

Trump's first year: truth gets lost in hysteria



President Trump's critics 'need to be less shrill'. Picture: AP

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The visceral and often irrational disdain for Donald Trump displayed by otherwise seemingly high-functioning adults is beyond easy explanation.

Here we are a year after his inauguration and large elements of the media, academia, left-of-centre politicians, their followers and even many centrists still recoil at the very mention of his name, treating him as a dumb, dangerous and illegitimate President.

It is silly and deluded. It also plays to Trump's strengths, affirming his claim to be a Washington outsider opposed by the broad political establishment and misrepresented by most of the media. It only underlines his narrative about insiders resisting his efforts to "drain the swamp" and rejecting the mandate he carries from mainstream voters.

Anti-Trump hysteria has been omnipresent since before his electoral triumph and has not lost any momentum in the full year since his inauguration. From the initial riots and grand conspiracies about Russia deciding the election, to predictions of impeachment and calls to challenge the electoral college, even pussy-hat protests and profanities from celebrities, this is a dummy spit of epic proportions.

Remember, pre-election, when the Democrats demanded Trump must heed the result!

Now unsourced and disputed records of private conversations are turned into major international news, Trump's wife and 11-year-old son are attacked, his every utterance is turned into an outrage, journalists speculate about the state of his mental health and academics publicly wonder whether it is Trump or Kim Jong-un who presents the greatest risk of thermonuclear war.

No matter how wrong the commentators are about his nomination chances, electoral chances, economic impact or tax reform prospects, they continue with wild, spiteful and juvenile attacks.

This is not only an American phenomenon. It is mirrored in other Western liberal democracies, including our own. Australian commentators wrote him off before the election and expressed alarm at his victory.

Beyond whatever he achieves as President, Trump might prove useful for the clarity he brings to the jaundice in the political debate and the growing chasm between mainstream political concerns in western liberal democracies and the predilections of the people charged with policy development, implementation and analysis.

He is not my cup of tea. In the lead-up to the 2016 US election I expressed my disapproval of Trump, suggesting in television commentary that American voters were presented with an appalling choice between a deeply-flawed, establishment Democrat candidate, who promised a continuation of the timorous Obama administration, and an anti-establishment Republican who was gauche, inexperienced and unpredictable.

On balance, largely because of how volatile Trump might be on foreign policy issues, my sense was that the US and the world would be best served by electing the devil it knew in Hillary Clinton. It seemed safer to stick with orthodox political awfulness rather than to risk awful unpredictability. Yet voters were attracted by that very unpredictability. They wanted to shake up the system. The attraction of Trump as a disrupter was obvious, especially for working (or under-employed) Americans away from the wealthy, liberal cities of the northeast and west coast. It was strange so many commentators gave him little chance given his poll deficit was often margin-of-error territory.

Illuminatingly one of the people to comprehend why Trump might succeed was his ideological antithesis, the hard-left documentary filmmaker Michael Moore. He went back to Flint, Michigan and found working families feeling isolated and forgotten. He produced a prescient film warning Trump was tapping into something. Anyone who has read JD Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* will understand the demographic and socioeconomic forces at play.

And to see how Trump worked this vein, you only need to read his campaign speech in Michigan in August 2016.

He implored people who had voted Democrat all their lives to think about what decades of voting Democrat had delivered for them. He accused the Democrats of a “bigotry” that saw broken African-American communities “only as votes, not as human beings worthy of a better life”.

“Hillary Clinton would rather provide a job to a refugee from overseas than give a job to unemployed African-American youth in cities like Detroit who have become refugees in their own country,” Trump said. He promised a “new American future” where American workers would always come first. If Moore could see the power of this message and how it would resonate in traditional Democrat heartland, why couldn’t the pundits? Or Hillary?

Clinton did not campaign strongly in Michigan, Wisconsin or Pennsylvania, so-called “blue wall” states that would have secured her the election. The way she turned her back on these states was as unfathomable as how she referred to potential Trump voters as “deplorables” who might be Islamophobic, misogynistic or racist. While Trump appealed directly to the blue-collar constituency, Clinton insulted them.

We have seen since his inauguration how Trump has stuck to this mission statement. Yet the political/media class hatred for him seems as intense now — and as confused — as it ever has been.

To be sure, he is easy to dislike. Brash, egocentric, abusive and petty, he is a personality type we all recognise but have seldom, if ever, seen rise to such heights.

We have heard private conversations and other accounts of him speaking cruelly and offensively about women, immigrants and foreigners. His political rhetoric has been crass and divisive. While an effective communicator, his lexicon is almost monosyllabic, and his style of diplomacy is, well, undiplomatic. Yet if we are to judge him solely on matters of personality and style we would be practising exactly the sort of superficiality his critics assign to him.

It is a mistake to think his supporters necessarily are fond of his personality or style. They love Trump for the pain he causes virtue-signalling liberals whose post-material concerns are a world away from their daily objective of making life better for their families. We have to judge Trump by his performance. His temporary immigration bans aimed at “extreme vetting” for immigrants from troubled Muslim countries have been stalled by state courts but are likely to be enforced after Supreme Court consideration. His tax reform package is monumental — it will be the basis of his success if it supercharges the US economy. Trump withdrew the US from the folly of the Paris climate agreement.

On foreign policy he has imposed decisive action against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. He has forced NATO to focus on burden sharing, placed Iran under increased pressure as its citizens begin to defy the theocracy and, crucially, forced stronger action by the UN and China against North Korea, triggering tentative but positive signs in this long-running and fraught power play.

The mainstream media has given him virtually zero credit for any of this. Transparently, the political/media class accused Trump of taking the world to the brink of nuclear war by standing up to Kim, then wrote him out of the script when North Korea turned up for its first talks with South Korea in more than two years. They have ignored the defeat of Islamic State in Iraq as diligently as they averted their eyes from Obama's red lines in Syria. Trump's critics fall for his rhetorical tricks, delivering his messages for him. His Mexican wall is more a difference of building materials and language than of border-security policy. Yet the exaggerated opposition gives him clear differentiation on a strong issue. Likewise, knee-jerk media defensiveness confirms his claim of partisanship. When serious journalists say Trump threatens freedom of the press because he accuses media of "fake news" and bias, they simply demonstrate their antipathy. Suck it up.

Don't forget how the political/media class hated and sneered at Ronald Reagan. They were wrong, of course. Reagan had more admirable qualities, experience and substance than Trump, and this is not to compare the presidents — perish the thought — but there are parallels in their treatment. Modern Republican presidents tend to be mocked, Democrats lauded.

Trump is reviled for bringing the Oval Office into disrepute because of horrible, boastful, sexually aggressive comments secretly recorded a decade before he ran for office. Yet Bill Clinton's cigar escapades with a young intern in that very office — and the way he and his wife denied the claims and undermined the reputation of his many alleged sexual harassment victims — are forgiven.

This week's hysteria has focused on Trump allegedly referring to some nations as "shithole" countries. The controversy hinges on contested versions of private meetings and amounts to little more than a hill of beans.

Sure enough, we saw serious analysis and commentary wondering whether this meant Trump was racist. In Australia, on SkyNews, we had the absurd spectacle of an RMIT University professor reacting with the conclusion Trump "is a textbook racist, as a matter of fact".

You might think Joseph Siracusa would be a little far from the action to draw such a hard and fast conclusion, but it gets worse — he claims to know Trump's mind: "We all know what he thinks, no matter what he calls those African countries, we all know what he meant." This partisan ranting provides a clue to what is going on.

In the age of identity politics, the left seeks to declare its virtue via the identities it praises and those it deplors. Obama — whatever his actual achievements — is lauded on identity grounds; Trump is the white, wealthy and Waspish antihero.

Trump could be a success as President and could yet be a disaster. It is too early to tell. But there have been achievements and, for all that is distasteful and unorthodox about his style, he has remained faithful to his pre-election posturing. His critics need to be less shrill. The Democrats need to spend less time shrieking about Russia and put more effort into unearthing alternative policies and candidates.

Across the globe rational assessments of his actions and results will matter, not emotive and personal denouncements.

Perhaps those who hysterically condemn Trump as a means of expressing their own virtue need to consider that if their aim is to portray themselves as more tolerant and urbane than the US President, they might be setting a pretty low bar.