

# THE MIRROR OF POWER

## Narcissism as a Political Dynamic



*Democracy in the Shadow of the Self – An Essay on Narcissism and Power*

*from*

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# The Mirror of Power – Narcissism as a Political Dynamic

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## Preface

As the editor of the books and writings of British investigative journalist Steven Ashbourg, I am pleased to present to interested readers this essay on the political power of narcissism.

In a time when leadership is increasingly shaped not by vision, but by spectacle, this work offers a timely and thought-provoking reflection on the psychological patterns behind political behaviour. With his signature blend of journalistic observation and analytical depth, Ashbourg explores how narcissism manifests not only in individuals, but in systems, narratives, and public discourse.

This essay does not seek to diagnose, but to understand. It offers no moral verdicts, but rather a mirror – one that reflects both the leader and the society that elevates him.

Steven Ashbourg challenges us to look closely – not only at those in power, but at ourselves.

I hope this essay encourages critical thinking, open dialogue, and a deeper awareness of the emotional forces shaping our democracies today.

Yours



# The Mirror of Power – Narcissism as a Political Dynamic

## Introduction: Mirror Zones – How This Essay Came to Be

I didn't begin writing this essay at a desk, but in the shadow of a stage. It was the spring of 2016 when I – then still a sceptical reporter – began to observe Donald Trump's rise not just politically, but psychologically. What at first appeared to be a media spectacle quickly revealed itself to be something more: a mirror, reflecting not just a man with ambitions, but something far deeper.

I spoke to former aides, read psychological assessments, held conversations with therapists and personality researchers – and delved deep into what is often referred to as a narcissistic structure. But the key insight did not come solely from the experts – it came from Trump himself. From what he said. And how he said it.

His vocabulary. His body language. The staging. The repetitive patterns. It all formed a picture that emerged not only from facts, but from observation, repetition, and analysis.

For this essay, I have not relied on a single source, but rather on a mosaic of interviews, behavioural studies, media analyses, and personal research – including collaboration with psychologists, sociologists, and historians.

But let me be clear:

This essay is not a psychological diagnosis. I am not a clinical psychologist – and it would be ethically and professionally inappropriate to ascribe a personality disorder to someone from afar. Such remote diagnosis would violate not only the standards of psychological ethics, but also my journalistic principles.

What I attempt here is something else: an observation. An analysis of patterns. A deliberate effort to place publicly visible behaviour into dialogue with well-established psychological concepts. I am not speaking of diagnoses – but of dynamics. Not of labels – but of lines of understanding.

In this text, the term “narcissism” is not used to pathologise, but to describe a phenomenon that extends far beyond a single individual. It concerns structures, narratives, power relations – and what they stir within us.

With this essay, I knowingly enter a grey area: between journalism, psychology, and political analysis. Not to judge – but to understand. Not to simplify – but to reflect.

It contains no medical diagnosis. But it is an attempt to make a pattern visible. One that does not merely manifest in Trump – but in all of us. And in the system that made him possible.

For this is not a portrait.

It is a mirror.

And every mirror reveals not only the one who stands before it – but also the one who gazes into it.

**Steven Ashbourg**

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## Prologue: The Grand Performance

A golden elevator, camera flashes, a smug thumbs-up. When Donald Trump descended the escalator of Trump Tower in June 2015 – like a pop star on his way to the stage – the world paused for a moment. Was this for real? A reality TV celebrity running for president? Between laughter, disbelief and a touch of unease, a thought flickered across the global stage – one that many were still reluctant to entertain: *What if he actually means it?*

What many dismissed as a PR stunt – yet another appearance by an ego-driven property tycoon with a flair for theatrics – soon revealed itself as the prelude to a political state of exception. For Trump was not merely a candidate. He was a message.

Behind the calculated performance lay more than calculation. There stood a man who stood not so much for a political agenda as for a worldview – his own. A personality refracting the light of Western culture like a jagged prism: glittering, distorted, dangerous. What if the 45th – and now also the 47th – President of the United States was not simply a political phenomenon, but a symptom returned? A symptom of a narcissistically charged culture that admired itself in his reflection?

This essay is neither an indictment nor an acquittal. It is an attempt to get closer. To a man who governed a nation with his ego. And to a society willing to submit itself to that ego – perhaps because it saw its own reflection staring back.

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## 1. The People's Mirror

Donald Trump is not a political accident. He is a cultural product.

Born in 1946 in Queens, New York, the fourth of five children to a successful property developer, he grew up in an environment where achievement was valued over affection, dominance over dialogue. His father, Fred Trump – a hard-edged businessman – instilled in him an early lesson: weakness is unacceptable; success is obligatory. According to biographers, Donald learned early on that emotions make one vulnerable – and so they must be hidden or overridden.

But what emerges when a child is never truly mirrored, only moulded? The answer is: a false self. A self-image built not on inner stability, but on outward display. In the language of psychoanalysis, this is referred to as a “grandiose self” – a façade sustained only through constant admiration.

Trump mastered this façade. He didn't just build skyscrapers – he built a myth: the unbeatable tycoon, the brilliant dealmaker, the alpha male of the modern age. His favourite word: “*huge*”. Everything had to be grand – not only the buildings, but the ego, the applause, the impact. But the grandeur was never real. It was performance – a shield against deep-seated insecurity.

“I've always been a winner,” Trump once declared. A sentence that speaks less of confidence than of an abiding fear of failure.



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From a psychological perspective, this behaviour is not particularly unusual. It is a narcissistic defence mechanism – and one that only functions when constantly affirmed from the outside. This is why individuals with pronounced narcissism crave attention, validation, and control. Their self-display does not stem from arrogance, but from inner deficiency.

But what happens when such a person no longer uses just a television audience – but an entire nation – as their mirror?



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## 2. The Leader as Mirror – Narcissism on the Throne of Democracy

A narcissist does not merely wish to lead. He wishes to be seen. To be reflected – as grandly, as brightly, and as often as possible. It is not about shaping policy, but about being significant. Not about power itself, but the sensation of being needed. And admired.

Donald Trump was therefore never a conventional politician. Not a man of dossiers, nor a figure of the establishment. He was – and remains – a performer. A man of the stage, not the institution. Politics, to him, was never a space for negotiation – but an arena. And he, the gladiator who must forever remain in the spotlight.

And he knew exactly how to command that light: through division. Trump created an America of black and white – no shades, no nuances. Only: us or them.

The people or the elite.

Patriots or traitors.

This division was no collateral damage – it was strategy. A narcissistic, deliberate logic: divide, so you may be seen. Split, so you may shine.

Attention is the narcissist's fuel – and outrage, his currency.

Trump never truly promised to make America great again – and yet, the performance repeats itself in 2025, this time with the sombre undertone of a man who knows his power and intends to mark his enemies. His true message was subtler – and far more personal:

**“Make me great, and I’ll make you great.”**

A deal. And millions took it.

As early as the 1970s, American sociologist Christopher Lasch warned of the rise of a *“culture of narcissism”* – a society where spectacle outranks substance, control replaces trust, and strength is valued above empathy. What Lasch described as theory, became political reality in Trump: the narcissistic leader type was no longer marginal – he had become electable.

But this goes beyond vanity. At the core of narcissistic leadership lies not merely the hunger for applause – but the inability to truly encounter others. He who only feels himself loses access to the other. He who constantly defends his own greatness cannot tolerate criticism. Dissent becomes not an invitation to discourse, but a personal attack. And what follows is retreat, retaliation, or revenge.

Trump's presidency followed this pattern with precision:

Journalists were branded enemies of the state.

Critics became liars.

Courts, ministries, the media – anything that did not comply was devalued.

Reality became malleable like putty.

Facts became opinions. And opinions became truth – as long as they served the self-image.

Because to the narcissist, truth is not what is accurate – but what does not hurt.

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### A Hidden Vacuum – The Invisible Fear Behind the Grandeur

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What narcissism stages as strength from the outside is, at its core, often a fragile construct – a psychological emergency measure against a deeply rooted sense of inadequacy. The YouTube feature “*Narcissism: Understanding and Identifying – A Deep Dive*” illustrates impressively that the narcissist’s grandiose self-image is not based on genuine self-assurance, but rather on a defence mechanism against an almost unbearable inner void.

This perspective reveals a disquieting truth: the loud performance of dominance and control is not a display of strength – but a means of avoiding vulnerability. Trump’s demonstrative confidence, his constant emphasis on dominance, victory, and grandeur – all this can be read as a psychological armour. A shield against a self that can barely exist without admiration.

Seen in this light, many of his actions appear not only as political strategy, but as psychological necessity: Those who are fractured within need the outside world to stabilise.

Those who cannot feel themselves need the stage to exist.

The narcissist, then, is not a confident leader – but a human being in a perpetual state of self-worth emergency. And when such a person gains power, the political stage becomes therapy – at the cost of reality.

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## 3. The Cycle of Wounded Pride – How Narcissistic Politics Breeds Escalation

A narcissist does not seek control out of confidence – but out of fear.

- Fear of being exposed.
- Fear of not being enough.
- Fear of the moment when the façade begins to crack.

For such a person, criticism is not an invitation to reflect – it is an assault on their very existence. And the response, in true narcissistic fashion, is not reasoned argument – but personal denigration.

Donald Trump has perfected this mechanism. Every critical question, every objection, every dissenting voice was not met with a substantive reply – but taken as a personal affront. Journalists were labelled enemies. Fact-checkers became conspirators. International partners were turned into adversaries. Anyone who threatened his self-image was attacked – not through debate, but with emotion.

And thus emerged what I call the **cycle of wounded pride:**  
**Attack → Defence → Counterattack → Escalation.**

A pattern that never settles – because it never concerns content, only ego.

And the audience? By now, fully part of the choreography. In a society that has grown as accustomed to polarisation as it has to background noise, this style has become the norm. Outrage is the new consensus. And politics has become a stage upon which wounded pride holds the reins.

This dynamic not only wears down democracies – it poses a real danger to global stability. For one who acts from wounded pride does not negotiate – he punishes.

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Trump withdrew from international agreements not because they were ineffective, but because they failed to flatter his self-image. And now, in 2025, this strategy escalates: Allies are disregarded. International cooperation is hollowed out – because it no longer serves his narrative of power. He insults democratic partners for their criticism and praises autocrats for their admiration. Narcissism transforms logic into loyalty – and diplomacy into mirror maintenance.

Narcissistic politics is never rational. It is an emotional theatre – fuelled by pride, shame, and rage – and by the constant urge to salvage the fragile architecture of the self.

On **6 January 2021**, this pattern reached its breaking point: The storming of the Capitol was not just an attack on democratic institutions. It was the collapse of a narcissistic worldview no longer able to withstand reality. A final, desperate revolt against the truth – and a chilling demonstration of how deeply wounded egos and political violence are intertwined.

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## 4. The Narcissistic Narrative – How Self-Images Become Systems

A narcissist needs a story – not just any story, but one in which he plays the leading role. It's not about what really happened. It's about how it can be told – so that grandeur, brilliance, and infallibility take centre stage.

- No narrative, no narcissist.
- No stage, no leader.

This story serves a purpose: it stabilises an inner chaos that never truly rests. And when such a person comes to power, something unsettling occurs:

His personal narrative becomes the collective narrative.

A distorted self-image turns into a worldview.

An inner myth becomes state doctrine.

Donald Trump's narrative was simple – almost childishly so. And it was precisely this simplicity that made it so effective:

**“I am successful because I am exceptional. Those who criticise me are liars. I am the people – if you're against me, you're against them.”**

These three sentences may seem innocuous. But in truth, they are the architectural blueprint of narcissistic power:

1. **Self-idealisation** – *“I am unique, no one understands the game like I do.”*
2. **Devaluation of others** – *“The media lie, the system is corrupt.”*
3. **Fusion with the collective** – *“I am your voice. Without me, you are lost.”*

It's no coincidence that this structure echoes authoritarian systems. The difference lies in its emotional engine. This is not driven by ideology, but by instinct. Not about theory – but about identification. Identification with the strongman who eliminates all complexity.



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The narcissist-as-leader does not merely want followers.

He wants to be admired.

And he wants to be loved – unconditionally.

But this love is not reciprocal. It is one-sided, instrumental. It serves a single purpose: validation.

Those who dissent betray the system.

Those who doubt are cast out. In this context, love means absolute loyalty to the ego at the top.

When a president says, “*Only I can save this country,*” it’s not about the country. It’s about him.

During Trump’s presidency, this principle became routine political practice. Ministries turned into stages.

Press conferences became self-promotional acts. Alliances were no longer judged by strategy, but by personal loyalty.

Those who pleased him stayed.

Those who criticised him were replaced, discredited, or publicly humiliated.

The self-image became the strategic axis of the system.

And this is what makes narcissistic politics so dangerous: It does not destroy immediately – it erodes gradually. Until, one day, the system is nothing but a façade. And at the centre stands only one thing:

**The Self.**

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## 5. After the Narcissist – What Remains When the Ego Departs?

A narcissist never simply leaves.

He does not disappear quietly through the back door.

He exits only in protest – with drama, defiance, and the clear intention of returning one day.

Trump left the White House in January 2021 – but only temporarily.

His return in 2025 proves the point:

The narcissist never leaves the stage –

he waits in the wings for his next entrance, more determined and less restrained.

His shadow still looms over American politics –

like the aftershock of a psychological trauma no one has fully processed.

For the narcissist endures.

Not merely as a person, but as a structure.

As a mindset. As a narrative. As a system.

So what remains when a narcissistic leader has left his mark on a nation?

The reckoning is sobering – or rather: alarming.

A country deeply politically divided.

A public discourse that has grown toxic.

And a party – the Republicans – that has locked its identity inside Trump’s ego,

like a vault whose combination now consists solely of loyalty.

Trump didn’t merely reshape the GOP politically –

he reprogrammed it emotionally.

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His rhetoric, his enemy archetypes, his patterns of grievance became the emotional code of a new party culture.

**Loyalty replaces integrity.**

**Polarisation replaces argument.**

**The “we” of his followers replaces the democratic “we” of all.**

Many former voices of caution have long since fallen silent. Some left of their own accord. Others were pushed out. Those who remained adapted – not merely out of calculation, but for a simple reason:

**To criticise the narcissist is to lose your platform.**

**To oppose him is to lose your part.**

**To expose him is to lose your place.**

And so the narcissistic system persists – even without the narcissist himself at the top.

Because the true danger is not the man. It is the structure he leaves behind – a structure that prizes loyalty over truth, and resonance over reflection.

But what does this mean for democracy?

A democracy thrives on dialogue. On friction. On dissent. It survives by tolerating multiple truths side by side.

Narcissism, by contrast, thrives on certainty. On self-assertion. And on the rejection of everything *other* – because the *other* threatens the fragile self.

When a system becomes infused with narcissism, it loses its centre. And with the centre, it loses what makes democracy strong: the capacity for complexity.

Social media, news feeds, filter bubbles – all these systems amplify the effect.

**Algorithms reward volume, not nuance.**

**Headlines feed outrage, not thoughtfulness.**

**Attention becomes the new truth.**

In this structure, Trump is no accident. He is the logical product of a system that prizes reach over maturity.

The question was no longer: *Will Trump return in 2025?*

The real question was:

**Can a democracy endure personalities like Trump – without losing itself?**

Or more pointedly:

**How resilient is a political system that not only tolerates narcissistic leaders – but fosters them?**

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## 6. Narcissism and Democracy – What We Must Learn from the Trump Era

The story of Donald Trump is not over.  
But it has already taught us a lesson –  
if we are willing to look.

It tells not just of a man who turned himself into a brand,  
but of a system that made him possible, electable – and effective.

Because narcissism in politics is not a character flaw.  
It is a systemic phenomenon.  
It emerges where public life becomes a stage,  
where discourse turns into a weapon,  
and power becomes a screen for projection.  
Where the question is no longer: *What serves the common good?*  
but: *Who owns the spotlight?*

Trump was – and still is – a stress test for democracy.  
He has exposed its vulnerabilities:  
How easily institutions can be infiltrated  
when loyalty outweighs competence.  
How quickly democratic dialogue becomes a theatre of vanity.  
And how dangerous it is when political power fuses with psychological insecurity.

The narcissist is not in search of truth –  
he is in search of validation.  
Truth, for him, is whatever protects his self-image.  
And power is the means to enforce that truth.

A healthy democracy, on the other hand, lives by the opposite:  
By doubt. By dissent. By ambiguity.  
It requires not leaders – but citizens.  
Not projection – but reflection.

So what lessons must we take away?

### Five things we must learn from the Trump era:

1. **Character is political.** Personality traits are not private matters when they shape global decisions.
2. **Democracies require psychological resilience.** Not just institutional safeguards, but cultural maturity – to resist the lure of narcissism.
3. **Media literacy is a survival skill.** Those who cannot distinguish between substance and spectacle become pawns in political theatre.
4. **Leadership must mature.** Not the pursuit of dominance, but the capacity for dialogue, self-criticism and empathy should define leadership.

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5. **Societies need true mirrors.** Not narcissistic projections, but spaces where we can recognise both ourselves – and others.

Donald Trump is not the end of the story.

But he is a mirror.

And the question is:

**Do we dare to look into it?**

Because this essay is not just about a president.

It is about all of us.

About how we respond to power.

To fear. To uncertainty.

And about the stories we choose to believe about ourselves – and those we are willing to question.

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## 7. Narcissistic Power – And What Might Stop It

A narcissist on the throne of democracy is no ordinary power-seeker.

He does not rely on complex strategies – he relies on resonance.

And in Donald Trump's case, that means: total loyalty, total control, total dominance over interpretation.

His cabinet does not consist of advisers – but of mirrors.

Those who fail to amplify him are removed.

Those who reflect him stay.

With his MAGA movement, Trump has created an emotionally charged construct no longer defined by party politics, but by personal devotion. Trump is no longer a political figure – he is a projection surface, a messianic symbol, an emblem of strength, resistance, and revenge.

And that is precisely what makes him so dangerous.

Because narcissistic leadership, when left unchecked, does not destroy institutions head-on – it hollows them out, gradually.

Loyalty replaces competence.

Emotion replaces reason.

The leader replaces the constitution.

**So what can stop him?**

### 1. Institutional Resilience

Courts, prosecutors, federal agencies – they are, in theory, independent in American democracy. But their strength depends on the spine of those who lead them. It requires attorneys general, judges, governors willing to withstand pressure – even when threatened, discredited, or politically sidelined.

### 2. A Strong Civil Society

Democracy does not die when one man shouts.

It dies when everyone else falls silent.

The media, NGOs, academics, artists, activists – they are the last line of defence against the narcissistic pull. But they too can be worn down when polarisation and intimidation dominate. Their role: to keep the public alert, the discourse open, and complexity alive.

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## 3. Republicans with a Conscience

Very few Republicans have dared to speak out openly against Trump. The party has long been emotionally colonised. But if individual voices rise, they might create cracks. The crucial question: will these voices be loud enough, early enough – and supported by voters who refuse to settle for a “strongman”?

## 4. The Legal System

Ironically, it may not be politics, but the law that poses the greatest threat to Trump’s power. Cases involving incitement, obstruction of justice, or attempted election fraud are ongoing – but now must contend with an executive branch once again under his control.

The question is whether the legal system is faster and more robust than his machinery of political corrosion.

Under a renewed Trump presidency, even justice agencies face mounting pressure. The temptation to undermine or politicise proceedings is no longer hypothetical in 2025 – it is real.

## 5. Narrative Exhaustion

Perhaps the greatest hope lies within the narrative itself.

Narcissistic systems often burn themselves out.

They require constant escalation – new enemies, new myths.

Eventually, followers grow weary, doubts emerge, scepticism creeps in.

When the image wears thin – when the mirror fogs over – the shine begins to fade.

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## Epilogue: The Mirror Returns – Larger Than Ever

I’ve never believed in the end of history.

But I do believe in cycles – and in repetitions that are no coincidence, but warnings.

Donald Trump became President of the United States once again in January 2025.

What once appeared a political anomaly is now reality – for the second time.

American democracy not only elected him again – it never truly let him go.

The narcissist has returned – not as a shadow of the past,  
but as a present force, wielding full executive power.

This time, there is no shock of the new.

No astonishment. No uncertainty about his intentions.

What remains is the will to repeat – and to seek revenge.

Trump 2025 is not Trump 2016.

He is the *revenant version* –

the narcissistic return of an ego that has neither forgotten nor forgiven,  
and certainly never truly relinquished control.

It was never a question of *if*.

Only *when*.

And now, the political system faces the same question –

but under more severe conditions:

Can it withstand the pressure of a personality that sees criticism as war,



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control as trust,  
and loyalty as the only currency of truth?

The United States is now entering the second phase of a political experiment that reaches deep into the psychological fabric of democracy.

This time without the surprise.

This time with the calculation of a man who has learned just how far he can go –  
and exactly who won't stop him.

The mirror Trump holds up to the world has grown larger.

But it has also grown more distorted.

And the danger is this:

We may grow accustomed to the image we see reflected there.

**What if we no longer recoil?**

**What if we begin to recognise ourselves in it – and start to like what we see?**

*Steven Ashbourg*