**Lonely Like America: Reflections on Donald Trump's First 100 Days**

**Dale S. Kuehne**

*For we are lonely like America*

*Land of less and more
Lonely like America
Mythic Graceland tour
The pioneers and racketeers
Sepia wagon trains
Across the Midwest plain*

*Lonely like America*

*The hustler and the free
Lonely like America
From sea to shining sea
The flag that's draped round the brave
Stars and stripes of deep dismay
Simply not having a nice day
We are lonely we are America
Lonely like America*

Martyn Joseph, ‘Lonely Like America’ from [*Under Lemonade Skies*](http://www.martynjoseph.net/under-lemonade-skies-october-2010/)

It is common for political scientists to evaluate U.S. Presidents after their first 100 days in office. This exercise is based on the assumption that by this time we can evaluate the effectiveness of a President and predict his future promise.

There is little ‘science’ applied in constructing these scorecards because there is not enough data on which to make an objective analysis. As a result, these scorecards tend to be rather subjective ‘I told you so’ exercises in which the author revisits and validates his post-election prediction of the President's performance.

While I am not persuaded that we can fairly ‘grade’ Donald Trump's first 100 days as President, I do believe we now have greater clarity about how Trump will govern and, more importantly, the mood of the country he is governing. Politicians not only shape the countries they serve, they also reflect the voters who elected them. In Donald Trump we see a man who is lonely like America.

**The Making of Donald Trump**

In their biography, [*Trump Revealed*](http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Trump-Revealed/Michael-Kranish/9781501155772), *Washington Post* reporters Michael Kranish and Marc Fisher provide a prescient look into the ‘making’ of Donald Trump. What they describe is an uncomplicated man who developed a way to view the world early in his life and to which as an adult he has stayed true.

His father found him to be an undisciplined, strong-willed child and at the age of 13 sent him to a military boarding school for the remainder of his middle- and high-school years. Young Donald quickly adjusted to his new environment and found a way to conquer the challenge. During this time, he developed a way of ‘doing business’ that he would spend the rest of his life perfecting. After fixing on a goal he would use a charm offensive to mobilize others to get his way. If he didn't get his way Trump would use every means possible to punish and shame those who stood in his way.

Once he identified his next project he'd start again, often charming the very people he destroyed for standing in the way of his previous project. He found a way to start ‘businesses’ within the school, and learned that one ingredient of success was building a brand. By the time he left the Military Academy his brand involved always having a beautiful woman on his arm. Yet the young Donald Trump the authors describe is a man using all of this manic activity to cope with a pervasive loneliness within. Trump's mantra was and is: people exist for personal transactions, and life is about transactional success, making winning deals.

Donald's father was a real-estate developer in New York who had found considerable success in creating housing for immigrants and the working-class families. After getting his MBA at Wharton, Donald began to work in his father's business, but he had higher aspirations. He wanted to develop high-end properties in Manhattan, and in order to do so he had to fight his way into the financial and social elite without any of the credentials or sufficient financial resources necessary for admittance to such an exclusive and closed society.

He succeeded to a point. He built high-end properties with money he did not have, but he was never satisfied. Since he didn't have the proper birth or the financial capital for true membership in the most elite New York society and business circles, he realized his success in real-estate required creating a name-brand for himself. He began to live a tabloid-life and he never stopped. He was constantly driven to tackle something bigger and as a result regularly bordered on insolvency. He couldn't help himself.

The opportunity came to build elite casinos in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and he embraced the challenge. Initially he succeeded. But he compulsively expanded his holdings even when the market could not support still additional casinos, and as a result ended up bankrupt. Donald Trump, however, has never taken no for an answer. He started over and again and made something out of next to nothing by imposing himself on the world. Life is about the success of the most recent transaction.

Kranish and Fisher describe a man with such singular focus that he should never be underestimated. To understand Trump is not to understand the wealth, the women, the tabloids and the gold-plated lifestyle. Donald Trump will always be the young man from Queens who possesses an inferiority complex and working-class instincts.

There is no other way to describe the extraordinary success he had as the star of the NBC reality television show *The Apprentice*. Running for 14 seasons, Donald Trump did what no one else in American entertainment had ever done - keep a reality television show about his life and business fresh and vital for 14 years. We refer to the Kardashians as the ultimate American reality television show, but their fame never rose above cable television. Donald Trump ruled major network television and his ratings never wavered.

In the end, the show didn't fire him. He fired the show - in order to run for President. His audience? Working class America. Despite his wealth he knew how to connect with them. They could live vicariously through him. He embodied their aspirations (the American Dream) while still seeming one of them. It is no accident that Trump won the 2016 election, and in so doing recreated the winning electoral coalition of working class Americans that Ronald Reagan created for the Republicans in the 1980s and Bill Clinton coopted for the Democrats in the 1990s.

**The Cost of Winning**

What we have seen in the first 100 days of the Trump Presidency is a President who is governing consistent with his background. Psychologically he may be the least complicated President in American History. He is extraordinarily transparent, to a fault. He created diplomatic waves the day after his election by taking a phone call from the political leader of Taiwan, thus violating decades of diplomatic protocol in dealing with China and Taiwan. Immediately, political analysts began asking questions about the calculation surrounding his decision to receive this call. They spoke of as if Trump had diplomatic instincts he has never exhibited. There is little doubt Trump had his reasons for taking the call, but it may not be more complicated than the fact he wanted to receive congratulations from a world leader.

Trump has also received much criticism for ‘tweeting’ his most current thoughts and emotions around the clock. Again, some pundits viewed this as an approach to campaigning that would certainly cease upon entering the White House. But Trump is governing as he has lived for 70 years. He is an extraordinarily wealthy man with working-class instincts, an inferiority complex and is driven to succeed. Success means winning. What it means to win may not always be clear, but once it is, it becomes the only goal.

There is, however, another ‘element’ to Donald Trump - a pervasive *loneliness*. Trump doesn't have friendships but rather has an ever-rotating series of business partners necessary to succeed in closing the deal-at-hand. As a child he would only interact with his father at his business office. [Kranish and Fisher](http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Trump-Revealed/Michael-Kranish/9781501155772) note that this is the way he has interacted with his own children. It is not surprising that it is virtually impossible for Trump to separate himself from his family business, because it is through the family business that he has had the most meaningful interactions with his wives and children. Trump often speaks wistfully of the importance of family, but has had extraordinary difficulty in building the marriages and family that he perceives he enjoyed as a child.

What Trump has brought to his first 100 days is his zeal to win. Throughout his life he has surrounded himself with people he believes can help him win, and if he does not enjoy success, he replaces them in short order. He will praise those he needs to get his way and he will turn on them if they are standing in his way. People in his life exist to help him achieve his goals. His staff are not friends, nor do they become friends. He routinely replaced his campaign staff when he perceived he wasn't winning, and he is doing the same in the White House. His ultimately loyalty is not to his staff, but to the next victory.

We see this in the manner with which he has dealt with Congress. He is focused on getting his way. To date he has been foiled in his effort to change ‘Obamacare’ but he has not conceded defeat; rather, he is adopting a different strategy. If Republicans and Democrats in Congress believe they can defeat his agenda, he will simply change it. If the Republican ‘Freedom Caucus’ in the House of Representatives believes they can get Trump to bargain with them by defeating his initiative, he will change the initiative and find others - including Democrats - to deliver him a victory he will claim he wanted all along.

Trump is not an ideologue. He never has been. He has vacillated between various political parties all of his life. As the title of his autobiography suggests, he is all about the ‘art of the deal’. He is about winning, and he has demonstrated the ability to change his goals and approach in order to do so.

It would be inaccurate to describe Washington, D.C., as a friendly place. Lyndon B. Johnson is famously quoted as saying, ‘If you want a friend in Washington, you better get a dog’. The first 100 days tells us that Donald Trump will be at home in Washington, because he has always been adept at being alone.

The same can be seen in Trump's foreign policy. He spoke defiantly on the campaign trail about pulling out of the Paris environmental accords, cancelling the Iran nuclear agreement and building a wall with Mexico by getting the Mexicans to pay for it. With the exception of commissioning a competition for designing the wall with Mexico, he has not moved on any of these during the first 100 days. Neither has he followed through on his promise to sanction China for currency fixing.

He has been surprisingly measured in military engagement. He ordered 59 Tomahawk missiles into a Syrian air base only after giving those present one hour's notice to leave, and dropped one bomb (albeit a large one) on an underground base in Afghanistan. Neither has he cozied up to Vladimir Putin as many critics suggested. He appears to be going slow on the international stage. It is not surprising given that he has far less experience on it. No doubt he is trying to decide what it means to win and how to go about it, and when he does winning will be all that counts.

**‘For Himself Alone’**

President Trump is concerned about cultivating friendship neither in Washington, D.C., nor on the international stage. He is concerned about making each deal the best deal for America. Each transaction is measured primarily by its particular outcome as opposed to the relational consequences (good or bad). It is not surprising that he is viewed as an isolationist in international affairs, but it is an erroneous characterization of his approach. He is constantly focused on the issue(s) at hand, and bases his calculations on how to proceed on a case by case basis. Trump makes neither public policy nor foreign policy by cultivating or drawing on friendship. Rather he uses people for getting his way.

All of us are influenced, to greater and lesser degrees, by our psychology. When looking at these first 100 days, and in trying to understand what the future holds for the Trump presidency, Trump's *loneliness* stands out to me as the defining characteristic.

With the exception of his children - perhaps even including them - Trump views life is a series of relational transactions toward the end of getting his own way. People have utility based on whether they can get the deal done. After both success and failure, everyone is expendable until circumstances make them relevant again. There is little time for introspection after defeat because he is already moving on toward a new and in all likelihood very different deal. Trump is no Barack Obama. When Congress thwarted Obama, he didn't change his goals, he simply went around Congress to achieve them. Trump will change his goals and his friends and his wives, as necessary.

Yet, in his loneliness, Trump is at home in America and much of America is at home with him. It is not just our President who is lonely. He presides over a lonely country. A significant aspect of Trump's appeal to the working class is connected to the way he represents the ‘American Dream’. In this respect he is like Ronald Reagan, but America has changed profoundly since the 1980s. In the 1970s the lowest rate of divorce in America was high school educated, working-class, middle-America. Now this demographic has one of the highest rates of divorce. When Reagan spoke to America he resonated with a group of people who were grounded in family and community and wanted to better themselves economically. When Trump speaks to middle-America he connected to people losing relational hope and hoping that increased wealth can compensate.

Some may find my characterization too harsh. I do not think it is. I believe the American Dream has always been about quality of life broadly understood, not standard of living. I believe returning to this is imperative. Moreover, the America I describe is not a recent phenomenon. Alexis de Tocqueville foresaw it when he wrote [*Democracy in America*](http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/286325/democracy-in-america-and-two-essays-on-america-by-alexis-de-tocqueville/9780140447606/) in the 1830s. Near the end of the second volume, he sagely writes:

‘The first thing that strikes the observer is an innumerable multitude of men all equal and alike, incessantly endeavouring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. Each of them, living apart, is as a stranger to the fate of all the rest - his children and his private friends constitute to him the whole of mankind; as for the rest of his fellow-citizens, he is close to them, but he sees them not - he touches them, but he feels them not; he exists but in himself and for himself alone; and if his kindred still remain to him, he may be said at any rate to have lost his country’.

Donald Trump has never allowed himself to be defined by the first 100 days of any endeavour. Anyone who believes he has been ‘contained’ by party politics or the D.C. establishment is underestimating him the way 13 Republicans and Hillary Clinton did in the presidential primaries and general election. What his first 100 days tell us is that, like those before him, when inaugurated he had an established way of life. In Trump's case, it is being driven to succeed even if only to escape his loneliness.

In this, Donald Trump is lonely like America.

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