

Trump: An American Dream—Documentary traces rise of New York real estate billionaire

By Fred Mazelis
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Trump: An American Dream, the four-part television series released in Britain last year and now streaming on Netflix, is a devastating portrait of the current president of the United States. It raises crucial issues about the experiences and lessons of the past 50 years, which have witnessed the accelerating decline of American capitalism on the world arena. It depicts the swamp of financial speculation, capitalist politics and degraded culture out of which Trump emerged to claim the US presidency.

Much of the material in this documentary is well known, but its presentation of recent decades—the near-bankruptcy of New York City, the victory of Ronald Reagan, the speculative orgy of the 1980s, which has only deepened since—together with footage tracing Donald Trump’s rise to prominence in New York and then nationally carries a powerful punch.

The viewer can watch the demagogue developing over an extended period. There is much in the young Donald Trump of what he was to become. The combination of archival television and numerous interviews adds up to a revealing picture.

The record of Trump’s business and political ventures over more than 40 years demonstrates that he is a petty, vindictive narcissist, a man without knowledge or political principle, whose primary need is for the incessant accumulation of wealth along with displays of obedience and adulation from those around him. He is driven by a lust for personal power and an outlook that he himself sums up as “kill or be killed”—the law of the jungle.

Among the interviewees, undoubtedly in the interest of evenhandedness, are a number of Trump intimates and supporters, including longtime friend Nikki Haskell and political advisers Sam Nunberg and the repugnant right-winger Roger Stone. Among the more noteworthy contributions are those from Tony Schwartz, the credited co-author of *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (1987), and David Cay Johnston, the journalist and author of *The Making of Donald Trump* (2016), who has known Trump for nearly 30 years.

As Schwartz puts it, Trump is “value free,” a sociopath who has “a primitive binary world view.” Johnston calls Trump “the greatest con artist in the history of the world.” While one hesitates to use the adjective “greatest,” he is certainly up there, with few rivals.

The film’s focus is on Trump’s life and career, and it does not pretend to explain how he became president. However, the portrait confirms the analysis summed up in the very first paragraph of the *World Socialist Web Site’s* comment only one day after the 2016 vote: “The victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential election is a political earthquake that has exposed before the entire world the terminal crisis of American democracy. Such is the degeneration of bourgeois rule that it has elevated an obscene charlatan and billionaire demagogue to the highest office in the land.”

Trump’s personality cannot be divorced from its economic, political and historical context. His rise is a barometer of the decline of American capitalism and its productive industrial base. It is significant that he first emerged in the midst of the near-bankruptcy of New York, which was

followed nationwide by deindustrialization, the financialization of the economy and the transformation of the US into a debtor nation during the Reagan administration.

Crucial to Trump’s career was his lengthy relationship with Roy Cohn. Cohn first became prominent as the chief counsel to red-baiting Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950s. Not yet 25 years old, Cohn became McCarthy’s alter-ego, copying the bullying tactics of the Senator and becoming a major public face of the witch-hunt on national television. Cohn also played a key role, as a Justice Department attorney, in sending Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to their deaths after their conviction for conspiracy to commit espionage.

After the Red Scare wound down, Cohn developed a law practice in New York. Trump turned to Cohn not only for legal representation, but also for advice on politics and dealing with the media. The vicious red-baiter, a vile specimen without scruples who utilized the techniques he learned in Washington to work behind the scenes as a “fixer” in New York law and politics, became Trump’s mentor. This is where Trump learned how to employ bluster, bravado and demagoguery and how to use the capitalist media to turn himself into a household name, beginning to assemble a following for future political purposes. For nearly 15 years Trump relied on Cohn, but abruptly dropped all connection to him as his reactionary mentor fell ill with AIDS in the mid-1980s, succumbing to the disease in 1987.

Trump was not just lucky, as some pundits have suggested. The son of successful builder Fred Trump, he had major advantages, but he set out on his own quest to far surpass his father in the scale of his operations and his influence.

Above all, Trump is the product of an era. His father built homes for workers and middle-class people. The son built extravagant monuments to and for the rich. This paralleled, fundamentally, the historic shift from General Motors and the Rockefellers to an increasingly parasitic economy based on various forms of speculation, including Trump’s gambling interests.

The symbiotic relationship between Trump and the capitalist media, including tabloids like the *New York Daily News* and the *Post*, was crucial in his rise. Especially revealing is the documentary footage of Trump’s interviews with sycophantic gossip columnist Rona Barrett in the late 1970s and with the equally toadying Connie Chung, the prominent television news anchor in New York City in the 1980s and 1990s.

Barrett’s interview illustrates the way Trump, almost 40 years ago, used the world of celebrity gossip to advance his personal fortunes. Chung, the news anchor supposedly in the mold of predecessors like Walter Cronkite, is even more revealing. She practically salivates in admiration for her interview subject.

These snippets provide some indication of the criminal role of the big business media, which has long specialized in encouraging the worship of wealth and all forms of cultural backwardness, along with the politics of race and gender to obscure the fundamental class issues.

Navigating capitalist politics was integral to Trump's career. As a young man, not yet 30 years old, he brashly demanded a huge tax break from New York City in order to refurbish the old Commodore Hotel, next to Grand Central Station. Trump promised, amidst the chaos of the mid-70s, to improve the area.

The City Council voted to grant him a 40-year tax abatement as inducement for his project to transform the Commodore into the Grand Hyatt on East 42nd Street. This kind of "corporate welfare" has of course become the norm in recent decades. The abatement was worth \$100 million in tax savings for the up-and-coming multimillionaire. The documentary points out in passing that Abe Beame, the Democratic Party mayor at the time, was "very close" to Fred Trump.

Trump's abatement came at the expense of social and public services desperately needed by the working class. As he and others enriched themselves, inequality grew by leaps and bounds in the center of US and world finance, and the city's basic infrastructure and social conditions deteriorated. The consequences can be seen today in the decay of the mass transit system and the growing homelessness amidst a luxury residential building boom.

The future president truly arrived on the scene in the 1980s. As the film puts it, "Ronald Reagan let capitalism off the leash." Deregulation, already begun under the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter, escalated under Reagan, along with speculative borrowing and a stock market boom. These conditions were "tailor-made for Donald Trump," the narrator notes. He might have added that this was possible only because of the social counterrevolution that Reagan accelerated with the breaking of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike in 1981, ushering in a decade of union-busting, accompanied by enormous budget-cutting.

The eponymous Trump Tower, only the first of many buildings that were to bear his name, was completed in 1982. The 58-story mixed-use building, noted for its garish and opulent ugliness, used a concrete frame instead of the steel frame usually used in skyscrapers. The film briefly notes the role of the Mafia in the concrete industry and the connection with Cohn, who represented leading organized crime figures, in addition to Trump.

Barbara Res, project manager for Trump Tower, points out in her interview that, in contrast to the opulence in the lobby and atrium, there was "a lot of crap in the apartments" upstairs, where Trump manifested his trademark style of promising wealth and success while doing everything on the cheap and stiffing his suppliers and customers—in the case of Trump University, hard-pressed students.

Trump's fortunes reflected the ups and downs that came along with the growing speculative booms and busts. His early successes in opening casinos in Atlantic City, New Jersey were followed by disaster when he borrowed \$675 million in the bond market at a 14 percent interest rate to build the giant Taj Majal casino.

The October 13, 1989 Wall Street crash, a collapse on a scale unseen since the Depression, deepened his problems and he later went through the first of several Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings. Despite having a personal debt of some \$800 million at one point, Trump survived in a soaring stock market, raising \$140 million in one initial public offering and securing loans from the banks after he was deemed "too big to fail."

Much has been made by ruling class critics and pundits of Trump's epic failures as a businessman. All true, but then again, the same could be said for the leading banks, the AIG insurance giant and the real estate industry. The federal government stepped in to rescue Wall Street in 2008, just as Wall Street somewhat earlier had stepped in to rescue Trump. The failures were above all those of the capitalist system, not of one company or one sector.

Trump's career in the 1980s and '90s, it should also be noted, paralleled the presidencies of Reagan and Bill Clinton. Both of these representatives of American capitalism—the old B grade actor and the

"man from Hope [Arkansas]" who "felt your pain"—were also con men, if not as crude as their successor. Two particularly revealing moments in the film are when we see both Reagan and later Clinton intoning the very phrase in their campaigns that became ubiquitous with Trump—"Make America Great Again." This only underscores the fact that Trump is not an aberration, but rather the outgrowth of a crisis that has deepened over decades.

In 1988, Trump first openly toyed with the idea of running for the presidency. When ex-wrestler Jesse Ventura won as a third-party candidate for governor of Minnesota in 1998, Trump soon paid a visit to gain pointers on a possible third-party campaign for the White House. He hesitated and then decided to bide his time, both in 2000 and 2012.

Meanwhile, he began to rely increasingly on the advice of dirty trickster Roger Stone. He found a national audience via the reality television show "The Apprentice," and later was convinced to open a Twitter account. Both of these moves were part of a longer-range effort to lay the basis for the presidential campaign that he finally announced in 2015.

Along the way Trump decided, as Stone explains, that if he was to attain the presidency it would have to be as the candidate of one of the two major capitalist parties. It was by no means excluded that he try for the Democratic nomination. He had registered as a Democrat earlier in his career, and the film shows the famous photo of Trump and the Clintons enjoying themselves at Trump's 2006 wedding to Melania Krauss.

As the crisis deepened, it was the Republicans who proved ripe for a "hostile takeover." After decades of whipping up militarism, religious fundamentalism, thinly-disguised racism and xenophobia, they had created a vocal ultra-right-wing base that felt continually betrayed, especially by the McCain and Romney candidacies of 2008 and 2012, respectively. Trump launched a major nationwide furor in 2011 with his demand that Barack Obama, then running for reelection, produce his birth certificate proving US citizenship. Testing the waters, Trump found that the adoption of the right-wing and racist conspiracy theory about Obama attracted a small but noisy base for his own ambitions.

This was by no means the first time that Trump had trafficked in racist demagoguery. In 1989, he had spent \$85,000 for full-page advertisements in the New York City newspapers calling for the return of the death penalty, to be used against the five black youth charged in connection with the rape of a jogger in Central Park. More than a decade later, the Central Park Five were exonerated. Needless to say, Trump never retracted his attacks.

The racism and xenophobia attracted a following, but what made Trump's 2016 campaign possible, let alone successful, was above all the role of the Democrats and the unions, amid the continued hollowing out of the economy following the 2008 real estate and financial crash. Sections of the lower-middle class had lost their jobs and homes, workers were consigned to low-wage or minimum-wage employment. The Republicans expected to reap the political benefits of the bitter disappointment with the Obama administration, who had been elected twice on promises of social improvements, but whose only answer to the deepening crisis was honeyed phrases along with a program of austerity, attacks on democratic rights and endless war—all supported by the trade unions as well as the upper-middle class exponents of identity politics.

Trump took advantage of the social anger. He had bided his time, and now made short work of all of his Republican primary opponents, tarring them fatally with the brush of the political establishment. First he used fascistic demagoguery to lock up the Republican nomination, and then he pivoted slightly toward populist promises, combined with vicious attacks on immigrants, in the campaign against the hated candidate of the Wall Street Democrats, Hillary Clinton.

It was above all the collapse of Democratic Party liberalism over a period of decades, illustrated by the presidencies of Carter, Clinton and Obama, the three Democratic presidents in the last half century, that

enabled Trump to become president. The Democrats' lurch to the right reflected the essential economic and political bankruptcy of the capitalist system, which could no longer hold out the promise of even minimal social reform. The trade unions, likewise speaking for the ruling class, have worked openly for decades to suppress the class struggle.

Under these conditions, Trump, like similar forces in Europe, filled the vacuum to a certain extent with right-wing populism. Attracting some support from desperate workers, he benefited mainly from the fact that millions stayed home rather than vote for Clinton in 2016. On this basis, Trump eked out an electoral college victory, the "political earthquake" that is only the precursor of far greater upheavals as the working class moves into struggle.

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