

## Article

# “Sacrifice” in the Trump Era

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**Abstract:** This article examines public conversations about sacrifice involving Donald Trump, his supporters and his critics. The author demonstrates that Trump, as a candidate and while president, has used specific discursive strategies in defining, ignoring and denigrating sacrificial acts. These strategies, as played out in conversations about sacrifice, distinguish Trump from previous presidents, maintaining his position as a “Washington outsider” even while in office and reinforcing his alignment with his base while isolating other communities within the country and sidelining the mainstream media. In redefining, dismissing and denigrating sacrifice, he undercuts prominent institutions (Congress, mainstream media) and publicly devalues specific communities within the United States.

**Keywords:** sacrifice; Trump; discourse; McCain; Evers

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“I hear that these rallies, it makes me very emotional, how much America appreciated the fact that he [Donald Trump] and his family made enormous sacrifices to run for President.”  
—Kellyanne Conway (3 November 2016)

“Sacrifice” has always been a powerful image in national civil discourse. Over the years, leaders have used sacrificial language to signal the value of certain kinds of work, especially that of first responders, military personnel, and their families. In public addresses, presidents often comment that these men and women should be honored because they risk the “ultimate sacrifice”, death. For example, in 2001, President George W. Bush announced military strikes against Al Qaeda following the September 11 attacks, saying, “Since September 11, an entire generation of young Americans has gained new understanding of the value of freedom, and its cost in duty and in sacrifice”.<sup>1</sup> In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, President Barack Obama referred to sacrifice as a necessary component of peace: “Peace entails sacrifice . . . The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms. The service and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform has promoted peace and prosperity”.<sup>2</sup> “Sacrifice” has been part of our shared national vocabulary, acknowledging how some individuals’ losses make our collective well-being possible.

Recently the term has received new attention under Donald Trump’s candidacy and presidency. Specifically, fierce debates have raged over the meaning of “sacrifice”, deeply partisan debates often fueled by Trump himself and played out across the nation. Now, perhaps more than ever in recent history, how you react to the U.S. president’s use of the term “sacrifice” reflects—and possibly entrenches—your political allegiances and your sense of the state of our country. As a long-time scholar of sacrifice, I am interested in how President Trump, his supporters, and his critics understand, reimagine, and deploy the term “sacrifice”. More broadly, I am interested in what arguments centered

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<sup>1</sup> Lincoln (2000), p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> Obama (2009).

on sacrificial discourse tell us about life today in the United States. How do we talk about sacrifice in the Trump era? What is consistent with past eras, and what has shifted? What do the contests over “sacrifice” tell us about our larger cultural setting and social dynamics? Throughout the coming pages we will look at several specific instances in which political discourse has centered on the term “sacrifice”; we shall see that in ceremonial contexts, Trump tends to use the term traditionally, fulfilling his presidential role in expected ways. In other contexts, however, specifically when Trump disagrees with a particular individual in ways that position him politically, Trump doubles down on controversial uses of the term, attracting mainstream media attention and aligning himself with his political base. His use of—or refusal to use—the term “sacrifice” is part of a broader rhetorical strategy that aligns Trump with his base through a populist, nationalist message. In this politically-driven conversation, Trump signals the value of individuals and communities by how he honors, diminishes, or mocks their sacrifices.

First, a word about terminology. Within religious studies, “sacrifice” has been used to refer to a broad spectrum of activities. This includes formalized manipulation of material substances (grain-based, liquid, or animal) in specific geo-temporal settings. In other contexts, the term sacrifice refers to practices (e.g., fasting, prayer) that do not involve a concrete offering. Often, these practices are characterized as internalized or metaphorical versions of “traditional” sacrifices that involve a concrete offering. As religious traditions expand, evolve, and/or splinter, new practices assert their authority by claiming to be “sacrifices”. In contemporary civil religious discourse, sacrifice is linked to civic authority, to the state, rather than primarily to the divine or transcendent. A practice recognized as “sacrifice” must involve some personal loss that directly benefits the state. Arguments about sacrifice, then, are arguments that touch on the relationship one has to the state and the nature of the personal loss. If one minimizes or questions the value of an individual in the eyes of the state, or if one denies that anything of value was lost, then there is no sacrifice.

## 1. Trump Family Business Dealings and Khizr Khan

Early on, disagreements about “sacrifice” involving Trump focused on simple definitional issues. As the presidential election approached, conservatives pointed to candidate Trump and his family’s willingness to step away from the family business. Kellyanne Conway argued, “Americans appreciated the fact that he [Donald Trump] and his family made enormous sacrifices to run for President”, referring to the fact that Trump and his immediate family members had relinquished some official business roles to devote their energies to the campaign. ([CNN NEWSROOM 2016](#)). Just after the election, Sean Hannity and Ainsley Earhardt (Fox News) noted that Ivanka Trump was taking a leave of absence from her roles in the Trump business organization as well as her own fashion company, and President Trump stated that he was going to put his older sons in control of his businesses to avoid “a conflict of interest ethically”.<sup>3</sup> Hannity commented, “there really is a sacrifice . . . Donald Trump legally does not have to recuse himself from his business. But he’s doing it to avoid any appearance of impropriety”. Later in this same conversation, Earhardt described moves that Jared Kushner would be making, saying, “He is resigning as the chief executive officer of Kushner Company. He is also the publisher of the ‘New York Observer’ so he’s giving up that role as well. And he’s not going to take a salary down in D.C. So they’re sacrificing a lot”. Similarly, Lou Dobbs (Fox Business Network) argued that “separating his [Trump’s] businesses from his public service as president” was “costly”, and the president “didn’t have to do any of it”.<sup>4</sup> Dobbs commented, “People don’t even think about the sacrifices Donald Trump and his family made to serve the nation. I mean, it’s a quaint idea, isn’t it? That people going into government sacrifice rather than get a pay raise. It’s not done often”.<sup>5</sup> Donald Trump Jr. complained

<sup>3</sup> [Fox News \(HANNITY\) \(2017\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Lou Dobbs Tonight \(2017\)](#).

<sup>5</sup> [Lou Dobbs Tonight \(2017\)](#).

that critics “fail to mention ‘the opportunity cost of the deals that we were not able to do’. That, Donny said, is ‘sort of a shame. Because we put on all these impositions on ourselves and essentially got no credit for actually doing that . . . for doing the right thing’”.<sup>6</sup> Repeatedly, conservative broadcasters and commentators supported the Trump family point of view, arguing that the combined actions of voluntarily stepping away from business leadership roles, access to potentially lucrative business deals, and high-paying salaries should be understood (and appreciated) as “sacrifices” on the part of Donald Trump and his children.

In these conversations, debates centered on whether or not Trump and his family experienced any personal loss as part of their service to the country. It comes as no surprise that Trump’s opponents never viewed these business management decisions as sacrifices, and these opponents were passionate and vocal in their disagreement. Bess Levin (*Vanity Fair*) discussed the Trump family’s business roles sarcastically saying, “If there’s one person who knows the meaning of sacrifice it is Donald Trump, the guy who was forced to abandon his gold-encrusted penthouse and his flourishing TV career in order to embark on the four-year inconvenience that is serving as America’s president”.<sup>7</sup> Trump’s opponents repeatedly argue that sacrificing opportunities for monetary gain and expanded business influence isn’t “sacrifice”—it’s what you do when you take public office: “‘The president should be putting the public’s interest before his business interests. That can’t happen if his son is flying around the world trying to trade on the fact that his father is sitting in the Oval Office’”.<sup>8</sup>

At the most basic level, people are simply defining “sacrifice” differently. Trump equates sacrifice with giving up something. Specifically, Trump consistently points to financial losses or foregone business opportunities. For example, he commented, “‘I’ve given up a tremendous amount to run for president . . . I gave up two more seasons of *Celebrity Apprentice*’”.<sup>9</sup> Trump repeatedly points to opportunities for monetary gain (personally and for the family businesses) that he gave up to assume the presidency. When asked about any personal costs he has suffered, Trump talks about “hard work”, namely the hard work involved in building his financial empire. His critics have problems with this. First, several of Trump’s opponents simply do not believe that he has given up anything. They argue that as president, he has actually generated more wealth, even with Trump family members stepping down from prominent formal leadership roles.<sup>10</sup> But more importantly for our discussion, Trump’s opponents reject his definition of sacrifice. Critics, of course, vehemently argue that “hard work” is not sacrifice, particularly when that work was designed to benefit Trump, his family, and his businesses. For example, David Horsey writes, “Trump was quickly lampooned for suggesting that working hard to make himself richer is any kind of sacrifice”.<sup>11</sup> Effort expended for personal benefit—even if it involves giving up other pleasures—simply does not count as sacrifice to Trump’s critics. Similarly, foregoing opportunities for future financial gain or professional success does not constitute real sacrifice in their thinking.

I am particularly struck by the depth of the emotion attached to this particular issue. Obviously, the 2016 presidential election was highly emotionally charged, and Trump himself is a polarizing figure—there is nothing novel here. But critics zeroed in on Trump’s use of the term “sacrifice”. In their responses, these critics do not simply dismiss the Trump family’s claims; Trump’s critics are “appalled”,<sup>12</sup> and they refer to Trump as a “barbarian”.<sup>13</sup> Sarah Kendzior ranted, “Serving one’s country is a sacrifice, and sacrifice terrifies Trump. The idea that one would risk oneself—out of

<sup>6</sup> Levin (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Levin (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Levin (2018), quoting Scott H. Amey.

<sup>9</sup> Bixby (2016).

<sup>10</sup> This seems to be inaccurate. Recent studies indicate that Trump’s net worth has decreased since he took office. See, for example, (Atkinson 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Horsey (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Graham (2016).

<sup>13</sup> See Meghan McCain’s tweet in Reuter’s (CNBC 2016).

love, loyalty, or duty—is alien to him. Sacrifice, to Trump, is a sucker’s bet, a gamble beyond his comprehension—but one he is all too willing to let other Americans make”.<sup>14</sup> This is strong, emotional language, indicating not only broad anti-Trump sentiment, but powerful, visceral reactions to Trump’s use of “sacrifice” in particular.

The first full-blown controversy over “sacrifice” occurred in 2016 when then-candidate Trump compared his sacrifices to the death of a Muslim–American soldier, U.S. Army Captain Humayun Khan. During the Democratic National Convention that summer, Khizr Khan, Captain Khan’s father, offered a televised speech, in which he stated that Trump had “sacrificed nothing and no one”.<sup>15</sup> In a subsequent interview with George Stephanopoulos, Trump seemed to equate his own actions with Captain Khan’s death, saying,

“I think I’ve made a lot of sacrifices. I work very, very hard. I’ve created thousands of jobs, tens of thousands of jobs, built great structures . . . I think they’re sacrifices. I think when I can employ thousands and thousands of people, take care of their education, take care of so many things, even in military. I mean, I was very responsible, along with a group of people, for getting the Vietnam Memorial built in downtown Manhattan, which to this day people thank me for”.<sup>16</sup>

Even stalwart Republicans distanced themselves from Trump after this comment, aligning themselves with a traditional view of military sacrifice. House Speaker Paul D. Ryan said, “‘Many Muslim Americans have served valiantly in our military, and made the ultimate sacrifice. Capt. Khan was one such brave example. His sacrifice—and that of Khizr and Ghazala Khan—should always be honored. Period’. Senate Majority Mitch McConnell, Arizona Sen. John McCain, and South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham chimed in with criticisms, too”.<sup>17</sup>

Trump failed to recognize Khan’s death adequately as a personal sacrifice by equating it with his own work. In comparing his own business efforts with Khan’s death as a soldier, Trump diminished Khan’s sacrifice. Trump diminished another soldier’s sacrifice in a similar way a little over a year later. He telephoned Myeisha Johnson after her husband, U.S. Army Sergeant La David Johnson, was killed in the line of duty. Mrs. Johnson recounts Trump “coldly telling her that her husband ‘knew what he signed up for’”, and she says he could not remember Sgt. Johnson’s name when offering condolences: “‘I heard him stumbling on trying to remember my husband’s name, and that’s what hurt me the most, because if my husband is out here fighting for our country and he risked his life for our country, why can’t you remember his name?’”<sup>18</sup>

Eric Zorn’s commentary, “What Donald Trump should have said about sacrifice”, speaks directly as to why many people distanced themselves from Trump in reaction to his remarks about Khan and his seemingly insensitive treatment of soldiers and their families. Zorn states that “sacrifice” can only be applied to those “who have risked and in many cases lost their lives fighting for our great country”.<sup>19</sup> He distinguishes between sacrifice and patriotism, paying taxes, and advocating and serving the nation. *The Atlantic* similarly rejected the notion “that having a successful business career was somewhat an equivalent sacrifice to having a son die in combat”.<sup>20</sup> David Graham makes similar comments, concluding, “Sacrificing oneself on the altar of propriety and respectability does not qualify as self-abnegation”.<sup>21</sup> Captain Humayun Khan and Sgt. Johnson’s deaths—and their family’s losses—contrast sharply with Trump’s lived experience. Sacrifice involves real risk, risk of

<sup>14</sup> Kendzior (2018).

<sup>15</sup> ABC News (2016).

<sup>16</sup> Zorn (2016).

<sup>17</sup> Horsey (2016).

<sup>18</sup> Kendzior (2018).

<sup>19</sup> Zorn (2016).

<sup>20</sup> Graham (2016).

<sup>21</sup> Graham (2016).

death, injury, or crippling loss. The implication of this is clear: Trump has never really been at risk. He and his family enjoy personal, financial and socio-political security that has never been vulnerable in any meaningful way. In that context, experiencing limited financial losses or foregoing business opportunities simply doesn't constitute sacrifice.

For some of us, this is obvious—why even discuss it? Of course Trump hasn't experienced meaningful personal losses; scholars needn't waste any time or ink on this issue. However, there is much more going on. An entire rhetorical dynamic has developed around "sacrifice" in the Trump era. Trump, along with his supporters and his critics, claim or dismiss sacrificial language as part of a broader strategy of aligning Trump with and distancing him from specific constituencies.

## 2. Scapegoating as Rhetorical Strategy

So far I have focused on sacrifice as a personal loss, willingly experienced on behalf of the nation. However, there are other elements of traditional sacrificial practice that occasionally come into contemporary political discourse. "Scapegoating" originated in sacrificial contexts, and was performed to achieve a distinct sacrificial purpose. While individuals suffer personal losses to secure specific material or spiritual rewards, scapegoating involves transferring personal guilt in order to avoid specific punishments. We might imagine these two practices as two sides of a single coin: One gives up certain things to secure benefits that otherwise might not come, and one scapegoats—transfers guilt or ritual contamination—to avoid punishment that otherwise should come. In contemporary civil religion discourse, scapegoating is part of the broad range of sacrificial rhetoric; it marks strategies used to avoid public disapproval or even legal consequences.

President Trump has frequently come under attack for publicly (and possibly legally) reprehensible actions. In those moments, the mainstream media has occasionally claimed that his strategy is to deflect attention and blame onto other individuals. At key moments they have charged Trump with "sacrificing" or "scapegoating" these people. For example, in July 2017, *The Moderate Voice* ran the headline, "Is the White House Sacrificing Donald Trump Jr.?" A similar headline ran in *Newsweek*: "Is the White House Sacrificing Donald Trump Jr. to Save Jared Kushner?"<sup>22</sup> This speculation arose out of increasing concern that Russia had interfered in the 2016 presidential election. The *New York Times* reported that Donald Trump Jr. and others, including Jared Kushner, had met in late 2016 with an attorney linked with the Kremlin. Emails suggest that the purpose of the meeting was to hand over "dirt" on Hillary Clinton to give Trump an advantage in the presidential campaign. As this story broke and gained momentum, the White House quickly began directing attention away from Kushner to Trump's son. Ron Klain, former chief of staff to Vice President Joe Biden, speculated,

"Perhaps this story was put out and hung on Donald Trump's son to move it away from Donald Trump's son-in-law, who definitely has more legal exposure, who played a role in firing FBI Director [James] Comey, who supposedly is one of the people who advised the president to fire Director Comey, who has been threatening your colleagues here at MSNBC with bad stories and all these things . . . It may well be, as incredible as this is, that this was an effort by the Trump White House to hang this on Donald Trump Jr. and move it away from Jared Kushner".<sup>23</sup>

A year later, President Trump was still distancing himself from Trump Jr., tweeting, "when the presidential campaign team met with a Russian operative at Trump Tower in 2016, its purpose was 'to get information on an opponent'. [President] Trump added, that it all was 'totally legal and done all the time in politics—and it went nowhere. *I did not know about it!*'" (my emphasis).<sup>24</sup> Political opponents and mainstream media outlets increasingly criticized President Trump for "selling out his

<sup>22</sup> Riotta (2017).

<sup>23</sup> Riotta (2017).

<sup>24</sup> D'Antonio (2018).

son", while simultaneously noting that this behavior "is appalling but not a surprise, nor does it reflect a momentary lapse".<sup>25</sup>

This is not an isolated incident. Comparisons have been made to Trump's actions in September 2017, when he fired Tom Price from his role as Health and Human Services Secretary. Ostensibly, Price was asked to resign in the wake of charges that he had taken at least twenty-five trips on a private aircraft at the taxpayers' expense, costing them hundreds of thousands of dollars. One critic concluded, "He was fired because he violated Trump's first principle: Never, ever make the boss look bad—especially in the press. Price had become a major distraction for Trump and his White House. . . . Ultimately, those bad headlines . . . were the kiss of death for Price. Bad decisions can be forgiven. Bad headlines can't".<sup>26</sup> However, other critics charged that Price was really fired for other reasons. Some determined that Price was fired for failing to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, known popularly as "Obamacare". But other critics argued that Price's departure was designed primarily to deflect attention away from criticisms swirling around Trump. The *New York Times* wrote, "The firestorm over Mr. Price came as the president was already on the defensive with his base".<sup>27</sup> Another source stated, "the tumult surrounding his travel became another distraction for an administration already reeling from the defeat of repeated Senate efforts to repeal Obamacare and criticism for its hurricane relief efforts in Puerto Rico".<sup>28</sup> Other news commentators said, "the Price thing is a sacrificial lamb that was easy for Donald Trump to sacrifice".<sup>29</sup> Price was only one of numerous White House officials to be fired in the face of mounting public and media scrutiny.<sup>30</sup> Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell is the most recent example. SchiffGold writes, "he [Trump] knows the Democrats are going to blame him when the bubbles burst. He needs a scapegoat, and Powell fits the bill".<sup>31</sup> Trump's critics argue that when he anticipates problematic criticism, he fires a top official or lays blame at someone else's feet, to deflect criticism away from himself. President Trump has a habit of sacrificing others—even his son—in order to save himself.

Scapegoating is a specific, structurally complicated form of sacrifice. It requires a social system that is willing to substitute one living being on behalf of another, to redirect condemnation. This formalized substitution of one being for another must be seen as beneficial not only to an individual, but also to the community overall. This complicated ritual practice has a long history in religio-cultural systems. The term itself is commonly understood to refer to the biblical practice laid out in Leviticus 16, in which the high priest lays hands on the head of a goat, which is then driven into the wilderness. The laying-on of hands ritually transfers sin from the community (represented in the priest) to the animal. By placing the hands onto the goat's head, the priest shifts the community's burden onto the animal; driving the animal into the wilderness literally takes the sin away. Not only are the people relieved from the spiritual burden of carrying those sins, but they are physically and geographically separated from the ritual pollution caused by that sin. The scapegoat is sent into exile, and the community is left ritually pure, spiritually positioned to continue in relationship with YHWH. Less well known is another ancient scapegoat figure, the ancient Greek *pharmakos*. The *pharmakos* was a socially marginal person (e.g., criminal or scoundrel) who was either exiled, beaten, or executed as a sacrifice on behalf of the community. This scapegoat figure took on any "ill fortune" directed at the community and was then publicly punished, killed, or sent away from the community. This isolated the "ill fortune" on

<sup>25</sup> D'Antonio (2018).

<sup>26</sup> Cillizza (2017).

<sup>27</sup> Baker et al. (2017).

<sup>28</sup> Diamond et al. (2017).

<sup>29</sup> CNN Tonight (2017).

<sup>30</sup> "In just eight months since taking office, Mr. Trump has fired or lost a chief of staff, a chief strategist, a national security adviser, a press secretary, two communications directors, a deputy chief of staff, a deputy national security adviser, the F.B.I. director and numerous other aides and advisers." (Baker et al. 2017)

<sup>31</sup> Schiff (2018).

a single individual, deflecting it away from the community as a whole, in a kind of ritualized social purification.<sup>32</sup>

In characterizing Donald Trump Jr., Tom Price, Jerome Powell, and others as scapegoats, critics imply that President Trump has mimicked these ancient social strategies. Trump shifts guilt (and the socio-political “taint” that accompanies potential criminal action) that might land on his shoulders onto others. He casts these figures as scoundrels (or even criminals) and directs public attention away from his own unethical actions to other peoples’ behavior, effectively avoiding any personal social and political cost. These scapegoats pay a public price as a result of Trump’s behavior, suffering public distancing or professional exile. When this is done effectively, the president remains legally blameless and unimpeded by social “taint”.

In certain cultural systems, the “scapegoat” approach is acceptable (as it was in ancient Greece). In the contemporary United States, however, this ritual strategy is not universally accepted, for several reasons. First, as a culture, we tend to expect individuals to pay for their own deviant behavior; there is no socially-sanctioned scapegoat process for criminal (or even socially reprehensible) behavior. As a result, when listeners conclude that Trump is scapegoating someone, they respond negatively. Second, technically Trump isn’t following the accepted sacrificial “rules” in contemporary civil discourse. For a scapegoat to be effective, the community overall has to agree that the scapegoat is paying for *someone else’s* sin or misbehavior. The biblical system assumes that the goat is taking on the burden of sins performed by the people. The Greek system made one or more individuals the target of “ill fortune” that might otherwise plague the entire community. Trump’s critics, however, charge that Trump attempts to deny any guilt by directing blame onto others and then distancing himself from them. This is particularly jarring when the scapegoat is his own son—a seemingly qualitatively different “sacrificial victim” than political appointees. Precisely because of this qualitative difference, critics are appalled that he would use his own flesh and blood. Traditionally, scapegoats are distinct from and socially less valuable than those they represent, either by their very physical form (e.g., the goat) or their social status (e.g., the “scoundrel”). For a parent to save himself by putting his child at risk crosses a line, because it implies that the parent sees himself as more valuable than his child. Our cultural opposition to such a strategy is reflected in news headlines, including titles such as “To protect himself, Trump is willing to undermine his son”<sup>33</sup> and “Is the White House sacrificing Donald Trump Jr. to protect a family member with more to lose?”<sup>34</sup>

Scapegoat language goes well beyond a simple disagreement over whether or not Trump has risked anything meaningfully himself or understood the ultimate losses that others have suffered. When constituencies publicly charge Trump with scapegoating, the conversation moves into the realm of values. Such a charge implies that President Trump values his own political, social, and financial well-being over the political, social, and financial well-being of his colleagues and potentially his own son. At this point, we become embroiled in an emotionally-charged conversation about values.

### 3. Acknowledging, Diminishing, and Mocking Sacrifice

As we noted earlier, sacrificial language has been part of national discourse for millennia, and nowhere is it more prevalent than in conversations about military service. By and large, Donald Trump and his supporters conform with the historical government tradition of recognizing soldiers and first responders for risking their own lives to safeguard others. When talking in generalities at official events, Trump supporters and critics unite to praise the military, emergency personnel, and their families, honoring the sacrifices these people make on behalf of their communities and the nation. This rhetorical strategy largely serves government interests. Kelly Denton-Borhaug has argued that using

<sup>32</sup> Roberts (1916), pp. 218–24.

<sup>33</sup> D’Antonio (2018).

<sup>34</sup> Rare (2017).

sacrificial language “transcendentalizes” war by packaging it in religious (usually Christian) imagery. Sacrificial death isn’t senseless; instead, it has meaning and worth. While senseless deaths should be scrutinized and prevented, sacrificial deaths should be honored and commemorated. Sacrificial deaths can become models for and calls to subsequent sacrifice, to ensure that those who have already died did not die in vain. Framing wartime deaths as “sacrifices” forestalls any questions or challenges, because to challenge the meaning of the war action is to risk challenging the meaning of those who died in war. Put another way, sacrificial discourse authorizes war by building value into the deaths brought about by war. If soldiers’ deaths are sacrifices, then they are meaningful; if they are not sacrifices, then their deaths may be meaningless.<sup>35</sup>

President Trump (2017a) endorses the value of soldiers’ work when he invokes sacrificial language. For example, on Memorial Day 2017, he tweeted, “Honoring the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to America”, and “Today we remember the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in serving”.<sup>36</sup> Trump (2018a) characterizes military sacrifice in primarily physical terms; he refers to sweat and blood, as well as the “ultimate sacrifice”, physical death.<sup>37</sup> This language has been consistent throughout his administration, particularly on important holidays. For example, on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, he tweeted, “Today, as we Remember Pearl Harbor, it was an incredible honor to be joined with surviving Veterans of the attack on 12/7/1941. They are HEROES, and they are living witnesses to American History. All American hearts are filled with gratitude and their sacrifice”.<sup>38</sup>

In ceremonial moments, Trump—like other presidents before him—publicly recognizes and thanks soldiers, veterans, and their families. At other times, however, Trump—again, like many of his predecessors—refers to the personal sacrifices of military personnel to justify requests he makes of the country. He pivots from a reminder of soldiers’ physical and personal sacrifices to ask citizens for a greater financial investment of U.S. resources. For example, within a week of his inauguration, Trump signed two executive actions, arguing that they would “ensure the sacrifices of our military are supported by the actions of our government,” adding “that members of the military ‘will always be supported by the actions of our government, believe me’”.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, these actions called for “new planes, new ships, new resources and new tools for our men and women in uniform”.<sup>40</sup> According to this line of thinking, the soldiers’ sacrifices should prompt citizens’ sacrifices, if not personally, then financially. Again, Trump mimics many previous presidents when he labels soldiers’ work as “sacrifice”, and then asks the American people to make their own contributions to the effort.

From time to time, Trump expands his acknowledgement to include first responders: “Happy #FirstRespondersDay to all of our HEROES out there. We are forever grateful to you for your service, sacrifice and courage 24/7/365!”<sup>41</sup> At the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual National Peace Officer’s Memorial Service, Trump tweeted, “Today is one of the most important and solemn occasions of the year—the day we pay tribute to the Law Enforcement Heroes who gave their lives in the line of duty. They made the ultimate sacrifice so that we could live in safety and peace. We stand with our police (HEROES) 100%”.<sup>42</sup> When referring to the military, to police officers, or to first responders, Trump (like many of his predecessors) calls them “heroes” and emphasizes their sacrifices.

However, Trump has drawn criticism—usually from liberal media outlets—for his insensitivity in dealing with *individual* military family losses. Repeatedly Trump has been called out for paying inadequate attention to particular servicemen or for being blatantly dismissive. For example, in

<sup>35</sup> Denton-Borhaug (2011b).

<sup>36</sup> Trump (2017a, 2017b).

<sup>37</sup> Trump (2018a). See also (Trump 2017a).

<sup>38</sup> Trump (2017c).

<sup>39</sup> Shinkman (2017).

<sup>40</sup> Shinkman (2017).

<sup>41</sup> Trump (2017d).

<sup>42</sup> Trump (2018b).

October 2017, the media chastised Trump for waiting two weeks to call surviving family members after four U.S. soldiers were killed in Niger. In response, he claimed (inaccurately) that Barack Obama had not called any “Gold Star” families during his time as president. Mary Katharine Ham, a conservative commentator, criticized Trump, capturing the thinking of many journalists:

He had the obligation to tell the country about these heroes, who’ve given their lives for our country, and instead he [did] as he always does he debased his office by attacking someone else . . . . And the President felt attacked. And what he did when he felt attacked is he started to counterpunch on this most solemn of subjects. And there’s not an excuse for it because like I work with these Gold Star families and they don’t want to be brought into it and you can talk about these heroes without turning it into this. You can just say, look, there’s a different timelines for different areas, this is how we’re dealing with the sacrifice these families made for generously, and we’re doing it very sensitively. End of story.<sup>43</sup>

Kirsten Powers responded, “You know, these are heroes and they sacrifice for our country. And so the point is that rather than doing that [behaving as Ham recommended in her comments], he immediately starts debasing, you know, himself and his predecessors”.<sup>44</sup>

This comment led to a discussion about a previous incident. The day after his inauguration, President Trump spoke at the CIA headquarters, and he spent a considerable amount of time describing the attendance at his inauguration. At the time, the mainstream media criticized how Trump handled this first presidential event, suggesting that Trump dishonored the military by focusing so much on the inauguration attendance issue. A year later, Powers criticized Trump’s behavior at the CIA: “instead of honoring them [the CIA] he talked about himself and his stupid crowds at the inaugural”.<sup>45</sup> Powers reflected a widespread belief that, when addressing the military, the president ought to keep his remarks focused on soldiers and their families rather than on personal concerns, precisely because “these are heroes and they sacrifice for our country”.<sup>46</sup>

Trump has also freely disregarded other communities’ sacrifices on the international stage. On 1 January 2018, Trump tweeted, “The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!”<sup>47</sup> Pakistan’s Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal responded quickly. He spelled out the sacrifices Pakistan had made, referring to “75,000 casualties of its civilians and troops with economic loss of \$188 billion and huge devastation to its infrastructure”.<sup>48</sup> In another context, Iqbal stated, “Our people, armed forces, law-enforcement agencies (LEAs) and police have given sacrifices and country’s economy suffered huge financial losses”.<sup>49</sup> Iqbal was not simply correcting Trump regarding a factual error; he took Trump’s words as an insult, saying that Trump “had belittled sacrifices made by Pakistan”.<sup>50</sup> Specifically, Iqbal declared, “No one has the right to call Pakistan a liar when it has made the biggest sacrifices in the war against terror. . . . the US president’s recent remarks are akin to belittling our sacrifices. We are a dignified nation and no one has the right to attack our dignity” (my emphasis).<sup>51</sup>

Iqbal publicly denounced Trump for the perceived insult to his country: “It amounts to making a mockery of [the] sacrifices of Pakistan in the war against terrorism,” and Iqbal emphasized that Pakistan is an “honourable and dignified nation and no one had the right to raise finger on their

<sup>43</sup> Cable News Network (2017).

<sup>44</sup> Cable News Network (2017).

<sup>45</sup> Cable News Network (2017).

<sup>46</sup> Powers, Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees (Cable News Network 2017).

<sup>47</sup> Trump (2018c).

<sup>48</sup> The News International (2018).

<sup>49</sup> App (2018).

<sup>50</sup> Kashmir Times (2018).

<sup>51</sup> Kashmir Times (2018). Iqbal It’s worth noting that Iqbal made these last remarks when speaking to the Anti-Riot Unit of the Islamabad Police.

dignity”.<sup>52</sup> Iqbal’s statement suggests that to dismiss or disregard someone’s sacrifice is to dishonor them. By suggesting that a group has contributed or lost nothing of value comes very close to suggesting that *they* have no value.

While barbed comments might be expected in international relations, Trump has treated widely recognized American heroes dismissively as well. For example, civil rights activist Myrlie Evers publicly criticized President Trump for calling her by her first name at the opening ceremonies for a civil rights museum in Mississippi. Evers’s late husband, Medgar Evers, was assassinated in 1963 for his work as a civil rights activist. In a later opinion piece, Mrs. Evers explained her reaction to Donald Trump, saying.

On December 9, the president visited that museum and afterward, he addressed me by my first name, instead of ‘Mrs. Evers’. That moment disturbed me since I had not given him permission to call me by my first name. My husband and so many others spent their lives fighting for the right to be treated with dignity and respect. That moment transported me back to the days of Jim Crow when whites refused to use courtesy titles toward African Americans, such as ‘Mr.’ or ‘Mrs.’ Instead, whites called us by our first names or, worse, yelled out, ‘boy’ or ‘girl’.<sup>53</sup>

Like Iqbal, Evers referred to dignity and respect. In a later interview, Evers declared, “‘You dismissed me by calling me by my first name and I did not give you permission to do so’”.<sup>54</sup> Janet Shan compared Trump’s treatment of Evers with his treatment of Captain Humayun Khan, writing, “Like Khizr Khan said, Donald Trump has sacrificed nothing and for no-one in any struggles in this country. This was a Mr. Tibbs moment that I don’t even know if Trump understands. This is yet another black leader that Donald Trump has insulted. He went after Barack Obama, John Lewis, Oprah Winfrey, Ken Frazier, Jay-Z and black athletes”.<sup>55</sup>

Trump’s treatment of Mrs. Evers is at odds with the language he used at ceremonial events in the White House, when he talked generally about leaders in the civil rights movement. While hosting guests in honor of National African American History Month, he tweeted, “As we come together to celebrate the extraordinary contributions of African-Americans to our nation, our thoughts turn to the heroes of the civil rights movement whose courage and sacrifice have inspired us all. Proclamation: 45.sh.gov/c9Gvt9”.<sup>56</sup> Once again, in a ceremonial moment the president used traditional language involving sacrifice. However, when faced with a specific individual’s sacrifice, Trump came across as dismissive.

Perhaps Trump’s most inflammatory dismissal of another person’s sacrifice was his treatment of Senator John McCain. While campaigning in Iowa during the Republican primary contest, Trump denied that McCain was a hero, stating, “‘He’s not a war hero. He’s a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren’t captured’”.<sup>57</sup> McCain had been captured during the Vietnam War and held as a prisoner of war for more than five years in Hanoi. He was offered early release, but refused it in solidarity with his fellow prisoners. Trump’s cavalier attitude toward McCain’s experience sparked a firestorm of criticism across the country, including from prominent Republicans. Some went so far as to say that Trump’s statement “made him unfit to be commander in chief”, reflecting the traditional view that military personnel deserve respect for the physical and psychological suffering their professional service can involve.<sup>58</sup> Former Texas Governor Rick Perry cautioned, “‘To disparage a legitimate American hero like John McCain—you may disagree with his policies and that’s fine. I tell people all the time it’s OK to question your government,’ said Perry, an Air Force veteran. ‘But don’t

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<sup>52</sup> App (2018).

<sup>53</sup> Evers (2018b).

<sup>54</sup> Shan (2018).

<sup>55</sup> Shan (2018).

<sup>56</sup> Trump (2018d).

<sup>57</sup> Martin and Rappoport (2015).

<sup>58</sup> Martin and Rappoport (2015).

question the men and women of the military who sacrifice and sometimes pay a huge price for our safety and our freedom and our economics’’.<sup>59</sup>

When pressed on the issue, Trump refused to apologize, saying, ‘‘People that were not captured that went in and fought, nobody talks about them. Those are heroes also . . . He’s [McCain] all talk and no action’’.<sup>60</sup> McCain never requested an apology, but his daughter, Meghan McCain, blasted Trump the next day, tweeting, ‘‘I can’t believe what I am reading this morning. Horrified. Disgusted. There are no words’’.<sup>61</sup> Over time, the antagonism between the two men intensified. Ultimately, McCain withdrew his support for Trump as president, (although this was prompted by a separate issue).<sup>62</sup> A couple of years later, when President Trump signed the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, he went ‘‘so far as to omit McCain’s name when citing the title of the bill’’.<sup>63</sup> This occurred when McCain was known to be gravely ill. Trump refused to soften his stance even when McCain died. According to multiple sources, White House staff members urged the president to issue a statement upon McCain’s death, recognizing his military service and calling him a hero.<sup>64</sup> Trump refused, and issued a brief tweet instead: ‘‘My deepest sympathies and respect go out to the family of Senator John McCain. Our hearts and prayers are with you!’’

The rift continued after McCain died. McCain himself excluded Trump from the funeral through arrangements he made in advance of his death. Dignitaries from across the political spectrum attended the funeral, including George W. Bush as well as the Clintons and the Obamas. President Trump’s absence was obvious, and he spent the day at Camp David, tweeting about unrelated topics and golfing. Chris Cillizza echoed the sentiments of countless Americans when he wrote,

The death of a long-serving Republican senator and war hero should be an absolute slam dunk for a Republican president, politically speaking. Honor his service, mourn for his family and ask that people remember the sacrifice he made. Donald Trump did none of those things, turning what should be a celebration of a life well lived in service of the country into a grudging and belated acknowledgment of a man who gave so much.<sup>65</sup>

Stephen Collinson commented on how Trump’s absence reflected more than his personal conflicts with McCain: ‘‘The President’s absence and failure to lead a grateful nation in mourning would, for McCain, eloquently reflect the fracture with the traditional ruling classes that he successfully made the focus of his 2016 campaign and that has become a motif of his presidency’’.<sup>66</sup> Meghan McCain, in her eulogy for her father, called McCain a ‘‘great man, the real thing’’, contrasting him with ‘‘cheap rhetoric from men who will never come near the sacrifice he gave so willingly’’.<sup>67</sup> While she didn’t mention Trump by name, her words were widely understood as a sharp critique of Trump’s character, as a man unable to acknowledge the sacrifice of others or make sacrifices of his own.

Our task is not to settle disputes between President Trump and Interior Minister Iqbal, Mrs. Myrlie Evers, or Senator John McCain. Rather, we simply note that three prominent individuals expressed, on national and international stages, a sense of outrage that Trump dismissed their sacrifices. That dismissal is a rhetorical choice on Trump’s part. He had the opportunity in all three cases to retract or correct his language, but he consciously (and conspicuously) did not. At this level, Trump refuses to acknowledge community and individual sacrifice. The question is why.

Bruce Lincoln refers to this discursive style as ‘‘language of mockery’’, and he discusses this genre of speech in a broader conversation about authority. Lincoln observes, ‘‘Curses, insults, mockery, and

<sup>59</sup> Scott et al. (2015).

<sup>60</sup> Scott et al. (2015).

<sup>61</sup> McCain (2015).

<sup>62</sup> Nowicki (2016).

<sup>63</sup> Timm (2018).

<sup>64</sup> Hartmann (2018).

<sup>65</sup> Cillizza (2018).

<sup>66</sup> Collinson (2018).

<sup>67</sup> CNN Politics (2018).

derision, like gossip, slander, heckling, and jokes, are not genres normally employed by the law or the state, both of which regularly attempt to discourage them".<sup>68</sup> Lincoln argues that mockery and derision tend to emerge out of the "fifth voice", the collective voice of people who do not have access to institutionalized power. Instead of clamoring for power, this voice mocks and disparages leaders, exercising "a devastatingly corrosive effect on the pretensions and the claims to authority of those who hold office, prestige, and to power".<sup>69</sup> Mockery and derision become tools of the disempowered, used to undercut state authority. Lincoln characterizes the "fifth voice" as "corrosive discourse". Lincoln describes corrosive discourses as "not only nonauthoritative, but downright antithetical to the construction of authority, given their capacity to eat away at the claims and pretensions of discourses and speakers who try to arrogate authority for themselves. . . . all of these discourses lead audiences to hold someone or something in diminished regard, and as an audience turns irreverent, authority crumbles".<sup>70</sup> By mocking, heckling and dismissing statements by government officials, the disempowered undercut these leaders' authority. At its most effective, this strategy not only negates the specific content of official statements, but also erodes the authority that empowers officials to make those statements in the first place.

In Donald Trump's case, issues become complicated. As a candidate, Trump could posture as a government outsider. By using mocking his opponents and national leaders, he aligned himself with "the people", specifically those who felt marginalized and ignored by a purportedly elitist social group who wielded national power. During the campaign, it was not surprising for him to position himself this way. Once he was elected, however, Trump might easily have slipped into a more centrist position and discourse, speaking from a position of widely-acknowledged power, using traditional presidential language, and working with mainstream media outlets to speak to the entire nation. Trump has chosen not to do this. Instead, Trump has maintained his "outsider" persona, continuing to align himself with a subset of the national population while simultaneously exercising presidential power. He succeeds in doing this by flaunting presidential discursive and behavioral norms. As president he has continued his campaign practice of disparaging large segments of the American population, often by mocking or dismissing their experiences. Most recently, he did this by publicly mocking Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, the woman who charged that Brett Kavanaugh assaulted her decades ago. In a now infamous rally speech, Trump mocked Ford by making fun of her inability to remember elements of the attack: "'How did you get home? I don't remember. How'd you get there? I don't remember. Where is the place? I don't remember. How many years ago was it? I don't know'".<sup>71</sup> Many Americans were surprised (if not appalled) by Trump's language. But by using a discursive genre typically "off limits" to government leaders, Trump continues to position himself with his base. He taps into the "fifth voice", undermining the authority of those with power and status.

Trump has also maintained his Washington outsider persona through his use of Twitter, which becomes his vehicle for "corrosive discourse". Trump circumvents the mainstream media, putting Trump into direct content with his base. The Twitter account gives Trump a communication stream so he is not dependent on press coverage to get his message out. This strategy only works because Trump is focused on a limited audience, his base. Since Trump is not concerned about connecting with the American population writ large, and because his Twitter communication strategy has been successful with his base, Trump is free to ignore or even alienate the mainstream press. Trump has significantly reduced the number of White House briefings as compared with other presidents, signaling his disregard for their work. His contempt is clear when he heckles reporters and refers to mainstream media outlets as "fake news". As Lincoln writes, sustained mockery and disparagement

<sup>68</sup> Lincoln (1994), p. 71.

<sup>69</sup> Lincoln (1994), p. 71.

<sup>70</sup> Lincoln (1994), p. 78.

<sup>71</sup> Malloy et al. (2018).

leads “audiences to hold someone or something in diminished regard”.<sup>72</sup> Trump’s mockery works with his intended audience: It undercuts the press’s authority, specifically its authority to hold the president accountable for his actions.

We see Trump’s discursive strategy play out in conversations centered on sacrifice. In fact, “sacrifice” is a particularly useful topic to focus on, precisely because national discourse about sacrifice has been steeped in longstanding tradition that has severely constrained what a president could say and do without violating accepted social norms. As a candidate and then as president, Trump has not only rejected commonly held definitions of sacrifice; he also flouted cultural norms regarding how we talk about and treat those who have sacrificed. Heroes and victims are traditionally “off limits” in certain ways, but Trump regularly ignores those boundaries. In rejecting common discursive patterns around sacrifice, he effectively undermines institutional authority (e.g., Congress, the press) and entrenches divisions between social groups in the country.

As we dig more deeply into Trump’s discursive strategies around sacrifice, we find a pattern. When Trump mocks or disparages specific individuals’ sacrifices, they tend to belong to one of two groups. First, Trump disparages political opponents. Interior Minister Iqbal, Senator McCain, Tom Price, and even Dr. Ford stood in the way of specific political goals Trump wanted to achieve. When Trump refuses to acknowledge their sacrifices, or when he mocks their personal suffering, he undermines their authority, specifically with his base. He distances himself from these political actors as he pushes toward specific political goals. Second, and more disturbing, Trump mocks individuals his supporters disrespect, based on identity factors. Trump consistently fails to acknowledge the sacrifices of minority citizens, even when they have served in the military. He disrespected Myrlie Evers, and she has charged him with a broader failure, “disparaging non-white nations with a hateful vulgarity”.<sup>73</sup> By ignoring and disrespecting the sacrifices of specific individuals based on their identity, he signals they are less valuable than other members of society, specifically members of his base. His public rhetoric signals that he will use his power to champion policies and programs based on the idea that some people are more valuable than others. As Timothy Cole notes (Cole 2005), a strategic speaker crafts “images presented to advance policy . . . [that] resonate with public values, even as they attempt to shape them”.<sup>74</sup> Trump’s rhetorical images—including sacrifice—resonate with his supporters’ values, the only audience he really cares about.

#### 4. Conclusions

Years ago, Kelly Denton-Borhaug explored the complexity of sacrifice as a category in civil discourse. She wrote, “sacrifice functions not only religiously, but socially, politically, economically, militarily . . . . [sacrificial elements] shape American self-identity, allegiance and moral vision”.<sup>75</sup> When Trump challenges specific communities’ and individuals’ sacrifices, either by dismissing them, mocking them, or simply ignoring them, he undermines their public identities, value and worth. To reject the idea that someone has sacrificed something is not simply to engage in a definitional debate; it implies that what they lost has little value. And it’s not a far stretch to conclude, ultimately, that *they* have no value.

This is a foundational reason for the strong emotional response to Trump’s language about sacrifice. It is not simply that Trump is generally polarizing, that people disagree with his understanding of the word “sacrifice”, or even that he compares seasons of “Celebrity Apprentice” to a soldier’s death. In claiming to have made sacrifices himself while dismissing the sacrifices of others, Trump up-ends longstanding traditional social mores and dethrones widely-respected national heroes. He undermines structures of authority that depend heavily on large-scale social “buy in”. Finally, he resets presidential

<sup>72</sup> Lincoln (1994), p. 78.

<sup>73</sup> Evers (2018a).

<sup>74</sup> Evers (2018a), p. 141.

<sup>75</sup> Denton-Borhaug (2011a).

values, explicitly valuing some individuals more than others based on their identities, not their actions. We see this cultural transformation unfold by tracing discursive threads focused on sacrifice.

What does any of this matter to those of us who study sacrifice and religion?

When I began writing about sacrifice twenty-odd years ago, I focused on ancient non-Christian priestly texts.<sup>76</sup> Studying sacrifice mattered because, as a category within the study of religion, it exemplified how one religious tradition—Christianity, specifically Protestant Christianity—not only dominated the content of our field’s work, but also shaped the framework through which we interpreted religious phenomena. When people said “sacrifice”, they meant it in a Christian way, involving atonement, the death of an innocent, and violence that was divinely transformed into a spiritual “good”. This understanding is largely informed by a Protestant Christian understanding of Jesus’s death on the cross. Sacrifice, however, occurs in multiple religious communities, often reflected in rich, comprehensive textual traditions. Careful study of sacrifice in those contexts leads to alternative understandings of sacrifice. For example, grain or liquid offerings are often center stage, and violence is largely absent, or it is euphemized. Recognizing this leads not only to expanded conversations about sacrifice; it also necessarily leads to questions of authority: who gets to define “sacrifice” as a religious category? What’s in and what’s out? And what are the consequences of categorizing some acts as sacrificial while excluding others? The study of sacrifice, ultimately, was an exploration of authority.

The study of sacrifice in the Trump era is still about authority. In today’s America, who gets to define sacrifice? Who determines the value of a community or individual’s suffering and loss? What does it mean to honor some losses while minimizing, dismissing or even denigrating others? The answers to these questions determine how we understand sacrifice. Similarly, the people whose answers to those questions matter are the people who hold cultural authority, whether they sit in official seats of power or not.

Lincoln has pointed out that cultural conversations are not simply a matter of words—they are shaped by power. He writes,

the threat of force is present in every speech situation, being implicit in the unequal power of those who are parties to it . . . . Accordingly, it may be more important to explore (and deplore) the subtle processes of inhibition and intimidation that run through every conversation than to concentrate attention on the relatively few occasions in which the implicit threats of force are spectacularly realized.<sup>77</sup>

In the Trump era, the contest to see who ultimately gets to designate some acts as sacrificial and others as not, to determine which losses are valued as sacrifice and which are not, is ultimately a contest over authority. In this moment, the person who defines and designates sacrifice has the power to ascribe value to individual and community losses. The scholar of sacrifice has the responsibility to illuminate this power dynamic in action, even in “subtle processes” at play in our public conversations.

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<sup>77</sup> Lincoln (1994), p. 75.

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