

A Trumped-Up Cult

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Last April, a hispanic man with multiple outstanding warrants was loose on Andover's campus. After the student body received an email urging us to remain in our dorms while the police conducted a search, a pack of white students took it upon themselves to hunt for the man in the woods as they broadcasted their search on social media with the accompanying "#BuildAWall." While this has ultimately been an isolated incident of outlandish behaviour, it is indicative of the cult mentality I have noticed that has developed among the small group of students at Andover—and other places of higher education—who still support Donald Trump for president of the United States.

When Trump descended from the heavens on an escalator to announce his candidacy for president, his promises to "make America great again" were the beginning of one of the most widespread and invasive cult-like movements with one of the most dangerous political false prophets the United States has ever seen. This movement has permeated virtually every corner of society, so its presence on Andover's campus comes as no surprise.

Throughout this election cycle, I have observed a common frustration among students who feel like Trump speaks to them and their interests. A frequent complaint from these students supporting conservative viewpoints—especially on social issues—in line with those of Trump's is that they have their ideas and speeches shut down by others in the school community and that there is a prevalent liberal bias among the faculty and students. Even though this frustration is understandable, it is not reasonable. Trump's exclusionary rhetoric is antithetical to Andover's mission to bring together "youth from every quarter." It sends the wrong message about the fundamental right to respect that every person has. They may feel like the school is not accepting of them and their views, while in reality, all Andover is not accepting of is intolerance. Frustrations with the system in place at Andover, as well as other communities, makes these students susceptible to some aspects of Trump's cult mentality.

Leading many cult movements are false prophets who, like Trump, are inherently the ultimate opportunists, capitalizing on the anxieties of their followers and then promising a fix by claiming to have a sort of divine or enlightened inspiration. Trump speaks of himself and his past as if he is a Christlike business figure or genius when it comes to making deals and resolving problems, and his followers are looking for a savior; his largest voting bloc is comprised of white, Christian males, a quickly shrinking majority in a nation with rapidly changing demographics. These people are upset with political elites—like Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama—who preach a message centered around how the nation's growing diversity is a sign of our nation's future and its strongest asset. While students who support Trump at Andover are not—at least based on my

observations—fundamentally against the diverse community of the school, the same theme of being frustrated with people not listening to their views and the theme of being silenced persist.

To be clear, Trump has not created a cult in the purest sense. While, during his rallies, Trump claims to provide a safe haven for his supporters to express their fear, discontent, and hatred of change, he has not inspired widespread gatherings with satanic rituals or other odd routines. Trump, rather, has inspired more of a cult mentality among his supporters by posing as a strong, authoritarian figure who blindly disregards other opinions and even facts if they do not fit within his narrative. He has presented himself as a martyr to his supporters by claiming to protect them from the press and their enemies regardless of the effect it has on his brand. The phrase Trump's campaign has used on campaign signs, "the silent majority," perfectly captures how Trump's movement has reached across the country and touched members of the Andover community. This theme of silence does not refer to his supporters' unwillingness to voice their views and instead refers to the shutting down and silencing of the views of his supporters. Trump goes as far as planting perennial false hope among his supporters by claiming that his poll numbers are much better than they are—which, unless the greatest polling catastrophe in modern history is currently unfolding, is an utter conspiracy theory. At a recent rally in Colorado Springs, Trump remarked that his supporters are attacked and that his rallies are a safe space from the press and others. Trump has made people feel like they can express their opinions, however far they differ from the mainstream, as long as they're under the umbrella of his campaign.

However, there was once a time in American history when it seemed unlikely that the dominance of white Christians would be under the threat of usurpation and be forced to retreat into a "silenced" corner of society that Trump has carried to the national spotlight. Trump harkens back to that era of America surrounding the 1950s, a time when strong conservative values were prevalent and Christians held heavy influence. But today, white Christians are losing the strong sense of country that they once had, and some are desperate for refuge from the rapidly changing demographics of the nation.

Andover, too, was once a bastion of white, male, conservative values that has undergone drastic demographic changes and shifts over the past 50 years. The social ostracisation of Trump supporters has grown throughout his candidacy, but from the perspective of his supporters, Trump's overarching message has some validity. The 7% of students who said they supported Trump for the State of the Academy, an annual survey of the student body conducted by Andover's student-run newspaper, *The Phillipian*, (back when John Kasich and Ted Cruz were still vying for the nomination) may feel like outsiders in Andover's largely liberal community.

With the growth of liberal intolerance across the country—especially on college and boarding school campuses like Andover—it has become acceptable, commonplace, and sometimes necessary for people to chastise those who openly support Donald Trump. But these efforts are unfortunately mostly in vain. At this point, people who support him even after all that has come to light in the past several weeks—his sexual misconduct, his unhinged behaviour on the debate

stage—will likely still support Trump and the movement he has created no matter what unimaginable new allegations come to light, if not for the candidate's actions or policies, for what he represents as a political entity. Supporting Trump seems to have become more of a statement of defiance towards the establishment of Andover, just as the candidate's larger movement is centralized around distaste with the political establishment. Trump's run has represented a reason for students to justify decisions and opinions that are not in line with the consensus of the school. But not only for unsanctioned late-night searches for fugitives. Trump's cult movement, rather than moving students of diverse viewpoints closer together, has moved them further apart and insulated "the silent majority" from the harsh criticism it has faced from morally outraged students. And this, more than anything else, has halted an ongoing dialogue across political lines that should be occurring at a place like Andover. Because as long as Trump is preaching, his followers will always listen.