

# TRUMP THE STRATEGIST

**Chapter A: The Path to Power:** *Focusing on the 2024 Campaign and the "Malignant" Road to Victory.*

**Chapter B: The "Art" of Governing:** *An Analysis of Trump's 2025/26 „Accomplishments“ and the Strategy of Chaos.*

**Chapter C: The Agonistic Approach** in the Philosophy of Strategy.

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## **Chapter A: Trump the Malignant Strategist**

**Chapter A** of this article on strategy focuses on Trump's campaign for the 2024 presidential election. How could Trump become U.S. president a second time? Deeply religious opponents of Trump may have suspected that he sold his soul to the devil many years ago and that he was to be richly rewarded with money and power in return, and that he was also granted special protection against the attacks of his numerous and powerful opponents. But there is also a simpler explanation: Trump was better suited for this type of propaganda campaign than any other campaign strategist, and the social and cultural conditions for such a campaign were extremely favorable. When Trump first became president in 2016, a dream came true for his "friend" Putin, and America's cultural decline could begin.

## **Chapter B: Trump the Chaos Strategist**

**Chapter B** deals with Trump's crucial first months in office through March 31, 2026 (in his second presidency), during which he sought to push through key parts of his agenda. During the campaign, Kamala Harris issued a stark warning against a second Trump presidency. Voters either paid no attention to her statements or did not believe her, even though it was already very clear during the campaign how Trump's second presidency would unfold. Unfortunately, things turned out to be much worse than many had feared during the campaign.

## **Chapter C: The Agonistic Approach to Strategy**

**Chapter C** presents the "agonistic approach" in the philosophy of strategy. In Parts A and B, I attempted to use this approach to analyze Trump's strategies in his "third and fourth political wars."

# Chapter A

## Introduction:

American deep culture played a role in the division of American society, and for Trump, it was a key source of his populism and propaganda methods. The next step was to illustrate the dynamics of the MAGA movement, the significance of MAGA culture, and the impressive strength of the MAGA echo chamber in Trump's campaign.

Key resources for Trump's campaign were the red states, centered on the strong Southern bloc, and the numerous red regions within the blue states. Furthermore, Trump could rely on the judiciary; in particular, the Supreme Court's intervention was of enormous importance. Trump did not have to spend any money to secure the support of the MAGA echo chamber. From this perspective, Rupert Murdoch was the most significant financier of the Trump campaign alongside Elon Musk, whose X platform was of great importance to MAGA.

During his campaign, Trump was able to deploy two branches of his forces into the propaganda war. One of these branches was responsible for the culture war, and the other for the economic campaign. The five "spectra" that Trump deployed in the culture war afforded him maximum flexibility. In the "economic" propaganda campaign, Trump sought to establish three narratives as dominant narratives, which he succeeded in doing. Furthermore, Trump had at his disposal a mosaic of five intertwined sub-narratives (economic narratives in a narrow sense).

The two branches of his forces aimed their weapons at three target areas (target groups): ethnicity, gender identity, and age cohorts, with resounding success.

Trump's campaign was briefly outlined from the perspective of the "agonistic approach" in the philosophy of strategy using the central concepts: method, content, methodological-content-related element, strategic project, strategic core, metamethod, and agonistic figure.

## **The underlying cultural structures (in German: “Die Tiefenkultur”)**

### **The atavistic layer of American culture**

Atavism, originally a biological term, describes the reappearance of traits or characteristics that were present in an organism's ancestors but were lost in the course of evolution or cultural development. In a cultural context, atavism refers to the persistence or return of ideas, practices, and values from an earlier time in modern society. These cultural relics can take various forms, whether in traditions, ideologies, social norms, or, for example, as linguistic relics. So, Afrikaans has connections to 17th-century Dutch, as it developed from the Dutch spoken by early settlers in South Africa. Afrikaans is, in a sense, a linguistic atavism, as it has retained features and structures of historical Dutch that have changed in modern Dutch. The concept of cultural atavism proves particularly relevant in the analysis of American culture, which is characterized by a fascinating and complex mixture of historical influences. The United States is a country whose identity is deeply rooted in the philosophical and political discourses of the 18th century. Many of the principles formulated at the founding of the nation remain central to this day. For example, Thomas Jefferson emphasized in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" and possess certain inalienable rights. Certain cultural aspects of the 18th century, i.e., from the period before and after the War of Independence, were frozen in time, so to speak, and remain effective today: unbridled liberalism and individualism, great freedom and opportunities for development in the religious and economic spheres, a pioneering spirit, religious tolerance, a strong anchoring of religion in society, competitive thinking, performance oriented thinking, meritocracy, and "the pursuit of happiness." The oligarchy was also structurally predetermined. An enlightened, wealthy elite set the tone in the colonies. This elite was probably the counterpart to the liberal section of the European elite, which even included many aristocrats, and the American elite also had a soft spot for Freemasonry.

There were two significant cultural currents in early American society: on the one hand, the ideas of the Enlightenment, which promoted the pursuit of freedom in the political, cultural, and economic spheres; on the other hand, the conviction that religious freedom for all, not just for a particular denomination, was of central importance. These two pillars formed the cultural core of the thirteen colonies during the War of Independence. The American elite was strongly influenced by Freemasonry and ideas of tolerance and strove for freedom, far away from the rule of the English king. After independence was achieved, the aim was to build the state in a liberal sense and create strong democratic and republican structures. There was no desire to have a new king at the helm. These two currents dominated the dynamically developing American culture. The Declaration of Independence of 1776, written by Thomas Jefferson, postulates that all people are created equal and endowed with

"unalienable rights." This declaration combines the tolerance of the Enlightenment with a strong reference to God. It was a combination that allowed the various denominations in the colonies to live together peacefully. Here we find ideas from the Enlightenment and a strong commitment to God united in a single important passage. The Declaration of Independence had a visionary element that should not be underestimated and influenced the movements to abolish slavery. However, equality of all people was still pure utopia in 1776. Equality did not apply to slaves, women, indigenous peoples, and men without sufficient wealth. In the course of the political negotiations of the time, the slave-owning states did not want to be disadvantaged, and so the idea arose to include slaves in the distribution of political power in the United States, but not as full citizens, but as 3/5 people.

With the end of the war in September 1783, America faced a complex political and social reality. While a slow process of abolishing slavery began in the northern states, deeply rooted, more traditional views persisted in the South. This cultural divide was initially bridged by the common interest in creating a strong state. The cultural differences between North and South and the attempt to continue as a united country are still evident today as atavistic cultural elements. The various dialectical opposites (not only in the question of North versus South) were significant in early America. There were two possibilities: either society would succeed in resolving fundamental conflicts through a *synthesis* of thesis and antithesis, or the original opposites or concise cultural (and ideological) positions would continue to exist and develop a life of their own. Many of the Founding Fathers were personally confronted with this dialectic as slave owners and enlightened thinkers and had to find a solution to this problem for themselves. After the end of his presidency, George Washington left all his house slaves behind in Philadelphia, and as a result, they gained their freedom under the laws of the time. America is going both ways (synthesis or continuation of the contradictions), and the cultural and social implications of this approach cannot be overestimated. An important "synthesis" was probably achieved by the Civil War with the abolition of slavery. The more modern North was able to defeat the South. But racism could not be defeated. The views of the 18th century, even among enlightened people, including important philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, reflect a hierarchy of races that was considered legitimate. The idea that certain races are less valuable than others has had a profound impact on social consciousness that is still visible today.

The dialectical opposites up until 1800 did not only concern the issue of slavery and the conflict between North and South. There were many other cultural (social, political, and ideological) opposites that continued to have a decisive influence on America to this day. For the most part, it was not possible to defuse them through synthesis for the benefit of society. People bowed to this reality, accepted it, and tried to live with it according to the motto: If you can't change something, change your attitude toward it. In the course of their socialization, many learned to love this cultural approach (to dealing with opposites) and used it to their advantage. For example, to fight ideological battles. In any case, people got used to the various opposing positions on many political and cultural issues and could fall back on them, when necessary, because the atavistic ideas and ideological positions did not become obsolete. This did not remain without consequences: when a political party attempted to achieve a synthesis, for example on the question of the role of the state in society and in other political and ideological areas, it did not really succeed. Obama was able to become president during a difficult time, but this was probably seen by most white people as an "exception" and

therefore did not represent a success for a new society. The old idea of racial hierarchy was still very much alive.

The colonies were a refuge for religious people of all kinds. All religions strove for territorial expansion and cultural dominance. The Puritan immigrants were already very successful in this regard. Today, there is the influential Bible Belt. At the same time, since the founding of the state, importance has been placed on the separation of church and state. These two opposing positions remain very strongly anchored in American culture. Through the War of Independence, the United States dared to fight against a world power that had emerged as the great victor of the Seven Years' War just a few years earlier, and it was successful. Then the USA itself became an expansive, emerging power. In fierce battles with the Native Americans, attempts were made to gain more land. A "synthesis" was achieved between these opposing positions: the Native Americans were unable to prevent the gradual loss of more and more land to the white settlers. As already mentioned, the old conflict between the ideas of the Enlightenment and slavery was also resolved through "synthesis" in the Civil War. The cultural differences between North and South had already begun to emerge in the period leading up to 1800. However, this contrast was by no means mitigated later on but developed very dynamically until today. Of course, the thinking in terms of opposites was already strongly represented in politics until 1800: the two-party system became established. The 1800 election campaign was already fiercely contested. The weaknesses of thinking in terms of opposites also became apparent later on: on the one hand, people advocated individualism, the freedom of the individual, and a weak state, but on the other hand, this made them more dependent on the elite, the oligarchy, capitalists, and, not least, religious movements, because they did not have a strong state as a partner and protector. Americans quickly became accustomed to these conditions. The atavistic cultural layer has had a decisive influence on American culture for over 200 years. It is ideology, but also reality, an active force. It is in people's minds, in social structures and institutions, in existing cultural material, in behavior, in the statements and expressions of social actors, in family traditions, etc. This force is effective, but it is not recognizable to people. It works hidden away as a deep cultural force (in German: as "Tiefenkultur"). Individual ideological elements are the easiest to recognize. The deep cultural structures have been secured by various interests and actors in such a way that most Americans cannot see through it. Beginning with the atavistic ideological core, the underlying cultural structures were further expanded and also changed over the course of more than 220 years (after 1800). Thus, today's oligarchy is no longer the oligarchy of 1800.

Most Americans are proud of their atavistic structures. They do not believe that anything should be changed. Can we still have confidence in these structures? Did they prove themselves after the 2024 election because Trump's unlawful seizure of power was prevented, or was America lucky because Mike Pence and others did not want to go down that path? On the one hand, America relies on the Constitution, the separation of powers, the rule of law, the police, and a strong independent judiciary; On the other hand, there is a large gray area characterized by an often ruthless pioneering spirit, brutal exploitation of political and economic power, opportunism, adventurism, gun ownership, and people who cannot be trusted because they act like snake oil salesmen. In addition, there is a dark area where injustice, violence, and the law of the strongest prevail. This was already the case in early

America, and nothing has changed to this day; it was difficult to deal with Alfonso Capone, for example. In many other countries, gangsters could not spread so openly and extensively.

In Austria, we have a federal president with a lot of power, but politics is made by the government. If something goes wrong, the federal president can intervene. The Americans rely on a strong president who is both head of government and head of state. This has already brought this country a great deal. Think of the strong American presidents who acted decisively at important moments. But when this power falls into the wrong hands, it becomes dangerous. In January 2021, for example, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff contacted his Chinese counterpart because the Chinese were concerned that the unpredictable Trump might stage a spectacular departure in order to create chaos and thus remain in power. Even the early Americans feared the great power of the president and hoped to keep him in check through the separation of powers and frequent congressional elections. The atavistic cultural layer developed in several phases. Important individual elements date back to the early phase of the thirteen colonies before independence, especially the religious element. Then came the phase of the War of Independence. During this time, the Declaration of Independence was drafted and independence from Great Britain was proclaimed shortly thereafter. George Washington was the leading politician and military leader during this period. The next phase was also hugely significant, with the creation of the Constitution and the important presidencies of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson. After the end of the war, it was necessary to quickly create and enact a constitution: the focus was on a weak state. The state was to interfere as little as possible in the affairs of its citizens. A weak state did not need as much tax revenue as a well-developed state. A weak state also meant, in the spirit of individualism at that time: help yourself, then God will help you, otherwise no one will help you. A weak state supposedly produces strong citizens. These were all atavistic elements that are still effective today. The constitution relied on checks and balances to keep the state and the powerful executive branch under control.

At first, people were still afraid of a new king. But Washington and his successors showed no such ambitions. The Constitution was not only about the separation of powers and the creation of a strong, independent judiciary; it was also about what kind of federalism should be practiced, or rather, how power should be divided between the central government and the states. In 1791, the Second Amendment to the Constitution was adopted. There was no standing army, probably in line with the idea of a weak state and the fear of a king or dictator. Citizens were supposed to defend the state when necessary. A high price was paid for this. Since then, gun ownership has been very important to many Americans. The First Amendment aimed above all to guarantee freedom of religion, speech, press, and assembly, in keeping with the strict liberalism of the time. This early culture and early liberalism as atavistic elements are still strongly effective in these areas today. This can be tapped into by a populist and used for propaganda purposes. A political party that is the first to take possession of this terrain in an election campaign, ruthlessly interpreting it in its own interests and using it to its advantage, has gained important advantages for itself in the electoral contest. In other democratic countries, ways would have been found to defuse aggressive propagandists (see Fox News). European countries know exactly why they do not allow unbridled First and Second Amendment matters. Elon Musk's "novel" salute would have prompted the public prosecutor to take action in Germany and Austria. But Americans did not want to touch their atavistic base. They were also far too hesitant when it came to necessary constitutional changes. They then

paid a high price for this. Wouldn't it have been better to use the consensus process much earlier to focus the Constitution more strongly on strengthening and defending democracy? Then we would have been spared the spectacle surrounding January 6, 2021, and Vice President Pence, as well as the Supreme Court's highly questionable rulings in favor of the Republicans and MAGA. If American democracy survives the current Trump presidency reasonably well, it is to be expected that nothing will be done again. This will be taken as proof of how strong and robust the atavistic base was: even Trump failed because of it. Overall, the advantages of this ironclad base outweigh the numerous disadvantages (according to this view) and guarantee America's privileged position in the world.

Around 1800, the expansion of the atavistic cultural layer was complete. This culture was a dynamic and contradictory one. This can still be felt today and can be exploited for populist and other purposes, for example by Trump or Putin. This early period is almost a "sacred" time for Americans, a time of great wisdom and foresight. Only in this way can one fully understand, for example, why the Constitutional Court often made meticulous considerations about what the founding fathers "really" meant by individual constitutional provisions. In doing so, they even conducted linguistic studies and studied old dictionaries to find out how a term was used at the time.

### **The further development of the underlying cultural structures**

The combative ideological elements of the atavistic cultural layer just described include individualism, the pursuit of freedom, competitiveness and performance-oriented thinking, the pursuit of money and power, as well as knowledge, and "the pursuit of happiness." This is not a recipe for a conservative society, but rather for an enormously dynamic one with many ups and downs. A great deal of optimism is necessary for this: the American experiment will work out fine. Combative means that ideas, ideological fragments, strategically significant elements, guidelines for action, and so on must be enforced in society against their (ideological) opponents. Combative also means holding on to old values and ideologies and trying to enforce them as far as possible whenever the opportunity arises. Compromises and "syntheses" are not allowed in this regard. This is how you get a recipe for a brutal but dynamic society that offers opportunities for individuals to achieve rapid social advancement. However, the old ideologies and thus contradictions remained, for example, individualism versus collectivism. Compare the differences between these two positions among the early Quakers and Puritans. All values and ideologies must be understood primarily in the context of their time. Back then (around 1800), they were at the height of their time. Old values and ideologies can also harm society if they are rigorously enforced. However, proponents of this type of enforcement believe that the benefits outweigh the harm (collateral damage).

In the evolving underlying cultural structures, new elements were incorporated in addition to the existing ones, which also attempt to prevail in the battle of ideas and ideologies. The cultural elements (old elements from the period up to around 1800 or later additions) of the early deep culture have changed to a greater or lesser extent over time until today. The old atavistic elements, such as individualism, freedom of thought, oligarchy, federalism, violence, competition, meritocracy, and others, remained alive and significant, and they were also continuously changed and adapted to the respective social possibilities. We can

speak of deep culture (Tiefenkultur) with corresponding ideas, ideologies, values, ways of thinking and behaving, institutions, and content (in works of art, books, films, radio and television broadcasts, on the internet and social media, and so on) because it goes back a long way and is deeply rooted in society, cultural institutions, and individuals, and is not easily recognizable. There are also numerous cross-connections between the various elements of the deep culture. Many elements are ideologically charged. People want to assert themselves against other ideological ideas that disagree with them. If dialectical debate in one area is exaggerated, it leads to ideological division in society. In addition to the various ideological elements that have been pushed to the point of social division on ideological issues, there are various other cultural contrasts and social divisions that are significant in America today: rich versus poor, educated versus uneducated, urban versus rural regions, individuals choosing modern lifestyles (many of whom are educated and enlightened) versus people with non-modern lifestyles, strongly religious versus weakly religious and atheistic people, red states versus blue states. These walls, which divide American society into separate entities, are not least a consequence of the (atavistic or later) underlying cultural structures. Putin intervened in the 2016 presidential election campaign by attempting to emphasize these rifts and lines of conflict, on the one hand to help Trump and on the other to weaken America through his hybrid warfare.

**Close connections between the ideological strands of "North-South" and "Slavery-Racism" in the unfolding underlying cultural system in America.**

General historical developments have had a major influence on the further expansion of deep culture. The history of deep culture is part of general history, influencing it and being influenced by it in turn. The unfolding of deep culture can only be touched upon here, using the examples of early racism in the 19th century and the dynamics of ideological division between North and South. With the end of the Civil War, slavery was history. However, this did not mean that the suffering of African Americans (former slaves and their descendants) was over. Racism soon dominated the South during the terrible Jim Crow era. Racism and discrimination against African Americans were, of course, not limited to the South. Jim Crow racism was an important new element in American deep culture, an innovation. I am not saying that there was no racism before the Jim Crow era. Slavery was so terrible, so inconceivable from today's perspective, that I do not want to use the term "racism" in connection with slavery, so as not to trivialize it. American society was infected by a virus. This initially led to slavery, then mutated into racism. Sometimes a kind of epidemic broke out, and more people were infected by the racism virus, then there were quieter times again. If the North had reacted differently after the Civil War and enforced a much more radical cultural change in the South, the South would not be so dangerous for the entire country today. After the Civil War, efforts were made during the Reconstruction period to transform society in the South of the US. These efforts were short-lived, ending with the so-called "Compromise of 1877" and the withdrawal of occupation troops from the South. Progress made in civil rights was lost, and the era of racial segregation and Jim Crow began. The North did not come to the aid of African Americans in the South. The Jim Crow laws were not officially abolished until the 1960s. It was only at this time that African Americans were able to successfully defend themselves through the Civil Rights Movement and its

charismatic propagandist Martin Luther King and achieve legislative changes (Civil Rights Act 1964, Voting Rights Act 1965), but only because a courageous president supported their cause. The Civil Rights Act ended legally mandated segregation in the southern states. The term Civil Rights Movement suggests a certain social breadth, but this was hardly the case. The abolition of the Jim Crow laws and the overcoming of institutionalized racial segregation in the US were primarily the result of decades of struggle by African Americans. In order to bring the South much closer to the North culturally, it would have been necessary to create appropriate political, economic, social, and religious structures. This would have required much more time and patience, and a great deal of investment. The necessary insight was lacking, and even if it had been present among important sections of the political elite, it would probably not have been possible to implement it politically. Furthermore, there was no guarantee that such efforts would be successful. The social and religious structures in the South were strongly linked to racial discrimination. The structures in the South favored a society that resisted any attempts at cultural change that threatened the existing order.

The First Great Awakening had a lasting influence on the South in cultural and religious terms. This new style of religious practice fell on particularly fertile ground there. This revivalist movement led to a greater emphasis on personal religious experiences and emotional sermons, a departure from traditional, formal church structures, and a greater emphasis on the individual in faith. In the South, where the Anglican Church dominated, new Protestant denominations such as the Baptists and Methodists were able to spread. This dynamic created a complex religious landscape that also influenced political and social aspects of society. Although the movement emphasized the equality of all people before God, much of the religious community came to terms with the reality of slavery. The famous revivalist preacher George Whitefield even supported slavery, believing that it would convert enslaved people to Christianity. In fact, many slaves did become Christians because slave owners often supported Christianization, and slaves found comfort and hope in Christianity. What was the duration of a short, miserable human life compared to eternal bliss? Since independence, the North and South had not been able to live well together, but with both regions united in a common state, the United States quickly became a global power.

The battle between North and South is not the only conflict dividing America. Since independence, Americans have been accustomed to stark contrasts and often fierce conflicts. In the 2024 presidential election campaign, Americans have outdone themselves in this discipline: Democracy or dictatorship, who is stronger? Bets are still being taken. The independent press was not taking sides strongly enough to defend democracy more vigorously; after all, the battle should be decided "fairly," and the "true" opinion of the people should prevail, in the spirit of a "true" democracy. This democracy was allowed to abolish itself. The whole thing was also a ratings-driven spectacle, a kind of reality TV show. It was no coincidence that Trump often said "stay tuned" during his first presidency. For the elite among reality TV fans, "democracy or dictatorship" was certainly much more exciting than the battle between "book smarts" and "street smarts" in Trump's reality TV show "The Apprentice."

Until the Civil War, people were preoccupied with the struggle for and against slavery. White people in the South, and not only slave owners but also many of the enlightened elite, did not believe in racial equality. Slavery provided "proof" of inequality, as it were. In 1808, the slave trade was abolished in a first step. The influence of the North was already making

itself felt. The atavistic ideological ideas of a hierarchy of races with whites at the top (and African American slaves at the bottom) and the deep-culture innovation of "Jim Crow racism," which emerged after the Civil War, had a major influence on society and culture in the United States in the postwar period. The South attempted to return to the old social conditions as closely as possible with the ideology of racism and corresponding activities (Jim Crow laws).

Long before the Civil War, still in the atavistic era, a second ideological strand emerged that was closely related to the first ideological strand (atavistic racial hierarchy including slavery and racism). This refers to the ideological positions in the conflict between the two cultures of the North and South. These two deep-rooted ideological strands have continued into the present day. They changed general history and were themselves shaped by it. When President Johnson took action against segregation, the South faced a problem. Should we switch to the party of our old archenemy, the Yankees, or should we grit our teeth and continue to vote Democrat? In the end, they gritted their teeth and switched to the Republicans. Today, the South is firmly in Republican hands. It is their stronghold. As a result, the Republicans also became the party of evangelical Christians. The "new" Democrats were overwhelmingly voted for by African Americans. The "old" Democrats vigorously supported the Jim Crow laws. This is how circumstances change, partly due to the dynamics of the underlying cultural positions. In atavistic times, a strategic alliance developed between the Protestants of the South and the supporters of slavery and the racial hierarchy. After the Civil War, people in the South had to content themselves with Jim Crow racism. This political and religious alliance, with racism as its central element, was later dynamically developed and modernized.

In the early 1950s, Joseph McCarthy, supported by Roy Cohn, was hunting communists, but then his activities were brought to an end. Eisenhower was even courted by Republicans and Democrats. He hesitated about whether to enter politics at all and eventually became the Republican presidential candidate. The conservative cultural climate of the 1950s was not yet able to arouse the anger of the South. Soon after, things became more turbulent in this regard. John F. Kennedy narrowly defeated the conservative Nixon. Lyndon B. Johnson from Texas, the majority leader in the Senate, became vice president. With Johnson, Kennedy wanted to win votes in the South. The South had no idea what was in store for it with Johnson. After Johnson, it was Nixon's turn. He was re-elected because he was able to prevail against the progressive George McGovern, the candidate of youth and the cultural revolution of the time, with his silent majority. Nixon eventually had to resign. After the transitional candidate Ford, Jimmy Carter came to power. With him, America attempted a new beginning after the cunning Nixon and a cultural synthesis between North and South: Carter was progressive in many ways, but he was also very religious and came from the South. However, he did not manage to lead the US out of the economic crisis, and on top of that came the failed attempt to rescue of the hostages in Iran. Carter was not re-elected and the very conservative Ronald Reagan became president. Reagan brought about a shift to the right in American culture compared to the 1960s and 1970s, which continues to this day. Clinton only came to power and was even reelected because he came from the South, was an excellent communicator, and incorporated many conservative elements into his political decisions. Obama was elected after the Bush wars and the stock market crash because American voters were disappointed with the Republicans. After his solid work, Americans did not want a woman as president (which is a no-go, especially in the South) and gave preference to the demagogue Trump. Trump was able to become the

Republican Party's presidential candidate through a hostile takeover of the party. Many important people in the party were opposed to him. He immediately began transforming the party into MAGA. This process was already complete at the start of his second campaign. Republicans (since Nixon) have liked to use so-called dog-whistles to mobilize their racist base. Reagan, for example, spoke of welfare queens in order to exploit the prejudices of his base during the election campaign. Trump acted much more aggressively and openly, and with great success.

### **Further ideological strands**

In addition to the two ideological strands (the North-South strand and the slavery-racism strand), which I have simplified by presenting as a single strand, there are other important ideological and cultural strands, including the expansion strand and the oligarch strand. Initially, the US had only 13 original states at its disposal for territorial expansion, primarily to the west. An important milestone was the purchase of Louisiana from Napoleon. The military advance northward to conquer further territories was unsuccessful. Victory in the Mexican American War (1846-1848) enabled the US to conquer large areas in the south and west.

The core zone, which contains 48 of today's 50 states, had to be conquered twice: first, it had to be purchased from the great powers with corresponding property claims or acquired through war and peace negotiations, and then it had to be wrested from the often fiercely resisting Native Americans. Hawaii and Alaska were added later. Many immigrants were needed to settle and control these vast areas. The USA was already a country of immigration before that. In areas that were already heavily populated, this led to conflicts with the original inhabitants. New immigrant groups brought their own language and culture with them, which was also met with resistance. Americans still suffer from this cultural conflict today. They were descended from immigrants themselves, but they needed immigrants, and yet they rejected them for various reasons. As there were always many new immigrants, a great deal of (more or less open) resistance built up. Conservative rural areas were certainly not enthusiastic when many migrants wanted to settle there. Soldiers from the north and south of the USA took part in the Mexican American War, including Robert Lee and Ulysses Grant. There had been long-standing disputes between the north and south, but the expansion of the state as a whole was very important for both regions.

Victory in the war against Spain gave the USA possession of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. These two islands are still American territories today. During the war against Spain, Hawaii was annexed and became the 50th state of the USA in 1959. By 1900, the USA was already a major power with its own colonies, but not yet a world power like Great Britain. Through its decisive contribution to the victory of the Western powers in World War I, the USA rose to become a world power. In World War II, Germany, Italy, and Japan were defeated by the USA and other powers. Then came the Cold War between the two superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the USA was the sole superpower for several years before China also achieved superpower status. The USA's superpower status brought both advantages and sacrifices. American culture spread throughout the world, and many found the USA attractive and wanted to emigrate there. The US has long been successful in attracting talent from all over the world in all fields to its country. If

the US voluntarily relinquished its previous superpower role and focused almost exclusively on its own country, it would pay a high price for it, even if voters in West Virginia liked it. This orientation certainly appealed to many MAGA supporters, but it would certainly not make America "great." Or did MAGA ideologues dream of dividing the world into relatively isolated regional spheres of influence with a "Greater America"?

Until industrialization, the oligarchy in the southern United States consisted mainly of large landowners, especially plantation owners, who had slaves at their disposal. This aristocratic class dominated politics, economics, and society in the southern states. After the American Civil War (1861–1865) and the abolition of slavery, this elite lost economic power but often remained socially and politically influential. It was only with the advance of industrialization, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that industrial entrepreneurs and businesspeople emerged as the new elite in the South. In the northern United States, industrialists and financial magnates increasingly dominated social and political life, especially from the mid-19th century onwards. While the southern states were dominated by an agrarian elite, the north rapidly developed into a center of industry, trade, and finance. Influential oligarchs such as John D. Rockefeller (oil), Andrew Carnegie (steel), J.P. Morgan (finance), and Cornelius Vanderbilt (railroads and shipping) had a decisive influence on the economy. These entrepreneurs (often referred to as "robber barons") controlled huge companies and monopolized entire industries. Their influence was not limited to the economy, but also extended to politics: through lobbying, campaign financing, and personal connections, they influenced laws and government decisions. As a result, it was not large landowners but industrialists and bankers who set the tone in the North, especially in cities such as New York, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. Well into the 20th century, the political landscape of the United States was shaped by this regional and economic divide and large landowners in the South were traditionally Democrats.

Until the Civil War, the Democratic Party was the party of agricultural interests and the slave-owning elite. After the Civil War, the so-called "Redeemer Democrats" in the South advocated white supremacy and the economic interests of former slave owners. Industrialists in the North tended to support the Republican Party, which had been founded in 1854 as an anti-slavery party. The Republicans stood for a strong central government, protectionism (tariffs to protect industry), and economic modernization. Especially after the Civil War, they were the party of big business, railroad magnates, bankers, and industrialists. The Democrats were a pragmatic choice for many workers and immigrants in the North, as the Republicans were too closely associated with the industrial elite. However, the Democrats were not a unified workers' party, as they also had to satisfy the South with its conservative landowners and racial segregation laws, which led to internal tensions. The South remained more or less reluctantly with the Democratic Party until Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency (1963–1969) because they did not want to vote for a Yankee party. In addition, under Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), the party increasingly became the party of the "little people" in the North. Nixon and Reagan recognized their opportunities in the South and were able to win this region for the Republicans.

Theodore Roosevelt, a war hero in the Spanish-American War, was a Republican from the North, but not a classic representative of the industrial elite. He recognized that populism was a powerful weapon in politics, and a combination of charismatic

leadership, national strength, and social reforms made him the most successful progressive president of his time. Under Theodore Roosevelt ("Trust Buster"), and later Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, tough action was taken against monopolists. The power of the monopolists was broken, but new forms of economic power emerged as a result. Modern large corporations and banks emerged, which continued to exist in the 1920s and later (Ford, General Motors, Coca-Cola, IBM, etc.) in the form of multinational companies. Wall Street and large banks such as J.P. Morgan remained centers of economic power. While Theodore Roosevelt deliberately broke up monopolies, Franklin D. Roosevelt focused more on regulation and control than on direct dismantling, primarily through the Glass-Steagall Act (1933), which separated commercial banks from investment banks to prevent the concentration of power. The Securities Exchange Act (1934) attempted to regulate the stock market more tightly and prevent speculative bubbles. From the 1930s to the early 1970s, building on the pioneering work of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, US society became more economically and socially egalitarian. This development was driven by several factors: Mass media consumption created a uniform popular culture. The New Deal and Great Society strengthened social security. Suburban growth and the GI Bill enabled millions of people to rise into the middle class. However, the neoliberal restructuring that began in the 1970s weakened many of these achievements.

There are numerous cross-connections between the various strands, which could only be briefly touched upon here. There are also other strands, such as the "economism strand," which shows that ultimately everything social is subject to the primacy of economic considerations (in a wide sense). An important ideological aspect of economism is the advocacy of meritocracy. Meritocracy was often undermined by the oligarchs. As long as they were still in the process of building up their wealth and power, the oligarchs were strongly exposed to meritocracy. But then, as monopolists, well-paid managers of established large companies, rich heirs, financial investors, financiers of political parties, and so on, they often wanted to gain advantages for themselves that had nothing to do with meritocracy but a lot to do with power, for example when they wanted to achieve large tax cuts. The Republicans had been receptive to such wishes, especially since Reagan. At this point, the cultural north-south divide came into play. Republicans were able to achieve impressive victories, especially in poor states in the South such as Alabama. There people voted against their own interests and didn't realize it because they were caught in a cultural trap. The rich got richer, their wealth grew rapidly, while the incomes of the lower income classes stagnated. The Republicans pushed through a law allowing the rich to make unlimited donations. This led to a very expensive political system in which the super-rich and corporations had massive influence over elections and legislation. This severely hampered meritocratic, tough, and fair competition between the best politicians and political concepts for the favor of voters. Americans were heavily dependent on the stock market when it came to their retirement provisions, whether through company-supported models or private stock purchases. While Europeans were able to rely more on the welfare state, personal responsibility and dependence on the capital market were significantly greater in the US. This turned Americans into investors, into "small oligarchs" who, in the power struggles surrounding meritocracy (the struggle to assert their own interests within meritocratic disputes, or the struggle to eliminate meritocracy for personal gain), were on the right side of power or meritocracy in this case, and were allowed to help decide the winners and

losers on the financial markets. They became capitalists, stake holders, and players in the system, whether they wanted to or not.

## **Trump the strategist in the 2024 election campaign**

The MAGA echo chamber was not only organizationally aligned with Donald Trump, but also ideologically, culturally, religiously, and strategically. Trump was its point of reference in a comprehensive sense. This meant that everything in the echo chamber related to him, his interpretations, moods, and activities. Trump set the direction and meaning. In order to fulfill his role as a comprehensive point of reference, Trump had to take on various roles. He was the highest ideological authority and supreme source of meaning for MAGA and thus for the echo chamber. What Trump said was perceived as correct, regardless of internal contradictions. He demanded ideological flexibility coupled with loyalty. Those who were against e-mobility the day before were allowed to openly sympathize with Elon Musk the next day, as long as Trump permitted it. There was no clear distinction from the far right; that would have been a form of distancing that Trump did not allow in order not to alienate supporters. In his role as cult leader, Trump presented himself as charismatic, unassailable, and larger than life. He demanded unconditional allegiance. Criticism was treated as treason. His public persona was characterized by symbolism, rituals, and emotional mobilization. As the "chosen one," Trump was not simply a politician for large parts of the Christian right-wing scene; he was an instrument of God, a super-Christian. His first election victory was interpreted in these circles as divinely guided, and his survival of an assassination attempt as confirmation of his chosen status.

Trump placed himself above other rich and powerful people. That was obviously one of his favorite roles. He felt right at home among these people. In the logic of the MAGA echo chamber, he was the supreme oligarch, the leader of the pack, not through capital, but through his political power. In the oligarch pecking order, he was undoubtedly above Musk, Bezos, or Gates, even during the election campaign and before the election victory.

Trump was the most important propagandist in the echo chamber. He was very active in this role, giving interviews, speaking at rallies to his fanatical supporters, or trying to influence them or persuade them to donate through his numerous posts on Truth Social. Truth Social was his personal channel. But Fox News, X, podcasts, and influencers also followed his lead. Without him, the flow of "truths" dried up.

In his role as strategist and commander in the political wars, Trump had been in a permanent state of political warfare since 2015: the 2016 election campaign was his first war. The first presidency (including the 2020 campaign) was the second. The non-recognition of the 2020 election results and the 2024 election campaign, including court proceedings, was the third. Since 2015, almost everything Trump did was in a strategic context. He was not only a symbol of a deep desire for a new political orientation, but also the architect of political change. As the supreme strategic authority, he shaped the direction of MAGA and the echo chamber. He was not only a passive but also an active reference point that shaped strategic reality.

As a strategist, Trump attempted in his third war, which like all his wars was designed as a propaganda war, to motivate MAGA (in a broad sense, including red states, red regions in blue states, echo chambers, and financial and other supporters) to go all out for him.

He steered MAGA in the desired direction, influenced it with his views, and controlled it primarily through strategic guidelines. Since his strategy was largely based on propaganda, the echo chamber was of central importance to him. Trump's strategic actions were innovative in several respects: the development and constant modification of his strategy, its communication to tactical units, its propagandistic "selling" (including exaggerations and untruths), and his own intervention as chief propagandist merged into a single entity. Trump abolished the classic distinction between strategy and tactics and used it to form a political and media war machine that was almost entirely tailored to him as a person. It is striking how strongly Trump tried to position himself as a defender of the male gender in this election campaign, especially in the face of liberal equality policies that were perceived as intrusive. Whether this decision was based on data, instinct, or ideological affinity with certain movements is unclear. What is certain, however, is that Trump was a master at identifying social trends and cultural sensitivities and quickly reinterpreting them strategically for his own purposes.

Trump the strategist brought himself into play and made himself the linchpin of his campaign by styling himself as the sole savior: only he was capable of saving America from liberal decline. This self-aggrandization served not only to mobilize support but also gave his campaign additional momentum. Trump adapted to MAGA supporters and vice versa. By the start of the campaign in August 2022, this process of mutual rapprochement was already complete. The almost symbiotic power relationship between Trump and the MAGA movement can be seen in the fact that he was not only a leader for MAGA, but also a mirror and a projection screen. His success was based precisely on the fact that he made himself a stage on which the unconscious desires, fears, and aggressions of his supporters could be staged. This marks Trump's transition from chaotic charismatic to fully integrated core of identification. Trump became an ideologically and emotionally charged figure with whom the movement could fully identify. This also explained his irreplaceability: MAGA without Trump was hardly conceivable.

This also brought the problematic aspects of Trump's personality into the spotlight of public attention. Trump played on his skills as a demagogue and turned his apparent political Achilles' heel into a political advantage through his campaign tactics. What would have been considered disqualifying for other politicians was not only tolerated in Trump's case but reinterpreted as strategic capital in the logic of the MAGA world. Trump's approach at the time could be described as the strategic pathologization of politics. Pathological traits such as lying, narcissism, breaking the law, and megalomania were effective not despite, but because of their incompatibility with political normality. In a system that many perceived as corrupt, elitist, or out of touch, Trump came across as a "flawed hero": someone who broke the rules because he was supposedly not part of the hated establishment. Paradoxically, the fact that his lies or projections were often transparent did not matter or even played a positive role: they signaled authenticity in the sense of "he says what you are not allowed to say." In the strategic perception of his supporters, the pathological was seen functionally as an expression of strength, unyieldingness, and "anti-system."

Trump was apparently also seen as a willing executor of unconscious aggression. We can only speculate about what was really going on in the minds of MAGA supporters. Many uncomfortable thoughts were apparently suppressed, and Trump was also able to benefit from

the unconscious aggressive desires of his supporters, because many hated the ruling political system and wanted to destroy or damage it. His dazzling personality offered a psychological outlet for these kinds of desires. What many liberals read as obvious self-revelation ("confession" or "projection") did not seem revealing to MAGA supporters, but rather downright relieving and a confirmation of a cynical-pragmatic worldview: Everyone lies, so the best liar is the strongest leader.

Trump succeeded in reevaluating himself in a way that made him irreplaceable for his movement. Trump was able to turn pathological traits into political capital: his lies were seen as authenticity, his narcissism was interpreted as unyieldingness, his violations of the law were accepted as an anti-establishment stance, and his megalomania underwent a strategically significant transformation into an unyielding determination to execute the important MAGA projects.

Important aspects of Trump's personality were, on the one hand, detrimental to him, but on the other hand, they benefited him; in any case, they made him a strategist like no other.

First of all, there was his "stupidity": rationality and predictability were not his strong points. The intelligence of the liberals came to nothing against him. Due to a lack of sufficient data, one could only speculate about Trump's intelligence, his knowledge, his abilities, and his mental and physical health. Even during his first term, experts warned about Trump because of the danger of mental health issues in a president. Trump's behavior was so erratic and contradictory that neither his opponents nor his supporters knew exactly how much of it was tactics and how much was pathology. This ambiguity allowed him to act unpredictably, often beyond established rational rules. While experts and political opponents publicly questioned his mental stability, MAGA used such attacks to defend Trump, claiming he was the victim of a malicious elite seeking to defame him. This, in turn, strengthened the loyalty of his base. In the 2024 election campaign, the issue of dementia was raised, partly because of the candidate's age. Trump initially benefited from his opponent being portrayed as a "tired old man," even though his own mental fitness was also publicly questioned.

With regard to Trump's behavior in terms of respecting moral standards and legal regulations, the data available at the beginning of the 2022 election campaign were already sufficient to form an opinion about Trump. There were enough facts about Trump's behavior to assess his suitability. What followed was not a rational decision based on information, but a decision based on loyalty and ideological commitment. For most Democratic supporters, Trump belonged in prison rather than in the Oval Office, and no one with his track record should ever hold public office again. For many Trump voters, it was his policies that mattered, not his behavior. This separation of morality and power was politically highly explosive. This problem was resolved in the November election: Trump was able to win the election, and for Trump voters, Trump was either a decent politician or Trump's inappropriate behavior was considered less important than his policies. The latter way of thinking was short-sighted and dangerous, because such politicians can also be prone to abuse of power, and then no one is safe. Trump's supporters accepted his transgressions because they felt he represented their interests. He was allowed to act "dirty" because he was fighting against a system, they perceived as hostile. This was a classic pattern of authoritarian temptation through the normalization of moral and legal transgressions under the guise of political loyalty.

The apparent weaknesses of his personality, such as his "stupidity" or his lack of rationality, became strategic capital in a cultural and political landscape that craved unpredictability, rebellion, and revenge. "Stupid" people ("the uneducated") vote for "stupid" politicians. If you vote for a "clown," you get a circus. Trump was an excellent campaigner, but certainly not a classic "policy maker" like Biden, but rather a tactical exploiter of stimuli who instinctively responded to signals of fear and anger. Trump's political style was empathetic rather than intellectual, relying on instinctive action rather than rational planning. He was not interested in long-term perspectives, preferring to focus on responding to stimuli and paying little attention to policymaking, as he is completely focused on exploiting fear and anger. In 2020, he lost to Biden, as voters' memories of his chaotic political style were still too fresh. However, Biden was a weak communicator, which was one of the reasons he had to give up a few months before the 2024 election. Trump's "stupidity" was not just incompetence, but a form of political decoupling from the rationalist establishment of liberal politics. Trump possessed a serpentine intelligence. He could instinctively tap into deep, even atavistic cultural layers. He sensed it all, almost like a snake senses a vibration. He also sensed the fear, dissatisfaction, and insecurity of MAGA supporters, and he was able to tap into their unconscious motives for revenge and exploit it all in his propaganda strategy.

His "stupidity" was matched by his "stubbornness," with which he never abandoned certain core beliefs. He was firmly convinced that America had been exploited for many years by its "friends" and "allies," but also by China for many years. Was this "stubbornness" (already in its early form) related to pathological mental problems (e.g., paranoia) in Trump? Could the Soviet Union have "fed" him such ideas through influence operations? In his stubbornness during the election campaign, he refused to recognize America's global role, and his horizons ended at the American borders: "America first" and no more immigration. His rejection of globalism was, of course, not merely stubborn protectionism and isolationism, but also an expression of a strategic boundary that was intended to focus his core messages (Make America great again and America first). To prevent his MAGA supporters and the echo chamber from thinking he was stupid, he pretended to know everything better, and according to his own publicity, he knew more about many areas than the experts. This could be dismissed as showmanship and typical Trump exaggeration, but unfortunately, he really believed that only he knew exactly how to make America "great" again.

Like his "stupidity," his "boundlessness" was also potentially dangerous for Trump, but through his propaganda, he was able to gain political advantages from it. He believed he was above the law and morality. In his mind, the elite could apparently get away with anything, "fortunately or unfortunately," as he once admitted during the E.J. Carrol trial. According to a New York court ruling, he unjustifiably enriched himself through his "generous" interpretation of valuation rules, but for him and thus also for MAGA, this was apparently just a trifling matter that was exploited by unfair attacks from political enemies. In the 2016 campaign his followers shouted: Lock her up. Trump embodied the ideal of an "elite" that flouted the rules, presenting these transgressions not as a weakness but as proof of his superiority. Only those who did not abide by the rules could break them and thereby dominate. According to the cruel MAGA logic, this was a sign of power, not a flaw. The elite was always "better" than the masses. That was why they became so rich. The richer the elite would become, the better for

the masses. During his first presidency, Trump "generously" made his time and skills available to the US, so in return, he and his family were allowed to benefit from it, weren't they?

Every scandal, every moral transgression generated a kind of pledge of allegiance from his supporters: those who still stood by him had completely renounced the "system." Trump's rule violations thus became loyalty boosters. Even Trump's extremely problematic "Russian past" was not an issue for him, MAGA, or the echo chamber. Very serious allegations were made, but they bounced off Trump and MAGA. Even his long-standing friendship with the pedophile billionaire Epstein was never investigated in detail. His boundlessness made Trump a very dangerous politician for democracy. Of course, he did not want to appear reassuring, but rather to serve as a fire accelerant. His personality perfectly matched his boundlessness. He had no qualms about acting this way. From the perspective of his enemies, he had the ability to lie to himself (or he just pretended to) in order to remain credible to his supporters. This allowed him to better sell himself as a victim of his evil enemies, who allegedly did not want his supporters to be better off. Trump succeeded in portraying himself as the victim of a politically motivated justice system despite (or perhaps because of) serious allegations. His transgressions thus lost their moral quality and became acts of war against a supposedly corrupt elite. Trump's ability to see himself as a victim and savior was not a game, because it was part of his deeply ingrained self-staging. This was precisely what made him seem authentic, even though it was all a lie. It made him the perfect projection screen for a deeply insecure electorate. The MAGA echo chamber surrounding Fox News, Truth Social, and other right-wing platforms ensured that Trump's boundlessness was portrayed not as a danger but as a heroic deed, often using religious or patriotic vocabulary. Trump's transgressions were not secretive; he tended to "act in public," for example, clearly showing his strange admiration for his daughter Ivanka's physical attributes.

Trump War 3 Phase 1 lasted from November 4, 2020, to November 16, 2022 (the day he announces his candidacy for the 2024 presidential election). From then on, Phase 2 begins: the campaign for the 2024 election. It is not easy to describe one of Trump's wars in a few words, because Trump was a very unusual politician who polarized opinion with his statements and various activities, and who, for example, spread over 20,000 lies during his first term in office. Not even professional observers could critically process all of this, and the Democrats never found a way to counter it politically. That is why I would like to emphasize one aspect in particular for the third Trump war. In reference to Mao's "Long March," I would like to speak of Trump's "Long Coup," which lasted for a period of four years. The coup was ultimately successful and ended with Trump's election victory and his seizure of power in January 2025. The term "Long Coup" highlights the processual nature and strategic dimension of Trump's actions. It was about a long-term undermining of democratic institutions. This fits well with Trump's way of thinking: no formal theory, but rather an intuitive, permanent crossing of boundaries, always tentative and escalating. The parallel to Mao's "Long March" cannot be overlooked: a retreat in the first phase of the coup, which at the same time led to a mythological reformation: Trump as the supposedly defeated politician who is nevertheless preparing a new order.

In the first phase of the coup, things did not look good for Trump. He first tried to challenge the election results in court. He refused to acknowledge Biden's election victory. He spoke of election fraud and was able to raise massive amounts of donations with his campaign

(Stop the Steal), which he allegedly needed for corresponding legal proceedings. But no election fraud could be proven. Trump's claim of election fraud was strategically calculated from the outset, regardless of its veracity, as a tool of agitation with which he achieved three things at once: delegitimizing the election winner, mobilizing his supporters (emotionally, financially, organizationally), and preparing his return to power. Particularly cynical was the monetary exploitation of his supporters through calls for donations for legal proceedings ("Stop the Steal"), the funds for which were mainly used for other purposes.

Trump also exerted massive pressure on authorities in Georgia and other states not to officially recognize Biden's election victory in their states. He tried to influence Mike Pence to refuse to perform the official act required by the Constitution. Trump and his MAGA aides recruited "alternate electors" in various states who would help Trump win the election if they were called upon to serve. The "alternate electors" tactic was a subtle, legally charged part of this coup, not a clumsy act of violence, but an attempt to undermine democracy with its own rules. On January 6, fanatical Trump supporters, further incited by him, stormed the Capitol and searched for Mike Pence and Nancy Pelosi. Biden nevertheless became president, and Trump sulkily retreated to Mar-A-Lago. While still in Washington, he faced impeachment proceedings. Mitch McConnell and Kevin McCarthy did not dare to try to convict Trump and thus get rid of him as a presidential candidate for good. This would likely have led to a split in the GOP between the traditional GOP and MAGA among conservative supporters, with unforeseeable consequences, and the leadership did not want to risk that. Trump supporters could have formed a new party with him as their leader. The next elections (Congress and presidency) would then probably not have gone well for the conservative cause in the event of a split in the GOP. McConnell and McCarthy's decision not to convict him was therefore not a legal one, but a strategic submission out of fear of their own base.

The Democrats had to try to end Trump's political career through impeachment proceedings, or at least severely restrict it, but this instrument was no match for the political dynamics, and the relevant constitutional provisions proved toothless. Nixon did not want to risk a likely conviction in the 1980s and resigned beforehand, but by then the political divide was already well advanced. That is why impeachment under Trump became a symbolic process that brought charges but had no real consequences, not because Trump was innocent, but because his party protected him and without Republican support, the necessary supermajority in Congress could not be achieved. Trump showed that it was possible to openly challenge the system without immediately failing. What was important here was complete control over the base, great fear within the party of punishment for disobedience, and a counter-public sphere in the media, which meant that there was no need for a majority in the country or for the truth to be on one's side. Trump's strength lay not only in evading condemnation, but also in exposing the system itself. He showed that political reality was created not by norms, but by power relations. This resulted in only a minor split. Some GOP politicians wanted to get rid of Trump and continued to fight him. Liz Cheney even took over as chair of the House Select Committee, which was primarily tasked with investigating the events surrounding the storming of Congress. McConnell and McCarthy relented and had to accept the transformation of the GOP into MAGA. Trump became de facto sole party leader. Opponents such as Cheney didn't stand a chance and were eliminated at the next opportunity. In classic Orwellian fashion, there was a change in terminology. People who were not sufficiently aligned with Trump were declared RINOS

(Republicans in name only). MAGA supporters were thus made the "real" GOP people. Trump succeeded in transforming the GOP, not through formal reforms, but by eliminating dissenting voices and semantic dominance. Orwellian language policy is a central tool of authoritarian rulers. Whoever controls the terms controls the political terrain. Lenin understood this even before Orwell. In a certain vote, he gained the majority. From then on, he called his people Bolsheviks. This term is derived from the Russian word for majority. Liz Cheney's expulsion was not just a personnel decision, but a ritual of power consolidation, comparable to classic "purges" in authoritarian systems.

Towards the end of phase 1 (which lasted until November 16, 2022) of the Trump coup, a dangerous phase began for Trump. For the first time, Trump was systematically prosecuted, no longer just symbolically or on a purely selective basis. In November 2022, Jack Smith was appointed independent special counsel by US Attorney General Merrick Garland. Smith's main task was to investigate the criminal aspects of Trump's role in the storming of the Capitol and in the "document scandal". Back in May, the Department of Justice had already tried in vain to get all classified documents back from Trump. In August 2022, Mar-a-Lago was therefore searched by the FBI, and more classified documents were found. The search of Mar-a-Lago was a blow to Trump's image, but he successfully turned this attack around again in line with his propaganda strategy: he styled himself as a persecuted patriot, a victim of the "deep state." Every weakness was recoded as strength and every setback became a martyr's story.

In phase 1 of the third Trump war, Trump was not defeated. This war was designed as a retreat battle with counterattacks. The objective was no longer the government, but total control of the GOP and preparation for a return to power. The Democrats were unable to prevent this. From this perspective, Trump was the winner in phase 1. The "long coup" could continue. Anyone who wanted to become someone in MAGA was not allowed to openly criticize Trump's lie about the stolen victory in the 2020 election. Trump initially appeared defeated, but he was able to create a new political reality in which only he was recognized as the "legitimate" leader of the conservatives. This allowed him to lay the foundation for phase 2 of the Third War (the 2024 election campaign), which he then ended victoriously. The Democrats made a crucial mistake: they did not take legal action against Trump quickly enough. This allowed him to portray himself as a victim of political persecution after his reelection bid, a serious strategic mistake and an expression of election-deciding naivety on the part of Attorney General Merrick Garland. Against such an opponent with such a following, political and legal caution was not appropriate; one had to act immediately and energetically, in parallel with the investigations in Congress. Furthermore, the "Epstein weapon" was not used by Attorney General Merrick Garland.

Phase 2 of the third war was examined in detail in this work from the perspective of the strategist Trump. Trump fought this war on two fronts simultaneously, namely legal and political. If he had clearly lost on the legal front, his election campaign would also have failed. That was his starting position in the second phase of his "long coup." The stakes were high. Trump acted like a gambler who risked everything. His direct involvement in illegal activities was highly risky from a legal standpoint, and the outcome was uncertain. Only with effort, pressure, and luck did he manage to prevent the collapse of the legal front. He was also lucky in an assassination attempt: deadly bullets narrowly missed him. His election victory then changed the situation abruptly: Special Counsel Jack Smith had to suspend his work for the

time being, and the other proceedings were also halted. Thus, the second front was neutralized by a gain in power.

His victory in the third war allowed Trump to start his fourth war as President of the United States. The warnings of his Democratic opponent Kamala Harris about a second Trump presidency went unheeded. This war has only just begun, and every day brings new surprises. In a separate chapter, I attempt to convey my impression of Trump's strategy for this war (after more than a year of Trump's presidency). Even before Trump, America was a democracy with structural weaknesses. Any candidate who lost in the decisive swing states had no chance of winning the presidency, despite having a majority of the popular vote. Other countries have long since significantly reduced the power of the second chamber (Senate), but in the US, each state had got two senators, regardless of size and population. Washington, D.C. was still not represented in the Senate. Under Trump in his second presidency, the US was no longer a democracy (but a phase 1 dictatorship) and only a DIMO (democracy in name only).

## **The MAGA movement**

### **Origins and dynamics of the movement**

The old GOP ceased to exist on August 16, 2022, at the latest, when Liz Cheney lost to a Trump candidate in the primaries. Trump prevailed in the 2016 primaries and became the presidential candidate. GOP voters were immediately enthusiastic, and the party leadership had to abandon its reservations. This was clearly a hostile takeover with the help of the grassroots. In the primaries, Trump brutally eliminated his opponents (Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Jeb Bush). A new era began for the party and for America. After Trump supporters stormed the Capitol, the old GOP once again made its voice heard. Liz Cheney wanted to hold Trump accountable. She succeeded in part, as the investigative committee under her leadership did a good job. Trump had previously survived an impeachment trial because Mitch McConnell and Kevin McCarthy shied away from calling for his conviction. This historic opportunity was wasted because these politicians were even more afraid of the alternative. So it came to pass: Trump took complete control of the party. Liz Cheney was not re-elected. The GOP was finally becoming MAGA. McConnell and McCarthy had to accept this. John McCain still refused to go down the path of populism. He demonstratively defended his opponent Obama from a racist attack during the election campaign. Populism unleashed enormous forces that could be used for party politics, but this type of politics could have disastrous consequences. Trump won the primaries for the 2024 presidential election convincingly. He did not even consider it necessary to debate the other candidates. Neither Ron Desantis nor Niki Haley, and certainly not his fiercest critic Chris Christie, could threaten his victory. Ron Desantis failed, even though he was fully on board with MAGA from an ideological point of view, but MAGA was also a cult with Trump at its center.

After losing the 2020 election, MAGA did not give up. Trump stubbornly refused to concede defeat. After 2020, MAGA supporters were politically and culturally active in all regions and at all levels. After 2020, the MAGA camp mutated from a presidential campaign into a wide-ranging political movement that sought to exert influence not only at the national level, but also specifically at the local level, often with the aim of shaping the democratic system from within

to suit their agenda. They discovered school boards as a field of activity. In individual states, they set out to disadvantage Democrats in elections. MAGA naturally had influence over the executive, legislative, and judicial branches in their states. Added to this was the majority of MAGA-friendly judges on the Supreme Court and the majority in the House of Representatives from 2022 onwards. Members of Congress were constantly trying to prosecute Hunter Biden in order to damage the president. This could also be exploited for propaganda purposes. Trump was not squeamish. He apparently forced several members of Congress, as well as J.D. Vance and Rick Ramaswamy, who defected to MAGA, to show up at one of his trials (all wearing red ties) and verbally exonerate him. Since Trump was prevented by a court order from speaking publicly about certain aspects of the trial, some of his supporters took on this role. They were critical of the prosecution, the judge, and the witnesses.

MAGA included not only Trump and other politicians at all levels. The voter base of staunch Trump supporters in red states and regions belonged to MAGA in a broad sense. They became the MAGA base with an important task: They were to serve as vote suppliers in various elections. The MAGA base was an important part of the echo chamber. Anyone who clearly declared his support for Trump before the election, for example by wearing certain clothing, putting up a sign in his yard, or placing a sticker on his car, was already part of the echo chamber. Another Trump supporter may have bravely defended Trump against attacks from their numerous liberal relatives. Conversely, elsewhere, red relatives tried to convince a stubborn liberal dissident to join the majority. Trump supporters were part of the echo chamber in everyday life, not only online, but also at family gatherings, in neighborhoods, and at work.

The propagandists who supported Trump during the election campaign and Trump's lawyers were, from a functional point of view, part of MAGA. They belonged to MAGA in a broad sense, as did the oligarchs who supported Trump directly financially or only indirectly through free services (such as Rupert Murdoch), or both ways (such as Elon Musk), as well as think tanks and similar organizations close to Trump (and their importance cannot be overestimated). Together, they provided the various resources to strategically secure MAGA. Project 2025 already played a major role in the campaign for the 2024 election. Project 2025 was a master plan for a technocratic penetration of the next administration, largely ignored externally but strategically central internally.

MAGA was a comprehensive, functionally and ideologically networked movement, a multi-layered social, cultural, political, ideological, and economic network in which different actors, roles, and levels intertwined with Trump as the political, ideological, and strategic center. MAGA was not just Trump. It was a strategically ramified system with a central agitator, many tactical accomplices, and a loyal base.

### **The various MAGA ideological orientations**

From an ideological perspective, MAGA could be viewed even more broadly. MAGA was then the broad basis for many important ideological currents. The ideologies in question were accepted and promoted by MAGA as MAGA ideologies for the mutual benefit of MAGA and the ideological partner in question. Synergistic effects could even be achieved by MAGA adopting certain ideologies if MAGA's other ideological partners could benefit from them. The more the ideological partners flourished and prospered, the better it was for MAGA. The individual

ideological actors also wanted to gain personal advantages. Marjorie Taylor Greene started out as a conspiracy theorist. She made it to the top of MAGA in 2022. Important ideological partners of MAGA were evangelicals, traditional GOP supporters (tax cuts, less government), the radical to extreme right, conspiracy theorists, supporters of the cultural distinctiveness of the South, and the losers of modernization (some states were particularly affected by this, and in all states there were regions and groups that belonged to this category). Most evangelicals were attracted to MAGA. This voter group was enormously important for MAGA. MAGA offered evangelicals and other Christians political, cultural, and ideological support, for example on the issue of abortion or in the fight against "woke" tendencies. Evangelicals, in turn, offered MAGA a religious superstructure or a right-wing interpretation of religion in the sense of Christian nationalism. For many evangelicals, Trump was a "chosen one." It was not only evangelicals who promoted the shift to the right. The shift to the right was very important to Trump, partly because it weakened democracy and made authoritarian tendencies more socially acceptable.

There were a few other noteworthy features of MAGA's ideological orientation. First of all, Trump himself was also an ideological partner within the circle of diverse MAGA partner ideologies. He loved tariffs and had isolationist tendencies. Every letter in MAGA could be interpreted as a threat: "Make" meant: Now is the time for decisive action. "America" had, in the context of "America first" had a dual meaning: firstly, it was about eliminating discrimination by other countries, and secondly, it was about securing America's economic and military supremacy in the world. "Great" meant that America was once "great," but for Trump, unfortunately, it was no longer so. "Again" meant that energetic backward-looking policies would restore America to its former greatness. How far back did they want to go? To the era of segregation? Secondly, the oligarchs were also ideological partners in MAGA. But that was not widely publicized. Trump was an oligarch himself and offered tax breaks to the oligarchs. When markets were taken away from the state (health, education), companies and oligarchs benefited. Thirdly, Trump succeeded in ideologically penetrating liberal core areas and winning over African Americans and Latinos by pretending to want to champion the causes of these groups. When individual opinion leaders were convinced by Trump, or because they wanted to climb a steep career path through MAGA, this certainly had an impact on attitudes toward MAGA in parts of these communities. Mark Robinson, an African American candidate for governor of North Carolina, who was introduced by Trump as "Martin Luther King on steroids," was suddenly confronted with an old statement in which he referred to himself as a "Black Nazi." He was not elected. In earlier times, when America was still "great," this would have been exploited as a mega-scandal. In the Trump era, it was just a trifle, a minor scandal.

### **A brief introduction to MAGA culture**

What battle cries, ideologies, values, and political, economic, and cultural preferences were dominant in MAGA culture? A few sentences should introduce us to MAGA culture. The dynamics of the interaction between the various actors and groups of actors within MAGA culture had also to be indicated. MAGA was a broad cultural and social phenomenon with many "stakeholders" who tried to shape the overall culture. The oligarchs within MAGA were in favor of outsourcing government tasks to the private sector, even more so than before. MAGA loved its oligarchs, especially the oligarch Trump, who brought racism with him. With Trump's

acquiescence, MAGA tolerated all forms of racism. African Americans and people from other minorities were only promoted as MAGA stars for tactical reasons, in order to win votes in these camps as well. The political elite at MAGA was against Obama Care, DEI, and Critical Race Theory. According to MAGA propaganda, the right of women to abortion was more important to many liberal women than the lives of unborn children. But what about the rights of fathers? MAGA couldn't accept that, because in MAGA society, men were supposed to dominate. MAGA loved the oligarchs, and they in turn loved political candidates who wanted to give them massive tax cuts if they were elected. MAGA ignored the fact that although America was at the forefront of medicine, many people could not afford this standard of care and insurance companies often refused to pay for medical services. The MAGA battle cry "deep state" concealed the interests of the oligarchs, who wanted to dominate new markets and tried to drive the US out of socially important areas. Hard-core MAGA influencers wanted to use the concept of the "deep state" concept to also target Democrats, who allegedly prevented the release of the Epstein files in order to protect wealthy Democratic wrongdoers. The MAGA movement explored the possibilities that the US Constitution offered for its interests. During the Trump trials, there was much talk of the First Amendment. Trump should have the right to attack anyone involved in his trial. The protection of victims of "freedom of speech" was not the focus of MAGA. Alex Jones and Rudy Giuliani went too far and were promptly punished by the courts for it. MAGA loved guns, gun owners, and the Second Amendment to the US Constitution.

American democracy would be "deactivated" (at least temporarily) if MAGA and Trump were able to assert themselves even more politically through an election victory in 2024. If Trump succeeded in his "long coup," i.e., his election as president, America would no longer be a democracy. A critical threshold would be crossed. Until then, America was a problematic democracy. There were many of those. But American democracy would not be dead for good, just out of commission. It could therefore be quickly reactivated. It was like in a Western: a gang took control of a town and made one of their own the sheriff and another the judge. They were the bad guys. Then the good guys showed up and killed and drove away the bad guys, and law and order returned to the town. But the damage caused by the bad guys could not be quickly repaired. Such events were also anchored in American deep-culture.

According to MAGA, the traditional immigration country of the USA was suddenly no longer a "country of immigration" anymore. MAGA preferred other terms such as immigration stop, closing borders, and mass deportations. In my opinion, the MAGA battle cry "woke" could only be understood in a broad sense (through various adjectives): liberal, socialist, even communist (Harris was "woke" for MAGA, for Trump she was also a communist), permissive, antiauthoritarian (according to MAGA, children should be shown their limits, for example through book bans for certain books in schools), sexually permissive in a broad sense (this also included sympathy for LBGTQ), naïve and gullible, and not tough enough: climate change was not recognized as a hoax. "Drill, baby drill" would ensure lower gas prices. The dangers of vaccinations were underestimated by the "woke." Furthermore, "woke" means "atheistic" (such people were also against the interference of religion in politics and did not want to accept that the leadership of society by WASPs was God-given), unpatriotic and internationalist (the advantages of nationalism and isolationism and the disadvantages of globalization were not recognized, and no American soldiers should be deployed in crisis regions in the future), naive

and idealistic in foreign policy (failing to recognize that the world belongs only to the strong, such as the US and China, and that the world should be divided into spheres of influence).

### **Structural features of MAGA culture**

Firstly, the Trump MAGA culture (as seen from the outside) was an information bubble culture with Fox News at its center: The Trump MAGA culture was characterized by a highly isolated information bubble. A central component of this bubble was Fox News, supplemented by a multitude of alternative media channels that often spread conspiracy theories, including those from QAnon. The various channels reinforced the supporters' attachment to the MAGA ideology. Russian interference and other disinformation campaigns further fueled this dynamic, at least before Trump's first presidency.

Secondly, MAGA culture was cult culture with Trump as its leading figure: Trump was the undisputed cult figure of this movement. His supporters accepted his words and deeds without critical questioning. His missteps or scandals did not shake the loyalty of his supporters. He enjoyed almost absolute authority in this cult structure.

Thirdly, MAGA was also dominated by a command culture with an emphasis on loyalty: loyalty is the highest principle in Trump's MAGA culture. Trump acted like a CEO who saw the US as his company. He often viewed the separation of powers and democratic institutions as obstacles. His admiration for authoritarian leaders such as Putin, Xi, and Viktor Orbán underscored his hierarchical thinking. Evangelical groups that promoted patriarchal family structures were central pillars of this culture.

Fourth, MAGA relied on an aggressive culture of combat: Trump-MAGA culture was designed for conflict and expansion. It constructed ideological and cultural enemy stereotypes and defended itself vigorously against attacks. At the same time, it used its attacks to shock its opponents ("to own the libs"), even if this harmed the country. On the internet and in red states, a right-wing climate was deliberately promoted, weakening the democratic counterculture.

Fifthly, Trump and MAGA agreed on one point. MAGA culture should present itself as a culture of revenge. Trump presented himself as the avenger of his supporters ("I am your retribution"). This rhetoric was directed in particular against the Democrats and globalization. His planned measures, such as punitive tariffs and planned mass deportations, served the desire of many supporters for retribution, but at the same time distracted from the resulting negative economic consequences such as inflation.

As an "Under Siege of Meritocracy" culture, the Trump MAGA culture was caught between defending traditional meritocratic values and increasing resignation. The American dream seemed unattainable to many supporters. This was probably why MAGA circles increasingly emphasized (directly or indirectly) a division between the working class and the upper middle class (in the sense of academics and higher-level employees). Trump also exploited this line of conflict by appealing to a large group within his base: "the uneducated," as he called them during the election campaign.

As a culture of disadvantaged regions, the Trump-MAGA culture was strongly rooted in economically and/or culturally disadvantaged regions, especially in poor red states such as West Virginia, Alabama, and Mississippi, but also in many regions within the blue states. Looking at the red "occupied" areas within the US, the US was predominantly under MAGA

control. The poor red states were heavily dependent financially on the wealthier blue states. At the same time, they emphasized their cultural independence, often with racist undertones, and rejected structural change.

Eighth, MAGA culture was a culture with many contradictions within the MAGA movement. For example, some trade unionists supported Trump, while other forces within MAGA advocated radical economic liberalism. Trump skillfully concealed these contradictions during the election campaign in order to gain maximum support. His strategy was also aimed at achieving short-term success without considering the long-term consequences of this approach. MAGA was set up like a big circus tent. The Trump-MAGA culture provided a large platform for different groups during the election campaign, including minorities such as Muslims in Michigan and African American men. This strategy aimed to win as many votes as possible before the election. After an election victory, the actual political priorities should be set. The nostalgic longing for a lost lifestyle also formed an important basis for this broad mobilization.

### **The key players within the MAGA echo chamber**

The MAGA echo chamber was in full swing during the election campaign. The base was to be fed raw meat on a daily basis. Donald Trump regularly provided his base with statements that were deliberately aimed at emotional outrage, identity politics mobilization, and cultural contempt. These statements were often so extreme that they stunned his political opponents. That was precisely part of the strategy: horror generated visibility, visibility generated loyalty. The base did not want moderate arguments, but "raw meat," i.e., aggressive, symbolically charged statements that combined anger, belonging, and transgression. A prime example of this was Trump's remarks about "disappearing" animals in the migrant-populated residential areas of a small town in Ohio. This was an attack designed to emotionalize animal-loving, white suburban voters. These statements were not slip-ups, but precisely calculated identity messages. Trump was a master in the discipline of aggressive propaganda.

In addition to Donald Trump, several key players were particularly effective in this game, but the impact of the numerous MAGA activists on social media, who radicalized each other, should not be forgotten, even if our interest should primarily be focused on the various key players. These two pillars of MAGA propaganda worked together effectively. Fox News was the central platform of the MAGA information bubble, reinforcing Trump's narrative around the clock. The daily Fox escalations ensured that every "provocation," every scandal or suspicion served as confirmation of the narrative of the sinister activities of Trump's opponents. Fox controlled the debate, and viewers followed these statements spellbound. Fox propagandist Tucker Carlson acted as the flagship of right-wing nationalist TV discourse. His mixture of intellectual cynicism, calculated outrage, and targeted emotionalization made him one of the most powerful culture warriors on television. Every day, he delivered fresh edgy, "ideological raw meat," always with the subtext: The US was being destroyed from within, and only Trump could save it.

Elon Musk, as a media oligarch and platform operator, made X the central mouthpiece for MAGA. The platform provided an infrastructure that delivered reach and algorithmic amplification directly. Joe Rogan reached young men outside traditional MAGA

circles with his seemingly casual style. His interviews with Trump-affiliated personalities normalized Trump rhetoric in the mainstream, and he acted as a bridge between podcast culture and the MAGA echo chamber.

Ben Shapiro provided rational justifications for emotional rhetoric. He made such provocations intellectually palatable. His positioning as a "conservative rationalist" gives MAGA fans permission to take even the most extreme positions while simultaneously feigning moral integrity. Ben Shapiro held radical views on important ideological issues (abortion rights, same-sex marriage) and was an energetic supporter of Israel.

Charlie Kirk anchored MAGA in academic youth, especially in religiously conservative college circles. He focused heavily on Trump and MAGA beliefs, and he wanted to bind many young people emotionally and culturally to MAGA. His roles as a political and religious activist in the evangelical movement and as chairman of the right-wing populist organization "Turning Point USA" helped him in this endeavor.

Dan Bongino fed MAGA views to circles interested in national security and government surveillance during the 2024 presidential campaign. His topics were the Deep State, surveillance, and culture wars. In his opinion, the Deep State prevented the release of the Epstein Files. As a former Secret Service agent and political commentator, he often spoke about an alleged "Deep State" structure within the government that was working against Donald Trump and pursuing undemocratic agendas. He postulated that these informal networks of bureaucrats, intelligence officials, and media figures were the ones wielding real power and withholding important information. After a Trump victory, the Epstein Files were then to be made available to the public.

Candace Owens was a key figure in the strategy of symbolically co-opting marginalized groups (especially African Americans) for MAGA. She provided the right-wing culture war with an "anti-racist" cover and allowed Trump fans to justify aggressive positions with supposed diversity. Her emotionality gave her rhetorical weight. She learned the right-wing populist craft at Turning Point USA and Shapiro's Daily Wire. Well trained in this way, she eventually struck out on her own. She was important to MAGA because, as an African American, she espoused radical MAGA views, was stylistically very aggressive, and was strictly opposed to African Americans always giving massive support to Democrats in elections.

Trump achieved great success among Latinos. The Latino propagandists did a great job in this respect, even though, with the exception of Marco Rubio, they were not as well known among non-Latinos as other MAGA stars. Marco Rubio was a long-time critic of Trump but fell into line after 2016. He acted as a serious bridge builder to the Latino center, especially in Florida (conservative Cuban Americans). He gave Trump the appearance of being anchored in the Hispanic establishment. He was not a charismatic culture warrior, but he was very useful as a symbol. Mayra Flores represented Trump's strategic breakthrough in Latinos in South Texas. Their message: "We Latinos are not automatically Democrats." As a former immigrant with a hard line on border security, she occupied a paradoxical but useful position for MAGA: she supported Trump's identity politics against immigration, thus distinguishing herself in the culture war and serving as one of the symbolic figures for Trump's offensive to convince as many Latinos as possible to support MAGA. Ana Paulina Luna was a former Air Force veteran. Like Flores, she embodied the "new generation" of right-wing Latinas who fought woke ideology while bringing diversity to the Trump movement. Flores and Luna gained political experience as

members of the House of Representatives. They both helped win Latinos for Trump. Trump was able to win many Latino votes, even though it was clear even before the election that the planned mass deportations would hit Latinos particularly hard.

Alex Jones was the conspiracy prophet par excellence, even after legal punishment. His reach legitimized extreme myths. His content provided the cultural framework for MAGA narratives about the deep state, elite control, and political coups.

Steve Bannon was one of the architects behind the MAGA propaganda style: polarization as strategy, populism as movement. He conveyed Trump's role as a cult figure of resistance and helped him establish his propaganda. His War Room podcast was very influential in the MAGA world.

Matt Gaetz presented himself as a beefy front-line fighter in Congress, not as a legislator, but as a media mouthpiece for the grassroots. He was a test balloon for breaking taboos, with a direct line to radical MAGA circles and a prime example of how the legislature could be transformed into performative propaganda.

Trump's Valkyries Marjorie Taylor Greene and Laura Loomer were not idle either. Greene represented the "culture war coalition" at the core of the MAGA camp. She embodied the fusion of QAnon narratives, anti-feminist rhetoric, anti-woke moralism, and authoritarian views of the state. Her radical demands served as permanent confirmation to the base that their anger was legitimate and necessary. Greene and Loomer did not speak for the center, but for the emotional depths of the movement. This appealed to radical supporters but probably scared off moderate Republicans. Trump undoubtedly had the loudest voices on his side. Laura Loomer served on the "digital front line" of the culture war. She was best known for her uncompromising populism. With targeted provocation against "woke" symbols, she was able to generate a lot of attention for her propaganda. Her aggressive rhetoric aimed to radicalize the online information war. She had repeatedly called for the Republican Party to completely "clean house," including RINOs. Loomer was not part of the official apparatus, but she was highly effective in the echo chamber. She radicalized, tested boundaries, and protected Trump by acting as a kind of "extreme vanguard": what Loomer said made Trump's position appear moderate. In the echo chamber, her extremism was often seen as "honest," as proof of authentic Trump loyalty.

### **MAGA as the pinnacle of American populism.**

First, let's introduce some pioneers of populism. Father Charles Coughlin, a Catholic radio preacher of the 1930s, was an important representative of early populism. He channeled economic uncertainties and showed his populist successors how mass influence worked via the media. George Wallace, the governor of Alabama who was active in the 1960s and 1970s, stood for white right-wing populism. Naturally, he vigorously advocated segregation, "law and order," and for the greatest possible political leeway for the states. Billy Graham was an influential evangelical preacher who made the interference of Christianity in politics a matter of course. He was a pioneer of the political theologization of the public sphere in the US. He made it socially acceptable for evangelical Protestantism to become politically effective, especially in the context of conservative politics. Ronald Reagan was an excellent communicator of

conservative messages. He was in favor of a strong state externally and a lean state internally. He offered a mixture of entertainment, ideology, and political theater. He never forgot his roots in show business. Reality TV star Donald Trump certainly learned a lot from his political style. Reagan was a savior for many conservatives, but for critics he was an agitator with a friendly face. The transition from Carter to Reagan marked the beginning of an ideologically charged conservatism, the late form of which is visible today in MAGA. In the 1990s, Newt Gingrich made a name for himself. He was the architect of the beginning of strong party-political polarization. In doing so, he laid the foundation for Trump's political style. In the 1990s, Rush Limbaugh established himself as a right-wing populist radio star. Trump was among his supporters. In 2020, Trump honored Limbaugh's commitment to populism with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Limbaugh made the easily consumable daily media culture war socially acceptable.

Fox News was also founded in the 1990s as a platform for right-wing populism. Its growing power allowed Fox News to exert significant influence on right-wing politics and position itself as the center of an echo chamber, thereby changing the political climate in the country and causing a shift to the right overall. At the time of Trump's first candidacy around 2015, Fox was a weapon ready for use that Trump could immediately deploy. Sarah Palin, the radical vice-presidential candidate of the moderate John McCain in the 2008 election, appealed to the "real America," which she claimed had been misled by the elites. She was a direct precursor to Trump's style of communication: unpolished, folksy, and highly provocative. Through her and the Tea Party, conservative politics became radicalized. In 2015, Trump made Steve Bannon his advisor on strategic and tactical matters. Bannon was thus able to play a decisive role in defusing the Access Hollywood affair and helping Trump win the election. The strategist Bannon was one of the brightest minds in the right-wing camp. Along with a few others, he stood for the intellectualization of populism. He was also reportedly a fan of the sophist Thucydides. Steve Bannon was not just a simple agitator. He was a strategically minded populist with historical and philosophical references. He helped make Trump electable in 2016 and tried to integrate his instincts into a strategically coherent campaign. Important stratagems such as "Flood the Zone" probably originated from him.

Trump stands at the end of these developments and innovations in the fields of populism and populist communication. A whole range of tools was at his disposal. All he had to do was reach for them. His instinct helped him find the right ones for the job. When he entered the election campaign with the radical statement that Mexicans were rapists, many believed he would soon fail spectacularly because of his radicalism. Donald Trump made the infamous statement on June 16, 2015. That was the day he announced his candidacy for the 2016 US presidency. This statement set the tone early on for Trump's polarizing and anti-immigration campaign. It was also strategically significant: Trump radically distanced himself from the established Republican discourse and immediately captured the attention of the media. On that day, crucial MAGA structures were created. A loyal base emerged that marched with him through thick and thin and even turned him into a cult leader. The Republican establishment began to fear his power. Until then, Republican candidates had been reluctant to fully embrace populism, partly because they were afraid of losing the election as a result. Trump was willing to take the risk because he had great confidence in the possibilities of populism and in his abilities as a communicator. Trump took the plunge into populism with a strategy of

polarization: the more he divided, the more clearly he could present himself as the leader of a movement. He relied on his ability to make an impact through media dominance, aggressive language, and emotional mobilization, and this gamble paid off. His two mentors, Roy Cohn and Roger Stone, saw great talent in him and apparently succeeded in instilling enormous self-confidence in him. Both men reinforced Trump's belief in himself as a political phenomenon: charismatic, invulnerable, superior in the media.

Fox News, Joe Rogan, and X (formerly Twitter) were important players in Trump's echo chamber. These three were mentioned here as representative of all the other important players in the various communication channels. Fox was not the only right-wing television station. However, Fox was the most influential medium in the Trump echo chamber, with a wide reach and great influence on older, loyal voters. If viewers were dissatisfied with Fox, they had the option of switching to Newsmax or One America News Network (OANN). These often tried to outdo Fox on the right. Fox was eager to make Trump and his political positions palatable to viewers, but if Trump were to hurt their audience after the election, they could cautiously distance themselves from Trump. Fox often broadcasted Trump's statements uncritically or approvingly. Only Trump-friendly content was offered. Everything else was ignored. The reporting was not neutral but emotionalized in order to increase viewer loyalty. The constant presence of Trump's views on Fox made Trump's perspective the new normal. Even extreme positions were slowly absorbed into the "mainstream." For Fox and its viewers, independent media was hostile territory. Fox was powerful. It could "punish" politicians from its own party who were critical of Trump. Fox's ability to prevent cognitive dissonance from taking hold among its audience, despite Trump's many contradictory political statements, could not be overestimated. This ability made Fox a psychological and political superweapon within the echo chamber. During the election campaign, Trump claimed that foreign countries (especially China) would have to pay the tariffs. This was a blatant lie that many people swallowed hook, line, and sinker. Secondly, no one thought about what a tariff war really meant. Fox did not portray Trump's statement as a lie but supported it with phrases such as "tough on China." Instead of providing economic analysis, Fox spread national narratives: patriotism and strength. Contradictions, such as Trump's advocacy for low taxes while simultaneously burdening consumers with tariffs, were not addressed. By conveying the feeling that "We have been cheated, Trump is fighting for us," viewers were emotionally relieved, even if the facts contradicted this. As a result, there was no internal pressure to distance oneself from Trump; on the contrary, the bond became stronger because Trump appeared to be under attack.

Joe Rogan was one of Donald Trump's most influential media supporters in the 2024 presidential election campaign. Joe Rogan was not part of the classic MAGA structure, but he still played an important role in Trump's echo chamber, primarily through his influence on young, male, often politically disillusioned listeners. Rogan was not a hardcore Trumpist, but he provided a popular, seemingly neutral forum for right-wing narratives, conspiracy theories, and anti-establishment sentiments. Through him, MAGA gained new followers (mainly young and male) who did not think much of traditional politics and traditional media but were receptive to right-wing narratives such as "the fight for freedom against the deep state," "mainstream media lies," "coronavirus policies were exaggerated," and many others. Rogan, like Fox, made an effort to prevent cognitive dissonance from taking effect. Rogan presented himself as a "skeptic" who "just asked questions." In doing so, he legitimized right-wing positions without

directly representing them. Through his seemingly gentle style of conveying ideology, he fulfilled an important bridging and relieving function for his often insecure audience. Right-wing ideological fragments were normalized and thus more easily accepted, and critical questioning would only have challenged the harmony that had been achieved. Rogan was very useful to Trump: Trump himself was not explicitly supported by Rogan during the election campaign, but Rogan rejected Biden and regularly spoke with Trump's ideological allies. Rogan's audience was supposed to come to the conclusion on their own: Trump is the right presidential candidate. Rogan helped to insidiously introduce Trump's worldview into milieus that otherwise did not identify with MAGA. Rogan was not controlled by Trump, but Trump's echo chamber benefited structurally from Rogan's reach, his anti-woke style, and his distrust of government authority.

X (formerly Twitter) remained strategically important for Trump's camp even after he switched to Truth Social. Although Trump personally used his own platform (Truth Social) primarily from 2022 onwards, X became the decisive right-wing hub under Elon Musk. Strategists, supporters, right-wing influencers, and politicians remained active on X because its reach was many times greater than that of Truth Social. People such as Stephen Miller, Matt Gaetz, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Charlie Kirk, and Elon Musk himself ensured the continuous dissemination of pro-Trump positions on X. After Musk's takeover of Twitter (at the end of 2022), censorship mechanisms were relaxed and blocked right-wing accounts were reactivated. Musk himself spread anti-woke, antidemocratic, and anti-Biden narratives, often in a style very similar to Trump's. He specifically offered a platform to right-wing influencers with reach (Tucker Carlson, Alex Jones, etc.). This effectively turned X into a free propaganda space for the right-wing sphere that was more accessible and dynamic than Fox or Truth Social. While Truth Social primarily served an internal MAGA community, X remained the central link to journalists, intellectuals, politicians, observers, and critics of Trump. Many narratives from Truth or Telegram were "translated" via X and made accessible to a wider audience. This allowed the right-wing echo chamber to feed back into the mainstream via X, and with greater efficiency than ever before. X developed into a place where right-wing populist, libertarian, or nationalist positions became "acceptable." "New right-wing" theorists and tech oligarchs mixed cultural criticism, technological utopias, and authoritarian ideas with MAGA narratives. Trump no longer had to tweet himself, because X worked for him anyway. The "Trump" brand was so deeply entrenched on X that he benefited from it passively. Elon Musk shaped X into a MAGA instrument that continued to polarize and mobilize even without Trump as an actor.

### **The quantitative and qualitative power of the echo chamber**

The Trump echo chamber was particularly impressive from a quantitative perspective. Numerous powerful players used a wide variety of channels—television, podcasts, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter)—to spread and develop Trump's messages. Added to this was a fanatical base, especially in red states and conservative regions of blue states, which participated in political communication with great dedication. The sheer volume of activity was a key factor in the echo chamber. Many Trump supporters were so active that observers sometimes mistook them for Russian bots. The propaganda had an impact not only through central players such as Fox News or Joe Rogan, but also through the multitude of small and

medium-sized voices that amplified the echo. The principle of how it works can be compared to shouting in the mountains. If you shout "hello" into a valley from a suitable mountain, you will hear the word echo back multiple times, often distorted.

The digital ecosystem surrounding Trump worked in exactly the same way. A single tweet, Facebook post, or short clip on TikTok could trigger countless reactions: agreement, outrage, additions, ironic repetitions. The initial responses attracted further ones. Eager followers actively participated, even on a small scale, and helped to amplify the original signal. A typical case might have looked like this: A MAGA supporter on X reported an alleged insult by a "woke" employee at a service provider and asked how he should respond. He immediately received advice from like-minded people. An influencer with reach, such as Joe Rogan, picked up on the incident and commented on it. What may have particularly interested Rogan was the confrontation between a MAGA man and a "woke" woman. The excitement grew until finally Fox News picked up on the topic and tried to exploit it to the detriment of the Democrats. This is how the propagandistic ping-pong of the 21st century came about: seemingly insignificant individual reports are turned into a major political event through the perfect interplay of the grassroots, influencers, and the media machine. In addition to the sheer volume of posts, the quality of the content in the Trump echo chamber was also strategically significant. The actors involved were not only vocal, but also functionally coordinated. Their posts fulfilled different tasks: mobilization, legitimization, distraction, attack, and above all, defense.

### **The achievements of the Trump echo chamber**

One important achievement of the echo chamber was the construction of a communicative fortress around the MAGA brand. This "fortress achievement" had two directions: outward and inward. Outwardly, the echo chamber was intended to act as a shield. Harmful information, such as critical reports or revelations, were to be warded off or reinterpreted. Internally, it was to serve as a bulwark of loyalty. Its own supporters were therefore constantly emotionally reinforced, ideologically consolidated, and protected from cognitive dissonance. This architecture of immunization favored the so-called Teflon effect. Scandals, contradictions, or blatantly false claims, such as Trump's repeated statement that foreign countries would pay the tariffs, bounced off the fortress or were reinterpreted. Loyalty to Trump as a person weighed more heavily than factchecking. Even serious events, such as his behavior during the coronavirus pandemic or the storming of the Capitol, did not automatically lead to a drop in his approval ratings. The aim of this approach was to make Trump appear unshakeable in his role as an identity-forming figure. His supporters were not to waver, even in times of crisis. The echo chamber therefore spread the narrative that Trump was being persecuted and that his supporters should protect him from his enemies.

The Trump echo chamber did much more than just political communication; it also fulfilled cult-like functions. The term "cult performance" describes the echo chamber's role in creating emotional bonds, unconditional allegiance, and "deification" of the leader. Within the echo chamber, Trump was portrayed not merely as a politician, but as a superhuman leader. His statements were not considered debatable opinions, but deeper truths. Criticism of Trump was not regarded as normal democratic expression of opinion, but as sacrilege. The cult often explained his infallible wisdom with phrases such as "He plays three-dimensional chess"

or "He is a genius." The echo chamber took on the role of a defense mechanism for the cult leader. It prevented doubt by resolving cognitive dissonance through distraction, counterattack, or pseudological arguments. At the same time, the followers were emotionally activated: loyalty became the highest virtue, doubt a weakness or even treason. The result: cult-like loyalty instead of political rationality. Supporters did not expect explanations but were satisfied with the assertion that Trump knew what he was doing. In extreme cases, political allegiance turned into personal devotion. This was a pattern that came to the fore in authoritarian movements. Cult followers were particularly dangerous for democratic discourse because they could not be persuaded. Their motivation was not only political, but also identitarian. They responded to critics with aggression, ridicule, or dehumanization, because they were considered enemies, not fellow citizens. The cult performance was thus a central component of the overall function of the echo chamber. It explains why many Trump supporters were so resistant to facts and why even Trump's spectacular failures did little to harm him.

The echo chamber was supposed to provide Trump with "political-geological" achievements. These involved profound shifts, tectonic tensions, and the long-term destabilization of existing structures in favor of a new political landscape. The echo chamber acted as a catalyst for tectonic shifts in the US political arena. Initially, Trump was concerned with internal tectonics, with transforming the GOP into MAGA. By the start of the election campaign, this process was already complete. The echo chamber specifically supported the shift to the right within the Republican Party. Traditional conservatives (such as Bush Republicans) were marginalized or silenced. The party was transformed into the Trump party and MAGA provided the new ideological foundation. Trump could now turn his attention to external tectonics, the transformation of the two-party system into the MAGA state. The radicalization aimed to shift not only the GOP but the entire political landscape to the right. The claim became total: not just to lead a government, but to transform the state. Trump attempted to instrumentalize or devalue democratic institutions (the judiciary, the media, elections, the Constitution). The echo chamber served as a resonance chamber for authoritarian trial balloons. The attempt to assert power across institutions (e.g., after the 2020 election) initially showed him his limits, but Trump did not let up: democratic structures were to be overwhelmed by populist mobilization and a culture of loyalty. Trump apparently has a longterm goal: he wants a great deal of power for himself and to govern with as little "interference" from internal and external powers as possible. Trump's recurring admiration for autocrats such as Putin or Xi pointed to a sense of power beyond Western democracies. The echo chamber prepared the ideological ground for this hunger for power. It was intended not only to defend it, but also to normalize it with the goal of creating a Trumpism that would function not merely as a trend or a movement, but as a state-supporting order, as a MAGA state.

The MAGA echo chamber offered its followers more than news or opinions. It provided them with a worldview, a cultural safe space that conveyed orientation, identity, and emotional security. As an ideology in a broad sense, it replaced traditional sources of education and information (schools, the press, academia) with an alternative system of knowledge and values. This system functioned through emotional attachment, not rational conviction. There were clear enemy stereotypes ("the elites," "the woke," "the media," "the Democrats") and clear heroes (Trump, Tucker Carlson, Rogan, etc.). The intentions went beyond mere demarcation. It was about hegemony: the displacement of liberal, enlightened culture by a MAGA ideology in a

broad sense that systematically undermined facts, differentiation, and reflection. It was not about intellectual debate, but about ideological warfare: "woke culture" was not discussed, but ridiculed or demonized. The goal was to enforce a reactionary, anti-intellectual cultural model based on obedience, emotionalization, and loyalty. The echo chamber relied on "targeted dumbing down": it was not just about gaps in education, but about structured immunization against knowledge. Facts that did not fit into the worldview were systematically ignored or reinterpreted. Scientific and journalistic authorities were discredited as part of the conspiracy. The effect was deliberate cognitive isolation, a kind of voluntary intellectual retreat. Trump recognized that gaps in education were political capital. His famous statement, "I love the uneducated," was not a slip of the tongue; it was an insight into his thinking: people with limited access to alternative information are easier to emotionalize. Many MAGA supporters thought they understood the political game, and so they considered Trump to be the only one telling the truth. In this world, emphasizing the importance of education did not mean broadening horizons, but rather betraying the group. The MAGA echo chamber was a cultural parallel society that relied not simply on disinformation, but on counterenlightenment, in the style of a counter-modernity. Its success lay not in its power of argument, but in its ability to create emotional and identity-based bonds.

The MAGA echo chamber did not want to give up on visions. What was the vision it offered? The echo chamber made it clear to all MAGA people: "The future lies in the past and Make America great again." The beauty of this broad vision concept was that the visionaries could choose for themselves which time they wanted to return to. Even before the election, it was becoming apparent that DEI was in danger. Then the LGBTQ concept would probably be attacked. Did anyone want to go back to the good old days of segregation? Why not, if it could be enforced without civil war? Some were probably already secretly dreaming of Jim Crow and/or a second secession movement. The MAGA echo chamber offered a vision of the future by drawing on the past, i.e., a "reactionary utopia," whereby backward-looking longings were transformed into political energy. The central message of "Make America great again" was vague in content but extremely effective emotionally: it suggested a golden age conservatives could want to return, without specifying exactly when this period had its "golden" effect. The empty formula allowed each supporter to read his own version of paradise lost into it. This past was conceived not as historical, but as mythical: strong, white, Christian, male-dominated, culturally homogeneous, economically nationalistic. This was not a classic vision of progress, but a restorative idea, as could also be observed in other right-wing populist movements. The backward-looking vision was flexible enough to allow for many variations, from Christian values to deeply reactionary fantasies. The vision was never fully articulated, but rather packaged in hints, dog whistles, and symbols. This allowed it to remain ambiguous and thus politically exploitable by groups of varying degrees of radicalism.

The MAGA echo chamber also served to obscure truths, including those about MAGA's mission and the role of the MAGA base. As a MAGA supporter, you were not allowed to speak such truths or even think them. The MAGA echo chamber was an enormously important tool in the hands of the rich, CEOs, oligarchs, and the politically powerful to enforce their interests. MAGA supporters did not realize that they were not only perpetrators, but also victims, even tragic victims: the dumbest of all calves, choosing their own butchers. Trump was the perfect actor for the role of supreme obfuscator. He was able to credibly represent ordinary

people, but at the same time serve the interests of the ultra-rich class. He was able to successfully distract from the fact that he was also an "evil oligarch" by selling himself as a successful businessman and master negotiator. Within the MAGA world, it was taboo to name the financial and political elite behind the system, because that would have destabilized the whole self-perception as a "movement of the little people" and because it might then have turned out that most MAGA supporters were objectively voting against their own interests and that MAGA was based on an anti-establishment myth, when in fact it was highly elitist. The real taboo break would not have been to support attacks on Democrats, migrants, or LGBTQ people, but to recognize that MAGA was a project of the super-rich disguised as a revolution of the lower classes. Ultimately, the echo chamber served to obscure real power relations. It channeled anger and discontent, but not against the oligarchs, but against minorities, liberals, "the media," or "the government." This was a very effective strategy for the oligarchs to expand their power or at least secure it in the long term. The social surface structure of MAGA (ordinary people, patriots, the working class, "forgotten Americans," "the deplorables" according to Hillary Clinton) stood in stark contrast to the deep power structures in which wealthy elites, conservative billionaires, and powerful CEOs played a key role. The MAGA echo chamber was not a chaotic network of random actors, but in many ways a political instrument designed to provide political stability for economic interests. The echo chamber as a political instrument of the oligarchs could also be used to build political pressure to shape government regulations and taxes in favor of the super-rich, to pit workers against workers (e.g., white workers against migrants), and to promote an authoritarian culture that stifled criticism and demanded loyalty. The echo chamber thus not only offered the oligarchic elites "concealment of the truth," but also provided them with important "instrumental services."

The expansionary power of the MAGA echo chamber was not defensive, but offensive, almost missionary. This was an essential part of its effectiveness. The MAGA movement was never content to simply retreat into "red strongholds." Rather, it aimed to expand its zones of influence. Blue states or counties with weak "liberal immune systems" were specifically targeted (e.g., through local media, church networks, activists). Swing states were, of course, particularly important. Certain target groups (former Democrats, independents, economically insecure people) were of particular interest. Attempts were made to infiltrate education, health, and justice systems (e.g., school boards, university committees, district attorneys). This expansion was no coincidence, but part of the MAGA tactic to broaden the ideological base through countless small activities in everyday life. The echo chamber delegated propaganda downwards. Everyone should be visible (e.g., MAGA flag, stickers, social media posts), appear convincing (e.g., conversations with neighbors, participation in local committees), be "seductive," and act emotionally and forcefully. The comparison with a "virus" or a "seducer" was appropriate when it came to influencing people affected by the economic crisis in their region, for example. Those who were fearful and uncertain were easier to convince that MAGA would make things better. The MAGA approach of "back to the past" sought to convey security in difficult times through tried-and-tested recipes (according to MAGA) from the past. This kind of "dangerousness," in the sense of subliminal persuasiveness, was a core feature of modern propaganda. It exploited emotional vulnerability (e.g., illness, loneliness, economic worries). It was persistent and omnipresent, and not spectacular, but corrosive. It often operated without visible leadership, which made it difficult to attack. Fox News, local

preachers, TikTok influencers, or neighbors with MAGA signs all belonged to the system of permanent agitation. With its expansionist efforts, the MAGA echo chamber aimed to permanently reshape the cultural and political territory of the US through constant, small-scale, emotionally effective influence.

### **The MAGA states and the swing states**

The southern bloc dominated MAGA. It formed the hard core of MAGA. MAGA benefited from the history and culture of the South. Evangelical Christians in these states were particularly important in this regard. The following states provided a total of 154 electoral votes: West Virginia (4), South Carolina (9), Kentucky (8), Tennessee (11), Arkansas (6), Louisiana (8), Mississippi (6), Alabama (9), Oklahoma (7), Texas (40), North Carolina (16), Florida (30).

The red blocs in the west and center of the country provided 49 electoral votes. The western bloc forms the first line of conservative resistance against blue influences from the West Coast: Utah (6), Idaho (4), Wyoming (3), Montana (4). This was followed by a strong, united block of five red states in the center of the country, east of the Mississippi River, adjacent to the southern states (i.e., north of Texas and Oklahoma) with the Missouri states: Kansas (6), Nebraska (4) + (1), South Dakota (3), North Dakota (3), Iowa (6); and the state of Missouri (10) (which is also on the Mississippi). In Nebraska, one electoral vote could possibly go to the Democrats.

The northern block delivered 28 electoral votes. This region in the north (initially more of a bridgehead) has been further expanded by the Republicans and MAGA in recent years. Obama last won against McCain in Indiana (2008). Indiana (11) is now a red state. Ohio (17) is still a purple state, but not a swing state in this election. Obama last won here in 2012. Voters in these states were recently very disappointed with Obama and subsequently turned away from the Democrats. They then placed their hopes in Trump and MAGA. The majority of voters were aware that if they voted for this party, they would get 100% MAGA, including the culture war.

Two purple states were clearly no longer swing states in this election, given the prevailing climate of opinion (which was already apparent long before the election, when viewed objectively), even though the Democrats had high hopes: Arizona (11) and Nevada (6). Total: 17.

Trump could therefore hope for 248 electoral votes (without the 3 swing states):  $154+49+28+17=248$ . The Democrats were just behind:  $538-248-44=246$  (538 minus 248 minus the electoral votes in the swing states: Pennsylvania: 19, Wisconsin: 10, Michigan: 15). 270 votes were needed: Since Pennsylvania alone was not enough for either party to win, at least two of the three swing states had to be won by Trump or Harris in order to win. Given the starting position, a close neck-and-neck race was to be expected in this decisive battle in the three swing states. This was no ordinary choice. This election was also about the future of America and the world. This decisive battle was decided by brutal propaganda wars. That was the strength of the strategist in charge, Trump. Trump also had an impressive propaganda army at his disposal, as already shown. Trump and his people knew that this was about victory or defeat in a particularly important political war. Trump could not afford to lose, otherwise his involvement in the Long Coup would have been in vain and he would probably have ended up in

prison. That is why he was determined to proceed ruthlessly and with the utmost severity. He was prepared to wage a dirty war. Unconditional loyalty to the leader, who was in a difficult position, was important in this regard. Donald Trump announced his candidacy for the 2024 presidential election on November 15, 2022. He made his announcement during an event at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida. By November 15, 2022, he had already been quite successful in his culture war. Therefore, it had to be assumed that in this election campaign, of the seven often-mentioned swing states, North Carolina, Arizona, Georgia, and Nevada were not swing states this time around. Hispanics and Latinos made up approximately 32% of the population in Arizona and approximately 28% in Nevada. Trump was gaining increasing support among the men in these groups. Trump focused on issues such as inflation, immigration, national identity, and economic isolation, and these issues had resonated strongly in the red states (but also in the purple states), and, to the delight of MAGA, also among voter groups that tended to lean toward the Democrats, including a number of Hispanics and Latinos. States such as Arizona, Nevada, North Carolina, and Georgia were clearly no longer swing states in this election, as the political landscape had changed. A strict distinction had to be made between purple states and swing states in this election. Ohio was still a purple state, but certainly not a swing state in this election. Indiana was once a purple state and even a swing state, but in the 2024 election, Indiana was already solidly red. From that perspective, Ohio could well end up the same way. High approval ratings for MAGA in the Rust Belt were also a sign of the economic decline of a region. Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan were not yet as far along as Indiana and Ohio.

Trump loved the poor, the needy, and the poorly educated, but only as a source of votes, of course. Trump had managed to portray himself as the advocate of "forgotten" Americans, especially the white working class in the Rust Belt. His rhetoric often targeted their fears and frustrations, whether in relation to job losses, immigration, or cultural changes. Trump sold his supporters the idea that the Deep State was their enemy, not the rich. According to this ideology, tax cuts and deregulation would not only benefit businesses and the wealthy, but also the poor and needy by stimulating the economy. The fact that the attack on the Deep State also meant cuts to social services was downplayed, suppressed, and ignored by his supporters.

The high level of support for MAGA in the Rust Belt reflected the economic decline and frustration of many voters. Trump managed to turn this discontent into political support. Ohio may have already been on its way to becoming a solid red state, like Indiana. Indiana used to be competitive (e.g., Obama narrowly won the state in 2008) but had since become firmly Republican. This development showed how the political landscape could shift in regions with economic problems and cultural conflicts. The economic decline in the Rust Belt was a key factor in the political development of this region. The loss of industrial jobs, the exodus of young people, and the associated lack of prospects had made many voters susceptible to populist messages. Trump successfully channeled this frustration by promising to bring back jobs and restore America to its "former greatness." Although these promises were often unrealistic, they resonated with many voters.

The real swing states were Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan. In the swing states, the margins in presidential elections were often minimal, so it did not take much to lose the election. A small mistake in campaign management, an unforeseen event, or poor mobilization could decide the outcome of the election. Trump was fully aware of this dynamic:

it was therefore to be expected that he would fight with all means to win the 2024 election, that he would try to win back many suburban voters he had lost in 2020 or influence Democratic voters not to go to the polls. These states had a mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas. They were the decisive states for the 2024 election. The economic decline in the Rust Belt played a major role in this. In Pennsylvania, there were large urban centers (especially Philadelphia and Pittsburgh) that voted Democrat; in Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Madison, and other urban areas were important for the Democrats; and in Michigan, voters in Detroit, Ann Arbor, and other urban centers favored the Democrats. Rural areas, on the other hand, were predominantly Republican, which made the suburbs the key to victory. Many working-class people supported Trump, and in the Rust Belt, issues such as jobs and energy policy were more important than in the South or West. These three swing states were not yet as Republican as Ohio or Indiana, mainly because the Democrats had a stronger counterbalance in the cities, and the suburbs were more contested. However, this could change rapidly in the future if economic problems and cultural divisions would continue to grow.

Rural areas in the US were predominantly in Republican hands. The urban-rural divide was an international trend and the rural population increasingly voted for right-wing to radical right-wing parties. A few decades ago, this trend was not yet very noticeable. The rural population was also more easily mobilized by a creeping culture war (especially against immigration) than the urban population. Populist parties and politicians used cultural conflicts to mobilize voters. Often, this was not about concrete political measures, but rather symbolic issues such as national identity, tradition, and "values." This culture war was often deliberately fueled in order to emotionally bind the electorate. The urban-rural divide was pronounced in the US. Cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago were often Democratic strongholds, while rural areas and small towns were strongly Republican. Trump successfully exploited this divide by presenting himself as the voice of the rural population.

Many people in the US and other countries who lived in rural areas were convinced that traditional values and ways of life were under threat. Issues such as immigration and globalization were exploited by populists to mobilize voters. Trump and other politicians managed to portray themselves as the "voice of the little man." Criticism of elites, the media, and "political correctness" also played a central role in this. Why were people in metropolitan areas more resistant to the "right-wing virus"? Cultural diversity was part of everyday life in cities. The population therefore tended to be more open to immigration and multicultural societies. Cities were often more economically dynamic and offered more opportunities for education, work, and social advancement. This could lead to the population being more optimistic and less susceptible to populist messages. Urban centers often offered higher levels of political education, which in turn provided people with the skills to engage more critically with populist "narratives." In European countries such as France (Front National/Rassemblement National), Germany (AfD), and Italy (Lega), the urban-rural divide was also an important factor in the rise of right-wing populist parties. Although the rural population in many countries was not necessarily worse off economically than it was a few decades ago, there was often an unpleasant feeling of being left behind or neglected. Globalization, technological change, and the loss of traditional ways of life have fueled fears. The rural population was often less accustomed to cultural diversity than the urban population. Immigration was therefore often perceived as a threat to their own identity and way of life.

Populist parties deliberately exploit these fears by offering simple solutions and clear enemy stereotypes. Social media and populist media have been able to stir up fears and polarize opinions more easily in this regard. It was unlikely that the urban-rural divide would disappear in the foreseeable future. One possible way out of this social crisis was certainly for both sides to realize that they had to make concessions in order to overcome the social divide. The needs of the rural population had to be taken more seriously, and targeted measures had to be taken to improve their economic and social situation. In this respect, the US was not well positioned even before Trump. Biden tried to counteract this, but his initiatives came too late to secure him electoral success. The rural population should become more tolerant and should understand that cultural diversity is not a threat. The state, society, and culture should promote dialogue between urban and rural regions in order to break down prejudices and find common solutions.

What did the red states stand for after six years of Trump, at the time of his candidacy announcement in November 2022? They stood for white supremacy, strict border security, the great political and cultural significance of religion (especially evangelicalism), private gun ownership, cultural conservatism and rejection of woke culture, and cultural warfare in many areas and on many levels. They advocated low tax rates (especially for the rich), a lean state, and strict laws to further restrict existing abortion rights. Many workers in the US did not have a high school diploma, and many Trump voters had no more than a middle school education. Red States in particular were associated with poor education and training. Furthermore, four plagues were rampant in these states: racism, bigotry, misogyny, and poverty. All of this made them susceptible to populism, to the resurgence of old concepts (Confederate States), to increased backward-looking attitudes, as indicated by the "Again" in MAGA. MAGA was against mandatory vaccination, did not believe in climate change, and was against the welfare state. MAGA also did not want to deal with American history objectively and in detail.

The Southern bloc culturally dominated the entire MAGA movement, and conversely, the Republicans (or MAGA) had a firm grip on the South. Many voters in the South were evangelical Christians. The Southern bloc was able to exert cultural pressure on the other red states, as well as the red regions in the blue states. Even before Trump, the Republican Party was shifting to the right, and the six years of Trump (until the start of the election campaign) changed the South and the other red states even more.

MAGA had an enormous voter base at its disposal. Seeing the many red zones even in blue areas, it was clear how much pressure the Democrats were under. The red voter base was important for majorities in all kinds of elections at the local, state, and national levels. The red states were particularly important for the Senate, because even small states could elect two senators. The Senate was important for the appointment of Supreme Court justices. In this regard, Trump and MAGA had already done a great job in his first term. What happened in the red states also had an impact on the swing states. MAGA's message to the swing states was: "Don't kid yourselves. You're no better than us. You've had better times. Why not give Trump and MAGA a try?" At least Trump promised his supporters (and it wasn't a lie): I am your retribution.

The red states were the driving force behind Trump's cultural and propaganda war. The MAGA states and MAGA regions were, so to speak, huge echo chambers. The MAGA supporters and MAGA activists from the red states and regions were not only voters, but they

were also important supporters for Trump in the election campaign. They were able to make themselves useful in many ways. For example, they ensured his stable approval ratings, which could be described as a Teflon effect. The MAGA people in these states were completely immune to criticism. They stood by Trump unwaveringly. Supporters in these states backed Trump financially and through personal involvement in the election campaign. Trump was already able to raise a lot of money for his Stop the Steal campaign. The Teflon effect also had to do with the fact that these states became cult states with Trump as their cult leader. This is why Trump was able to put enormous pressure on Republicans in Congress and force their obedience. Trump had enormous influence on politics and the party in the red states and was thus able to make his personal political and cultural preferences clear and incorporate them into his election program.

### **MAGA financing**

The oligarchs were an important source of direct financial support for the Republicans and MAGA. In 2010, the Republican-dominated Supreme Court ruled that donors (individuals, companies) could invest unlimited amounts of money in "independent campaign advertising" (Super PACs). However, personal donations to candidates or parties were subject to upper limits. The Super PACs allowed the rich and super-rich to intervene massively in election campaigns. The Super PACs were not allowed to support candidates directly. They had to engage in "independent campaign advertising" and were not allowed to coordinate with a campaign. They could run election ads (TV spots, online ads, etc.) and explicitly position themselves for or against a candidate. The requirement to run "independent election advertising" was easy to circumvent if Super PACs were run by people close to the candidate or campaign, or it was enough to watch Fox News to know what to do. The introduction of super PAC financing did not secure a lasting advantage for the Republicans, because the Democrats were also supported by oligarchs. The winners were the rich people: their influence on politics had increased. The Koch family avoided Trump in 2024, probably because of ideological and strategic differences. Many billions were spent on election campaigns, which could not be raised by individual donors alone. Each presidential campaign was apparently even more expensive than the previous one. Trump constantly tried to encourage his supporters to make individual donations, but Harris was more successful in this regard.

Even with his major donors, Trump was unable to gain an overall advantage in direct financial support for his campaign. The Democrats were financially stronger overall. Even Elon Musk's intervention in this regard in the late stages of the campaign could not change that. Although Musk's financial support could not completely offset the Republicans' financial deficit, it was of great importance to Trump, but probably not decisive for the election. Musk used his money primarily to finance campaign measures in the swing states, especially in Pennsylvania.

Trump was proud to be a billionaire, but his wealth was not evident in the election campaign. Lara Trump's leadership of the RNC allowed Trump to direct Republican financial resources toward his own campaign, but this posed risks for the party as a whole, as less money was left for other Republican candidates. In any case, under Lara Trump, large sums of

money flowed into Trump's presidential campaign and his legal battles. Billionaire Trump struggled to prevent a foreclosure sale of real estate in 2024. Trump claimed to be a billionaire (primarily through real estate) but had little liquid assets. He was apparently forced to use campaign donations to pay his legal fees, which was legally controversial.

Thanks to the indirect financial support Trump could count on, he easily managed to offset the disadvantage in direct financing and even gained a significant advantage over the Biden-Harris campaign in terms of total (direct and indirect) financial support for his campaign. This was mainly due to echo chamber financial support. Trump and MAGA would not have been able to raise the huge sums needed to pay for the services of Fox and other helpers (around the clock). Without Fox, Musk, Rogan, etc., Trump's campaign would have had no chance. These networks served as free multipliers that Harris did not have at her disposal in this quantity and effectiveness. Imagine what would have happened if they had fought against Trump. MSNBC was important to the Democrats, but it couldn't do that. Trump's biggest "donor" is not a super PAC, but Rupert Murdoch's Fox empire. This made Trump's funding deficit in direct support irrelevant. Cynical people would certainly not be surprised by such a statement. They also had a simple explanation for the success of a top soccer team: money scores goals. The most expensive team with the best players wins. The direct funding disadvantage was thus not only offset by indirect media support but exceeded many times over. The Democrats relied more on expensive traditional advertising, while Trump used the echo chamber for a shadow campaign.

Key individual players in the echo chamber have already been introduced. One should not assume that the various important players in the echo chamber supported Trump solely for financial reasons, because the efforts of the various actors in the echo chamber during the election campaign were also driven by strong religious, political, ideological, social, strategic, and cultural motives. But of course, it was also about "quid pro quo" from Trump and MAGA for their support in the election campaign. After all, the echo chamber was also an industry that had to make money. In any case, Rupert Murdoch made it clear in a trial that his favorite color was not red, but green (the color of dollar bills). The numerous unknown actors who used social media to help Trump or who participated as "extras" in his "reality TV broadcasts" during his campaign appearances did not receive anything in return. They were part of a cult, and that was their most important reward. Added to this was the joy of an election victory and the defeat of political enemies when Trump was successful. The many anonymous actors on social media radicalized the base itself. This allowed Trump to save a lot of energy and money and thus minimize costs. The left also had an echo chamber. It was not as strong and efficient as the right's.

There were apparently different models of "cooperation" between Trump and his key supporters from the echo chamber. The key-lock model stated that Trump and Fox were a perfect match. Media consumers were also Trump voters. This model also applied to Joe Rogan. The "one hand washes the other" model described the collaboration between Musk and Trump. Musk supported Trump massively, both directly through payments and indirectly through important free services: Musk supported Trump and MAGA on X. Political polarization enabled X to significantly increase its advertising revenue in 2024. Trump promised tax breaks for oligarchs. As a close friend of the future president, Musk would certainly not be forgotten after the election victory. After an election victory, the share prices of Tesla and Musk's other companies would rise. The model "ideological complementarity" model for creating an

expanded base of ideology and media consumers for mutual benefit proved successful: Trump did not have to pay anything to attract new supporters. Charlie Kirk gained access to Trump's base. Kirk and Shapiro used Trump's base as a customer base (subscriptions, donations, etc.). Turning Point USA and Daily Wire flourished and prospered. In return, Trump received free propaganda. His base was heavily manipulated and slid further to the right ideologically. Shapiro stood for the "intellectual access" to the shift to the right, and Kirk demonstrated how radicalization can be achieved through grassroots work. Trump's task of mobilizing the grassroots was greatly facilitated by the work of Kirk and Shapiro. The grassroots were thus further prepared for his propaganda messages. The model of "bridging the gap to radical opinion leaders" and their followers, such as Steve Bannon, Nick Fuentes, and Alex Jones, also fueled the rightward shift of the MAGA base. What was still extreme in the GOP in 2016 was already mainstream among MAGA supporters in 2024. The rightward shift suited Trump very well, as he ultimately wanted to become a strong president. Democracy degenerated into a tactical tool for MAGA. People were in favor of "free speech" when it benefited them. The model of "direct access to Trump" was exploited by fanatical Trump supporters and opinion makers such as Marjorie Taylor Greene (MTG) and Laura Loomer. Trump didn't care that the two didn't like each other. Trump also spoke about the two on Truth Social, turning them into role models. Both quickly rose to the top of MAGA. MTG benefited from Trump's support for her candidacy. In Congress, she was accepted into the GOP leadership. Trump uses the two as cheerleaders and free mouthpieces.

Finally, the model of "oligarch and CEO rule" for creating a common market of media consumers, voters, customers, and employees was primarily intended to reduce the influence of the state. Entrepreneurs and managers indirectly supported Trump through the type of reporting in the media they controlled. The entrepreneurs already received tax breaks from Trump during his first presidency, and further tax cuts were to follow if he won the election. Trump gained enormous political legitimacy through "mainstream media acceptance." According to this model of acceptance, all possible gradations of cooperation between Trump and the oligarchs and CEOs was made possible. However, Trump had to grudgingly accept that the Washington Post and other media outlets were not willing to do more for him. Most media moguls felt compelled to at least participate in normalizing and "sanewashing" Trump. They deliberately portrayed him as a "normal," serious, reasonable politician, even though his rhetoric and plans were often extreme. In this context, "sanewashing" meant Trump's authoritarian tendencies and polarizing behavior were downplayed in order to frame him as a rational mainstream candidate. At the same time, it was suggested that he was mentally stable and not, as the Democrats claimed, unpredictable or dangerous. Trump had to accept that he was often sharply attacked by the corporate media. He was fine with that: the media reported on Trump constantly. CNN achieved record ratings in 2024. Trump used the coverage as free advertising, because in his view, "all publicity is good publicity." Media attention was a zero-sum game. When the media focused on Trump, they paid little attention to the messages of his political opponents. Even negative reports strengthened his base and allowed him to show that he was a courageous fighter for the causes of the disadvantaged. However, one oligarch was identified as an enemy by MAGA and was therefore repeatedly attacked: George Soros.

## The MAGA justice forces

During his first term as president, Trump succeeded in expanding the conservative majority in the Supreme Court and appointing three judges: Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett. Together with the already established conservatives Alito (since 2006) and Thomas (since 1991), this group had a conservative 5:4 majority in the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court did not dare to openly intervene on Trump's behalf and attempt to invalidate Joe Biden's election. No Supreme Court justice supported the demand to annul this election. Trump's appointment of three Supreme Court justices then paid off under Joe Biden. Trump had promised in 2016 to appoint "pro-life judges" and, with Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, and Barrett, he appointed precisely the judges who overturned *Roe v. Wade*. The decision mobilized the evangelical MAGA base and rewarded them for their loyalty. This decision demonstrated the power of the Supreme Court as a tool in the culture war and deepened the divide between blue and red states. The right wing (MAGA, evangelicals, conservative majority in the Supreme Court) was able to score an important victory in the ongoing culture war. In 2024, the Supreme Court was able to help Trump run for office in the first place through two controversial decisions. First, the Court overturned a ruling that had barred Trump from running in Colorado elections for "rebellion" (Jan. 6). Then, the Supreme Court intervened decisively in the prosecution by the courts, preventing Trump's impending conviction in Washington before the election. Trump was indicted in Washington, D.C., for conspiracy to influence the election (Jan. 6, 2020). The trial was scheduled to begin in March 2024. His team argued that a president was immune for "official acts," even if they were criminal. The Court surprisingly accepted Trump's immunity claim, even though lower courts had rejected it and granted the president partial immunity for "official acts." The case was referred back to the court in Washington to clarify which charges would be affected by this. The trial was delayed for months, making a conviction before the 2024 election virtually impossible. The criminal prosecution of Trump in Georgia was so broad that it was unlikely to be concluded before the 2024 election. The criminal proceedings in New York also did not result in a prison sentence for Trump. Many lawyers worked on Trump's behalf in the numerous civil and criminal proceedings. At least he was able to run for election. His aggressive demeanor and the many legal interventions by his lawyers made that possible. Trump also suffered serious legal defeats despite his intimidation campaigns. However, he did not give up, and with the help of his lawyers, Trump succeeded in promoting the narrative of a candidate who was being politically persecuted by judges and prosecutors. Not only MAGA supporters, but also many independents agreed with this view. Alina Habba best embodied the type of "hybrid lawyer," politically firmly anchored in the movement and at the same time a defender in legal matters. The counter-narrative that Trump denied the validity of the 2020 election, incited an insurrection, and was also charged and convicted as a "sexual predator" in a civil lawsuit could not achieve decisive effectiveness because left-wing opinion makers and critical mainstream media could no longer penetrate the electorate with their statements, and MAGA-friendly media of all kinds filtered out unwanted facts as "fake news."

Among the hard core of Trump's supporters in the judiciary was Judge Eileen Cannon, who was appointed by Trump. Prior to her appointment, she had no significant legal experience. She belonged to the Federalist Society, which specifically placed conservative judges. After the FBI search of Mar-a-Lago (August 2022), Trump turned to Eileen Cannon. She

declared herself competent and blocked the investigation until the court of second instance withdrew the case from her. Later, through the judicial assignment system, she became the judge responsible for the trial in Florida, where Trump's unauthorized possession of classified documents was being heard. Cannon has often been accused of putting party politics above the law, and her behavior could be seen by other judges as encouragement to act similarly. Even if the classified documents trial had taken place at some point, the delays caused by Eileen Cannon would have effectively exonerated Trump.

Biden and his attorney general hesitated for many months to find a special investigator to be appointed to hold Trump accountable. Jack Smith, on the other hand, took swift action and wanted to quickly bring Trump to justice for his theft of important documents. Let's assume that the judge in charge had been a strict judge with no sympathy for Trump, rather than Eileen Cannon. In that case, a swift conviction of Trump, including a considerable prison sentence starting in mid-2023, would have been entirely possible, unless the Supreme Court intervened beforehand.

## **The culture war**

Trump's propaganda campaign was not a spontaneous feat of strength, but a complex undertaking with clear intentions. It functioned as a strategically managed campaign. Trump and MAGA pursued three important goals in their cultural propaganda campaign. First, a central concern of MAGA was to systematically exacerbate the division between the political camps. The cultural dividing lines between "Red America" and "Blue America" were deliberately reinforced: through targeted provocations, through the cultivation of enemy stereotypes, through moral polarization. Old cultural boundaries, for example on issues such as religion, guns, gender roles, or migration, were not defused, but deliberately charged. MAGA was able to exploit the cultural differences between the dynamic Democratic coastal states and the red states in the middle, or between deeply religious states (such as those in the Bible Belt) and the "woke" states, just as it exploited the deep cultural divide between the South and the Yankee states in the North, which rejected slavery, a divide that is still palpable today. Once the division crossed a critical threshold, it became unstoppable, and the division itself drove further division.

Why was Trump so interested in division? It was the only way he could build the MAGA movement and sharply distinguish it from the moderate cultural mainstream. Many Republicans liked the demarcation that began in 2015, especially the radical way in which it was carried out. Trump and his increasingly fanatical supporters saw this approach as a win-win. At first, Hillary Clinton's Democratic campaigners were not unhappy with Trump's approach. They were convinced that Trump's fanatical base would scare off many moderate Republicans and many independents, and that he would therefore lose the election. In the 2024 election campaign, the Democrats already knew how dangerous Trump was, but they could not

find a recipe to counter his divisive efforts. The chaos of division was precisely the political terrain in which Trump felt comfortable, where he could play to his strengths as a propagandist. The chaos of division allowed Trump to tell countless lies without being punished for it. The divisive chaos enabled Trump to sell his court cases as political persecution. Even the storming of the Capitol by his fanatical radical fighters and his stubborn claim to have won the 2020 election did not harm him among his supporters, quite the contrary.

Secondly, MAGA was to be designed as a cultural wildfire (as an expansion in a geographical sense) that was successful, and many regions could be "conquered." The conditions for such conquests were favorable, not only in the US. The political shift to the right among the rural population is an international phenomenon that has increased significantly since the 2000s, wherever rural areas have been politically marginalized or culturally overlooked. The cultural divide between urban and rural areas has deepened. Postmodern, progressive values and lifestyles dominated in large cities: LGBTQ, migration, gender equality, climate protection, post-national thinking. Rural areas, on the other hand, were more attached to traditional, community-based ideas of family, nation, religion, and order. The reaction of the rural population was to retreat into identitarian attitudes and open resistance against "those up there" or "those from the city." In many countries, globalization has primarily benefited industrial and urban centers. In many rural regions, migration, even if numerically small, caused profound irritation: "If even our remote village is changing, no one is safe anymore." In the past, the rural population was tied to local media. Later, much of the information in rural areas was also disseminated via social media, YouTube, and Telegram. Right-wing influencers and populist parties have deliberately focused on rural areas because their reach and influence could be expanded there through family and neighborhood structures. In many countries, the rural population has felt that their "own culture" (work ethic, simplicity, homeland, closeness to nature) has been disparaged by media taunts and urban arrogance. Right-wing populist and authoritarian leaders were seen as avengers and self-assertors: "Finally, someone is telling it like it is." Trump, Orban, and Meloni played precisely on this sentiment. MAGA was not intended to appear as a subculture or fringe movement, but rather as a national movement with regional breadth and an emotional sense of mission. In many regions, especially in the South, Midwest, and rural areas, the conditions for MAGA's success were favorable: social uncertainty, economic frustration, media echo chambers. Trump used these opportunities to stage MAGA as a wildfire. As a result, it was not the culturally dominant center, but the periphery that became the bearer of political energy. The wildfire was also used to exert cultural pressure on the swing states, as discussed elsewhere. A third important project was the systematic cultivation and disciplining of their own supporters. Trump's team knew that whoever loses the culture war loses everything. That is why the MAGA base was not only addressed, but also militantly involved, through repetitive narratives, emotional arousal, and targeted reward systems (e.g., visibility on social media, proximity to the "leader" at rallies). The result was that the base held firm in every crisis. Trump's status as "untouchable" was cemented precisely by the many attacks against him. This also impressed those outside MAGA who were susceptible to influence, especially when they were made tempting offers, such as men and white people.

## **The five spectra**

In the culture war, Trump propaganda fired on all cylinders. Since the culture war was broad in scope and encompassed five areas of propaganda with specific themes, I called these phenomena "spectra." The spectra were not only about words and images, but also about the activities of the various actors. However, propaganda was always central to the orientation of the culture war in the five propaganda fields (spectra). The size and breadth, and the thematic diversity of the propaganda fields, the numerous transitions from one spectrum phenomenon to the next, and the widely scattered relationship structure between them allow each of these fields to be described as highly dynamic propaganda areas. The Trump propaganda war machine had two armies at its disposal in the 2024 election campaign: culture and economics. The weapons of these two armies fired their propaganda ammunition at the intended target areas among the electorate. The use of these weapons was intended to turn previously undecided voters into Trump voters, who would then vote for Trump in the election. The five spectra of the culture war were the combat units (of the "culture-army") that deployed their propaganda weapons according to their specific abilities and combat missions. There were continuities and sharp breaks along the spectral dynamics, also through the cultivation of enemy stereotypes. The spectra also overlapped, which was also strategically relevant. The spectrum concept made it clear how the culture war was being waged: not through simple messages, but through the constant loading of the individual spectral combat units with diverse spectral elements, through many actors, symbols, and lines of conflict.

## **The constitutional spectrum**

Two cultures faced each other on the constitutional spectrum: the constitutional state, spearheaded by special counsel Jack Smith, and the defendant Donald Trump, who played two roles. He portrayed himself as a victim of Biden's justice system, needing the ironclad support of his followers, and he played the determined leader of the "long coup" who would succeed in defeating his enemies and offering protection to his supporters. The constitutional spectrum was the most important spectrum for Trump: it was existential, because without the important rulings of the Supreme Court, Trump would either not have been allowed to run for office or would have been politically destroyed by lawsuits. The Supreme Court rulings created legal gray areas and gave Trump's authoritarian practices an aura of legitimacy. This also strategically secured the long coup project (since 2020). Two rulings in the 2024 election year thus ensured his political survival.

The first ruling (Colorado ruling) allowed him to participate in the election despite the accusation of "insurrection." Then the Supreme Court ruled that presidents enjoy broad immunity for "official acts." Both rulings undermined key legal positions of the Democrats, but some conservative constitutional experts were also appalled. The Supreme Court itself has long since become part of the battle: Trump appointed three conservative judges (Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, Barrett) who shifted the balance of power to the right. Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito in particular were considered ideologically close to MAGA. Constitutional loyalty was increasingly interpreted in terms of party politics. This success told the MAGA base: "Our future

president fought against a corrupt system and won." Many undecided voters probably thought, "Maybe it's all legal after all, since the Supreme Court ruled in Trump's favor."

Trump liked to present himself as the guardian of the Constitution, but only when it suited him during the election campaign. Trump used his advocacy for freedom of speech (First Amendment) as a shield to publicly attack judges, witnesses, and prosecutors: he was merely "campaigning." A core issue that shapes identity is gun ownership (Second Amendment). It also symbolizes personal freedom, self-defense, and resistance against "tyrannical" governments, which Trump deliberately projected onto Democrats. The Constitution guaranteed freedom of speech, fair trials, and political participation. Trump turned these principles around for propaganda purposes: his various indictments became a show, his court appearances a starting point for attacks on "the system" and the "deep state." The legal stage became a political arena. The trials also dealt with Trump's activities surrounding the lost 2020 election. Surviving the trials was important for Trump in order to successfully end the long coup. In terms of content, the trials dealt with election interference, for example in the Georgia case (demand for a reversal of votes), alleged misrepresentations of election results, and ultimately the violence of January 6. At that time, Trump wanted to force a return to power through targeted escalation in 2020/2021, and individual court cases were aftershocks of this attempt.

During the trial phase, or rather the phase of the long coup, MAGA stood firmly by Trump. A large part of the population thus embarked on a very dangerous path: "Since democracy does nothing for us, we will do nothing for it." Trump was apparently above the law with the permission of these supporters. Trump's central propaganda success showed that the courts became the enemy, Trump became the persecuted leader, and the Constitution became a means to an end. MAGA's anti-democratic stance turned democracy itself into a bargaining chip. Attempts by members of the House of Representatives to influence the trials were also damaging to democracy. MAGA-affiliated representatives such as Jim Jordan and Matt Gaetz actively sought to delegitimize the trials. They used hearings and public appearances to put pressure on judges, prosecutors, and witnesses. Congress acted as an arena for cultural propaganda, often with barely concealed threats. Then even important MAGA representatives, including members of the House of Representatives, showed up in red ties to support Trump in court in New York.

On the constitutional spectrum, Trump achieved significant successes for his culture war propaganda. Trump presented his role as appointing judges as a "gift to voters." Evangelicals saw the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* as a divine reward. Then Trump was able to say during the election campaign, "I brought you the judges, and they delivered!" Trump used the persecution by the judiciary to present himself as a martyr of the MAGA movement, sacrificing himself for his supporters. The judiciary was turned into a weapon of liberal elites, but Trump and his supporters fought vigorously to defeat these hunters and their accomplices in the judiciary. On the constitutional spectrum, Trump was able to convince several important groups through his propaganda that he had achieved a great deal for them in this area: evangelicals through judicial appointments and anti-abortion dynamics; men and the white working class through his advocacy for gun rights and freedom of speech; and authoritarian-minded voters by showing strength and assertiveness despite numerous lawsuits. Many undecided voters were convinced of Trump's "innocence" by the authority of the Supreme

Court, especially those of the undecided who were not opposed to MAGA. The oligarchs and elites were shown that constitutional instrumentalization through MAGA power and MAGA propaganda is feasible. The constitutional spectrum was also crucial for Biden and the Democrats. They had a good chance of excluding Trump from future elections. The surest way to achieve this was probably the rapid publication of the Epstein files, but this opportunity was not seized.

### **The ideological spectrum**

The ideological spectrum was Trump's second most important strategic spectrum. Ideology was the key raw material that propaganda processed and packaged to suit its purposes, sometimes directly, sometimes in coded form. Basic ideological substances were transformed into easily digestible portions of "raw meat" and fed to the grassroots. These portions provided argumentative ammunition for the culture war, for example, to reshape fundamental structures (separation of powers, position of the president) or to demonize the "deep state." Added to this were individual aspects with high emotional explosive power: abortion, LGBTQ, DEI, critical race theory.

Feeding these portions also supported the harmonization and standardization of the MAGA base: it served to confirm that MAGA fits into the evangelical framework. This was important because evangelicals were part of the MAGA core. It was also necessary to complete the MAGA worldview with additional building blocks such as conspiracy theories, anti-Semitism, white supremacy, right-wing radicalism, and anti-science sentiment. It also served as a distraction with controversial topics (e.g., gender reassignment in children) with high potential for outrage. The potential for outrage should remain as high as possible until the end of the election campaign. The MAGA base should not realize that they were voting against their own interests.

Ideology was not only a "material" for obtaining sustenance, but also a "material" that was shaped into a tool or a weapon, a weapon of division. Ideology was a flexible tool for deepening cultural fault lines and sharpening enemy stereotypes. Where conflicts were already "burning," ideological propaganda acted as an accelerant. Trump masterfully used this technique to win elections.

As a highly versatile "material," ideology was also a source of energy, supplying MAGA and Trump with a great deal of emotional energy. In this way, ideological narratives generated emotional energy and strengthened the sense of belonging among the grassroots in an environment perceived as hostile. Shared narratives, such as those about the "deep state," created fear of self-constructed horror scenarios, which were then exploited politically by Trump.

Ideology was even a "material" from which a motor for propaganda work was created. Ideology drove the establishment and coordination of propaganda structures along the central spectrums of enemy image, dominance, and deep state. This enabled the transfer of ideas into political reality. Even in the sensitive "constitutional spectrum," Trump was able to convince ideologically prepared voters and ultimately win the 2024 election, despite the unfavorable optics due to the many court cases.

Ideology was not only “material”, but also “content” (innovative ideas) and intellectual power. Thus, the invention of "woke ideology" and its subsequent constant expansion ultimately led to the strategically significant adaptability of the woke ideology thus created, in order to label ideological opponents. The invention of "woke ideology" was about MAGA creating an ideological-cultural woke core. MAGA initially focused on CRT (Critical Race Theory). With the propaganda focus on CRT, Republican Youngkin was able to become governor of Virginia in 2021. Then the "woke concept" was expanded to include other cultural elements rejected by MAGA (e.g., feminism, climate protection measures, liberal abortion rights). This allowed MAGA opponents to be flexibly categorized using a more modern and inclusive term to replace the old GOP labels of "liberal" or "socialist." During the Reagan and George W. Bush eras, there was no offensive racism or overt misogyny, no open fight against abortion or measures to mitigate the effects of climate change. Under Trump, these areas then had to provide a lot of "woke material" that MAGA contemptuously threw into the “big woke trash can.” The woke concept actively helped to bring about a lasting change in the cultural climate in the US.

### **The spectrum of enemy images**

The MAGA base was driven by strong emotions, primarily fears: fear of the future (including the dynamics of the economy and culture), fear of failure, of losing one's job, of not earning enough to support one's family, fear of no longer being able to maintain one's standard of living due to rising costs, fear of being overtaken by non-whites and women as a white man. These strong feelings also included disappointments: with politics, the Democrats, Obama, Biden, globalization, women, democracy, the elites, the state, the dominant culture of the coastal states, stagnating wages, and so on. Fears and disappointments produced hatred. Hatred needed enemies. Trump knew all this. He helped to produce and cultivate stable enemy images so that he could use them for his propaganda.

Enemy images were not a side aspect of authoritarian politics; they were at their heart. They not only provided the opponents but also structured the entire worldview: "Who we are is best revealed by who we stand against." Trump had to act cautiously when it came to creating enemy images. He couldn't openly say that women and non-white people were the enemies. That would have meant the end of MAGA, so the MAGA enemy image only included women who weren't in line with MAGA. MAGA couldn't take such radical action against all non-white people in the election campaign as it would have liked to, because it also wanted to appeal to African American and Latino men.

Since MAGA had to hold back, it wanted to at least offer its supporters campaigns that were close to racism and misogyny. That is why it tended to use coded attacks and ideological statements that conveyed the core of the message without crossing certain legal or social boundaries. Nevertheless, MAGA's language was still radical. In terms of migration, this meant focusing on illegal border crossings and mass deportations, especially of criminals. Latinos were particularly affected by these campaigns, and there were also plans to target African Americans (DEI, CRT). Furthermore, campaigns were directed against abortion rights,

LGBTQ rights, and "gender ideology." Attempts were made to combat MAGA-hostile (primarily female) activists with campaigns for restrictions on legal abortions. Harris made abortion a major issue in the election campaign. In any case, it was not enough to reach the additional women that would have been necessary to defeat Trump. Harris focused on women and lost her bet in this regard, despite prominent support, not only from Taylor Swift.

Open racism ultimately came into play when Trump came under pressure during the televised debate and attacked Haitians in Ohio as a distraction. Trump and MAGA did not distance themselves from the far right, nor from violent racism. Even in his first presidency, he saw "good people on both sides." Trump apparently did not want to forego Nick Fuentes' long-standing expertise in racism either. So, it came as no great surprise to America and MAGA that, after the end of the election campaign, Elon Musk got carried away and gave a Nazi salute, and because it was so much fun, he did it a second time.

There were seven main axes in the MAGA spectrum of enemies. First, leftists, liberals, and Democrats as permanent main opponents: "The radical left." Portrayed by MAGA as elitist, dangerous to children, and blasphemous. Democrats were considered the "deep state," fundamentally undemocratic and secretly anti-national. Second, the media: "Fake news" and "enemy of the people." Freedom of the press was deliberately discredited in order to replace public scrutiny with an emotional echo chamber. Third, migrants served as a versatile enemy: sometimes criminal, sometimes parasitic, sometimes dangerous as a latent biological-cultural threat. Invasion and "replacement" served as central narratives. Fourthly, science, education, and universities: these were seen as sources of indoctrination ("woke ideology," "gender madness"). MAGA even attacked the natural sciences and medicine (e.g., climate change, vaccinations) with the aim of gaining cultural interpretive authority in as many important areas as possible. Fifth, bureaucracy and the state (Deep State): Institutions such as the FBI, the judiciary, and the CIA were considered enemies. This mindset led to the systematic delegitimization of constitutional processes by MAGA. Sixth, transgender people and the LGBTQ community were particularly affected by MAGA attacks as a highly charged cultural battlefield, as these individuals were considered an ideological threat and a symbol of a "degenerate" America. LGBTQ rights were questioned by MAGA. Seventh, globalism: This mainly referred to external enemies that threatened America's sovereignty, "entities" such as the WHO, the UN, and the EU. Trump presented himself as an energetic fighter against external and internal (American) globalists with his "America First" ideology.

In Trumpism, enemy thinking was developed into a system that I attempted to capture through the enemy spectrum. The system encompassed those groups, institutions, and narratives that were systematically marked as dangerous. These markings were fundamentally highly flexible in design, but stable in their emotional and cultural logic. Enemy thinking had several central functions: emotionally charging the supporters (anger, disgust, ridicule), strengthening internal cohesion ("us against them"), distracting from substantive criticism, legitimizing rule-breaking and harshness (as an apparent necessity to save America from its internal and external enemies), and structuring thinking (before arguments for reasonable political debate could arise). Enemy images were metapolitical and not rational, and that was precisely what made them so dangerous.

What made the enemy images so effective? First, reduction: complex realities were transformed into simple opposites (patriots versus traitors, the people versus the elite,

etc.). Second, repetition: enemy images were constantly repeated, but not justified. Their "truth" arose through duration and volume. Third, projection: one's own weaknesses were systematically projected onto one's opponents. Fourth, demonization: opponents became threats, threats became enemies, and enemies were the source of evil. Fifth, displacement: enemy images could change when the strategy changed, but the enemy image system remained stable even when individual elements were changed. Analysis of the spectrum of enemy images revealed a central ideological figure: the anti-America. It stood for everything that was un-American, corrupt, wrong, and therefore had to be fought. Trump shaped this counter-image over many years: it was cosmopolitan, woke, weak, effeminate. It wanted to destroy or sell America. It consisted of "effeminate elites," "woke universities," "gender fanatics," and "illegal immigrants." The anti-America was not real, but it was emotionally effective, mobilizing, and collectively experienced. Enemy stereotyping radicalized the public: it allowed extreme language (because the opponent was "evil"). It justified breaking the rules (because the state was "hostile"). It created a division of society into hostile camps. It put the Republican Party under ideological pressure: anyone who did not actively fight enemies was considered "weak." Trumpism was not a well-thought-out program, but a dynamic system of agitation based on demarcation, provocation, and confrontation. Anyone who did not fall in line was declared a threat. The enemy image system was Trump's "dark resonance chamber." Without an enemy image, there was no sense of unity, and without an opponent, there was no strategy.

How did cultivating enemy images benefit Trump in his propaganda battles? Enemy images served to mobilize his supporters: they kept them in a constant state of combat readiness and also served as a distraction. His own mistakes or scandals were covered up by enemy image themes. Enemy images also served to create identity. The definition of who "belonged" and who "stood outside" was created through enemy images to reinforce division. Clear front lines facilitated propaganda attacks. As sources of energy, enemy images provided emotional charge for speeches, campaigns, and social media attacks.

What techniques were used to cultivate enemy images? Above all, flexibility in the use of this propaganda tool was important. When old enemy images no longer worked, new ones had to be used. Sometimes a repair measure was enough, with new topics giving old enemy images new momentum. Constant bombardment was also important: the constant repetition of relevant attacks on social media, Fox News, and at various rallies. Furthermore, exaggeration: opponents were exaggerated, distorted, and portrayed as holding more extreme positions than they actually did (Trump's opponents became "radical left lunatics"). Different opposing groups were also rhetorically linked to form a single, large threat. This facilitated propaganda efforts. Trump also resorted to personalization: individual figures (e.g., Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton, George Soros) were portrayed as important symbols of particularly evil and dangerous political opponents. A cruel but effective technique was dehumanization: opponents are denied morality and legitimacy in order to justify more radical measures. A classic of Trump's techniques for cultivating enemy images was distraction: political problems are concealed by attacks on the outside world. Furthermore, narrative control was very important to Trump: enemy images made it easier to create clear, catchy narratives. Anyone who engaged in propaganda as aggressively as Trump could not do without the technique of

coding: open discrimination sometimes had to be avoided, so attacks were carried out via proxy issues that were less likely to cause offense.

### **The deep state spectrum**

The deep state spectrum encompassed the strategic fantasies, attacks, and re-codings with which Trump and MAGA portrayed the state apparatus as an enemy power in order to subsequently conquer, empty, or destroy it. The goal was to gut the government system and replace it with a new loyalty structure in which Trump himself would become the supreme authority. Initially, the fight against the deep state was about gaining complete control over the executive branch. Numerous officials suspected of being insufficiently loyal to Trump were to be dismissed. Project 2025, from which Trump officially distanced himself but which was closely related to his agenda in terms of content, planned to cut government jobs and abolish entire agencies. According to MAGA's vision, the administration would no longer act independently, but as an extension of Trump and his confidants. The "state within a state" was declared a threat in order to undermine it politically. At the same time, radical cuts were on the agenda: if new tax breaks for the rich were to be financed, the state had to shrink. Trump wanted to grant massive tax breaks to the rich for the third time after Ronald Reagan and the tax cuts during his first presidency. Such tax gifts did not help the working class: the trickle-down concept had already failed under Reagan. Social programs, health care, and regulatory agencies were up for grabs. Many people perceived the existing US economic system as highly inefficient and antisocial, especially with regard to citizens' high expenditures on education and medical care. Nevertheless, MAGA wanted the state to withdraw completely or partially from other areas. This would allow the private sector (including the oligarchs) to better fill these gaps. The state should disappear wherever it was somehow an "obstacle" to corporations and the super-rich. At the same time rollback efforts against "woke" politics, diversity programs, and environmental protection were initiated. Kamal Harris warned during the election campaign that Trump would attack Obama Care. However, her warnings were not taken seriously. During the election campaign, Trump announced that a powerful organization called DOGE would intensively search for various ways to cut costs in the administration after the election.

Trump wanted to become US president for the second time and thus also rise to become the most powerful oligarch. This type of politics was tantamount to the reintroduction of a kind of feudal system: oligarchs such as Musk, Thiel, and Murdoch became direct power partners of the ruler. They provided resources, platforms, and media power, and in return, Trump promised deregulation, privatization, and access to political decisions. The state was to give way so that "private" interests could operate unhindered. Platforms such as X became asylum-like spaces for unbridled MAGA propaganda. After his first election as president, Trump saw himself not only as a politician, but also as an entrepreneur who wanted to generate income. The presidency offered him opportunities to make money, for example when foreigners stayed at his hotels for a lot of money in order to put him in a favorable mood for their causes.

Not all oligarchs were in favor of Trump. Jeff Bezos, for example, financed the Washington Post. However, this did not mean that Bezos was close to the Democratic Party. He apparently wanted to strengthen democracy, which was under threat. But there were oligarchs

who supported and promoted the Democratic Party or woke causes. MAGA feared George Soros above all else. Billionaire Michael Bloomberg emerged as a Democratic presidential candidate for the 2020 election and even called for higher taxes on the rich. Did he want to abolish wealth and oligarchy? Certainly not. He was just more far-sighted than the greedy oligarchs, who could more easily fall prey to strong countercurrents (possibly led by Bernie Sanders and AOC).

But the deep state was not just a technical target, it was also a Narrative. In the world of MAGA, Washington stood for betrayal, elites, "wokeness," and exclusion of the white working class. Trump promised to drain this "swamp," even though he was actually a swamp dweller himself. The MAGA base paid the price with social cuts but was compensated in the culture war against migrants, against non-whites, against "woke" ideological views, and against the elites of the East Coast. The deep state spectrum made it clear: the enemy was never simply "the state." The enemy was anyone who questioned the oligarchic social order.

### **The spectrum of dominance**

The spectrum of dominance showed that in the MAGA world, dominance always had a performative component, as opposed to mere rhetoric. Dominance had to be demonstrated, experienced, and amplified by the media. A dominant actor appeared invincible, even in defeat. Every debate, every confrontation was seen as an arena in which there were winners and losers. Compromise was seen as weakness, cooperation as a threat to one's own authority. Trump staged dominance not only against political opponents, but also within his own camp. Loyalty was rewarded, deviation immediately punished. Constant media presence served to stabilize the image of a superior leader, while political content often remained secondary. During the election campaign, MAGA sought to ensure that Trump would have dictatorial structures at his disposal after an election victory, as a reward for his uncompromising enforcement of MAGA priorities. People were aware of his boundless hunger for power but did not see this as a problem; on the contrary, many believed that only a strong Trump could effectively enforce MAGA interests both domestically and abroad. The planned dominance was twofold: domestically, democracy was to be deliberately weakened through the numerous efforts of Trump, MAGA, and its echo chamber and replaced by authoritarian structures, with Trump emerging as the absolute ruler: I am the state. Externally, the imperial "America First" meant extracting national advantages and ruthlessly enforcing them against other states. The common core of both endeavors was an unbridled, power-political egoism, on an individual, domestic political level through the ruler Trump and on a national, foreign policy level through the US empire. Domestically, the motto was to be Trump First, and externally America First.

Trump and MAGA were declared isolationists. They saw America as a victim of globalization and free world trade. Trump's campaign threats of tariffs showed how little he thought of global integration. In doing so, he overlooked the fact that the rich and powerful America of the past needed global cooperation. Before Trump, America was a fragile but functioning work of art. America imported a lot but was still the richest and most powerful country. The protectionist MAGA strategy promised greatness, but it would do America more harm than good in the long run. Trump was a brilliant campaigner but a poor politician, and that

was already apparent before the election if one took a sober look at his achievements during his first presidency.

In foreign policy, too, MAGA sought a new dominance through withdrawal. Expensive foreign missions and "useless" wars were to be avoided. Many Americans envied Europe for its peace dividend and resented the burden of the NATO alliance. Calls for lower military spending and an early end to support for Ukraine grew louder. MAGA's view of its allies was sober to hostile: J.D. Vance called Europeans "freeloaders." The confrontational course toward China was also part of this dominance strategy, not for moral reasons, but to defend American interests. Trump apparently believed, like the rulers in Orwell's 1984, in a world order of great empires. The coexistence of empires would (as in Orwell) be by no means peaceful but marked by power struggles and serious conflicts of interest. If Trump respected Putin and Xi, it was not because he believed in harmony, but because he admired their power. His message was clear: help for allies would only be forthcoming if American interests were strongly affected, as would probably be the case in the event of an attack on Taiwan. America should remain the strongest power and the other powers should have no influence on the American-dominated regions of its empire. However, America also had global interests (Israel, Taiwan, Japan, Europe, Latin America, etc.) that it was prepared to defend as long as it could. Trump also emphasized his leadership role within his own sphere of influence. During his first presidency, he renegotiated trade agreements with Mexico and Canada and even attempted to buy Greenland. Trump made it clear even then which country dominated this part of the world.

Many people experienced social change not as progress, but as a loss of meaning, influence, and recognition. In many Western societies, traditional forms of dominance began to crumble, including in the US: racial hegemony (whites as the dominant group), male dominance (patriarchal role models), religiously conservative norms (e.g., Christian fundamentalist morals), national self-assurance (e.g., the US as a moral world power), the rural way of life (vs. urban diversity), traditional gender roles (along classic family lines), and cultural homogeneity (language, values, dominant culture). MAGA offered no sober analysis of these processes, but rather an emotional reaction: the restoration of the old order as a moral duty. Dominance was sold not as inequality, but as a "natural state," a desirable social world that had to be defended against external influences (migration, globalism, feminism, educational elites). Trump stylized himself as the restorer of this God-given order, as the right man for the return.

Within the arena of dominance, several axes could be identified along which Trump and MAGA operated. Through the axis of "race," Trump reinforced an image of "White America." Black people, Latinos, and migrants were only integrated if they submitted culturally. Code words such as "inner cities," "law and order," and "illegal aliens" served to mark racial differences. Along the "gender" axis, classical patriarchy was considered the norm, and feminism, gender studies, and #MeToo were seen as threats. "Strong men" were promoted as leaders. The terms "masculine" and "competent" were equated. Trump's "religion" axis postulated that Christian fundamentalist morality was the basis of political order. The official separation of church and state was to be undermined. Other religions (especially Islam) were to be recognized as foreign, dangerous, and distant from the state. The "class and origin" axis was intended to prevent social mobility from being pursued. Cultural sedentariness was favored. "Working Americans" were considered morally superior. Educational advancement was viewed

ambivalently in MAGA circles, especially when it was associated with urbanity, diversity, or critical thinking. The "urbanity vs. rurality" axis portrayed the rural population as the "true America." Cities were considered decadent, leftwing, "no longer America." Urban lifestyles (vegan, environmentally conscious, polyamorous, intellectual, etc.) were rejected.

MAGA's efforts in the area of dominance also served to stabilize its support base. In doing so, Trump achieved an important effect: his supporters saw themselves as part of a higher identity, as fighters for a good, right, true order. They were not only ideologically won over, but also existentially addressed. Those who defended these dominance-relationships did not see themselves as "right-wing," but as normal, healthy, American. The dominance-mindset appealed to emotions. People were proud of their origin, gender, skin color, and religion. People reacted with outrage to being disparaged by "left-wing elites." They feared losing control and hated groups and individuals who questioned the dominance-mindset. These emotions were not private, because they were systematically exploited for propaganda purposes. Dominance propaganda was not a nostalgic look back, but a highly modern mechanism of power. Trump understood how to reinterpret old forms of dominance in such a way that defending them seemed like a revolution. Anyone who criticized the dominance of white people, men, Christians, or rural areas was portrayed as an oppressor, and MAGA appeared to be a movement of liberation. This re-coding is one of Trump's significant propaganda coups: selling dominance as resistance.

Trump was able to successfully employ a number of dominance practices, starting with "media omnipresence." This involved constant visibility across all channels in order to push through his political views. Furthermore, he used "insults and ridicule" by deliberately humiliating opponents to highlight power imbalances and "crisis appropriation." Every crisis was used as a stage to demonstrate alleged leadership strength. Trump, the power politician, could not do without "control." Through "narrative control," he was able, for example, to immediately place and defend his own versions of events. Through "personnel control," he established loyalty as the highest prerequisite for offices and positions. Trump knew the power of effective appearances. That is why "control of the relevant stage productions" was important to him at large events, mass rallies, and other symbolic appearances. Trump also loved to theatrically stage "breaking the rules as a strength." His aim was to transcend political conventions as a sign of power, to exploit institutional weaknesses, and to act deliberately at the margins of legality. Trump was a master of "direct communication" by bypassing traditional media, especially through social media and live appearances. Trump the strategist had a "preference for the offensive." Even when on the defensive, he tried to put pressure on his opponents with counterattacks.

In addition to tactical successes achieved through the use of dominance practices, Trump was able to achieve additional important propaganda successes through his general dominance approach: first, "consolidation of authority." In this process, the base experienced the leader as untouchable. Through this dominance aspect (of his dominance approach), Trump succeeded in "bundling loyalty," because his dominance led to strong dependence of his followers at all levels. In return for loyalty, Trump presented himself as a strong protector against hostile forces and powers by selling "strength as protection." "Disloyal" employees at all levels immediately felt his wrath. Second, he was successful in his attempts to "discourage opponents." Opponents were to be demotivated by the constant ineffectiveness of

their attacks in public discourse. Third, Trump succeeded in gaining control over what was being discussed through "agenda setting." For Trump, it was extremely important to find ways to escape the annoying and dangerous "need to justify himself," for example by constantly going on the offensive, which made it difficult for skeptics and opponents to ask critical questions.

What principles were available to Trump to use his dominance approach as efficiently as possible? First, the principle of "permanence": dominance had to be exercised constantly, otherwise it began to erode. Second, the principle of "flexibility": for example, harshness could be replaced by mercy at short notice, if necessary, in order to gain loyalty in return. Third, the principle of "personalized attacks": opponents were singled out individually to achieve a deterrent effect. Fourth, the principle of "coordination with the media": acts of dominance had to be timed so that they dominated the news cycles. Fifth, the principle of "circular confirmation": the base confirmed dominance with applause, which was then reflected back to the base via the media. So, Trump congratulated the base for their excellent "understanding of politics."

## **The propaganda war about the economy**

Trump's economic propaganda was based on three narratives. The dominance narrative saw America as a fortress, with Trump as the supreme economic leader. In the victim narrative, the country appeared as a betrayed victim that could only obtain justice through Trump. Finally, the enemy narrative clearly named the culprits and ignited the fighting spirit of the American people. These three narratives could only work if Trump succeeded in portraying the Biden administration's efforts to strengthen the economy as a failure. If voters had been impressed by "Bidenomics," they would have said, "We don't need a fortress, we are not victims, and divisive rhetoric hurts the economy." Trump's economic narratives would have failed in the face of Bidenomics (as a real success story), especially among voters who were not close to the MAGA base. It was precisely these voters who were crucial to winning elections.

Trump painted a bleak picture of the economic situation under Biden. The MAGA base (about 90% of Republican core voters) was quickly convinced, but it was crucial to win over as many independents as possible to this view. Trump succeeded in doing so because Biden's successes were not yet clearly visible: Pete Buttigieg's infrastructure projects had yet to have much impact, many wages were stagnating, and inflation was noticeably higher than under Trump. Inflation became a central issue for Trump because it was Biden's Achilles' heel. Trump did not allow any counterarguments to be heard. His propaganda megaphone drowned out those voices that emphasized that inflation was a consequence of the Covid crisis and Trump's mismanagement. If there had been strong unions in the US, they could have pushed through wage increases more quickly. Minimum wages would also have had to be adjusted. But such considerations were not allowed in the MAGA empire.

Inflation was hugely important in the election campaign. Many voters were affected by it. That did not escape Trump and MAGA. Fighting inflation was a clear weakness in Biden's economic policy. But only if you didn't see the full picture, only the MAGA snippet of the picture according to Trump's propaganda. Biden's economic achievements were simply not supposed

to be "seen" by the people because of Trump's distracting narratives, caused by the "tunnel vision" that Trump and his echo chamber imposed on people. Trump's propaganda focused on radically narrowing voters' perceptions. The propaganda triggered a kind of tunnel vision in those susceptible to it (including many independents and men from minority groups): these people completely ignored Biden's economic successes. For example, increases in stock prices were reinterpreted as "anticipation of Trump's victory." Independent media praised Bidenomics as the "envy of the world," but in the echo chamber and for those affected by tunnel vision syndrome, only the inflation figure mattered. Even if many voters suspected that they were being brainwashed, they were not angry about it, because Trump's propaganda was preaching to the choir. Biden's reserved manner did not go down as well with voters in his second presidential campaign against this loud opponent as it did in the 2020 campaign.

From the perspective of Trump's propaganda, this tunnel vision was supported by a concept that could be described as reductionism. Actual complex social and political processes were simplified through reductionist thinking and then presented accordingly, reduced to a single social sphere: the economy. Trump's reductionism was therefore economism: Focus only on the economy. MAGA even employed a double reductionism or economism: within the economy, only inflation mattered and nothing else, through its second reductionism to inflation. Reports of Biden's economic successes were fake news for MAGA, intended to distract from inflation. This created a particularly narrow tunnel that excluded alternative perspectives in the election decision: democracy, climate, the international reputation of the US, the future of young people; all of this was irrelevant to voters. People even forgot that Trump's first presidency was not a resounding success. Men in particular were susceptible to this tunnel vision, which Trump's propaganda naturally exploited.

Biden and the Democrats focused their efforts on substantive work: structural development, crisis management, international stabilization after Covid and the start of the war in Ukraine. Trump, on the other hand, focused exclusively on propaganda and destruction. This asymmetry was decisive: Biden trusted that his successes would be clearly perceived by voters. Trump, on the other hand, knew that it was enough to dominate perception in the short term with his narratives. Biden refrained from self-praise. This attitude was in line with his political culture, but it was a strategic disadvantage in the election campaign.

### **The dominance-narrative of Trump's economic propaganda**

The dominance-narrative was the most important pillar of Trump and MAGA's economic propaganda. It delved deeply into the US's self-image as an "exceptional nation" and transferred the claim of political and cultural dominance directly to the economic sphere. Trump wanted to use protective tariffs and trade restrictions to build a new self-sufficiency and turn America into an economic fortress. The American economy was to operate as independently as possible from global interdependencies. In the propaganda, this became the image of a fortress whose walls symbolized strength rather than weakness. Imported products were seen as a threat, while buying domestic products was portrayed as a patriotic duty. In this narrative of dominance, Trump was not simply president, but the supreme strategist and "deal maker" who defended America in a hostile trading world. He was portrayed as a brilliant tactician who would renegotiate agreements, intimidate rivals, and increase national

prosperity. His person was declared a central resource: without Trump, economic subordination loomed; with him, dominance was guaranteed. This made economic propaganda highly personalized, with Trump himself appearing as the "invisible hand" that controlled the system.

Externally, it was made clear that the US had the right to dominate economically. Trade conflicts were not portrayed in the propaganda as normal negotiation issues, but as skirmishes between domination and subordination. Punitive tariffs in particular were intended to force other countries to agree to bilateral dependencies. Prosperity was portrayed as a resource that naturally belonged to the US, while other nations were merely "free riders" seeking to profit from America's strength. Trade alliances and multilateral institutions such as the WTO were not seen as networks of mutual reinforcement, but as chains that restricted America's freedom of action. Trump's message was: Such shackles are un-American; they weaken our sovereignty. Propaganda cultivated an image of liberation: America was breaking the chains imposed on it by globalists and international bureaucracies so that it could once again act without restriction. Economic propaganda went one step further: the economy was not viewed as a separate domain but was directly linked to questions of power and security. Anyone who harmed the US economically was automatically declared a political opponent; anyone who was economically dependent on the US was considered a potential vassal. This created a clear friend-or-foe logic that made economic conflicts appear like geopolitical battles.

Economic dominance was therefore not a question of numbers, but of national superiority. The narrative of dominance in economic propaganda offered supporters a simple pattern of interpretation: America against the rest of the world. It promised economic security in times of global uncertainty and gave voters the feeling that they were on the side of the stronger power. By linking prosperity, patriotism, and power politics, this narrative created an emotional foundation that not only justified Trump's economic policy, but made it appear to be a historic mission.

### **The victim-narrative of economic propaganda**

The victim narrative of economic propaganda was another important narrative of Trump's economic propaganda. It appealed to the emotions of the disadvantaged and complemented the image of the economic fortress with the narrative of a beleaguered, unfairly treated nation. The victim narrative portrayed the US not as a dominant world power, but as an innocent victim of a hostile and exploitative environment. The strongest nation in the world presented itself as betrayed and exploited. This apparent paradox was a central element of Trump's economic propaganda. Trump's propaganda claimed that the US had been fleeced by other nations for decades. Trade agreements concluded by liberal elites had systematically weakened the country. Jobs had been relocated abroad, factories closed, and entire regions deindustrialized. According to Trump, the blame for this lay not only with foreign powers, but also with his own country. "Globalists" in Washington had sold out their own people. The victim narrative was

particularly harsh on China. The country became a symbol of unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, and low-wage competition. Propaganda portrayed China as an overwhelming threat that was pushing the US to the brink of defeat. China was both a real competitor and a symbolic scapegoat for all of the US's economic problems.

At the center of the victim narrative were not the oligarchs, but the "forgotten men and women": workers in the Rust Belt, farmers in the Midwest, small business owners who were being crushed by taxes and bureaucracy. They were told you are not to blame for your decline; you are victims of a system that worked against you. This victim identity created emotional bonds and shifted responsibility from individual adaptation to external forces. The victim narrative made it clear that the American elites had abandoned the people. This gave the victim narrative a political charge: not only other countries, but also the country's own economic leaders became perpetrators who had abandoned the people. Economic weaknesses were not presented as the result of technological changes or complex globalization processes, but as moral injustice. America had been "robbed" and "cheated." These terms were highly emotional and personified in an attempt to present a one-sided view of these processes. It was not "the market" but "someone" who had done this to America. This turned every economic loss into a question of guilt and atonement. They had concluded international deals that only benefited Wall Street, but not Main Street.

The victim narrative served two key purposes: First, it turned Trump's supporters into "fellow sufferers" who were connected by a shared fate. Second, it helped create strong potential for mobilization: Those who saw themselves as victims sought an avenger. Trump then presented himself as precisely that avenger who would restore "stolen dignity" back. The victim narrative was thus not just a lament, but the emotional basis for aggressive countermeasures. The victim narrative was the emotional flip side of the dominance narrative. Together, they had a powerful effect: America was portrayed as a victim that would only be able to increase and secure its prosperity through tough dominance.

### **The enemy narrative of economic propaganda**

The enemy narrative was the sharpest sword of economic propaganda. While the dominance narrative focused on strength and the victim narrative on emotional vulnerability, the enemy narrative gave opponents a face. It determined who anger, rage, and mobilization should be directed against. China and Europe were the main external enemies. Other countries also came under fire. China was declared the main threat: unfair, devious, state capitalist. In Trump's rhetoric, China was "the thief" of American jobs and technologies. Every economic setback could be projected onto this opponent.

Mexico symbolized low-wage competition and migration. Economic and cultural struggles were linked here: Mexican workers stole US jobs, migrants "burdened" the state. Mexico was an economic and cultural bogeyman. Europe was declared a hypocrite on trade issues: it became prosperous, partly because it was able to reap the dividends of peace and because it was protected by the American-dominated NATO, but in return it engaged in unfair trade practices toward the US. Germany, the world champion of exports, was particularly targeted.

In addition to external enemies, Trump created a powerful internal enemy: his own elites. "Globalists" (a deliberately vague term) stood for financial elites, liberal politicians, think tanks, and the media who worked "against their own people." This enemy image created a "us against our own rulers" narrative that is characteristic of populist movements. The media and academic experts were also seen as internal enemies. Anyone who spoke of "the benefits of free trade" was considered part of the "corrupt system." In doing so, Trump not only devalued alternative opinions, but also undermined trust in expertise. Criticism of his economic policy became "fake news." The enemy narrative followed a clear pattern: economic problems were not the result of complex globalization developments, but targeted attacks by opponents. Every job loss was theft by China or betrayal by the elites. Every foreign policy tension could serve as evidence of the fight against unjust exploiters. This created the feeling that people were not powerless but rather engaged in a war that could be won if they fought their enemies consistently.

The enemy narrative offered the opportunity to combine economics and culture into an overall war narrative. China, migrants, and globalists were not only marked as economic opponents, but also as cultural foreign bodies. Thus, economic propaganda merged with cultural propaganda to form a unified propaganda effort. This broad enemy narrative had three central effects in the service of propaganda. First, emotionalization: it created clear culprits who were responsible for everything. Second, mobilization: it called for active struggle instead of allowing resignation. Third, immunization: criticism of Trump was dismissed as enemy stereotyping. MAGA did not expect praise for Trump from his enemies. When Trump's enemies tried to get his supporters to think critically by criticizing his economic policies, they failed because any criticism only served to bring his camp closer together.

### **The Trump economic narrative in the narrower sense**

The Trump economic narrative in the narrower sense was not a closed narrative, but a mosaic of five intertwined sub-narratives that were combined and reinforced depending on the audience, situation, and propaganda needs. They served to create a coherent image of a supposedly "new American economy" that Trump exclusively embodied. The "energy supply narrative" focused on the oil and gas industry as the foundation of national strength. Fossil fuels were presented not only as a guarantee of cheap energy, but also as a weapon against inflation and international dependencies. Renewable energies, on the other hand, appeared as a threat to jobs, prosperity, and national sovereignty. In the "oligarch narrative," the economy was staged as a field of a few powerful players who, instead of paying taxes, wanted to use their resources "voluntarily" for the benefit of the US. Trump positioned himself as the arbiter of this oligarchic economy, in which coordination processes and personal deals were more important than market competition. The tax state was discredited, and the personal power of the leader over economic activity was emphasized. The "Trump reindustrialization narrative" promised the rebirth of an industrial worker economy: factories would return, and "Made in the USA" would dominate once again. The pride of workers and the supposed "golden age" of American industrial society were evoked. It was a nostalgic narrative of return that resonated particularly strongly in the old industrial regions. In the fourth narrative, the "fair trade state narrative," globalization was rejected and international agreements were portrayed as harmful. They were

replaced by the idea of a closed national economy, secured by protective tariffs, "Buy American" programs, and strict trade controls. In this model, the economy was no longer an open playing field, but a battlefield on which the nation defended its self-sufficiency.

In the fifth narrative of the "high-wage state, high-price state narrative," the labor market was supposed to belong exclusively to American citizens. Immigration was portrayed as a threat to wages, which is why deportations and border closures were part of the economic program. Welfare state benefits were to be dismantled, and society transformed into a work society in which prosperity arose directly from hard work and industrial strength. This model served both to complement and safeguard the oligarchic economy: prosperity from above (capital) and prosperity from below (labor) were to be propagandistically merged into a harmonious MAGA economic paradise. Taken as a whole, this narrative resulted in an ideological parallel economy that was not necessarily realistic or consistent, but which functioned in propaganda as an American counter-model to globalization, the welfare state, and green transformation. It was a mixture of nostalgia, nationalism, and authoritarianism, and served as the economic foundation of the MAGA movement. The high-wage, high-price state narrative was not simply an economic fantasy, but a harmonizing total narrative. It was precisely this point that revealed the parallel to National Socialism. The concepts of prosperity from above (capital) and prosperity from below (labor) were intended to enable a modern form of the Volksgemeinschaft narrative. Prosperity from above (capital) meant that oligarchs, the super-rich, and economic leaders were to operate tax-free, free from regulation, and in direct exchange with Trump. Their role was staged as the "engine of prosperity," not as opponents of the little people. Prosperity from below (labor) meant that industrial workers, craftsmen, rural populations should become winners in the myth of "reindustrialization." Migration was ruled out, and the welfare state was to be dismantled. "Honest work" and advancement into the oligarch class are the only ways to gain access to income and prosperity. In this propagandistic fusion, capital and labor did not appear as opposing interests (class struggles were ignored), but as a national community. The high-wage state (for "our own people") and the domestic market (highly secured by market isolation, tariffs, and self-sufficiency) were stylized as a shared destiny. In National Socialism, too, the ideology of the Volksgemeinschaft covered up real social contradictions. Capital and labor appeared harmoniously united in the national project, externally against "foreign powers," internally against "enemies of the people." Propaganda was decisive, i.e., the creation of myths rather than the representation of reality.

### **The cultural significance of the five sub-narratives**

The five sub-narratives of the Trump economy were not isolated economic models. They were propaganda projection screens that only had an emotional impact because of their cultural significance. Trump constantly linked economic issues with cultural identity patterns, thus turning a purely economic struggle into a culture war with an economic mask. Cheap oil and gas were presented not only as an economic promise, but also as a declaration of war against "green elites" and "woke climate fanatics." Energy policy was transformed into a symbolic proxy war: those who were in favor of oil stood for "true Americans"; those who were in favor of wind turbines fought for "decadent globalists." The oligarchic economy close to Trump was legitimized with a cultural argument: taxes were a coercion of the corrupt state, while private

deals and "voluntary" engagement embodied the "true spirit of America." The concentration of economic power in the hands of the few was thus reinterpreted as a narrative of "freedom versus paternalism," embedded in a deep cultural narrative that reaches back to the founding myths.

The longing for factories and industrial work was not only economic but also cultural: steel mills, car factories, and coal mines were all seen as symbols of a masculine, white working culture. The narrative focused on the identity of the "forgotten men," whose pride had been destroyed by deindustrialization and globalization. The rejection of globalization was linked to cultural chauvinism: "us" versus "others." Previous trade agreements were not only economically damaging, but also culturally demeaning because they "made America small." Foreign trade thus became a field of national honor and economic isolation, an act of cultural self-assertion. The demand for an exclusive American labor market for Americans only was directly linked to ethnic-cultural ideas: migrants threatened not only jobs, but also national identity. "Wealth for Americans through hard work" thus became a code for a white working society without foreigners. The economic narrative served as a cover for an ethnically charged cultural policy. The Trump economic narrative in the narrower sense could therefore only be understood as hybrid propaganda: it was economically simple but culturally highly charged. Each economic sub-narrative provided a piece of the MAGA cultural narrative: energy policy as an anti-woke program, reindustrialization as the rebirth of male working-class culture, trade nationalism as national self-assertion, the "welfare state" as ethnic exclusion. Thus, the cultural weapon became an amplifier of the economic weapon, and the economic weapon, in turn, became a legitimization of the culture war.

The various cross-amplifications made Trump's propaganda so powerful: the economic weapon gained emotion through the cultural weapon. The cultural weapon gained rationality through the economic weapon. This enabled Trump to anchor unpopular, divisive culture war issues in the middle of society, seemingly economically legitimized, but in reality, culturally charged. In energy policy, the cultural weapon reinforced the economic weapon by charging economic decisions with morality and identity. The decision in favor of oil and gas was a decision against "aloof elites." Anti-immigration policy, on the other hand, was economically justified as a means of preserving jobs and protecting wages. The economic demand (a departure from globalization) fits perfectly with the political demand (defense of national dignity). In this case, the economic weapon gained its power through the cultural narrative of the "humiliated nation" that had to rise again. The economic demand for new industrial jobs fits perfectly with the cultural demand for a comeback of masculine, white working-class culture. Economic ideas thus became an identitarian myth. Trump's economic world was about economic growth through capital power. This had to be culturally veiled by rhetoric against "tyrannical state" that collected too much tax.

The five sub-narratives (energy supply, oligarchic economy, reindustrialization, fair trade state, high-wage state-high-price state) were not isolated fragments, but elements of a larger narrative architecture. Each of them appealed to specific groups (the oil and auto industries, oligarchs, industrial workers, protectionist small business owners, nationalist-minded workers). Taken together, however, they had a much deeper effect. In the oligarch narrative, capital was portrayed as the source of national prosperity. In the high-wage state narrative, work was glorified and the promise made that prosperity would trickle down to the

"bottom." Both strands were merged for propaganda purposes: capital and labor no longer appeared as opposites, but as partners in the "America First" project. This "America First" narrative obscured real contradictions (unequal incomes, weak welfare state, oligarchic power). Instead, it created the impression of national harmony: "Everyone is working toward the same future, prosperity is distributed 'fairly,' and immigrants or globalists are threatening this state of affairs from outside and within." This "America First" narrative was a modern variant of a Volksgemeinschaft narrative, and class conflicts disappeared in the propaganda. This supposedly harmonious community was portrayed as an economic paradise in which capital and labor coexisted in harmony. The aim was to use propaganda to create a symbolic unity that would strongly emotionalize people and draw them into the MAGA project.

### **The synergistic effects (achieved through the use of the two propaganda initiatives)**

Cultural and economic propaganda did not develop their real impact in parallel, but rather in synergy, merging into a joint attack system (and propaganda machine). Each of the two areas had impact, but their real power came from mutual reinforcement. Both propaganda initiatives pursued important common goals. Cultural propaganda created identity. It divided society into "true Americans" and their opponents: immigrants, liberal elites, "woke" Democrats. Economic propaganda translated these cultural fault lines into material issues: foreigners threaten not only cultural purity but also jobs; Democrats destroy not only traditions but also prosperity. In this way, every cultural front line took on an economic dimension, and conversely, every economic uncertainty became culturally charged. Those who were culturally receptive found confirmation in the economic narrative: "They are not only taking your homeland, but also your jobs." Those who were economically insecure were drawn into the camp of "true Americans" through cultural propaganda: "Your poverty is the work of foreigners and liberal elites."

This dual connectivity maximized the reach of the propaganda and allowed Trump to weld culturally and economically diverse groups into a common front. In addition, economic propaganda served as a cover and layer of legitimacy for the culture war. Attacks that, taken on their own, might have appeared racist or divisive now seemed like objective interest politics. Trump's "energy independence" was both an economic argument (low prices, jobs) and a cultural symbol (America as a free, self-determined nation). This fusion gave rise to myths of enormous impact. Culture provided emotions such as pride, fear, and belonging, while economics provided tangible arguments: jobs, prices, and wages. The result was total myths that appealed to both the heart and the wallet: "America First" was not only a patriotic slogan but offered an economic warning: migrants are not only cultural foreign bodies, but also job thieves.

During the election campaign, these synergies increased the potential for escalation. The MAGA culture war alone mobilized the base but reached its limits among independents. The economic battle alone seemed too sober. But the combination created a cohesive worldview that ignited emotions and provided rational justification. This allowed Trump to establish important bridgeheads among non-MAGA groups beyond his core constituency and confidently enter the battle for the swing states. There, the MAGA virus had already managed to spread rapidly. When the echo chamber fired on all cylinders to spread its cultural and economic propaganda, it created a high-pressure campaign that the Democrats

had no equivalent to counter. Economic propaganda also provided important added value for cultural propaganda. Economic arguments, for example, served as a cover to help voters hide other motives (racism, etc.) from themselves or others. Economic narratives could be pushed as a distraction to divert attention from unpopular and controversial policy areas (e.g., MAGA-supported changes to abortion laws).

MAGA was essentially a cult. Two other terms came to mind when describing the Trump cult before the election: "brainwashing" and "deliberate dumbing down." This allowed Trump to reduce complex economic issues to a primitive level: tax cuts would allegedly not cause deficits, and tariffs would be paid by China. Trump's economic policy would make America rich. These broad narratives were therefore easier for the grassroots to consume than any detailed economic analysis. The movement's various stakeholders, such as oligarchs, evangelicals, the working class, echo chamber propagandists, MAGA politicians, and radicals, could thus be addressed simultaneously. Everyone received a suitable offer from cultural and economic propaganda: cultural identity slogans, economic promises, symbolic blame. The enemy images that formed the core of the MAGA strategy were also served on both levels simultaneously: Democrats and migrants threatened not only values and traditions, but also jobs and prosperity.

## The target groups of Trump's propaganda

### The target group differentiation according to the category "ethnic affiliation"

After highlighting the potential of Trump's two propaganda armies (concerning culture and economy) it is now time to take a closer look at the target areas where the propaganda fire was primarily intended to have an effect, beginning with the target group "ethnic affiliation". Then Trump's target group work with regard to the other two target areas is examined. If Trump could prevail with the target groups in question, his election victory would be unstoppable. All preparatory work for the use of the two propaganda armies and the target area work were important elements of the strategic core of Trump's strategy for the 2024 election.

American society has been multi-ethnic from the very beginning: immigrants had to take possession of the land of the indigenous peoples, and soon after the first permanent settlements were established, the slave trade began in the region. America was a country of "immigration", and the white majority defined who was welcome and who was not. There have been repeated tensions with newcomers throughout American history. According to the ethnic-religious hierarchy in society, WASPs were at the top (meaning Catholics ranked below Protestants). Then came the descendants of immigrants (from various countries) who were not accepted into the dominant group, and the various minorities in the country. The Republicans had a problem with ethnic minorities. They tended to vote for the Democrats, and the Republicans preferred to focus on the concerns of white voters. This was already the case before Trump. Trump unscrupulously crossed a line that had been respected by his predecessors. Two historical moments illustrate this change. McCain defended Obama against a racist woman in his base: "Obama is a decent man." We all know the decisive Trump moment: "Mexicans are rapists." Trump primarily exploited the culturally deep-rooted racism in the

southern United States. The Deep South could not escape its past. People in states like Alabama were caught in a cultural trap. Against their interests, they voted predominantly Republican. The other states in the region were also influenced by this culture. They were all important Republican core states. Before the 2024 election, the Democrats were strongly represented on both coasts, and in the middle of the US between the coasts, only Illinois, Colorado, and Minnesota were blue states. Overall, the Democratic states were significantly stronger economically than the red states. Globalization was primarily driven by political/economic forces from the blue coastal states. It was not until Biden took office that energetic attempts were made to launch compensatory measures to cushion the effects of globalization in the affected regions.

Trump changed the GOP: a second Obama and a female president were to be prevented at all costs by Trump's seizure of power in 2016. Then he suffered an election defeat to Biden in 2020. Kamala Harris became vice president. Trump lost despite a record number of votes because Biden was able to convince even more voters. Since more African Americans than usual voted in the 2020 election, whites should take up this challenge and try harder before the next election, according to this competitive logic. MAGA supporters quickly understood this, in line with Trump and the MAGA campaign. Trump was apparently convinced of the superiority of the white race. At the very least, the white race should enjoy a privileged position in America. Trump and his father did not like African Americans. Trump personally apparently preferred immigrants from countries with Germanic languages. MAGA did not sharply distance itself from racists. Trump saw good people on both sides. Anti-Semitism also ran rampant in MAGA. George Soros was a clear enemy figure. Marjorie Taylor-Greene spoke of Jewish space lasers. In the QAnon milieu, people believed in Jewish-Democratic ritual murders. The right wing of MAGA was afraid of "replacement": "Jews will not replace us." Racism was important for the spread of MAGA culture because racism was particularly close to the hearts of MAGA people. Above all, they were willing to make sacrifices and neglect important self-interests, to compromise and form alliances. Only together could they win elections and defeat the Democrats through an alliance: fans of right-wing dictatorial tendencies, opponents of globalization, people with feelings of revenge against established politics, opponents of abortion, LGTBQ opponents, isolationists, opponents of immigration, advocates of mass deportations of illegal immigrants, racists, "deep state" haters, haters of "woke" culture, haters of socialist tendencies, and the alliance also includes oligarchs, evangelicals, gun fanatics, many farmers and large landowners, fans of tax breaks, advocates of tariffs on Chinese goods and closer relations with Russia, and advocates of withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement and NATO, and so on. Many white people were against the Affordable Care Act or the welfare state in general, contrary to their objective interests, because they believed it primarily benefited African Americans. Some foolish people were against Obama Care but in favor of the Affordable Care Act. Since the division in the country was already well advanced, many Republicans fought against everything the Democrats considered good and right in their efforts. "To own the libs." At least the hard core of MAGA wanted to see that politicians are serious about white dominance. That's why they wanted to see cruelty. During Trump's first presidency, children were separated from their parents and locked up in cages. In their eyes, Trump was a politician who followed through on his words with actions.

The red states exerted cultural pressure on whites in the swing states: the increasing radicalization of MAGA culture and the Trump cult, and their accompanying cultural phenomena in the red states, were to be carried into the three swing states through election rallies, information campaigns of all kinds, and personal contacts. The starting point for this approach was very favorable. Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan were already susceptible to it. Swing states were among the "purple states," along with former swing states or red states that were turning bluer, such as North Carolina. For example, New Castle, Pennsylvania, was won by Trump in the 2024 election, and even a number of welfare recipients voted for him there. The MAGA package was very attractive to many white voters in the swing states, despite the clearly recognizable dangers posed by MAGA. In Wisconsin, Biden won in 2020 by a margin of only 21,000 votes. This narrow deficit could be easily offset in 2024 by increased efforts on the part of all MAGA forces. After all, white voters were the largest group in the electorate. MAGA was therefore not just a locally limited phenomenon, but a cultural export project with clear target regions: Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan. These swing states were, by definition, open to this kind of cultural influence. This suggests a strategic logic: those who infiltrate culturally can later dominate politically. The periphery (red states) influences the center (swing states) and creates peripheral pressure.

Trump and MAGA made a strict distinction between their racist attitudes and the tactical requirements of the election campaign: Trump succeeded in promoting non-white MAGA candidates and building them up as stars who should aspire to a great career with MAGA and thus also be recognized as "real Americans." These role models were intended to encourage minorities to vote for Trump. At the same time, a signal was sent to minorities: MAGA is not racist. African American MAGA stars served as figureheads (Candace Owens, Herschel Walker, etc.) for a propagandistic symbolic policy aimed at refuting accusations of racism, combined with an attempt to create specific opportunities for identification. Trump exploited racist resentment but was tactically astute enough not to pursue it dogmatically. This strategic flexibility was typical of him: no consistency of principle, but rather "fluid racism management" in the service of gaining majority support. Trump followed the principle of sham integration without solidarity: he integrated minorities not to do them justice, but to use them as tools to strengthen white majority power. Furthermore, many people from minority groups sensed the heightened racial climate, were afraid, and wanted to be on the right side (the side of the white majority) if social and political conflicts were to become really bad. Many minority voters liked certain aspects of MAGA, such as its emphasis on masculinity and the deportation of criminal gangs from the south. These criminals were certainly not popular with the law-abiding Latino community. MAGA's egoism was also contagious: according to MAGA propaganda, new immigrants were threatening the jobs of African Americans and established immigrants who were legally residing in the country if illegal immigrants took those jobs. An old Roman principle (divide and conquer) was once again successfully applied.

Trump's voters were afraid of competition from immigrants and minorities. Trump was particularly interested in the two income classes above the lowest class. For him, the working class, with modest education and great dissatisfaction with their own economic and political situation in the country, and dissatisfied people from the middle and upper (but not upper-most) middle class were important. Trump took advantage of an important imitation effect: not only white people, but also people from minority groups often felt like they belonged

to the working class and therefore voted for Trump in accordance with the principle of status approximation through voting behavior: those who behaved like the dominant group (e.g., by voting for Trump) also hoped to enhance their cultural status. Trump succeeded in disguising purely ethnic power struggles (within the framework of his identity politics) with his socio-economic perspectives, thus successfully appealing to non-white population groups as well.

Finally, it is necessary to show what benefits the use of the two armies of culture and economy (especially in the various efforts to consolidate white supremacy) offered the white target group, and what purposes Trump and the MAGA propaganda machine pursued in doing so: Firstly, the aim of cultural and economic propaganda was to appeal to whites along the lines of "ethnic identity" and achieve important propaganda successes, thereby consolidating existing white supremacy, impress supporters and strengthen their loyalty, and convince those who are still undecided. The white people felt that this appealed to them on a tribal level: "Finally, a politician is also looking out for us and our concerns." Secondly, they wanted to gain interpretive authority over the past. The white people always celebrated July 4th very conspicuously, but the "dark" past should not be discussed: Critical Race Theory was a red rag to MAGA. School textbooks should teach „correct" history. Trump loved America's supposed power in times past and therefore invited his supporters to take a trip down memory lane. For Trump, MAGA meant: Back to the desired past. Every MAGA supporter could let his imagination run wild and dream of his favorite past: how wonderful the time before the end of segregation was, and so on. Thirdly, Trump and MAGA wanted to deepen the culture of white supremacy through important initiatives (the anti-DEI polemic during the election campaign already served this purpose), and they did not want to and could not hide what the pursuit of white supremacy was really about. For Trump and MAGA, "ethnicity" meant being caught up in a zero-sum game. As minorities became stronger and more powerful, they wanted a bigger piece of the pie. It wasn't just about money, but also about power, cultural participation, educational opportunities, career opportunities, etc. The children of illegal immigrants were already American citizens. In keeping with the prevailing meritocracy, capable and ambitious people from minority groups tried to make a career for themselves through their own achievements, such as Kamala Harris. This made them competitors to white children. Trump and MAGA were against increased competition from minorities. That is why they were also against "diversity, equity, and inclusion." Harris was labeled a DEI beneficiary by MAGA during the election campaign. Fourth, overt racism was also used extensively (tools such as dog whistles are child's play for the brute politician Trump and for MAGA): The lie about the alleged un-American behavior of Haitians in Springfield, Ohio, was spread by the echo chamber. A "comedian's" Puerto Rico joke caused great hilarity among MAGA supporters. Laura Loomer and others made nasty remarks about Harris: Kamala Harris allegedly used her physical attributes to advance her career. People did not dare to do this to white female politicians. Fifth, African Americans should be made aware of their "true" place in society. This is another reason why Trump speaks with relish of "Black Jobs." Sixth, African Americans and Latinos should adopt MAGA views and also switch to the "dark side": immigrants threaten "black jobs" and criminal Latinos should be deported immediately. Minority voters should protect their social position (behind whites) from new immigrants and therefore vote MAGA. Like the MAGA people, they should give their "inner demons" some leeway.

During the election campaign, Trump tried to question Kamala Harris' African American identity: Harris was neither African American nor Indian. This emphasized the importance of the ethnic component in politics. With his polemical remarks on this subject, Trump wanted to say that Kamala Harris did not even meet this basic requirement for an American politician. Racial mixing was obviously not popular with Trump and MAGA. Racial mixing also made it more difficult to classify people in a pecking order. Did Trump and MAGA believe that mixed-race people were above Indians or African Americans? Hardly. Trump's remarks about Harris were probably meant to be derogatory. This disparagement by Trump and MAGA made it difficult for many white women and African American men to vote for Harris. Trump and MAGA operated on several levels of racism simultaneously: in addition to tactical racism (e.g., Black jobs, competition from illegal immigrants), they also employed open hostility (e.g., against Harris) and systemic declassification (e.g., criticism of DEI, rewriting history).

Eight propaganda themes were particularly well suited to demonstrating Trump's commitment to his white supporters through his cultural propaganda: mass deportations and stopping illegal border crossings. Contradictions that were already apparent were ignored. Latinos were the main ones affected. The demands for appropriate measures were important concessions to racism and isolationism in the Trump camp. During the election campaign, there was talk of up to 20 million people being deported. It was already clear during the campaign that this would require an enormous amount of money. Should government spending be cut accordingly to compensate for this? At the same time, Trump also wanted to push through tax cuts for the rich. Illegal immigrants also paid into the system and thus supported it. Without illegal immigrants, some important industries would have too few workers available. MAGA was indifferent to this: "Then raise wages significantly and you will have enough Americans willing to work." During the election campaign, Trump was not interested in how his racist promises would be implemented in political practice. His voters were not interested in such details either. If Trump could finally introduce dictatorship after the election, many things would be easier to implement. Even if MAGA could deport millions and stop illegal immigration, that would not satisfy racism. Trump even questioned the right to US citizenship for all persons born in the US. He had already expressed this during his first presidency and during his election campaigns, repeatedly emphasizing that he wanted to change the existing legal practice. He argued that the interpretation of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which established birthright citizenship, should be "reevaluated." Since Trump, racism has been an unstoppable force in the US. After major successes, he would seek new goals and focus more on non-white people in the country. In bad times, scapegoats are needed for all undesirable developments, and they could be found quickly if necessary.

The "economy" as a propaganda tool was also very important in the fight for white interests. The Biden economy was to be perceived as bad by white people. The economy in Trumps propaganda provided white people with economic motives that could serve to conceal racist motives, even from themselves. Emphasizing the importance of the "economy" or "inflation" was therefore often a means of repression (as a psychological process) for voters. It allowed white people to behave in a racist manner without seeing themselves that way.

### **The target group differentiation according to the category "gender identity."**

Trump had a decisive women's problem against Biden in the 2020 election campaign: "Suburban women, why don't you like me?" From this, he learned for 2024: take full risks and specifically target men in the election campaign, especially young people, African Americans, and Hispanics, who overall voted for the Democrats in the majority. Trump was thus able to win new voters and decisively weaken the Democrats. Trump's bet (bet 1) to appeal more strongly to white people was not strategically risky, but it was ethically and culturally reprehensible. Trump's bet (bet 2) to appeal more strongly to men was much riskier, and also ethically and culturally reprehensible. A society shaped by these two bets in the election campaign was not on a good path. Bet 2 meant that Trump had to expect further losses among women, especially suburban women. Would these losses be limited? Could they be mitigated by certain measures? Would the gains among men be enough to compensate for the weakness among the target group of women and achieve an overall advantage? Trump also won bet 2. Democratic women found it easy to oppose Trump, but women from red states and those from a MAGA environment found it much more difficult. What would tip the scales for them? Trump and his misogyny or the MAGA culture of their social environment? For many women, this was a difficult decision, often made on a subconscious level. In the end, MAGA propaganda also worked on many women. Propaganda in the areas of "culture" and "economy" had an effect on women. Overall, the perceived misogyny was not enough to draw enough women into the Democratic camp. The dangers of Trump and MAGA for democracy, morality, law and order, for the functioning of the state, and for peaceful coexistence in society were ignored by the women who voted for Trump. Many women were also strongly influenced by the culture of white supremacy. The loyalty structure of many MAGA women was culturally mediated and not rationally justified.

Trump did not have to differentiate between tactical campaign requirements and his own ideological stance toward women. He did not have to compromise. He could be completely himself. He had complete confidence in his echo chamber, and so even the efforts of the opposition could not shake him: Taylor Swift, Oprah Winfrey, and other celebrities attempted to win over younger and older women from their enormous fan bases for Harris. This engagement was not without consequences, but Trump won anyway. Women as a whole delivered for the Democrats in the election, including in the suburbs and cities. Younger white men and men from minority groups, on the other hand, surprisingly often voted for Trump or did not vote at all. The majority of women voted for Kamala Harris. There was talk of a lead of around 7 to 8 percentage points for Harris. The fact that Trump won by a clear margin among men, while Harris won by a smaller margin among women, ultimately led to Trump's overall share of the vote being higher. The gender gap was therefore a decisive factor in the election result.

Did Trump owe his election victory to minority men (African Americans, Latinos, others) compared to the 2020 election, taking into account the changes in this regard in the 2024 election? The answer is yes. Men from minority groups (African Americans, Latinos, but also Asians) played a decisive role in Donald Trump's election victory in 2024, as there were significant shifts compared to 2020. While Joe Biden had a clear lead among Latino men in 2020

(in some cases by more than 30 percentage points), Trump was able to gain ground among this group in 2024 and at least deliver a neck and-neck race in this segment. This was the most significant change among men. Trump's messages on border security and his "America First" rhetoric also resonated with some Latino men, especially in border regions and more conservative communities. It wasn't just about the Biden economy. Latino men also felt culturally addressed and liked Trump's emphasis on men in his campaign. Among African American men, the increase in support for Trump was remarkable. Some sources reported that approximately 21% of African American men voted for Trump. This was a remarkable shift, as Joe Biden had won among African American men by a very large margin in 2020. There was also a trend toward Trump among Asian American men, albeit to a lesser extent than among Latinos. In the swing states, the victorious presidential candidates often won by very narrow margins. Every percentage point that shifted from one party to another could have a decisive impact on the outcome. As always, the Democrats relied on broad support from minority groups. If even a small percentage of these minority voters shifted to the Republicans, it was dangerous for the Democrats.

Many American men were apparently affected by brain failure during the 2024 election. They were deceived by propaganda about white people, men, white men, and they were far too impressed by MAGA, by Trump and his cult. This was already apparent before the election. Men have a hard time voting, and this was not just an American problem. So, hope lay with the women. Would they ask the right questions when making their voting decisions: "Is Trump good for the future of the US?" Did he want to abolish democracy, given that his people tried to storm the Capitol? Were people living in 'normal' times, where you could say with a clear conscience that inflation had been too high in recent years and that's why I would like to vote for Trump? What evidence was there that Trump was better for the economy? What did Trump and MAGA mean for the future of women in the US (Make women great again?). What about the findings from Trump's lawsuits against E.J. Carrol? Powerful men (stars) could get away with anything: fortunately, and unfortunately. Trump was probably (viewed soberly) unelectable for women, even if he had been a political genius. How did women view Trump's "strange" marriage to Melania? What about his infidelity? He "lovingly" cared for his former wife Ivana with a "magnificent" tomb in Bedminster. What about Trump and Epstein? Epstein was a close friend of Trump's for years. Trump's inability to love was clearly visible. This was also related to his childhood. His strange behavior towards his daughter had also been noticed several times. What about the Access Hollywood recordings? Trump also did something for women: he promoted the extremely aggressive MAGA women Marjorie Taylor Greene and Laura Loomer. Poor women had nothing to expect from Trump. Kristi Noem was an important personnel reserve for Trump. MAGA did not want to curb gun violence. The assassins were men. Climate and environmental activists were not welcome at MAGA. The school system would certainly not improve under Trump, nor would the healthcare system. MAGA was against vaccinations. Project 2025 would be implemented, but did the women know what was in store for them?

There were important correlations between the factors of "ethnic identity" and "gender," which in turn had an impact on voting behavior: African American men did not have it easy in America. They often grew up in difficult environments and may have fallen into bad company. If they did not take energetic steps to pursue their education, they could hardly

expect any help from others. Women were much more persistent and tenacious in this regard. They needed these qualities when, for example, they had to care for their children as single mothers. It also caused bad blood when men had to acknowledge their own failures and looked at the successes of women. Trump was able to convince many men, including Latinos and African Americans, to support MAGA, with enormous consequences for the election results. Cubans were particularly fascinated by Trump, including women. Not all young voters were in favor of Harris; young white working-class voters in particular voted overwhelmingly for Trump. White MAGA men certainly did not vote for Harris, even though this clearly went against their interests: Harris issued an urgent warning about Project 2025. They either ignored this or, if they did hear it, did not believe it, or simply felt that acting on their prejudices on election day was more important. Many Democrats and independents did not vote because of Harris (a woman with an African American identity). The argument that many Democrats did not vote because they were convinced Harris would win is not credible.

One example of Trump's appeal to young men on YouTube was remarkable. Trump was invited to an interview by a young influencer. Right at the start of the conversation, Trump was presented with a valuable watch by his interlocutor. Trump always enjoyed receiving gifts. The whole thing was not about questions and answers. The young man wanted above all to express his admiration for Trump. These are the kinds of interviews Trump loves: little substance, but a lot of goodwill towards him and very "transactional": Trump gained propaganda access to the group of young men. The interviewer was able to increase his market value through a smooth Trump visit. This young man was not chosen by the Trump campaign by chance. He was a hard-core male fan. He apparently had the disgusting habit of sniffing the seats where various alpha males had sat after their visits. This was apparently his way of determining their alpha ranking. Perhaps one of the Tate brothers was also invited. During Trump's visit, he refrained from this practice. In his focus on "body politics," Trump did not shy away from "obscenizing" masculinity. This proved effective, not only in his "mascu-scene." It allowed him to show men who were receptive to his propaganda how aggressively he was promoting their "interests." Women were therefore the weak point in the 2020 and 2024 campaigns because Trump himself was a weak point in terms of his role model effect and because he had too little to offer women politically and culturally. Trump stood more for regression, if only because of his closeness to evangelicals. Right at the beginning of his first presidency, Trump was warned by an impressive demonstration of women. This also had to do with the image of women presented by MAGA. Evangelicals were against abortion rights. The issue became an important building block of MAGA culture and was used in the power struggle for cultural dominance at the societal level. Women's resistance on the abortion issue was in vain. In June 2022, *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the Supreme Court. Since then, the states have been making decisions because there was no federal law on the matter. Kamala Harris focused heavily on the issue of abortion during her election campaign and highlighted the dangerous consequences of this decision for women in states such as Texas. MAGA and Trump mean "back to the days when men were more powerful," when, for example, there was no Me-Too movement. Trump himself was a perpetrator. Since his court ruling on the matter, he has been considered a sex offender. He did not go to prison for it. "Stars" could get away with more: fortunately.

Not only MAGA, but MAGA men were also unpopular with many non-MAGA women. As social division progressed, real tragedies unfolded when women separated from their MAGA men. The sale of a red Trump hat headwear should only be allowed with a warning label: "Caution: your chances with women will decrease if you venture out in public wearing this." Women were generally more open to various "woke" ideas. This was another reason why so many white women voted for the Democrats. Women were more flexible than men. Trump said he would protect women, even if they didn't ask for it. This had a threatening undertone because it came from Trump. Trump promised law and order. He wanted to win over women with this. Trump staged protection, but meant control, in line with his attempt to regress to patriarchal times. In his first term, he tended to act as a catalyst in the various crises.

Why was MAGA so aggressive toward LGBTQ people? Trump certainly set a "good" example in this regard. At his rallies, he relished telling stories of children who were "suddenly" subjected to sex reassignment surgery at school, apparently without their parents' consent. The MAGA audience was horrified. One reason for the aggressiveness was certainly the evangelicals' aversion to deviations in sexuality from the God-given order. Religious ideas also served to preserve the system: two gay men meant that they could only start a family with children through adoption. The majority of MAGA was against allowing gay people to raise children. There was probably another reason: LGBTQ was ambiguous. MAGA wanted clarity, hierarchy, and order, but LGBTQ stood for change and ambiguity. MAGA hated that, just as it hated the "ambiguity" of Kamala Harris, as already shown. Ambiguity was, in principle, not so easy to control, and less control meant less power over the members of society. If gender relations were viewed as a zero-sum game rather than a win-win game, then men in the US have lost power at least since the beginning of the 20th century (taking into account "successes" and "defeats" from the men's perspective). Men also felt this loss of power in their personal relationships within their families. Trump changed the gender dynamic. Women suffered political and cultural setbacks. They ran for president twice and failed twice due to Trump's populism. The MAGA struggle to clearly assert "male superiority" in society left many losers. Women lost politically, and men felt like losers when they were rejected by women.

Did Joe Biden make a serious mistake by not stepping down after two years (after the midterm elections)? If Biden had resigned after two years (at the latest!), Kamala Harris would have become president with a chance to make her mark. She might have had to compete against strong opponents in the Primaries. If Harris had prevailed in the Primaries, it would have been a success for women. Then they would have fought back against Trump not only culturally, but also politically. But Biden clung to power and passed up the chance to establish a new female leader in time. Biden should have declined a second run in time. Against such opponents, one could not show any weaknesses. The smallest mistakes were immediately registered by MAGA and exploited for propaganda purposes. Trump, on the other hand, was completely immune to criticism. Biden had already beaten Trump once. He believed he could do it a second time. But the worst-case scenario became reality: after a disastrous televised debate with Trump, the pressure on Biden became so intense that he had to drop out of the race. Kamala Harris had only a few months to make her mark. Mission impossible, only Tom Cruise could have pulled that off.

What benefits did the use of cultural and economic propaganda (in various efforts to promote male dominance) offer the male target group? What were the goals of the Trump

and MAGA propaganda machine? First, Trump succeeded in addressing his target group (men) on a "male level." In doing so, he deliberately appealed to male-coded emotions: pride, hurt, and the desire for dominance. This also worked with Latinos and African Americans when the message tied in with traditional images of masculinity. Secondly, men recognized that Trump was serious about his plan to establish and maintain a "culture of male dominance." MAGA promised men that they would regain their natural leadership role in the family, society, and nation. Progressive emancipation was branded as woke and decadent. Third, the ideology of MAGA (back to a better past) was also to be dominant in this important area. The fact that women had become systemically important was to be obscured and ideologically overlaid. Fourth, since Trump was betting that his aggressive propaganda would more than compensate for the loss of female votes by gaining male votes, he could also allow open misogyny within MAGA. It was even necessary to prove his determined commitment to the cause. MAGA normalized misogynistic language, including by female supporters who actively promoted the desired role model. This created an additional ideological immunization against criticism. Fifth, the role of women in society was to be made clear in accordance with MAGA ideals. Women should serve, not lead. The limits of female power were to be deliberately narrowed, for example through attacks on gender politics or female political leaders. Biden's forced withdrawal from the election campaign made a non-white woman the leading candidate. Trump and MAGA did not let this opportunity slip by. Their well-oiled propaganda machine was to strike without restraint. Already with the target group of "ethnic identity," Trump and MAGA offered Latinos and African Americans the chance to switch to the "right side" and accept white dominance. Men in particular could be persuaded to do so. Sixth, it soon became clear during the election campaign that Trump had prepared an enticing offer for African American men and Latinos: male minorities should also convert to MAGA's authoritarian culture of masculinity. Anyone who was "tough" enough and rejected "woke" discourse was welcomed with open arms (at least until election day). This little secret addition was, of course, not spoken aloud. Seventh, aggressive career women are not real women. This passage from the MAGA creed became important when Kamala Harris became the top candidate. Career-oriented, self-determined women were thus ridiculed or demonized. The contrast to the submissive, loyal MAGA woman was to be made clear and Harris' electability for MAGA women made more difficult. The contrast to a loyal and devoted MAGA supporter was to be clearly emphasized, also to highlight the appeal of a loyal MAGA voter to potential female voters (among MAGA supporters who, for example, in this matter important to MAGA were not on the MAGA course). However, there was no danger that genuine MAGA men would vote for Harris. Eighth, it was important to point out the (alleged) disadvantages of the historical developments for women, families, culture, and society when presenting the history of emancipation from a MAGA point of view.. MAGA was the political home of evangelicals. For MAGA and evangelicals, emancipation was a mistake: fewer stable families, more loneliness, less male authority, and so on. The idea of "rollback" was thus made attractive. Ninth, one propaganda theme was particularly important for MAGA: the issue of abortion bans. By overturning *Roe v. Wade*, MAGA was able to achieve a major legal, political, and cultural victory. During the election campaign, MAGA was initially satisfied that individual states should decide to what extent abortions would be permitted in their states, as long as there was no federal law regulating this matter. Kamala Harris hoped that the issue of abortion bans would lead many women to the Democratic camp.

This did not bring the hoped-for victory because Trump was very successful in courting male voters. White men were easy prey, and many young men also voted for Trump. His performance among African Americans, Latinos, and other minorities was sensational.

The culture war provided the emotional energy in this area, while economic propaganda provided the rational justification: the Biden economy should be perceived as bad by men. This was supposed to give them an important reason to vote for Trump, the entrepreneur. Then men would not have to think about whether there were other reasons to vote for Trump, such as his racism and misogyny. Economic propaganda thus helped men conceal misogynistic motives.

### **The target group differentiation according to the category "age"**

Focusing on Generation X was not a gamble, unlike focusing on men and white people. Focusing on Generation X meant that this generation was recognized as key to Trump and his campaign, as the key to the door that led to electoral victory. Taking a gamble was too risky. The young would have been alarmed. Possibly the old too, partly because of the announced withdrawal of the state from many areas important to them. So, Generation X was not openly favored. Trump did not want to take a gamble in this regard, as he did in favoring white people and men. This approach worked: on election day, the other generations were unable to save presidential candidate Harris.

The other generations were not alarmed, as the focus on Generation X was "disguised." This meant, first of all, that this focus could not be made public. Trump and his campaign knew about the importance and sensitivity of the age issue. They had to ensure that this "disguised focus" went smoothly. To make this "disguised focus" work, Trump also launched diversionary attacks: poaching in the age territories of the younger generations served to secure the advantages among Gen X. The fewer younger people (Generation Y, Generation Z) would vote for Harris, the easier it was for Trump to compensate for corresponding losses among the other generations with his focus on the Gen X age cohort. Younger white voters (men and women) and younger men were intensively targeted by Trump's propaganda. The fact that this targeting also had the aforementioned hedging and supplementing function was not particularly noticeable. Seen in this light, this targeting was a false flag operation. The hedging and supplementing operation itself was a complete success: if we looked at the changes in voter preferences between the 2020 and 2024 elections, especially among age and gender groups, we could say with a high degree of certainty that Donald Trump owed his 2024 election victory largely to young men. While Harris still had a narrow lead among young voters (18-29, 30-44) overall, this was a dramatic decline compared to Biden's lead in 2020. Within these young age groups, there was a massive shift from young men to Trump. Some analyses show that a majority of men under 45, and especially under 30, voted for Trump. This was a reversal of the trends seen in 2020. Trump's lead among voters aged 65+ was minimal, and Trump's clear lead among the 45-64 age cohort only came into play because older and younger voters were unable to offset it.

"Disguised concentration" also meant "disguised cooperation" for mutual benefit. "Disguised" meant that most people in Generation X and other age groups were not even aware of the "cooperation with Generation X." Factor 1 of the "covert cooperation" ensured "smooth"

cooperation: Trump and Generation X fitted together like a key and a lock: culturally, ideologically, and also in terms of Trump's political style. Generation X was not just the established and powerful in the country. Many workers in this age group liked Trump's tough approach to stopping immigration and deporting illegal immigrants. This generation hated Biden because of his style, his cultural orientation, and his politics. Biden was too soft for them. Only under pressure did he try to vigorously prevent illegal border crossings. This generation liked many things about Trump, but other generations liked him less: he was crude, vulgar, cynical, and conservative on important issues. Trump distanced himself from progressive values and from Boomers (many of whom were former hippies). Many Generation X voters liked his "irony," for example when he broke with convention by buying votes in Pennsylvania. Other generations found this less amusing. Younger generations became more woke over time (until the 2020 election). Generation X did not want to go along with this trend. Generation X became even more conservative by 2024. Trump and his campaign knew the importance of this generation for the election, and they knew the preferences of this group. It was also strongly represented in the echo chamber and knew its own value and enormous importance to Trump. Trump and MAGA had a lot to offer Generation X in terms of style and politics without compromising their principles: a win-win situation for MAGA and Generation X.

Factor 2 of the "covert cooperation" should not be underestimated either: in the battle of the generations, Generation X had to set itself apart from the young and the old. Generation X sensed that 2024 would be a key election. It was now or never. Generation X wanted to show its strength on election day so as not to lose cultural and political significance to the numerically strong boomers and millennials. They wanted to send a message: "Time to take over." This was their opportunity to say to the left-wing old and young: "Smells like Teen Spirit." They sensed that this was their moment, their "retribution." Generation X acted not only out of defiance, but above all out of cultural weariness. This was a generation that decisively rejected both the old left and the neo-progressives. Many of them were fans of Ronald Reagan in their youth. That's how generational dynamics worked. Generation X was easily convinced by MAGA. This generation hated "political correctness," "speech code," "wokeness," high taxes, and too much government. The generational and power shift from the boomers to Generation X was to take place with Trump's help. This is how Generation X succeeded in dominating America politically and culturally. The symbol of this victory was Elon Musk's dominant appearance after the election. Musk's favorite letter is X. The elite in the Generation X pecking order were the oligarchs of this generation. Trump brought many of them into his cabinet after his election victory.

Factor 3 of the "covert cooperation" between Trump and Generation X: The approach of "profiting from sharp contrasts" was not applicable to the "age" target group in the strategic orientation. Therefore, other instruments had to be used, including symbolic politics. Musk, a hero of Generation X, is present at Trump's campaign appearances. This celebrates the transfer of power to Generation X by the boomer Trump. Trump had no problem with social power shifting from the boomers to Generation X because it did not affect his power as president. Musk and his DOGE team immediately made it clear to the boomers after the election which generation was now in charge. Through a quiet but real transfer of power, Generation X was established as the new elite. While Trump relied on loud polarization among white men, a quiet symbolic transfer of power took place. This was not announced, but rather

portrayed, including through personnel decisions: Elon Musk served as a leading figure, embodying the "victory" of Generation X in style, political detachment, and provocation. The "X" became a cultural code for Musk, for Twitter (X), for the new, anti-woke, aggressive political style, and a generational symbol that simultaneously served as a demarcation from the young (woke, sensitive) and the old (institutional, state-supporting). Musk even had a son named X. Boomer Trump was not handing over power loudly, but through his behavior and his proximity to X icons. He made it clear that he wanted to rule with this generation, not over it. The target area of "age" was also upgraded, as the other target areas (e.g., "Whites will be great again," "Men will be proud again"), but here it was done quietly, indirectly, and symbolically, because otherwise it would have provoked backlash.

Factor 4 of "covert cooperation" concerned a very important achievement by Generation X to guarantee joint success: Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) was able to bring the youngest boomers (born between 1961 and 1964) on board. This was easy because they were in the same socio-economic situation as the older members of Generation X. Trump owed his election victory to the 45-64 age group, i.e., Gen X and the younger boomers. While Trump was able to win over many older voters in 2024, the level of support among voters aged 65+ was not as high as in previous years. Strong support and a clear lead among 45- to 64-year-olds were therefore key to his election victory. Older boomers and even older voters were quite cautious about Trump this time around. Apparently, many boomers were still reeling from Covid. Many older people fell victim to the pandemic, and the survivors have not forgotten what a miserable crisis manager Trump was at the time, and many Trump voters (in the 2016 election), especially from red states, were swept away by the pandemic.

Factor 5 of "covert cooperation" could only succeed because the Biden-Harris campaigns were unable to play the age card and mobilize young people (born in 1981 and later) more strongly. This type of politics and how it was marketed demotivated, frustrated, and lulled young people into complacency. However, the Democrats couldn't take a gamble and bet everything on young people, because that might have upset the boomers. Young people weren't enthusiastic about Biden. They felt he didn't understand them enough. He was "too old" for them. What did they secretly mean by that? Biden should have given up his re-election bid in time and allowed the Democrats to hold tough primaries on the future direction. Then the young people could have had a say in shaping their future. Trump therefore had an important advantage in not losing the game of striking the right demographic balance. The Biden campaign could not address young people directly because it would have lost the boomers. Trump, on the other hand, was able to mask his Gen X agenda in all directions without losing his base.

Trump's target group work for the "age" target group was not a polarizing game. It was about camouflage. This work was not executed in a weaker or more incidental way; it was simply structured differently. It did not work through antagonism, but through stylistic (e.g., irony) and ideological fit (e.g., low taxes), symbolism, and quiet cooperation. It was precisely this "invisibility" that gave it its power: it enabled generational change without proclaiming it, and it avoided mobilizing the opposition while motivating Generation X to see themselves as the real new power in the country.

What were Trump and the MAGA propaganda machine trying to achieve with Generation X as their target audience? Trump uses Generation X as a cultural space between

the boomers and the younger generation. Gen X was the first "ironic generation." They learned not to commit themselves, but to communicate through cynicism, coolness, and testing boundaries. This was exactly in line with Trump's communication style. His irony, his exaggeration, his crude language was not break in style for Gen X, but rather their "native language." At the same time, Gen X found the younger generations (millennials and Gen Z) "exhausting": too emotional, too woke, too idealistic. Boomers also often seemed "embarrassing" from Gen X's perspective: patronizing, moralizing, or outdated. The Trump campaign picked up on this latent discomfort without openly expressing it. Gen X did not need to be publicly distinguished from other generations in order to be addressed effectively. The campaign did this through cultural codes and target group language. Trump's campaign helped them gain clarity about their political and cultural significance, and they quickly realized that the time had come for a change of power under the (hopefully) future President Trump, and they did not want to miss this opportunity.

Gen X was also the generation under the most economic pressure: too young to be secure, too old to benefit from new trends. They were the sandwich generation, responsible for parents and children, without government relief. Trump's economic promises appealed to them: "Jobs, security, and no inflation." Trump's talk of "bringing back industry," "tax cuts," and "government-backing down" could be interpreted as economic appeasement for a generation that was also suffering under the current system but did not want to drift to the left. As with white people from the "ethnic identity" target group, Gen X was concerned with processing fears, especially those of an economic nature. Out of a cultural reflex, these fears were processed by adopting Trump's ideologies (including on economic issues). Without deep reflection, they adopted his backward-looking view of the past rather than looking forward to the modern creation of a better future. Generation X and the younger boomers included not only the rich elites and the powerful in the country, but also many people from Trump's core group of white industrial workers.

The strategic benefit of Gen X for Trump lay in its role as the invisible middle (but a decisive power factor) that secured Trump the presidency. Gen X provided many decisionmakers in the media, tech, administration, and judiciary. This was the functional power base that Trump could rely on. Trump aimed to win over this class in the long term, but not through ideology, but through anti-ideology (cynicism, pragmatism, irony). Gen X did not seem like a target group, even though it was. This is precisely what made Gen X support all the more effective: no resistance, no counter-campaign, no canaries warning the Biden/Harris campaigns of impending disaster.

## **The agonistic approach in the philosophy of strategy**

With the presentation of the target groups of cultural and economic propaganda in Trump's "strategic core," Trump's strategic efforts have not yet been sufficiently captured, because Trump's "meta-methodical" preferences were also indirectly part of his "strategic core." I will attempt to describe the significance of the "metamethod" for the work of strategists. In doing so, I will also examine Trump's "meta-methodical" approaches. Starting with the "philosophy of strategy" we will arrive at the "philosophy of the metamethod": strategists must decide which "sub-principles" from the nine "meta-methodical principles" are important to them.

### Basic concepts of the philosophy of strategy

The philosophy of the various philosophical approaches to strategy is the meta-level for actual strategic work. My approach (the agonistic approach) as the basis for the work of the strategist competes with other philosophical approaches to strategy. For example, there is the possibility (among many others) of not being concerned with the breadth of the various strategic areas (fields, domains) and therefore offering a single specific approach to strategy work for only one area (e.g., corporate strategy). This can often lead to astonishing successes, but such specific approaches are not widely applicable even in the selected area because they are essentially reductionist "Procrustean approaches."

The agonistic approach in the philosophy of strategy requires two philosophical levels. The upper level is the "knowledge type level": it examines the "seven types of knowledge" and their dynamic interaction. Strategy is one of the seven types of knowledge. This level ("agonistics in the broad sense") deals with the special features of strategy in comparison to other types of knowledge. At the level below ("agonistics in the narrow sense"), two major philosophical areas are examined in more detail: "strategic projects" and "meta-methodological principles". Every strategic project is based on three pillars: the strategist, the strategy, and the "strategic unit". The meta-methodical principles show which overarching structural principles shape strategic thinking. Strategists are *always* confronted with these philosophical areas (consciously or unconsciously). Donald Trump has come to know and love the uncanny power of ideology (as one of the seven types of knowledge). This approach is not without risk for political strategists, e.g. when the grassroots realize that it neglects practical politics.

The agonistic approach attempts to capture the "essence" of strategy as accurately as possible on a philosophical level. It claims to be ideally suited to all strategic fields. For those interested in my philosophy of strategy, there is a separate theory chapter (chapter C) available in this text with important glossary terms. The agonistic approach is also suitable as a method for analyzing specific strategies. This paper examines Trump's strategy for the 2024 election. The Trump 2024 election campaign and Donald Trump's election victory *can only be properly understood* if one grasps Trump's strategic approach. For this reason, I am trying now to briefly explain some of the terms used in my strategic approach, before presenting the strategic core of Trump's strategy and some of its meta-methodological principles (and sub-principles). One can speculate about many things regarding Trump, but he was certainly not interested in theory or even philosophy. How, then, did he acquire effective strategic knowledge? How was he able to get closer to the "essence" of strategy? He was probably able to tap into several sources. He learned to use his instincts or "snake intelligence" and to follow the critical advice of his important mentors. His work as an entrepreneur also allowed him to gain valuable lessons. He also had certain talents and personality traits that could be used strategically. He loved the media, and they loved him. His mentors considered him a political talent. He believed this himself, so he studied role models who best suited him, such as Rush Limbaugh.

Strategic knowledge comes from one of the seven types of knowledge that I distinguish in my philosophy of knowledge types, namely the "strategy type of knowledge". The

other six types of knowledge are: society, religion, art, philosophy, ideology, and science. Strategic work focuses not on "truth" but on "power." Trump was able to become president twice, but as a scientist, he would not have gotten very far as a chronic liar. Quantitatively speaking, most of the knowledge that is produced is "social knowledge," for example, the knowledge contained in a daily newspaper. Articles from scientific journals contain "scientific knowledge." The Bible provides its readers with "religious knowledge." The writings of Enlightenment offer their readers "philosophical and ideological knowledge." In my opinion, Greek philosophical thought began with the works of Homer and Hesiod. Sun Tzu's influential work on strategy was also created long ago. Sun Tzu's "The Art of War" is not art of the "knowledge type art," but rather philosophy of strategy. Those who apply his approach gain valuable "strategic knowledge" from his philosophy, which they can then put to use. Strategists hope that all their "strategy theory" efforts (including the creation of their own strategic philosophical foundations) will have a positive effect on their strategy work. The "strategy theories" used by strategists are not scientific theories. Strictly speaking, the "validity" of the "theories" refers only to their one-time use in a specific strategy. Art (as a type of knowledge) works very differently from strategy. The works of art are "complete", but the possibilities for interpretation are limitless. Since the Industrial Revolution, our lives have been increasingly shaped by scientific knowledge.

### **Strategic projects**

Strategic projects arise when three factors come together: the strategist with his skills and limitations, the strategy with its "goal-means links", and the strategic unit as the bearer of the power to act (army, party, company, movement). If one pillar is missing, no project can emerge; but as soon as they are all in place, the project begins and grows, changes, and stabilizes again. This is where strategic knowledge is formed, not only as "theoretical" knowledge, and in the pre-planned elements, but also in actual action. At the project level, therefore, the strategist is mentioned in the same breath as the strategy and the strategic unit. His main task is to draw up the strategic guidelines for the strategic unit and to implement them. At the start of his 2024 election campaign, Trump already had a strategic unit at his disposal: the MAGA movement (consisting of the Republican Party, the echo chamber, supporters in the judiciary, financial backers, etc.). He had strategic plans, so he could give the starting signal for his 2024 propaganda election campaign, and his strategic project took effect.

General terms from the knowledge type "social knowledge" (in German: Gesellschaftswissen) can be divided into "methodological" and "content-related" terms: for example, "city" as a methodological term and "Rome" as a content-related term. The knowledge worker's definitions must give rise to "content" that shows which "Rome" the knowledge operator wants to emphasize, for example, "Rome as the center of the Roman Catholic Church". The example of the content-related term "Rome" shows that content also needs methodological terms as a basic framework, in this case the method "city."

Strategies become effective through "strategic methods" and "strategic content." Trump had certain methods in his repertoire, such as division, emotionalization, lies, simplification, and so on, which he absolutely needed for his type of campaigning. The definition of a content-related term reveals the semantic material used strategically or

tactically. Trump and MAGA had numerous pieces of content at their disposal during the election campaign that were used for mobilization, such as the content "woke." This was an attempt to marginalize ideas, individuals, groups, organizations, the Democratic Party, democratically dominated regions, various cultural elements, and so on as not "mainstream."

The most abstract methodological concept in strategist Trump's definition for the 2024 election campaign could be captured by the methodological term "propaganda," and the most abstract content concept by the content term "Trump populism." The "propaganda" method alone would not have achieved the goal. First, it had to be filled with content. Important content here is the strategist's knowledge of the "Populism," the "MAGA movement," and "the pulling power of Trump himself as the driving force behind the movement," as well as the already "divided American society" and so on. The filling (merging) resulted in "methodological and content-related elements of knowledge" (in German: *methodisch-inhaltliche Elemente*). The method of "propaganda" was therefore his "overarching method", and his content "populism" was his "overarching content."

At its core, strategists are not concerned with language, but with the presumed "effectiveness" of "methods" and "content" in the real world, initially considered in isolation as methodological and content-related elements, and then through "merger" as "methodological-content-related elements," whereby synergistic effects come into play. Trump mastered the complex method of "propaganda." He spent his entire life honing it. His personality (including his narcissism) was also perfectly suited to his brand of propaganda. So, Trump didn't have to think long to find a suitable method for his strategic plan. It wasn't difficult for him to find suitable material in terms of content either. Of course, it had to be populist in nature, essentially right-wing populist, since left-wing populism was out of the question for him, but suitable left-wing populist elements had to be integrated in order to give his content "populism" even more power. Trump studied the "populism of Rush Limbaugh" and was later able to incorporate this knowledge into his "populism" content as a strategist to further increase the appeal of his "Trump populism."

The fusion of "overarching method" and "overarching content" into the "overarching methodological-content element" results in the "strategic core." These four concepts are the highest and most abstract concepts of a strategy. The strategic core contained the most important methodical-content related elements of the strategy Trump used to execute his "overarching methodological-content related element" (propaganda campaign for the 2024 election to enforce Trump populism). In 2012, Trump already wanted to run against Obama but then didn't dare. The top methodological-content-related element, "propaganda campaign for the 2012 election," probably wouldn't have been enough against Obama. Society was not yet ready for this kind of politics. In 2015, the time had come. The work of the Tea Party wing of the GOP during this period was very useful.

Other goals, such as the performance of MAGA candidates in the congressional elections, were more of a strategic periphery for Trump: important, but not decisive for the success of his strategy. A strategic core can consist of only nine methodological-content-related elements, for example, and still accounts for 90% of strategic success, while a strategic periphery of 25 elements contributes only 10%. The strategist must therefore learn to deal with the asymmetrical leverage effect of methodological-content-related elements. Paradoxically, the strategic periphery can take more time than the core, even though it is less effective in

terms of success. Nevertheless, it must not be overlooked: it stabilizes, complements, relieves pressure, and can suddenly become decisive in certain situations. Despite the positioning of the congressional elections, which took place at the same time as the presidential election, in the strategic periphery, Trump was lucky and MAGA was able to achieve a majority in both houses. Trump was primarily concerned with his own election victory and devoted himself primarily to this endeavor. This focus also determined his priorities in media appearances. Everything in his strategy revolved around this central strategic goal, with complementary authoritarian undertones: MAGA sensed that Trump was also striving for dictatorship, and this already diminished the importance of Congress's role in American politics, at least for Trump and MAGA.

The strategic core unfolds its effect with "methodological-content related elements" and the sub-elements derived from them. Depending on the strategy, there may also be additional sub-elements to the existing ones, if the strategists and tacticians involved so desire. The tactical levels construct their own methodological-content related elements and implement them, ideally in such a way that they not only have a short-term effect but also best serve the strategic project as a whole. The tactics are primarily implemented through their own methodological-content-related elements and through the various sub-tactics associated with these elements. In doing so, they take into account the specifications of the strategist and any higher-level tactical authorities that may exist, thereby contributing to the strategist's strategic success. The strategic-tactical chain is not necessarily based on a common organizational foundation. For example, Fox boss Rupert Murdoch, one of the top tacticians in the Trump election campaign, was organizationally independent of the Trump campaign, but there was a close ideological connection between Trump and Murdoch, and their interests complemented each other to their mutual advantage. Murdoch was primarily concerned with his business interests, while Trump was focused on his political ambitions.

Trump's strategic core unfolded its effect through its "methodological-content related elements." Trump employed four such elements in his strategic core. These were his priorities because he considered them critical to success. These four methodological-substantive elements were his top-level elements, which still needed to be specified by sub-elements. The first top-level element, "strategic resources," dealt with the red states and regions, the MAGA movement, and the strength of the MAGA echo chamber, and the financial, legal, political, and ideological support for Trump in the election campaign from the relevant supporting forces. This involved the efficient use of his strategic resources and structures, in particular the use of his propaganda machine and the control of the MAGA movement.

Secondly, Trump's strategic core (on a more concrete level) was about enforcing his central themes of "economy" and "culture," with which he wanted to achieve thematic leadership in the election campaign, which he succeeded in doing. These were the two armies whose "weapons" Trump used to deploy enormous firepower (primarily through Trump and Fox) at decisive points in the battle. So, it all came down to the effectiveness of the weapons used in battle. The two focal points, "economy" and "culture," proved to be very effective, strategically significant possibilities. The determination, ruthlessness, and brutality with which Trump and his people deployed these two armies and its weapons were also important. As a result, the Democratic counter-narratives never really took hold, even though Trump had several court

cases hanging over his head. The Democrats were faced with an uphill battle, and they were and remained the underdogs in this election campaign.

The third methodological-content element (on the operative level) of the strategic core of Trump's strategy was his decision to direct the firepower of the two armies toward specific targets. To win the election, it was enough to prevail in the swing states, but in order to achieve this goal with certainty, he wanted to decisively prevail among three target groups in as many states and regions as possible, because it was not possible to address these target groups only in the swing states in order to achieve overall victory. So, he tried to win over as many white Americans as possible, and many of them were enthusiastic about his plans in this regard. Trump was also very successful in targeting men, and he even managed to win over many African Americans and Latinos to MAGA. The only age group that voted for him by a majority was Generation X, supported by "young" boomers. The support of this age group was enough to win the election, as the other age groups were unable to compensate for this.

Finally, Trump was also fully aware that presidential elections would be decided by the swing states. Hillary Clinton won more votes than Trump in 2016, but Trump still became president. The efforts of Trump and MAGA to draw Robert F. Kennedy jr. into their camp were strategically significant, especially given the often-close results in individual swing states. When Kamala Harris replaced Biden, many of the Biden haters among RFK's supporters returned to the Democratic Party. If JFK had stayed in the race as an independent candidate until Election Day, the Republicans might have lost crucial votes in the swing states. The Democrats could not prevent Arab and Muslim voters helping to deliver Michigan to Trump. Many young people were very disappointed that Biden did not try harder to help the Palestinians in Gaza. We don't know if all of that was decisive for Trump's victory in the three swing states. These four methodological-content related elements formed the core of his strategy.

### **The importance of the "MAGA-soldiers" in Trump's third war**

MAGA supporters, mainly in the red states (but also in the blue states) were Trump's most valuable resource in this propaganda war. They were voters and propagandists at the same time. Of course, Trump also needed professional supporters (propagandists and other important helpers). The key areas in the war were the three swing states. Whoever was more successful in the three battles for the swing states won the election. The fight was also fought in the other states, not just in the key areas critical to success. As important strategic resources the efficient deployment of the Trump-soldiers was a critical task in Trump's strategic core.

The "election war" was a different game with different rules than a military war, but certain military strategy terms were best suited to describe the methodological and content-related elements of Trump's strategy. There were no man-to-man battles. At the end of the final day (election day) of the election-battle, the war had already been decided before all votes had been cast and counted. The votes cast by eligible voters in the individual states turned their personal decisions into political reality. A state with a red majority (Florida, Texas, etc.) could not rush to the aid of a weaker red state and throw surplus voters from those states into the battle. The battles for the swing states took place before the election. During this time, the two major parties had to try to win as many supporters as possible. The power lay in the hands of the individual voters: they could vote red or blue. During the election campaign, the old party

soldiers tried to draw undecided voters into the Trump camp and turn them into "party soldiers" and "party fighters" who would go into battle against opposing voters on election day to win the election war. By election day at the latest, voters had to make a decision. Do I go to the polls or not? Do I vote red or blue, or for another party? The election war for the 2024 election was already Trump's third war. In the second war, he waged a hybrid war. Government policy and campaigning for the 2020 election blurred into a single strategic undertaking for Trump. Trump was a poor politician, and he couldn't cover that up with his propaganda, so he lost the 2020 election. Of course, different rules apply to political work than to campaign games.

From the perspective of those responsible for the strategic and tactical aspects of the election campaign, voters were people who should be influenced in two ways by the measures of the respective campaign strategy. First, for example, previous red voters should vote for Trump again on election day, and impressionable blue voters should opt for MAGA this time around. Second, voters were to be turned into fanatical MAGA supporters and determined propaganda fighters. Such battles took place in all states, but only the battles in the swing states were decisive for the election. The battles between voters (who had already decided on a party and openly and clearly declared their decision) were not bloody, but they were often fought with great intensity, even within many families. In contrast to a military war, this (political) election war primarily depended on the quantity of warriors who would then cast their votes in the election. The strategists also tried to bring the factor of "quality" into play in order to turn "soldiers" into "good soldiers" who would be able to convince other voters to also become "soldiers" for this good cause and then vote for the "good cause" in the election. Ordinary Democratic voters had no opportunity to express their frustration with MAGA views in discussions with MAGA celebrities, so the only recourse was to discuss the issues with MAGA supporters in their personal circles. In this case MAGA supporters should defend Trump and MAGA with counterarguments.

Trump, the strategist, tried to decide the election in his favor through his strategy and various campaign activities by him and MAGA. He hoped to win over certain voter groups in the swing states who might not yet be among his MAGA supporters. He hoped that his style of campaigning would make him more attractive to these groups than the Democrats with Biden or Harris. He was primarily concerned with three large groups: white people, men, and a certain age cohort. Trump did not focus his propaganda campaign specifically on the swing states, because that would have been very difficult and risky. In the swing states, he wanted to achieve additional electoral success through special targeted activities. Trump wanted to use his propaganda in all states; after all, he wanted to win as many votes as possible for MAGA, because MAGA was also supposed to prevail decisively in Congress. There were also many red areas in blue states. The concentrated power of the MAGA movement and its echo chamber unleashed in all states was able to exert enormous propaganda pressure on the swing states. This also made it easier to keep former swing states in the red camp.

Trump's election battles were based on his concepts of economic and cultural propaganda campaigning. This was not about a tough but reasonable debate on the state of the economy and culture. Above all, Trump wanted to use his superior propaganda to impose his ideologically charged narratives, based on the concepts of economy and culture, as the leading narratives in the election campaign.

## The Meta-Methodical Principles

The agonistic approach (in the narrow sense) in the philosophy of strategy is based on the two major philosophical areas of "strategic project" and "meta-methodical principles." The meta-methodical principles have a decisive influence on the strategist's thinking when working on his strategic project. Our attention now turns to the nine meta-methodical principles of strategies, and also to Trump the meta-methodologist.

Each type of knowledge has its own "color," and so does strategy. Above all, the meta-methodical principles show us what constitutes the special color of strategy. Strategic projects are examined purely methodically, but from a higher methodological level (from the metamethod). The strategist therefore works with two types of methods: "simple methods," which are then incorporated into the methodological-content related elements, and meta-methods (meta-methodical principles). Through the overarching perspective of the metamethod and the concept of "strategic projects," strategy is fundamentally constituted as a type of knowledge. The meta-method gives strategic projects momentum, enables strategic innovation, and efficiently sets strategic access to reality in motion. Why was a strategist like Donald Trump able to operate so effectively? He drew on the depth of meta-methodical possibilities without many observers realizing it. This is one of the important reasons why he was able to win the 2024 election.

The meta-method acts as a catalyst that generates abstract "agonistic (strategic, tactical) figures." An "agonistic figure" stands for a specific process of action. The mechanism of action of the agonistic figure "supermarket" becomes clear when we compare this figure with the old social figure "service store." We can see the power of the agonistic figure "supermarket" in the example of the definition of this figure by the innovative strategist Sam Walton. For Sam Walton, the figure "supermarket" was initially only a social figure or an emerging strategic figure, which he used as a source to develop his own agonistic figure. When science examines structural change (from full-service stores to self-service stores or supermarkets), the figure "supermarket" additionally becomes a scientific figure in a scientific context. The nine principles of the metamethod are very abstract agonistic figures that are important to the strategist through their sub-figures (sub-principles). These sub-principles are what we mean when we say that Trump drew on the depths of meta-methodical possibilities.

"Agonistic (knowledge) figures" are concepts of the knowledge-type strategy. Such figures relate to: "simple methods" (which merge with content to form content-methodological elements), as well as content (for example, Trump's populist content), methodological-content related elements, strategic cores, strategic peripheral areas, the meta-methodical principles, and their sub-principles. The concept of "agonistic figure" clarifies the connection between "strategic project" and "metamethod". Agonistic figures derive their effectiveness primarily from existing sources. For example, the agonistic figure "new weapon of war" derives its effectiveness from the superiority of a new (but already existing and operational) weapon used for the first time over the weapons of the enemy. In the Battle of Königgrätz, for example, Prussian rifles were superior to Austrian muzzle-loading rifles. The power of the echo chamber available to Donald Trump was also a reality. The echo chamber was already an existing "new weapon of war" in Trump's first propaganda war in 2016, which was then successfully deployed. From a meta-methodological perspective, strategists must look to see if there are

already new weapons that can be used, and they must also be prepared for the enemy to use weapons with which they are unfamiliar. For example, Alexander and his Macedonians were confronted in India with an army that could use war elephants. Secondly, agonistic figures emerge and gain effectiveness through knowledge operations, innovations, and creative processes. Trump, for example, knew how to build a populist movement and use it politically to win elections. In doing so, he relied on his interpretation of certain meta-methodical principles and their sub-principles.

The structure of strategy-work is captured in more detail by the first three principles (the structural principles). These concern the important roles of the strategist, the characteristics of strategy, and the depth of strategist and strategy. The next four methods deal with the essential components of strategy work. In other words, they deal with the craft of strategy work. Every strategist deals with these methods, at least unconsciously. Trump showed how dangerous strategists who used these methods could be. The last two methods go beyond craftsmanship.

Unfortunately, there is currently no broad general strategy training available. I do not wish to go into the reasons for this here. Military strategy training is far from sufficient to cover all strategic fields, areas, and topics. However, a good "general strategist" (through broad and deep experience, important influences, self-education, talent, etc.) is familiar (at least unconsciously) with the logic of the two (remaining) meta-methods and with the most important sub-methods of these two complementary meta-methodical approaches: the "principle of reduction" and the "knowledge-type principle". It is not possible to present the nine meta-methodical principles in detail here. Those interested can learn more about them in the separate theoretical chapter (Chapter C) showing more details about the agonistic approach in strategic thinking.

### **The Principle of Responsibility.**

The principle of responsibility establishes the connection between the strategic project and the strategist. Without strategists, there is no strategic project. As soon as someone takes responsibility, such a project comes into being. Taking responsibility means above all gaining control over a strategic unit. Control also includes the power to plan the strategic development of this unit. The strategist's overall responsibility encompasses the structure of the strategic unit, the leadership of the strategic unit, the behavior of the strategist (or strategists) in fulfilling the strategic tasks, the creation of the strategy, and the execution of the strategy.

By assuming responsibility, the strategist is also responsible for those structural elements of the strategic unit that do not correspond to his ideas, but which already existed when he assumed responsibility and which he was unable to eliminate. In addition, the individuals and groups affected by the strategy want to gain influence over it. This is part of the strategist's framework conditions. The framework conditions reveal the limits of the strategist's power. If the strategist cannot accept his framework conditions, then he must cease his activities or not even begin his work in the first place. There is no strategic authority above or alongside the strategist: the strategy is the highest authority. The strategy is therefore primary. The strategist has no other external basis. The strategy is his basis. The strategist is the strategy.

There is no goal, no purpose, no mission statement above the strategy. There is therefore nothing above strategy that guides and influences it.

A strategic entity (e.g., a political party) wants the best strategist it can find and install. Of course, it is risky for a strategic entity to depend on the skills, will, and knowledge of one person and to vest that person with a great deal of power. If the strategist takes his responsibility seriously, he needs no excuses. On closer inspection, every strategic failure can be traced back to mistakes made by the strategist, even if coincidences and stupid mistakes by individual tacticians led to the failure of the strategy. Such a strategy was simply not robust enough. It may also be that the strategist misjudged the initial situation. What counts is only strategic success. This fundamental responsibility does not mean that the strategist is actually held accountable. In order to lead a strategic unit, strategists need specific expertise to achieve the unit's objectives, as well as knowledge about the effective leadership of people, groups, and organizations. Trump was ideally suited as a strategist for his style of campaigning in his second campaign. In his first term as US president, however, his lack of expertise and leadership knowledge was very evident: objectively speaking, Trump was vastly out of his depth in his role as the strategist responsible for US policy. His supporters, however, saw things differently.

### **The Principle of the Underlying-Traits of Strategy**

According to this principle, the knowledge-type “strategy” is often ambiguous in all strategically or tactically relevant characteristics, and strategists can therefore be very flexible in selecting a suitable positioning within the spectrum of possible strategical thinking and acting. They have various polar opposites at their disposal: ethical and unethical, rational and irrational, judgmental and non-judgmental, objective and subjective, interest-related or interest-neutral, ideological or pragmatic, backward-looking or progressive, compassionate or emotionless, fair or unfair, cruel or humane, truth-oriented or highly tolerant of untruths, creative or simple, strong or unstable, greedy (for money, power, etc.) or moderate, lawful or unlawful, and so on. The knowledge-type “strategy” therefore also has its gray and dark sides. If you take a closer look at this structure of characteristics, you will see that it does not fit in with the other knowledge- types. In science, you don't get very far with spreading lies and capitalizing on deception.

If one views Trump as merely a chronic liar due to his numerous falsehoods, one greatly underestimates the agonistic effect of his lies. His lies were important to his central narratives: Trump the successful businessman and superior dealmaker. Trump the victim of the Democrats, who stole his victory in the 2020 presidential election through electoral fraud. Trump the campaigner, who was to be decisively hampered in his successful election campaign by court proceedings. Lies could be used in the election campaign to reinforce central messages. The echo chamber played along, and the lies were often much more effective than the truth. The master class in agonistic lying was achieved when Orwellian levels were reached and when it was successfully made clear to the many core MAGA supporters that they should not always trust the reality they believed they perceived, because Trump was, after all, the ultimate authority on matters of truth.

## The Principle of Strategic Depth

The principle of "strategic depth" explores the depth of content, especially "personal depth" and "historical depth" of content that is significant to the strategist. "Personal Depth" explores the depth of the strategist or the depth of other people who are of strategic importance, such as strategic opponents. Trump was a "depth-strategist" in two respects. First, he was able to apply personal depth-structures in his strategic work in terms of content or methodology. For example, Trump knew that he was a decidedly "irrational strategist." He was able to turn this apparent disadvantage into a strategic advantage through content-related, methodological, and meta-methodological activities. Second, Trump certainly did not study American history and culture diligently, but he had a keen sense of social trends and the significance of American deep culture for these trends, and he also looked to role models such as Rush Limbaugh for guidance. Limbaugh had already made use of the various sources of deep culture, which Trump was able to exploit even more effectively and bring to bear in his election campaigns.

## The Directional Principle

By setting a direction in accordance with the principle of direction, the strategist makes a long-term commitment and creates appropriate structures. He takes a risk. He sets the ship on course. Many methods and content are available to the strategist, but only relatively few methodological-content elements make it into the strategy. The "action dilemma" in strategy work is that the consequences of agonistic (strategic, tactical) action are uncertain and must therefore be estimated. Every strategy is „pointed.“ Thus, it sets the direction. The logic of direction requires the strategist to choose a (strong, medium, or broad) "escalation." Trump's strategy was highly focused in terms of method and content. He relied on his few elements in his strategic core, which were to be used in a propaganda campaign. Choosing a direction is always a serious matter. You can't change a strategy on a whim. It is expensive, difficult, and laborious to build successful strategic structures, and any major change is often even more difficult to manage. Every new strategy is risky. That is why you only do it if there are good reasons for doing so. Trump's strategy was flexible enough that, despite his unpredictability, he was able to see the election campaign through without changing direction. "Escalation" should not be confused with "sharpness." The sharpness of a strategy is not so easy to recognize, but there are sharp generalists and blunt specialists. So, it is not true that a broad strategy is fundamentally less sharp and therefore potentially less successful. Generalists, for example, are better at exploiting synergies. The sharpness of Trump's strategy had a lot to do with his willingness to cross boundaries (for example, through his many lies).

"Deepening" is not a question of escalation. Generalists and specialists must deepen their knowledge, i.e., ensure a solid foundation for their strategy and, first, ensure high quality in methods and content and, second, ensure that the specific character of the strategist and the strategy is clearly recognizable. Trump has succeeded admirably in deepening his knowledge. "Trump" and "MAGA" have been developed into important brands. Deepening also protects against imitators. Imitation is often expensive, laborious, and risky, and then, as an imitator, you may find out that good imitation is more difficult than you initially thought. It is better to put all your energy into your own methods and content. Biden and Harris had no

intention of imitating Trump, but in future election campaigns, the Democrats may also adapt and use some of Trump's methods or of his agonistic figures for their own purposes.

### **The Tactical Principle**

A strategy is not visible at first. Then something visible must follow, otherwise the strategy will not be effective. The strategy becomes visible through the individual steps taken to implement it. Implementation is primarily a matter of tactics, in accordance with the tactical principle. The various methodological-content elements for implementation are contained in the strategic core and the strategic periphery. The overarching tactics are formulated from these elements. Depending on the strategy, the overarching tacticians have tactical leeway. The influence of the strategy on the overarching tactics must be significant in any case, otherwise the strategy cannot be truly effective. In complex strategic projects, the influence of strategy on sub-tactics can only be effectively exerted through proper leadership (see the principle of responsibility), i.e., not by intervening in tactical details. The strategist can take on some high-level tactics in addition to strategy development and strategy control. In the case of Trump's strategy, Trump himself was the most important top tactician, making many important decisions for various tactical implementations and even participating in many practical implementations himself.

The strategy-tactics logic is of central importance for strategic work. All other operational logics only unfold their methodological effect along this central logic: organization, process, structure, function, planning, competence, concrete work, and so on. These logics must not hinder the tactical implementation of the strategy. The motivation of employees should be closely aligned with tactical tasks, if possible. Many terms beloved by managers, such as system, phase, level, decision, goal, and so on, must not be interpreted in such a way that they hinder the implementation of strategy-tactics logic. If an organization thinks primarily in terms of process logic, then the focus is on completing the work at hand. Strategy and tactics may be neglected in the process.

Another question is to what extent Trump's strategy was based on tactical principles and how successful it was. I believe that Trump's aggressive approach as a master tactician (for example, through his rallies) was a decisive factor in the success of his propaganda strategy. With minimal effort, Trump succeeded in creating an army of committed tacticians at all levels, from Fox News to MAGA people with little influence. The significance of these meta-methodical achievements for the success of his propaganda campaign should not be underestimated.

### **The Value Principle**

According to the "value principle," a "value strategist" believes in approaching the "true essence" of strategy primarily through a "strategic value." Strategic values are rules, criteria, and regulations in the service of the "value strategist" for the "true" strategic approach to strategy development or strategy implementation. Ordinary values, such as the value of

"beauty," can take on agonistic significance, in which case the figures of knowledge associated with this value become agonistic figures. The social value of "beauty" becomes a strategic value when it is incorporated into the strategic core or strategic periphery of a strategy. The starting point for finding "agonistic values" is, for example, observations that impressed us and that we then analyze. For example, we observe the behavior of successful people and draw conclusions about their characteristics. In doing so, we consider which of their characteristics or sets of characteristics contribute to their success. For example, is it their "speed," i.e., their ability to think and act quickly, that is decisive? People have a positive attitude toward values, and values are fundamentally important to them and therefore "valuable"; this also applies to agonistic values. Goods are also "valuable" to people. Values become intangible goods for individuals when they recognize their significance and use them in social or strategic contexts. A strategist can gain an advantage for his strategic unit by using the strategic value of "speed." Agonistic (strategic, tactical) values are agonistic figures.

It depends on the strategist which agonistic values he finds and prefers. This also has to do with the specific situation in which he finds himself. A military strategist, for example, knows the agonistic value "offensive." Behind the value "offensive" are many agonistic sub-figures that can be used by the military strategist: The attacker determines when and where the attack will take place. The defender does not know this. It is also possible to suddenly switch from defense to counterattack and thus surprise the enemy. A flexible strategist can switch between agonistic values when he deems it necessary. Then, for example, he does not rely on speed, but on slowness, on delay. There are many agonistic values, not just the classic ones such as speed, flexibility, and so on. A strategist also determines the degree to which an agonistic value should be expressed. In other words, they determine the degree of offensiveness, the degree of flexibility, etc.

The agonistic value of flexibility in strategy work has nothing to do with the personal flexibility of the strategist. However, strategists with a high degree of personal flexibility are more willing to change their strategy quickly if they recognize the need to do so. However, any change in strategy is a serious and risky undertaking that should be avoided if possible. A strategist can try to avoid this by working with a higher degree of flexibility. Such a strategic unit can quickly make strategic adjustments without changing its strategy. The structures, processes, and tactics are then already prepared for such adjustments when, for example, a company wants to enter completely new markets. In this case, the company has already developed competencies that enable such an entry in accordance with its degree of flexibility. Due to his high degree of flexibility, Donald Trump was able to quickly integrate different personalities such as Robert Kennedy and Elon Musk into his election campaign without having to change his strategy.

Strategists who attach great importance to the agonistic value of "strategic optimum" are optimizers. Optimizers are not maximizers. Optimizers understand a lot about long-term thinking. They take timely steps to ensure that major problems do not arise in the first place. This may make it possible to avoid dangerous battles. Optimizers do not make so many enemies through their activities that they are ultimately hunted down by them. Optimizers need a lot of patience and strong nerves. Optimizers juggle significantly more important strategic areas than maximizers, partly because they are more intelligent. Optimizers want to reach the summit of the mountain. If they only reach a secondary peak, they descend and try a new route

to the highest peak. After the chaotic Trump years, the optimizers around Biden were able to make good policy. However, the ideological divide in American society allowed a propagandist of Trump's ilk to run a maximum campaign to maximize votes for the November 2024 election. Maximum campaigning also meant that Trump stopped at nothing. He made promises he could not possibly keep. That is maximization taken to the extreme: after me (i.e., after my election victory), the deluge.

### **The Vision Principle**

The vision principle considers how strategy should remain grounded on the one hand, while still being as ambitious as possible on the other. Strategists understand vision to mean a concise, directional vision of the future for the strategic unit. The vision should be subordinate to the strategy and not vice versa, with the strategy pursuing potentially unattainable goals and utopian ideas. Vision work should therefore be strategy, serious and realistic strategic work. Strategy must not be a North Star that only vaguely indicates direction and can never be reached. Nor is vision a balloon that rises into the sky and pulls the entire strategy up to lofty heights. Setting big goals does not automatically make you a great leader. The vision should therefore be part of the strategy. Methodological terms are joined by visionary terms, for example, visionary ideas such as global market leader, etc. for corporate strategists.

The enormously ambitious political newcomer Trump, with his matching visionary knowledge of content and methodology, sensed the opportunity that he could even become US president. After all, even before Trump, Americans had already made people from show business high-ranking politicians at least twice: Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger. George W. Bush could rely on the support of evangelicals. This did not escape Trump's attention. Trump was aware of his own unique propaganda skills and sensed around 2015 that his time had come. So, he had a very ambitious but not unrealistic vision. His vision simply envisaged Trump as president. He wanted to achieve this by playing on the various visionary ideas of his voters. "Make America great again" is vague enough to be used by him in this sense.

Visionary goals are often not easy to achieve. They encounter enormous resistance. They must first be overcome, so to speak. All tacticians should work hard for the strategy. Everyone should pull together. Only the rough edges of the strategy are interesting and are communicated together with the vision. When communicating the strategy (including the vision), many things that are part of the mission statement have no place because they are not important enough. The strategy must be communicated in a forward-looking, optimistic, emotional, combative, judgmental, ideological, and interest-based manner. Visions help strategists in their strategic work; that is their core task.

When working on a vision, there is a danger that the strategist will fall into a dangerous trap. My belief (i.e., my vision) can only move mountains if I also have the right tools to remove the mountain. If I don't have the right tools at my disposal, then I am embarking on an adventure that will probably end up badly for me. I have fallen into the vision trap. I was unable to achieve my visionary goals and failed because I had already fallen into the optimism trap: I

set myself overly optimistic goals (compared to my methodological and content-related strategic options) or I overestimated my abilities as a strategist. Or I failed with my vision because I had already fallen into a motivation trap: I was very ambitious and highly motivated, but my motivation was not sufficiently grounded in the actual chances of success measured against the real conditions. You cannot force success with high motivation alone.

### **The Principle of Reduction**

The principle of origin, also known as the principle of reduction, describes the strategic practice of tracing phenomena back to fundamental principles or origins (reducing them). It serves to reduce strategic complexity and identify core patterns. Analogies to other fields of knowledge such as physics, biology, technology, or philosophy play a central role in this. Strategists who adhere to physicalism use physical terms such as time, speed, mass, or the concentration of forces to formulate strategic principles. Examples from military strategy illustrate the application of these concepts, such as the Blitzkrieg concept, in which speed is crucial. Strategists who adopt biological principles, for example, view evolution as a kind of strategically acting agent. In biology, tactics can be found in the behavior of packs, while evolution acts as the actual strategist, producing new species through adaptation and selection. A possible application of this way of thinking in corporate strategy shows that actors can acquire new core competencies that clearly set them apart from the competition. This is how a company can be transformed into a "new species" through disruptive innovation. Philosophical approaches reduce strategy to specific philosophical concepts such as structure, game, or system. Proponents of large and small structures debate, for example, whether large conglomerates can be managed economically efficiently or whether they should be broken up. The concept of "game" is useful for providing strategists with important analogies: a chess player thinks in terms of predetermined moves, while a poker player can defeat a player with better cards by skillfully bluffing. The reduction of strategy to technology gained importance through companies such as IBM, Microsoft, Google, Apple, and Nvidia. Technology is seen as a decisive strategic success factor, but the (exaggerated) reduction to technology is dangerous. The example of Nokia shows that technological superiority alone is not enough if it is viewed too narrowly.

Donald Trump transformed the term "deal" and the corresponding economic concept into an agonistic figure important to Trump and MAGA through his brand of reductionism or economism: for him, a "deal" was not a fair compromise, but a zero-sum game. The aim was to negotiate better than the opponent and secure an advantage for himself and his strategic unit. "Nobody makes better deals than me" was his credo. For him, negotiations were a form of three-dimensional chess that only he understood. Only a genius like him could achieve the optimal deal. Trump wanted to use his superior negotiating skills to gain tangible advantages in politics, economics, and diplomacy. But that was not the end of the story. On a second level, "deal competence" became the central narrative about Trump himself: Trump, the author of "The Art of the Deal"; Trump, the successful billionaire; Trump, the "stable genius" in many areas, including, of course, politics. This narrative charge made him not only a skilled negotiator, but also an invincible politician, a cult figure, and a symbol of strength, assertiveness, and strategic genius. The agonistic figure of the "deal" thus had a double effect:

instrumental in political action (according to Trump propaganda) and identity-forming in political myth. Originally (i.e., before Trump), the concept of a "deal" usually referred to an exchange relationship in which, ideally, both sides benefited. Trade brought people and nations into peaceful contact with each other through markets, treaties, and long-term relationships.

### **The Knowledge-Type Principle**

The other six types of knowledge (in addition to strategy) are also of great importance to strategists. Strategists should be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the various knowledge types and use them in their respective situations. For example, good strategists quickly learn to deal with uncertain knowledge, because they often cannot wait until they can gain complete certainty on an issue through thorough preparatory work, including scientific research. As a strategist, one should at least ensure sufficient certainty. Vladimir Putin did not follow this principle sufficiently in relation to the war of aggression against Ukraine. He was too much of an ideological strategist and far too little of a skeptical scientific strategist. Strategists do not work against the other types of knowledge but try to use them for their own purposes. Trump recognized this insofar as he succeeded in effortlessly filling the role of MAGA ideologist. "The principle of knowledge type" also concerns the various "groups of access types to strategy". Some strategists, for example, focus primarily on this gateway (among the possible gateways to strategy) that offers them a single knowledge-type-oriented approach to strategy. This then brings a certain type of knowledge into play. So, Trump, for example, was successful with his ideological approach to strategy, but for Putin, this approach had fatal consequences.

There are several other access doors to strategy. In this case strategists do not focus on a specific type of knowledge, but on certain "role models" for approach to strategy: therapist, innovator, manager, general, motivator, executor, communicator, teacher, and so on. From a knowledge type-based perspective, these are mixed approaches, whereby different types of knowledge are used, depending on the "role model" and the strategist's capabilities and preferences. Jack Welch, one of the most famous managers of the 1980s, was primarily technologically and scientifically oriented in terms of his education and career. He was dissatisfied with the management science of his time and so developed his own ideas on how to lead his conglomerate. General Electric (GE) finally lost its once-dominant position among US companies, because Welch and his successor were unable to make GE's structures future-proof. In the role of a good "structural historian" (as a strategist), he would have recognized the relative importance of seemingly everlasting dominant structures in good time and then tried to find solutions to the problem.

Strategists should also be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of "general methods." "General methods" (also as scientific methods) are widely used methods in strategy work that are employed by many strategists. For example, before Jack Welch's time, the complicated scientific management approach of the time had certain typical weaknesses that could be exploited by aggressive companies (at that time, Japanese companies).

Strategists should also recognize that science has certain structural limitations in a strategic environment, for example economic policymakers who attempt to use various general scientific economic concepts in economic policy are not scientific, but primarily

strategic actors (from the perspective of knowledge types): Economic policy is primarily strategy not science.

## **Chapter B:**

### **Trump's Fourth War**

#### **Trump and the structural features of his Strategy for the Fourth War.**

Trump was the clear victor in his third war. Following his election victory in November 2024, his fourth war began: Trump as president in his second term. Since the third war transitioned seamlessly into the fourth, I dedicate a separate chapter to attempting to outline his strategy (in a broad sense) for his second presidency and the leadership of the MAGA movement during this term (and possibly beyond). To do this, a great deal of material had to be reviewed and examined for strategic relevance. In this way, I could narrow down the Trump strategy. By

“narrowing down,” I meant introducing certain concepts and then assessing their relevance to his strategy. Since Trump acted flexibly in his role as a strategist and often changed his narratives over time, we had to consider whether his respective activities signified a shift in strategy, or whether his strategic framework was highly flexible and allowed for such changes. The various concepts he employed, more or less consciously, allowed him great strategic flexibility without a shift in strategy.

One concept that came to mind was the dystopia concept: Trump was a multi-dystopian. I quickly compiled a list of Trump dystopias and came up with over 20 dystopias.

Another concept immediately suggested itself: Trump was not a classic strategist, but the ultimate “irrationalist”. This was also a very effective defensive strategy, because it made him difficult to assess. For example, one did not know how long he would continue to support Ukraine. His base enabled him to take this approach, making him very difficult to counter. Gavin Newsom has been attempting for some time to deconstruct Trump’s political style and his irrationality using the weapon of humor. I tried to grasp Trump’s strategy for his fourth war and to outline its strategic core. This was a difficult task. The third war was still straightforward: It was a propaganda war, and the armies of culture and the economy were deployed. In the fourth war, there were no weapons. Instead, I proposed the term “pillar.”

By introducing the term “dictatorship pillar,” the “pillar concept” should become clearer: The dictatorship pillar was not only about propaganda, but also about political activities, about political and cultural advancement in a specific direction, about the establishment of structures (which could no longer be easily changed), about military operations and military deployment, the establishment of geopolitical spheres of influence, a tariff war as a political lever, the lowering of moral standards in politics and society, the intimidation of the press, enormous influence on world affairs (Trump as king of the world), the promotion of loyal and unscrupulous aides at all levels, and the disregard of key campaign promises. To win elections under these circumstances, various manipulations would be carried out. Trump wanted as much dictatorship as possible. But he was not establishing it through a grand coup, but rather through many small maneuvers and acts of revenge against political opponents. His repertoire also included the dismantling of government oversight mechanisms, punitive actions against cities or states, and threats against allies. He did this not in the name of an ideology, but in his own name. The pillar of dictatorship was the attempt to gradually transform U.S. institutions into a personal tool of power. Each step might seem small on its own, but taken together, they created an architecture of oppression that was difficult to dismantle.

Building on this, we were able to discuss further pillars. The pillars were also closely interconnected, for example through the “Trump-irrationalism pillar”. The other pillars were recipients of material, but they also had to provide material to this pillar and feed Trump’s egoism abundantly. Trump was so successful not despite, but because of his irrationality. “Weapons” (as in the Third War) were means in a propaganda battle. “Pillars”, on the other hand, were the supporting structures of an entire sphere of power and strategy. They were not only means, but simultaneously an end, a foundation, and an instrument of power. The dictatorship pillar made it clear: it was about institutional anchoring and normalization of the new political culture, military and geopolitical expansion, psychological manipulation and

building loyalty, and achieving global impact. This was no longer “a series of single blows with a weapon,” but a continuous carrying and driving forward. “Pillars” could be used to capture various processes (propaganda, institutions, politics, culture, military, globalization ...) that were intertwined. The pillars were closely interconnected. We could describe Trump as a system architect who no longer led his empire with improvised weapons alone, but with a pillar system that could remain viable even after his departure (political heirs, loyal apparatus).

In the fourth war, Trump acted as a “multi-dystopian”: consciously or unconsciously, he opened countless doors to political and social dystopias. In doing so, he needed not develop a self-contained ideology. He scattered fragments of various nightmarish worlds that coalesced into a threatening overall situation. Trump fulfilled not just one dystopia, but many simultaneously, such as the Orwellian dystopia (manipulation of truth, erosion of language, total control over the information sphere), the *Handmaid’s Tale* dystopia (reactionary social policy, subordination of women’s rights to religious-nationalist dogmas), the Joker dystopia (political and social anarchy, targeted escalation of chaos, violence, and division), the Asset dystopia (a president as a tool of foreign powers; in extreme cases, a “Putin agent” operating in the White House), and many other dystopias (strict totalitarian surveillance, autocratic rule by the oligarchy, internal militarization, eco-dystopias, etc.). Dystopias offered simple images that triggered emotions. Trump used dystopian fragments (e.g., “the Democrats are destroying your country”) to generate both fear and loyalty. Every new crisis, whether created by him or not, allowed him to incorporate dystopian elements into reality (deportations to dangerous countries, criminalization of the opposition). The borrowing of dystopian elements supported the political struggle because the opposing side was portrayed as the embodiment of doom. These elements were used against migrants (apocalypse of foreign infiltration), against Democrats (the demise of freedom through socialism) and against China (the fight against a malevolent superpower). This flexibility made him highly agile in terms of propaganda and prevented him from being pinned down to a single narrative. In the fourth war, the role of the multi-dystopian served to normalize constant political turmoil as a permanent state of affairs. Every dystopian scenario that Trump appropriated for himself justified more presidential power, less oversight, and less democracy. At the same time, for his base, Trump was the only one who could combat “all these dangers” simultaneously. If the Democrats were afraid of the various dystopias, so much the better.

Independent voters were spoiled for choice. Should they give more credence to Trump and MAGA or to the Democrats? If Trump succeeded in further advancing the dictatorship, however, they would no longer be needed as the deciding factor. Internationally, too, Trump acted as a multi-dystopian. For Western partners, he embodied the dystopia of an unpredictable superpower. For autocrats like Putin or Orban, he was the realization of their dream, with the U.S. as the pioneer of a new authoritarian world order. Trump was not a theorist who has devised dystopias as an ideology. He drew on them intuitively because he sensed how powerful such images were. He lived out the dystopias by staging them and embodying them at the same time. In many cases, he likely did not even realize that he was currently playing into multiple dystopias. He followed his intuition, which aimed for maximum attention, maximum fear, and maximum loyalty. As a result, his approach appeared chaotic, but it was strategically very effective. All the dystopias he invoked, or that are evoked by his various statements and activities, had a paralyzing effect on his opponents because they did not know whether they

were fighting a fascist, a gangster, or a clown, and internally he transformed them into projections that mobilized his base. He conjured up nightmares for his supporters and the rest of Americans and presented himself as the only one who could control these nightmares. When he spoke of Hannibal Lecter, he aimed to instill fear in his base of dangerous madmen from abroad.

When reconstructing the Trump pillars, one had to stay closely attuned to Trump as a person and his actions and engaged with his madness. Only then could one do the fine-tuning and make subdivisions to identify instrumental, structural, and other sub-pillars. Following the “dictatorship pillar” and the “dystopia pillar”, I wanted to introduce another Trump pillar: the “Reality TV Pillar.” Somehow, Trump’s tariff wars did not seem real because they were also propaganda and reality TV. Trump staged politics as reality TV with himself as the villain in the lead role, for example, when he publicly attacked Zelensky.

For Trump’s “Historical Pillar,” his “phase concept” was very significant. Trump was a master of this concept. If he emerged as the “historical” victor in a “historical phase”, he might thereby succeed in tightening the screws of dictatorship another turn; moreover, the many historical phases were important for his reality TV show: “Stay tuned.” The brief Trump-Musk phase was very entertaining. It was to be expected that a dispute would break out between the two alpha males after a certain amount of time. Trump emerged victorious, thereby cementing the myth of his invincibility. His base believed that he was only defeated by Biden because the Democrats rigged the 2020 election in their favor. Further phases followed: the tariff war phase, the One Big Beautiful Bill phase, the ICE phase, the Trump-illness-rumors phase, the revenge phase, and so on. The phases could overlap, last a long time, disappear entirely, or resurface and push themselves to the forefront. In the Trump-Musk dispute from that phase, Musk dropped a bombshell: Trump is in the Epstein files. Very important historical phases I called dominant phases. The dominant Trump-Musk-phase was followed by the Epstein-files-phase.

No strategist other than Trump would ever have risked entering top-level politics with his history: for over 10 years, he was bound by a close friendship with Jeffrey Epstein. That had to come to light one day. Some historical phases were forced upon Trump, including the dangerous Epstein phase. After a few months of the Trump administration, another dangerous phase slowly began to take shape: the Trump economic crash phase. Terms from the past have resurfaced, such as a stock-market crash, stagflation, and dollar weakness. Warren Buffett hoarded an enormous sum in cash. He didn’t want to buy stocks, real estate, gold, or bitcoins. He was apparently waiting for the crash. Trump’s economic policies and his chaotic governing style were the main causes behind the emergence of this dangerous historical phase. Trump could not defeat history. He tried again and again, but he could not succeed. He could push through a few name changes, for instance, Denali became Mount McKinley again. He and his supporters understand too little about history; that was why they did not realize that initiatives like MAGA (Make America Great Again) were already sure signs of cultural decline. From a historical perspective, Trump’s great success, “The One Big Beautiful Bill,” was a Pyrrhic victory. He was desperate to push through tax cuts for oligarchs. The oligarchs were thus closer to him than his base, but if he deemed it necessary, he would not hesitate to throw the oligarchs “under the bus.”

Trump, as the ultimate “irrationalist,” differed from classical strategists who acted predictably within long-term patterns. His defining characteristic was the refusal of rational predictability. His irrationality protected him because no one could predict what he would do next. Opponents froze because they did not know whether he would hold the same position tomorrow as he does today. This irrationality was not accidental but functions as a strategic defensive weapon. Anyone who wanted to fight Trump encountered a kind of smokescreen. Classic counterattacks that relied on logic or institutional norms came to nothing because Trump simply did not accept these rules of the game. Opponents found it difficult to “pin him down” because they did not know on which level to attack him: the rational (policy), the moral (norms), the emotional (base), or the personal (scandals). Even serious contradictions did not destroy his credibility but rather amplify the effect: in the opinion of MAGA, only he mastered three-dimensional chess. Thus, he remained unpredictable and offered his opponents his contradictory positions. This “strategic ambiguity” confused his opponents and limited their room for maneuver. His irrationality afforded Trump great strategic flexibility. Trump could change positions quickly without his base perceiving this as a weakness. The change itself was interpreted as proof of his strength: “Only he can do that.” No one knew how long he would continue to provide support to Ukraine. Every possibility remained open, and each could be strategically marketed. Democrats like Gavin Newsom were trying to develop new methods not only to expose this irrationality but also to outmaneuver it politically. Yet every attack risked reinforcing Trump’s smokescreen: rationality quickly seemed wooden in the face of emotional irrationality. Classic defensive strategies (factchecking, logical refutation) lost their effectiveness because they did not come into play on Trump’s turf. Trump thus appeared like a black box: one could project whatever one wanted onto him (savior, destroyer, genius, madman) but never predict what would come out. This irrationality became part of his aura. He became the “ultimate player” who forced everyone else to react to his unpredictable moves.

Trump’s favorite agonistic procedure was the “Flood the Zone” figure. Typical of this irrational approach was flooding the public sphere with an avalanche of contradictory messages, scandals, distractions, half-truths, lies, and so on. In doing so, he also employed other pillars (not just his irrationalism pillar), much to the delight of his core supporters, for they accepted his various dystopias, and they liked his reality-TV approach. This flooding served as a preemptive defense: Even before an attack could truly hit him, he drowned the public in a chaos of issues, so that the actual attack got lost in the shuffle, and anyone who tried to confront him head-on immediately lost track of the bigger picture, because Trump’s counterfire was so massive and inconsistent that no single accusation stuck. Biden was the perfect victim for the corporate media; he didn’t employ “Flood the Zone” and so the press was able to gleefully focus on Biden’s age and mental fitness. The Trump echo chamber wasn’t idle either. This had an impact on key voter groups. Trump was a master of “Flood the Zone”: A single scandal could end a politician’s career. The promising candidate Gary Hart once had to withdraw from the presidential primaries following a scandal. Is a scandal dangerous, and are multiple scandals even more dangerous for a politician’s career? Trump didn’t believe that; he fought doggedly on and eventually became president. From the perspective of the independent press and political opponents, scandals were opportunities to hold politicians accountable or to take them out of the race. In the 2016 campaign, Trump barely managed to survive the Access Hollywood

scandal politically just before Election Day. In the 2024 election campaign, he was confronted with many political scandals (for example, numerous lawsuits). Thanks to Trump's propaganda, these many scandals could slip past his pursuers, much like a school of fish evaded a predator. The larger the school, the lower the probability that any individual fish would become a victim. At the same time, the rapid, synchronized movement of the school ensured that the predator had difficulty singling out a specific prey. To predators, the school often appeared as a single, elusive entity. Trump had successfully employed this swarm tactic particularly in crisis situations: first against the Mueller investigation (the Russia affair, 2017–2019). Instead of reacting defensively to the investigation, Trump flooded Twitter and Fox News with an endless series of distractions: “witch hunt,” “fake news,” attacks on Mueller and the FBI. His aim was to undermine confidence in the process and shift the narrative toward an alleged coup against him. This method was then deployed against Impeachment I (the Ukraine affair in 2019). When it became clear that his pressure on Zelensky was legally explosive, Trump resorted to a barrage of attacks: Hunter Biden, corruption in Kyiv, the “perfect call,” along with attacks on Democrats and the media, and thus the actual core issue (abuse of power) was drowned out in a constant storm of side issues. During the Covid pandemic (2020), Trump flooded the discourse with contradictory statements: “It’s just the flu,” “it goes away on its own,” “China virus.” The result was total confusion, which obscured his responsibility and forced his opponents into constant correction and clarification. Through his “Stop the Steal” campaign following his election defeat, he inundated the country with a flood of lawsuits, press conferences, tweets, and bizarre appearances by his supporters. Every single narrative was absurd or debunked, but the sheer volume created a “perceived reality” for the MAGA base. People didn’t believe a single claim, but rather the “swarm” of his claims, the chaos itself.

Since Trump's second presidency, it was no longer just about mere scandals, but about even more serious boundary violations, for his core pillar was the pillar of dictatorship. Dictatorship could only be introduced in the U.S. in several steps (boundary violations), and this involved not only the quantity of these transgressions but also the escalation of their severity through various grave boundary violations. In contrast, his earlier boundary violations (i.e., the past scandals) were politically less explosive. The many new boundary violations were accepted by society, even as the FBI and the Department of Justice were turned into tools of Trump. The many transgressions were able to prevail as a “swarm.” Trump transformed the White House by tearing down the East Wing. Nevertheless, there was no storm of protest. “Flood the Zone” also served a heuristic purpose for Trump. He threw eight things at the wall and hoped that three of them would stick. He then exploited these three “successes” massively for his propaganda. “Flood the Zone” also served to distract his own base. This was necessary when contradictions arose and campaign promises were broken.

Trump acted irrationally, and both friend and foe had great respect for the deployment of this strategic pillar. From the perspective of his strategy, his irrationality was a rational technique to surprise his opponents. They should never know which arena he would plunge into chaos next. This allowed him to throw the very terrain on which the battle was fought into a state of permanent instability. Everyone who wanted to attack him was fighting on dangerous ground, because everything was slipping and swaying. Trump used irrationality as a strategic overload. His opponents had to react to fifteen absurdities at once, while his base took only one thing to heart: “Trump is fighting for us.” If we truly wanted to understand the

pillars of Trump, we had to engage with Trump's madness, that is, take his irrational, performative, chaotic nature seriously, otherwise we would lose the inner logic of his power. We had to describe Trump the way he himself functioned, namely as a showman, egomaniac, and narcissist, and not as a cold tactician. The dictatorship pillar was the hard power base, involving institutions, force, and intimidation. The irrationalism pillar was a key source of his unpredictability, and a pillar, that simultaneously fed all the other pillars. His irrationalism enabled him to constantly flood the public and his opponents with noise, smoke, and attacks, so that no clear response was possible. This pillar was not weak. It was dangerously strong because it acted as a shield against rational opponents.

The "Reality TV pillar" revealed: Trump did not just engage in politics; he staged it as a show, as an endless series in which he was sometimes the hero, sometimes the villain, and sometimes the victim. He was the producer, lead actor, and villain of his own series. Even trade wars or foreign policy appeared as episodes of a drama. Everything had to deliver ratings. Tariffs became drama, negotiations became a show, public humiliations became episodes that stuck in the memory. His political fate was closely linked to the ratings. Anyone who encountered his world inevitably ended up in his show as a friend, enemy, hero, or victim. No one could escape, because the show went on incessantly.

The historical pillar brought Trump's handling of "time" into sharp focus. He did not construct his project of dictatorship linearly, but in episodes that came across to people like reality TV. Some historical episodes disappeared, some reappeared, some overlapped. For Trump, history was not about chronology but had to be handled by his phase-management. Each important historical phase was treated like a season of his reality TV series, with its own dramaturgy and its own adversaries. This made him hard to pin down, because he did not follow a fixed agenda but constantly improvised new scenes. For his supporters, this multifaceted nature was exciting; for his opponents, it was confusing. So far, he had been unable to make the Epstein narratives disappear. Not only the U.S., but other countries were involved as well, such as the U.K. due to Prince Andrew and the British woman Ghislaine Maxwell. Trump used the various dystopias of his dystopia pillar as projections and instruments of intimidation, paralyzing externally, mobilizing internally as a bogeyman. This pillar was a logical extension of his irrationalism pillar.

**Epstein, Epstein, Epstein: the files, the "birthday book," Trump's attempt to prevent the release of the files, the lockdown of the House of Representatives, the "Epstein Act", the release of the files**

Externally, Trump showed in this time little respect for the major problems the Trump administration faced because of its economic, foreign, and domestic policies. In his hubris, Trump signaled to his supporters: I have the problems under control. They pose no danger. Only I can conduct politics at this high level. Trump started his "tariffs-war". Just a few months into his presidency, a severe economic crisis gained momentum, and Trump was embroiled in numerous legal disputes both as president and as a private citizen; however, the Department of Justice was under his control and provided him with massive support. New problems emerged, though they were not immediately dangerous for Trump and MAGA. So, Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez attacked MAGA at a vulnerable point. They tested what a sharp anti-

oligarchy course might look like. Many young voters, Latinos, and African Americans who had voted for Trump increasingly regretted their decision. Despite all his diversionary tactics, Trump was unable to bring the dominant Epstein phase under control, which was very dangerous for him. The Epstein problem (in the broad sense) escalated.

Attorney General Pam Bondi's statement that the Jeffrey Epstein files (or the "client list") were sitting on her desk right now for review was made on February 21, 2025. This remark triggered a chain of events that shaped the entire year of 2025. The Department of Justice (DOJ) released the first "files" on February 27, 2025. This move was a political failure. In July, the DOJ caused a stir with a controversial memo in which the Department of Justice and the FBI stated that, contrary to earlier expectations, there was no "Client List" in the Epstein files and that the Jeffrey Epstein case (including the suicide theory) had been definitively resolved. During a public cabinet meeting on July 8, 2025, a reporter attempted to directly address Attorney General Pam Bondi about the contradiction with her statements from February (when she claimed the list was on her desk). Before Bondi could respond, Trump sharply interrupted the reporter and snapped at him: "Are you still talking about Jeffrey Epstein?" Trump dismissed the ongoing questions as a waste of time, thereby signaling unequivocally that the matter was "completely closed" for his administration following the DOJ report released the previous day. This session marked the point at which the Trump administration attempted to draw a line under the Epstein issue. However, this led to a massive backlash, not only from political opponents but also from segments of Trump's own base, who had demanded full disclosure. Ultimately, this "closure" did not last long: public pressure became so intense that Congress passed the Epstein Files Transparency Act later that year, which Trump was ultimately forced to sign in November 2025, leading to a massive (though not complete) release of files in two waves in December 2025 and January 2026.

The Epstein phase was the new dominant historical phase which followed the dominant Trump-Musk phase ending in a fierce dispute. On June 5, 2025, Elon Musk made an explosive statement on his platform X: Donald Trump is in the Epstein files. That is the real reason they were not released. This claim marked the absolute low point in the relationship between Musk and Donald Trump in 2025. The post was a direct response to Trump's threats to cut government contracts and subsidies for SpaceX and Tesla after Musk had criticized Trump's budget policy ("One Big, Beautiful Bill"). Musk's claim gave Democrats in Congress a massive boost. Trump emerged victorious from the dominant Trump-Musk phase, and MAGA remained loyal to him, but the Epstein phase became a pivotal phase for Trump during his crucial first year in office.

Trump's Epstein phase remained "in limbo" for months. It was unclear whether we were merely witnessing a storm in a teacup or whether this already signaled the beginning of the end. His base remained steadfast: Over 90% of Republicans remained loyal to him, as if the flood of scandals had long since become routine. However, the multitude of revelations, especially the "birthday book," gave Trump-criticism a new dimension. As a result, Aletheia (the truth) clearly revealed the limits of his power to Trump. Trump decided to take flight. With his trip to England, he sought to outshine the crisis. The spectacle was meant to present him as the "true king of the English-speaking world." But the protests on London's streets brought the repressed truth back to the surface: the Epstein affair traveled with him, inseparable and

impossible to ignore. The attempt to elevate himself with glamour and nobility was doomed to fail.

That was why Trump also reached for the tools from his dystopia pillar. Jimmy Kimmel, one of his sharpest critics, was fired by ABC. An event that could be interpreted in the spirit of a Cicero dystopia, wherein, in the run-up to a dictatorship, inconvenient voices were systematically silenced, just as Rome once silenced this great orator of the Republic. With Colbert and Kimmel, it was not just entertainers, but also corrective forces that defended democracy against its enemies through humor. At the same time, the dictatorship pillar grew, and major networks paid Trump large sums, even though they held the legal advantage. For Trump, it was about the recognition of his superior power and about the money. Murdoch remained the only one ambivalent between cooperation and rivalry. This was where it was decided whether Trump could discipline the oligarchic circle or whether he would face an equal. The Epstein affair ran deep. As the British king, King Charles was indirectly entangled through his family circle and British politics, via Peter Mandelson and Prince Andrew. After a brief hiatus, Jimmy Kimmel was allowed to resume his role as a critic of Trump. Trump had gone too far.

In the U.S. itself, strange connections were made public. Bill Barr was Attorney General at the time of Epstein's death, and his father was the author of a novel that also dealt with pedophilia. Donald Barr, the father of William (Bill) Barr, published a science-fiction novel titled "Space Relations. A Slightly Gothic Interplanetary Tale." The book contained scenes involving, among other things, slavery, including the abduction of people as "illegal playthings of the galaxy's super-rich." This included minors in some cases. Why would anyone write such a book? Donald Barr might have argued that the book was fictional, satirical, or metaphorical and not intended as an endorsement of actual violence and pedophilia. Donald Barr was head of the Dalton School in the early 1970s. Jeffrey Epstein was allowed to take a teaching position there in the early 1970s, even though he had not graduated from college.

Trump still considered himself invincible, but his inner circle was riddled with revelations that run like fine cracks through his strategic "pillar structure." No single crack was fatal on its own. But taken together, they were very dangerous. Even the most robust strategy could collapse if the scandals cumulatively exceeded a "critical mass." This fits the image of the straw that breaks the camel's back. In any case, the resilience of Trump's strategic fortress was astonishing. Even serious scandals (convictions for sexual assault, countless lies, authoritarian threats) had so far failed to shake the hard core. The strong MAGA core of Republican supporters was the bulwark that continued to sustain him. The Roy-Kohn-tools "deny, deflect, counterattack" were not merely a defensive technique but an efficient immunization system against attacks. It prevented opponents from gaining interpretive authority. With each new scandal, the shock effect diminished. Trump supporters developed a kind of desensitized immunity, a strange form of stabilization through perpetual crises. Whether the Epstein phase initiated the collapse of the Trump presidency or merely created the appearance of erosion would only become clear later. The ancient Greeks would have judged Trump's behavior from a religious perspective. In Solon's Muse Elegy, lines 11 and 13 mentioned Hubris and Ate. Ate and Hubris wanted to have their fun too, and so they were constantly on the lookout for arrogant prime examples like Epstein and Trump. The deeper the fall of these prominent figures, the greater the intended social impact: mission accomplished.

In Trump's case, Hubris and Ate had the support of a third goddess: Aletheia. Trump would be dismantled piece by piece through revelations and his own self-revelations.

Rupert Murdoch's Wall Street Journal published a drawing from the birthday book compiled by Ghislaine Maxwell for Epstein's fortieth birthday. Trump denied that the drawing was his and immediately filed a lawsuit. The lawsuit involved a massive sum of money. The drawing depicted a woman (likely a young woman) with a strange text as a contribution to the birthday book. Trump's signature was prominently displayed in the woman's pubic area in the drawing. Trump initially claimed he did not make drawings. That was quickly disproved. It was also proven that he sometimes signed his name in the way we could see on the drawing in the birthday book. Trump maintained that the signature was not genuine and that his alleged contribution was a forgery.

The birthday book took us into the depths of the elite world. It was full of names, hints, connections, a document that not only exposed guilt but also the atmosphere, decadence, power, and moral decay of that circle. This book was more than a scandalous document. It was proof of the inconceivable. It exceeded the worst expectations, not only in content but also symbolically. Everything one had suspected was confirmed in a grotesque way. It made it clear that transparency could be dangerous. Things were not merely revealed, but exposed. While the many Trump crises were diffuse, the birthday book crystallized the Epstein crisis. It was the images and text from the birthday book that stuck in the mind. Even though Trump was not directly at the center, the mere association with Epstein's world (elite, abuse, abuse of power) was poison for his "outsider" narrative. Who stood beside him in the book? Politicians, billionaires, and cultural icons. The more prominent the company, the more strongly he was marked as one of them; as a member of the Epstein-class. The demand for transparency was unmistakable. Many of his own supporters were additionally motivated to vigorously demand answers. The myth of the movement's purity began to crumble.

The birthday book and the Epstein files were not just scandals, but touchstones for American society. From this perspective, Trump's world (the Roy Cohn School, the ideology of masculinity, abuse of power) appeared as a "dark side" that has been increasingly dragged into the light. At the same time, unexpected counterforces formed within Trump's world itself. Thomas Massie and three women (Marjorie Taylor Greene, Lauren Boebert, and Nancy Mace) demanded the release of the Epstein Files. Until then, these three women had been seen in the public eye as representing radicalism and populism. When they began distance themselves from Trump, it signaled a dramatic reversal of their roles. Their motivation was apparently multifaceted, and a range of motives may have come into play, such as Christian morality (because the Epstein affair crossed a red line and strayed from the territory where religious voters could identify with him), or along the lines of female solidarity, as the birthday book context struck a sensitive nerve among the female politicians, putting them at odds with Trump. Careerism certainly played a major role for these ambitious female politicians as well. Their instincts told them to jump in time, before it was too late. Many MAGA politicians had a legitimate fear that Trump would one day "throw them under the bus" without warning. Ultimately, it was also about political credibility. Before the 2024 election, some influential MAGA people vigorously demanded the release of the Epstein Files, because they wanted the publication to primarily target pedophiles within the Democratic circle.

If the Epstein Files were fully made public, and it would turn out that Trump was also heavily implicated, that would represent the ultimate strategic escalation. Trump's loyal fighters like Bondi, Patel, and Bongino would then become liabilities themselves, their careers destroyed. In this scenario, Trump would no longer stand alone at the center of criticism but would be embedded in a corrupt, morally depraved network that could no longer be so easily sold as a "patriotic movement." Thomas Massie and his three MAGA allies were the center of attention for several weeks. 218 votes in the House of Representative, that was the narrow majority they were aiming for, enough to force the release of the Epstein Files. The public suddenly realized that only a few more votes were needed to break the dam on this crucial issue. Thus, Trump's future fate was also influenced by a very concrete parliamentary mechanism. Trump and MAGA tried for a long time to prevent the vote by any means necessary. On October 1, 2025, the longest government shutdown in U.S. history began. It lasted 43 days, ending on November 12, 2025. This time was used to try to soften up the GOP rebels, but the effort failed. The House of Representatives was effectively gridlocked during this period when it came to legislation. As a result, the important Epstein vote could not take place in the House, and an Epstein bill could not be submitted to the Senate. Trump and MAGA failed, because after the vote in both chambers, a bill to release the Epstein Files was finally passed and presented to Trump for his signature.

Trump disputed the authenticity of his signature in the birthday book, but the book itself was considered genuine. Since Epstein received it as a gift, forgery by Maxwell was unlikely: Epstein would have noticed if entries had been manipulated or forged. Furthermore, it was reasonable to assume that he thanked the contributors. He would then have discovered that Trump's entry was not his own. This leaves the "forgery" defense weak and vulnerable. Why would Maxwell forge Trump's entry of all things? He was a close friend of Epstein's at the time.

The passage in book in which Trump is portrayed as a buyer of a young woman could also be interpreted as a mere "joke," yet it was precisely this "humor" that exposed the mindset and emotional world of the Epstein circle. The entries in the birthday book ranged from lewdness (obscene innuendo) and pedophilia. This revealed how deep the moral corruption in this circle ran. If the book was "merely" a gift, then it showed what his people believed would please Epstein, namely, allusions to sexual transgressions. Why did so many powerful men seek Epstein's company? Charisma alone is not a sufficient explanation. It was more likely that he offered access to networks, exclusive spaces, and intimate connections. Furthermore, he used his knowledge as "leverage". Whether all contributors to the book were aware of its nature cannot be proven. But such proximity to Epstein almost inevitably meant proximity to a milieu that disregarded moral and legal boundaries.

The birthday book, compiled by Maxwell for Epstein, was more than a private curiosity. It was a document that reflected the decadence of an era. Obscenity and pedophilic allusions became a form of "tribute." This fact alone showed how far moral transgressions could go. That Trump was mentioned in it two times, once with a supposedly forged signature and once in a "joke" as the buyer of a young woman, was no coincidence. Whether he wrote this text and drew a contribution himself or not, in this circle he was associated with precisely these connotations. Thus, the book revealed much about the perception of his role in the Epstein circle and its milieu of boundary-crossing. The birthday book was an expression of an ambiguous structure. It was both a gift and a threat, a game of innuendo, in which loyalty and

knowledge of forbidden behavior were deliberately intertwined. Epstein himself was also vulnerable to blackmail, as he was, alongside Maxwell, the principal perpetrator of the sexual assaults and responsible for the criminal infrastructure. With regard to Epstein, the book was the epitome of his hubris. Legally, the book may have had no consequences, but symbolically, it was a bombshell. It revealed how closely politics, oligarchy, and decadence were intertwined, and how thin the rope was on which a strategist like Trump was balancing.

### **The One Big Beautiful Crisis**

There was strong resistance from Trump and MAGA in order to block the release of the Epstein-files. Trump and MAGA lost this fight and had to accept that the Epstein-problem would not disappear and therefore Trump had to find a strategic solution to deal with it. All of Trump's political crises merged into a single crisis. Trump's legal problems intensified. Trump himself and the Trump administration were embroiled in countless legal battles. Trump and his team launched attacks against James Comey and others. Trump could not rely on the Supreme Court to always support him on key issues. On November 5, 2025, a public hearing took place before the Supreme Court, during which the majority of justices expressed strong doubts about the legality of the Trump tariffs. The tariffs remained in place pending a decision. Trump was not a rational strategist. A rational strategist would not have risked being forced to wait and see whether his tariff policy, a cornerstone of his strategy, would be doomed to failure. Trump relied entirely on his irrationalism. The emotional charge of politics was further intensified and therefore rational discourse lost all effectiveness.

The Epstein crisis was even more dangerous for Trump than the risks arising from his legal problems and he knew it. The Epstein crisis had a dual nature for Trump. On the one hand, it revealed the enormous pressure for disclosure that was building up, and on the other, his search for a strategic way out through tightening the other pillars, and through escalation, and his headlong rush into enemy stereotypes and dystopias was visible. The pressure for disclosure had to be overcome by the pressure to escalate. As a result, the dystopia pillar was brought much more to the forefront. Trump's strategic project (the fourth war) shifted more clearly than before from strategic competition (agon) between the warring parties toward the strategic interpretation of apocalyptic (eschatological) fears and hopes. The five pillars merged into a kind of dystopia machine whose energy was fueled by fear, denial of guilt, blame, and promises of salvation. Trump's strategy veered into the mythical sphere. As a result, he became less of a dogged political trench fighter and more of a bearer of apocalyptic narratives.

The mental illness dystopia illustrated this dystopian intensification. In it, Trump's narcissism merged with the conviction of his own infallibility and Trump could escalate his radicalism. The Handmaid's Tale dystopia aligned ideologically with his base through its theocratic traits and anti-feminist setbacks. The Joker dystopia stood for chaos as an end in itself and for the authenticity of the cult leader. Irrationality tended to become a distinct form of strategically significant energy, and Trump relied primarily on projection and self-reflection. In the process, "reality" in the eyes of his supporters increasingly shifted through projection into terrifying scenarios. These projections transform his opponents into demons, and only total loyalty promises salvation. His political opponents, however, were to be traumatized by

dystopias. The smoldering economic crash and the shutdown crisis were triggering fear, and many people were already feeling the consequences of bad policies. A dangerous tactic from the “Wag the Dog” dystopia was employed: Trump attempted to divert attention from the Epstein scandal through political maneuvers; the shutdown, too, had much to do with the Epstein scandal. Ever since the beginning of his second term, Trump had been confronted by sharp observers who commented on his mental state, and then serious doubts about his physical health began to surface. Some MAGA supporters even feared he might die soon. Was Trump still fit to govern? Trump and his people were not interested in clarifying this question. That was why the “Edith Wilson dystopia” came to the fore, with Suzie Wiles in the role of Edith. Stephen Miller was crucial to Trump for implementing his various dictatorial dystopias. Trump wanted to provide Tomahawks to Ukraine, then he spoke with Putin on the phone, and suddenly he demanded that Ukraine should hand over the Donbas to Russia. What did Putin have on him? Many Americans believed that Trump was being blackmailed by Putin. Whether that was true or not, the “Russian-Asset Dystopia” was able to unleash its fatal effects, especially in Europe. The various dystopias could not shake MAGA’s fundamental trust in Trump. When Trump was criticized for his policies aligned with these dystopias, it was likely dismissed as enemy propaganda. The radicals within MAGA took the fear triggered by Trump’s policies and his various dystopias as a sign that they were on the right path: We own the libs.

One got the impression that the various dystopias were coalescing into an overarching dystopia, and that the intensification of one pillar of Trump’s strategy led to intensification in at least one other pillar. Thus, a loss of trust among voters (also due to Trump’s exaggerated campaign promises) and the dynamics of the economic crash crisis in addition to the Epstein phase led Trump to focus more on his dictatorship pillar and act accordingly. Trump has also attempted to win over the generals. His brutal ICE-troops were seen by the Democrats as a MAGA army. Internationally, too, he appeared aggressive and dominant. The Department of Justice and the FBI were repurposed as Trump’s instruments. The dictatorial orientation intensified whenever Trump himself and his strategic project were in danger. The image of the “Sun King” (from one of his dictatorial dystopias) thus gained strength. In the process, the Führer principle was pitted against democracy; furthermore, political institutions were devalued, and finally, the judiciary, media, and bureaucracy were constructed as bogeymen. The dictatorial leader, whether intentionally or not, also evoked diffuse nightmarish fantasies in society, which were then transformed into clearly recognizable images of horror through corresponding dystopias. In the Omen dystopia, Donald Trump became Damian Thorn, a demonic, invincible adversary of order. One couldn't help but think of Bible passages about the Antichrist seizing power. Particularly grim was the Jim Jones dystopia: When the leader fell, everyone within his sphere of influence was supposed to go with him.

The economic crash gained momentum, many American stocks were significantly overvalued, but the stock market was still holding, and the bubble has not yet burst. There was no convincing plan to deal with the enormous amount of private and public debt. Confidence in the American economy has been declining for some time, even within the U.S. Were extreme and influential MAGA supporters not afraid of a crash? Should a “White National Christian Economy” be established after a crash? One could suspect or fear this, in line with the Nazis’ “destruction and reconstruction” dystopia. Trump did not need an Albert Speer to express his worldview through architecture. He did that himself, on a grand scale and with clear

symbolism: a king resides in the White House. This building no longer stood for democracy. It has not escaped the notice of many people how brutally he had the East Wing of the White House demolished with relish, accompanied by his favorite music played by construction machinery. Future Democratic Party presidents would do well, assuming there would be any in the foreseeable future, not to tear down the Trump Ballroom, if it could even be built, but to transform it into a museum that would warn of the dangers of dictatorship. This would provide ample space to address, for example, Trump's activities and his numerous lies, and to counter his "Flood the Zone" persona with an effective counter-narrative. In this way, the "true" Trump could be clearly presented to future generations, highlighting the danger of this kind of populism. Trump was under enormous pressure, especially because of the Epstein scandal, which he could not bring to an end. No wonder his irrationalism was intensifying as well. For example, he was relying even more on aggression than before. His renovations in the White House were, at their core, pure aggression. Already the "No Kings" protests in October 2025 certainly made an impression on him. He was, in fact, jealous of Obama and disputed that Obama's inaugurations drew larger crowds than his own. Trump did not doubt the massive turnout at the "No Kings" protests. He therefore had to react differently this time. Trump reposted a video in which King Trump, as a pilot in an airplane, dropped feces on demonstrators.

A crucial question that likely tormented Trump was the irrationalism of his base: The Trump base wanted the Epstein Files released, but at the same time, they remained staunchly loyal to Trump. If the files were released after all and Trump would be implicated, would MAGA still stand by him, and would his supporters come to the conclusion that the released documents were fake material and that MAGA celebrities should get away with anything, fortunately or unfortunately? If Trump could prevent the release of key parts of the Epstein files, would MAGA be satisfied with this cover-up? The president's various psychological, physical, legal, economic, and political problems have not impressed the base so far. Another crucial question was: Could Trump bring the military more firmly under his control? He could dismiss individual generals, but not all at once. The military would not remain silent about political and military events forever. If individual powerful military figures, with the backing of their colleagues, developed the U.S. armed forces' stance on the question of dictatorship versus democracy and advocate for it publicly or even just internally, they thereby would become key players in the political arena. This would be the prerequisite for a military coup for or against Trump to become possible.

Trump's escalations, his crises, and his problems were reality TV at its finest. The reality TV drama pushed the boundaries of what was possible in this genre: Trump offered pure suspense (not entirely by choice, but that made it even more thrilling). He was the star of a reality TV cliffhanger, turning the whole world into viewers and participants: "Will he crash and burn? How much longer, and with what tricks, can he hold on? Will the economy crash, but not him? Will a power struggle ensue if Trump and his associates finally refuse to release all the Epstein files?". By the fall of 2025, the reality TV narrative had reached an advanced stage, and the line between fiction, news, and reality had dissolved. The media landscape played along, willingly or unwillingly, because every report extended the spectacle's reach. Appropriate dystopias were employed, such as the previously mentioned "Wag -the-Dog dystopia." In the process, reality was manipulated in favor of a substitute reality. The Russian-Asset dystopia has

also already been mentioned. Information wars and disinformation systems thus became visible and triggered fear. MAGA supporters were able to resolve cognitive dissonance by liking Putin and viewing him as a patriot who fought for his country by any means necessary. The Running Man/Hunger-Games dystopia would fit perfectly with the rise of reality TV. Here, violence and persecution were presented as entertainment. Trump has publicly announced that a UFC “cage fight” spectacle was to take place in 2026 in the Octagon on the South Lawn of the White House, with around 20,000–25,000 spectators. Violence was already a political reality when we thought of scenes on television from ICE operations or the cruel remarks of those responsible for these operations. Hunger also became an issue again due to the political struggle (during the shutdown) over providing food assistance to many people through the SNAP program. The shutdown was used as a distraction from the Epstein-files and Trump and MAGA did not want the release of the files. 218 votes in the House of Representative, that was the majority the MAGA rebels were aiming for, and an important step for the release of the Epstein Files. Trump and Mike Johnson have already had to pull the emergency brake: Adelita Grijalva from Arizona could not be officially sworn in for a long time. Mike Johnson has long refused to administer the oath, even though she clearly won a special election on September 23, 2025. Johnson’s behavior was linked to the Epstein affair, as Grijalva’s petition for the release of the Epstein files. In the wake of the shutdown, thousands of employees, such as those at the Treasury Department and health agencies, were laid off, particularly in subordinate agencies that receive less attention. Air traffic control, police, border protection, and hospitals remained on duty as essential services, but staff shortages and overwork led to bottlenecks. There was a risk of delays or failures in program payments and “food stamps” (SNAP), which particularly harmed families in need. Many federal employees were affected by mandatory leave or unpaid work; many government contractors, and especially subcontractors, received no payments or only uncertain ones and increasingly faced financial difficulties.

When Trump took office, he could not prevent despite all his efforts that Americans’ confidence in his governance began to wane, for while he was a successful campaigner, he also was a very poor politician. The loss of confidence had already intensified significantly by the summer. This was particularly important for Trump in the medium term: If MAGA lost the majority in the House of Representatives in the midterms, governing would become even more difficult for him. On the one hand, such a scenario was welcomed by a majority of Americans; on the other hand, such a development would make Trump even more dangerous and unpredictable. The shutdown apparently further exacerbated Trump’s crisis of confidence, and in November 2025, MAGA and Trump suffered four major election defeats: in the gubernatorial elections in Virginia and New Jersey, in the mayoral election in New York, and in California due to the clear passage of Proposition 50. Around that time Trump was mercilessly booed at a purely sporting event, while Gavin Newsom was enthusiastically welcomed in Texas.

### **Trump at the Center of the Trump dictatorship**

After four years of the Trump presidency from 2016 to 2020 and another year of his second presidency, one could speculate on how Trump structured his dictatorial project around his own person. In terms of his understanding of power, Trump even surpassed the rulers of

European absolutism. His motto was not only: “I am the state.” Trump’s supreme motto was: “I want everything.” Trump was interested only in himself. The “I” was the starting point of his thinking and will. Everything else was secondary. That was why Trump wanted “everything”: His greedy “I” wanted maximum power, exclusive access to intelligence information, the greatest possible recognition, ever more money and goods, maximum affection and sympathy from his followers and from women, great recognition in the future as well, a very positive view of history and historians, maximum respect and obedience from his people, maximum flexibility (i.e., no loyalty to others), and so on. His ideas, ideologies, notions, and convictions were to be fully enforced. “I am the state” meant for Trump: “The state and its resources are at my disposal. Magnificent buildings should be erected for me as if for a king, and the state should participate in this as well. But since the state belongs to me, I do not have to “serve.” Above all, the state is supposed to be useful to me, to serve me. If the interests of the state conflict with my own, my interests take precedence”. After the inner circle (Trump and his family), the interests of the oligarchy were to be promoted to the maximum extent: tax breaks, power shifts, etc. Only in third place came the MAGA base. Price increases due to inflation could also be offset by wage increases, but the oligarchy did not want that. The base was offered, above all, culture wars and racism. Therefore, no money was needed. The MAGA base was very much to Trump’s liking: it was pro-dictatorship, oriented toward a religion tolerant of oligarchy, and easily influenced. Trump could deliver concrete results: deportations, tax cuts, tariffs, and agricultural subsidies. Furthermore, (according to an expanded “America First” concept) U.S. dominance was to be enforced in its sphere of influence: Mexico, Canada, Greenland; Venezuela, and the rest of Latin America. Trump was no champion of democracy against the dictatorships and authoritarian regimes in many countries. He could offer his MAGA supporters even more treats: military operations on domestic soil, sending ICE agents to “occupy” Democratic cities, revenge against political and legal opponents of Trump and MAGA, and the legal fight against his enemies from the “Deep State.”

The Trump dictatorship was advancing in small steps but inexorably. Trump was determined to become a dictator (“Putin light”) and “Imperator” in his sphere of influence, at least as powerful as China’s leadership and more powerful than Putin. Until 2015, the U.S. was a “problematic” democracy. From 2015 to 2020, it was a “highly problematic” democracy, and in November 2020, the transition to a Phase 1 dictatorship took place: Trump started his “long coup.” In this phase, democracy was increasingly restricted, but the dictatorship (Trump in his second term) had to share power with strong opposing forces. With the start of Phase 1, Trump was able to throw the political landscape into disarray. Anyone fighting against Trump and MAGA was embroiled in a very grueling uphill battle. With the help of this instability and thanks to his ruthless use of power, Trump could attempt, eventually after a few intermediate steps and through a variety of activities, to enforce Phase 2 of his dictatorship expecting little serious resistance. In Phase 2 of the Trump dictatorship, there would be no longer any real opposing forces that could slow Trump down.

Trump wanted to reach Phase 2 of his dictatorship as quickly as possible. In doing so, he was initially proceeding “asymmetrically.” He was first trying to establish himself as “Emperor” of his region and only then as “King” of America. Trump publicly supported Putin through various statements and activities. One could surmise that Trump was concerned (among other motives for this support) with his upcoming “Putin light” dictatorship. Trump

wanted to push for dictatorship worldwide and curb democracy. Democracy stood for transparency, the distribution of power, and the peaceful transfer of power following election victories. That was why he hated democracy in Europe. He has already corrupted the U.S. Europe was also to be converted to MAGA, after which it could eventually be relatively easily assigned somehow to the Russian and/or American sphere of influence. Trump wanted to incorporate Canada and Greenland into his empire, as well as Venezuela with its vast oil reserves. Other countries in his “sphere of influence” were also threatened by him: Mexico and Cuba. However, if Trump failed to make further progress with his “pet project” (dictatorship phase 2) in the U.S., he would continue to pursue policies of chaos until the end of his term. He would have the power to do so, and even the prospect of major Democratic gains in the 2026 congressional elections would not drive him from office. He would have a good chance of surviving another impeachment proceeding. The GOP candidate for the 2028 presidential election would need his support to be accepted by the base.

However, it was possible that Trump would have to step down for health reasons or be forced to resign due to health and/or political problems. There were numerous indications that Trump already had serious health issues (both mental and physical) and should be replaced. His staff certainly would want to prevent that. Was Donald Trump already unfit for office? Would his inner circle skillfully begin to conceal this through a “Fred Trump solution”? An “office” was set up for Fred, who was already suffering from Alzheimer’s, where he could “work.” But that would only make sense if Trump could continue to play the leading role in his reality TV show. If his physical and/or mental decline would progress, he might eventually have to be replaced. J.D. Vance would then become president and would attempt to capitalize on Trump’s dictatorial groundwork to win the next election. If Trump resigned several months before the 2026 congressional elections, Vance would also bear joint responsibility for that election result. Vance would likely have access only to the structures of Phase 1 of the Trump dictatorship until the election in 2028.

Trump was already attempting to enter Phase 2 of his dictatorship in a constant power struggle that was being waged both openly and covertly. At the start of his second presidency, Trump was able to build on the groundwork he had laid up to that point. The U.S. at the beginning of 2025 has undergone significant cultural changes compared to the U.S. at the end of the Obama presidency. By 2025, he had achieved further significant “progress.” By late 2026, Trump would likely have to face a Democratic majority in Congress, then he would not be able to reach Phase 2 of his dictatorship. In January 2026, he even brought up the suspension of the 2026 congressional elections. If this was meant to be a joke, it was a “joke” straight out of his Joker dystopia. The public and his supporters were to be acclimated to further rhetorical escalation toward dictatorship, and his opponents would be annoyed by it. Did Trump feel compelled to take action accordingly even before the midterms? Pure chaos politics and aggressive foreign policy in line with his asymmetric approach would likely not be enough for that. Trump and Stephen Miller probably anticipated as early as the beginning of the second presidency that Trump would fail with his campaign platform for the 2024 election and that many of his supporters would also face disadvantages as a result. His people probably thought at the time that Trump would come up with something later on to counter this. Furthermore, he had to expect that the courts would severely hinder his policies in various ways: If, for example, he lost his tariff policy, that would be a serious setback for his dictatorial ambitions. How would

Congress react to Trump's Epstein policy, especially as the November elections came ever closer? Did Trump and his aides have a plan for how he could overcome these difficulties in 2026? They likely did not want to plan that far ahead, because Trump was highly unpredictable in his decisions. This was also evident after the "kidnapping" of Maduro and his wife. The commando operation succeeded, but then it was unclear how to proceed politically or militarily. Trump, with his serpentine intelligence, was always lying in wait for an opportunity so he could strike with lightning speed and move on to Phase 2. There were certainly already considerations about how such "opportunities" might be brought about.

Trump's chaos policy from Phase 1 might be interrupted by severe crises, causing Trump to want or need to move on to Phase 2. Such crises would plunge Trump into fierce power struggles. Trump would then attempt to win the power struggles associated with the crises while simultaneously asserting himself against all enemies seeking to thwart his revolutionary plans. Trump, with his narrow lead in the polls (in the 2024 election) intended to tackle a Herculean task with his very weak but loyal team: a severe economic crisis was brewing; Ukraine was to be "thrown under the bus"; Trump's role in the Epstein affair was to remain uninvestigated; America was losing all its friends around the world; Trump's tariff policy was proving a failure, etc. There was already an initial indication of an attempt at a dictatorial solution to the Epstein crisis: Trump's people were resolutely stonewalling on the issue of the legally mandated release of *all* the Epstein files. In any case, Trump could only enter Phase 2 by crossing a line, by taking revolutionary steps. But these are enormously risky. Sabotaging the 2026 congressional elections would be such a step.

Without a specific trigger or a severe crisis, he would not dare to do so, nor would he feel compelled to take such steps. The following scenario shows a conflict that could serve as trigger for revolutionary dictatorial measures: Trump could attempt to ensure, through massive, constant distractions as part of his chaos strategy, that the demand for clarification of the Epstein scandal would lose significant importance in American society. If this failed, he would eventually lose control of the Epstein narratives while attempting to contain the Epstein scandal. If this were unacceptable to Trump, he would feel compelled to take action against his Epstein opponents (including those in the MAGA camp): journalists, judges, politicians, members of Congress, and other opponents. Trump might initially still attempt to prevent the impending loss of control through the Phase 1 concept of pushing foreign policy to prevent the impending loss of control (before he was forced to move into Phase 2 of his dictatorship through revolutionary steps). Trump had enormous "blackmail material" at his disposal to do so. He could start wars and thereby inflict enormous damage on American society. He saw the abduction of Maduro and his wife as a success. He made Venezuelan politicians compliant through threats and no ground troops were necessary. No one knew how Trump would react. Through such initiatives, Trump could divert attention from the Epstein material (which was apparently extremely threatening to him) and could threaten Americans (and thus also his base) with further menacing "surprises." If society signaled compliance Trump, then possibly could take more vigorous action against "incorrigible" opponents, who continued to demand the release of all the Epstein material. In doing so he would quickly cross the line separating Phase 2 from Phase 1 dictatorship.

Finally, a few remarks on "the elephant in the room," namely the U.S. military. There were rational arguments indicating that one could not rely on the U.S. military to prevent

a Phase 2 Trump dictatorship. The military was already completely overrun during Phase 1: for example, a special operations commander ordered a second attack on the survivors of the first attack. He could have refused this order, and indeed, he should have refused it. Trump and Hegseth could issue further such orders that cross the line, thereby turning the military into accomplices. All Americans, including the military, have become desensitized due to Trump's constant violations of boundaries. For example, he was tearing down the east wing of the Capitol; there was hardly any resistance to this, and many political changes already made in the direction of dictatorship were taking effect.

The murder of Charlie Kirk has not opened up an opportunity for Trump to deploy the military on a massive scale within the U.S., because the killer was culturally close to MAGA. Massive protests by the population could also be stifled through military intervention. If the economic crisis spiraled out of control and parts of the population rioted, military intervention would be also a threat. Furthermore, blue states might plan things that Trump and MAGA did not like at all. The military traditionally had good relations with the Senate. But little encouragement to resist came from this direction, and the Supreme Court was of little help either. Then military might take the seemingly safer path: One did not see oneself as the spearhead of democracy, since society voluntarily and with relatively little resistance enabled Trump's path to dictatorship through his reelection and through his first year in office during his second presidency. Trump and Hegseth could end or advance careers. If Trump and Hegseth acted skillfully, they could take down dissidents one by one. They just should not severely pressure or anger all approximately 300 top military officials at the same time. These military officials were not yet organized as a group, as that did not correspond to American military tradition. In such a group, a few leaders would quickly be perceived in the political arena as an important (or even the most important) power factor. The military was socialized into a culture in which politics determined what happened or did not happen militarily. Politically ambitious military figures (individuals, groups) had so far been unable to assert themselves and build power. The military had not yet viewed itself as politicians. Trump and his people would fear such military figures. Even the refusal of orders was, for them, unauthorized political interference. The Democrats reminded the military that they could face criminal prosecution for overstepping their bounds after the Trump administration. Trump and Hegseth, however, could replace hesitant military figures and easily find successors with more "guts" who wanted to advance their careers and were therefore willing to take this risk.

Even the extent of Trump's dictatorship in Phase 1 was difficult to grasp, let alone the sheer volume of measures, initiatives, personnel decisions, rhetorical escalations, and informal power operations carried out by Trump himself, his administration, MAGA politicians, the MAGA echo chamber, and associated actors. Future historians would have to analyze this in detail. Here, the dictatorial scope was merely hinted at through a subjective selection of examples, and any serious observers of Trump would compile their own lists. The following cases, grouped under the term "dangerous" serve merely to illustrate the scope of Phase 1's authoritarian practices. In this context, "dangerous" means: a threat to Trump's opponents at home and abroad, appeals to the base on key issues, and a consistent policy of chaos (reinforced by Trump's incompetence and that of his associates in line with his strategic orientation). "Dangerous" also refers to actions that reveal transgressions typical of dictatorships with regard to morality, legality, or established political norms, while

simultaneously exposing Trump's selfishness, fears, greed, and boundless ambitions for power.

Dangerous personnel figures like Pam Bondi and Todd Blanche acted more as ruthless enforcers than as guardians of institutions. Hegseth and the Pentagon signaled a willingness to deploy aggressive, politically instrumentalized military power. The selection of personnel itself becomes an authoritarian tool. The career of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as a member of Trump's cabinet shows the power of dangerous beliefs under Trump and demonstrates Trump's and MAGA's acceptance of anti-scientific worldviews. Vaccine skepticism and hostility toward expert knowledge were not trivialities, but deliberate concessions to the base intended to undermine institutional power in these areas. Already from the beginning of Trump's second term we saw dangerous activities and dangerous rhetorical signals in foreign policy: Musk's political interventions, at the start of the second Trump presidency, in Europe, followed by corresponding actions by Trump, Vance, and Miller, blurred the lines between state policy, personal interests and beliefs, the private power of oligarchs, and ideological interference in foreign policy. Trump used his pardoning power in a damaging and therefore dangerous way. The pardoning of figures such as Juan Orlando Hernández and various white-collar criminals blurred the distinction between legality and loyalty. Pardon became a sign of power, not justice, which exacerbated the spread of systemic chaos. Trump should be remembered by his enormous efforts of enrichment. This was a dangerous development for the US. The rapid increase in the Trump family's wealth since the start of his second presidency pointed to the merging of public office and private wealth accumulation as a structural feature of Trump rule.

Dangerous symbolic renaming efforts such as renaming the Gulf of Mexico or Mount Denali in Alaska were not merely symbolic. They signal historical and geographical claims of ownership. At the same time, Trump was attempting to "immortalize" his own name, for example by renaming cultural institutions such as the Kennedy Center. Trump's dangerous politics of revenge was not hidden from the public in order to scare the Democrats. The repeated, targeted persecution of figures like Letitia James showed that legal pressure was not being used to resolve political conflicts, but rather to wear down and intimidate opponents. Revenge was becoming political routine. Dangerous new patterns in enforcement appeared in 2025: There was a surge in ICE arrests, which had targeted individuals with no prior criminal records. These activities pointed to a shift from security policy toward a demonstrative policy of repression aimed more at signaling toughness than to combat crime. Trump's ICE efforts failed militarily and politically and became dangerous for him. Trump did not admit his mistakes and decided to throw Kristi Noem under the bus.

Striking contradictions were no problem for Trump and his strategic chaos approach, but they were dangerous for American society and culture. Trump vigorously demanded the Nobel Peace Prize for himself, while at the same time threatening and even escalating military actions against Venezuela and other states. This contradiction highlighted the gap between rhetoric and action and posed no problem for his extremely loyal base. Would the base still follow him if he reinterpreted "America First" in accordance with the "Donohue Doctrine" and followed through on this reinterpretation with more military actions? Due to Trump's efforts to prevent the publication of the Epstein Files, there has already developed a rift with Marjorie Taylor "Brown" and other MAGA supporters. Nevertheless, contradictions have so far been largely absorbed by the base: The Epstein affair, foreign interventions despite

isolationist rhetoric, and expanded territorial claims (e.g., Greenland) have been rationalized or ignored, and cognitive dissonances resolved in Trump's favor. Objectively speaking, this stood in stark contrast to the populist self-image of the base. MAGA also liked Trump's clearly discernible closeness to oligarchs, wealthy donors, and corporate executives, including the expectation that this elite would finance government projects such as the renovation of the White House.

Taken together, these examples did not describe isolated scandals. They illustrated the operational scope of the dictatorship of Phase 1: authoritarian personnel, degraded norms, instrumentalized law, symbolic rule, selective repression, the merging of elites, and the psychological stabilization of the masses. Phase 1 did not require total control. It required only "saturation."

### **Trump's Phase of Hubris**

Trump was focused on accumulating and wielding power during the first year of his second term. That was why the "dictatorship" pillar of his strategy and his "dictator-emperor" approach were deployed so extensively. By the second year of his presidency, Trump already saw himself as the undisputed strongest politician in the world and regarded himself as the ultimate leader in the world by whom other leaders were measured. Trump quickly realized what a formidable military machine he could deploy to achieve political goals and secure propaganda victories. He had Maduro and his wife kidnapped, but the regime in Venezuela remained in place, for Trump was no champion of democracy. Trump crossed previous boundaries in domestic and foreign policy with impunity. Domestically, the executive branch was the strongest force in the state, and the press, Congress, the judiciary, and the Constitutional Court could hinder him but not rein him in. The Supreme Court stripped him of the legal basis for his tariff policy. He quickly found a new legal basis. He left the MAGA representatives in Congress little room to maneuver. The Department of Justice did whatever he wanted. The Epstein revelations in December and January yielded no disclosures that could seriously endanger Trump, but in the UK, Andrew Mountbatton, his ex-wife, and Peter Mandelson faced massive problems. As soon as Trump realized that the "Epstein" revelations were not as dangerous to him as he had feared, especially since the pressure from the MAGA forces advocating for the releases had greatly subsided. So, he decided to enjoy the height of his power to the fullest. Thus began the third dominant phase of his historical pillar: the hubris phase (following the Trump-Musk phase and the Epstein Files phase). In this new historical phase, the dictatorship pillar, along with dominance at home and abroad, came into play once again, alongside the immense military power of the U.S. Additionally, he exerted political pressure. Resistance was met with the threat of violence. If one military adventure went well, he could dare to embark on the next. Such adventures were dangerous. His friend Putin already had to take note of the dangers of this path. America was the strongest nation in the world. Trump used this ruthlessly. He did not suspect that America would lose power as a result in the medium term (politically, militarily, economically, and culturally), or he didn't care: After me, the deluge. After the commando operation in Venezuela, Trump attacked Iran. "King" Trump did not seek Congress's approval for this war.

The deployment of the strategic pillars was driven by his irrationalism pillar: He apparently wanted to “enjoy” his power while he still could, because after losing the election in the fall, that would no longer be possible. For him, the enjoyment of power meant indulging his lust for power through the reckless exercise of authority. His election victory allowed him to expand his power during his first year in office, both domestically and abroad. In his second year in office, he also wanted to test the limits of his power. It was unclear whether Trump was already suffering from dementia. In any case, he acted even more uninhibitedly than before. He had an “alcoholic personality” (even though he didn’t drink alcohol) with a tendency toward aggression. His unpredictability made him dangerous. No one knew what he was planning next. He had basic trust only in himself, and he made all important decisions alone. In that sense, his administration was a one-man government. However, he had many advisors who tried to influence his decisions. For important tasks, he primarily relied on Steve Witkoff and his son-in-law Jared Kushner.

In his reality TV shows, everything revolved around him and his propaganda, e.g., in his SOTU (State of the Union) address. The reality TV star Trump did not take wars seriously either. He had no sound strategy for them. From his perspective, military planning was merely tactics that did not interest him further. He was likely not even capable of fully understanding the military’s plans. He wanted to quickly withdraw from the Iran war after achieving a “success.” Despite the war with Iran, Cuba had already been named as the next target. Trump was to be symbolically portrayed as the center of power (in the U.S. and on the world stage) through relevant organizations and their events, such as the Board of Peace Conference and the Shield of America Conference. The SOTU spectacle was intended to serve as a model for Trump’s reality TV productions. Trump was the center of attention and demanded applause from all MAGA representatives, and then he sharply attacked the Democrats. The SOTU event confirmed the representatives’ unwavering loyalty. If a propaganda coup (Ballroom, Trump-Kennedy Center) went awry or threatened to go awry, Trump was not held accountable. Kristi Noem was “removed” by the DHS and subsequently allowed to work at Shield of America. Instead of devoting himself exclusively to the war with Iran, Trump showed reporters a draft of the bombastic “East Wing Modernization and State Ballroom” project, which would have made Albert Speer jealous.

During this phase, Trump could not do without a “tried-and-true” concept from his dystopian playbook: the military intervention in Venezuela delivered Trump a quick propaganda victory without (initially) causing further political damage. The “Wag the Dog” concept worked in that respect. But the Epstein crisis continued to smolder, nonetheless. This was likely important for his decision to start a war against Iran. The looming midterm disaster threatened Trump and his people in Congress. Together, they wanted to master their fate. Would they find a way out and jointly prevent the change in power? But the Jim Jones dystopia was already lurking in the background. Jim Jones also felt threatened, and then the violence escalated. The Damian Thorn dystopia also became highly relevant with its warning about Trump the destroyer. His penchant for destruction could not be attributed solely to his arrogance, his narcissism, his stupidity, and his incompetence, for there were also unconscious dark motives at play. Trump conquered one system after another, ruining them in the process: the Republican Party, the U.S. (government, economy, society, politics), and as U.S. president, he saw himself as the king of the world. Thus, he sought to impose his will on global politics, with devastating

consequences for the entire world. He didn't care that the entire world was affected by the consequences of his policies.

Trump's new dominant phase, stemming from his historical pillar, could also be viewed and examined from the outside. First, it was an expression of stupidity, a loss of touch with reality, disinhibition, loss of control, mental illness and psychological problems, arrogance, and serious character flaws. This mixture was frightening and dangerous. Second, Trump always wanted to fully indulge his incompetence. The first result was the Atlantic City Casino Management Disaster 1.0. The whole world was able to witness the new Version 2.0 in real time. How much more of Trump could the global economy and the U.S. economy tolerate? Third, Trump's new dominant phase resembled a dance on an active volcano. He took the pent-up problems and the looming dangers for himself, the U.S., and MAGA (for example, from the 2026 congressional elections) in stride, as if to say: "Why are you so afraid? Look at me, I'm calmly playing golf. Don't worry, I'll think of something." Fourth, it was an expression of a particular brand of brinkmanship. We had long been familiar with his usual brinkmanship, such as his aggressive testing of boundaries with occasional defeats, or his attempts to exert maximum pressure and then back down at the last moment. Then strike a deal and present it as a victory. He tried that against Iran in the early stages of the conflict, but they had studied him thoroughly for a long time and were unimpressed by his ultimatum. The new form of brinkmanship lay in the fact that, strategically completely unprepared, he ventured into "Putin territory," so to speak, and likewise risked a war of aggression against a strong opponent. Thus, America also became a predatory state and a rogue state. Furthermore, he attempted to rebrand MAGA from "America first" to "American worldwide interests first" through the war against the rogue state Iran. MAGA didn't even want to support Ukraine, but Trump actually launched a war of aggression alongside Israel. An old contradiction continued to smolder: Iran and Russia were allies, but Trump went to great lengths to end the war in Ukraine in Putin's favor. Russia supported Iran in the war against America by passing on vital intelligence, but Trump showed understanding for this, and Russian Duma deputies were allowed to visit their American counterparts in Congress. In his hubris, Trump was not yet satisfied with the dual deployment of his military (Venezuela, Iran) and set his sights on Cuba, initially only verbally. Fifthly, Trump always wanted to look good in the eyes of history. He rightly saw this issue as his Achilles' heel. His previous construction activities and his projects that had not yet begun or were unfinished demonstrated his ambition in this regard, as did his renamings (the Kennedy Center became the Trump-Kennedy Center) and his insatiable longing for the Nobel Peace Prize. During this historical phase, he was largely able to dispel his self-doubts and saw himself as the greatest president of all time, the one who halted America's decline, including through the use of the military. Through great deeds, he sought to win the favor of history and historians despite his "mistakes." This dominant historical phase was, sixthly, an expression of his policy of chaos taken to the extreme. For example, one heard various versions of why America entered the war against Iran and what it hoped to achieve through the war. To Trump's surprise, the killing of Iran's military and political leadership did not yet mean the end of the regime. Despite the devastating American and Israeli airstrikes, the Iranians were still able to launch many missiles, threaten the Gulf states, and close the Strait of Hormuz. The Houthis threatened shipping in the Red Sea. At that point (March 31, 2026), no one knew how things might unfold. Predicting Trump's behavior, a month in advance was more difficult than issuing a weather

forecast for April 2026. There is even talk that ground troops could be deployed to occupy Kharg Island or search for enriched uranium in Iran. If ground troops landed and became embroiled in fierce fighting, new troops might have to be deployed in support. Trump could also end the war and declare himself the great victor, even though the Strait of Hormuz would still be unusable: “Dear Japanese, Chinese, Europeans, Gulf States, and other nations, this is now your problem. Thank you very much for your kind attention to this matter. DJT.” Seventh, this dominant historical phase (the Trump Hubris Phase) was about high-stakes, high-risk games. That is part of the Art of the Deal. Trump, for example, was banking on emerging from the Iran war very well (as the big winner). If that failed and, as a result, the U.S. economy slid into a recession, even the MAGA members of Congress might get nervous and parts of his base might rebel. The majority of voters firmly rejected Trump and his policies. Polls had already shown this even before the recent massive “No Kings” protests. Did Trump, during this historic phase, consider how he could move into Phase 2 of his dictatorship to avoid defeat in the fall congressional elections and to silence his numerous critics across the country? That would then be the ultimate gambling. He demonstrated what he would be willing to do under pressure on January 6, 2021, as the day of his departure from power drew ever closer.

As of early April 2026, it was still impossible to estimate when and why Trump would be forced to step down from this dominant historical phase, from a phase of supreme power. Serious health issues (mental and/or physical) could lead to this. If an economic crash were to occur, the population in the red states were to protest, and the oligarchs were to lose confidence in him, this could lead to his removal. It was reasonable to assume that the congressional elections in the fall of 2026 would not go well for him. If he lost the majority in the House of Representatives, the Democrats would put him and his people under greater pressure. If he also lost the Senate, this dominant phase would come to an end by then at the latest.

### **On responsibility, guilt, and historical developments**

The question of guilt could not be conclusively resolved. It could only be posed responsibly. Who was responsible for the deep division in American society? Who bore the blame for the accumulation of hatred, mistrust, and political anger? Trump did not create these forces. He amplified them, exploited them, and used them as a weapon. A capable and well-meaning populist, in the same historical situation, might have steered the anger of the base toward integration, reforms, or social redress. Trump chose a different path. He opted for division as a strategy for power.

But the underlying conditions have existed long before him. Long before Trump, globalization had produced winners and losers on a massive scale. Oligarchic structures spread, while political counterforces weakened. Entire regions and social groups were neglected, economically marginalized, culturally disregarded, and politically overlooked. The language of institutions became technocratic, abstract, and far removed from lived experience. Discontent grew slowly, then suddenly. In this sense, Trump was not the source of the crisis, but its accelerator. It was tempting to place the blame on individuals: Trump, oligarchs, media figures, politicians. This was understandable and partly justified. Yet it was not enough. There was also structural responsibility: systems that rewarded the concentration of capital without

democratic checks, political elites who ignored growing inequality, institutions that confused stability with justice, societies that postponed conflict resolution until resentments solidified into identities. History itself exerted pressure. Not as fate, but as a provider of choices. There were repeated opportunities to limit the power of the oligarchs. They were delayed, watered down, or abandoned. Each delay limited future options. In this sense, history did not act alone. It also acted through decisions that were not made.

Responsibility is widely distributed, but not equally weighted: the elites had more influence than the citizens. The institutions had more opportunities for foresight than the voters. The leaders had more responsibility than the followers. Nevertheless, the followers were not absolved of their responsibility. Democracies did not collapse only from above. They also eroded from below: through fatigue, cynicism, withdrawal, and the willingness to trade complexity for certainty. Trump did not invent hatred. He sensed that hatred was politically exploitable. Many other experienced politicians before him had already recognized these trends, but they did not want to go down this path.

The historical trajectory toward the division of American society revealed a tragic pattern: Necessary reforms were politically costly. Short-term stability was repeatedly prioritized over long-term corrections. By the time anger became a decisive factor in elections, there was no longer sufficient political capital available for constructive solutions. In this sense, the blame was diffuse, multifaceted, and cumulative. Not everyone was equally to blame. But almost no one was entirely innocent. This analysis did not end with condemnation. It ended with a question that was deliberately left open: Was the rise of oligarchic rule a historical inevitability, or rather the result of repeated inaction when opportunities for action still existed? It was history's task to record everything. And future judgment would ask not only who seized power, but also who allowed the conditions under which power could be seized.

## Chapter C

### Concepts of Philosophy of Strategy:

#### **Knowledge and Prior Knowledge:**

The starting point for my philosophy of knowledge is the distinction between knowledge and prior knowledge, between current knowledge and stored knowledge. Current knowledge is activated through thinking (by creating new knowledge or by “rethinking” old knowledge). Stored knowledge is inactive knowledge awaiting activation. Current knowledge is knowledge in a narrow sense. Knowledge in a broad sense also encompasses stored knowledge (prior knowledge, latent and inactive knowledge, limbo knowledge). Current knowledge is thought, is activated, is alive, exists within a thought process. Prior knowledge is latent, inactive, stored in limbo, and awaiting activation. The term “prior knowledge” indicates that this knowledge is potential. It is already there, but not yet in use. Prior knowledge is “old knowledge” stored in various forms, for example the books in a library constitute prior knowledge.

#### **Actors of Thought:**

Humans are the central thinkers, but animals can also think. Animal knowledge is not directly accessible to humans, but it can eventually be prior knowledge to us, for example strategists may be interested in animal attack tactics (as animal knowledge) on the assumption that the animals operate at the strategic optimum (under given conditions) due to the influence of evolution. Artificial intelligence is another actor capable of thinking and generating knowledge in a broad sense.

#### **Information Intelligence:**

Normal computer programs cannot think, although they operate very intelligently and can play chess better than humans. Such computer programs possess high information intelligence. Human evolution took a long time to create the information-intelligence systems of our body. With every step of a thought process (for example, when we see something and then process it), various layers of countless information-intelligence helpers are at work.

#### **The emergence of types of knowledge and societal knowledge:**

##### **Societal knowledge:**

The significance of societal knowledge: Human thought generates both important and unimportant knowledge. Knowledge that is important to individuals only for personal reasons does not provide society with significant knowledge. The important knowledge generated through thinking is stored by society. Society accumulates more and more knowledge in a broad sense. The individual dies, but society lives on. The individual as a knowledge worker can draw on societal prior knowledge. Without society, there is no knowledge, and without

knowledge, there is no society. There are seven types of knowledge in total. In the “society” type of knowledge, “societal knowledge” is generated. This type of knowledge forms the broad societal undercurrent of knowledge based on language and the existing societal structures and processes. A conversation between two people about the weather already generates societal knowledge, simply through the use of language. This is not important societal knowledge. Changes in societal structures and their corresponding implementation through knowledge operations, on the other hand, constitute important societal knowledge. Societal knowledge concerns the systems of society, its sectors, structures, institutions, groups, values, individual people, their families, their professional and private lives, and so on.

**The specific types of knowledge:**

The broad mainstream of knowledge cannot fulfill all societal needs. That is why other types of knowledge have developed. These six paths to knowledge assist society in specific areas or with specific problems. They give people meaning and hope. They enrich society. They make our lives more interesting and valuable. They make us human. The six specific types of knowledge fulfill genuine needs of society. One cannot invent new types of knowledge. Human societies have six specific basic needs for knowledge that can only be met by these specific types of knowledge. Every type of knowledge has advantages and disadvantages: The seven paths to knowledge not only solve problems, but they also create them. Every type of knowledge has its pitfalls. Every type of knowledge accomplishes something different. Every type of knowledge is structured differently in terms of methodology (i.e., in terms of its conceptual framework).

**The Limits of Social Knowledge:**

The broad mainstream of social knowledge absorbs much of the knowledge generated in the six specific types of knowledge, but not all of it. Some knowledge can only be understood by specialists (for example, by doctors through their scientific training) or can only be activated within the context of their professional practice (for example, by priests). Most members of society also have no influence over how military strategists arrive at their strategic decisions through knowledge operations. Enormous scientific achievements of the past are now taken for granted as social knowledge, for example, the introduction of the number zero.

**Ethical knowledge in the broad sense:**

Social knowledge is always embedded in value systems. This is intended to ensure the functioning of society in both private and public contexts. Orientation toward values enables society to develop social structures and to create the phenomena of culture and history. Seen in this light, social knowledge is ethical knowledge in a broad sense. This “ethics in a broad sense” makes constant social change possible. For the individuals, ethical knowledge in a broad sense concerns their life, the meaning of their life, and the meaning and purpose of all social phenomena.

**Ethical knowledge in the narrow sense:**

Within social knowledge, ethics in a narrow sense ensures the emergence of social moral concepts.

**Differences between specific types of knowledge:**

**“Strategy” as a type of knowledge:**

Strategy is about “enforcement.”

“Power knowledge” is employed in strategy.

“Pragmatic rationality” is particularly important in strategy.

“Responsibility” is a central concept in strategy.

Through their actions (especially through war), strategists can bring about enormous social changes in a short period of time. In the territories conquered by Alexander the Great, several generals established themselves as new rulers after his death, and Hellenistic culture was able to spread.

**“Science” as a type of knowledge:**

Science is about “searching” (searching for something, investigating something, verifying something, and so on).

In science, the “certainty of knowledge” is paramount.

In science, “truth-seeking rationality” is particularly important.

“Hypothesis” is a central concept in science.

Since the beginning of the modern era, science (along with technology) has been a type of knowledge that has played a decisive role in greatly energizing social development. We live very differently today than people did 140 to 150 years ago. Berlin had about 151,000 inhabitants around 1790 and around 1890 about 2 million. Philosophy, too, was pushed into the background. Thinkers such as Adam Smith, Auguste Comte, Sigmund Freud, and Max Weber came to be regarded as scientists rather than philosophers. Scientists are rarely held accountable for their work because they are not directly responsible for the application of knowledge.

**Knowledge Type “Philosophy”:**

Philosophy is about “questioning.”

In philosophy, the goal is “depth of knowledge.”

In philosophy, “deep rationality” is particularly important.

“Conceptual definition” is central in philosophy.

Philosophy questions itself and the other types of knowledge. The other specific types of knowledge cannot examine their own foundations. When strategists are interested in the fundamental questions of their discipline, they act as philosophers of strategy. The philosophy of science is philosophy and not science, even if scientists carry out such work. Philosophy, as the philosophy of philosophy, deals with fundamental questions of philosophical work. The philosophy of knowledge and the types of knowledge are important branches within the philosophy of philosophy.

**Type of knowledge “Art”:**

Art is about “creation.”

In art, the “aesthetic component of knowledge” is emphasized.

In art, “creative rationality” is particularly important.

“Interpretation” is a central concept in art.

Works of art convey not only art, but also philosophical, ideological, religious, social, scientific, and strategic content at the highest level. Homer already achieved this. In the two epics, the “Iliad” and “The Odyssey,” the various types of knowledge are explored in depth. Through these very verses, Homer not only offered his listeners artistic enjoyment but also imparted to them a wealth of philosophy and religion (mythology).

**Type of Knowledge: ‘Ideology’:**

Ideology is about “division.”

In ideology, one strives to “conceal knowledge” (regarding the hidden interests of ideologues).

In ideology, “propaganda rationality” is particularly important.

“Ideological constructs” are a central concept in ideology.

Scientists fear being associated with ideology, and they fear the allegation that their ideologically influenced interests and attitudes have consciously or unconsciously flowed into their findings. Strategists, on the other hand, are clearly intent on enforcing their interests and views with all their might. In doing so, there is no clear boundary between purely personal interests and those of the strategic unit. If one views religion from the outside (as a non-believer) as a cultural movement competing with others, it becomes an ideology.

### **Knowledge Type “Religion”:**

Religion is about “belief.”

Religion generates “transcendent knowledge.”

In religion, “dogmatic rationality” is particularly important.

“Divine being” is a central concept in religion.

In the Middle Ages, an exciting struggle arose between philosophy and religion. The enemies of philosophy, who completely rejected philosophy, were unable to prevail because the other theologians underestimated the danger philosophy posed to religion and thus to medieval culture. Philosophy was seen as a servant of theology, as a useful tool for religious purposes, as Anselm of Canterbury demonstrated with his proof of God. However, philosophy quickly became an equal partner with religion in medieval culture. This was an important cultural intermediate step on the path to Renaissance culture.

### **Philosophy of Strategy:**

#### **Meta level:**

Strategy, as a type of knowledge, cannot reflect on its own foundations. Only the philosophy of strategy can do this. It is the meta-level for actual strategic work. All strategists rely (consciously or unconsciously) on positions within the meta-level of their strategic thinking that are important to them. They must find an approach to strategy at the meta-level, because the level of simple strategic work is not capable of doing so. In this respect, strategists are always engaged in philosophical activity. Trump also justified his favorite approach on the meta-level. For him populism and propaganda were his powerful weapons to win elections, superior to any other approach.

#### **Agonistic Approach in the Philosophy of Strategy:**

The agonistic approach advocated in this work competes with other philosophical approaches to strategy. Some strategists can achieve astonishing success with their approaches in their specific fields of application (corporate strategy, political strategy, etc.). However, these approaches are often so tailored to the strategists in question that other strategists are doomed to fail with them. Furthermore, these specific approaches lack the necessary breadth. Unlike the agonistic approach, they cannot be applied generally (i.e., in all strategic areas).

#### **Levels of Knowledge in the Agonistic Approach to the Philosophy of Strategy:**

The highest philosophical level examines the seven types of knowledge and their significance for the type of knowledge known as strategy. This is the level of agonistics in a broad sense. The second level, agonistics in a narrow sense, is based on two concepts: “Strategic Project” and “Metamethodological Principles”. Every Strategic Project is based on three pillars: the strategist, the strategy, and the strategic unit. The Metamethodological Principles reveal which

overarching structural principles shape strategic thinking. The knowledge generated by the strategist's activities is not philosophical knowledge, but strategic knowledge from the knowledge type Strategy.

### **Strategic Projects:**

Strategic projects arise when three essential factors converge: the strategist with his or her capabilities and limitations, the strategy with its goal-means linkages, and the strategic unit (army, party, company, movement) as the bearer of the power to act. If one of these pillars is missing, no project emerges; but as soon as they are present, a project emerges, grows, changes, and stabilizes anew. In this process, strategic knowledge arises through actual action. At the project level, the strategist is mentioned in the same breath as the strategy and the strategic unit. His main task consists of establishing strategic guidelines for the strategic unit and their implementation. There is no strategy without strategists and no strategic unit without strategists. Without a strategic unit, we have only one or more would-be strategists who merely devise abstract plans, or for example a strategist with already concrete concepts for a strategic unit that only starts to exist, if the takeover of this structure is successful (see Trump's attempts in 2012 to run against Obama: There was no strategy, no strategist, no strategic unit, because nothing concrete unfolded). For concrete action to get underway, for a strategic project to emerge at all, the three pillars must be activated simultaneously.

### **Strategy Development:**

#### **General Methods and Content:**

Methodological and content-related terms occur in all types of knowledge. For example, the methodological term "city" can be defined as a social, scientific, or conceptual term from another type of knowledge. A purely methodological definition of "city" leaves open which city is meant. "Rome" is a content-based term for the knowledge worker. Content-based terms are not purely content-based, as they also require a methodological component. A "methodological-content-based definition" specifies which Rome is meant, for example, Rome as the hub of the Roman Catholic Church or as the center of the Roman Empire, and so on.

#### **Strategic Methods and Content:**

The first important task for strategists when developing a strategy is to identify methods and content and to organize them into a (at least rudimentary) hierarchical order through conscious or unconscious knowledge operations. In the end, only a few methods (such as the Trump method "cultural division") and contents are ultimately incorporated into the strategy. The top-level method (overarching method) in Trump's strategy for the 2024 election campaign was the method "propaganda." The corresponding top-level content (overarching content) was the content "Trump populism." The top-level method for Putin in his war against Ukraine was his concept of "geopolitics." This was based on methods such as "massive military machine" and "dictatorial rule." His top-level content dealt with "a historic opportunity to attack Ukraine." In doing so, he relied on content such as "the weak West's fear of nuclear-powered Russia" and "Russian imperialism" (Putin's model here is the Soviet Union and its influence on Eastern Europe).

#### **Methodological-content-related elements of knowledge:**

Strategists do not require isolated strategic methods and content for their strategic work, but rather "methodological-content-related elements of knowledge." These arise through the "fusion" of methods and content in the strategist's mind. It is possible that strategists already

has vague initial ideas of their “overarching methodological-content-related element” when formulating a strategy, which they then further develop through “sub-elements (methodological-content-related).” Other strategists, however, only arrive at their overarching methodological-content element after meticulous preparatory work.

**Strategic Core:**

When developing a strategy, strategists focus on the presumed “impact” of “methods” and “content” in the real world, initially considered in isolation as methodological and content-related elements, and then fused into “methodological-content-related elements,” whereby synergistic effects are also intended to come into play at all levels. The “overarching methodological-content-related element” is called the “Strategic Core”. It arises from the “fusion” of the overarching method and overarching content. Trump’s Strategic Core was his more or less clearly conscious concept of “a propaganda campaign for the 2024 presidential election to enforce Trump populism”. Putin’s Strategic Core was his concept of “a military strike using all available conventional forces as the sharpest weapon of geopolitics to rapidly conquer Ukraine, which cannot be supported by NATO forces, even though Belarus is making its territory available for the attack.” At the time, Putin did not yet know what risk he was taking with his Strategic Core. The Strategic Core encompasses the decisive elements that determine the success or of a strategic project. At its core, methods, content, and methodological-content-related elements (as superordinate and subordinate parts) coalesce into an effective whole. The strategic core exerts its effect through its “methodological-content-related sub-elements.” Depending on the strategy, there may also be further sub-elements beneath these sub-elements. The tactical levels take up the sub-elements intended for them (as specified by the strategy) and implement them, ideally in such a way that they not only have a short-term impact but also become effective in the long term and best serve the strategic endeavor as a whole. The Strategic Core is the direction and center; it sets the course and holds the project together. It is both a risk and an opportunity, for if the core fails, the entire project fails. A strategic core is usually lean in structure: a few elements produce the main effect. Strategy is never diffuse but has a center around which everything revolves.

**Strategic Periphery:**

The Strategic Periphery encompasses all strategically relevant elements outside the Strategic Core. They are not critical to success in the strict sense, but can stabilize, complement, and relieve the core’s performance. The periphery can become a stumbling block if neglected by the strategist, or a lifeline if the core begins to falter. A core with its few elements may generate 90% of the total impact, while a multitude of peripheral elements contribute only the remaining 10%. Nevertheless, maintaining them is important, and the strategist must devote significant time and strategic expertise to the Strategic Periphery. For Trump, the congressional election 2024 belonged only to the Strategic Periphery because he sensed that his influence on MAGA momentum would also secure a majority in Congress. For Trump, peripheral elements such as legal proceedings, media networks, or alliances with right-wing lawmakers stabilized his propagandistic core strategy. For Putin, energy policy and global propaganda belonged to the periphery, while the military project in Ukraine was at the core.

**Metamethod:**

The agonistic approach in the philosophy of strategy is based on the two major philosophical domains: “Strategic Project” and “Meta-Methodological Principles.” Every type of knowledge

has its own “color,” and so does strategy. Above all, the metamethodological principles show us what constitutes the particular color of strategy. The metamethodological principles decisively shape the strategist’s thinking while working on his strategic project. In this context, strategic projects are viewed purely methodologically, but at a higher methodological level (a meta-level), in contrast to the “simple methods” that are incorporated into strategy as strategic methods. Through this overarching perspective of the metamethod and through the concept of “Strategic Projects,” strategy is fundamentally constituted as a type of knowledge. Strategic Projects gain momentum through the metamethod, strategic innovation is enabled, and strategic engagement with reality is set in motion.

### **Agonistic Figure:**

An “agonistic figure” represents a specific strategic or tactical process of action. The mechanism of action of the agonistic figure “Supermarket” becomes clear when we compare this figure with the older societal figure “service store.” We see the power inherent in this agonistic figure in the example of the definition of the agonistic figure “supermarket” by the innovative strategist Sam Walton. Through the concept “agonistic figure,” a methodological connection is established between the metamethod and the strategic project. A strategist works with “simple methods,” which are then incorporated into his methodological and content-related elements and also combined with metamethods (metamethodological principles). The nine principles of the metamethod are highly abstract agonistic figures that are important for strategic work through their sub-figures (sub-principles). The metamethodological principles act as catalysts that generate more or less abstract agonistic (strategic, tactical) figures. “Agonistic (knowledge) figures” are concepts of the knowledge type Strategy. Such figures concern not only “simple methods” and “metamethods.” They also concern content, methodological-content-related elements, strategic cores, and strategic peripheral areas. Agonistic figures derive their strategic effectiveness, on the one hand, from existing sources. Thus, at the outset of his strategic project, Trump had access to Fox News as a propaganda machine with significant influence over potential Trump voters. Agonistic figures further derive their effectiveness from the strategist’s various knowledge operations, innovations, and creative processes. Trump knew how to use the echo chamber as propaganda machine, and he knew how to build a populist movement. In doing so, he relied on his interpretation of metamethodological principles. The term “agonistic figure” is preferred over the term “stratagem” in the agonistic approach. All stratagems are also agonistic figures, but not all agonistic figures are regarded as stratagems by those who use this term.

### **The Principle of Responsibility:**

**Sub-principle 1: Responsibility of the Strategist:** Strategic projects rest on the three pillars of strategist, strategy, and strategic unit. From the perspective of the Metamethod, strategic projects arise when the strategist assumes responsibility for a strategic unit. In doing so, the strategist is responsible for the strategy and for its implementation at the tactical levels.

**Sub-principle 2: Overall responsibility of the strategist:** For each strategic unit, there are one or more responsible persons. If two or more strategists are involved in the overall responsibility, then each of the strategists is responsible for the entire project. Even if a strategic initiative was created partly or almost entirely by other people, the strategist accepts that the initiative becomes his strategy by assuming overall responsibility. Whether one person bears overall responsibility or there are several strategists: Strategic work is always teamwork.

**Sub-principle 3: The Strategist's Framework Conditions:** The groups and individuals affected by the strategy want to gain influence over the strategy. The framework conditions define the limits of the strategist's power. The various interests that are to be incorporated into the strategy are part of the strategist's framework conditions. If the strategist cannot accept his framework conditions, then he must cease his work or not begin the activity in the first place. Only the strategist creates the strategy, observing his strict and less strict framework conditions in the process. There is no strategic authority above the strategy: No vision, no system of principles, no goal, no purpose, and no mission statement. The strategy has no external basis. The strategy is the basis.

**Sub-principle 4: Strict Accountability:** If the strategist takes his responsibility seriously, he needs no excuses, because every strategic failure can ultimately be traced back to the strategist's mistakes, even if coincidences and gross errors by individual tacticians led to the strategy's failure. However, it often happens that a strategist sees himself as a power strategist rather than a strategist of responsibility and performance, because he cannot be held accountable by anyone. Such a strategist can, for example, continue as an entrepreneur until his company goes bankrupt.

**Sub-principle 5: The three areas of leadership within a strategic unit:** First, as a strategic leader, the strategist seeks to implement his strategic vision. To ensure his vision is "realized", he requires the support of all stakeholders within the strategic unit, and the strategy defines the leadership structures necessary for realization. Strategy is thus leadership in the broadest sense. Second, the strategy must be implemented. If implementation (as leadership in the broader sense) fails, then the strategy also fails. Implementation involves practical work and the leadership of the actors (as leadership in the narrow sense) at all tactical levels of the strategic unit. Third, the strategist and his tacticians are responsible for leadership in a narrow sense. Good leaders operating at the strategic or tactical level understand a great deal about leadership in the narrow sense, but not every good leader in the narrow sense is also successful as a tactician in execution. A good tactician, in turn, may fail as a strategist. As a leader in the narrow sense, the strategist is in direct contact with all senior tacticians, the junior tacticians in his own tactical units, and with the personnel in the strategic staff office, if such an office exists.

**Sub-principle 6: A good leader in the narrow sense employs a mixed style:** He delegates as much as possible, but he also gives his people direct instructions as well. He is friendly and polite, but he can also come across as tough and demanding. He can fundamentally combine a friendly work atmosphere with a focus on performance. A wide range of character traits is available to the leader for his blended style. For example, he should be flexible and lead each group entrusted to him differently—his personal staff, the leadership team, the middle levels, and the rank and file. He must encourage, challenge, motivate, and inspire. For his tacticians he should be predictable (and for strategic rivals unpredictable). He must be able to slip into many roles.

**The Traits Principle (or principle of characteristic traits of strategic work):**

**Sub-principle 1: Ambiguity of Strategy:** Strategy, as a type of knowledge, is ambiguous across all strategically significant traits dimensions. It is ethical and unethical, rational and irrational, sensible and senseless, qualitative and quantitative, objective and subjective, abstract and concrete, theoretical and practical, judgmental and value-free, interest-driven and

interest-neutral, ideological and pragmatic, backward and progressive, compassionate and dispassionate, just and unjust, cruel and humane, revolutionary and reactionary, primitive and subtle, true and false, objective and subjective, creative and unimaginative, strong and unstable, etc. Why is strategy so ambiguous? Strategy is about implementing a strategy against strategic competition, and it cannot be unambiguous because otherwise strategists would be easy to outmaneuver. Often, the mere suspicion that the strategic opponent is resorting to unfair means is enough to compel one to look for such means as well. One must understand the characteristics of strategy, especially its ambiguity, and its gray and dark sides, in order to avoid unpleasant surprises as a strategist. However, the temptation to apply this knowledge always exists.

**Sub-principle 2: The Gray Sides of Strategy:** Strategy can certainly bring its gray sides to the forefront. It is then, for example, secret, hidden, masked, vague, elusive, convoluted, complicated, unclear, merely hinted at, ambiguous, and slippery.

**Subprinciple 3: The Dark Sides of Strategy:** In the strategy knowledge type, very dark considerations are sometimes put into practice. This knowledge type is then deceitful, mean, underhanded, false, scheming, unscrupulous, dangerous, hurtful, brutal, murderous, predatory, reckless, lawless, dictatorial, merciless, cruel, and so on (in all degrees). Every agonist (strategist, tactician) is bound by ethical considerations—both in the broad and narrow sense—and must pay the price for unethical behavior within that framework. For many agonists, unethical behavior may pay off, but eventually society will fight back if its ethical standards are suppressed, or it will suffer harm. Society does not accept everything a strategist does within the framework of his Strategic Project. Strategists who overreach will fail not only ethically but also strategically. The lower limit for the strategist is the framework of what is permitted as defined by the law. The upper limit, from the strategist's perspective, is reached when the Strategic Project is put at risk. In between lies the strategist's ethical leeway.

**Sub-principle 4: The “typically political” (in the broad sense) does not exist:** Politics is the sphere of society that deals with “governing.” Politicians are not only directly involved in “governing,” but also indirectly: in addition to their direct functional duties, politicians are particularly interested in career, party, and ideological issues. For politicians, the social world is above all a political world. Everything is a task or a problem or could become one. Everything is potentially harmful or useful. However, what is often considered “typically political” in society has, upon closer inspection, nothing to do with “governing.” Everywhere there is the exercise of power, the assertion and enforcement of interests, the emergence of conflicts, group formation, negotiation, struggle, violence, and intrigue. A power struggle within a religious community has no connection to “governing.” The “typically political” in this broad sense does not even exist, and thus there is no inherent characteristic behind it. These supposedly “political phenomena” are social phenomena that are also of interest to strategy and to science. Organizational psychologists speak of “micropolitics.” With this term, they emphasize, for example, the various interests of the actors within an organization. To advance their interests, they have many tools at their disposal: filtering information, forming cliques, spreading rumors, and the like. Science studies such phenomena, but strategists should create organizational structures that allow for as little “micropolitics” as possible. When everyone pulls in the same direction, no one has a free hand to stab a colleague in the back.

**Principle of Strategic Depth:**

**Sub-principle 1: Use of Deep Knowledge:** Their metamethodological knowledge helps strategists search for and identify “deep methods” and “deep content” to incorporate into the strategy, thereby giving the strategy strong roots. They provide the strategy with the necessary grounding. Thus, Donald Trump sensed and recognized how deeply American society was divided, and he was determined to exploit that. His “deep knowledge” pertained to the methodological-content related complex “social division in the USA.” Vladimir Putin, too, incorporated his deep knowledge of “Russia’s geopolitical past” into his strategy in the war against Ukraine.

**Sub-principle 2: The Strategist’s Personal Depth:** Strategists often incorporate their own depth into the strategy. We can only speak of the strategist’s personal depth if the incorporated methods and content are crucial to the strategy’s success (or failure). Thus, every long-term successful strategist is also a “will-driven strategist”, but there are only a few” pronounced” will-driven strategists, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger in his long-term career strategy. The pronounced will-driven strategist propels the development of his strategic project primarily through sheer will. If he lacks talent, experience, knowledge, or other resources, he seeks out what is missing from others. He develops tremendous diligence. He is constantly learning. He keeps improving in key areas. He never gives up. If he cannot achieve a goal, he takes a different path. He develops a sense of his strengths, which he then leverages. He does not let his weaknesses discourage him. The meta-method “Strategic Depth” is an abstract agonistic (strategic, tactical) figure. The figure “Personal Depth of the Strategist” is already more concrete. A hierarchy of such agonistic figures emerges when f. e. the “will strategists” and then the agonistic possibilities of the will strategists are taken into account. “Pronounced will strategists” rely on their “perseverance” and/or their “will to achieve goals” and/or their “fighting spirit.” Often, people fight because one side takes pleasure in the struggle. The outcome of the struggle is often uncertain. Other strategists try to avoid conflicts through long-term planning while still achieving victory. Fighting spirit is also needed to battle against something (e.g., one’s own fear). If one suffers a defeat, one wants to keep fighting. Maybe it will work out next time. However, if one is too focused on victory, one cannot shake off a defeat so easily. Other deep strategists draw on the depth of their personal past. Ray Kroc worked with his past. For many years, Kroc sold products to restaurants across America. In doing so, he saw and learned a great deal, as he was deeply interested in the restaurant industry. His experience helped him recognize just how good the McDonald’s restaurant concept was. In addition to the will strategists, there are several other deep strategists: courage strategists, value strategists like former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, creative strategists like Steve Jobs of Apple, as well as strategists who work extensively with their subconscious and other types of deep strategists. A few questions can help illustrate what the “depth” of a strategist entails: What profession did the strategist pursue? Did his father also have this or a similar profession? In what field does the strategist have extensive experience? What has strongly impressed or influenced him? How was the strategist raised? What resources were available to him? What did the strategist see as the meaning of life? What culture shaped him? Where do his strengths and weaknesses lie? To which generation does he belong? What ideologies are important to him? Which element of his personality is particularly pronounced? The Traits Principle dealt with the characteristics of strategy, for example irrationality. A strategists can employ irrational elements, but this does not make him a distinctly irrational strategist (like Donald Trump).

### **Directional Principle:**

**Sub-principle 1: Anti-Strategy:** As soon as a strategist assumes responsibility for a strategic unit, he is a strategist with a strategy. He cannot opt out of the strategy. Even blind (or chaotic) activism on the part of the strategist and his tacticians is then a “strategy of blind or chaotic activism”. With such a strategy, the strategist does not set a clear direction or there are frequent changes in direction, and therefore there is no consolidation of strategic forces along a clearly recognizable strategic orientation. This strategy is anti-strategy. The strategist is overwhelmed, a chaotic figure, or both. Trump is a master of anti-strategy. First, he sets a vague direction; then chaos breaks out (intentionally and out of incompetence); then the chaos is sold to his base as somehow “necessary”; and finally, he attempts to impose his dictatorial goals amid the fog of chaos.

**Sub-principle 2: Normal Strategy:** In normal strategies, that is, strategies that are not anti-strategies, the strategist sets a course: he takes a risk; he steers the ship on course. In doing so, the strategist selects the methods and content to be incorporated into the strategy. An enormous number of methods and elements are not included in the strategy during this process. Every normal strategy is “focused.” Only a few methods, elements, and methodological-content-related elements shape the strategy. It does not matter how focused the strategy is. What matters is simply that it is focused at all. The strategist then deploys all his “strategic forces” to ensure the strategy’s success. A motorcyclist eventually loves speed, chooses his destinations based on his mood of the moment or at random, then heads toward these destinations at full throttle. This approach does not work in strategy. Due to frequent changes in direction, the deployment of strategic forces is too limited or almost entirely absent. The strategist must fully commit to the refinement and make all available forces available to the strategy. As the strategy progresses, new forces continually emerge. These forces originate from the strategist, from the strategic unit itself, and from people and structures that intervene from the outside to provide support. Strategic forces include, for example, tangible assets such as land, buildings, equipment, and money, but also rights and patents, power, knowledge, experience, creativity, and so on. Choosing a direction (intensification, concentration of forces) is a serious matter. One cannot change a strategy at will, because the deployment of forces creates structures that can only be established with great effort, and changing existing structures is often even more arduous, more expensive, and more difficult. A strategist can implement multiple strategies if, for example, as a corporate strategist, he manages several independent companies simultaneously. However, a corporate strategist can also manage the different companies in his portfolio using a single strategy.

**Sub-principle 3: Action Dilemma:** In strategy, the effects of strategic action often cannot be properly assessed. The action dilemma states that the strategist has no reliable principles at his disposal with which he can reduce the risk of his actions. For example, the economic principle does not help business strategists either. One must choose between minimizing resource use or maximizing the target system. A corporate strategist, on the other hand, can in reality (over a longer period) increase revenue and profit, significantly increase market share, and still reduce costs.

**Sub-principle 4: Specialists and Generalists:** The more precise the “direction” of the strategist, the more focused and specialized the strategic unit is, the narrower is the methodological-content-related scope of that unit. The distinction between generalists and

specialists is based on the methodological, content-related, and methodological-content-related scope of the strategic units. A specialized strategic unit is not very flexible. A company that specializes, for example, in the manufacture of certain engines, cannot easily enter other industries. Specialization also offers advantages. Such companies are often small, agile, responsive, and unbureaucratic. One must not confuse specialization with “sharpness.” With a sharp knife, one can cut many things almost effortlessly. One can immediately tell whether a knife is sharp or not. The sharpness of a strategy is not so easy to determine. There are sharp generalists and dull specialists. Nor is “depth” a matter of specialization. Generalists and specialists must go deeper. Depth enhances the quality of methods, content, and methodological-content-related elements. Every strategy should be built on a solid foundation. Every strategy with depth thus becomes something special. This gives the strategy “character” and the strategic unit a greater chance of survival. The character of the strategy protects against imitation. Imitation is also risky. Isn’t it better to put all one’s efforts into one’s own methods, content, and methodological-content-related elements? Specialists, too, can leverage synergies through the deepened interplay of strategically significant factors and forces. Generalists tend to be synergistically oriented because they have the ability to combine many elements (methods, content, and methodological-content-related elements) to improve strategic success.

### **Tactical Principle:**

**Sub-principle 1: Implementation of the Strategy:** If the strategic project is still invisible during its inception, visibility must follow later through the “tactical implementation of strategic planning”. The creation of the strategy cannot be strictly separated from its “strategic implementation”. During the development phase, strategy implementation enables the ongoing refinement, modification, and supplementation of the project. In the initial phase of a strategic project, strategy implementation controls the course of the development process. Where must the strategy be supplemented, in the strategic core or in the strategic periphery? In the development phase, additions and changes to the strategy do not yet constitute a change in strategy. The (tactical) implementation of the strategy is primarily a matter of tactics, the “higher-level tactics,” and their “lower-level tactics.” However, the strategy must make fundamental statements regarding tactics. The methodological-content-related elements regarding the implementation of the strategy contained in the strategic core or the strategic periphery have a major influence on the high-level tactics and the sub-tactics. Strategy determines the tactical scope of the major tactical units. A tactician must not merely “interpret” the strategy on his own but must also take into account the interpretation of the strategy by higher-level tactics. Tacticians are primarily concerned with implementing the higher-level tactics that pertain to them. In doing so, they must interpret the higher-level tactics. Any interference by the strategist in tactical matters constitutes a violation of the principle of sole responsibility of the tacticians and higher-level tacticians for their tactical sub-units. The strategy should specify what is to happen in the event of conflicts between tacticians at the same tactical level regarding tactical execution. It is not necessary for a tactician and his senior tacticians to operate within the same organizational unit of the strategic unit. Every tactician must focus on his senior tactics in his work. He may modify his tactics within his framework. If this framework is exceeded, he must seek agreement with the senior tacticians. The strategist can adopt one or more senior tactics and thus become tactically active himself.

**Sub-principle 2: The Strategy-Tactics Logic:** The establishment of the Strategy-Tactics Logic in accordance with the principle of “strategy execution” does not mean that this will bring about undesirable consequences: too many hierarchical levels, excessive complexity, bureaucratization, slowdowns, overregulation, overburdening of those responsible, conflicts, neglect of important matters, inflexibility, high risk, militarization, excessive pressure to perform, centralization, a planned economy, top-heaviness, and a lack of creativity with regard to the strategic unit. All other logics (organization, process, structure, function, planning, competence, system, phase, decision, goals, and so on) only unfold their methodological impact along the central strategy-tactics logic. Processes must support tactics. Organizational units, of course, do not have to correspond to the tactical units. The tactical cores of the tacticians ensure speed, simplicity, and effectiveness.

**Sub-principle 3: Getting the work done:** Those entrusted with tactics must execute the strategy while simultaneously handling the “day-to-day work.” Soldiers at war face varying levels of demand daily but are under heavy strain during major battles. For employees in a company day-to-day (daily) work looks quite different. Strategy and tactics are “theory,” and the day-to-day work is “practice.” Practice should operate within the theoretical framework. Practice is the touchstone for theory. Practice has repercussions on theory. Practice is the purpose of theory. Through day-to-day work, the theory-practice system is preserved. Companies make profits and can thus grow. For senior tacticians in a strategic unit, day-to-day work looks very different from that of tacticians at the lowest tactical level. There are three lines of work: from senior tactics to junior tactics, from junior tactics to senior tactics, and from one tactic to another tactic at the same tactical level. Thus, in war, the units entrusted with the supply of food and war materials and the evacuation of the wounded must cooperate seamlessly with the combat troops. The people who do the main work at the lowest tactical level also have some tactical leeway, since the execution of the work at hand (in general) is not, shall not or cannot be regulated down to the last detail.

### **Value Principle:**

**Sub-principle 1: Strategic values in the broad sense:** The Value Principle does not seek to examine the ethical basis of strategy. That is the task of the Traits Principle. The Value Principle deals only with strategic values in a broad sense. A value strategist believes that such values (e.g., flexibility) bring him closer to the true essence of strategic work. Values in a narrow sense (beauty, justice, truth, etc.) can acquire strategic significance and thus be employed as values in a broad sense. For example, the value (in a narrow sense) “beauty” can play an important role among the strategically significant methodological-content-related elements of a corporate strategist, and “beauty” is therefore intended to help make his company successful. Strategic values in the broad sense can be derived from human characteristics and behaviors. People are wise, cautious, courageous, clever, persistent, quick, reasonable, just, determined, and so on. This leads us to strategic values in a broad sense, such as courage and flexibility. We view values positively and compare them to goods. Values are valuable to us, just like the material goods we possess. Thus, a strategic unit can be spared great harm through its courage (creativity, caution, etc.). In certain situations, slowness and seemingly hesitant action can be more important than speed.

**Sub-principle 2: Values in the broad sense as agonistic figures:** For the strategist, strategic values in the broad sense are not general values, but *his* own values, which he arrives at

through his definitions (e.g., of creativity). His focus is on the agonistic figures with their corresponding sub-figures, which he intends to employ in his strategy. Strategists are primarily interested in the agonistic figures underlying the strategic values. In the agonistic method “offensive,” the attacker determines where, how, and when the attack takes place. The attacker can attack precisely and make thorough preparations. He must also anticipate counterattacks by the defenders. The strategist decides which values in the broad sense should play a role in his strategy, and in doing so, he also decides what form a value should take, that is, what degree of offensiveness, flexibility, etc., he should allow. Agonistic (strategic, tactical) values are agonistic figures, but conversely, agonistic figures can also become values. The “bridgehead” method is an agonistic figure. It involves “establishing a foothold on the other side.” This conceptual framework is so widespread that it is familiar to many strategists. It has become a strategic value in a broad sense. When we use agonistic values in a broad sense, we benefit from the experiences of many strategists. These values tell us what we should prioritize so that we do not make the same mistakes as the strategists who were not yet familiar with these values: offense, defense, perseverance, security, toughness, flexibility, wisdom, cleverness, enthusiasm, and so on. Jack Welch utilized the agonistic concepts embedded in his value of “Simplicity.”

**Sub-principle 3: Flexibility and Degree of Flexibility:** Flexibility is important for corporate strategists. There are companies that are very flexible; they expand into new markets, develop new technologies, or continuously change their organizational structure. The Strategic Core dictates or at least tolerates such behavior. A company that is already flexible can maintain its flexible structure. In that case, this strategic unit does indeed have a great deal of flexibility, but its degree of flexibility is low: Such a company cannot transition to a less flexible strategic orientation without a change in strategy. A specialized firm with low flexibility but a high degree of flexibility can penetrate other markets more easily over time, as this can be accomplished without a change in strategy and the company is already structurally prepared for these opportunities. After all, it is difficult and costly to create structures from scratch quickly when they are urgently needed. The strategist must set his own degrees for all his strategic values. Aggressive strategists like Trump prefer a high degree of offensiveness and a low degree for the value of caution, constantly operating with reduced caution.

**Sub-principle 4: Optimum or Maximum:** Strategists who strive for the optimum are optimizers. Optimizers understand the long term. They often stay in the background. They ensure that problems do not arise in the first place. Often, more is achieved when a conflict can be prevented through timely action. Optimizers do not accumulate so many enemies through their actions that they are eventually hunted down by them. Optimizers need a lot of patience and strong nerves. Optimizers want to reach the highest mountain peak. If they reach only a secondary peak, they descend again and try a different path. Optimizers must accept that in many important areas they can only operate at half strength because their overall resources are insufficient, since optimizers juggle more important topics and areas than maximizers. The optimizer is a marathon runner who must pace himself well. Unimportant setbacks leave him unmoved. He is determined to achieve the goals along the path to the optimum. He must work just as hard as a maximizer. The optimizer sometimes adopts a wait-and-see approach to avoid costly and exhausting reversals. He does not follow every trend. For Trump, the maximizer, the 2024 presidential election was solely about his electoral victory, and the fact that he would

later probably fail to keep important campaign promises as president, also due to his inability to govern, did not concern him at the time.

### **07) Vision Principle:**

**Sub-principle 1: Vision is part of the strategy:** Through the vision principle, the strategist considers how the strategy should, on the one hand, remain grounded, but on the other hand, be designed to be as ambitious as possible. The concept “vision” deals with the “concise, directional concept of the future for the strategic unit.” These concepts of the future are methodological-content-related in nature. The starting point for the strategist’s vision work for the strategic unit are individual terms such as “industry leader” or “successful global company” for corporate strategies. For Ukrainian strategic leadership, a methodological-content-related element took center stage: driving the Russians out of Ukraine. The visions of the future should be subordinate to strategy formulation: Vision development should be serious and realistic strategic work. The vision must not be an unattainable goal like the North Star, which only vaguely indicates the direction. Nor is the vision like a powerful balloon that rises into the sky and carries the entire strategy away with it. One does not automatically become a great leader simply by setting grand goals.

**Sub-principle 2: Avoiding a vision trap:** When a strategist devises “grand” visions, there is a high risk that the strategic unit will lose touch with reality and the strategic project in question will fail. This strategist has fallen into the vision trap. A strategist should set ambitious but realistic goals, and of course, strategic work involves risk. Caution is always advisable. As it turned out, Napoleon was not cautious enough and fell into a vision trap with his Russian campaign.

### **Sub-principle 3: The communication function of the vision:**

Due to the various functions that visions are intended to fulfill, the vision principle is of great importance to strategists. Strategists do not communicate all their strategic considerations “outwardly,” but only a portion of them. For example, corporate strategists specifically target customers, employees, investors, authorities, and so on, to influence them. The vision should be communicated alongside the rest of the strategy. Through the communication of the strategy, employees should learn everything necessary about: medium- and long-term goals, values, and culture (of the strategic unit), planned changes to existing processes or structures, new programs or operational priorities, etc. Above all, they should also become familiar with the strategist’s visionary ideas. The communicated part of the strategy shows employees what the strategist expects them to do. They shall go the extra mile for the strategy. Everyone in the strategic unit shall pull together in the same direction.

**Sub-principle 4: The tension function of the vision:** In the German language, the term “Spannung” has many meanings: electrical voltage, a suspenseful movie, nervous tension, a bridge spans a river, to stretch someone on the rack, the bow is drawn, I am curious, etc. A strategist must be able to handle the concept of “tension” (in a broad sense): He must assess whether the strategy extends into the future. Above all, he is interested in the “gap” between the current and the desired future reality of the strategic unit. “Tension” is not just about a quantitative gap, but also a qualitative one. The tacticians in a strategic unit with an unfavorable starting position know what lies ahead. That alone has an enormously motivating effect. Added to this are the visionary goals, which provide additional “tension.” Everyone shall know that achieving ambitious intermediate goals brings them closer to the visionary goals.

**Sub-principle 5: The directional function of the vision:** Every strategist sets a course. The strategist embarks on a long journey. The vision shows us where the journey is to lead. The strategist's vision indicates the endpoint of the strategic journey, but it remains unclear how this goal is to be achieved. The more precise the direction, the more specialized and focused the strategic unit becomes. The vision helps the strategist with this focus. Through this visionary focus, the already focused methodological-content-related elements gain more bite. At the start of the critical phase of the war against Russia, the Ukrainians knew they had to fight differently than the Russians to avoid being quickly overrun by this massive military machine. This was important methodological-content-related refinement and, at the same time, the beginning of visionary refinement. Through fighting spirit and the development of their own methodological-content-related elements of warfare against this opponent, whose style of warfare they knew all too well, they were certain, and this was expressed through this visionary refinement, that "this opponent can be completely worn down in the long term," as long as Ukraine's friendly foreign allies stand by its side.

**Sub-principle 6: The mobilizing function of strategy:** These visions help mobilize all forces. If a strategist is naturally very courageous, then he also needs a courageous vision to fully realize his potential. Despite numerous legal proceedings and the impending, highly significant decisions by the highest courts, Donald Trump showed great confidence at the start of his campaign that he could successfully overcome these challenges. Thus, he held fast to his vision of becoming U.S. President for a second term. If a strategist tends to be cautious and not particularly courageous, but very ambitious, then his courage will undoubtedly grow if he opts for an ambitious strategy with an ambitious vision. If strategic units have too little power and too few resources for their ambitious plans, then they must somehow compensate for this through superior knowledge, through new ideas, creativity, courage, enthusiasm, tenacity, speed, flexibility, precision, discipline, and so on. Tacticians at all levels often feel under intense pressure from ambitious strategic units. But fear and pressure are not inherently negative. After a job well done, one feels proud of one's own contribution to the overall achievement and of one's own capabilities. In the long run, one can only take pride in one's own achievements if these achievements are also "recognized" accordingly. In addition to visionary goals in a narrow sense, tacticians should also be addressed and motivated by visionary goals in a broader sense. These goals then appeal to the emotions, ideologies, and values of the tacticians.

**Sub-principle 7: The Vision Traps:** If, as a strategist, I let myself be guided by a vision and my strategic project fails, then I have fallen into the vision trap. In doing so, my visionary goals may have been set far too optimistically for some reason, and I thereby fell into the optimism trap. I placed too much trust in the strategy, and my abilities as a strategist. Or I was so highly motivated that I could not (or did not want to) see that my strategy was not based on a sound, realistic foundation. High motivation alone cannot force strategic success, and one falls into the motivation trap.

### **Principle of Origin or Principle of Reduction:**

**Sub-principle 1: The pre-structuring influence of a higher-level method or a higher-level methodological-content-related element:** These pre-structuring influences ultimately have their roots in one of the various types of knowledge, for example in science. Physics is particularly important in the context of reductionism, referred to as physicalism or physical

reduction. Biology, economics, psychology, sociology offer further possibilities for reduction to science referred to as biologism, economism, psychologism and sociologism.

**Sub-principle 2: “Structure” and “Game” as examples of pre-structuring methods:** If, for example, a strategist likes to work with the concept of “structure,” then he sees this method as an important sphere of influence (an important source) for his strategic thinking. The way he views this method makes it clear which types of knowledge (science, philosophy, social knowledge) are significant to him in this context. Even ideology can play a major role, as there are fanatical adherents of large or small structures. Some political parties want a lean state, but the well-developed structures in the defense sector should not be scaled back. When strategists reduce the world to a “game,” they can gain tremendous operational clarity. Games have rules, goals, winners, and losers. It is not enough for strategists to master only the “chess” method in strategy. They must also be able to switch to other games. Chess is a game of perfect information. Nothing is hidden. Whoever can calculate further ahead inevitably wins. A strategist who views the world as a chessboard believes in pure causality and predictability. Poker, on the other hand, is a game of imperfect information. The opponent’s cards are unknown. Here, it is not the one who calculates best who wins, but the one who manages uncertainty and lures the opponent into making mistakes through bluffs. Strategists can switch the game system. If one is logically inferior, one forces the opponent into the poker system, where risk and psychology are key. Donald Trump likes to play high-risk games in zero-sum scenarios. He tries to win, and his opponent is supposed to lose everything. By maximizing stakes and risk, he tries to bring his opponents to their knees. Thus, during the critical phase of his trials and convictions, he did not act modestly but went on the massive offensive. Trump, therefore, did not adhere to the old rules of the game in the judiciary and politics. In the past, politicians were often forced to resign even over much smaller issues.

**Sub-principle 3: Pre-structuring Methods of Physicalism:** Since strategy historically emerged on the battlefield, where physical masses clashed in a physical space, it was to be expected that physical considerations would be incorporated into its formative foundation. This way of thinking must not be exaggerated, for physics describes only the “hardware” of the world, but strategy deals predominantly with human systems. Many physical concepts are important to strategists: space, time, motion, force, center of gravity, leverage, acceleration, mass, velocity, and so on. Napoleon, for example, used the “velocity” of his armies to catch enemy generals off guard. The Russian generals used the vastness of the Russian “space” to run Napoleon into the void. Many strategists are rightly fascinated by physics: one can easily drive a nail into a board. A judoka uses the opponent’s force and hurls him through the air. Strategists rightly believe that one can turn physical concepts into strategically significant concepts, but one must not overdo it and fall prey to physicalism.

**Sub-principle 4: Pre-structuring Methods of Biologism:** In nature, every species has developed its own combination of abilities that guarantees its survival. This “competence” is, so to speak, the “strategy” of a species, and the corresponding strategist is evolution. Apart from this “strategy,” there is only “tactics”: fighting for dominance in the lion pack, territorial disputes with other lions, competition with other hunters, and battles with prey animals, which are often highly defensive. Evolution, as the name implies, is not “revolutionary.” “Revolutions” only occur when new species emerge. Nature’s “strategies” are long-term strategies and persist until the species in question becomes extinct. Through biological reductionism,

strategists learn to think in terms of systemic contexts. Corporate strategists, for example, then view their industry as their “species” and consider what prospects this industry has in the relevant environment, what “tactical” adjustments to changing environmental conditions are necessary, and whether new “species” (i.e., industries) are already emerging. Military strategists in Russia are confronted with the fact that a once-important branch of the armed forces (the Russian Navy) is losing significance. Evolution operates through two hard mechanisms that every strategist must understand: mutation and selection. Strategists can also apply this insight to their work. In the economy, mutations are driven by startups or new technologies. Also, for the military new technologies (e.g., the use of FPV drones) are important. Selection mechanisms can also be observed: the market or the battlefield mercilessly decides which “species” survives. A strategist who thinks biologically does not try to swim against the current but rather understand the environment’s selection criteria better than the competition. In biology, it is not necessarily the strongest that wins, but the best-adapted. If the niche shrinks, even the tactical optimization of the lion pack is of no use, and the species must split. Nature is merciless; this is an important lesson for strategists. They must learn to cope with work-related stress. If the prey (the market/competitor) gets faster, the hunter must get faster. Standing still is synonymous with biological death. This explains why companies in highly competitive industries (tech) are under constant stress despite billions in profits. Biologism also has its dark sides, primarily referring to its influence on the emergence of racist ideologies. Furthermore, strategists who are overly enamored with biologism, often lean toward radical social Darwinism. They believe that destruction and ruthlessness are “natural” and therefore right. In doing so, they overlook the fact that in nature, symbiosis and cooperation are also highly successful “strategies.”

**Sub-principle 5: Pre-structuring Methods of Economism:** In economism, strategic work is significantly influenced by economic concepts and terms. Economic reductionism is practiced not only by corporate strategists, but also by politicians, economic policymakers, geopolitical analysts, military strategists, and other strategic actors. Since there are an enormous number of economic terms and concepts that are used by such reductionists, they cannot be presented here. Let’s take, for example, the important concept of “money.” What is particularly interesting to strategists is the use of money to finance something. In this process, money flows once, multiple times, or regularly from the donor to the recipient. For the Ukrainian president, it is of paramount importance to maintain good relations with supporting nations in order to defend the Ukrainian state against Russia. The USA, the EU and other countries made enormous financial resources available to help Ukraine. Donald Trump saved Argentina from bankruptcy. Economic terms and concepts are very important for strategists, and they offer them the opportunity to attach great significance to these methods and apply them with reductionist intent, but the actors must not overdo reductionism and believe that strategy is only about economics and money. Economic policy strategists should not believe that the economic application of individual economic concepts (by John Maynard Keynes, Milton Friedman, etc.) is sufficient to ensure long-term success as an economic strategist. There are also “mixed” terms and concepts that, from a strategic perspective, do not have a purely economic meaning but are assigned here to the chapter on economism. Such terms in connection with Trump include, for example: oligarchy, meritocracy, tariffs, working class, trade agreements, tax cuts for the wealthy, etc.

**Subprinciple 6: Pre-structuring Methods of Sociologism:** Sociological reductionism is the counterpart to psychological reductionism. While the psychologically oriented strategist reduces everything to the individual, the sociologically oriented strategist reduces everything to the collective. Strategists who lean toward sociologism, for example, view strategic events through the lens of demographic trends. They may then believe that a country with a young, growing population will inevitably expand or experience unrest, and that an aging country (such as Russia or China) will act strategically defensively or act aggressively out of desperation before it runs out of “young men”. In the spirit of sociologism, one can view Trump less as a person and more as a symptom of a “rebellious working class” opposing a “global elite.” This one-sided perspective would be dangerous for strategic adversaries. Trump is not merely a symptom, but an unpredictable and dangerous actor. Mao Zedong was a master of sociological reductionism. Through his sociologism, he reduced military success to sociological roots in the peasantry: if the sociological foundation is sound, technical inferiority (against the Nationalists or the Japanese) is irrelevant. Sociologism is not without risk for strategists. One may possess superior group morale, but if the opponent, for example, employs superior weapons against which there is no physical defense, sociological cohesion is of little help. Sociological analyses cannot predict geniuses or madmen, nor can they foresee sudden, grave events. The Europeans believed they knew America well and could rely on America completely, then suddenly Trump came along. European sociologism regarded American democracy as an impregnable fortress in a world with many authoritarian rulers, and therefore Europe’s fundamental trust in America as a leading power remained unshakeable until Trump’s emergence. But even before that, there were frequent problems with the Americans, which were, however, quickly pushed aside. It was believed that Americans behavior would soon be in accordance with European sociological wishful thinking. This led to rigid strategies that made it difficult to react quickly to sudden political shifts in America.

**Sub-principle 7: Pre-structuring Methods of Psychologism:** The shift from physical to psychological reductionism marks the transition from the mastery of matter to the mastery of the mind. In strategy, this is the realm where the focus is not on “mass” or “acceleration.” A strategist who employs psychological reductionism believes that the most important key to victory lies in the opponent’s mind or in the psyche of one’s own troops. One’s own troops are to develop a strong will, and the spirit of the opponents is to be broken. Political strategists quickly recognized that Trump was a pronounced narcissist. So, they tried to manipulate him through flattery. Putin exerted enormous influence over Trump (he owned Trump), for whatever reasons. This was not just about dividing the world into three major spheres of influence. Putin relied too heavily on his power over Trump. He focused on Trump and thus attempted to win the war. Has he also sufficiently considered the possibility that he might lose this war? Although he “owned” Trump, he (hopefully) overestimated Trump’s capabilities, for the U.S. possessed its own collective mental capacity that transcended the psyche of a single individual. Putin knew that political leadership under a narcissistic, charismatic leader was unstable. Trump could be forced to change course. Psychologism was not without danger for strategists or their strategic units. One must not overestimate the possibilities offered by this reductionism and, for example, believe that it is sufficient to boost the morale of one’s own troops. The Nazis’ belief in “final victory” was a murderous form of psychological reductionism which ignored their physical inferiority compared to the Allies. Strategists must not make the mistake of believing

that enemy strategists are like themselves. In doing so, they underestimate the fact that strategists from a different culture or ideological background have entirely different psychological attitudes.

**Sub-principle 8: The Significance of Reduction to Philosophy:** Philosophical reductionism (“philosophism”) is not about studying textbooks, but about the strategist’s efforts to create and understand the ontology of his own world. When a strategist reduces concepts such as “money,” “power,” or “morale” philosophically to use them in his strategy, he exercises a form of conceptual sovereignty. He redefines reality in such a way that his actions become logically compelling within it. Thus, for example, time for a strategist does not become a linear phenomenon as in physics, but rather a “window of opportunity” that can be stretched or narrowed according to his needs. A strategist must not delve too deeply into the world of conceptual work, thereby allowing himself to be distracted from important strategic work. After all, he is a strategist, not a philosopher. A top strategist must be capable of treat his “philosophical concepts” as “working-hypotheses.” He must remain flexible and discard them when they no longer apply. Strategists shall note that ethics and morality are very sensitive areas. Trump acted like a bull in a china shop in this regard. It did not harm him, especially not among his evangelical core voters, who apparently do not draw inspiration from the Bible on every issue. Trump evidently held the philosophical view that presidents are not bound by “normal” morality. In this respect, he was engaging in philosophical reductionism, for this question touched on the core of Trump’s style of politics: If “normal” morality (love of truth, modesty, respect for the law) was defined as a mere obstacle to the sovereign’s mission, then the violation of this morality was not a “mistake,” but a necessary strategic act. While this philosophical reduction grants the strategist great freedom of action, it alienates him from the sociological and ethical reality of those he seeks to lead.

**Sub-principle 9: The Significance of Reduction to Technology:** Superior military technology enables military strategists to gain significant advantages on the battlefield. Military strategists should identify the potential applications of new military technologies and promote these technologies until they are ready for deployment. In this respect, their reductionist thinking is in perfect alignment with the logic of military strategists, if significant military technological innovations can alter the balance of power on the battlefield. One example is the use of longbowmen in the battles of the Hundred Years’ War. From a strategic perspective, the longbow was part of a technological system that destroyed the existing military logic (the dominance of heavy cavalry): it could pierce the armor of French knights from a distance. A skilled archer fired significantly more arrows per minute than a warrior with a crossbow. The “software” behind the hardware was the lifelong training of English peasants, which was mandated by law. Thanks to the longbow, the English were able to achieve a multiple of military effectiveness at a fraction of the cost (peasants instead of knights). Reductionism “worked” because the new technology undermined the old logic. That was sensible reductionism. This approach turns into unreasonable reductionism when one realizes too late that the technological advantage may not last long. The French, for example, could not suddenly switch their military system to peasant warriors, but they later developed better artillery, which in turn attempted to neutralize the longbows at even greater distances. The use of new technology offers not only military strategists the chance to gain strategic advantages. This way of thinking leads to a technological arms race in many strategic areas. In the geopolitical arms race

between the superpowers, the U.S. and China, the innovative forces themselves (NVIDIA, AI companies), and not just their past innovations, are becoming decisive factors in the arms race and thus in reductionist thinking “on steroids”. However, this is also a slippery slope into unhealthy technological reductionism. For by focusing heavily on key players, one easily “overlooks” the emergence of new, potentially significant players, or the fact that strategic competitors are exploring new avenues (for example, modern analog computing).

**Sub-principle 10: The Significance of Reduction to History:** In historical reductionism, strategists are influenced by narratives. In the advanced stage of this kind of reductionism, the strategist is obsessed with such narratives. He succumbs to historicism, believes in his destiny, and sees himself as the executor of a historical mission. Putin is an example used here to illustrate historicism. As a KGB agent in the GDR, Putin was a henchman of Soviet imperialism. As president, he distinguished himself as an aggressive geopolitician. But Putin has also internalized a deeper historical layer: Russia’s restlessness and aggressiveness. At the end of “Dead Souls,” Gogol described Russia as a frenzied troika that stormed past everything, while other nations had to make way. Putin was obsessed with such ideas, which significantly guided his actions as a strategist. Putin 1 was a KGB agent entrusted with operational tasks: subversion, surveillance, and blackmail. Putin 2 was the dictator and geopolitician who took immediate and ruthless political and military action whenever he perceived Russia to be threatened from within or without. The Putin Doctrine, formulated during this phase, stated: Anyone who disregards Russian spheres of influence must expect resolute Russian resistance. The delineation of these spheres of influence was based on the former Soviet sphere of influence. The fact that many former Warsaw Pact states were admitted to NATO even before his time, he had to accept grudgingly. But Putin had by no means abandoned the concept of Russian spheres of influence. He has not had the power to enforce this concept of historical reductionism. Putin 3, however, did not want to “give up” Ukraine and Belarus under any circumstances and “lose” them to the West. Putin therefore decided to invade Ukraine. In this phase of losing touch with reality, his historicism became truly apparent: in his sense of mission, history served as justification for any sacrifice. He wanted to become a collector of “Russian soil”: Ukraine could not prevent Crimea from being forcibly annexed as Russian territory in 2014. Putin knew Russia’s eternal “restlessness” all too well. This aggressiveness stemmed from a sense of permanent threat, even amidst military superiority over smaller neighbors. He exploited this myth for his war: If history dictates that Russia must always suffer to be great, then economic sanctions or losses on the front lines are not “mistakes”, but part of the heroic narrative. Putin knew that his historicism was dangerous: he was applying solutions from the 18th or 19th century (territorial conquest and imperialism) to the 21st century. Imperialism was not a modern concept, but Putin and Trump, possibly together with Chinese leaders, were evidently working on a revival. Putin also ignored Ukraine’s actual political development over the past 30 years toward a stable “Ukrainian identity” because it did not fit into his historical model. He did not view the people of Ukraine as a distinct nation with its own history and culture. Through his historicism, he reduced Ukraine to a Russian province. In his propaganda, he used only those historical sources that supported his vision. He believed the outcome was predetermined by historical laws because he stood on the right side of unstoppable historical development. Soviet Marxism to which he was exposed also played a

role here. Yet history is often the result of stubborn resistance and rebellion against seemingly invincible forces.

**Principle: Knowledge Type:**

**Sub-principle 1: The metamethodological significance of the types of knowledge:** Agonists (strategists, tacticians) should examine the extent to which their agonistic freedom is or can be influenced by events in other types of knowledge. Agonists cannot simply ignore other types of knowledge. The significance of other knowledge types for agonistic work must not be underestimated, but neither should it be overestimated: The agonists should know the strengths and weaknesses of the types of knowledge and utilize them in respective situations. Science seeks truth and aims to produce knowledge that is as certain as possible. Strategists usually cannot wait until they can attain complete certainty on a matter. Strategists do not, in principle, work against the other types of knowledge, but rather try to use them for their own purposes. If necessary (or even beforehand), the strategist must, for example, be able to slip into the role of an ideologue.

**Sub-principle 2: The approach to strategy (tactics) based on concepts from the other types of knowledge:** Jack Welch, the former CEO of GE, did not choose the approach of a “scientifically trained manager” (according to the science of the time). He was an engineer and developed his own management methods, with which he achieved great success. Through him, GE was transformed from a company managed according to management science into a purely strategically oriented, successful conglomerate, despite the structural disadvantages of conglomerates. Donald Trump, on the other hand, preferred the “ideology” approach in conjunction with his vision of effective “propaganda.” Trump’s populism was, of course, not based on scientific considerations, but on social and strategic ones (from the knowledge types of society and strategy). This gives us several approaches: “scientific approach” (old GE), “manager approach” (Jack Welch), “societal approach,” “mixed approach” (spanning multiple knowledge types), “ideological approach” (Trump, Bernie Sanders), “political-populist approach” (Trump), “traditional political approach” including its associated ideological basis (Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden). Strategists across other types of approaches include: “therapists,” “innovators,” “traditionalists,” “motivators,” “fighters,” “planners,” “executors,” “investors,” and many others. Further subdivisions are also possible within a single approach type: Hannibal was a feared fighter and struck terror into the Romans. In Italy, however, he encountered Roman fighters who fought differently than he did. Quintus Fabius Maximus refused to offer Hannibal an open battle. Instead, he pursued him, cut off his supply lines, and wore down his army in small skirmishes. An example of the “historian type” is Emperor Frederick III. The conflict between the emperor and the Hungarian ruler Matthias Corvinus is a prime example of two completely opposing strategic approaches: Corvinus’s offensive expansion versus Frederick III’s policy of endurance. Frederick thought in terms of long-time frames and dynasties. He could not defeat Corvinus, but he outlived him. That was enough, and Austria was able to expand its territory through marriages: Tu felix Austria, nube.

**Sub-principle 3: The “Manager” Approach Type:** A “manager” type strategist may never have worked as a manager, but as a strategist, he acts like a manager. General Leslie Grove was in charge of the massive Manhattan Project. For example, he ensured momentum through swift decisions, as the time factor was extremely important during the war, and since it was initially unknown which uranium enrichment process was best, he had facilities built for all processes.

He had almost unlimited resources at his disposal, which he utilized. As the manager in charge, he was also the head of personnel for the project. In that capacity, he selected J. Robert Oppenheimer as scientific director. In making this extremely important personnel decision, he was able to demonstrate his relevant qualities.

**Subprinciple 4: The “General” Approach Type:** General Leslie Groves should not simply be viewed as a dual talent (manager, general). He was primarily a general, but not an ordinary general, rather an extremely capable general who could not afford to fail under any circumstances. An extremely capable U.S. general must not be underestimated: he is assertive, highly flexible in thought and action, decisive, well-versed in large-scale structures, knows how to lead individuals, groups, and projects, and so on. As a top general, he was accustomed to thinking strategically. Top military leaders are also well-versed in politics. For him, the Manhattan Project was a military-political project. He was flexible enough to fulfill the various management roles as well. Groves was so successful because he did not view the project as a management task, but as a battle that had to be won with concrete, steel, uranium, and brilliant minds. He did not fulfill the management roles out of a passion for business administration but because they were the necessary tools to carry out his military mission.

**Sub-principle 5: General Methods in Strategy:** In meta-methodological work based on the knowledge-type-principle, the strategist must understand the strengths and weaknesses of the knowledge types and incorporate them into his work, decide on his approach to strategic work, and finally reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of “General Methods.” “General Methods” (including those promoted by scholars) are widely used methods in strategic work that many strategists employ. For example, portfolio approaches used in corporate strategy (as “General Methods”) have certain typical weaknesses that can be exploited by strong competitors. Portfolio thinking often treats business units in isolation and with a financial focus, without establishing genuine operational linkages or shared core competencies. For example,

agile, industry-specific newcomers can react more quickly and capture entire segments, and thus even powerful conglomerates have lost significant market share to specialized tech companies. Strategists who use “General Methods” can also be more easily assessed by strategic opponents. Thus, Ukrainian strategists were fully aware of the weaknesses of Russian military strategy and the modus operandi of the Russian military at various strategic and tactical levels and could therefore repeatedly gain an advantage from this knowledge. Publius Cornelius Scipio (the Elder) was a strategist who studied and copied Hannibal’s tactics. He saw tactical methods at work in Hannibal’s strategic approach, which he developed into a “General Method” for the Romans. That did not make the Roman military machine invincible, as the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest clearly demonstrated.

**Sub-principle 6: Ontological dominance of Strategy in important fields of application:**

When it comes to “general methods” (in various strategic fields of application such as economics, the military, business, politics, legal disputes, career decisions, education, child-rearing, etc.), science (by deploying “scientific” methods) can offer only “relatively good” solutions but not “proven-to-be-best solutions”. Nobel laureate Gunnar Myrdal had already dealt extensively with the problem of applying economic theory (i.e., scientific concepts) in economic policy in his work titled: “The Means-End Approach in Economics.” I go one step

further and assert: Economic policy is primarily strategy and not science (or philosophy), even though it draws on a great deal of scientific knowledge.