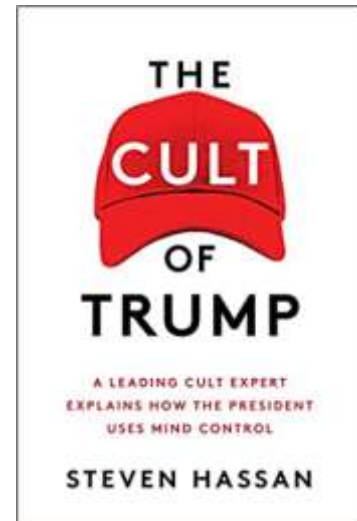


“Of Cults and Mind Control”
a review by Dick Burkhardt of

The Cult of Trump:
A Leading Expert Explains How the President
Uses Mind Control

By Steven Hassan (2019)



Hassan was once himself sucked into a cult (the “Moonies”) as a young man. Now he asks all of us to be on the lookout for the warning signs – how any of us, no matter how smart or informed we think we are, could be sucked in, just like he was. In this book Hassan summarizes and builds on his earlier work “Combatting Cult Mind Control” to illustrate how Donald Trump is one of history’s great masters of the mind control techniques of cult leaders.

Hassan gets at the essence of cults by noting that they are characterized by classical mind control techniques, which could be used for therapy but are instead abused, yielding damaging social outcomes. The “big lie” is the best-known technique, so much so that Hassan says that “Deception is the life blood of a destructive cult...Cult leaders use a variety of confusion techniques but a major one is delivering a dizzying amount of information, much of it contradictory and false, so that it overwhelms critical thinking” (p 51). “When it comes to lies, Trump seems almost peerless...The bigger the lie the greater the disorientation...a person begins to question their own perception of reality” (p 52).

These techniques are typically engineered by a cult leader, like Rev. Moon or Trump, but this is not a necessity. With Trump, his well-documented “malignant narcissistic personality disorder” explains much of his cultish behavior, but in this age of social media a group of individuals united by a powerful ideology can propagate cultish behavior far more easily than in the past. We see it in the anti-vax movement and in a wide variety of speculative theories, from 911 to QAnon to critical theories of gender and race.

As to the latter, I was just looking at John McWhorter’s book on “Woke Racism” and noted his list of 10 confusing and contradictory statements that form the “catechism” of “third wave racism” as he sees it, revealing “not a philosophy but a

religion”. Others have noted that “cancel culture” has been an enduring feature of cult-like religions, going back to the Spanish Inquisition and even early Christianity. Here Trump is also a master, not only by attracting true believers, but canceling them by firing or insulting them when they fail his unstated loyalty tests.

Hassan notes how his loyalty was always being tested in the Moonies and how this drove his dishonest and unethical behavior (anything goes to bring in new members or more money), not to mention his exhaustion and eventual burnout. In critical theories and the like, the ever-evolving loyalty tests have been referred to as “political correctness” and followers are kept in line by the constant threat of being “called out” if they miss a beat.

Other key mind control techniques, long known to gurus of all sorts, not just Trump, include “absolute confidence”, “grandiosity”, and the “trust me” intimacy of the “confidence man”. Again, Trump is a master manipulator. But “fearmongering tops the list” (p xiv), often in the form of scapegoating various supposedly nefarious groups. Jews are the best-known historical example, but with Trump it was people like Muslims and Mexicans, supplemented by the usual rightwing bugaboos - globalists, radicals, socialists, Hollywood actors, liberal media, etc. “The ultimate goal is to make people dependent and obedient” (p xvi).

To rescue a person from a cult (Hassan’s business) is not so easy. He’s learned that “attacking a person’s beliefs is doomed to fail...I had to develop a process to help people recover their individual faculties and ultimately, their true, or authentic selves.” This means encouraging warm relationships outside the cult – “to build trust and rapport – while raising essential questions”, leading eventually to a renewed self-confidence in their own “capacity for critical thinking” (p xix).

Hassan also reviews key points from his earlier book: People are most susceptible to cults at disorientating stress points in their lives, such as entering or leaving college, a job, or a relationship. His BITE model, gives a structure to cultism: (1) B is for behavior – followers are required to observe certain dress, diets, slogans, or rituals, (2) I is for information – followers are flooded with cult-generated propaganda while access to outside sources is denied or demonized, (3) T is for thought – followers undergo intensification indoctrination in lectures and workshops, with mind-numbing repetition or mantras, sometimes referred to as brainwashing, (4) E is for emotion – followers are taught that they are the chosen or the elect – to feel pride in membership, while great fear of outsiders is instilled – the world is portrayed as a dangerous place that only the cult can fix.

Several more chapters explicated Trump's life in detail, showing how he developed into becoming a cult leader. Though I knew the broad outlines, the rich details here was fascinating. Other chapters look at the history of psychology in the US and how Trump fits in to techniques such as hypnosis, trances, meditation, anchoring, framing, storytelling, modeling, confusion, disruption, double binds, projection, fear, repetition, etc.

Media gets a whole chapter, especially Trump's symbiotic relationship with Fox News and how rightwing personalities like Rush Limbaugh set the stage. Another chapter went into behind-the-scenes influencers like Roger Ailes, Vladimir Putin, and the Christian Right. Then Trump's followers are analyzed. They are always looking for heroes and villains.

A great many followers are evangelical Christians, others didn't like Hillary or were disenchanted with liberals. Those who had experienced authoritarian leadership, such as in certain churches, and felt dumped on by society (many workers) were primed for Trump. The alt-right is the most dangerous faction behind Trump but there are also plenty of QAnon conspiracists, gun devotees, etc.

Finally, Trump's own people, once escaped, have referred to him as a cult. His former lawyer Michael Cohen says that his relationship to Trump was "something akin to a cult". His former staffer Omarosa Newman declaring "I've escaped from the cult of Trumpworld. I'm free". It's like our society has been suffering a mental breakdown and we all need to be pinching ourselves to see if we're still sane and not clinging to the aura of Trump or one of the many cult like alternatives.