



Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump speaks during the Republican National Convention July 18 in Milwaukee. (AP photo/J. Scott Applewhite)



by Michael Sean Winters

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As Donald Trump walked to the podium last night to accept his party's presidential nomination for the third time, no one was sure what to expect. [There had been reports](#) that, in light of the failed assassination attempt on his life, the former president would dial back the vitriol and, instead, make an appeal to national unity.

And Trump tried, but he couldn't help himself. The former president couldn't stick to the teleprompter and his inner devil kept popping through. And, so, shortly after promising "I will end every single international crisis," Trump recalled the 2020 election and said, "The election result — we're never going to let that happen again." Huh? I am dying to learn how he intends to end every international crisis but also frightened by what he intends in promising not to ever permit a negative election result. What role do the voters have?

Trump promised to offer a vision, but he lapsed into bumper sticker slogans. "Drill, baby drill," got the audience repeating the chant, but most Americans know that climate change is real and it is the height of irresponsibility to ignore it.

Trump's call to unity — "the discord and division in our society must be healed" — didn't last but a few minutes. In discussing the many criminal indictments he and his family have faced, he said, "They're destroying our country." He did not explain — how could he? — that our founding fathers understood that the rule of law was a necessary and essential precondition for the preservation of liberty.

"We must not criminalize dissent or demonize political disagreement," Trump intoned before denouncing the "Green New Scam" and telling the United Auto Workers they should be "ashamed" and their president, Shawn Fain, "should be fired." For what? [Getting his members a 25% raise?](#)

The former president spoke about the attempt on his life last weekend. "I felt very safe because I had God on my side. I felt that," Trump said. He is right, of course. God is always at all of our sides. "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent," we read in Matthew's Gospel ([10:29-31](#)). "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows." But I suspect he doesn't know he is right, or that God is near to us all, but He is closest to the brokenhearted (cf. Psalm 34:18).

Trump had a long, meandering section in which he praised those who preceded him to the stage: former professional wrestler Hulk Hogan, singer Kid Rock and Dana White, the CEO of the Ultimate Fighting Championship. This was fitting. Professional wrestling is self-evidently orchestrated and fake; the UFC is more realistic but it doesn't speak to our better angels. Kid Rock is a performer whose success I simply do not understand. White said, "I'm in the tough guy business and this man [Trump] is the toughest, most resilient human being that I have ever met in my life." As if international diplomacy and body slamming were essentially the same.

Trump's encomium to these gladiatorial stars undercuts his distaste for the elites, but no matter. It is his comfort level with the commodification of violence and fakery that is disturbing, that and the fact that he was almost pathologically discursive when praising them.

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If we get Trump again, it is because we Americans have become so enthralled by our entertainments we can no longer distinguish reality from falsehood, seriousness from nonsense, posturing from principles. He speaks to the lower angels of our nature to be sure, but we are responsible for indulging those lower angels. Trump's strongman routine is only possible to the extent that we Americans have become a weak people. Strong people do not need strong men.

Eight years ago, at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, [candidate Donald Trump sketched a largely dystopian vision](#) of America as a place overwhelmed by crime, drowning in public debt, and humiliated around the globe by what he considered the fecklessness of then-President Barack Obama's foreign policy, especially as it had been crafted by Obama's first secretary of state, Hillary Clinton. You expect the party out of power to traffic in doom and gloom, and Trump embraced that task.

What was frightening, however, was his solution. "I have joined the political arena so that the powerful can no longer beat up on people that cannot defend themselves," Trump told the delegates. "Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it."

America's constitutional system is designed specifically to make sure that no one person has the power to fix, or to break, the country and its government. Trump's claim that he "alone" could fix what ailed the country was frightening. It was the claim of an aspiring strongman, someone aiming to lead a weak country down an authoritarian path, someone who saw weakness, not value, in our admittedly slow, deliberative governmental processes.

Nothing in last night's speech suggested Trump has achieved a more sophisticated understanding of our constitutional system. The man who has built his career around the promise to "make America great" does not actually know or value what makes America great: the rule of law, the separation of powers, the sanctity of the ballot box, an independent judiciary, a free press and other constitutional freedoms.

Trump is Trump. His appeal is obvious and easy to understand. His reptilian distillation of all reality into food or threat appeals to people who feel the country is adrift and want someone whose pitch is simple and whose promises are uplifting. In the face of complexity, he promises simplicity. In the face of uncertainty, he promises surety. In the face of the unknown, Trump is as predictable as the rising of the sun.

It is all fraudulent. It is all thin. It has elements of shame. The prospect of a second Trump term is frightening — "The election result — we're never going to let that happen again" — but it might be the judgment we have earned.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)