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From Tony Soprano to Donald Trump : situating the rhetoric of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign in the antihero genre

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ABSTRACT

FROM TONY SOPRANO TO DONALD TRUMP: SITUATING THE RHETORIC OF THE 2016 TRUMP PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IN THE ANTIHERO GENRE

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In the wake of Donald Trump's stunning victory over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, scholars and political pundits alike were left scrambling to understand what had occurred. While there is no single explanation for this unexpected turn of events, the present study argues that an overlooked and central aspect of Trump's appeal was foreshadowed by the increased prominence of antihero protagonists in American media, particularly exemplified by the recent "Golden Age" of television wherein television series like *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men* and *Dexter* found critical and popular success by building compelling narratives around morally flawed characters. Trump certainly defied traditionally heroic notions of presidential character, instead opting to embrace an unfiltered and morally flawed persona not unlike those depicted on television. This study surveys extant literature on heroism and anti-heroism to construct a framework for understanding the fundamental elements of the antihero genre before applying it in a generic rhetorical criticism of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign.

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FROM TONY SOPRANO TO DONALD TRUMP: SITUATING THE RHETORIC OF THE
2016 TRUMP PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IN THE ANTIHERO GENRE

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT, AND METHOD

Statement of the Problem and Context

On June 16, 2015, Donald Trump launched the presidential campaign that would irrevocably shake the landscapes of American politics, media and culture. In his bombastic and rambling campaign declaration, the infamous business mogul ran a characteristically controversial gamut: decrying Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists, blasting the “stupidity” of the Obama administration, and promising to be the “greatest jobs president that God ever created” (Bomey, 2016). While Trump’s audience— in his words, a crowd of “Thousands... There’s been no crowd like this” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s Campaign Announcement Speech”, 2015, para. 2)— roared with applause, critics across party lines denounced his campaign kick-off address as racist, xenophobic and self-aggrandizing. Quickly, political commentators dismissed the prospect of a Trump presidency as a joke (Bobic, 2015; Cilizza, 2015; Reed, 2015).

Indeed, Trump’s campaign should have been dead on arrival based on a conventional understanding of political campaign conduct. Trump lacked any meaningful political experience, rather building his reputation upon his real estate empire and popularity as the host of reality television show *The Apprentice*. Trump’s prospects of even winning the Republican primary race, which already featured established conservative politicians like Senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz and former Florida Governor Jeb Bush (to name only a few in a historically crowded

field), appeared unlikely to say the least. Yet one year and seven months later, Trump would place his right hand on the Bible and be sworn into the highest office in the United States.

Needless to say, this stunning turn of events prompted widespread reevaluation of conventional campaign wisdom. By nearly every statistical measure, Trump's opponent—Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton—was a stronger candidate. Polling pointed in Clinton's favor (Mercer et al., 2016), and her campaign held a significant financial edge over Trump, who was among the “most poorly financed candidates in recent memory” (Lawrence and Boydston, 2017, p. 151). Trump, who self-financed most of his campaign, raised only \$5 million in comparison to Clinton's \$76 million (Smith, 2017, p. 14). With formerly trusted indicators failing to predict Trump's victory, pundits and scholars alike have repeatedly pondered the question: How in the world did Trump win the presidency?

Perhaps part of the answer to this question lies not in the polling data, but rather in the careful consideration of an overlooked context: the rise of the antihero genre in contemporary American media.

Justification for Study

The “character” of Donald Trump seems eerily familiar to some of contemporary American media's most recognizable and beloved protagonists. Like Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos*, Walter White of *Breaking Bad* or Don Draper of *Mad Men*, Trump's persona is largely defined by decidedly unheroic behavior. Yet, like these antihero characters, Trump is nonetheless a central figure in an engaging “drama” and supported by a passionate “fan base”. A close analysis of Trump's presidential campaign in the context of the antihero genre could

provide valuable insight explaining why such an abrasive, morally flawed and controversial candidate was able to reach the Oval Office.

While the antihero genre has been widely studied by scholars and entertainment periodicals alike (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Molony, 2014; Smith, 2014; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015; Janicke & Raney, 2015; Hines, 2016; Eden, et al., 2017; Schubert, 2017; VanDerWerff, 2017), it has rarely been considered outside of the fictional context of novels, television and film. Even more rarely has it been considered in the political context, an environment in which candidates must construct identities and craft narratives in order to appeal to the electorate (Duranti, 2006). Thus, this study will serve not only to fill a gap in the literature regarding political anti-heroism, but also to prompt future research and provoke discussion about the future of political campaign rhetoric and discourse in the wake of Trump's victory.

Furthermore, this study seeks to emphasize the value of studying political communication in the context of prevailing media trends—especially those present in popular culture. Since Kracauer (1945)'s *Caligari to Hitler* (discussed at length below), it seems little consideration has been paid toward the predictive relationship between fictional media and political behavior. Even without constant comparisons between Trump's populist rise to power and Hitler's (Beorn, 2018; Greenwood, 2018), Kracauer's thesis-- that trends in German film predicted Hitler's rise to power-- is worth revisiting in the context of our present circumstances. Film and television (in particular) have only grown more pervasive and influential in American culture. Thus, the study of film and television themes and genres and their influence on real-world public behavior is more valuable than ever.

Above all else, this study is fundamentally rooted in the essential task of understanding Donald Trump’s rise to power. No presidential election has ever shaken the study of political rhetoric, campaign strategy, media influence and American identity so foundationally. As scholars and strategists alike scramble to understand the 2016 election and its aftermath, this study offers a unique perspective. No single scholarly work can adequately explain how Trump won or what it means, but each contributes to a valuable tapestry that offers greater insight than any of its parts. The antihero genre lens is one such potentially significant part that had yet to be sewn into the bigger picture.

Literature Review

The Rise of the Antihero Genre

Published first in 1930, the Motion Picture Production Code— known as the “Hays Code” after its creator, Will H. Hays— sought to ensure that the American film industry upheld moral standards that would contribute to the betterment of American society. The Hays Code set the following ground rules for American film (Mondello, 2008):

“No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.”

“Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.”

“Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.”

Clearly, the American motion picture landscape long sought to emphasize morally righteous heroism at the expense of moral complexity. However, the American film landscape would begin to experience a sizeable shift alongside the nation at large as the patriotic optimism that followed World War II gave way to the cynicism and disillusionment that followed the

Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. As Americans' perceptions of government and national identity broke further than ever from idealized visions of American morality, the films of the 1960's and 1970's began to break away from the industry's reliance on morally righteous protagonists. The westerns featuring a righteous John Wayne would begin to give way to the westerns of Clint Eastwood's morally ambiguous *Man With No Name*. Films like *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Godfather*, *Chinatown*, *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Taxi Driver* would push American film even further from the image of the righteous protagonist. Clearly, the rise of the antihero is not entirely a new phenomenon—the antihero has been on the American mind for decades. However, the antihero genre of the 1960's and 1970's was still far from dominant or widespread. The majority of film and television producers largely remained reluctant to focus on such criminal and morally flawed protagonists. Television, in particular, long resisted the portrayal of any morally flawed main characters—at least until it appeared financially reasonable. As Feinberg (2017) explains:

“For most of TV history, creators assumed audiences needed to be able to identify with a protagonist in order to care about a show. That theory began to gradually erode with the massive success of *All in the Family*, with its lovable loon Archie Bunker, as well as a few other shows that helped creators appreciate that audiences inherently identify with any protagonist because they experience the world through his or her eyes.”

Indeed, the antihero had begun to emerge in the American television landscape even before the recent “Golden Era” of television antiheroes. Characters like Archie Bunker, a character that Trump campaign advisor Steve Bannon often openly compared Trump to (Peters and Haberman, 2017), began to erode at previous standards demanding that popular protagonists be purely morally good. However, the dominant antihero genre as it exists now would not truly take off in earnest until decades later.

In recent years, film and television protagonists have broken the traditional “hero” mold in favor of moral ambiguity and controversy with more frequency and intensity than ever before. Television series like *The Sopranos*, *Dexter*, *Mad Men*, *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad* (to name only a few) have garnered massive popularity and critical acclaim in large part due to their focus on deeply flawed protagonists grappling with the complexities of their environments. *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* in particular have been regularly praised as two of the greatest television dramas of all time. In each case, the show’s protagonist has been described as an antihero. While later chapters of this study will illustrate the underlying characteristics of anti-heroism, it is worthwhile to survey some basic definitions and to understand its rise to prominence.

As Mackey-Kallis (2001) defines it, an antihero is “a protagonist who lacks the attributes that make a heroic figure, [such] as nobility of mind and spirit, a life or attitude marked by action or purpose” (p. 91). Merriam-Webster defines an antihero as “a protagonist or notable figure who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities” (Merriam-Webster). These definitions both depend on the antihero as contrasted against the “hero”. Others define antiheroes by their own characteristics independent from heroic figures. For instance, Vaage (2016) defines antiheroes as “morally flawed main characters whom the spectator is nonetheless encouraged to feel with, like and root for” (xvi), introducing the notion that an antihero is inherently supported by an audience in spite of their unheroic qualities. The exact definition of an antihero remains contested in terms of these specific elements, but each definition offered above is accurate nonetheless; antiheroes are complex and morally flawed protagonists who break from the traditional heroic connotations

attached to the role of protagonist and garner support or appreciation from audiences nonetheless.

While antiheroes have long existed in works of fiction, their presence has increased in recent years particularly in film and television (Eden et al., 2017). Indeed, many have television's "new Golden Age" (Martin, 2013, p. 9) to this trend, beginning with David Chase's *The Sopranos* as template for success. The show's protagonist, New Jersey mob boss Tony Soprano (portrayed by James Gandolfini), is deeply immoral, violent, sexist, repulsive, and yet undeniably engaging. As the centerpiece of HBO's revolutionary programming, *The Sopranos* would redefine what a "hit" television show could look like (Martin, 2013). Martin continues:

...Soon the dial would begin to fill with Tony Sopranos. Within three months, a bald, stocky, flawed, but charismatic boss—this time of a band of rogue cops instead of mafiosi—would make his first appearance, on FX's *The Shield*... on *The Wire*, viewers would be introduced to a collections of Baltimore citizens that included an alcoholic, narcissistic police officer, a ruthless drug lord, and a gay, homicidal stickup boy... In the wings lurked such creatures as *Deadwood*'s Al Swearengen, as cretinous a character as would ever appear on television, much less in the role of protagonist... These were characters whom, conventional wisdom had once insisted, Americans would never allow into their living rooms: unhappy, morally compromised, complicated, deeply human... daring [the viewer] to emotionally invest in, even root for, even love, a gamut of criminals whose offenses would come to include everything from adultery and polygamy (*Mad Men* and *Big Love*) to vampirism and serial murder (*True Blood* and *Dexter*) (pp. 4-5).

Clearly, television has embraced the antihero as the centerpiece of its recent renaissance—and this even before series based around a chemistry teacher turned meth kingpin (*Breaking Bad*) and an ensemble of murderous, treacherous and power-hungry figures vying for the Iron Throne (*Game of Thrones*) shattered viewership records (Yahr, 2013; Lynch, 2017) and established massive followings of their own. As Smith (2014) explains in his analysis of this trend, "There can be little doubt that there is a large audience for the morally distressed narrative, and that the sustained exploration of weak, dubious, compromised and corrupt protagonists is a

major reason for the critical and popular success of these programmes” (p. 31). Together, these series (and films like them) have established their own genre: the antihero genre.

Just as crowds have flocked to stories of morally compromised and socially rebellious figures on the big and small screens alike, it stands to posit whether voters similarly flocked to the voting booth in support of the morally compromised and socially rebellious “lead character” of 2016’s greatest drama: Donald Trump and the 2016 presidential campaign. One may quickly object to the classification of Trump as a “protagonist” in the 2016 presidential campaign—a natural reaction from those whose experience of the campaign narrative featured Trump as the antagonist. However, such an objection ignores two significant points. First, Trump was clearly viewed as a protagonist figure by those who supported him. Any analysis concerned with explaining Trump’s victory must primarily be concerned with the perspective of those whose votes made it possible. Second, one could argue that Trump was the “central figure” of the 2016 presidential campaign regardless of the audience’s political affiliation. Trump’s campaign received an overwhelming amount of media coverage as his campaign “played the media expertly” (Lawrence & Boydston, 2017, p. 150). Lawrence and Boydston (2017) add, “...he successfully moved onto the proverbial front page throughout the campaign” (p. 152). If the 2016 presidential campaign were a television series (which, in more ways than one, it was), then Trump might be credited as the lead based on “screen time” alone.

“Life Imitates Art”

The notion of political realities reflecting artistic developments is not new. The works of Kenneth Burke—such as the notions of dramatism and pentad discussed in *A Grammar of Motives* (first published in 1945) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (first published in 1950)—have long

considered the reflective dynamic between life and art. The very concept of dramatism, “the label Burke gives to the analysis of human motivation through terms derived from the study of drama” (Foss, 2009, p. 355), implies a reflective relationship between reality and artistic symbols and narratives. As Bruner (1987) crystallizes, “just as art imitates life in Aristotle's sense, so, in Oscar Wilde's, life imitates art” (p. 13). Indeed, much of the foundation for rhetorical criticism rests in the notion that dramatic symbols, narratives and characteristics are reflected or understood in real action.

In his 1947 book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, influential film scholar Siegfried Kracauer offered perhaps the most relevant and significant work addressing the role of art in predicting political shifts, or life imitating art. As the title suggests, Kracauer argues that the rise of Adolf Hitler in post-World War I Germany could have been predicted by understanding the development and characteristics of German film at the time (chiefly exemplified by 1920's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*). He writes:

It is a puzzling spectacle: on the one hand, the Germans were reluctant to give Hitler the reins; on the other, they were quite willing to accept him. Such contradictory attitudes frequently spring from a conflict between the demands of reason and emotional urges. Since the Germans opposed Hitler on the political plane, their strange preparedness for the Nazi creed must have originated in psychological dispositions stronger than any ideological scruples. The films of the pre-Hitler period shed no small light on the psychological situation. (Kracauer, 1947, p. 204)

Kracauer (1947) addresses several recurring themes that foreshadow the rise of Hitler, including issues of class and economic inferiority, adherence to “just” authority, and escapism, apolitical dispositions and submission to force. On the subject of submission, Kracauer notes, “...since the early days of the German cinema nearly all important films have ended with an act of submission” (p. 246). Through his analysis of various German films of the era, Kracauer identifies an especially interesting recurring theme: individuals or populations falling under the

influence of villainous figures. These themes clearly reflect aspects of Hitler's rise to power: capitalizing on economic insecurity, asserting the Nazi regime as a "just" authority as opposed to corrupt predecessors, and perhaps above all, asserting dominance over a population conditioned to submit.

Television as a Window into the American Psyche

Kracauer (1947) asserts that the "films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media" (p. 5). In contemporary American media, this argument naturally extends to the small screen. Research has long confirmed the significant impact of television on psychological and cultural behavior (Hamilton & Lawless, 1956; Greenfield, 2014; Lotz, 2017), and this influence has become more widespread as television access, viewership, and revenue has increased over time.

Indeed, television has come a long way from its emergence as an elitist technology in the early 1950s, accessible only to those who could afford the lofty cost (Martin, 2013, p. 22). As Martin (2013) continues, however, "By 1954... 56 percent of American households had TV sets... And from the moment TV became a mass medium, it was a reviled medium" (p. 22). In other words, the cultural legitimacy of television as an artform has long been contested and dismissed. However, advances in the medium over the last several decades—from the advent of HBO and premium cable services to the emergence of Netflix and the streaming platform—have helped to propel television content to new heights as a legitimate artistic and cultural form worthy of study (Wayne, 2016).

Likewise, television viewership and revenue have continued to reach new heights. 102.2 million households in the United States were considered TV households in the 2000-2001

season. In the 2017-2018 season, that number had risen to 119.6 million (Nielsen). Meanwhile, the estimated revenue of the U.S. broadcasting industry rose from \$89.56 billion in 2005 to \$157.48 billion in 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau). It stands to reason that the television medium has only grown more pervasive and influential over time. Thus, the trends reflected in American television (like the rise of the television antihero) are worthy of the same kind of social analysis that Kracauer performed on German film.

Method

Research Agenda

In order to clarify and focus this study, the present rhetorical criticism of the Trump 2016 presidential campaign seeks to answer the following central questions:

RQ1: Is the Donald Trump 2016 presidential campaign representative of the antihero genre?
RQ2: If so, to what effect does the Trump campaign utilize the tenets of the antihero genre?
RQ3: How does the Trump campaign reshape our understanding of the antihero genre?

In answering these questions, a framework for understanding the components of the antihero genre will be derived from the literature and then employed in a generic criticism of four specific campaign texts.

Artifacts of Analysis

While any rhetorical criticism of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign must consider a wide range of texts, the present criticism focuses primarily on four central artifacts, each a crucial marker in the progression of the 2016 campaign: (1) Donald Trump's campaign kickoff speech on June 16, 2015 at Trump Tower in New York City; (2) the first Republican Primary Debate held on August 6, 2015 in Cleveland, Ohio; (3) the first General Presidential Debate

between Trump and Clinton on September 26, 2016 at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York; and (4) Trump's Inaugural Address on January 20, 2017 at the Capitol. These four texts were chosen in order to allow for the comprehensive study of Trump's rhetorical construction of himself at the outset of his campaign, in contrast to other Republican candidates and the Democratic nominee, and ultimately in the victorious culmination of his campaign. Together, they form a narrative that can then be considered in the context of genre.

As the official starting point of his campaign, Trump's June 2015 campaign kickoff address stands as a crucial text for analysis. Campaign kickoff speeches serve an important role in establishing a candidate's qualifications, national vision and political persona (Bloomfield & Katula, 2012; Neville-Shepard, 2014). Thus, an analysis of Trump's campaign kickoff address will provide valuable insight regarding the construction and presentation of a possible "antihero" campaign persona while also establishing a foundational context upon which to analyze later campaign texts.

By the time the first Republican Primary Debate arrived, Trump had already established himself as a central figure in the presidential race. That said, his campaign was still struggling to be taken seriously compared to viable Republican challengers ranging from governors (John Kasich, Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, Scott Walker) to senators (Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, Ted Cruz). In such a crowded field, this first televised debate was a critical opportunity for candidates to "rise above the pack" and convey campaign messages and values to a wider audience. Of course, the debate also served as a battlefield upon which candidates could contrast themselves from "weaker" alternatives with verbal barbs. Analysis of this text will offer insight into Trump's

construction and presentation of self in contrast to more “mainstream” Republican candidates while allowing for an analysis of his debate tactics in the context of anti-heroism.

Of course, much of Trump’s campaign rhetoric targeted his presumptive (and indeed, eventual) opponent in the general election: Hillary Clinton. Just as the first Republican Primary Debate warrants analysis as a representation of Trump’s debate tactics and his construction of a possible antihero persona in contrast with other candidates, so too does the first General Presidential Debate. By analyzing the first of the Trump-Clinton debates, conclusions can be drawn regarding Trump’s characterizations of Clinton (and the Democratic Party), his treatment toward women and the evolution of his campaign persona from candidate to nominee.

Finally, while not technically a part of his presidential campaign so much as a result of his victory, Trump’s Inaugural Address warrants analysis as both an ending to a turbulent campaign and as the launching pad for the Trump presidency. This analysis will shed light on whether any elements of anti-heroism found in previous texts persist into the Trump presidency and whether these elements are emphasized or diminished in the context of an Inaugural Address—an address that traditionally seeks to establish unity and hope for the future (Vigil, 2013).

While the four artifacts outlined above receive the bulk of the focus in this study, several “peripheral” artifacts are also taken into consideration. After all, no analysis of the Trump campaign narrative would be complete without addressing key factors like the *Access Hollywood* tape controversy, Trump’s persistent refusal to share his tax returns, and his rise to media prominence as host of *The Apprentice*. Thus, these elements of the Trump campaign narrative are considered in order to provide additional context and depth around the four primary texts.

Generic Criticism

The study of rhetoric has long acknowledged, explicitly and not, that rhetorical situations and artifacts fall into similar categories and general types. The assumption that rhetoric can be analyzed in relation to recurring situations and characteristics can be traced back to Aristotle (Foss, 2009, p. 138), and this notion “has been part of the tradition of the communication field since its inception” (Foss, 2009, p. 138). These categories—named after the French word “genre” referring to a “distinct group, type, class, or category of artifacts that share important characteristics that differentiate it from other groups” (Foss, 2009, p. 137)—have been used as the basis for rhetorical criticism by rhetorical theorists like Edwin Black (who first coined the term “generic criticism”) and Mikhail Bakhtin.

At its core, generic criticism seeks to assess rhetorical patterns across artifacts and situations. This purpose, however, manifests itself in three distinct approaches: generic description, generic participation and generic application. As Foss (2009) explains in her seminal work on conducting rhetorical criticism: generic description is an inductive process “where you examine several artifacts to determine if a genre exists” (p. 140); generic participation is a deductive process in which the critic moves “from consideration of a general class of rhetoric to consideration of a specific artifact... test[ing] a specific artifact against a genre to discover if it participates in that genre” (p. 140-141); and generic application, another deductive approach, “involves application of a generic model to particular artifacts in order to assess them” (p. 141).

The generic criticism method of rhetorical criticism is an apt fit for this study, as it seeks to address a question of genre (anti-heroism) and situate the Trump 2016 campaign in the context of said genre. However, this generic criticism necessitates the use of all three approaches

(description, participation and application) to some extent. The initial establishment of the antihero genre through a survey of existing literature acts as something of a generic description. However, rather than establishing whether the antihero genre exists (the literature confidently agrees that it does), this process will establish the tenets and characteristics that tie the genre together. A hybrid approach of generic participation and description will then be utilized in the ensuing criticism of the Trump campaign texts—that is to say, the texts will be analyzed to determine whether they participate in the antihero genre (generic participation) and assessed in terms of their effectiveness as examples of the genre (generic application).

Preview of Chapters

To best analyze the Trump campaign in the context of the antihero genre, this study begins in Chapter Two by establishing the foundational elements of the traditional hero in both fictional and presidential/political contexts. This chapter provides necessary context for Chapter Three, which establishes the foundational characteristics of the antihero genre via a thorough examination of extant literature. The framework constructed between Chapters Two and Three is then applied in the rhetorical analysis of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign in Chapter Four. Finally, Chapter Five crystallizes key conclusions, addresses the research questions and offers implications regarding the future of campaign rhetoric and the dynamic between fictional media and political behavior. This chapter will also address limitations to the study and call for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

UNPACKING THE TRADITIONAL HERO

From the moment Donald Trump began his presidential campaign, it was clear that the nation was witnessing a very different kind of political campaign run by a very different kind of political candidate. Rather than framing himself as morally pure or virtuous, Trump embraced the confrontational and controversial elements of his persona in hopes that they would help carry him to the White House. It quickly became clear that the Trump campaign would not be adhering to the established “rules” and standards of political campaigning; rules and standards that would have demanded professionalism, courteousness, and some semblance of presidential decorum. After all, the nation had never seen a presidential candidate so unapologetically controversial, so unrelenting in his verbal jabs, and so willing to stretch (or simply ignore) the truth *actually* win.

Trump’s already jarring campaign style and persona was even more shocking when compared to the campaign style and persona demonstrated by his eventual presidential predecessor, Barack Obama. While Obama’s campaign rhetoric and persona as both a candidate and president were clearly effective—he won a clear victory in 2008 and won re-election in 2012—, Trump’s rhetoric and persona were also effective enough to send him to the White House despite it being difficult to argue that they represented a staunchly “anti-Obama” approach. Where Obama employed messages of hope, unity and change, Trump employed messages of fear, frustration and division. Where Obama presented himself as a poised and somewhat professorial figure hesitant to “throw mud” at his opponents, Trump presented himself as an off-the-cuff and abrasive business mogul eager to dive into the muddy trenches. In

comparison, even at first glance, it is apparent that Obama's campaign and presidential rhetoric represented something more familiar: a traditional heroic figure. Even those who staunchly opposed his policies or actions on the campaign trail or in office would be hard-pressed to deny that Obama presented himself in heroic terms—as a charismatic leader with aspirations of guiding the nation to better times. Trump's campaign rhetoric and persona, on the other hand, may have represented an unfamiliar type of politician: an antihero figure.

As the present study seeks to assess whether (and to what extent) the rhetoric of the Trump 2016 presidential campaign may be understood as an example of the antihero genre, it is crucial to first understand the depiction and construction of traditional heroism. After all, one cannot fully understand the elements of anti-heroism without first understanding how they deviate from the elements of traditional heroism. One may not fully understand how Tony Soprano, for example, broke the traditional protagonist mold without first understanding what that mold was made from. Likewise, one cannot fully evaluate whether the rhetoric of the Trump 2016 presidential campaign is rooted in anti-heroism without first evaluating how the American presidency is rooted in the rhetoric of heroism.

The present chapter seeks to accomplish two goals: 1) To establish a framework of traditional heroism through the consideration of fictional American hero figures and significant themes that have emerged in scholarship on the subject; and 2) To use this framework to evaluate the presidency (and presidential candidates) in terms of heroic rhetorical characteristics.

Unpacking the Traditional Fictional Hero

The term “hero” has often been treated as synonymous with the term “protagonist”. After all, “protagonists are generally the characters... with whom audience members identify or empathize” (Beckwith, 2009, p. 446), and so audiences naturally identify and empathize best with figures who embody an idealized-yet-relatable vision of the best humanity has to offer. However, while antiheroes represent a very different type of protagonist they are protagonists nonetheless. Clearly, then, modern protagonists do not always fit such a heroic mold. That said, traditional protagonists are almost universally portrayed as heroic figures— “the questing knight, for example” (Barbour, 1999, p. 30). Cultures have long focused their stories—both fictional and in the narrative interpretation of reality— upon strong and noble heroes from Achilles to King Arthur to Superman and so on. As Wright (2005) notes, “...popular culture, in any society, has always been committed to this hero. The hero is integral to the culture of a society—that is, to the beliefs, values, and goals of a society—because the hero is integral to storytelling, the essence of culture” (p. 146).

Arriving at a clear definition of the traditional hero is no easy task. While heroes may generally be defined as traditional protagonists in opposition to some force(s) of perceived evil, it is important to note that heroes do not all demonstrate the same set of characteristics. As Kelsey (2016) notes, “Hero figures do not carry a monolithic form or set of characteristics and values” (p. 975). Extant literature regarding the construction and portrayal of traditional heroes considers a wide range of heroic traits, and an utterly exhaustive review of these many elements would risk becoming convoluted and certainly too unfocused to discuss productively. That said, the survey of extant scholarship offers several central and generally-agreed-upon elements

through which to understand traditional heroism. These elements are grouped here into three distinct subjects: 1) Morality and Leadership; 2) Heroic Journey and Heroic Circumstance; and 3) Masculinity. Using these three lenses, a framework of heroism is constructed to better assess how American culture understands and portrays heroism in popular fiction and presidential politics, and ultimately, how the antihero contrasts with this traditional protagonist classification.

Morality and Leadership

If asked to picture quintessential hero figures in American popular fiction, countless possibilities may come to mind. Many would think of Superman, perhaps the most iconic of American comic book heroes. Some may envision Atticus Finch, the honorable lawyer waging a fight against racial injustice in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and whose portrayal by Gregory Peck in the 1962 film adaptation was ranked atop the American Film Institute's list of top fifty heroes in American film (AFI). Others still may picture Luke Skywalker dueling against Darth Vader and the evil Sith forces in the *Star Wars* trilogy or Harrison Ford's *Indiana Jones* fighting off a swarm of Nazis on one of his grand adventures. While each of these fictional protagonists are distinct in their representations of American heroism, each of them share two core commonalities: They are fundamentally moral characters, and they demonstrate leadership (in the sense of moral leadership and/or in the literal sense of leading a group or movement).

Heroic rhetoric and identity is fundamentally based in a set of moral standards. Superheroes—perhaps the most obvious and culturally significant representation of heroism in American culture— from Superman to Batman to Spiderman and beyond all hold themselves to a strict moral code: they only fight against forces of evil, commit themselves to protecting

innocent civilians, and seek to maintain an honorable and respectable character both in public and private settings. Likewise, iconic heroes of American popular fiction commit themselves to doing the “right thing” in the face of injustice and evil. This strict adherence to doing what is “right” separates traditional heroic characters from ordinary individuals who may waver in such commitments. While most may struggle to maintain such moral behavior and intent in the face of inevitable challenges, heroic figures rarely waver from moral rightness even under the most trying of circumstances. Even those who do deviate from the moral path—and heroes are indeed fallible, albeit not as fallible as non-heroic characters (Kelsey, 2016)—are generally willing to recognize their wrongs and “atone” for them in order to return to the moral high ground. Simply put, traditional heroes are agents of good. They may not be completely faultless or morally pure, but they are driven by a core moral conscience. As Hyde (2005) explains, “Any act of heroism presupposes the answering of a call of conscience” (p. 8).

Of course, what is “right” is subjective. Individual interpretations of morality may differ, and so it is difficult to pin down a singular standard to judge heroic morality. Ultimately, however, such standards of morality are constructed through a bilateral dynamic between the hero and the society and culture in which he/she is depicted. On one hand, traditional heroes “are dramatized and personified to reflect the core values of the societies in which their stories feature” (Lule, 2001, p. 82). In other words, standards of heroism reflect societal expectations of morality, and heroes are adherent to these expectations. On the other hand, as Hyde (2005) observes, “Heroes provide the material that directs a society’s moral compass, offers instructions for understanding what human greatness is, and thereby informs the members of the society about what it takes for a finite being to live on after death in the hearts and minds of others” (p.

8). Thus, heroes both reflect the moral standards of society and influence society's moral judgements.

Several studies have attempted to further dissect the elements of heroic morality in American culture. In their work building upon Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), Haidt & Joseph (2007) analyzed heroic characters through five moral dimensions: Care, Fairness, Authority, Loyalty, and Purity. Using this measure as part of their study, Eden et al. (2015) asked participants to rate an extant hero and villain along each of these five moral dimensions. They found that the chosen hero figures were more moral across all five as compared to the chosen villains (Eden et al., 2015). While perhaps unsurprising in its results, this study offers insight toward how traditional hero figures are morally evaluated: Heroes are judged as caring, fair, authoritative, loyal, and (at least relatively) pure.

Additionally, Beckwith (2009) found similar moral values at play in her analysis of core values associated with protagonists in Academy Award-winning films and blockbuster films. In both types of films, protagonists were characterized as loving, courageous, honest, responsible, helpful, ambitious, and capable (Beckwith, 2009, pp. 453-454). Together, these studies provide a useful schema of heroic morality. Traditional heroes are good toward others, committed to good causes, passionate and effective in the pursuit of good, and are fundamentally of good character. Of course, it is not enough for a heroic protagonist to have a sound moral core. Luke Skywalker's morality alone could not conquer Darth Vader. Like most heroic protagonists, Skywalker is able to unite others and lead them in the fight against evil. Indeed, heroic figures are not only moral, but they generally take on a leadership role (as moral leaders or leaders among a group or movement) in their respective narratives (whether explicitly or not).

Traditional heroes must also be capable of leading the fight against “evil” through the combination of moral character and strength (physical or otherwise).

Heroic figures are portrayed as extraordinary individuals whose strong character traits and unique abilities situate them as ideal agents of good, or as “leader and deliverer” (Barbour, 1999, p. 30). As Hyde (2005) observes, “Among their many attributes, heroes are people who exhibit greatness in some achievement and are admired for doing so. With their extraordinary actions and praiseworthy character, heroes ‘stand out’ from the crowd” (Hyde, 2005, p. 1). Thus, heroic figures emerge from the crowd and set an example for the crowd to follow. Such heroic leadership may come in the form of setting a moral example or by demonstrating the strength and capability to “lead the charge” against antagonistic threats.

Leadership in-and-of itself is something of a nebulous quality. That is, it is difficult to define a leader without using other qualities: strong, capable, influential, active, etc. After all, one cannot lead without proving him/herself worthy of following through the demonstration of strength and sound character. Central among the qualities of heroic leadership, however, is the ability to unify others in a common cause. Truly heroic leaders do not seek to divide their “followers” from others, but rather to bring different (and perhaps opposing) factions together.

Altogether, traditional heroes in popular fiction may be understood as moral figures (“agents of good”) who act as leaders in the fight against evil/injustice/etc. by setting a moral example for others to follow and/or by using their unique strength and capabilities to emerge from the crowd and “lead the charge”.

Heroic Journey and Heroic Circumstance

Naturally, traditional heroic characters cannot exist outside of heroic narratives. Scholars have long observed recurring heroic narratives across works of fiction, but few have had as much influence as Campbell (1949)'s seminal work on hero narratives, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell (1949) outlined seventeen steps in what he calls the Hero's Journey, also called the monomyth. These seventeen steps are further delineated into three phases: Departure, Initiation, and Return. Explained simply, Departure denotes the hero's embarking on a "journey" or "quest; Initiation denotes the trials, obstacles and tasks that the hero must confront on the journey; and Return denotes the hero's ultimate triumph.

Campbell's (1949) work has served as a foundation for future interpretations and analyses of hero narratives, each emphasizing key elements such as a call to adventure, facing of trials and tribulations, and ultimately, a triumphant return. Indeed, heroic narratives generally follow some variation of Campbell's framework. Heroes are called to action, forced to overcome obstacles, and arrive triumphant at the end of the journey. After all, a hero cannot exist without being compelled to embark on a heroic narrative. Likewise, a hero may not exist without overcoming difficult challenges and winning at the end of the day. No hero succeeds without first facing defeat. As Wright (2005) argues, "Heroes must rise from defeat and sacrifice in order to symbolize victory over death, and this is the ultimate human victory, the victory of all heroes in popular, social stories" (p. 147). In this sense, heroic protagonists are not born heroic, but rather develop into heroic figures by persevering through difficult circumstances. After all, no compelling protagonist ever has it easy. Even Superman, as capable and strong a heroic figure as they come, struggles to defeat his foes.

This formulaic hero narrative—call to adventure, trials and tribulations, and triumph—is certainly not unique to American fiction. The formulaic heroic journey is further reflected in hero myths beyond American fiction. As Lule (2001) explains:

“The Hero myth, like many archetypal stories, often takes on similar forms from age to age. The Hero is born into humble circumstance. The Hero initiates a quest or journey. The Hero faces battles or trials and wins a decisive victory. The Hero returns triumphant” (p. 82)

Like Campbell’s (1949) *Hero’s Journey*, the Hero Myth that Lule (2001) describes revolves around a recurring narrative of embarking on a journey, facing challenges, and returning from the journey victorious. However, Lule also alludes to another recurring and equally significant element of hero narratives: heroic circumstance.

Indeed, heroes are largely defined by circumstance. In one sense, circumstance may denote the conditions that the hero begins in. Audiences are drawn toward stories of underdogs rising from unfortunate or humble conditions only to discover newfound strength and potential as heroes. Luke Skywalker begins his journey as an unknowing farmer on the planet of Tatooine. Bruce Wayne grows from the child of murdered parents into a conflicted and tormented young adult before finally taking on the identity of Batman. Compelling heroic protagonists like these are not born into comfortable circumstances; it is their emergence from humble origins that makes their transformation into heroes so compelling. After all, we are decidedly less likely to root for protagonists who have success handed to them from prosperous beginnings.

In another sense, heroic circumstances may denote the context in which a hero exists and operates. As Kelsey (2016) observes, “a hero’s role is dependent on the world he is born into” (p. 975). In other words, a character may only be heroic if he or she is faced with the contextual opportunities and challenges necessary to take heroic action. For example, Atticus Finch would

not be a heroic figure if not for the contextual challenges of Southern racism and his need to set a good example for his young children. Likewise, Sheriff Will Kane (*High Noon*) becomes a hero only when challenging circumstances—the threat of invading outlaws and the abandonment of the fearful townspeople—force him into action. Indeed, heroes do not create heroic circumstances. Rather, heroic circumstances create heroes.

Masculinity

While heroism is of course not inherently gendered— one may demonstrate characteristics of heroism regardless of gender, and there are certainly female heroes both in fiction and reality— it is hard to deny that perceptions of traditional heroism are closely intertwined with perceptions of traditional masculinity. As Goodman et al. (2002) observe, “Dating back to ancient Greece, the term ‘hero’ was defined as ‘a superior man, embodiment of composite ideals’” (p. 375). Over time, heroic tropes from the “knight in shining armor” to the brave soldier to the powerful warrior have all been built upon an underlying assumption of masculinity, which has in turn influenced the very characteristics that society deems heroic. As Goodman et al. (2002) note, “the archetypical hero may have varying visages, but typically is male. Descriptions of male heroism are frequently found in Warrior tales of old, and more recently, in media coverage of major sporting events” (p. 374). Indeed, the notion of the heroic male figure pervades American popular culture from popular fiction to sports (Michael Jordan, Derek Jeter, etc.) and, naturally, politics.

In many ways, American fiction has framed the traditional hero as the ideal “All-American male” (Merritt, 1975). Protagonists, especially in early American cinema, were

overwhelmingly portrayed as charming, boyish and bashful men—the type of hero that American men could both see themselves in and aspire to be like. As Merritt (1975) adds, “It is in the social message movies of Gary Cooper, Henry Fonda, and James Stewart that the bashful hero not only becomes the most complex, but also a character intended to epitomize the average American male” (p. 131). Indeed, characters like Cooper’s Sergeant Alvin York (*Sergeant York*) and Will Kane (*High Noon*), Fonda’s Juror #9 (*12 Angry Men*) and Tom Joad (*The Grapes of Wrath*) and Stewart’s Jefferson Smith (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*) and George Bailey (*It’s a Wonderful Life*) personified the hero in American fiction and maintain their standing as among American fiction’s most iconic protagonists.

Of course, American popular fiction has also produced a wealth of female heroes, especially in recent decades. Characters from Wonder Woman to Clarice Starling (*The Silence of the Lambs*) have certainly contributed to American culture as strong female heroes. However, even these female hero figures demonstrate traits and behaviors that are generally considered masculine. Wonder Woman has superhuman physical strength modelled after other superheroes like Superman. Clarice Starling works in the male-dominated FBI and is presented as more of a tomboy than feminine figure. Indeed, even female heroes have trouble escaping from the masculine confines that have historically defined heroic character.

Unpacking the Traditional Presidential Hero

The preceding framework of fictional heroes, while insightful and necessary in order to understand its contrast to the antihero genre, would not be as fruitful in setting the foundation for an analysis of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign without first being considered in the

context of presidential heroism (both in terms of presidential depictions in fiction and real presidents). After all, the present study does not merely seek to assess how Trump's campaign rhetoric diverges from standards of heroism as established in American fiction. Rather, it seeks to assess how Trump's campaign rhetoric diverges from traditional and expected standards of presidential and presidential candidate identity—standards that have historically been entrenched in the same heroic elements outlined above.

Until *House of Cards* debuted on Netflix in 2013, the fictional media depiction of American presidents could not have been further from the image of Donald Trump. Indeed, the president has regularly been depicted as a quintessential hero figure. From *The West Wing*'s President Bartlet to the big screen presidents portrayed in films like *Deep Impact* and *Independence Day*, the commander-in-chief has been characterized as a heroic protagonist. As Murphy (2000) observes, “an unusual number of movies and television episodes have portrayed the presidency”, and in these portrayals, “the president is a good guy” (p. 466).

Of course, such heroic presidential portrayals are rooted in real heroic expectations of real presidents and politicians. Indeed, the rhetoric of political character—particularly in the case of presidential politics—has long been entrenched in the rhetoric of heroic identity (Alexander, 2010; Murphy, 2000; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2006; Mercieca & Vaughn, 2014). As Mercieca and Vaughn (2014) note, “That Americans have what we can think of as ‘heroic expectations’ for the president cannot be denied” (p. 2). The American public looks to the president as a hero figure in the larger American narrative—the “protagonist” who will lead the nation to better times. Such expectations are only natural. After all, George Washington became the first President of the United States after leading the colonies to victory as a general in the

Revolutionary War. He was a literal war hero in the nation's battle for independence. Presidents like Abraham Lincoln, for instance, would only add to America's expectation for presidential heroes. This rhetoric of heroic presidential expectations has only continued to grow more heroic since the Progressive Era (Mercierca & Vaughn, 2014), when presidents like Teddy Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt emerged as quintessential heroic figures in American cultural lore amidst the emergence of the rhetorical presidency (Tulis, 2017). Such 'great' presidents—those who are held in high esteem as crucial leaders and figures in the framing of American history—set a high bar for all those who follow them into the White House.

That said, no president has ever been universally adored by the American public, and any president deemed heroic by some is inevitably deemed villainous by others. Likewise, no presidential act has been universally interpreted as heroic. For all those who deemed Lincoln a hero for abolishing slavery and leading the Union to victory over the Confederacy, there were those who decried his actions as abusive and unconstitutional. However, presidential heroes are not solely crafted by their popularity in office, nor must they be universally considered heroic. Rather, presidents become heroic figures largely through retrospective consideration and popular memory and depiction. As Pika et al. (2018) argue, “[We] have glorified the memories of past presidents. The ‘great presidents’, particularly those who took decisive action and bold initiatives, and even some of the ‘not so great’ are treated as folk heroes and enshrined in national mythology” (p. 30). Indeed, ‘great American presidents’ are mythologized and portrayed as heroic “protagonists” in the grand American narrative.

The mythologization of the heroic presidency and resulting heroic expectations of the role appear to stem from a variety of factors. For instance, Simon (2009) found that our

expectations for the presidency are largely developed through school textbooks, which tend to emphasize the heroic characteristics of presidents like Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Kennedy, and others. Meanwhile, scholars like Murphy (2000) and Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2006) attribute our heroic presidential expectations to the aforementioned heroic portrayals of presidents in media. The more that the president is portrayed like *Independence Day*'s President Whitmore—a president who quite literally joins the fight against alien invaders—the more Americans are predisposed to expect such heroism in their real commander in chief (although few likely expected Presidents Obama or Trump to jump into a fighter jet to fight off any alien threat). Between school textbooks and media portrayals of the presidency (whether depicting real or fictional presidents), Americans are conditioned to view the presidency as a heroic role to be filled by heroic figures. As Simon concludes, these expectations of a heroic presidency “are part of the historical inheritance that awaits every new president. They are, in a sense, imposed on every incumbent, regardless of party ideology... These expectations shape how presidents are covered by the press as well as how they are perceived and evaluated by elites and the mass public” (p. 135).

Of course, heroic expectations are not entirely placed upon presidents or presidential candidates by external factors. Political candidates—particularly those vying for the presidency—do not shy away from fostering heroic expectations themselves. Rather, as Alexander (2010) explains, presidential campaigning is largely based in the construction of heroic narratives. As he bluntly notes, “Political stories are all about heroes” (p. 63). Any politician vying for office, whether that be the presidency or otherwise, must frame his or her identity around a heroic narrative. Political campaigns, then, act as platforms for candidates to construct

and communicate heroic narratives with the candidate as the heroic protagonist at its center. As Mercieca and Vaughn (2014) add, "...all political campaigns are persuasive attempts in which candidates attempt to convince the American public that they are the right hero for the moment" (p. 8). Thus, establishing oneself as a heroic figure—and as the "best" heroic figure among other self-proclaimed heroic candidates—has become a central element of the political campaign ritual.

While countless presidents and presidential candidates have framed themselves and been framed as heroic figures, few seem to fit this traditional heroic mold better than President Barack Obama. In their analysis of Obama's presidential campaigns and ensuing time in office, Mercieca and Vaughn (2014) argue that Obama represents a quintessential heroic presidential figure. Obama's initial presidential campaign is well remembered for its themes of hope and change. To his supporters, Obama might as well have been a knight in shining armor crusading to correct the course of a nation emerging from eight years under President George W. Bush, whose low approval ratings toward the end of his tenure reflected a disillusioned American public (Gallup). Even before taking the oath of office, Obama was portrayed in a similar light to towering heroic presidents past. In the wake of his victory in the 2008 presidential election, Obama "appeared as Abraham Lincoln on the cover of the November 15, 2008, *Newsweek*; as FDR on the November 24, 2008, cover of *Time*; as George Washington on the cover of the January 26, 2009, *New Yorker*, and on and on" (Mercieca and Vaughn, 2014, p. 17). While Obama was far from universally adored by voters, his campaign persona and rhetoric helped to build especially high heroic expectations of his presidency. Between his campaign message of hope and change, his relative youth, charisma, and identity as an African American seeking to

become the first non-white U.S. president, Obama's campaign rhetorically constructed a hero narrative with a powerful heroic figure at its center.

Considering that Obama's campaign and presidency not only provide a strong example of heroic presidential rhetoric and identity, but also serves as a natural point of contrast for the 2016 Trump campaign (featuring a candidate who has often been referred to as the "anti-Obama"), each element of the hero framework outlined above will now be applied to both presidential heroism in general and the case of Obama as an insightful case study.

In order to better illustrate the heroic rhetoric surrounding the American presidency, each element of traditional heroism outlined above will be applied to a historical overview of the office and those who have held it.

Morality and Leadership in the Presidency

In today's political climate, it is difficult to imagine a presidency that isn't based in expectations of rhetorical leadership. However, early presidents—though expected to be competent executives capable of handling the lofty duties of the office— were less interested in leading "the people" than they were in governing (Tulis, 1987). In stark contrast to modern presidential expectations, presidents were often celebrated for silently focusing on the work of the government rather than attempting to lead public opinion. As Tulis (1987) humorously notes, "Lincoln was cheered for keeping silent; [Andrew] Johnson was castigated for speaking to crowds" (p. 16). Though Lincoln's public addresses have certainly found their place in American historical lore and have attracted widespread academic study, his relative silence and brevity as an orator seem to be more indicative of how early presidents viewed their function.

Since the emergence of the rhetorical presidency—often traced back to Teddy Roosevelt’s use of the bully pulpit and Franklin Roosevelt’s public and radio addresses to the nation (Tulis, 1987)—, however, the president’s function has transformed to center on leadership. Tulis (1987) explains, “...the doctrine that a president ought to be a popular leader has become an unquestioned premise of our political culture” (p. 4). While Americans certainly look for a capable executive in a presidential candidate, we tend to be most interested in candidates who fulfill our desire for rhetorical leadership. Indeed, public perception frames “the ‘great president’ as a heroic leader rather than a competent chief executive” (Mercieca & Vaughn, 2014, p. 4). In this sense, one may argue that the president’s most important function is as a symbolic and rhetorically heroic leader even before functioning as a competent head of state.

Like fictional heroes, heroic presidents often function (rhetorically, at least) as national unifiers. Of course, presidents are intrinsically divisive by their very nature as partisan politicians. However, presidents rarely seek to foster division as rhetorical leaders. Rather, presidents generally seek to establish themselves as unifiers from the very beginning of their tenures. In fact, presidential inauguration speeches regularly feature appeals to national unity; so much so that Campbell and Jamieson (2008) include unity as a fundamental element of the inaugural address genre in presidential rhetoric. They explain, “Before the citizenry or their representatives can witness and ratify an ascent to power, the audience, divided by a hard-fought presidential election campaign, must be unified and reconstituted as ‘the people’” (p. 32). Indeed, presidents rhetorically emphasize themselves as leaders of the nation, not as leaders of the people who voted for them. At the time of his study of inaugural addresses, Sigelman (1996) observed that the use of such unity appeals has only increased over time. He writes:

“66 percent of the variance among inaugurals in the use of unity symbols is associated with the simple passage of time, with each address expected to contain almost exactly one more unity symbol per 1,000 words than was contained in the immediately preceding inaugural... Over the course of two centuries, then, the steady accumulation of these symbols has produced a genre that is literally brimming with verbal tokens of unity” (p. 87)

Clearly, then, presidents generally emphasize national unity upon taking the oath of office. In the process, presidents may construct themselves as heroic figures in part by rhetorically demonstrating the same kind of unifying leadership commonly found in fictional heroic protagonists. Of course, presidential actions and ideologies inevitably foster division between those who agree and those who do not, but such unifying rhetoric may appeal to the public’s desire for symbolic and rhetorical leadership.

Now, this is not to say that the American public seeks rhetorical leadership alone. To the contrary, like expectations that heroic protagonists in fiction be strong and competent enough to lead the fight against evil, Americans have very high expectations of what the president must be capable of. Mercieca and Vaughn (2014) note,

“We expect the president will act at a minimum as the chief administrator, chief diplomat, chief legislator, chief magistrate, commander in chief, chief executive, ceremonial head of state, manager of the economy, party leader, and national leader—much more than the US Constitution prescribes” (p. 2).

In this sense, the president is expected not only to rhetorically lead, but also to possess the strength and capability necessary to lead the nation forward in this multitude of functions. Among the key functions of the president as a national leader is the task of guiding the nation through crises. Indeed, scholars have committed a great deal of study to the presidential handling of crises (Holm & Summers, 2007; Bohn, 2015; Gilmore, et al., 2016), as Americans place a great deal of faith in the president to effectively manage complicated situations that threaten

American stability and security. As such, Americans celebrate presidents who are strong enough and capable enough to gracefully navigate national crises. Those presidents who have gracefully guided the nation through crises are praised, as they have demonstrated strength and capability necessary to meet our expectations of heroic leadership. Kennedy is revered in history for his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Roosevelt led the nation out of its greatest economic crisis, the Great Depression, and toward victory in its greatest military effort, World War II. Lincoln navigated the nation through the Civil War, abolishing slavery and beginning the process of reconstruction in the process. These stories of presidential crisis management live on in public memory and perception of the presidency, and thus further emphasize heroic leadership as perhaps our greatest expectation of whomever holds the office.

Perhaps due to these lofty expectations of symbolic leadership, competent executive ability and graceful crisis management, Americans have often placed a great deal of weight on military experience in presidential candidates. For instance, 2016 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found that fifty percent of respondents would be more likely to vote for a president who has served in the military, “the most positively viewed trait among 13 tested” (Fingerhut, 2016). Of course, Washington’s selection as the first American president established a symbolic connection between the office and military heroism. This relationship would only grow as prominent military figures like Ulysses S. Grant, Teddy Roosevelt and Dwight D. Eisenhower would make the transition from the battlefield to the oval office. While not every president has served in the military, even those presidents and presidential candidates with only minimal (much less nonexistent) military experience often fall victim to public scrutiny regarding their ability to act as commander-in-chief. While presidents may be heroic figures

without having led an army or even having fought in a war, many of history's most revered presidents have been portrayed as heroes in no small part because of their military leadership.

However, the president is not only expected to be a heroic leader in symbolic terms or as a competent chief executive and commander-in-chief. Presidents are generally expected to act as moral leaders—figures who embody American moral values while acting as moral guides to the American public. Growing up, countless Americans are taught to look to 'great' presidents as moral examples: "Honest" Abe, George Washington (who "never told a lie"), and so on. While there have certainly been more than a few morally flawed presidents (Warren G. Harding's philandering behavior and Richard Nixon's infamous temperament, dishonesty, and abuses of power quickly come to mind), it is difficult to deny that Americans generally cast an expectation of presidential morality upon whomever enters the oval office. In this sense, Americans expect that the president be a "good guy" akin to the heroic protagonists throughout fiction, and therefore a morally worthy "protagonist" in the national narrative.

While presidents are expected to be strong and tough leaders, they are also generally expected to demonstrate respectful behavior—to "stay above the fray" as those below the office may attack and "sling mud" at one another. Indeed, standards of presidential decorum are fundamentally based in expectations of moral behavior. Presidents are generally expected to treat others with respect, to demonstrate compassion and care for the public and those around them, and to be truthful and honest even in the face of controversy. Presidents may also be expected to be loving, which is often illustrated through a president's family life. Apart from James Buchanan, every president has been married. Only James K. Polk did not have any children upon assuming office. Otherwise, it seems that the public expects the president to be a loving family

figure. Surely, it would be naive to expect that all of these standards be universally adhered to—as we know, not all presidents have been universally truthful, honest, or even particularly respectful of others— but these moral qualities have nonetheless provided an outline of the “ideal” moral president, the heroic president, in the public mind.

Likewise, presidents are often expected to serve as sources of empathy and healing in times of tragedy—as “consoler-in-chief” (Elving, 2018). Presidents throughout history have attempted to heal national wounds through their rhetoric, often prompted by instances of national crisis and tragedy. In the wake of the Challenger explosion, President Reagan spoke from the oval office to calm the nation and eulogize the lives lost in the tragedy. President Clinton sought to provide some comfort to a nation rocked by the Oklahoma City bombings. After the September 11 attacks, President Bush encouraged Americans to come together and begin the process of healing while remembering those who had fallen victim terrorist aggression. Presidents have so regularly eulogized victims of tragedy or deceased public figures (including past presidents) that the national eulogy constitutes another of Campbell and Jamieson’s (2008) genres of presidential rhetoric. As such, presidents are asked to serve the heroic function of moral guides and comforters through difficult circumstances. Such a task would certainly be difficult for a president lacking genuine moral character.

Morality and Leadership in the Obama Campaign and Presidency

Even before the beginning of his 2008 presidential campaign, the Obama candidacy was largely framed in terms of heroic leadership and morality. In his analysis of public perceptions toward the Bush presidency and their effect on the 2008 presidential campaign, Wilentz (2006)

framed the 2008 race as a referendum on heroic leadership. Childers (2014) adds, “The 2008 presidential election was widely characterized as being as much about outgoing President George W. Bush as it was about the candidates running for office” (p. 30). The race between Obama and his Republican challenger, longtime Senator John McCain, would certainly revolve around heroic leadership as a central factor.

Obama’s campaign persona was largely typified by his charismatic and compelling calls for a new status quo— for “hope” and “change” toward a more positive, more inclusive and less corrupt direction in the American political process. A widely praised orator, Obama’s campaign persona and rhetoric could be seen as following the mold of the aforementioned ‘great’ rhetorical presidents. His powerful public addresses conveyed gravitas and passion akin to Kennedy or Roosevelt, two progressive presidents whose skill as powerful orators helped to further engrain them in public memory as heroic rhetorical leadership figures.

While his campaign messages of hope and change inherently placed blame for the nation’s struggles at the feet of the incumbent leadership of the Republican Party, Obama’s rhetoric also strongly emphasized a sense of unity among the American public (Dieter, 2014). Across public appearances and even his widely read autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama regularly affirmed his belief that Americans were becoming more alike rather than more divided. When asked by George Stephanopoulos in May 2007 what special qualities he felt he possessed as a candidate, Obama responded by saying, “I think that I have the capacity to get people to recognize themselves in each other”. Indeed, as Dunn (2018) notes, “Obama’s rhetoric attempts to convince his audience to become civically engaged by inviting them to participate in a larger American story in which historic American heroes work toward the common purpose of

forming a more perfect union” (p. 79). After all, the Obama campaign regularly turned to the refrain of “Yes *we* can”, certainly not “Yes *the Democrats* can”.

While few would claim McCain to be as powerful an orator as his opponent, his campaign persona and rhetoric were also fundamentally constructed upon notions of heroic leadership. After all, McCain’s candidacy was rather explicitly built upon his experience as a war hero—something Obama could not claim to be— who had long inspired the nation after persevering through torture as a prisoner of war only to return home and establish himself as a major political figure in Congress. Even in such a hotly contested and inherently partisan political race for the presidency, McCain’s reputation as a “maverick” Senator unafraid to cross the aisle for the sake of fruitful bipartisan cooperation provided his candidacy with a unifying undertone. McCain had even famously considered naming Joe Lieberman, a Democrat, as his running mate in a symbolic showing of bipartisan unity (Hart, 2018).

Just as both candidates emphasized unity in their rhetoric, both presented themselves as morally righteous individuals worthy of following as moral examples. Indeed, neither candidate seemed to have to try very hard to appear moral. Consistent with their messages of national unity, both Obama and McCain seemed more comfortable debating on issues than slinging mud via character attacks or name-calling. In one famous instance on the campaign trail, a woman at one of McCain’s rallies decried her inability to trust Obama because he was “an Arab”. McCain quickly defended his opponent, responding “No ma’am. He’s a decent family man, a citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that’s what this campaign is all about” (Segarra, 2018). Likewise, Obama would frequently note his respect for McCain’s service to the country in both the military and in the Senate (Zeleny, 2008). While McCain’s

supporters may have viewed Obama as immoral and vice versa, both candidates clearly sought to set a moral example by maintaining respectful decorum.

Outside of the inevitable character attacks levied on any political figure by his or her opponents, few political elites or public figures seemed to question that Obama and McCain were fundamentally good people with their hearts set on making the nation better for those who live in it. Like virtually all presidential candidates, Obama and McCain called attention to their loving families, thus framing themselves as loving family men whose support from their wives and children would seem to validate their moral core. Also like virtually all presidential candidates, Obama and McCain regularly engaged with their constituents on the campaign trail. Unlike some presidential candidates, however, both seemed to do so from a place of authentic empathy and care. In other words, both candidates generally appeared to be “good guys”. Even many of those who disagreed with Obama’s ideologies and policy positions, for instance, often fell into a familiar refrain: “I might not vote for him, but I would have a beer with him”. Like traditional heroic protagonists in fiction and “heroic” presidents past, Obama and McCain seemed to generally adhere to (or at the very least present themselves according to) a moral code of decency while continuing down the high road even under the trying circumstances of a hotly contested race.

The 2008 battle for the presidency certainly seemed to be waged between two heroic leadership figures, each generally accepted to be of moral character, each with heroic rhetorical leadership traits (as inspiring rhetorical and symbolic leaders and through relatively unifying rhetoric for such a partisan contest) and each with a strong claim to be the heroic leader that the country needed. However, with the nation still militarily involved in conflicts in Afghanistan and

Iraq, still concerned by the threatening rhetoric and behavior of nations like Iran and North Korea, and still struggling with a litany of domestic policy conflicts from drug policy to education policy— all among the central talking points of the 2008 campaign— the American public was clearly in search of heroic leadership that transcended rhetoric or symbolism. The next president had to be strong and capable of tackling a plethora of global and domestic challenges. Such high stakes in the public's demand for heroic leadership would skyrocket to newfound heights when, with the election quickly approaching, the 2008 economic crisis rocked the nation (and the world) and prompted a sense of national panic, uncertainty and instability.

Indeed, the global economic downturn would dramatically heighten the nation's demand for not only a rhetorical and symbolic leader, but for a strong leader capable of guiding a country in crisis. Obama's relative lack of experience as an executive, having only served as a Senator (a non-executive position) for a few years, had already attracted scrutiny from critics (Holland, 2008). He would also face criticism for lacking military experience, especially in comparison to his Republican opponent. Though McCain had also only served as a Senator, his longevity in the role combined with his experience as a brave war hero would have seemed on the surface to give him the advantage in the race to appear as the stronger and more capable heroic candidate for office. However, several factors seemed to complicate McCain's case. One such factor, his selection of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate, will be discussed below in the section regarding masculinity. Perhaps more relevant to this discussion, however, is McCain's difficulty handling the economic crisis. After declaring that he would suspend his campaign to return to Washington in what appeared to be a grand demonstration of leadership, "it became clear that McCain had no real plan to fix the bailout package, and no real pull with House

Republicans to get it passed. Instead of looking presidential and reassuring, McCain looked desperate and alarming, a stark contrast to Barack Obama” (Horsely, 2008). Meanwhile, Obama’s comparatively confident and capable response to the crisis has been credited with helping to swing the election firmly in his favor (Langley, 2008). Even before entering office, Obama had demonstrated the type of heroic leadership in crisis that the public demanded of the presidency.

Upon assuming office, Obama’s rhetoric would continue to demonstrate these elements of heroic leadership. His presidency has been widely studied through the lens of heroic leadership in terms of his rhetoric in public addresses to the nation (Sevin et al, 2011; Crosby, 2015; Bostdorff, 2017), his handling of national security and the war on terror (McFarlane, 2016), and his perception among both cultural elites and large swaths of the American public as a “great man” (Brown, 2011) and standing among the “great presidents” (Cummings, 2018). Of course, interpretations of the Obama Presidency as an example of heroic leadership are heavily partisan (his popularity is very low among Republicans and very high among Democrats). Such staunchly partisan differences in perception render it impossible to uniformly call Obama’s handling of domestic and foreign policy issues heroic or unheroic. However, it would be difficult to argue that Obama’s presidential rhetoric and actions were at least framed in terms of heroic leadership—a framing that would be deemed justified by his supporters and deemed inauthentic or egotistical by his critics.

Perhaps the strongest examples of Obama’s moral leadership as president came in the face of national tragedy. Obama has frequently been credited as a strong “consoler-in-chief” (Zelizer, 2018)—the type of presidential leader capable of demonstrating the empathy and

fostering healing in the face of overwhelming tragedy. Consider, for example, Obama's public responses to multiple mass shootings that occurred during his presidency. In the wake of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Obama spoke from the podium of the White House Briefing Room with tears in his eyes in an attempt to bring some comfort to the nation and demand stronger gun control legislation. At the funeral service for the victims of the mass shooting Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Obama delivered an impassioned eulogy and even lead the choir in singing a powerful rendition of "Amazing Grace" (Buncombe, 2017). As Buncombe (2017) described, "The President's job on 26 June 2015 was to offer solace not just to the people of Charleston, but to the nation". Under these tragic circumstances and others, Obama demonstrated yet another fundamental element of heroic leadership and morality that helped to solidify him as a strong example of a heroic president.

Heroic Journey and Heroic Circumstance in the Presidency

Just as the public has historically expected strong leadership and sound morality in U.S. presidents, so too does the public appreciate a president with a compelling path to the presidency. In a sense, presidents may be viewed as heroic figures in large part due to the journeys they experience before and during their time in office. In many ways, the Hero's Journey that Campbell (1949) described is strikingly similar to what we might call "the Heroic President's Journey".

Consider the humble beginnings shared by many of American history's most celebrated presidents: Lincoln was born to a poor family in a one-room cabin in rural Kentucky; Grant fought through poverty and alcoholism from an early age; Truman grew up in Independence,

Missouri, dropped out of college due to financial constraints and worked a variety of odd jobs to get by for much of his youth; Eisenhower was born to a large and impoverished family in Texas. Indeed, countless presidents—including less celebrated presidents like Andrew Jackson, Andrew Johnson, Millard Fillmore, etc.—have reached the nation’s highest office despite growing up in poverty or otherwise difficult conditions. It would seem that the American public often gravitates toward presidential candidates with such “rags-to-riches” narratives.

That said, it cannot be denied that many presidents—including several of those most often celebrated as heroes in American lore—came from anything but humble circumstances: Both Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt were born to wealthy parents with the means to provide them with quality educations and valuable family connections, and FDR had the advantage of being able to emphasize his familial connection to the popular preceding President Roosevelt; Kennedy was born into the already wealthy and politically powerful Kennedy Family, which would no doubt contribute to his later success; Reagan was a wealthy and powerful player in Hollywood long before embarking on his path to the presidency; George H.W. Bush was born to a wealthy family, and his legacy would provide his son with a relatively comfortable path to the White House.

It has long been observed that factors like wealth and name recognition may give presidential candidates an upper hand, but not every president listed above may be considered heroic. Humble beginnings may be a powerful but unnecessary element of the “Heroic President’s Journey”. In other words, a president from humble beginnings is not guaranteed to be considered heroic unless the other phases of the journey—the overcoming of hardships and obstacles, and an eventual triumph—are sufficiently heroic in nature.

This second phase, the overcoming of hardships and obstacles, can either progress the heroic narrative of a president from humble beginnings or, in the cases of presidents from more comfortable and prosperous beginnings, render the narrative as heroic. Few presidents exemplify the former better than Lincoln (which often seems to be the case with Lincoln and exemplifying standards of the presidency). Lincoln was certainly a longshot to become president, having only served as a one term Congressman with no executive governing experience and two Senate campaign defeats under his belt. More significantly, he had to fight through a lifetime of tragedy; his younger brother died days after birth, his mother passed away when he was only nine years old, his sister died in childbirth along with her stillborn baby, and his second and third sons, Edward and Willie, both died at very young ages. Even Lincoln's first love, Ann Rutledge, died before he could marry her. The fact that Lincoln was able to persevere through these personal and political difficulties even before entering office (except for Willie's death, which occurred while Lincoln was president) may have added to his appeal as a heroic presidential candidate, much less as a heroic president. When one factors in the sizeable challenges that Lincoln faced in office as he attempted to preserve the Union, win the Civil War, abolish slavery, and finally begin the reconstruction process, his legacy as a heroic president is cemented in public memory.

While Lincoln's journey exemplifies the rise from humble beginnings and through difficult obstacles, the journeys of presidents like FDR and JFK exemplify a different narrative: falling from comfortable beginnings into worlds of struggle and difficulty. While enjoying a day of summer sailing on his yacht—again, signs of a less-than-humble beginning—Roosevelt fell overboard into icy waters. Over the ensuing hours and days, he would slowly lose movement in his legs before eventually being diagnosed with polio. While paralysis would force Roosevelt to

temporarily leave his political life behind, he would take a decidedly determined and committed approach to his rehabilitation process. By the time Roosevelt returned to politics, he was wheelchair-bound and uncertain of how the American public would view his disability. Perhaps due in part to the perseverance and bravery he had demonstrated in his recovery and return, Roosevelt would garner widespread popular support despite his disability. Of course, this personal obstacle would seem to pale in comparison to the obstacles Roosevelt had to overcome as president: lifting the nation out of the Great Depression, overcoming substantial opposition to his New Deal agenda, and of course, leading the nation to victory in its costliest and deadliest war.

While Roosevelt's physical ailment was certainly more severe in nature, Kennedy had to overcome his fair share of physical obstacles on his way to the presidency. As a student at Harvard, Kennedy had ruptured a disk in his spine while playing football. As a Lieutenant in the Navy during World War II years later, Kennedy's back would be re-injured when the PT boat he captained was cut in half by a Japanese destroyer ship. Kennedy would emerge from the incident as a war hero, having successfully rescued most of his men, but his back pain would only continue to worsen in the years following. Soon after John's return from the war, his eldest brother Joseph would be killed in combat, thus coupling JFK's physical pain with the emotional pain of family tragedy (something that would come to be even more closely associated with the Kennedy family, of course). Despite these difficult circumstances, JFK would go on to become a popular Congressman in both the House and Senate before becoming the youngest candidate to ever win the presidency. Of course, the most trying challenges and obstacles of Kennedy's life would arrive once in office, as Kennedy was tasked with navigating the complexities of the Cold War.

Most notably, of course, Kennedy had to lead the nation through the Cuban Missile Crisis and the seemingly immediate threat of nuclear war. Between his personal struggles and presidential obstacles, Kennedy cemented his status as a heroic presidential figure. Of course, JFK's heroic narrative would end in a dramatic martyrdom of sorts when he fell victim to a rifle's bullet in Dallas.

In a sense, Kennedy's tragic assassination seems out of step with the third step of the typical heroic journey: triumph. It goes without saying that Kennedy's death could not have felt further from a heroic victory. He had fallen victim to a fundamentally evil act. However, as scholars and history remind, Kennedy's assassination—a martyrdom in many ways—did not constitute the end of Kennedy's policy initiatives. Upon moving into the presidency, Lyndon B. Johnson would ensure the passage of many of Kennedy's legislative goals through Congress. In this sense, Kennedy's journey remains heroic with a triumph (albeit a bittersweet triumph) at its end. Likewise, while Lincoln's assassination at the hands of John Wilkes Booth provided his journey with a tragic end, the fact that Lincoln was martyred for his leadership of the Union to victory in the Civil War and his opposition to and abolishment of slavery—both actions that history mostly deems heroic, and both significant triumphs in their own respects—allows his journey to remain heroic in nature. Other heroic presidential triumphs— from Roosevelt's guiding the nation out of economic disaster and defeating Hitler on World War II's European front to Reagan's contributions to the collapse of the Soviet Union— have all contributed to heroic presidential expectations. Meanwhile, presidents who suffered “defeat” instead of triumph—LBJ and Nixon's involvement in Vietnam, for instance— are irrevocably scarred in public memory for failing the heroic test of the office.

Perhaps even more fundamental to the president-as-hero concept than the heroic journey is the notion of heroic circumstance. After all, presidential legacies are disproportionately defined by the time, or “moment”, in which they serve. Presidents may be forgotten when they serve in relatively uneventful times. As Skowronek (2011) explains, “only certain presidents (the ones who head a ‘regime change’ or set the nation on an entirely new course) have the opportunity to become heroic leaders” (p. 36). In other words, presidents may only become heroic figures if circumstances offer the opportunity lead a change from one party to another or to navigate the nation through unexplored and/or harsh waters. Washington’s heroic stature is rooted in his status as the nation’s first president—the man tasked with helming this new ship through uncharted territory while setting the first precedents for the office itself. Lincoln would not be a heroic figure had he not served as president during the Civil War. Roosevelt would not be a heroic figure had he not served as president during the Great Depression and World War II. Kennedy would not be a heroic figure had he not served as president during the height of the Cold War. Each of these presidents was defined by the time in which he served, but those definitions certainly would not have been heroic had each “man” not been seemingly tailored to the challenges of his time.

Obama’s Heroic Journey and Heroic Circumstance

Barack Obama’s journey to the White House is unlike that of any president before him—a fitting narrative considering that Obama’s campaign and presidency were unlike any other before or since. Indeed, the heroic character that helped to propel Obama to the presidency

would not have been nearly as powerful without the accompanying combination of a heroic journey and heroic circumstance.

As established, many presidents started their “Heroic Presidential Journey” from humble beginnings. Obama’s humble beginnings are uniquely complex, and as such, set the stage for a uniquely compelling narrative. Born in Hawaii to a white American mother and a black Kenyan father, Obama’s upbringing was already bound to feature a complex mix of cultures unexperienced by any previous president. Matters would only grow more complicated for young Obama when his father left the family when he was only two years old in order to study at Harvard and, eventually, return to Kenya. Obama’s mother would remarry another foreign student studying in the United States, this time from Indonesia, where the three would move for Obama’s age six to age ten years. There, Obama would study at Catholic and Muslim schools while grappling with his complicated ethnic and cultural identity. At age ten, however, Obama would return to Hawaii to live with his grandparents through high school—a time during which he later admit to experimenting with drugs and alcohol. Needless to say, this is not the “typical” presidential origin story. Rather, Obama’s journey began in relatively humble circumstances and, more importantly, very complicated circumstances that make his eventual arrival to the Oval Office especially heroic in nature.

Of course, Obama’s complicated family life and multi-cultural upbringing were far from the only challenging circumstances that would face. Indeed, Obama’s path to the presidency was anything but smooth, but it began with a great deal of tireless work. After working hard to get into and to graduate from Harvard Law School, becoming increasingly active in public service, and beginning to work as a lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School, Obama would

finally enter into politics in 1996 when he won a seat in the Illinois state legislature. Only a few years later in 2000, however, he would make his first major political misstep by posing an ill-advised primary challenge against popular U.S. Representative Bobby Rush. Obama would be dealt a lopsided defeat sending him back to the state senate. However, as Alexander (2010) would explain, “He was defeated and humiliated. But this downfall was followed by a rise... only by losing could Barack Obama become a hero on the larger historical stage” (p. 63). Indeed, Obama’s defeat would help set the stage for his eventual victorious Senate race in 2004.

While Obama certainly faced some bumps in the road in his political career, such struggles pale in comparison to the greatest roadblock he would need to overcome: his race. Obama set out to become the first African American U.S. President—a lofty goal considering the nation’s long history of oppression and the long-held notion that the president should be a white male. One could fairly argue that no prior president had ever needed to overcome such a significant obstacle in order to reach the nation’s highest office. Nonetheless, Obama would make history by defeating John McCain and breaking the racial barrier of the presidency—the heroic overcoming of deep historical and societal obstacles toward a heroic triumph.

Of course, the obstacles don’t stop once in office. Obama’s presidency— an extension of his initial heroic journey as a candidate— would continue to face obstacles. Notably, Obama would be tasked with pulling the nation out of the 2008 recession, navigating complex foreign affairs and military conflicts in the Middle East, and attempting to pass groundbreaking domestic legislation (most notably the Affordable Care Act, dubbed “Obamacare”). It may be too soon to determine whether Obama was able to leave office as a triumphant hero—history will be the

greatest judge of his presidency— but his final approval rating, 59% (Gallup), seems to indicate as much, at least in the eyes of many.

As both a candidate and president, Obama’s personal and professional narratives certainly appear to reflect a similar heroic journey to those seen in fictional traditional heroes. Yet Obama’s journey obviously would not have played out as successfully in nearly another other “moment” in American history. Indeed, Obama arrived in the midst of heroic circumstances—with a nation looking for change after the unpopular Bush presidency, struggling to recover from economic disaster, and finally ready to elect a non-white leader. As such, not only did Obama help define the national zeitgeist from 2008 onward, but the national zeitgeist of the time would help to define Obama in heroic terms.

Masculinity in the Presidency

While it may go without saying, it is nonetheless important to address the clear gendered expectations associated with the presidency. Despite the strong efforts of female candidates from Margaret Chase Smith to Hillary Clinton and others, the oval office has yet to be occupied by a female president. As Anderson (2002) decries, “the U.S. presidency remains a bastion of masculinity” (p. 107). Various social and cultural factors have contributed to and continue to contribute to this reality. For instance, the very characteristics outlined above as elements of heroic presidential identity and behavior are received differently in women as compared to men. As Kittilson and Fridkin (2008) argue, “Male traits... tend to overlap with leadership traits, including strength, intelligence, and toughness” (p. 286). While identifying strength, intelligence and toughness as “male traits” is problematic (there are certainly countless strong, intelligent and

tough women), the underlying sentiment holds true; these leadership traits are commonly associated with masculinity and therefore benefit male candidates. Furthermore, scholars have observed that female candidates who do demonstrate such leadership traits run the risk of being viewed as too intense, too controlling, too outspoken, or even too masculine (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). Meanwhile, female candidates may also have to contend with moral traits (compassion, respectfulness, etc.) being misinterpreted as signs of weakness or fragility (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009)—an interpretation that male candidates would rarely be subject to. Such double-standards toward female presidential candidates are both rooted in and reinforce the historical and cultural expectation of the male presidency.

Even while “the American people claim to welcome ‘qualified’ woman candidates for the U.S. presidency with open arms, the requirements for qualification tip the scales dramatically in favor of male candidates” (Anderson, 2002, p. 126). In their description of how potential presidents are evaluated by the public, Mercieca and Vaughn (2014) provide a particularly telling description: “Potential presidents are measured against an ideal that’s a combination of leading man, God, father, hero, pope, king, with maybe just a touch of the avenging Furies thrown in” (p. 3). Consider the commonality between most figures described here as benchmarks for presidential qualification: “leading man”, “father”, “pope”, “king”. Needless to say at this point, even scholars describing the expectations of the presidency do so in almost exclusively masculine terms. As Heldmen (2007) adds, “scholars, pundits, and laypeople alike almost exclusively use the male pronoun when referring to the office of the presidency” (p. 21). Even the present study is likely—and regrettably—guilty.

Even in the wake of a historic wave of female candidate victories in the 2018 midterm elections (Cooney, 2018), it is still difficult to deny that “politics is typically seen in masculine terms, and this impression appears to increase as candidates seek higher levels of office” (Meeks, 2012, p. 177). So engrained are notions of masculinity in American politics, much less in the presidency and heroic elements associated with it, that the mere image associated with the presidency is gendered. Hungerford (2010) poses the question in her article, “Take a few moments to ponder what you may envision when you hear the word ‘president’... what physical characteristics came to mind when envisioning the president? Tall, thin, attractive, intelligent, male?” (p. 55). Indeed, until a female candidate is able to break through the glass ceiling and into the oval office, the very characteristics used to evaluate presidential qualifications and to define the president as a heroic figure—much like the very characteristics used to define heroism in popular fiction—will likely continue to be cast in a masculine mold. One may even argue that the American public’s demand for presidents to be heroic figures reinforces the gender discrepancy, as heroic figures are so strongly associated with notions of masculinity in other areas of American culture.

Obama’s Masculinity vs. Female Opposition

Barack Obama is a man; this much needs no further explanation. However, Obama’s masculinity is worth assessing. He is not simply male and therefore masculine, but rather several masculine traits have regularly been emphasized either by Obama himself or in the way he has been portrayed. He has often been described as “handsome” (Hensch, 2016), in keeping with the “tall, thin, attractive” vision of the president noted above. His prowess as a basketball player

(Crouch, 2015) and status as a passionate sports fan add an additional element of traditional masculinity to his persona. Perceptions of Obama as handsome and sporty take on more significance when combined with his previously noted leadership and moral traits—the standards for which are largely based in masculine expectations. In other words, Obama’s persona meets the masculine standards not only of the presidency, but of a heroic presidency.

Interestingly, Obama’s masculinity may have been a crucial factor in his ability to secure the Democratic presidential nomination in the first place. After all, his most serious primary challenger was Hillary Clinton—a candidate whose inability to overcome boundaries, unfair treatment, and recurring character judgements stemming from her gender has been widely studied for years (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Shepard, 2009; Meeks, 2012; Meeks, 2013; Albrecht, 2017). Between Obama and Clinton, Democratic primary voters were presented with a choice of barriers to help shatter; to help elect the first non-white president or the first non-male president. Based on the above analysis of the male qualities associated with the presidency, the choice that primary voters made should be quite telling. While Clinton will be discussed in more depth and detail in Chapter Four (unsurprising considering her substantial role in the Trump campaign), it is worth noting the possibility that Obama’s gender allowed him to be seen as a heroic figure in the minds of voters while Clinton’s gender may well have inhibited many voters from seeing her in the same heroic light.

Upon winning the nomination, Obama would select another masculine figure, Senator Joe Biden, as his running mate. In an interesting (if ill-fated) response, McCain selected Alaska Governor Sarah Palin to join his ticket, offering voters the chance to elect the first female Vice President in the process. What may have initially seemed to be a strong tactical move on

McCain's part quickly took a different turn, as Palin would attract widespread skepticism questioning her preparedness to take on the presidency (especially significant given McCain's advanced age at the time) (Horsely, 2008). By the end of the campaign, Palin would be widely credited as one of the central factors in McCain's defeat (Horsely, 2008). Again, American voters seemed unable to view a female candidate in the heroic presidential mold even as she ran alongside about as traditionally masculine and heroic a candidate there is. The masculine pairing of Obama and Biden, however, fit that mold well enough to glide to victory.

Chapter Summary

The present chapter sought to accomplish two goals: 1) to establish a framework of traditional heroism based on the construction and depiction of heroic protagonists in fiction, and 2) to apply that framework to expectations of the presidency. A framework was constructed based around three central lenses of traditional heroism—leadership and morality, heroic journey and heroic circumstance, and masculinity. Traditional heroes are morally good people and strong leaders in either or both the moral or literal sense; they progress through heroic journeys defined by humble beginnings, obstacles and eventual triumphs; they exist and operate in heroic circumstances; and they demonstrate masculine traits. Each of these elements was applied to American cultural perceptions and expectations of the presidency, with special attention paid to Barack Obama, whose traditionally heroic presidential persona may have sparked Donald Trump's decidedly non-traditional campaign and the American public's willingness to accept it. This comprehensive understanding of traditional heroes in fiction and presidential politics will serve as an insightful foundation for the following chapter's unpacking of the antihero genre as it

aids in understanding how traditionally heroic elements may manifest themselves differently (or not at all) in antihero figures.

CHAPTER THREE

ESTABLISHING THE ANTIHERO GENRE

If Barack Obama embodied the traditional hero in political and presidential terms, then Donald Trump—the “anti-Obama” candidate (Smith, 2018)—certainly embodies something else. While some, depending on their political affiliation, may quickly jump to the conclusion that Trump embodies a traditional villain, this classification would fail to explain why so many Americans swarmed to embrace his candidacy and propel him to the White House. Surely, then, Trump must have demonstrated *some* elements of heroism, or the elements of a different type of heroism, in order to garner support in a political context dominated by hero narratives. The present study is interested in the genre surrounding such a different type of hero: the antihero genre. In order to fruitfully assess the 2016 Trump Campaign in the context of this antihero genre, the present chapter seeks to establish and outline the elements of the genre.

While antihero behavior can be observed in reality, it is most prevalently studied and most easily understood in terms of fiction. The traditional fictional narrative featuring a protagonist in the heroic mold seeking to triumph over a villainous antagonist remains pervasive throughout popular fiction (Smith, 2014). In recent decades, however, this black-and-white standard has given way to shades of gray more often than ever before in recent years (Moloney, 2013). Even so, “the mass of fiction in all media doubtlessly remains conventionally heroic – tracking the fortunes of more or less morally admirable protagonists as they struggle against and overcome obstacles of various sorts” (Smith, 2014, p. 31). Thus, antiheroes stand out from the pack in their refusal to be identified as purely good or purely bad. This defiance of traditional

moral associations attracts audience attention, as “the ambivalent portrayal of likeable villains on the screen results in an innovative entertainment which undermines stereotypical categorizations” (Schubert, 2017, p. 30).

The social scientific study of antiheroes in fiction has largely been performed in terms of Affective Disposition Theory (Eden et al, 2015; Janicke & Raney, 2012; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Schafer & Raney, 2012; Smith, 2014), which “examines the way audience members respond to ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ characters within a narrative” (Marett, 2015, p. 268). More specifically, Affective Disposition Theory is used to monitor enjoyment and emotional involvement with characters, and generally asserts that audiences will enjoy and feel more emotionally invested in “good” characters (Marett, 2015). These findings are unsurprising given the schema established in the previous chapter. Popular fiction has long revolved around such morally good figures with strong leadership qualities and compelling journeys. It would stand to reason that this formula works well with audiences—it has been the standard for centuries. However, multiple studies have confirmed that viewers do enjoy antihero narratives as well (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013, 2015; Janicke & Raney, 2015).

While Affective Disposition Theory may easily be applied to most traditional narratives featuring a typical protagonist/antagonist dynamic (Janicke & Raney, 2015), the application is more complicated in the case of antihero narratives. As Janicke and Raney explain, “Affective disposition theory explains well the process of enjoying hero narratives but not the appeal of narratives featuring antiheroes” (p. 1613). In these studies, antihero characters are commonly defined as “morally ambiguous characters” or MACs.

The increasing prominence of studies focusing on MACs and antihero narratives coincides with the increased prominence of antihero characters in recent years, particularly on television. Acclaimed television series like *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Mad Men*, *Dexter*, *The Americans*, *House of Cards*, *The Shield*, *Game of Thrones* and many more have risen to public and critical prominence while revolving—and perhaps in large part *by* revolving—around morally ambiguous and complex protagonists. The popular and critical success of these shows, beginning in earnest with *The Sopranos* in 1999, has contributed to the further rise of morally complex protagonists on television and, in turn, the demand for such characters from audiences (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013).

As in the case of defining heroism, it is impossible to arrive at an all-encompassing definition of anti-heroism nor of the antihero genre. No two antihero characters or narratives are quite the same. However, an inductive rhetorical schema of the antihero genre and its characteristics may be drawn from extant literature on the subject as well as in its contrast from the elements of traditional heroism outlined in Chapter Two. This schema, while not exhaustive, emphasizes several central elements of the antihero genre, grouped here as: 1) Moral Ambiguity, Realism and Audience Identification; 2) “Justifiable” Motivation; 3) The Lesser of Two Evils; 4) The “Antiheroic Journey” (Narrative Suspense and Uncertainty); and 5) The Antihero as White Male. The present chapter seeks to outline and demonstrate each of these elements of the antihero genre, and in doing so, establish a clear lens through which to analyze the rhetoric of the 2016 Trump Presidential campaign in the following chapter.

Moral Ambiguity, Realism and Audience Identification

Across antihero series' like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, the narrative's protagonist behaves immorally and/or works in an immoral environment. *Mad Men*'s Don Draper is a sexist womanizer and philanderer in the cutthroat world of New York advertising. *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White is a chemistry teacher who turns to cooking methamphetamine to provide for his family. *The Sopranos*' Tony Soprano is a mob boss struggling to balance the demands of his criminal family and literal family. *Dexter*'s Dexter Morgan is a serial killer who only murders other serial killers. The protagonist in each case is immersed in illegal and deeply immoral activity, and yet audiences flocked to watch their misdeeds and moral high-wire acts from episode to episode.

Even though these characters are blatantly immoral in their actions, "audience members seem to excuse or even embrace these actions when performed by a beloved character" (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012, p. 117). The emergence of antiheroes as beloved protagonists in popular fiction seems to correspond with a sort of public disillusionment. As Smith (2014) contends, "These are fictions for a morally disabused age, conscious of the reality and demands of ethics, but weary and wary of tabloid moralism, and skeptical of conventional heroism" (p. 33). Indeed, the days of the Hays Code enforcing moral standards are long behind us.

This sense of disillusionment with traditional heroes is understandable. Traditional protagonists embodying moral ideals in their battles against evil and tyranny may be engaging on the page or screen, but there is something inherently disingenuous about them. Nobody has ever met a real-life Superman or Wonder Woman. These are characters who are utterly committed to doing good and combating threats to the moral foundations of society. Reality does offer many

role models who are committed to such ideals, and such individuals are far less relatable to audiences surrounded by moral ambiguity in their daily lives.

Stories with antihero protagonists, therefore, may offer audiences a more relatable narrative. As Vaage (2016) explains, “An important part of the explanation for our sympathy with the antihero is that... he is portrayed as a complex human being with positive sides in addition to his negative sides” (p. 41). Such characters are often referred to as “being more realistic than other characters” (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012, p. 119) in their moral ambiguity. Superman and Atticus Finch may be role models of the American moral ideal, and audiences may aspire to be like them, but few can truly relate to their relative moral purity. In contrast, characters like Tony Soprano and Walter White—criminals whose exploits may seem unrealistic and repugnant—are humanized by their relatable moral complexity and everyday responsibilities and interactions. These are not purely villainous characters meant to attract the ire of audiences. These are fully complex humans grappling between moral rights and wrongs much like any of us.

While audiences may not find Walter White’s decision to abandon his menial life as a high school chemistry teacher in favor of building a drug empire to be particularly realistic, White’s morally imperfect response to his complex circumstances (being diagnosed with cancer and needing to provide for his family in the event of his death) resonates with viewers as human behavior rather than character behavior. After all, “Characters who have no human weaknesses are often perceived as less enjoyable” (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012, p. 119). The sense of humanity attached to antihero narratives not only fosters a sense of realism with the audience, but that sense of realism enhances the audience’s ability to identify with the character. Konjin

and Hoorn (2004) elaborate that “Characters who are perceived to be more realistic have been found to be more involving, meaning that they encourage more positive affective responses, empathy, and identification” (p. 226).

Not only does this paradoxical combination of human sincerity and villainous activity create a sense of relatability in which audiences may engage more fully with the antihero, but it also serves to allow audiences to live vicariously through the character as he or she defies social norms in a way that viewers only wish they could. Audiences appreciate the complex realism of an antihero and sympathize with his underlying morality. However, as Vaage (2016) notes, “the spectator does not merely sympathize with the antihero in spite of his bad sides. The antihero’s bad sides offer enjoyable attractions” (p. 90). She elaborates on this viewer-character relationship with Tony Soprano, for instance, explaining that “Tony has a paradoxical appeal: the spectator is attracted to his regularity, and sees him as morally grounded to some degree... but Tony’s ability to flout moral and other constraints with impunity is enjoyable, too” (p. 96). In other words, audiences may see themselves in Tony the father, family man and flawed human being, and may therefore vicariously participate in Tony’s immoral actions without consequence.

Of course, audiences are not generally excused to vicariously appreciate the immoral actions of pure villains. Antiheroes are just heroic enough in their moral cores to justify audience sympathy and engagement in the first place. Indeed, even antiheroes—much like traditional heroes—generally adhere to something of a moral code. Returning to the study conducted by Eden et al. (2015) wherein respondents were asked to name heroes and villains in popular fiction and rate them according to the domains of morality (Loyalty, Care, Fairness, Purity and Authority) established in Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), an interesting trend regarding

antihero morality was observed. While the researchers found that (naturally) villains violated each moral domain more often than heroes, heroes would occasionally violate the domain of authority (e.g., defying the corrupt mayor's wishes in order to save lives) but virtually never violate the domain of loyalty. Interestingly, though, several respondents named heroes that would be better characterized as antiheroes (Dr. Gregory House and Don Draper were two such examples). The authors found that antiheroes violated several domains more frequently than pure heroes (Harm, Fairness, Authority), but there was no significant difference when it came to loyalty (Eden et al, 2015). In other words, loyalty remains central to the moral codes of traditional heroes and antiheroes alike.

Indeed, loyalty serves as a central moral code to several antihero characters. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of Tony Soprano. As Vaage (2016) explains, “the moral code that *The Sopranos* and other antihero series both exploit and explore... is loyalty within one's own group. The antihero is not amoral; he is loyal toward his own and can thus be seen following a moral code” (p. 39). After all, loyalty is perhaps the greatest moral expectation placed upon those in organized crime. Gangsters on *The Sopranos* generally refuse to inflict violence upon those within their family, only doing so when one of their own is exposed as an informant (a “rat”)— “the mobster's ultimate deadly sin” (Vaage, 2016, p. 49). Even Walter White, who often demeans or betrays Jesse Pinkman — his “partner-in-crime”— , spends much of the series' first several seasons trying to protect Jesse's life. It would be inaccurate, then, to say that antiheroes are fully immoral. They adhere to the same sense of loyalty that traditional heroes do even as they diverge from other elements of heroic morality in a realistically complex way.

Justifiable Motivation

Of course, an antihero isn't guaranteed to be appreciated by an audience purely on the basis of being realistically complex. The motivations behind an antihero's actions must also be taken into consideration. An antihero with purely malicious and harmful motivations ceases to be an antihero at all, instead becoming a more traditional villain. In order for an antihero to serve as a likable protagonist within a narrative, the motivation behind immoral behavior "must be justified and defensible" (Schafer & Raney, 2012, p. 1029).

In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White's criminal empire is constructed upon a morally justifiable motivation: the desire to support his family. As Smith (2014) observes, "White's self-understanding is heavily fortified by self-justification: his mantra – everything I do, I do for my family – only gives way decisively in the final season" (p. 32). Indeed, antiheroes often base their actions in this motivation; "they typically do what they do for their families" (Lotz, 2014, p. 210). As Vaage (2016) elaborates:

As Tony Soprano puts it in one of his sessions with Dr. Melfi: 'I'm a good guy, basically. I love my family.' As Walter White works his way up in the Albuquerque drug underworld, he reassures his wife Skyler that 'I've done a terrible thing. But I've done it for a good reason. I did it for us.' And the biker Jackson Teller in *Sons of Anarchy* uses the very same excuse: 'I love this club, but I love my family more.' (p. 40)

Audiences naturally understand this motivation—we all would claim to do anything for our families. This serves to allow the audience to excuse the antihero's immoral behavior and to justify the behavior in the mind of the antihero his/herself. The antihero is able to justify his or her actions as being in the service of a moral goal whether that goal relates to protecting one's family or otherwise. *Dexter's* Dexter Morgan, for instance, is less motivated by the need to

protect his family than he is by his desire to rid the world of other killers—another “justifiable” motivation. In Dexter’s case, his immoral killer instincts are channeled into the moral goal of making the world a safer place (however counterintuitive that may be). Thus, by framing immoral action as the means toward a morally justifiable end, the protagonist may maintain something of a heroic nature while acting in a manner antithetical to heroism. The antihero’s justifiable motivation allows the audience to excuse the protagonist’s immoral behavior just enough to continue rooting for him or her while, as noted above, excusing themselves to “enjoy immoral wish-fulfilment” (Vaage, 2016, p. 95) in their identification with the character.

The “Lesser of Two Evils”

Even as antihero characters perform villainous actions and inflict pain upon the more sympathetic characters surrounding them, audiences may nonetheless find themselves rooting the protagonist on. In large part, this is only possible when the antihero’s immoral actions compare favorably with the immoral actions of another “greater” evil (Carroll, 1996, 2004, 2010; Smith 1995, 1999, 2011). Vaage (2016) observes that “Portraying someone as morally worse than the antihero is indeed common in the antihero series” (p. 5). Audiences naturally seek to identify heroes and villains within a given narrative, and the use of “contrast characters” (Vaage, 2016) prompts the viewer to situate the antihero closer to the heroic side of the moral continuum. As such, “viewers identify intended character roles within narratives—specifically viewers come to understand that, despite their morally questionable actions, antiheroes serve as the protagonist seeking to overcome some enemy—and our liking and expectations develop accordingly” (Schafer & Raney, 2012, p. 1031).

For instance, *The Sopranos* contrasts Tony Soprano's behavior with the behavior of other, more villainous mobsters around him. As Carroll (2004) notes, "[o]f most of the relevant characters in this fictional universe, they are worse or no better than Tony Soprano... this provides us with our ground for our willingness to ally ourselves with Tony" (p. 132). Indeed, unhinged and dangerous antagonists like Richie Aprile, Ralph Cifaretto and Phil Leotardo—characters who murder and steal with little regard for any moral standard—are portrayed in contrast to Tony's criminal activity, which, at the end of the day, is done for the "good" of his family. Even Tony's mother, Livia Soprano, serves as a contrast character in the series' first season. As Vaage (2016) explains, "Livia [Soprano] acts as the first season's antagonist in the dramatic season finale. Livia conspires with Tony's uncle Junior to have her own son killed. This is indeed an immoral act—but in many ways not objectively worse than the many other murders in the series. Nevertheless, for the spectator... Livia's betrayal of her own son stands out as nothing short of a monstrous act" (p. 39). While Tony certainly behaves as a villain in countless ways, his villainy is lessened when compared to these "greater evils" whose criminal activity is more extreme and who fail to adhere to the antihero's moral code (in Livia's case, not being loyal to her own family).

The same can be said for Walter White, whose criminal dealings force him to confront drug cartel members and ruthless criminal kingpins like Tuco Salamanca and Gustavo Fring. Tuco, for instance, "is portrayed as thoroughly cold-blooded and evil, and serves as a contrast character to make Walter appear morally preferable" (Vaage, 2016, p. 56). While Tuco is objectively unhinged and clearly dangerous in comparison to the still mild-mannered Walter, Fring is a deceptively monstrous drug kingpin whose brutality and power hides behind the façade

of a mild-mannered restaurant manager. In comparison to Fring, White comes off as an amateur in the drug business and therefore as morally preferable in the same sense that a low-level criminal would appear morally preferable to a criminal mastermind like Al Capone.

Antiheroic characters regularly commit immoral acts—murder, drug abuse, theft, and on and on — and yet there appear to be lines that even antiheroes will not cross but that pure villains often will. For instance, Vaage (2016) observes that certain immoral actions, notably rape, remain unforgivable to audiences. Neither Tony Soprano, Walter White, Dexter Morgan nor virtually any other true antiheroic character is ever portrayed as committing rape, as this would “cross the line” into pure villainy. Contrast characters often cross such lines, thus establishing a moral hierarchy in which the true villain is made clear and the antihero is rendered heroic in comparison.

Additionally, antiheroic protagonists are portrayed as morally preferable to “greater evils” by the very nature of our familiarity with them as audiences. Audiences that follow Tony Soprano or Walter White from episode to episode grow familiar with their actions and motivations (Vaage, 2016). After all, the antihero series is told—and experienced— from the antihero’s point of view. In the process, audiences are familiarized with complex character backgrounds that may in some way explain or excuse the antihero’s behavior. Tony Soprano’s troubled upbringing and ensuing anxiety attacks serve as one such “excuse”. Walter White’s sense of underappreciation from both his students and his family may “excuse” his need to be feared and respected. Audiences are never allowed to grow so familiar with contrast characters to understand their backgrounds or dismiss their actions, and so their immorality is far less forgivable. Dexter Morgan, while a serial killer in his own right, “appears morally preferable to

the other serial killers... by making us know him better than the other characters and by pleas for excuses; e.g., Dexter was traumatized as a child” (Vaage, 2016, p. 24). When contrasted with other immoral characters, antiheroes are depicted as being familiar, understandable, favorable, and therefore worthy of audience support.

The “Antiheroic Journey”: Narrative Suspense and Uncertainty

While perhaps not as foundational to the popularity of antihero narratives as realistic moral complexity or moral justification, the suspense and uncertainty that accompany such narratives also serve to enhance audience investment. As established in the previous chapter, heroic narratives almost universally adhere to close variations of the familiar formula established by Campbell (1949). Antihero narratives, however, are not generally bound to such a formulaic narrative structure. Likewise, while traditionally heroic characters can always be expected to behave in accordance with their moral beliefs, antiheroes do not adhere to the same moral expectations. The complex nature of their morality allows for a wider range of narrative possibilities. Due to the unpredictability associated with antiheroes, “they may produce more uncertainty and suspense than characters who are consistent in their actions” (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012, p. 121). Therefore, audiences may feel more attached to the drama unfolding in antihero narratives than they would feel toward a more generic “good versus evil” narrative.

Nonetheless, one may observe several recurring elements of what we might call the “Antiheroic Journey”. Much like traditional heroes, antiheroes regularly must overcome obstacles in pursuit of their “justified” goals. Walter White does not earn enough money to support his family and pay for his cancer treatment without first overcoming countless “greater

evils” and other obstacles in his way. Just as the hero earns our appreciation by overcoming obstacles, antiheroes may win our sympathy by demonstrating similar determination and perseverance. In both cases, the challenges posed by these obstacles serve to create suspense as the audience “roots on” the protagonist. After all, suspense cannot exist without an audience that identifies with the protagonist, even if that protagonist uses immoral means to overcome obstacles.

Vaage (2016) references a sequence in *Breaking Bad* in which Walter must race against the clock to pick up his stash of methamphetamine and meet Gus Fring at a distant meeting place—all as his wife, Skyler, goes into labor with their second child. While we recognize that White is ignoring his duties as a father, we cannot help but pull for him to meet the deadline. As Vaage explains, “the spectator is meant to feel suspense for a character in a situation where the character is doing something that is far from morally good and desirable: Walter should not be producing drugs in the first place, and there is no morally good, rational reason for me to want him to make it to the agreed upon meeting place with Gus in time” (Vaage, p. 64). In this sequence, Walter demonstrates determination and perseverance in overcoming this obstacle, thus earning appreciation from the audience despite the immoral nature of the act itself. The suspenseful presentation, meanwhile, reinforces this appreciation and sympathy, as “empathizing with a character in suspenseful sequences can make the spectator root for a character or feel sorry for him, at least locally in the narrative, and can therefore make the spectator sympathize with and feel suspense for even immoral characters” (Vaage, 2016, p. 66).

While the Hero’s Journey (Campbell, 1949) ends with the hero’s triumph over obstacles, the Antihero’s Journey does not necessarily end in the antihero’s triumphant victory—at least not

entirely. Indeed, both Tony Soprano and Walter White's narratives end somewhere between triumph and defeat. In the series finale of *The Sopranos*, Tony is finally able to locate and “whack” Phil Leotardo, the boss of a rival crime family who had ordered Tony's assassination. However, the series' now famous closing moments—in which a shot of Tony's face abruptly cuts to black—imply that Tony may well have been killed in a delayed execution of Leotardo's command. Likewise, the series finale of *Breaking Bad* features Walter exacting revenge upon the Neo-Nazi gang that had killed his brother-in-law and kidnapped Jesse. However, Walter's drug empire had already collapsed earlier in the season, and a gunshot wound during the final conflict results in his death in the closing shot of the series. In these two examples, it is clear that the “Antihero's Journey” does not always end in pure triumph. Thus, the antihero genre may be characterized by its suspenseful and uncertain narrative nature.

The Antihero as White Male

As you have likely noticed by this point, protagonists like Walter White, Tony Soprano and Dexter Morgan have something in common besides their status as popular antiheroes: they are all white male characters. In fact, the antihero protagonists of other television series like *Mad Men*, *House of Cards* and *The Shield*—Don Draper, Frank Underwood and Vic Mackey respectively—share this distinction. Just as the traditional hero tends to embody masculine traits, the antihero is most often portrayed in masculine terms. However, antihero characters are also generally portrayed as white, adding an interesting racial element to the discussion. Johnson (2017) observes that this may be more by design than a coincidence. In describing Walter White's villainous tendencies on *Breaking Bad*, Johnson writes:

Critics render these [immoral] details as signs of Walt's humanity rather than his toxicity. Can one imagine critics heaping praise on a black, drug-dealing, wife-raping protagonist? These appraisals treat white masculinity as sympathetically contingent rather than strategically abject, while at the same time suggesting liberals and conservatives share sympathy for Walt[er]. (p. 24)

Johnson (2017) argues that White's criminal behavior would not be as excusable to critics (and audiences, one can assume) if the character were portrayed as a black man. He asserts that the character's white masculinity allows audiences to sympathize with his actions, and that the character's racial and gender identity allows audiences across the political spectrum to engage with the character. Indeed, one may conclude that an antihero is most palatable to the public when presented as a white male.

Specifically on the subject of gender, Vaage (2016) notes that only is the antihero series' "main character, the antihero... typically male" (p. 150) with only a few notable exceptions (*Nurse Jackie*, *Weeds*, *Homeland* and *Orange is the New Black* being among the handful of shows with a female antihero protagonist), but that the antihero protagonist's wife often "seems to fulfill the function of villain for some – or even many – spectators" (p. 150). Indeed, characters like Carmella Soprano, Skyler White, Betty Draper and Corrine Mackey are regularly portrayed as something of a moral antagonist. In other words, the antihero's wife within their respective narratives often seems to serve the function of "holding her husband back from what the audience may perceive as enjoyable transgressions" (Vaage, 2016, p. 151). Indeed, these characters often serve as reminders to their antihero husbands of their responsibilities at home, and "the home is not where the hear is in the antihero series" (Vaage, 2016, p. 156). While antiheroes may be loyal to their families, they are nonetheless drawn away from their home lives in their endeavors in such a way that the home becomes a restrictive narrative tool.

Widely associating female characters in antihero series with the home is a troublingly sexist, if unsurprising, trend. However, this is only one way in which the antihero genre generally emphasizes masculinity at the expense of femininity. Including and beyond the antihero's wife, female characters in antihero shows are "typically conventional, despite the oft-celebrated innovative nature of these series; women in these stories are either expected to be morally good and play the traditional roles of mother or daughter, or play 'fallen' and sexually alluring women as strippers, prostitutes or lovers" (Vaage, 2016, p. 151). Thus, even when the antihero genre does not render a female character as an antagonistic and restrictive figure, the female character is still assigned fill a shallow and stereotypical narrative function while the male protagonist's masculine complexity is celebrated.

Chapter Summary

The present chapter sought to establish and outline a framework for understanding the elements of the antihero genre. Extant literature on the subject focuses on the fictional antihero (primarily in antihero television series') and, when taken together, offer five central elements of the antihero genre: 1) Moral Ambiguity, Realism and Audience Identification; 2) "Justifiable" Motivation; 3) The Lesser of Two Evils; 4) The "Antiheroic Journey" (Narrative Suspense and Uncertainty); and 5) The Antihero as White Male. Antiheroes are fundamentally immoral (or comparatively immoral) and commit immoral actions, yet this moral complexity allows the antihero and his narrative to feel more realistic and identifiable to audiences. Despite moral faults, antiheroes have "justifiable" motivations (like the protection of family or the betterment of society) that forgive their actions. Immoral actions and traits in antihero characters are further

forgiven in contrast to a “greater evil” who is established as the antagonist by behaving as comparatively more immoral than the antihero protagonist. These antihero narratives are largely based in suspense and narrative uncertainty given the unpredictable nature of protagonists unbound from moral expectations and heroic narrative tropes. Finally, antiheroes are overwhelmingly white and male.

In many ways, the elements of traditional heroes and antiheroes may overlap: both are generally masculine, both have some form of moral code (although antiheroes are mostly concerned with matters of loyalty and family), both are motivated by “good” causes, and both may win audience appreciation by overcoming obstacles on their respective “journeys”. However, the differences between heroes and antiheroes far outweigh their similarities: antiheroes are morally complex and perform immoral actions while heroes are relatively morally pure and take moral action; antiheroes are more realistic and relatable to audiences than traditional heroes; antiheroes are willing to act immorally in seeking a moral outcome while heroes will not stoop to such immoral means; heroes are generally strong leadership figures while extant literature does not seem to consider the antihero in the context of leadership; the heroic journey ends in the hero’s triumph while the antiheroic journey does not necessarily end in triumph, but rather often ends in defeat; and hero narratives generally fall into predictable formulas while antihero narratives foster greater suspense and uncertainty.

With this understanding of the antihero genre in hand, we are now fully equipped to apply this lens in the next chapter’s rhetorical analysis of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYZING TRUMP'S ANTIHERO RHETORIC

On November 8, 2016, millions of Americans tuned in for the “season finale” of one of the nation’s most compelling, perplexing and unpredictable political dramas. By the time Election Day finally rolled around, Americans had become all too familiar with its two central characters. Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton had long been considered the “heir apparent” to the Oval Office occupied by Barack Obama since 2008, but a divisive primary contest—in which Clinton had to fend off the fiercely popular, anti-establishment Senator Bernie Sanders—had left the already divisive Secretary of State struggling to maintain a firm grip on her base. Of course, Sanders would only serve as Clinton’s first fiercely popular, anti-establishment opponent. As unexpected as Sanders’ challenge would have seemed to those expecting an easy Clinton victory in 2016, the identity of her ultimate foe could not have been further from expected.

While Donald Trump had long been a household name as perhaps the nation’s most well-known real estate tycoon and host of popular reality television show *The Apprentice*, his political experience leading up to 2015 essentially amounted to an abandoned 2012 presidential campaign based on his controversial questioning of Obama’s U.S. citizenship (Marr, 2011). In fact, Trump was widely considered to be a Democrat for years before entering the political arena (Moody, 2015). Nonetheless, the 2016 campaign— one that “broke almost all the rules of politics” (Sabato et al., 2017, p. vii)— would catapult Trump from political punchline to the presidency. On the way, the 2016 campaign cycle would establish “Trump” as perhaps the central term in the

national zeitgeist for years to come. In “the Donald”, Americans witnessed the rise of a never-before-seen type of political candidacy, and with it, a near complete overhaul of the political rulebook. Needless to say, it made for some compelling television—for better or for worse.

Though compelling, few could have expected Trump’s campaign to remain the focal point of the national narrative all the way until Election Day (and beyond). After all, his campaign faced what appeared to be inevitable defeat from the outset. Only by overcoming nearly every established political campaign norm could Trump have emerged victorious, and that he certainly did. As Sabato et al. (2017) explains:

“Among the ‘rules’ that Trump broke: winning a presidential election despite being considerably outspent in the general election; losing the national popular vote by over two percentage points but still winning the Electoral College, something that has happened rarely in American history; emitting a constant stream of controversial statements that would have sunk most previous candidacies; and capturing a presidential nomination despite having very little support from his own party’s leadership” (vii)

Indeed, Trump’s victory over Clinton served as the shocking culmination to a campaign narrative that unrelentingly occupied the American consciousness in its refusal to conform to established standards. Considering that the American public traditionally looks to heroic figures to lead the nation (Chapter Two), Trump’s nonconformity is especially notable. While he must be considered heroic in some sense to the base that elected him (just as any politician is viewed in heroic terms by his or her supporters), it does not take long to recognize how Trump diverges from traditionally heroic standards. As explored further below, Trump’s rhetoric was intentionally abrasive and divisive. His moral and ethical compasses have been questioned since long before entering the political arena. He is no Atticus Finch, Luke Skywalker nor Superman. Where Barack Obama seemed to fit comfortably into the heroic presidential mold cast by the

likes of Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Kennedy, Trump did not seem interested in fitting any mold at all.

One mold, however, would appear to fit Trump's campaign at first consideration: the antihero genre. If one is to both acknowledge that Trump diverges from the traditional heroic mold of presidential political identity and that he nonetheless must have been viewed in some sort of heroic manner by those who passionately supported him, then this antihero classification would seem to be a sound explanation. This conclusion serves as the genesis for the present study. As noted in Chapter One, perhaps Trump's campaign may have built upon the foundation laid by the rise and popularity of the antihero genre as exemplified by "Golden Era" television shows like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. Smith (2014) described such shows as "fictions for a morally disabused age, conscious of the reality and demands of ethics, but weary and wary of tabloid moralism, and skeptical of conventional heroism" (p. 33). Perhaps, then, Trump similarly offered voters a fitting candidate for such a time.

Thus, the present chapter offers a rhetorical criticism of the Trump 2016 presidential campaign employing a framework established in the previous two chapters. In most cases, the elements of the antihero genre build upon the elements of traditional heroism with added consideration paid to unique antihero characteristics (Heroic Morality/Moral Ambiguity, Realism and Audience Identification & "Justifiable" Motivation; The Hero's Journey/The "Antiheroic" Journey; Masculinity/White Masculinity). However, literature on the subject of anti-heroism did not offer much insight regarding leadership—an important element of political/presidential identity. With each of these elements in mind, the framework employed below is divided into the following groupings: 1) Morality, Realism and Audience Identification; 2) Leadership; 3)

“Justifiable” Motivation; 4) The Lesser of Two Evils; 5) The “Antiheroic” Journey (Narrative Suspense and Uncertainty); and 6) White Masculinity.

Rather than attempting to evaluate the Trump campaign in its entirety—an admittedly impossible task—this rhetorical criticism focuses primarily on four central artifacts: Trump’s Campaign Kick-Off Speech (cited from “Here’s Donald Trump’s presidential announcement speech”, 2015), the first Republican Primary Debate (cited from “2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016 [YouTube video]”; “Transcript: Read the full text of the primetime Republican debate”, 2015), the first General Presidential Debate (cited from Blake, 2016; NBC News, 2016 [YouTube video]”, and Trump’s Inaugural Address (cited from “President Trump’s inaugural address, annotated”, 2017). However, additional “peripheral” artifacts (*The Apprentice*, the *Access Hollywood* controversy, etc.) are also considered where relevant and valuable to the analysis.

A “Real” Candidate: Morality, Realism and Audience Identification

While he is neither a mob boss nor a drug kingpin (so far as we know), Trump’s appeal as a candidate has a great deal in common with Tony Soprano’s and Walter White’s appeal as television protagonists. As established, antihero narratives appeal to audiences in large part due to their relatability and the perception that they are more realistic than straightforward hero narratives. Just as audiences are attracted to morally complex characters, Trump voters seemed to be drawn in by his unconventional persona. In fairness, Trump supporters likely did not base their votes on the sole criterion of which candidate was more morally complex. That said, his supporters frequently expressed admiration toward the fact that Trump had broken the mold for

serious political candidates (Altman, 2017). Where most politicians go to great lengths to present themselves as morally good, Trump seemed content not to.

Indeed, anyone familiar with Donald Trump's persona would likely arrive quickly at the conclusion that he lacks the characteristics of traditional heroism established in Chapter Two. Even as the "admired" host of *The Apprentice*, Trump's "character" was largely defined by his verbal barbs and taunts toward contestant (Kranish and Fisher, 2016; Nussbaum, 2017). Rather than framing his candidacy as one of a "white knight" upholding virtues of kindness, respect, honor and decorum, Trump embraced his morally flawed reputation on the campaign trail. This much was clear after his campaign kickoff speech, wherein Trump displayed the same sort of derogatory rhetoric that defined his no-holds-barred persona on *The Apprentice*.

For instance, Trump regularly refers to the nation's leaders (indirectly referring to Obama and his administration) as "stupid": "How stupid are our leaders? How stupid are these politicians... How stupid are they?" ("Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech", 2015, para. 50); "Free trade can be wonderful if you have smart people, but we have people that are stupid. We have people that aren't smart." ("Here's Donald Trump's...", 2015, para. 57); "We have all the cards, but we don't know how to use them. We don't even know that we have the cards, because our leaders don't understand the game" ("Here's Donald Trump's presidential announcement speech", 2015, para. 74). From the very beginning of his campaign, Trump signals his unwillingness to play by the rules of moral decorum. Traditionally heroic presidents may well have believed their opponents to be "stupid", but their moral codes kept them from saying so publicly (or at least not in such clear terms). Trump had no such qualms, thus contributing to an unusually negative campaign. As Kayam (2018) explains:

“The 2016 presidential campaign has often been described as outrageous, ridiculous, coarse, uncivilized and even immoral. This was mainly due to the nature of negative campaigning, mostly from Trump’s side. He often used brutal slanders against other candidates. By referring to politicians in general and other candidates in particular using negative terms, Trump emphasized that he was not a politician – that he stood in opposition to the standard old politicians.” (p. 192)

By standing in opposition to the “standard old politicians”, Trump constructed a campaign persona that, while abrasive and upsetting to many, conveyed an authenticity rarely seen in American politics. Just as television antiheroes offer a refreshingly authentic window into the darker sides of humanity, Trump offered what his supporters found to be a refreshing political candidate—one whose flaws were worn on his sleeves rather than hidden under a manufactured mask of moral righteousness. In this sense, Trump presented himself as an unlikely “everyman” candidate—an odd persona for a multi-millionaire public figure like Trump to adopt. Even on *The Apprentice*, Trump’s “image-molders... saw *Apprentice* as a chance to present him as a more authentic, nuanced person than the glitz-obsessed, ego-first character Americans knew from tabloid headlines and TV cameos” (Kranish & Fisher, 2018). While he may be rich and famous, Trump at least appeared more genuine in his rhetoric, and therefore, more like the “average American” he purported to speak for when the political establishment had left them behind.

Adding to his “unmanufactured” appeal, Trump’s campaign rhetoric diverges from established norms of political oratory. Where past candidates have long relied on meticulously worded addresses designed to avoid controversy, Trump employs a “stream of consciousness” speaking style (Kayum, 2018). His campaign addresses rarely feel scripted or even rehearsed. Rather, Trump appears to be speaking off the top of his head—certainly a more authentic approach to communicating his message, albeit an approach more prone to controversy. Of the

central texts considered in this analysis, only Trump's Inaugural Address appears pre-prepared. After all, it would be difficult even for Trump to improvise a speech as significant and as rooted in tradition as the Presidential Inaugural. One result of Trump's "rambling" oratorical style, intentional or not, is a simplicity of his language. In his 2017 study, Kayum observed that Trump's language represented a fourth-to-fifth grade level compared to the average eighth-to-ninth grade level language employed by other candidates. Especially in comparison to his predecessor, Barack Obama, who has often been called one of the great orators in American history (Theye and Melling, 2018), Trump's rhetorical style conveys a rare and (to many) appealing sense of authenticity and simplicity even before one considers what he actually says.

Of course, it is not immoral to communicate in a simple or unstructured manner. However, Trump's authenticity is bolstered further by his refusal to conform to moral political standards, the most prominent of which are discussed below.

Proudly Politically Incorrect

Trump's willingness to launch his candidacy with a tirade aimed at "stupid" leaders speaks to perhaps the central most widely studied (Theye and Melling, 2018) (non-policy) theme of his campaign: a war against political correctness. Between his verbal barbs aimed at the Obama administration, Trump makes a series of politically incorrect choices in his kickoff speech. He openly boasts—"I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created" ("Here's Donald Trump's Campaign Announcement Speech", 2015, para. 47) —, he mocks other candidates—"I can tell, some of the candidates, they went in. They didn't know the air conditioner didn't work. They sweated like dogs" ("Here's Donald Trump's Campaign Announcement Speech", 2015, para. 3), and, perhaps most notably, he labels Mexican

immigrants as “rapists” and criminals (“Here’s Donald Trump’s Campaign Announcement Speech”, 2015, para. 8). Such rhetoric does not conform with traditional standards of moral behavior. This is how Tony Soprano would talk about his enemies, not how Superman would talk about his.

Just as Tony Soprano’s moral ambiguity seems more authentic to audiences than does Superman’s moral righteousness, Trump’s politically incorrect rhetoric struck a nerve with Americans eager for a more authentic politician—an “anti-politician”. Indeed, Trump would receive applause in the first Republican Primary Debate when he declared, “I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct... I don’t frankly have time for total political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn’t have time either” (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; “Transcript: Read the full text of the primetime Republican Debates”, 2016, para. 94-95). Trump’s willingness to break from standards of presidential decorum and display a palpable and unfiltered rage about the state of the nation would not go unnoticed by his primary opponents. In fact, Ohio Governor John Kasich would make a point of noting:

“I was just saying to Chris Christie, they say we’re outspoken, we need to take lessons from Donald Trump if we’re really going to learn it. Here is the thing about Donald Trump. Donald Trump is hitting a nerve in this country... People are frustrated. They’re fed up. They don’t think the government is working for them. And for people who want to just tune him out, they’re making a mistake” (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; “Transcript: Read the full text of the primetime Republican Debates”, 2016, para. 169)

Kasich’s acknowledgement of Trump’s political effectiveness, a rare nod from a Republican opponent, seemed to be an intelligent decision. After all, Trump was leading in the polls ahead of the debate (Bump, 2015) and few could argue that Trump’s outspoken anger was working. In a sense, Trump’s rage refreshed and captivated his base in the same way that

Network's Howard Beale inspired his disillusioned audience ("I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!"). By presenting himself as an unfiltered and outspoken voice for public frustration, Trump separated himself from the more rhetorically measured candidates standing beside him. In comparison to Trump, candidates like Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio—each an established politician— not only appeared inauthentic, but also out-of-touch.

Bush, in particular, appeared to be committed to maintaining a traditionally heroic and presidential demeanor, which in turn may have made him an easier target for Trump's verbal barbs. In response to Bush's criticism regarding his tone, Trump responded, "We don't have time for tone. We have to go out and get the job done". Quickly, then, Trump framed Bush as an inauthentic politician more concerned with decorum than action. Even Senator Rand Paul, who made perhaps the most frequent attempts at cutting Trump down, was met with derision ("I don't think you heard me. You're having a hard time tonight"). In comparison to Bush and Paul's criticisms, Trump's rhetoric is unfiltered, politically incorrect, and seemingly completely unconcerned with any morally righteous appearance.

Perhaps the most interesting instance of Trump's refusal to play by the rules of political decorum in the Republican Primary Debate arrived toward its beginning. Still unconvinced that Trump could win the party's nomination, many Republicans had grown increasingly concerned that Trump would wage a third-party campaign (Cheney, 2015). Considering that such a campaign would "steal" votes from the Republican nominee and essentially hand the election to the Democratic nominee, many called upon Trump to pledge his support to the Republican nominee and reject a third-party campaign. Traditionally, presidential candidates have willingly pledged to support their party's eventual nominee in a gesture of party loyalty over personal

pride. When asked by moderator Brett Baier if any among them would not pledge their support to the eventual Republican nominee and pledge not to run an independent campaign, every candidate's hand remained by their side—except for Trump's. The following exchange then ensued:

BAIER: “Mr. Trump to be clear, you're standing on a Republican primary debate stage.”

TRUMP: “I fully understand.”

BAIER: “The place where the RNC will give the nominee the nod.”

TRUMP: “I fully understand.”

BAIER: “And that experts say an independent run would almost certainly hand the race over to Democrats and likely another Clinton. You can't say tonight that you can make that pledge?”

TRUMP: “I cannot say. I have to respect the person that, if it's not me, the person that wins, if I do win, and I'm leading by quite a bit, that's what I want to do. I can totally make that pledge. If I'm the nominee, I will pledge I will not run as an independent.” (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; “Transcript: Read the full text...”, 2015, para. 39-45)

Trump's response, while somewhat comical (“If I'm the nominee, I will pledge I will not run as an independent”), sent a powerful message of nonconformity. From a visual standpoint, perhaps no image better speaks to Trump's politically incorrect nonconformity than that of nine Republican candidates standing silently with their hands by their sides as Trump, situated in the center of the stage, defiantly raised his hand. While Trump's refusal to pledge his support was greeted with boos from the audience, he nonetheless emerged with his powerful outsider identity bolstered in contrast to a primary field committed to “playing by the rules”.

On January 23, 2016, shortly before securing the Republican nomination, Trump provided perhaps his most politically incorrect soundbite at a campaign rally in Sioux Center, Iowa. Boasting about his loyal support base, Trump declared, “I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters” (Diamond, 2016). While this campaign rally is not among the central texts considered in this analysis, it would be negligent to overlook

such a shocking comment made by a presidential candidate; one that almost begs the audience to conjure Trump playing the part of Tony Soprano or Walter White. Perhaps no other presidential candidate in history could have boasted his ability to murder and retain support as Trump did—and in fairness, Trump’s argument rang true. While the comment garnered criticism from both sides of the political spectrum, Trump’s support would not diminish. If anything, such immoral rhetoric seemed only to further fuel Trump’s appeal.

Tax Returns and Bold Claims: Defying Expectations of Honesty

While Trump himself has never openly admitted to stretching the truth (or downright ignoring it), his campaign seemingly set a new (low) standard in terms of political honesty. Politics and honesty, of course, do not always go together. Americans have recognized the contentious relationship between the presidency and the truth since the Watergate scandal shattered expectations of presidential honesty. However, the lore surrounding traditionally heroic presidents from Washington (who “couldn’t tell a lie”) to Lincoln (“Honest Abe”) has continuously emphasized honesty as a key presidential trait nonetheless. In this sense, Americans seemed to expect presidential candidates to at least appear truthful and honest. The Trump campaign’s casual relationship with the truth only further emphasized that this was not a traditionally moral candidate.

After all, Trump’s campaign would come to embody the notion of “post-truth politics” (Montgomery, 2017). Factual inaccuracies and hyperbole can be observed throughout virtually any Trump campaign text. Not only does Trump frequently deny making statements that he has been found to have made on record (Qiu, 2016), but he notoriously makes false factual claims

regarding a wide variety of issues. For instance, the following selected claims from the four central texts were debunked by fact-checkers (Kessler and Lee, 2015; Kiely et al., 2015; “Fact check: Trump and Clinton debate...”, 2016; Qiu, 2016, 2017):

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “Islamic terrorism is eating up large portions of the Middle East. They’ve become rich. I’m in competition with them. They just built a hotel in Syria. Can you believe this? They built a hotel.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 11-12)

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “Remember the \$5 billion [Affordable Care Act] Web site? \$5 billion we spent on a Web site, and to this day it doesn’t work. A \$5 billion Web site.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 26)

First Republican Primary Debate: “The fact is, I built a net worth of more than \$10 billion” (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; “Transcript: Read the full text...”, 2015, para. 437)

General Debate: “Under my plan I will be reducing taxes tremendously, from thirty five percent to fifteen percent for companies, small and big businesses.” (Blake, 2016; NBC News, 2016, para. 25)

General Debate: “You [Clinton] are going to approve one of the biggest tax cuts in history - you are going to approve one of the biggest tax increases in history. You are going to drive business out.” (Blake, 2016; NBC News, 2016, para. 116)

General Debate: “No wonder you’ve [Clinton] been fighting ISIS your entire adult life.” (Blake, 2016; NBC News, 2016, para. 141)

Inaugural Address: “You came by the tens of millions to become part of a historic movement, the likes of which the world has never seen before.” (“President Trump’s inaugural address...”, 2017, para. 11)

Inaugural Address: “We’ve made other countries rich while the wealth ... of our country has dissipated over the horizon.” (“President Trump’s inaugural address...”, 2017, para. 17)

Over the course of the campaign, Trump’s false claims became so commonplace that even his opponents would call upon fact-checkers to aid their cause. In the general debate, Clinton would remark, “Well, I hope the fact-checkers are turning up the volume and really

working hard” (Blake, 2016, para. 364; NBC News, 2016). While any presidential candidate is bound to stretch the truth, few have turned it into a central campaign characteristic like the Trump campaign.

Further rejecting expectations of presidential honesty and transparency, Trump famously refused to share his tax returns during the campaign (Cillizza, 2016) – a very unusual act for presidential candidates who normally seek to foster at least an illusion of honesty and transparency for voters. Pressed throughout his campaign to reveal his tax returns—especially as questions of Russian collusion clouded his candidacy— Trump routinely avoided such disclosures. He frequently blamed ongoing audits related to his business for his inability to share his tax returns, explaining in the general debate:

“Well, I told you, I will release them as soon as the audit. Look, I've been under audit almost for 15 years. I know a lot of wealthy people that have never been audited. I said, do you get audited? I get audited almost every year.” (Blake, 2016, para. 183; NBC News, 2016)

Trump’s refusal to share his tax returns, however legitimate his excuse for doing so may or may not have been, certainly contributed to criticisms that he was dishonest and perhaps even corrupt. However, Trump’s dishonesty and lack of transparency would not deter his supporters, perhaps already willing to accept his dishonesty as a forgivable part of his character or even as a refreshing alternative to “morally righteous” politicians whose attempts to appear honest and transparent so often felt disingenuous in the face of public distrust.

Donald Trump, Family Man?

In his campaign kickoff speech, Trump frames himself in terms of the moral trait shared among both traditional heroes and antiheroes: family. Recalling a dialogue he allegedly had with a reporter, Trump explains:

“Somebody said to me the other day, a reporter, a very nice reporter, ‘But, Mr. Trump, you’re not a nice person.’ That’s true. But actually I am. I think I am a nice person. People that know me, like me. Does my family like me? I think so, right. Look at my family. I’m proud of my family. By the way, speaking of my family, Melania, Barron, Kai, Donnie, Don, Vanessa, Tiffany, Ivanka did a great job. Did she do a great job? Great. Jared, Laura and Eric, I’m very proud of my family. They’re a great family” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s Campaign Announcement Speech”, 2015, para. 119-122)

While Trump initially acknowledges that he may not be the nicest person (“That’s true”), he quickly backtracks by essentially arguing that he must be a good person because he has the support of his family—a familiar political tactic and a familiar antihero tactic (recall Tony Soprano’s explanation to Dr. Melfi noted in Chapter Three). By acknowledging that he is “not a nice person” and then claiming, “But actually I am”, Trump both affirms the unfiltered fire-brand reputation that distinguishes him from other candidates and emphasizes the familial justification that antiheroes often provide in claiming to still be morally right. Further, Trump runs through a list of family supporters including his wife, children and step-children. In doing so, he draws attention to a core “moral” element of his persona that may allow his audience to forgive some of his immoral behavior just as we would Walter White’s or Tony Soprano’s. After all, if his family loves him and he loves his family then who are we to judge?

Of course, Trump does not provide a full picture of his family life—one that included two “messy divorces” and extramarital philandering (McCammon, 2016). Indeed, Trump’s relationship history may look more like Don Draper’s than Walter White’s. However, by

omitting these aspects of his private life and presenting his family as a “character witness” that purports him to be a loving father and husband (Cooper, 2016), Trump appeals to our expectation that presidents have stable and loving families—even as he defies most of our other expectations. Perhaps Trump recognized that the American public was ready for a morally ambiguous president but not a president who isn’t committed to his family, just as television audiences embrace antiheroes but generally demands that they be loyal to their families nonetheless.

The *Access Hollywood* Tapes: A Moral Line Crossed?

On October 7, 2016, with the general election quickly approaching, *The Washington Post* published what would become perhaps the defining obstacle of the Trump campaign: the *Access Hollywood* tapes. *The Washington Post* shared a video featuring a lewd 2005 conversation between Trump and *Access Hollywood* host Billy Bush. In the now infamous video, Trump openly describes his efforts to seduce women in morally repugnant ways. Benoit (2017) details the video’s graphic content:

“‘I did try and f*ck her,’ Trump tells Bush in reference to a married woman, while acknowledging he was unsuccessful. ‘I moved on her like a b*tch but I couldn’t get there,’ Trump says. Later in the video, as Trump and Bush spot Arianne Zucker... the real estate mogul says: ‘I better use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her,’ adding that he immediately starts kissing ‘beautiful’ women when he encounters them. ‘I don’t even wait,’ Trump says. ‘And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything—grab them by the p*ssy.’” (p. 248)

Needless to say, such problematic language would sink virtually any presidential campaign. In the immediate backlash, it seemed that Trump’s campaign may similarly have been dealt a final deathblow. As Benoit (2017) explains, “The business magnate found himself instantly under severe attack from people from both ends of the political spectrum” (p. 244).

Even Trump's running mate, Indiana Governor and staunch social conservative Mike Pence, was reportedly furious about Trump's language (Relman, 2017). Indeed, it appeared that Trump may have finally stepped too far beyond the moral line.

Of course, Trump's campaign would survive in a seemingly miraculous political recovery. In Trump's initial response, he referred to his language as "locker room banter, a private conversation" before arguing that "Bill Clinton has said far worse to me on the golf course—not even close" (Flores et al., 2016). Trump's initial reaction was clearly one of denial and minimization. No apology was issued initially, and Trump instead emphasized two antihero elements discussed below: masculinity and the "lesser evil" technique. By framing his lewd words as "locker room banter", Trump minimizes the moral wrongness of his behavior by essentially arguing that he was just being "one of the guys". Meanwhile, Trump situates Bill Clinton as a "greater evil" by claiming him to have said "far worse"—a claim that reignites memories of Clinton's own questionable conduct.

After his initial response, however, Trump would release a video tweet addressing the persistent public backlash. In the video, Trump finally apologizes, but then follows the apology by saying "I've never said I was a perfect person nor pretended to be someone that I'm not" (Diamond, 2016). By apologizing, Trump acknowledges that he may have stepped too far from the moral road expected of most political candidates. However, he also reaffirms his moral ambiguity; he is who he is, and he has never tried to be anybody else—a firm appeal to the moral authenticity that helped him secure the Republican nomination in the first place.

In sum, Trump presents himself as an authentically flawed and morally complex alternative to the seemingly manufactured moral righteousness of most presidential candidates.

He does not portray himself as wholly immoral—he has a loving family, for instance— but rather embraces the fact that he is not “a perfect person” nor does he try to behave like one. As such, many Trump’s supporters surely jumped at the opportunity to reward an authentic and relatable candidate over the carefully crafted heroic political personas that pervade the status quo.

From the Boardroom to the Ballot: Trump’s Leadership Persona

“The Art of the Deal”: Competence and Strength

“Our country is in serious trouble.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 5)

Toward the very beginning of his campaign kickoff address, Trump utilizes this familiar rhetorical framing device—he situates the nation in a state of crisis so that, like any political candidate, he can present himself as the ideal leader to make everything better again. While Trump’s campaign breaks from nearly all established campaign formulas, it follows this one expertly. In fact, one could argue that Trump’s entire campaign is fundamentally rooted in an extreme version of this formula. Few presidential candidates have gone to such great lengths to rhetorically establish a state of crisis while framing themselves as the competent and strong leader to save the day. While this would seem to be a traditionally heroic trait, Trump offers a unique spin on this rhetorical technique: the traditionally moral heroes are too weak to get the job done, and only he is willing to do what it takes. Indeed, Trump framed the election as a referendum on competence from the very beginning. In his campaign kickoff speech, he declared, “This is going to be an election that’s based on competence, because people are tired of these nice people. And they’re tired of being ripped off by everybody in the world” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s Campaign Announcement Speech”, 2015, para. 124).

In order to demonstrate that he was the competent alternative to incompetent leadership, Trump would have to overcome the fact that he lacked any meaningful governing experience. Of course, that would not pose too great a challenge to Trump, who is more willing to boast about his accomplishments than virtually any other political candidate. When Trump declared that he would be the “greatest jobs president that God ever created” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 47), he was only beginning down the path of confident self-aggrandizing that would eventually reach the White House. Since *The Apprentice*, Americans have known that Trump views himself in particularly high esteem (Kranish and Fisher, 2016; Nussbaum, 2017). Trump’s persona radiates self-assuredness, which certainly contributed to his base’s confidence in him as a potential Commander-in-Chief. While this self-assuredness may simply be in Trump’s nature, his campaign rhetoric deliberately emphasizes his competence and strength as a leader—especially in contrast to the “stupid” leaders he sought to replace.

Trump’s campaign kickoff address is littered with appeals to competent and strong leadership. Many of these appeals are about as explicit as one could imagine. Early in his speech, for instance, Trump declares: “Now our country needs—our country needs a truly great leader, and we need a truly great leader now. We need a leader that wrote ‘The Art of the Deal’” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s Campaign Announcement Speech”, 2015, para. 39) Without any subtlety, Trump asserts that he is the “great leader” that America needs while calling attention to his self-proclaimed status as a master negotiator. After calling attention to China’s “victories” over the United States in trade deals, Trump declared, “I beat China all the time. All the time.” Indeed, Trump emphasizes his negotiating prowess throughout each artifact alongside other efforts to rhetorically conflate his business leadership with presidential leadership. In the General

Presidential Debate, for instance, Trump remarks, “I built an unbelievable company. Some of the greatest assets anywhere in the world, beyond the United States, in Europe, lots of different places. It’s an unbelievable company” (Blake, 2016, para. 227).

With virtually no political experience to build from, Trump regularly uses his business empire to illustrate his strength and competence as a leader—strength and competence that had been portrayed to the public on *The Apprentice* for years. As Kranish and Fisher (2016) argue, “Above all, *Apprentice* sold an image of the host-boss as supremely competent and confident, dispensing his authority and getting immediate results”. Indeed, Trump’s public image had largely been framed around his status as a powerful businessman. This framing would naturally come in handy during Trump’s campaign. By framing himself as a heavyweight in the cutthroat world of real-estate, Trump compensates for his lack of political leadership experience while making his own business experience appear more valuable than any political experience, especially when it comes to trade—perhaps Trump’s main policy focus. Indeed, discussing economic issues like trade seemed to be the most natural application for Trump’s reputation as a powerful businessman. He frequently referred to the national deficit as one such problem he could tackle, explaining in the Republican primary debate, “And by the way, this country right now owes \$19 trillion. And they need somebody like me to straighten out that mess” (“Transcript: Read the full...”, 2015, para. 449).

Promises of Patton and MacArthur: Appeals to Military Might

While emphasizing his ability to solve economic problems using his business background, Trump also made constant references to global security threats throughout the campaign (Edwards, 2018). Of course, such rhetoric is often simply a partisan matter, as

Republicans have generally rooted more of their messaging in “hawkish” warnings regarding national security than have Democrats. However, presidents and presidential candidates from both parties face the same burden of demonstrating competence and strength in commanding the military and confronting international threats. As such, Trump’s military-centric national security rhetoric represents more than partisan messaging. It represents an additional tactic by which to establish himself as a strong leader fit for the role of Commander-in-Chief.

However, Trump would not be able to use his business background to demonstrate his competence as a military leader. Further complicating this effort, Trump never served in the military and has frequently been criticized as a “draft dodger” (Alfaro, 2018). Perhaps recognizing this weakness, Trump frequently notes his fondness for great military leaders of the past while promising to lead his generals to victory over global threats. For instance:

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “I will find — within our military, I will find the General Patton or I will find General MacArthur, I will find the right guy. I will find the guy that’s going to take that military and make it really work. Nobody, nobody will be pushing us around.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 159)

General Debate: “And look at her website. You know what? It's no difference than this. She's telling us how to fight ISIS. Just go to her website. She tells you how to fight ISIS on her website. I don't think General Douglas MacArthur would like that too much.” (Blake, 2016, para. 135; NBC News, 2016)

By invoking the memory of great generals like Patton and MacArthur, Trump frames himself as a student of military history with a deep appreciation for the military compared to leaders like Obama and Clinton, who he claims to have “abandoned” American veterans (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para 40). Further, Trump frames himself as the preferred candidate in the eyes of the nation’s security forces. In the general debate, he notes:

“I do want to say that I was just endorsed -- and more are coming next week -- it will be over 200 admirals, many of them here -- admirals and generals endorsed me to lead this

country. That just happened, and many more are coming. And I'm very proud of it. In addition, I was just endorsed by ICE. They've never endorsed anybody before on immigration. I was just endorsed by ICE. I was just recently endorsed -- 16,500 Border Patrol agents. So when Secretary Clinton talks about this, I mean, I'll take the admirals and I'll take the generals any day over the political hacks that I see that have led our country so brilliantly over the last 10 years with their knowledge. OK? Because look at the mess that we're in. Look at the mess that we're in.” (Blake, 2016, para. 344-346; NBC News, 2016)

While leadership is not necessarily a core element of anti-heroism, it crucial nonetheless to any presidential candidate—hero or not. However, Trump’s leadership is rhetorically constructed in a different manner than most previous presidential candidates. Rather than leaning on past political experience like most successful presidential candidates, Trump asserts that his experience as a political outsider equips him with the kind of toughness and business savvy that should be preferred to traditional standards of political leadership—standards that, he argues, failed to produce genuinely effective leaders. However, by presenting himself as an outsider *and* as competent and strong – two standards of traditional heroic leadership –based on his business experience and affinity for the military, Trump situates himself somewhere between the traditional heroic presidential leader and a different type of leader entirely.

Making America Great Again: A “Justifiable” Motivation?

No matter how realistic and identifiable Trump may seem in contrast with mainstream politicians, his narrative may have veered into one of demagogic rants had he not presented his motivations as ample justification for his actions. Theoretically, every presidential candidate sets out with the similar, fundamental motivation of bettering life in the United States— a morally righteous goal that, in most cases, can justify the candidate’s campaign behavior. When candidates run attack ads against their opponents, for example, we accept it as a sour tactic

nonetheless justified by a sound motivation: winning an election in order to pursue the betterment of the nation. This common motivation alone, however, may not have been enough to sufficiently justify Trump's controversial behavior in the public eye. A candidate like Trump—outspoken, abrasive and seemingly hungry for controversy—cannot simply justify his behavior by traditional means. The justification needed to be stronger. Instead, Trump's campaign narrative frames his motivations as urgent, necessary, and ultimately, important enough to justify his troubling behavior.

“Make America Great Again”: Redemptive Justification

From the outset of his campaign, Trump announced his primary motivation with crystal clarity: he sought to “Make America Great Again”. On the surface, this motivation could be interpreted as only a minor variation on the conventional goal of bettering America, but a closer look reveals a more dramatic goal in Trump's rhetoric. He frames his campaign not simply as a crusade to improve the country as most politicians do, but rather as a crusade to rescue a dying country. Trump established his motivation and justification clearly in the declaration of his candidacy: “Sadly, the American dream is dead. But if I get elected president I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before, and we will make America great again” (“Here's Donald Trump's...”, 2015, para. 179-180). On every campaign poster, on every red hat worn by Trump supporters and in every campaign speech to follow, the Trump campaign continued to remind the public of its core motivation to revive a spirit of American greatness presented as lost under the leadership of politicians like Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Indeed, the Trump campaign regularly returned to this rhetorical theme by suggesting that the nation had lost its standing as a world power while under the protection of “loser” leadership. Throughout his

debate performances, Trump made constant reference to America’s “loser” status under the leadership of President Obama— and by extension, the Democratic Party. This theme of “Making America Great Again” after years of “stupid” leadership emerges throughout each artifact. For instance:

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “...if I get elected president I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before, and we will make America great again.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 180)

First Republican Primary Debate: “We can’t do anything right. Our military has to be strengthened. Our vets have to be taken care of. We have to end Obamacare, and we have to make our country great again, and I will do that.” (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; “Transcript: Read the full...”, 2015, para. 666)

General Debate: “Look, here’s the story. I want to make America great again. I’m going to be able to do it.” (Blake, 2016, para. 501; NBC News, 2016)

General Debate: “I want to make America great again. We are a nation that is seriously troubled.” (Blake, 2016, para. 498; NBC News, 2016)

Inaugural Address: “You will never be ignored again. Your voice, your hopes, and your dreams, will define our American destiny. And your courage and goodness and love will forever guide us along the way. Together, We Will Make America Strong Again. We Will Make America Wealthy Again. We Will Make America Proud Again. We Will Make America Safe Again. And, Yes, Together, We Will Make America Great Again. Thank you, God Bless You, And God Bless America.” (“President Trump’s inaugural...”, 2017, para. 36-37)

While Trump’s disrespectful rhetoric unquestionably flew in the face of campaign decorum, it did not represent the rhetoric of a pure villain. Rather, Trump’s behavior could be accepted as justifiable in pursuing a moral motivation: restoring America’s status as a “winner”. His campaign could still present itself as an antihero narrative rather than a destructive one.

China, Mexico and ISIS: Protective Justification

While Trump primarily justifies his behavior as necessary in the effort to make America great again, he provides additional justification by framing his behavior as a demonstration of strength and toughness in the face of urgent global threats to American superiority and security. Throughout his campaign, Trump identified countless criminal, economic and military threats that could only be defeated by a strong leader like himself. He presented himself as the only candidate willing to call out the “rapists” and “criminals” crossing the border from Mexico (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 8), and as the only candidate capable of doing anything to address the threat—through the unprecedented construction of a border wall: “I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I’ll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 156).

He would return to the threat of criminal immigrants in the first Republican primary debate and General debate, making assertions like:

First Republican Primary Debate: “The fact is... many killings, murders, crime, drugs [are] pouring across the border... money going out and the drugs coming in. And I said we need to build a wall, and it has to be built quickly” (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; “Transcript: Read the full text...”, 2015, para. 157)

First Republican Primary Debate: “And the Mexican government is much smarter, much sharper, much more cunning. And they send the bad ones over because they don’t want to pay for them.” (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; “Transcript: Read the full text...”, 2015, para. 161)

First Republican Primary Debate: “We can’t beat Mexico, at the border or in trade” (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; “Transcript: Read the full text...”, 2015, para. 665)

General Debate: “We have gangs roaming the street. And in many cases, they’re illegally here, illegal immigrants. And they have guns. And they shoot people. And we have to be

very strong. And we have to be very vigilant.” (Blake, 2016, para. 249; NBC News, 2016)

While the Trump campaign may have framed illegal immigration as perhaps the greatest threat to American security, it was far from the only threat that Trump promised to fend off as president. He made constant references to the economic threat posed by China, and the need for his negotiating skills to turn the tide in America’s favor:

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “China has our jobs... They all have jobs” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 20)

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “Our country is in serious trouble. We don’t have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don’t have them. When was the last time anybody saw us beating, let’s say, China in a trade deal? They kill us. I beat China all the time. All the time.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 5)

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “But their leaders are much smarter than our leaders, and we can’t sustain ourself with that. There’s too much— it’s like— it’s like take the New England Patriots and Tom Brady and have them play your high school football team. That’s the difference between China’s leaders and our leaders” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 72)

First Republican Primary Debate: “Our country is in serious trouble. We don’t win anymore. We don’t beat China in trade” (“2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; “Transcript: Read the full...”, 2015, para. 664-665)

General Debate: “You look at what China is doing to our country in terms of making our product. They’re devaluing their currency, and there’s nobody in our government to fight them. And we have a very good fight. And we have a winning fight. Because they’re using our country as a piggy bank to rebuild China, and many other countries are doing the same thing” (Blake, 2016, para. 21; NBC News, 2016)

General Debate: “Well, first of all, Secretary Clinton doesn't want to use a couple of words, and that's law and order. And we need law and order. If we don't have it, we're not going to have a country.” (Blake, 2016, para. 243; NBC News, 2016)

Perhaps most controversially, Trump railed against Islam as a threat to Christian values and national security at large, often by conflating Islam with the threats posed by Iran and ISIS that only he could overcome:

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “And, I can tell, some of the candidates... They sweated like dogs... How are they going to beat ISIS? I don’t think it’s gonna happen” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 3-4)

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “Nobody would be tougher on ISIS than Donald Trump. Nobody.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 158)

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “So now ISIS has the oil, and what they don’t have, Iran has. And in 19— and I will tell you this, and I said it very strongly, years ago, I said— and I love the military, and I want to have the strongest military that we’ve ever had, and we need it more now than ever. But I said, ‘Don’t hit Iraq,’ because you’re going to totally destabilize the Middle East. Iran is going to take over the Middle East, Iran and somebody else will get the oil, and it turned out that Iran is now taking over Iraq. Think of it. Iran is taking over Iraq, and they’re taking it over big league.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 13)

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “They’re building up their military to a point that is very scary. You have a problem with ISIS. You have a bigger problem with China.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 76)

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “Islamic terrorism is eating up large portions of the Middle East. They’ve become rich. I’m in competition with them.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 11)

General Debate: “And by the way... the worst deal I think I’ve ever seen negotiated that you started is the Iran deal.” (Blake, 2016, para. 439; NBC News, 2016)

General Debate: “The deal with Iran will lead to nuclear problems. All they have to do is sit back 10 years, and they don’t have to do much... And they’re going to end up getting nuclear” (Blake, 2016, para. 442; NBC News, 2016)

Inaugural Address: “We will reinforce old alliances and form new ones – and unite the civilized world against Radical Islamic Terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth.” (“President Trump’s inaugural...”, 2017, para. 27)

In each case, Trump justifies his brash tone and abrasive rhetoric as necessary in the cause of defending the country. This was perhaps most clearly demonstrated in Trump’s response to a critique from Jeb Bush regarding his tone toward the Middle East:

“...when you have people that are cutting Christians’ heads off, when you have a world that the border and at so many places, that it is medieval times, we’ve never—it almost has to be as bad as it ever was in terms of the violence and the horror, we don’t have time

for tone. We have to go out and get the job done.” (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2015; “Transcript: Read the full text...”, 2015, para. 522)

While antiheroes like Tony Soprano and Walter White often justify their immoral behavior as necessary to protect their families, Trump justifies his immoral behavior as necessary to both redeem and protect the American people. One could argue that Trump’s motivation is not too far removed from those of Tony Soprano or Walter White, as the president may be viewed as something of a patriarch of the metaphorical American “family”. Either way, Trump clearly provides a “justifiable” motivation for his controversial behavior—one that many Americans must have been willing to accept.

He May Be Flawed, But At Least He’s Not Hillary: The Lesser of Two Evils

In a general election campaign between two deeply unpopular candidates (Holyk & Langer, 2016), the Trump campaign was presented with a unique path to victory. Neither candidate received overwhelming adoration from their respective party bases. The contest became less about which candidate rode the largest wave of support and more about which candidate rode the smallest. In fact, many Trump voters claimed that their decision was motivated less by Trump’s appeal than by the fear of Clinton becoming president (Mann, 2017). Simply put, Trump’s campaign had a unique opportunity to ride a “lesser of two evils” narrative to victory. This, if Donald Trump represented the Walter White of the 2016 presidential election, his campaign did everything in its power to convince voters that Hillary Clinton represented the equivalent of Gus Fring.

Trump’s targeting of Clinton as a “greater evil” was not always direct. That is, Trump did not only attack Clinton by name. Rather, he casts Clinton in the larger villainous shadow of “the

Swamp”—Trump’s term for the political elitism of Washington D.C. Indeed, Trump’s declaration that “It is time to drain the swamp in Washington D.C.” (Timm, 2016) establishes the “corrupt” and out-of-touch political status quo as the “greatest” evil facing Americans. This sentiment is echoed throughout each text:

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “Well, you need somebody, because politicians are all talk, no action. Nothing’s gonna get done. They will not bring us— believe me— to the promised land. They will not.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 29)

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “So I’ve watched the politicians. I’ve dealt with them all my life. If you can’t make a good deal with a politician, then there’s something wrong with you. You’re certainly not very good. And that’s what we have representing us. They will never make America great again. They don’t even have a chance. They’re controlled fully— they’re controlled fully by the lobbyists, by the donors, and by the special interests, fully.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 37)

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “We have losers. We have losers. We have people that don’t have it. We have people that are morally corrupt. We have people that are selling this country down the drain.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 147)

In contrast to these “corrupt” and elitist politicians, Trump establishes himself as a self-funded outsider, stating in his Kickoff Speech: “I’m using my own money. I’m not using the lobbyists. I’m not using donors. I don’t care. I’m really rich” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s Campaign Announcement Speech, 2015, para. 95). Thus, while Trump is clearly abrasive and self-aggrandizing, he sends the message that he is not as bad as the politicians in power.

Not only does Trump associate Clinton with this corrupt and elitist establishment, but he also rhetorically conflates Clinton with the “failures” of her “boss” at the time: Barack Obama. As the “anti-Obama” candidate, much of Trump’s rhetoric assigns blame for America’s problems to Obama and, by extension, his administration and his party. While Chapter Two established that Obama fits the traditional heroic mold, Trump frames Obama’s character and leadership as inauthentic and weak— the “hero” as the “greater evil” in a time that calls for a

break from the political norm. Of course, Trump does not view Obama through a heroic lens, and his rhetoric frequently accuses Obama of lying or conducting illegal activities in addition to being incompetent:

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “We have a disaster called the big lie: Obamacare. Obamacare.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 24)

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “He’s actually a negative force. He’s been a negative force. He wasn’t a cheerleader; he was the opposite.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 45)

Campaign Kickoff Speech: “I will immediately terminate President Obama’s illegal executive order on immigration, immediately.” (“Here’s Donald Trump’s...”, 2015, para. 161)

First Republican Primary Debate: “We have a president who doesn’t have a clue. I would say he’s incompetent, but I don’t want to do that because that’s not nice.” (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; “Transcript: Read the full text...”, 2015, para. 538)

Of course, Trump had some help in attacking Obama and Clinton from his Republican peers. While the ten Republican candidates on the main stage—Trump, Jeb Bush, Scott Walker, Mike Huckabee, Ben Carson, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, Chris Christie and John Kasich—spent ample time attacking one another during the first primary debate, the most effort was arguably spent attacking Obama and Clinton, by then considered the favorite to win the Democratic nomination. Bush asserted, “We’re not going [to] win by doing what Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton do each and every day. Dividing the country.” Cruz highlighted the “consequences of... Obama-Clinton foreign policy”. Walker, targeting Clinton’s email server scandal, declared to the delight of the partisan audience that “probably the Russian and Chinese government know more about Hillary Clinton’s e-mail server than do the members of the United States Congress”. Huckabee, seemingly gearing up for an attack on Trump, delivered the zinger of the night: “It seems like this election has been a whole lot about a person who’s very high in

the polls, that doesn't have a clue how to govern. A person who has been filled with scandals, and who could not lead, and, of course, I'm talking about Hillary Clinton". Even when the subject moved away from Clinton at one point early in the debate, Walker would go so far as to remind his Republican opponents that "...we should be talking about Hillary Clinton". As for Trump, his criticism packed the dual punch of presenting himself as charitable and Clinton as corrupt:

"Well, I'll tell you what, with Hillary Clinton, I said be at my wedding and she came to my wedding. You know why? She didn't have a choice because I gave. I gave to a foundation that, frankly, that foundation is supposed to do good. I didn't know her money would be used on private jets going all over the world. It was" (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; "Transcript: Read the full text...", 2015, para. 320-322)

Hunting season on Hillary Clinton had begun with a bang, and Trump would have no qualms in continuing the hunt alone once his Republican challengers had all dropped out of the race. After months of fending off primary opponents, Trump would finally come head-to-head with Clinton in the first General presidential debate—a stage upon which he could firmly paint Clinton as the "greater evil". In addition to attacking Clinton as an out-of-touch politician as discussed above, Trump used phrases like "But we have no leadership. And honestly, that starts with Secretary Clinton" (Blake, 2016, para. 151; NBC News, 2016) to imply that his opponent was simply incompetent. He would add barbs:

General Debate:

TRUMP: "And, Hillary, I'd just ask you this. You've been doing this for 30 years. Why are you just thinking about these solutions right now? For 30 years, you've been doing it, and now you're just starting to think of solutions."

CLINTON: "Well, actually..."

TRUMP: "I will bring -- excuse me. I will bring back jobs. You can't bring back jobs." (Blake, 2016; NBC News, 2016, para. 66-68)

General Debate: "Typical politician. All talk, no action. Sounds good, doesn't work. Never going to happen. Our country is suffering because people like Secretary Clinton

have made such bad decisions in terms of our jobs and in terms of what's going on.” (Blake, 2016; NBC News, 2016, para. 172)

General Debate: “Well, first I have to say one thing, very important. Secretary Clinton is talking about taking out ISIS. ‘We will take out ISIS.’ Well, President Obama and Secretary Clinton created a vacuum the way they got out of Iraq, because they got out -- what, they shouldn't have been in, but once they got in, the way they got out was a disaster. And ISIS was formed.” (Blake, 2016, para. 360; NBC News, 2016)

Incompetence, however, does not necessarily constitute evil. It comes as no surprise, then, that Trump’s focus would shift to depicting Clinton as an untrustworthy criminal. This was perhaps most evident in his approach to the subject of Clinton’s e-mail scandal. Not only did Trump call Clinton’s use of a private e-mail server “disgraceful” (Blake, 2016; NBC News, 2016), but he attributed her action to a dangerous criminal intent by asserting:

“It was more than a mistake. That was done purposely, OK? That was not a mistake. That was done purposely. When you have your staff taking the Fifth Amendment, taking the Fifth so they’re not prosecuted, when you have the man that set up the illegal server taking the Fifth, I think it’s disgraceful” (Blake, 2016, para. 201; NBC News, 2016)

By placing so much emphasis on the scandals surrounding the Clinton campaign, Trump presents himself as the morally superior, if still flawed, choice to lead the nation: the antihero preferred to the “villain”.

Trump’s Antiheroic Journey: Narrative Suspense and Uncertainty

More so than any previous presidential campaign, the Trump campaign created a media spectacle that in turn would arguably fuel the campaign’s success (Azari, 2016 ; Kellner, 2016; Owen, 2017; Wignell et al., 2019). Between traditional news media, social media and everyday conversation, Trump would become perhaps the central figure of American discourse throughout 2015 and 2016 (and at the time of this writing, remains such a central figure in 2019). The

attention surrounding Trump's candidacy should not have come as a surprise. After all, Trump's controversial and unpredictable behavior made for some uniquely compelling television.

Indeed, the Trump campaign represented a uniquely suspenseful and unpredictable story. With Trump at the center, coverage of the presidential campaign seemed as dramatic as the best shows on television. After all, the Trump campaign could easily be portrayed as something of an underdog story even though, as real estate titan, Trump was far from an underdog in the ordinary sense. While few likely believed Trump's claims to have built an empire out of humble beginnings, claiming that his "father gave me a very small loan in 1975, and I built it into a company that's worth many, many billions of dollars" (Blake, 2016, para. 36; NBC News, 2016), Trump's campaign narrative was certainly compelling as one of a political outsider overcoming the odds to win his party's nomination and, eventually, the presidency. Indeed, over the course of his campaign "journey", Trump overcame countless obstacles that certainly would have sunk virtually any other presidential candidacy. He overcame the initial doubts about the seriousness of his candidacy to defeat a historically crowded field of Republican primary challengers, each with more political experience than he had (apart from Dr. Ben Carson, another outsider candidate). Each time that his campaign was declared "doomed" by a controversial statement or news story, Trump carried on seemingly unfazed. Even the *Access Hollywood* scandal—perhaps the most morally troubling scandal to hit a presidential candidate in the months preceding a general election— could not sink the Trump campaign.

By continuously overcoming challenges and obstacles insurmountable to most candidates, Trump's "journey" would be defined in large part by the kind of suspenseful twists and turns that defined the "antiheroic journeys" of Tony Soprano, Dexter Morgan and Walter

White. Even those who rooted against Trump’s candidacy likely could not help but feel enthralled by each narrative twist in much the same way viewers felt enthralled by White’s efforts to overcome obstacles toward an unethical end.

The “End of the Journey”: Trump’s Inaugural Address

Trump’s campaign journey ended in triumph, as he defeated Clinton in the general election despite losing the popular vote. On January 20, 2017, Trump would finally arrive in Washington D.C. to deliver his Inaugural Address—not a campaign text per se, but a valuable artifact to analyze nonetheless as the de facto “ending” to his campaign narrative. As noted in Chapter Two, inaugural addresses are renowned as a genre of political rhetoric for their unifying messages. While Trump’s campaign was divisive to say the least, he nonetheless seems to have embraced this expectation in his own inaugural, appealing to national unity with lines like:

“The oath of office I take today is an oath of allegiance to all Americans.” (“President Trump’s inaugural...”, 2017, para. 14)

“We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and to restore its promise for all of our people. Together, we will determine the course of America and the world for years to come. We will face challenges. We will confront hardships. But we will get the job done.” (“President Trump’s inaugural...”, 2017, para. 1-2)

“Today’s ceremony, however, has very special meaning. Because today we are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another – but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the American People.” (“President Trump’s inaugural...”, 2017, para. 4-5)

“What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. January 20th 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer. Everyone is listening to you now.” (“President Trump’s inaugural...”, 2017, para. 9-11)

Alongside Trump's unifying rhetoric ("allegiance to all Americans", "we" language, "giving [power] back to you, the American People, etc.) remains the populist and anti-establishment rhetoric that defined Trump's campaign. Even as he begins his tenure as president – no longer an outsider, but the nation's central political figure – Trump maintains his anti-political stance. As opposed to Trump's campaign rhetoric, however, it is difficult to separate Trump's Inaugural Address rhetoric from the rhetoric of traditional heroism: unifying, triumphant and packed with appeals to presidential leadership as Trump begins to define the agenda of his administration. Absent is Trump's off-the-cuff oratorical style, replaced here by a carefully crafted address to the nation. One could perhaps be forgiven for believing that Trump would enter the White House with a new, more traditionally heroic rhetorical approach.

However, the rhetoric of Trump's Inaugural Address would also give several signs that Trump would not be replacing his controversial persona with a more traditionally heroic presidential persona. Indeed, Trump would still go on the attack toward the previous administration and political establishment, even as the Obama's sat nearby:

"For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished – but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation's Capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land." ("President Trump's inaugural...", 2017, para. 6-7)

In this sense, Trump maintains a rhetorical distance between the anti-politician persona of his campaign and the politicians whom he had long decried as out of touch despite their attempts at appearing heroic and morally righteous. This distance would only be emphasized further by perhaps the address' defining line: "This American carnage stops right here and stops right now"

(“President Trump’s inaugural...”, 2017, para. 13). Indeed, it is telling that Trump’s address is perhaps most remembered by a line about “American carnage”, a decidedly negative line in terms of tone. As such, one may argue that the conclusion of Trump’s “journey” to the presidency features a darker tone than most Inaugural Addresses, and perhaps signaled that the Trump presidency would maintain a similarly negative and antiheroic tone as the Trump candidacy.

Trump’s White Masculinity

The 2016 presidential election has widely been explained as a referendum on race and gender in American society (Milligan, 2016; Alter, 2016; Terrill, 2017; Sanchez, 2018). After electing the first African American president in American history in 2008, it seemed regrettably predictable that 2016 would unleash years of pent-up racial backlash. Likewise, decades of sexism aimed toward Hillary Clinton were bound to be unleashed as she campaigned toward what many assumed to be the inevitable victory of America’s first female president. It came as no surprise, then, that both Obama and Clinton would face the fiery opposition of a white man in 2016, and few candidates could have been more willing to “fight dirty” on matters of race and gender than Donald Trump.

Long before he announced his intention to run for president, Trump’s relationship with minorities and women was already surrounded by controversy. Even before *The Apprentice*, Trump faced several accusations of racism (Snopes). During the filming of *The Celebrity Apprentice*, Trump was allegedly prone to using racial slurs (Haberma, 2018). Throughout *The Apprentice*, Trump would frequently make gendered barbs or comments toward female contestants. As Nussbaum (2017) explains, “Gender is [discussed] all the time [on *The*

Apprentice]... [Trump is] also prone to saying things like 'You're all beautiful women. Do you think you had an advantage over the men, in selling ice cream?'"', minimizing the ability of the female contestants to succeed in the episode's challenge only to their appearance. Outside of *The Apprentice*, Trump built his public image as the owner of the Miss Universe Organization pageants—a position that indicates his attitude toward women as objects for male pleasure and which he allegedly used to degrade and harass women (Stuart, 2016). If there was still any question about Trump's attitude toward women, then the previously discussed *Access Hollywood* tapes certainly should have answered it.

Of course, few could forget Trump's infamous feud with Rosie O'Donnell—one rattled with sexist and demeaning rhetoric. Trump frequently referred to O'Donnell as unattractive and overweight, even Tweeting in December 2011: "I feel sorry for Rosie's new partner in love whose parents are devastated at the thought of their daughter being with @Rosie-a true loser" (@realDonaldTrump, 2011). The topic of Trump's contentious relationship with O'Donnell would be raised during the 2016 election. For instance, Republican primary debate moderator Megyn Kelly – herself the subject of Trump's gendered criticisms – posed the question:

KELLY: "Mr. Trump, one of the things people love about you is you speak your mind and you don't use a politician's filter. However, that is not without its downsides, in particular, when it comes to women. You've called women you don't like 'fat pigs, dogs, slob, and disgusting animals.' Your Twitter account..."

TRUMP: "Only Rosie O'Donnell." (2016 US Presidential Debates, 2016; "Transcript: Read the full text...", 2015, para. 84-85)

The subject would come up again in the general debate, as Trump stated:

TRUMP: "You know, Hillary is hitting me with tremendous commercials. Some of it's said in entertainment. Some of it's said -- somebody who's been very vicious to me, Rosie O'Donnell, I said very tough things to her, and I think everybody would agree that she deserves it and nobody feels sorry for her." (Blake, 2016, para. 487; NBC News, 2016)

Clearly, Trump's identity had already been entrenched in sexist rhetoric and behavior for decades. 2016 would prove no different, as this sexist rhetoric—coupled with veiled racist rhetoric— pervades many of his attacks toward Clinton and Obama (his “greater evils”).

Indeed, white masculinity is central to Trump's political identity. From decrying the threats posed by Mexican immigrants and Muslims to “nasty women”, Trump bases much of his rhetoric around the threats posed by “others” and the “strength and toughness” he possesses to overcome them. One could argue that his very campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again”, calls on voters to undo social progress and return the white male American to his position of uncontested power. As Johnson (2017) explains:

“Trump's use of conventional masculine signifiers like strength and domination encourages his audiences to approach politics as already whole masculine subjects, separate from the political establishment and thereby hostile to difference that threatens the totality of both their nation and their subjectivity. Trump's hostility toward women and minorities symptomatizes a broader hostility to democracy itself, premised as it is on the play of difference” (p. 234)

Trump's rhetorical construction of minorities and women as threats to America's heritage as a nation controlled by white men is particularly unsurprising when one considers the support he received from countless hate groups like the Klu Klux Klan (Chan, 2016; Sanchez, 2018) and male supremacy groups (Paquette, 2016)— each of which he refused to firmly and consistently condemn on the campaign trail (Chan, 2016).

In his initial foray into Republican politics, Trump targeted President Obama with thinly veiled racial attacks aimed at his American citizenship. Trump repeatedly called for Obama to release his birth certificate to disprove his accusations. Even while running for president years later, Trump would stand by his actions, explaining in the general debate:

“When I got involved, I didn't fail. I got him to give the birth certificate. So I'm satisfied with it... And I think I did a great job and a great service not only for the country, but even for the president, in getting him to produce his birth certificate.” (Blake, 2016, para. 308; NBC News, 2016)

In response to Clinton's criticisms on the subject, Trump would quickly redirect the conversation to her own alleged treatment of Obama's cultural background and emphasize the racially insensitive comments of her past. He argued:

“I would love to respond. First of all, I got to watch in preparing for this some of your debates against Barack Obama. You treated him with terrible disrespect. And I watched the way you talk now about how lovely everything is and how wonderful you are. It doesn't work that way. You were after him, you were trying to -- you even sent out or your campaign sent out pictures of him in a certain garb, very famous pictures. I don't think you can deny that.” (Blake, 2016, para. 328; NBC News, 2016)

“I do want to bring up the fact that you were the one that brought up the words super-predator about young black youth. And that's a term that I think was a— its's – it's been horribly met, as you know. I think you've apologized for it. But I think it was a terrible thing to say.” (Blake, 2016, para. 282; NBC News, 2016)

While Trump stands by his insensitive and, in the opinion of many, racist calls for Obama to confirm his citizenship, he also rhetorically situates Clinton as comparatively worse for sending out “pictures of him in a certain garb” and for her past description of African Americans as “super-predators”.

Of course, Trump had many more verbal barbs in store for Clinton. Just as female politicians (including Clinton) have long been attacked for their appearance and perceived incompetence (lack of “masculine” leadership traits), poor judgement and unfit temperament, Trump unleashed a series of attacks aimed at portraying Clinton as cold and weak:

“Well, I have much better judgment than she does. There's no question about that. I also have a much better temperament than she has, you know? I have a much better -- she spent -- let me tell you -- she spent hundreds of millions of dollars on an advertising -- you know, they get Madison Avenue into a room, they put names -- oh, temperament,

let's go after -- I think my strongest asset, maybe by far, is my temperament. I have a winning temperament. I know how to win.” (Blake, 2016, para. 409; NBC News, 2016)

“We need heart. We need a lot of things. But you have to have some basic ability. And sadly, she doesn't have that. All of the things that she's talking about could have been taken care of during the last 10 years, let's say, while she had great power. But they weren't taken care of. And if she ever wins this race, they won't be taken care of.” (Blake, 2016, para. 463; NBC News, 2016)

“She doesn't have the look. She doesn't have the stamina. I said she doesn't have the stamina. And I don't believe she does have the stamina. To be president of this country, you need tremendous stamina.” (Blake, 2016, para. 465; NBC News, 2016)

In just these three comments, Trump subtly attacks Clinton's femininity as a weakness. He questions her judgement, temperament, heart, competence, appearance and stamina— all criticisms that likely would not have been levied were Clinton a man. Few would argue that Trump's sexist and veiled racist rhetoric are immoral, and yet voters supported him nonetheless. Had Trump not been a white man, or had Trump not been rhetorically and literally opposing a black president and female campaign opponent, it stands to reason that he would not have been able to get away with such behavior. However, just as we forgive Tony Soprano's sexist and racist remarks as part of his morally complex antihero character, voters forgave (or downright agreed with) the controversial rhetoric of Trump's white male antihero persona.

Chapter Summary

While the following chapter offers a more comprehensive discussion of the analysis conducted here, it is prudent to unpack some initial conclusions. At the outset of this study, three central research questions were posed:

RQ1: Is the Donald Trump 2016 presidential campaign representative of the antihero genre?

RQ2: If so, to what effect does the Trump campaign utilize the tenets of the antihero genre?

RQ3: How does the Trump campaign reshape our understanding of the antihero genre?

Having now analyzed the Trump campaign through the antihero generic lens, RQ1 and RQ2 may now be answered (with RQ3 being addressed in more depth in the following chapter). As established, the antihero genre may be characterized by the following tenets: 1) Moral Ambiguity, Realism and Audience Identification; 2) Justifiable Motivation; 3) The “Lesser of Two Evils”; 4) The “Antiheroic Journey” (Narrative Suspense and Uncertainty); and 5) White Masculinity.

Trump’s campaign is clearly characterized by morally ambiguous, realistic and identifiable rhetoric between his authentically unfiltered “stream of consciousness” speaking style, willingness to embrace the immoral or flawed elements of his controversial persona, rejection of political correctness and presidential decorum and frequent use of dishonest and hyperbolic claims. Interestingly, however, Trump’s campaign rhetoric still emphasizes his family as something of a core moral compass—one that both speaks well to his character and helps to forgive his faults. In this sense, Trump does not portray himself as a pure villain. Rather, he presents himself as having morally good characteristics as attested to by his family. In Trump’s response to the *Access Hollywood* tapes, he both denies the severity of his behavior and “apologizes” by emphasizing that he is “not a perfect person”—thus “saving face” as someone morally good enough to apologize, but morally ambiguous enough to reject responsibility and embrace character flaws. Between each of these rhetorical tactics, Trump morally situates himself as being not-quite-a-hero but not-quite-a-villain—an antihero whom voters may have been able to identify with as an authentically flawed man rather than a seemingly manufactured “do-gooder” politician.

Like Tony Soprano, Walter White, Dexter Morgan or any other antihero protagonist, Trump provides a “justifiable” motivation for his unscrupulous behavior. By emphasizing his desire and unique ability to “Make America Great Again” while protecting the nation from economic and security threats, Trump provides his supporters with ample justification for his controversial rhetoric. Indeed, the Trump campaign emphasizes the “toughness” and strength that “only” he possesses to meet these goals. Thus, Trump’s behavior is not only framed as the justified means toward a noble end goal, but as the very tools that make Trump uniquely capable to reach that goal where others, in his eyes, had failed.

Just as any political campaign seeks to establish one candidate as preferable to another, Trump’s campaign constantly framed him as a preferable candidate to Hillary Clinton, herself cast as an embodiment of the political establishment (the “swamp”) and as a continuation of the “failed” Obama administration. Trump does not just portray himself as preferable in standard political terms. Indeed, Trump casts himself as a “lesser evil” compared to the politicians of the status quo (whom he claims are “corrupt” and “weak”), the “inauthentic” heroism of Obama (whom he blames for most of the nation’s problems) and the “criminal” and “incapable” Hillary Clinton (whom he attacks as incompetent at best and criminal at worst). Thus, just as Tony Soprano and Walter White may compare favorably to “greater evils” in their fictional worlds, Trump presents himself as a flawed-but-preferable candidate.

In antihero fiction, the narratives surrounding antihero protagonists are characterized by suspense and uncertainty. Antiheroes may win over audiences by their persistent ability to overcome obstacles (even toward questionable goals), and audiences are compelled to keep watching by suspenseful and unpredictable narratives. Likewise, the Trump campaign became a

media spectacle for similar reasons—his campaign would not fold no matter the size of the obstacles it ran into (political norms, controversial statements, the *Access Hollywood* tapes, etc.), and Trump’s unpredictable nature transformed the campaign narrative into a suspenseful political drama the likes of which America had never quite seen unfold in reality. Thus, Trump’s campaign represents an “antiheroic journey”; the story of an outsider whose immoral deeds both fuel and are made compelling by a suspenseful and unpredictable narrative. Where antihero narratives may not always end in triumph like heroic narratives do, Trump’s Inaugural Address signals both a triumphant victory and an ambiguous future as he begins his tenure in the White House.

Finally, Trump is obviously a white male. However, Trump’s white masculinity serves as a fundamental aspect of his campaign rhetoric and not only as an aspect of his identity. Trump’s white masculinity—one prone to sexist and even racist remarks before the campaign and during it— may well have enabled his victory. After all, Trump embodied a wave of backlash against Obama’s presidency (the election of America’s first non-white president) and dismissal of Clinton’s legitimacy as a female presidential candidate. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine Trump’s campaign succeeding were he a non-white or non-male candidate. So engrained were notions of masculinity and whiteness in his campaign rhetoric that he won support from hate groups nationwide and emerged as the symbolic leader of an alt-right movement laced with racist and sexist undertones (and overtones).

Though not a fundamental element of the antihero genre, Trump’s rhetoric also emphasizes his leadership ability by making frequent appeals to his status as a real-estate titan, strong negotiator and staunch military supporter. Such rhetoric is representative of traditionally

heroic character, but it does not turn Trump into a traditional hero. Rather, Trump's leadership rhetoric helps to situate him as an antihero (a protagonist who fails to meet traditionally heroic standards but remains a different sort of heroic figure) rather than a villain while also contributing to his "justifiable" motivation and "lesser evil" tactics. In other words, Trump uses traditionally heroic leadership appeals to demonstrate his ability to solve the nation's problems ("justifiable" motivation) and to juxtapose himself against "incompetent" leadership ("lesser evil").

In sum, the 2016 Trump presidential campaign does indeed demonstrate the tenets of the antihero genre (RQ1). However, it is important to note that the presence of just one or even several of these tenets does not necessarily create an example of the antihero genre, as the genre is characterized by the wholistic dynamic between each element. In other words, a narrative that only demonstrates one or two elements (for example, establishing a justifiable motivation and characterizing the protagonist as the lesser of two evils) may not be representative of the antihero genre, but the presence of each element in conjunction with one another does constitute a representation of the genre. Given the clear presence of each element across the artifacts considered, one may firmly claim that the 2016 Trump presidential campaign represents an antihero narrative.

While each of the above antihero elements certainly contributed to Trump's appeal as a presidential candidate, surely not all of them contributed equally (RQ2). Based on this analysis, it would seem that the Trump campaign was most fundamentally rooted in the first tenet of anti-heroism: Moral Ambiguity, Realism and Audience Identification. This is the element that allowed Trump to construct his populist message by demonstrating that he is different from the

establishment politicians who had forgotten about the common American citizen. It allowed Trump to overcome obstacles that no other politician could. Only by embracing his moral flaws could Trump have overcome the *Access Hollywood* controversy, for instance, as the heroic image of a candidate like Obama would have been irrevocably damaged by such a scandal. It allowed Trump to make searing and effective attacks against his “greater evils”, often using sexist and racially charged rhetoric, that few presidential candidates would have been willing to make out of fear of appearing unpresidential. It allowed Trump to present himself as a no-nonsense leader with “no time for tone” whose tough-guy tactics could redeem and rescue America from foreign and domestic threats where others had failed.

With the 2016 Trump presidential campaign firmly situated in the antihero genre, the final chapter offers several points for discussion (including an answer to RQ3), recognition of the study’s limitations, implications for the future of presidential and antihero rhetoric and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER: DISCUSSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND LOOKING AHEAD

Discussion

Having applied the framework of the antihero genre to the 2016 Trump presidential campaign, it is now time to unpack what has been learned. At the outset of this study, three research questions were posed:

RQ 1) Is the Donald Trump 2016 presidential campaign representative of the antihero genre?

RQ 2) If so, to what effect does the Trump campaign utilize the antihero genre?

RQ 3) How does the Trump campaign reshape our understanding of the antihero genre?

The first two questions were answered at the conclusion of the previous chapter: Trump's campaign is indeed representative of the antihero genre as characterized by the framework established in Chapter Three, and the campaign's utilization of the genre effectively presented Trump as a more authentic candidate whose willingness to cross moral lines— particularly when it comes to rejecting “politically correct culture” – equipped him with the unique abilities to overcome established political norms and significant campaign obstacles, levy unfiltered and fierce attacks toward his opponents, and frame himself as the answer to a political system filled with inauthentic “good guys” who had “left the American people behind”.

The clear success of the Trump campaign reshapes our understanding of the antihero genre in several ways. Initially, this study provides a clear and crystallized framework for understanding the core tenets of anti-heroism—something that had been lacking in extant literature to this point. Using this framework of the antihero genre, future scholarship may be able to evaluate antihero characters and narratives from a less general standpoint. In other words,

we may now be able to define characters and stories as antiheroic with greater accuracy rather than assuming that any seemingly immoral protagonist fits the bill. This study also helps to clarify the definition of anti-heroism where previous studies seemed to define the term in differing and either overly broad or overly narrow terms.

Additionally, this study demonstrates that antiheroic narratives and personas may (and should) be studied outside of fiction contexts—the domain that virtually all current scholarship on the subject considers. Such consideration is especially valuable when evaluating political rhetoric, as the Trump campaign’s successful utilization of the antihero genre may well lead other candidates to follow suit in hopes of attaining similar success. As scholars watch for future antiheroic campaigns, we must also look to the past and reevaluate other political campaigns that may have utilized these elements. After all, Trump is far from the first “outsider” candidate to fiercely challenge the political status quo (Zaller & Hunt, 1995; Neville-Shepard, 2014). The antihero framework may help to explain why such candidates were largely unsuccessful in overcoming political norms until recently. Future studies should also consider whether the antihero framework could be utilized as effectively by female or minority candidates. Trump’s campaign persona (like most fictional antihero personas) is firmly rooted in a white masculinity that seemingly makes it easier to get away with immoral and controversial tactics. It is difficult to imagine a non-white or non-male political candidate succeeding by using similar tactics. Research should continue to investigate why voters view elements of morality, leadership, motivation and strength differently across races and genders and how such double standards may (hopefully) be overcome.

However, the antihero genre may well be present in other real-world contexts beyond politics. Perhaps this framework could be employed to help scholars to explain the appeal of controversial celebrity figures (e.g., Kanye West, Shia LeBeouf), athletes (e.g., Connor McGregor) or business titans (e.g., Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk) who seem to display antiheroic tendencies. For instance, few would deny that Zuckerberg and Musk display some morally ambiguous behaviors, and yet Americans often deify them as models of success.

Further, this study suggests that antihero scholarship has yet to fully evaluate how antiheroes differ from traditional heroes. Clearly, antiheroes differ from traditional heroes in terms of morality and conduct. However, extant scholarship fails to consider anti-heroism in the context of heroic leadership. This study suggests that antiheroes may well employ elements of heroic leadership (strength, competence, etc.) while rejecting other notions of heroism, but clearly not every antihero is a leader. Dexter Morgan, for instance, is much more of a loner than a leader. Future research should further consider how leadership qualities may manifest in antihero characters and whether or not antiheroes with such qualities are preferable to “loner” antiheroes. In the context of presidential politics where leadership appeals are perhaps the most fundamental rhetorical element, it stands to reason that any antiheroic campaign must nonetheless provide a promise of traditionally heroic leadership.

Clearly, presidents are expected to display strong leadership ability whether they are presented as traditionally heroic or antiheroic. However, this study suggests that our “heroic expectations” of the presidency may not be as firm as previously considered. Indeed, Trump’s election and ensuing presidency may force scholars to reconsider the way that presidential

identity has long been viewed. In this sense, it is crucial that future scholarship evaluate the Trump presidency – not just his presidential campaign – through the antiheroic lens.

Interestingly, the present study suggests that Trump's use of antihero rhetoric began to wane as he reached the White House – of the four central texts analyzed, Trump's Inaugural Address demonstrated the least antiheroic rhetoric by far. That said, anyone who has followed the news since Trump took office knows that Trump's persona remains intensely unconventional and controversial. However, it is decidedly more difficult to think of President Trump as an antiheroic figure than Candidate Trump. After all, presidential candidates may frame themselves as embarking on a journey to better the nation. There is a fundamentally heroic element to any political campaign, whether the candidate is traditionally heroic or antiheroic. Once he took office, however, Trump could no longer claim to be an “outsider” on a crusade to shake of Washington D.C. As president, one could argue that he now represents the very institutions and behaviors that he had decried as a candidate. Likewise, Trump seemingly should no longer be able to win over audiences with rhetorical appeals of having justified motivations and the leadership ability to accomplish his goals. Rather, the public is now equipped to evaluate his effectiveness in delivering what was promised in his campaign rhetoric. Ultimately, one must wonder whether the trappings of the presidency can coexist with the core elements of anti-heroism and, therefore, whether Trump remains an antihero at all (Detrow, 2016; Kall, 2017; Klein, 2017)

Limitations

Like any scholarly inquiry, this study had several limitations that are worth noting. Just as Kracauer (1947) argued that trends in German film foreshadowed the rise of Adolf Hitler, it

would certainly appear that the popularization of antihero narratives (especially in television) foreshadowed Trump's rise to power. After all, Trump's campaign utilizes too many elements of the antihero genre for it to be entirely incidental. Unfortunately, however, we can never be entirely certain without being inside of Trump's head. Likewise, just as Kracauer could only argue that German citizens were predisposed to Hitler's rhetoric, the present study cannot definitely prove that shows like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* predisposed American voters to support the Trump candidacy. In fact, these shows may be more indicative of the kind of "arthouse television" that generally attracts more liberal viewership than conservative viewership (Bond, 2012).

It cannot be denied that the people who watch antihero television shows may not necessarily have been the same people who voted for Trump. That said, it is important to note that characters like Tony Soprano and Walter White are more than just television protagonists—they are cultural icons whose popularity as antiheroic figures transcends viewership and enters the American cultural zeitgeist (Bender, 2013; Dolak & Messer, 2013; Lee, 2013; Verhoeven, 2015; Stubbs, 2017; Collins, 2018; MacInnes, 2018). In other words, one does not necessarily need to have watched *The Sopranos* or *Breaking Bad* to recognize and appreciate these protagonists and understand how they break from the traditional heroic mold. After all, as established in Chapter One, the antihero phenomenon is not entirely new. The cynicism and disillusionment with American heroism can be traced back to the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal and even the antihero films of the 1960's and 1970's that built a foundation for the antihero television shows of recent years. In other words, the American public may have already been predisposed for decades to the sort of antiheroic tendencies emphasized and popularized in

television's recent "Golden Age". One can say with some degree of certainty that Trump's victory could not have been possible without the shifting moral standards that these events, films and television shows helped to reinforce in popular culture. Had the Hay's Code never been lifted or had film and television producers never began to reevaluate their protagonists, then it stands to reason that Trump's immoral conduct would have gone too far against the grain. In fact, Trump's own rise to fame may never have been allowed in the first place.

In addition, it is worth noting the limited scope of artifacts considered for this criticism. This study only considered four central texts from Trump's campaign (including his Inaugural Address, which is not a campaign text per se but nonetheless provided valuable insight) along with some peripheral artifacts where relevant. This study was also primarily interested in analyzing rhetoric from examples of Trump's campaign public address, which therefore limited the study from fully engaging with elements like Trump's use of social media or campaign advertisements. Future scholarship may add depth to our understanding of the Trump campaign by considering a wider range of artifacts.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, there is no singular explanation for Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election. It was a perfect storm of different factors, each of which has been and will continue to be widely studied. However, this study adds a valuable thread to that tapestry seeking to explain the most shocking event in American political (and perhaps even cultural) history. Academics, political pundits and everyday Americans alike will continue to seek answers. This author certainly intends to continue studying the subject. For now, it is clear that Trump's

campaign may be considered in a new light—as an example of the antihero genre that Tony Soprano, Walter White and many other morally ambiguous characters helped to create. Indeed, it seemed that countless American voters were eagerly awaiting the chance to elect a presidential candidate from outside the traditionally heroic mold. Perhaps in 2020, the antihero Trump will again wage war with a traditionally heroic candidate. Perhaps the Democratic Party will nominate an antihero of their own. Either way, this much is certain: we no longer know what we thought we did about rhetoric or politics. The world is changing quickly. The impetus is on us to keep up.

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