advances toward his re-election campaign, with an eye not on the Nielsen ratings but on the polls: The only solution for any given problem was a Trumpier Trump.

Did it work for “The Apprentice”? Yes and no. His show hung on to a loyal base through 14 seasons, including the increasingly farcical celebrity version. But it never dominated its competition again, losing out, [despite his denials](#), to the likes of the sitcom “Mike & Molly.”

Donald Trump’s “Apprentice” boardroom closed for business on Feb. 16, 2015, precisely four months before he announced his successful campaign for president. And also, it never closed. It expanded. It broke the fourth wall. We live inside it now.

Now, Mr. Trump re-creates the boardroom’s helter-skelter atmosphere every time he opens his mouth or his Twitter app. In place of the essentially dead White House press briefing, he walks out to the lawn in the morning and reporters gagle around him like “Apprentice” contestants awaiting the day’s task. He rails and complains and establishes the plot points for that day’s episode: Greenland! Jews! “I am the chosen one!”

Then cable news spends morning to midnight happily masticating the fresh batch of outrages before memory-wiping itself to prepare for tomorrow’s episode. Maybe this sounds like a TV critic’s overextended metaphor, but it’s also the president’s: As [The Times has reported](#), before taking office, he told aides to think of every day as “an episode in a television show in which he vanquishes rivals.”

Mr. Trump has been playing himself instinctually as a character since the 1980s; it’s allowed him to maintain a profile even through bankruptcies and humiliations. But it’s also why, on the rare occasions he’s had to publicly attempt a role contrary to his nature — calling for healing from a script after a mass shooting, for instance — he sounds as stager and inauthentic as an unrehearsed amateur doing a sitcom cameo.

His character shorthand is “Donald Trump, Fighter Guy Who Wins.” Plop him in front of a camera with an infant orphaned in a mass murder, and he does not have it in his performer’s tool kit to do anything other than smile unnervingly and [give a fat thumbs-up](#).

This is what was lost on commentators who kept hoping wanly that this State of the Union or that tragedy would be the moment he finally became “presidential.” It was lost on journalists who felt obligated to act as though every modulated speech from a teleprompter might, this time, be sincere.

The institution of the office is not changing Donald Trump, because he is already in the sway of another institution. He is governed not by the truisms of past politics but by the imperative of reality TV: Never de-escalate and never turn the volume down.

This conveniently echoes the mantra he learned from his early mentor, Roy Cohn: Always attack and never apologize. He serves up one “most shocking episode ever” after another, mining uglier pieces of his core each time: progressing from [profanity about](#)

[Haiti and Africa](#) in private to publicly telling four minority American congresswomen, only one of whom was born outside the United States, to “[go back](#)” to the countries they came from.

The taunting. The insults. The dog whistles. The dog bullhorns. The “Lock her up” and “Send her back.” All of it follows reality-TV rules. Every season has to top the last. Every fight is necessary, be it against Ilhan Omar or Debra Messing. Every twist must be more shocking, every conflict more vicious, lest the red light grow bored and wink off. The only difference: Now there’s no Mark Burnett to impose retroactive logic on the chaos, only press secretaries, pundits and Mike Pence.

To ask whether any of this is “instinct” or “strategy” is a parlor game. If you think like a TV camera — if thinking in those reflexive microbursts of adrenaline and testosterone has served you your whole life — then the instinct is the strategy.

And to ask who the “real” Donald Trump is, is to ignore the obvious. You already know who Donald Trump is. All the evidence you need is right there on your screen. He’s half-man, half-TV, with a camera for an eye that is constantly focused on itself. The red light is pulsing, 24/7, and it does not appear to have an off switch.

Mr. Poniewozik is the chief television critic of *The Times* and the author of *Audience of One: Donald Trump, Television and the Fracturing of America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

# The Reality TV President Finds His Format in the [Press] Briefing Room

The coronavirus briefings have given Donald Trump a regularly scheduled reality show again — or, rather, a create-your-own-reality show.



The daily coronavirus briefings have given President Trump something he hasn't had since "The Apprentice": a regular TV show in which he plays an executive in control. Credit...Erin Schaff/The New York Times

James Poniewozik, *The New York Times* National Edition, March 31, 2020, A11.

"I've gotten to like this room," President Trump said March 23 in the White House briefing room.

If the walls had ears, they'd have been surprised to hear it. Until recently, the Trump administration had all but done away with formal press briefings, and the president preferred to talk to reporters amid the helpful din of a helicopter or in a Fox News studio.

But the briefing room has one amenity that Donald Trump, suddenly without rallies and travel appearances amid a pandemic, cannot resist: a camera.

Mr. Trump became a prime-time star through TV, a political figure through TV and a president through TV. But he has not, as president, had what he had with NBC's "The Apprentice": a regular TV show in which he plays an executive in control.

Now, the coronavirus briefings have given him a new, live and unfiltered daily platform before a captive national audience. True to his résumé, he has conducted them as a kind of reality TV, or rather, create-your-own-reality TV.

In this reality — often subject to later fact-checking by the press or to backpedaling by staff — help and needed equipment are always [just around the corner](#). [Accurate reports](#) of his conflicts with governors over federal support are “fake news.” And [no one could have anticipated](#) a pandemic like this, despite warnings, [playbooks](#) and public-health infrastructure intended to do exactly that.

The daily coronavirus briefings, increasingly timed to run live on cable and broadcast right around the evening news, are a journey. The president begins them by soberly reading statements. (On Thursday, he gave the roll call of the G20 leadership.) He can be expansive — even, astonishingly, praising the media — and he can be peevis. (“I want them to be appreciative,” he said Friday of American governors.)

In its short life, for all its dead-serious subject matter, the program has developed the structure, rhythm and characters of a weekly reality show.

There’s drama and intrigue, such as the reports that the president might [be at odds](#) with staffers like Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. There’s the appearance of the protagonist, Mr. Trump, flanked by lieutenants, to announce the day’s topics and story lines.

And there’s the concluding “Apprentice” boardroom-style conflict in the Q. and A. session, in which friendly journalists are praised, and those who ask questions he doesn’t want to answer are [“terrible.”](#) After which Mr. Trump leaves the set and his public-health officials climb into the producer’s chair to edit his comments and their

Mr. Trump’s critics have said that his briefings are simply campaign rallies in another form. The two things do have elements in common: the litanies of grievances, the insulting of reporters and political rivals, the self-aggrandizement and selective history.

As at his rallies, Mr. Trump’s digressions can defy both science and syntax, like [his observation](#) on how children tend to be less seriously affected “by this pandemic, by this disease, this — whatever they want to call it, you can call it a germ, you can call it a flu, you can call it a virus, you know, you can call it many different names, I’m not sure anybody even knows what it is.” (It is a virus.)

The key difference is that Mr. Trump’s campaign rallies are for the faithful. They speak to and galvanize his base, and lately have been broadcast only on Fox News. The briefings are something that Mr. Trump hasn’t had since he declared Leeza Gibbons the winner of his final “Celebrity Apprentice” in 2015: a TV show aimed at a [wide mass audience](#).

Mr. Trump, [numbers-obsessed](#) even in more ordinary times, went on Twitter to boast that his briefings on a deadly catastrophe had boffo ratings.



Because the “Ratings” of my News Conferences etc. are so high, “Bachelor finale, Monday Night Football type numbers” according to the [@nytimes](#), the Lamestream Media is going CRAZY. “Trump is reaching too many people, we must stop him.” said one lunatic. See you at 5:00 P.M.!

His audience — stuck at home, in their living rooms, with their screens — is looking for a red cross, not red meat. They’re afraid for their lives and their jobs. They want information, action, a reason to believe things will get better.

There is no greater asset to a salesman or a politician than an audience that wants to believe. If you want to believe, here’s what you can see: The president of the United States, at a podium, backed by a team of officials and experts, doing something — or at least saying something, at length, which in the visual language of TV reads as the same thing.

It is not only viewers at home who want to have faith. On March 17, when Mr. Trump struck a somber note after minimizing the virus for weeks, CNN’s Dana Bash said that he was being “the kind of leader that people need, at least in tone.”

A week later, he was at a Fox “virtual town hall” saying, “We lose thousands and thousands of people a year to the flu — we don’t turn the country off,” and announcing his urge to reopen the economy on Easter. (The host, Bill Hemmer, hosanna’ed that it would be “a great American resurrection.”)

And for Mr. Trump, the briefings allow him to turn his pandemic response from a serial narrative, in which he’s held accountable for his cumulative action or inaction over time, into an episodic production, in which all that matters is what happened in the latest installment.

Every episode, in this production, wipes the slate clean, like a sitcom restoring the status quo. All those comments about how the coronavirus is like the flu and about how the cases will soon go down to zero and about not wanting to receive infected cruise-ship passengers because [“I like the numbers being where they are”](#)? That’s last season.

What matters, as the briefings frame it, is the next thing, the new rhetoric, the latest drama. “Will the president be there?” asked CNN’s Wolf Blitzer, teasing the March 25 briefing. “Will Dr. Fauci be there?”

There has been some counterprogramming, especially the live-morning briefings by Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York, who has emerged as the default Democratic response. (The presumptive opposition nominee, Joseph Biden — whose media strategy has seemed premised on the idea that people simply want a chance to turn off The Trump Show — [has struggled to break through the noise](#), being limited to the equivalent of [FaceTime calls](#).)

Mr. Cuomo’s briefings are part tough talk, part pep talk. His tone is both more dire than the president’s and more emotional — a kind of virtual New York backslap next to Mr. Trump’s outer borough pitchmanship. On Friday, he asked a National Guard group to imagine a day, a decade hence, when they will remember how hard they worked and

how many people they still couldn't save, then concluded: "So I say, my friends, that we go out there today and we kick coronavirus's ass!"

But it's the president who's able to seize prime time, abetted by networks who — knowing that his briefings have made objectively false claims — fall back on the easy answer that when the president speaks during an emergency, that is by definition news. (It's true: If the president is spreading misinformation, deliberately or otherwise, in a public health crisis, that is absolutely news. That doesn't mean that airing it live is a service.)

Mr. Trump's career has always been based on the premise that appearance is everything. That may be proving effective for him now, as measured by his cable ratings and his [rising poll numbers](#). But there are limits to this media strategy; you can't simply give a disease a mean nickname or dismiss it as if it were Don Lemon or Nancy Pelosi.

You can go a long way, in TV and politics, producing a successful reality show. A virus, ultimately, produces its own reality.

**James Poniewozik is the chief television critic. He writes reviews and essays with an emphasis on television as it reflects a changing culture and politics. He previously spent 16 years with Time magazine as a columnist and critic. [@poniewozik](#)**

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# President Trump's Show Has Been Canceled

For years, we've been living inside a story defined by Donald Trump's reality-TV worldview. America finally changed the channel.



At an October rally, President Trump said a vote for Joe Biden would be a vote for “boredom.” America opted for boredom. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

James Poniewozik, *The New York Times* Online Edition, November 12, 2020.

Many incumbent presidents have gone on the campaign trail to make their cases for a second term. Donald J. Trump was the first to campaign for a second season.

At a 2019 campaign rally in Minnesota, he [described his victory](#) in 2016 as “one of the greatest nights in the history of television.” And he often seemed to cast his re-election argument less in terms of policies than as a TV producer’s pitch to keep the show going.

Only with him, he argued, would you get the zing, the pizzazz, the drama that kept you on the edge of your seat. A vote for President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr., he [told a rally in Erie, Pa.](#), on Oct. 20, would be a vote for “boredom.”

“Look at all those cameras,” he said, gesturing at the press pen. “If you had Sleepy Joe, nobody’s going to be interested in politics anymore.”

On Nov. 3, a majority of the electorate answered, “You promise?”

If Donald Trump’s loss still seems somehow unreal, and not just to the president’s lawyers, it may be the aftereffect of having spent years trapped in his personal Truman Show. It’s distorted our sense of what’s normal. Was it ever not like this? Was there a time when each day didn’t rattle us awake to the blaring alarm clock of his Fox News live tweets?

American life, since Mr. Trump’s escalator ride on June 16, 2015, had been like a Willy Wonka ironic punishment: *You like TV, do you? Then you shall live inside TV — forever!*

And then, one day, the show was canceled.

## The reboot that wasn’t

The former “Apprentice” host and lifelong media hound dominated the 2016 campaign by knowing what TV wanted. Before he ran for office, Mr. Trump flourished in reality TV, cable news and even pro wrestling, genres that thrive on the same thing he does: conflict.

He was a perfect fit for the “You’re fired” ethos of Mark Burnett’s pseudo-business competition because he, like “The Apprentice,” saw competition and fighting as the most productive state of existence.

Image



Mr. Trump dominated the 2016 race in part because he understood that TV loves conflict. His 2020 campaign often seemed like a grittier reboot. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

This made his presidency an eyeball magnet, for cheerleaders and hate-watchers alike. He was the show's biggest superfan, consuming hours of TV news, a magic mirror reflecting him, every day.

He trumpeted his Nielsen ratings as if they were jobs reports. He told advisers to think of every day of his administration as an episode of a reality show.

Mr. Trump has often said, not without justification, that the news networks were [addicted to him](#) as much as he was to them: "Without me, their ratings are going down the tubes."

But the Trump presidency proved something else as well. People may like to watch exciting TV shows. They do not necessarily want to live inside one.

And for four years, that's what we did. We were [redshirt](#) extras inside a potboiler driven by, and customized for, the adrenaline urges of a conflict junkie. The unceasing tension. The ever-ratcheting drama. The tweets that became news that generated more tweets. What was the latest story line? What was the president mad about today? What did *you* get mad about today?



Mr. Trump and his sons, Don Jr., left, and Eric, in Season 13 of "The Apprentice." The show's ratings declined as Mr. Trump's role expanded. Credit...Douglas Gorenstein/NBC



The TV-addict president assumed that everyone else found constant battle as invigorating as he did, that they, like him, would rather be relentlessly upset than momentarily bored. He tweeted out links to his choleric TV interviews with a hearty [“Enjoy!”](#) There was no apparent irony. Why wouldn’t people enjoy all this? Everything was so exciting!

He believed this partly because he immersed himself in environments where this was true: Tucker and Hannity and Dobbs; his rallies; the mega-MAGA reply choruses on his Twitter feed. All these inputs validated his conviction that a life best lived was a never-ending slugfest.

He postured as a TV antihero, the unpleasant guy it takes to get results in an unpleasant world. Like a “Breaking Bad” or “The Sopranos,” his presidency invited fans to compartmentalize their own morality from the dishonesty, racism and bullying of the protagonist whose exploits mesmerized them. “He’s no Mr. Nice Guy,” one of [his re-election ads](#) said, “but sometimes it takes a Donald Trump to change Washington.”

And he ran his White House on the “Apprentice” model. Pundits who expected him to become “presidential” (that [would be so boring](#), he told a rally crowd in Texas) ignored the evidence of his showbiz career.

People forget this now, but the first and highest-rated season of “The Apprentice” had relatively little Trump in it. The host showed up in the beginning, fired someone in the end and mostly vanished in the middle.

From Season 2 on, though, Mr. Trump’s boss-from-hell persona, like a breakout character on a sitcom, became bigger, louder and more ubiquitous. The show spotlighted him with longer, nastier boardroom sessions, sometimes with multiple firings. NBC scheduled the show twice a year, following a fundamental TV dictum — if something’s a hit, give it to people twice as much, twice as hard — all the way down the ratings charts.

So too with Mr. Trump’s 2020 campaign, which often seemed like a grittier reboot of the 2016 version. In the White House as on NBC, the solution to any problem had to be more of him. The pro-wrestling heel turns — barking his way through the first debate, brazenly undermining the voting process — were louder and less subtle.

Each big twist had to outdo last season’s. The monster rallies came back, this time with the apocalyptic frisson of defying, or denying, the prospect of death in a pandemic. When he himself got Covid, as the season’s writers had been foreshadowing all along, he timed his flights to and from the hospital for the network evening news.

The president’s media omnipresence may have made some difference; he increased his turnout in the end, however many votes it also motivated against him. As Election Day neared, he openly tried to cast his constant schedule of rallies and gaggles and events as proof of his strength. But it often felt like a test of ours.



Mr. Trump immersed himself in environments that valued his combativeness, like Fox News, Twitter and his rallies. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

## One-man show vs. ensemble drama

In the closing days of the campaign, Mr. Trump often said that he [couldn't imagine losing](#) to the likes of Mr. Biden. That is, he couldn't fathom people choosing the political equivalent of PBS — a Trump adviser [likened Mr. Biden to Fred Rogers](#), apparently considering that an insult — when they got so much razzmatazz from the president.

I'll admit, as somebody who writes about TV and politics, that I was skeptical, too. In the television era, candidates who make themselves the protagonists of their elections — Reagan, Obama, Bill Clinton — usually win. To beat President TV, I assumed, [you had to counterprogram him](#), not just offer to turn the set off.

That offer turned out to be powerful. Jim Carrey's Biden impression on "Saturday Night Live" was mostly a comedic dud, but its one great insight into the campaign was imagining Mr. Biden at a debate pausing and [silencing Mr. Trump](#) with a magical remote control. But the more I watched the campaign, the more I realized that Mr. Biden was not merely trying to replace something with nothing. I started to get a sense of his media message this summer, when I [offhandedly wrote](#) that, amid a reality-show presidency, Mr. Biden was producing a political version of "This Is Us."

I can explain. "This Is Us" is the NBC drama (whose story starts, fittingly, in the swing state of Pennsylvania) that follows several generations of an extended, multiracial family from the Vietnam War era into the fictional future. "This Is Us" is not cool. It's not groundbreaking. It's sentimental and a little sappy. It relies on big life moments (births, weddings, tragic deaths) that shamelessly pull at the heartstrings. Its aesthetic is strictly middle-of-the-road.



In a parody of the first 2020 presidential debate, Jim Carrey, as Mr. Biden, imagined a remote control that could pause Mr. Trump, played by Alec Baldwin. Credit...Will Heath/NBC, via Associated Press

But in mass-experience environments, like network TV and general elections, basic and sentimental and middle-of-the-road still get you a big following. Most people are not cool. Grieving and loving are powerful themes because they're universal.

And Mr. Biden's campaign happened to come when the country was experiencing a tremendous loss from the ongoing pandemic, which it still has not entirely processed, under a president who has shown no interest in empathy or catharsis. In all those soulful addresses to the camera, sharing his own history of family loss, Mr. Biden was filling a role of the presidency that had essentially been vacant for four years.

But it wasn't entirely about him. In fact, much of the point of his campaign was that it was not all about him. It was an ensemble drama, not a star vehicle.

You could see the difference in the two parties' conventions in August. The Republican convention was [fully the Trump show](#), with the above-the-title talent making repeated appearances, speakers trying to mimic his notes like "American Idol" contestants, the production crescendoing with his name spelled in fireworks over the Washington Monument.

The Democratic convention was a group production. It emphasized the demographic variety of the party and of the country, most vividly in the [roll call of the states](#). When Mr. Biden made guest appearances, it was in little virtual forums that foregrounded the voices of others. Each night featured different headliners, including both Obamas, Kamala Harris and Mr. Biden's wife, Jill.





The Republican National Convention wrapped up with fireworks that spelled President Trump's name over the Washington Monument. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

This was as much a matter of necessity as a statement — modeling safe behavior in a pandemic precluded traditional barnstorming. And Mr. Biden, while often a strong one-on-one connector, is not a meteoric screen presence like the president he ran to replace, or the one he served under.

So it didn't hurt to bolster him with telegenic co-stars, and he didn't seem to mind sharing the stage. Even his victory celebration gave prominent billing to the more dynamic Ms. Harris, making history as the first woman, and the first Black person and person of South Asian descent, elected vice president.

All this also echoed a message of their campaign. America had spent years sitting through a relentless solo act. From the minute Mr. Trump rode down the escalator in 2015, the national story had been about him, him, him.

Maybe the corrective to the Trump drama wasn't a copycat show built around another operatic camera hog. As much as anything, Mr. Biden was offering America a chance to reclaim its breath from a celebrity-in-chief who had sucked up all the cultural oxygen.

## The show goes on hiatus

Like many canceled programs, this administration still has a few more episodes to burn off, even if its stunts feel increasingly like shtick and self-parody, like Rudy Giuliani's raging against the dying of the light in a Four Seasons Total Landscaping parking lot.



Mr. Trump's escalator descent to announce his candidacy became a recurring piece of Trump imagery, here playing before his appearance at a teen summit in 2019. Credit...Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

But the noise of the Trump era will outlast the president, in some form, because it preceded him. It had existed on Fox News and conservative talk radio, whose dialect he mimicked after spending four years as a weekly regular on “Fox & Friends.”

Maybe another politician will learn its language. Maybe another Trumpist — say, Don Jr., who speaks in Twitter-troll memes and hosts an online show called “Triggered” — will be its next interpreter.

Maybe Mr. Trump will become, as some have speculated, a right-wing-TV host, or maybe a right-wing-TV host will become the next Trump. If this presidency has accomplished anything, it was to obliterate the line between the two job descriptions.

It's easier to vote out a president than to repeal a media ethos. And as it plays out in our media now, politics seems to be as much a battle between aesthetics as a battle between ideologies. The inclusive, return-to-normal tone of the Biden campaign — this is us. And the high-octane, finger-in-your-eye style of Trumpism — this is us, too.

But while the circus goes on, it will pitch its tent farther away from the White House for a while, maybe long enough for our ears to stop ringing.

James Poniewozik is the chief television critic. He writes reviews and essays with an emphasis on television as it reflects a changing culture and politics. He previously spent 16 years with Time magazine as a columnist and critic. [@poniewozik](https://twitter.com/poniewozik)