

Trump marks first Super-President



Joshua Guerra

Tom Palaima and Al Martinich

November 18, 2016

The Daily Texan

<https://thedailytexan.com/2016/11/18/trump-marks-first-super-president/>

The election of Donald Trump marks so significant a sea change in American political history that we, Professors Al Martinich (Philosophy) and Tom Palaima (Classics and Dylanology), have proposed a new interdisciplinary Undergraduate Studies (UGS) course based upon our experience teaching courses with ethics and leadership flags and our longstanding scholarly interests in political history and philosophy. We believe that what starts at UT Austin should not only change the world, but explain clearly how the world has changed. Our course will do just that.

If you are trying to make sense of the presidential election results and the voter appeal that lifted Donald Trump to victory, you need to rethink the entire moral framework of

our fundamentally Judeo-Christian, post-Enlightenment humanist society. You need to free your minds of outmoded models of viable democracies that go back in western culture to the personal genius and political savvy of Solon and Cleisthenes in 6th-century BCE Athens. In short, you need to reach for Friedrich Nietzsche, a Classics-steeped German philosopher who knew power-mongering when he saw it.

Notice we say 'reach for' Nietzsche. We do not say read Nietzsche. As the election and appointments made since then prove, informing ourselves on issues and fact-checking even preposterous assertions are passé. That's the old and outdated form of dutiful citizenship we have taught here at UT Austin for so long.

Friedrich Nietzsche proposed the concept of the 'superman' to define the kind of animal that would come after and surpass human beings. If Donald Trump had been born 80 years earlier, Nietzsche would not have had to invent his superman. Like Donald Trump, Nietzsche's superman is driven by an indomitable "will to power." He openly violates moral rules and conventions because he believes himself to be superior to them. Also because, as Bob Dylan sang when Donald Trump was still a teenager, "money doesn't talk, it swears."

Think here of Donald Trump on Fox News moderator Megyn Kelly: "There was blood coming out of her wherever." Or Trump on immigrants from Mexico: "They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists." Our ordinary understanding of morality requires concern for other people even if it comes at our own expense. Trump calls it a "herd morality." He stands out from the herd.

Trump proclaims that he has never asked God for forgiveness for anything. Damned straight. Compare Nietzsche: "Let us not be cowardly in face of our actions! ... Remorse of consciousness is indecent." As John Wayne proclaimed in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, released in 1949 when Trump was a toddler, "Mister, never apologize. It's a sign of weakness."

Guilt and sin were the inventions of priests, according to Nietzsche. Freed from these, Trump is free to claim, "[I could] shoot people and I wouldn't lose voters." Apparently like an all-wise and all-self-serving deity, he did not shoot any of his own supporters.

What about precedents? We should note that the United States has had super-presidents before. However, they believed in democracy and they did not brag about their greatness. Teddy Roosevelt wanted the United States to be a nation of conquest. His cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt broke the one hundred and fifty year convention that no president should serve more than two terms. But both were discreet supermen. For Trump, indiscretion is not a vice; it's what he says it is: "fair game."

The title of Nietzsche's book about a superman, who could be a super-president, is usually translated as *The Anti-Christ* (1895). A more accurate translation from the German is *The Anti-Christian*. The values of Nietzsche's anti-Christian are the opposite of Christian values: strength, not weakness; pride, not humility; impulsive passion, not controlled reason; war, not peace; and egoism, not altruism. In short, the creed of anti-Christians is this: "What is good? All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad? All that proceeds from weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power increases, that a resistance is overcome."

Trump has overcome enormous resistance and become president. His support from Republican leaders, who unadvisedly held onto our once common moral scruples, was tepid at best. Trump never praised Republican leaders in his campaign speeches. He won it all on his own, his way, the superman way.

As divided as Democrats and Republicans have been for the last thirty years, they have been united on some basic values. People who served in the military were patriots, for "giving service to their country" and sometimes "making the greatest sacrifice." Only soldiers who "disgraced their uniform" were subject to criticism. These sentiments are widespread. They are not intellectual or elitist. They were once commonly held throughout our population.

Super-President-elect Donald Trump singlehandedly has changed all that. John McCain is not a war hero for enduring five and a half years of brutal physical and psychological torture in the Hanoi Hilton and even refusing to be released unless all his fellow prisoners of war were. Nor is he a hero for afterwards dedicating his life to public service in the U.S. Senate.

He never should have been considered a war hero, "because he was captured," or because his plane was shot down and he went down with it. So sayeth Donald Trump,

who also holds in contempt a mother and father named the Khans, whose son was killed in Afghanistan, because they are Muslim.

The Book of Ecclesiastes, which is supposed to be a work of wisdom for Christians and Jews, says “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happens to them all.” Pious resignation and acceptance of what life offers us were once chief tenets of moral wisdom throughout our land.

No more. Trump has exploited the resentment of the politically and economically weak. For Trump, those who lose the race, lose the battle, or lack riches, are all losers. Yet, blue collar workers, especially males, and others who have lost out in their socio-economic lives idolize Trump. He is a comfort to them. In their fantasy, they are Donald Trump, with big houses, long cars, and fine clothes—and women, beautiful women, many of them. He is their ideal. Their resentment trumps all, as Nietzsche suggested.

Lastly the superman, according to Nietzsche in *The Anti-Christ*, cannot exist without the masses because he is the pinnacle of “a pyramid” that “can stand only on a broad base; its very first prerequisite is a strongly and soundly consolidated mediocrity. The crafts, trade, agriculture, [i.e., hard-working Americans] ... are in no way compatible with anything other than mediocrity in ability and desires ... For the mediocre it is happiness to be mediocre.”

Our first super-president basks in the admiration of the 60 million Americans who voted for him. No matter that he lost the popular vote and won the presidency via the electoral college system that in 2012 he declared “a disaster for a democracy.”

Our Nietzschean interpretation here comes with one reservation: Trump may be too big to understand in terms of one theory. We may need to supplement our understanding by borrowing from Freud. Trump is all id. He has no superego. Egotism substitutes for ego. That we will explore with students who enroll in our course.

The United States is still a democracy. The sad truth is that every democracy gets the government it deserves, or, as we now are seeing, the super-president.

Al Martinich is a professor of philosophy. Tom Palaima is a professor of classics.