

# Complicit

*Martin Donohoe*

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In 1866, a 16-year old Bavarian teenager named Friedrich immigrated to the United States. He worked as a barber's apprentice and other odd jobs in New York, before moving to Washington state in 1891, where he sold food, liquor, and women to miners. He then found financial success in Canada's Yukon during the Gold Rush. During a trip home in 1902, he fell in love with a woman named Elisabeth. They returned to New York and were married. When Elisabeth became homesick, the couple returned to Bavaria, where Friedrich attempted to regain his German citizenship, which was denied, as he had failed to fulfill his compulsory military duty. Consequently, the couple was ordered to leave Bavaria.

Friedrich wrote to the Bavarian Prince Luitpold, begging the "well-loved, noble, wise and just" leader not to deport him. He implored, "We are paralyzed with fright; our happy family life is tarnished. My wife has been overcome by anxiety, and my lovely child has become sick...Why should we be deported? This is very, very hard for a family." That man's full name was Friedrich Trump, father of Fred Trump and grandfather of our current President Donald Trump.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Trump's wife Melania came to the U.S. in 1996 on a visitor's visa and between October of that year and 2001, received five H-1B visas, which are reserved for individuals who demonstrate "extraordinary ability in the sciences, arts, education, business, or athletics through sustained national or international acclaim." The first lady's ability to get a green card enabled her to sponsor her parents Viktor and Amalia Knauss for legal residency and ultimately U.S. citizenship. The president has implemented restrictions to the H-1B Program and has vowed to end sponsorship of immediate family for citizenship, known as family reunification (or derisively as "chain migration"). Perhaps unbelievably, Stephen Miller, senior advisor to Trump and architect of the president's

I will not mince words. Our current president is a narcissistic, sociopathic, xenophobic, racist, proudly ignorant, anti-science, ecocidal, misogynistic, admitted sex offender and sexual predator, whose words and deeds are antithetical to democratic ideals and whose policies are causing manifold suffering and death and severe damage to our nation's international power and prestige. He is a compulsive liar, a demagogue, and lacks empathy.

This essay is entitled "Complicit," and it is directed at those who support our current president, who fail to acknowledge the very real threats he poses to civilized society, and who remain silent, grateful for the benefits he bestows on their wallets or policy agendas.

We will begin with the so-called Christian right. Sixty nine percent of Americans identify as Christians, and the subset of these known as evangelicals are the most loyal supporters of President Trump. Many consider America to be a Christian nation. Forty percent of US citizens state that they attend church weekly, yet actual head counts show that only 20% really attend weekly service. Only 40% of Americans can name more than four of the Ten Commandments and only 1/2

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Public Health and Social Justice Website:

<http://www.publichealthandsocialjustice.org>

<http://www.phsj.org>

Prescription for Justice Television:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJt34I9c5vT2RpZtkg6Im2A/videos>

Prescription for Justice Podcast:

<https://www.kboo.fm/program/prescription-justice>

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November, 2017 tweet, Trump fumed, "Some people come in, and they bring their whole family with them, who can be truly evil."

can cite any of the four authors of the Gospels. Twelve per cent believe Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. Three quarters believe the Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves, a statement antithetical to Christ's teachings that was, in fact, uttered by Benjamin Franklin.

Evangelical Christians claim to honor family values, marriage, honesty and truthfulness, and law and order. I understand how religious conservatives may feel that the world is full of compromises and from a utilitarian perspective have decided that Trump might help them achieve some of their agenda, which includes the prohibition of same-sex marriage and opposition to comprehensive reproductive health care. But I wonder, how much are you willing to tolerate, even support, to achieve those goals? Are you comfortable following the leadership of someone who rarely attends church, has limited understanding of the Bible (outside of its potential utility as a prop for political photo opportunities designed to energize his base, such as his awkward appearance at a Washington, D.C. episcopal cathedral, one facilitated by military riot police and members of the National Guard using teargas, pepper spray, flash-bang grenades, and rubber bullets to disperse a group of citizens peacefully protesting police violence against African-Americans).

To those of you who profess to support family values, how do you explain your support of a thrice-married sybarite who cheated on his current wife with an adult-film star, joked about dating his daughter, and supported (along with Jerry Falwell, Jr.) the Senate candidacy of Roy Moore, a man accused by multiple women of sexual assault and pedophilia; a man whose policies have led to immigrant children being separated from their parents, some of whom are seeking asylum, and being kept in detention centers without access to their relatives, their attorneys, and the press. And how do you explain your support of a man:

- Who has referred to women as “fat pigs,” “dogs,” “slobs,” and “disgusting animals.”
- Who told a New York Magazine writer in 1992 that “You have to treat women like shit,” then poured a bottle of wine down her back, and later called her “extremely unattractive” and someone who had “lots of problems because of her looks.”

- Who stated, in a 2005 radio interview, that he didn't change diapers because it's the wife's job, and that he wouldn't marry a woman who expected him to help share in child rearing duties.
- Who walked out a room during a 2011 deposition when a female attorney asked to take a break to pump breast milk for her 3 month-old child, calling the attorney “disgusting.”
- Who, in 2013, brushed off the epidemic of sexual assaults in the military, opining “What did these geniuses expect when they put men & women together.”
- Who, during the 2016 election campaign, tweeted “If Hilary Clinton cannot satisfy her husband, what makes you think she can satisfy America,” suggested that a reporter's tough questioning might be consequent to her menstruating, and insulted the physiognomy of a fellow Republican primary candidate.
- Who publicly mocked Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's impassioned testimony regarding her alleged sexual assault by his Supreme Court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh.<sup>2</sup>
- Who has been accused by 25 women of sexual assault.
- And who acknowledged sexually assaulting women (using a derogatory term for female genitalia).

Unbelievably, 41% of women voted for Trump, and as of mid-April, 2020, 37% approve of his presidency.

To those who value the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment (against lying), how can you support a man who

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<sup>2</sup> Kavanaugh lied before the Senate Judiciary Committee and, by almost all media reports, exhibited the classical behavior of an out-of-control alcoholic during the period of Dr Ford's and two other alleged sexual assaults. Remarkably, in polls conducted just before his confirmation, nearly 50% of evangelicals supported Kavanaugh's elevation to the bench, even if Ford's allegations were proven true, something that may not be possible given the extraordinary limits place on the FBI investigation (given the severity of the allegations), along with the prestige and power of a Supreme Court appointment.

has made 18,000 false or misleading statements during his first 1,170 days in office.<sup>3</sup>

To those who believe that asking for forgiveness is a basic tenet of Christianity, how can you support a man who has publicly boasted on at least 2 occasions that he has never asked God for forgiveness

To those who support Christ's call to build up treasures in heaven, not on earth, how do you explain your support of a man whose avarice seems to hold no bounds, and whose shady overseas property deals have meant working hand in hand with enemies of democracy, including those who have trampled upon human rights and who have been both suspected and convicted of crimes. These individuals include dictators and individuals with ties to Iran's Revolutionary Guards, which our government has sanctioned and accused of criminal activities, including drug trafficking, sponsoring terrorism abroad, and money laundering.

When a rich man asked Jesus what he should do to get into heaven, He replied, "Sell what you have, give the money to the poor, and follow Me." Nothing about tax cuts for the wealthy moneychangers, whom he routed from the Temple for corrupting His Father's house, and certainly nothing about "trickle down" economics.

Christ commanded His followers to "love your neighbor as yourself," and by neighbor He meant the poor, the sick, the naked, and the hungry. As if to assuage their guilt, many unable to rise to Christ's immense challenge follow a "prosperity Gospel," which posits that an individual's financial blessings and physical well-being are God's will and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one's material wealth. The converse of such a belief is that those who are not healthy or wealthy are weak of faith, or somehow deserve their destinies. Try telling that to my patients with leukemia, the survivors of those killed by land mines or errant missile strikes, or those fleeing gang violence in Central America.

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<sup>3</sup> Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo and Meg Kelly. President Trump made 18,000 false or misleading claims in 1,170 days. Washington Post 2020 (April 14). Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/14/president-trump-made-18000-false-or-misleading-claims-1170-days/>.

To those of you who pay your taxes (the dues we all pay for living in a civilized society), how do you explain your support of a man who, unlike past presidents, has refused to release his own income tax records and who brags about not paying taxes, boasting that this "makes [him] smart."

To those of you who proclaim to believe Christ's message from the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they will be called children of God," how do you support a man who has called for a massive military buildup and the invasion of countries who have not attacked us. A man who has praised dictators like Vladimir Putin, whose government has poisoned, killed, and disappeared reporters and which, according to all the major US intelligence agencies, illegally intervened to sway the 2016 presidential election; and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and Deputy Prime Minister Mohammad bin Salman, whom the CIA concluded ordered the gruesome assassination of Washington Post journalist and US resident Jamal Khashoggi.

Trump has also spoken admiringly of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who compared his desire to massacre opioid addicts to Hitler's mass killing of Jews, bemoaned the fact that he was not first in line when an Australian missionary was gang-raped during a prison riot, and referred to former President Obama and Pope Francis as "sons of whores."

Likewise, Trump has praised Brazil's new president, Jair Bolsonaro, a belligerent, misogynistic, homophobic, racist demagogue. Bolsonaro has spoken fondly of the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil between 1964 and 1985, his only criticism being that "The dictatorship's mistake was to torture but not kill." Referring to a black settlement in Brazil founded by the descendants of slaves, Bolsonaro said, "They do nothing. They are not even good for procreation." He described black activists as "animals" who should "go back to the zoo." A self-described Roman Catholic, Bolsonaro admitted that he spent the housing allowance he received as a congressman "to have sex with people." And, in response to remarks made by congresswoman Maria do Rosario claiming that he had encouraged rape, stated, "I wouldn't rape you because you don't deserve it," later adding that she was "ugly."

Trump has also opposed gun control, supported the death penalty, threatened new wars, and selected for CIA chief Gina Haspell, who ran a black site where detainees were subjected to torture and ordered the destruction of videotapes that would have proven her complicity in a practice which the military acknowledges is ineffective and which constitutes a war crime.

To Republicans, who have tolerated Trump and at best offered muted criticism of his vile behavior, whether it is because his tax policies help your stock portfolios (or the corporations for which you, and most of your Democratic counterparts, still), you are complicit. To most elected Democrats, who have timidly failed to oppose, at every turn, the excesses and criminality of this presidency, you are complicit. Your party has fielded too many stale, right-centrist candidates with little appeal to the average voter (with the exception of some of the recent primary hopefuls), rendering many Americans who long for remedies to their financial and social problems easy prey for the empty promises of the Republicans.

To the media, many in your ranks are complicit. Most people do not have the time to read detailed investigative reports, nor to examine the nuances of specific policy proposals, the historical antecedents and possible future ramifications of current events, or the veracity of claims by and against candidates and officials. Thus, our free press is obligated to convey facts, expose lies, contextualize current events, investigate malfeasance, and speak truth to power, all while avoiding (or at least acknowledging) potential conflicts of interest. Nevertheless, cable news producers fill hours of television with talking heads from the left and right sides of the political spectrum spouting the same tired talking points, without challenging their factual misstatements or, better yet, using airtime to provide historical context and in-depth analyses of alleged and confirmed crimes and abuses of power.

Admittedly, these are trying times for the press. The president has vilified major news outlets and verbally attacked numerous reporters, often using sexist and/or misogynistic language, for trying to do their jobs. During the daily White House press briefing (halted in mid-March, 2019), members of the White House press corps called out questions they already knew would be met

with disdain and prevarications. Trump obfuscates, denies the obvious, calls every critique “fake news,” and like the old joke, lies almost every time his lips move.<sup>4</sup> He also repeats, sometimes verbatim, racist, incendiary talking points from right-wing propagandists. Given the enormous workload of the presidency, it amazes me that he has time to watch so much TV, tweet incessantly, and play golf far more often than his predecessor, whom he mocked for being an absentee leader.

Too often the press fails to do its job. Reporters too timid to aggressively query government officials may fear being denied further access to these officials. For some, a focus on ratings or the agendas of their corporate owners (who are also heavily invested in manufacturing, energy production, entertainment, and other economically influential areas) leads them to alter or even eliminate stories. Sadly, many expressed outrage when comedian Michelle Wolf courageously and with biting sarcasm accused Sarah Sanders, the president’s then Pinocchio-in-chief, of lying and the press of not doing its job. Intriguingly, many from the right-wing press, who often accuse liberals of being overly-sensitive “snowflakes,” expressed faux outrage at the “insensitivity” of Ms. Wolf’s criticism.

As a presidential candidate and experienced reality television host, Donald Trump manipulated the press into showering him with free and extensive media exposure for all sorts of pre-election antics. The media equated his numerous malfeasances with alleged crimes by his opponent, Hilary Clinton, giving similar air time to faux conspiracies like Benghazi and leaked emails of limited national security consequence.<sup>5</sup> Major news outlets failed to aggressively and in a timely manner expose Trump’s dirty property deals and much more consequential scandals involving

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<sup>4</sup> Trump also speaks through his surrogates, such as Sarah Sanders, now a Fox News Contributor, and current press secretary Kayleigh McEnany, a former webcaster, CNN contributor, and loyal Trump sycophant.

<sup>5</sup> As of September, 2019, Trump has begun retroactively classifying some of Clinton’s e-mails, to resurrect this “scandal” and divert attention from the US House of Representative’s impeachment inquiry.



accused and suspected international criminals and even acknowledged enemies of the United States.

Trump' appointees, who are also complicit, have been systematically shutting out scientists, removing factual information from federal websites, and dissolving government regulations protecting public health and safety and the environment that were decades in the making. They include former Environmental Protection Agency director Scott Pruitt, an egomaniacal, free-spending, front-man for dirty energy who overturned regulations that would have, by his own agency's estimates, saved tens of thousands of lives; current EPA head (and former coal lobbyist) Andrew Wheeler, who has proposed overturning Obama-era limits on power plant emissions, a move that the EPA acknowledges could lead to an additional 1,400 deaths each year by 2030; and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, a self-aggrandizing buffoon who insists that the US flag be raised when he enters the Department building and who has prioritized the fossil fuel industry over the protection of wildlife and public lands. Remarkably, 40% of the world's yearly deaths are linked to water, air, and soil pollution, and global warming kills 400,000 people worldwide each year, a number that is expected to double by 2030. Yet Trump does not believe in human-caused global warming and cannot grasp the difference between climate and weather. Furthermore, he failed to act quickly in the face of the national and global coronavirus pandemics by ignoring and silencing scientists and public health officials (some of whom have been complicit through their cooperation and self-censorship); promulgating myths about potential, yet dangerous treatments; and threatening to remove the U.S. from the influential World Health Organization. His wanton recklessness undoubtedly caused tens of thousands of deaths, cost billions if not trillions of dollars, and weakened the influence of the once-proud U.S. medical and public health communities. His words and policies have dire consequences for humanity.

For those who want to "Make America Great Again," help us understand what you mean. If you mean a country where all three branches of government are independent, mutually respectful, provide meaningful checks and balances, and carry out the laws codified in the Constitution and its amendments, even when such changes are way

too long in coming, like outlawing slavery or granting women the right to vote, then I am with you. If you mean a country where whistleblowers and journalists are unafraid to take on powerful interests to expose the truth, as Daniel Ellsberg and the Washington Post did with the Pentagon Papers, or the same paper did with the Watergate scandal, then I am with you. If you mean a country which was a powerful force in international diplomacy, helping to broker peace deals between warring nations such as Israel and Egypt, and helping those we had defeated rebuild and develop democratic institutions, as we did with post-World War II Germany and Japan, then I am with you. If you mean a country where the people can unite to demand justice, from eliminating unfair taxes on colonial tea, to outlawing separate but equal schools and granting civil rights and equality before the criminal justice system to African-Americans, then I am with you. If you mean a nation where whether the president was a Democrat or Republican, the officeholder by and large treated his tenure with dignity and did not ridicule other countries' leaders, was not mocked worldwide as a buffoon, and whose ethical and financial conflicts of interest make it seem as if the presidency is for sale, then I am with you.

Alas, our country is not the America idealized in the quotes carved into the monuments which grace our nation's capital. While we were born from a group of exiles escaping religious persecution, we marginalize those who do not share the Christian faith and turn the ideas of its central Figure on their head. A nation founded by immigrants, we excoriate those coming here to escape violence, persecution, and poverty in their own countries, something many of our own ancestors did. We slaughtered Native Americans, forcing them off their land onto marginally habitable reservations, and kidnapped and enslaved Africans to build our much of our infrastructure (including many of our government buildings and universities); we passed racist laws punishing Chinese, Italian, and Irish immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century; and today we deport immigrants who have lived in the US for decades, contributing to the economy and paying taxes (despite not being eligible for most government benefits), often separating families and banishing people to countries they have never known and whose languages they do not speak. In violation of

international law, we turn away those with credible claims for asylum and indefinitely lock up children, sometimes in actual cages. Appallingly, the government has acknowledged that it is likely that some of these children will never be reunited with their parents. Meanwhile, Trump proudly took credit for shutting down the government for 35 days, which affected 800,000 federal workers and cost the economy \$11 billion, over his demand for \$5 billion in federal funds to build a wall along our Southern border, a project he previously admitted would cost up to \$25 billion (with more credible estimates even higher) and would be paid for by the Mexican government (which it has unequivocally stated it will never do). After failing to get Congress to approve funds for a border wall, Trump diverted funds from military construction, readiness, and safety projects; schools and day care centers for military families; counter-narcotics programs; and an asset forfeiture fund for wall reinforcement and construction. He declared a phony national emergency and sent troops to the Southern border to combat the imminent threat of an “invasion”; closed the border to those seeking asylum (requiring them to stay in Mexico); suggested sending asylum seekers already in the US to sanctuary cities (strongholds of democratic party voters); and expressed a willingness to close the border entirely, which aside from violating human rights would cost the U.S. economy billions.

We pat ourselves on the back for our military ventures against dictators like Gaddafi in Libya and Assad in Syria, yet offer only the tiniest number refugees from these nations asylum, with quotas much smaller than those offered by even the most xenophobic governments in Europe. Have we forgotten the words on the Statue of Liberty, which welcomed to our country the world’s “tired, ... poor, ... huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Remember, unless you are Native American, then you are either an immigrant or descended from an immigrant.

We like to brag about being the best country in the world, but by what measure? We are #17 in education, #26 in infant mortality, and #37 in life expectancy and overall health. A nation where women still make 78 cents on the dollar; where lack of access to health care is the major cause of bankruptcy, kills 29,000 citizens annually, and contributes to delayed or absent care for chronic

conditions, causing immense suffering. A country where 15% of residents and 22% of children live in poverty and where the median income of black and Hispanic U.S. families, as a percent of white U.S. families, is 62%, essentially unchanged compared with 1968. A country with a biased judicial system that disproportionately targets racial and ethnic minorities, and where corporate crime (which costs citizens exponentially more than street crime) is woefully under-prosecuted, fines for corporate malfeasance are considered merely a cost of doing business, and CEOs and their associates carry out policies which cause death and suffering yet are not tried for murder and assault.

The United States is, however, number one in the world in military spending. We spend more on defense than the next nine countries combined and have over 1,000 bases worldwide. We maintain a nuclear arsenal that could eliminate the human race many times over. We are the world’s largest arms supplier, responsible for ¾ of the global market, as well as the greatest debtor to U.N. (including U.N. peacekeeping fund). Meanwhile, veterans’ health care needs are massive, yet 26% of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are uninsured and not part of the VA health care system.

It is not surprising that given our nation’s wealth, Americans on average think that 24% of the federal budget goes toward foreign aid, whereas the true value is just 0.2%. As a percentage of Gross Domestic Product, the U.S. ranks 21st among the world’s wealthiest nations in foreign aid. Just one-third of our aid goes for food and development, while most benefits U.S. corporations, including those selling weapons to countries whose policies are out of touch with ours. Since the end of WWII, the US has bombed twenty countries, only a few of which can now claim to be reasonably functioning democracies. We have failed to sign and/or ratify multiple international agreements, including those relating to climate change, gender equality, even sex trafficking.

Martin Luther King admonished us almost 50 years ago: “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” Hopefully it is not too late.

Imagine if making America great again meant maintaining a strong yet not excessive military

defense while also providing guaranteed housing, free education through college or trade school for those qualified, universal health care, a living wage to every able-bodied person, adequate disability benefits to the sick and injured, and a fair criminal justice system focused not just on punishment but on restitution and rehabilitation. This is possible with a return to the much more progressive taxation system we had during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Indeed, a fraction of our military budget could eliminate world poverty and provide safe drinking water, full primary and secondary education, and basic health care to every person on earth. Imagine the goodwill that would be created in most Arab nations by a modern-day Marshall plan to feed, clothe, educate, and provide basic health care to those in poorer nations, creating the conditions under which democracies can flourish. With opportunities for lasting economic development, young men and women would face an optimistic future, and the chants of “Death to America” from Jihadis who pervert the true meaning of Islam through their support of terrorism would be drowned out by cries of “God Bless America.”

Returning to Grandpa Trump, one can sympathize with Friedrich and his homesick wife for wanting to remain in the country of their birth; and yet, it is harder to forgive Friedrich for failing to perform his required military service, as this negligence was not borne of pacifism or conscientious objection. Indeed, most individuals want to stay in the country of their birth, close to their friends and families. That is why the main drivers of undocumented immigration to the United States are violence, severe poverty, and the desire to give one’s children a better life. Where is the sympathy for which Trump’s grandfather, even in his wealthy state and knowing he was going to a country of enormous opportunity, begged so obsequiously?

It is possible, but unlikely given the Senate’s kangaroo court impeachment trial, that Congress or federal or state law enforcement authorities will put together a solid case for treason, election fraud, racketeering, bribery, sexual assault, or other crime punishable by prison time, and that Trump will be led out of the White House in handcuffs. Anyway, we would then be left with Mike Pence, another hypocritical, anti-science, corporate lapdog. Trump may still try to pardon

himself, his family, and his associates for any and all crimes.

For now, we must fight Trump’s agenda at the state and local level by electing progressive candidates and passing laws to preserve our democracy, human rights, and the environment. Every citizen age 18 and over should study the candidates and ballot measures and vote in every election, especially the 2020 presidential election. To abstain means you have no right to complain about your city’s potholes, the textbooks selected by your local school board, changes in the state and federal tax codes, and national policies. When you vote, ask yourself not just how a candidate or initiative will benefit you, but how your vote might benefit your community, your country, the world, and future generations. Each vote you cast helps to determine your legacy.

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