

## Review of Trump's Ten Commandments, by Jeffrey Sonnenfeld

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Professor Jeffery Sonnenfeld of the Yale School of Management is in a unique position to assess Donald Trump. He started advising Trump the real estate guy a quarter century ago, he got into reality television with *The Apprentice*, and long before he ran for the Presidency.

Sonnenfeld claims to have advised five presidents on leadership topics. These would have to have started long before Trump, when Sonnenfeld was in his thirties, with Bush Senior or Clinton.

The book evidences a good measure of the disdain for Trump that characterizes academia in general, the Ivy League especially, and Yale in particular. Sonnenfeld frequently cites the disdain of others, such as the CEOs of 100 major American corporations, the upper ranks of the military establishment, and Europeans in general. These observations are valid; his analysis of the foundations of the disdain, and why they propelled Trump's success, are hit and miss.

To give one example before launching into the book itself, consider Pete Hegseth at the Department of War. Hegseth's predecessor under Joe Biden was Gen. Charles Q. Brown. The Secretary of Defense was Lloyd Austin. By coincidence (?) both Brown and Austin are black, and the diversity theme was dominant. The white officer who got the most press was the (coincidentally?) transsexual Admiral Rachel Levine.

One often read, and it is easy to believe, that merit was no longer a primary factor in military promotion. Southern white men, long the backbone of the armed services refused to enlist. Mid-career soldiers such as Maj. Hegseth quit in disgust.

Hegseth threw out DEI root and branch, teamed with RFK Jr. in demonstrations of physical fitness, and reestablished a martial spirit in the armed forces. Enlistment soared. Trump's gut feel of what would appeal to the public, and of the sense that woke, careerism and bureaucracy had become dominant, was right on target.

I offer this as an introduction because such passages, which belong as well in Sonnenfeld's book, are comparatively rare. That said, his analysis is very much on target and very useful to make sense of the whole of Donald Trump.

The book is well organized and the ten Trump Commandments very well chosen. Sonnenfeld's summary in the book's concluding chapter is so concise and useful here that I include it as my own vehicle for organization. In the Substack format, his Trumps ten commandments are in bold, Sonnenfeld's text indented in purple, followed by my own comments.

<p><b>1. The Hub - and - Spokes Model</b></p>	<p>Centralizing All Power in Your Own Hands Theorists such as Max Weber celebrated bureaucracy as a system of structure to allocate resources fairly and wisely, undercutting the capriciousness of bosses and bullies. Trump is in the business of undermining bureaucratic structures, to the delight of some and the horror of others. His natural state is not to delegate any real authority or to be transparent about his next moves unless they serve his interests at that moment. Allies and adversaries alike should take care in considering whether to grant him the unconstrained leeway to make his governance structure as fluid as he intends for himself.</p>	<p>Absolutely true. Trump appoints people without long careers or many credentials because they are easier to control. Hegseth, above, is a prime example.</p> <p>He likes pretty faces, such as Tulsi, Kristi, and Pam. They are malleable and replaceable. They can take the fall for Trump's own failures and zigzags.</p> <p>While his personal charm is able to attract and retain competent people such as Marco Rubio and JD Vance, he will overload them with responsibilities, such as Rubio as Secretary of State, National Security Adviser, U.S. Archivist and Head of USAID. He discourages their working as a team. All of this reinforces Trump's role as the central, indispensable personality.</p> <p>It is awkward for subordinates, all of whom must pivot, like a school of fish, when Trump changes direction on a whim.</p>
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<p><b>2. The Real Art of Trump's Deal</b></p>	<p>Start with a Punch in the Face Versus Building Trust If you go into a negotiation with Trump or a similar strong leader, wear a helmet, prepare to be struck, and don't be surprised by the trauma he inflicts on you to start with. That is merely his opening bid, intended to throw you off course before negotiations even really begin. If you lose your balance or composure, you've lost the negotiation already.</p>	<p>Trump punched Denmark in the face by proposing to take over Greenland. Out of thin air. It certainly focused the conversation on Trump – certainly one of his objectives. It contributed to fracturing NATO, another objective.</p> <p>Trump punched Iran in the face without telling NATO. Surprise was indeed an advantage, BUT...</p> <p>On the (big) other hand, it made NATO reluctant to enlist in his fight on Iran, especially with regard to opening the Strait of Hormuz.</p> <p>Among the many punching bags has been Volodymir Zelensky. More him and Ukraine later.</p>
<p><b>3. Divide and Conquer</b></p>	<p>Build Walls, Not Bridges When up against a leader who relies on divide and conquer, you will not</p>	<p>Trump is a genius at fragmenting groups, whether supposed allies such as NATO, the EU and the Republican Party, or enemies.</p>

	<p>succeed on your own even if you are one of the wealthiest people in the world. You need alliances across parties and diverse constituencies. These alliances not only provide air cover and strength in numbers but, more importantly, can centralize resources and constituencies that a strong leader cannot afford to alienate simultaneously. Only collective action can neutralize a bully.</p>	<p>As noted above in the hub-and-spoke model, he will pit members of his team against one another. At this moment that would be Vance and Rubio.</p>
<p><b>4. How Trump Makes Money</b></p>	<p>The Art of Stealing the Deal — Heads I Win, Tails You Lose          your negotiations have to begin with you privately knowing the worst case deal you could possibly accept. And be prepared to walk promptly when it goes below that threshold, or else, before you know it, you'll be stuck holding the bag, left with only downside risk and little to no participation in any upside.</p>	<p>Conventional wisdom contends that one succeeds in business by treating partners fairly. After a succession of win-win deals, partners will want to do business with you.</p> <p>Trump is the opposite. He squeezes the maximum profit out of every opportunity, regarding it as having left money on the table if the opposite party comes out ahead.</p>
<p><b>5. Trump Behind</b></p>	<p>The Fluidity of Friends, Foils, and Foes. It costs you nothing to show respect for</p>	<p>Trump is totally transactional. If you are of some use at the moment,</p>

<p><b>Closed Doors One-On-One</b></p>	<p>Trump privately and to acknowledge his flashes of warmth and authentic charm. You should seek to build on his positive qualities through positive reinforcement, but also subtly remind him of your rock-solid foundations of authority and that your standing does not depend on his blessing. Otherwise you are already cornered.</p>	<p>well and good. If not, fuhgeddaboudit</p> <p>You need to deal from strength, and he needs to recognize that strength.</p> <p>Viz is statement to Zelensky “You got no cards!” Turns out that Zelensky does have cards. However, the notion that Putin holds the cards remains cemented in Trump’s mind.</p>
<p><b>6. The Wall of Sound</b></p>	<p>Trump’s Perpetual Noise Machine of Constant, Overwhelming Distractions Focus, focus, focus. Trump is a master distraction artist, and if you take his bait and go down diversionary paths, you have virtually conceded to his framing of the world. You should stay relentlessly focused on your own objectives and message no matter how many diversions are tossed out.</p>	<p>The diversion of the moment is <a href="#">Bruce Springsteen</a>.</p> <p>Trump is always changing the topic, the question of the moment. The only constant is that he is at the center of every issue.</p> <p>Another issue of the moment is the Epstein files. Whether or not Trump has anything huge to hide, keeping the discussion on the somewhat meaningless Epstein affair distracts people from the far more momentous events in Iran and Ukraine.</p>
<p><b>7. Trump’s World of Winners and Losers</b></p>	<p>Class for the Masses, Avoiding Losers like the Plague, and Selective Retribution If you seek to</p>	<p>Trump adores glitter. He surrounds himself with pretty women – his cabinet, for example. With gold</p>

	<p>persuade constructively, you have to approach from a position of strength. Coming in with grievances and complaints, begging for help, looks weak and undercuts your own credibility and standing. And if it isn't constructive, you have to make sure you have more force than he has. As the adage goes, "If you throw a stone at the emperor, don't miss." It is not advisable to attack unless you are certain that you have the upper hand, you are confident you will win, and you are willing to stick to it through a complete, prompt closure.</p>	<p>appointments in his house, his properties – everywhere.</p> <p>Sonnenfeld writes that Trump projects a lifestyle to which the common man would aspire if he won the lottery.</p> <p>Don't cross him, because he can be very petty.</p> <p>Sonnenfeld is right that RFK has much more of a freehand than other members of the cabinet. He has a large following of his own, independent of Trump. As does, for example, Elon Musk</p> <p>In this reviewer's opinion RFK is using that freedom well. He gets criticism from the right, people like Sasha Latypova, that he is not doing enough, as well as from the left. Politics is the art of the possible. He appears to be doing as much as he can in the in the right direction.</p> <p>Trump's infatuation with winners extends as well to tyrants. He cuts more slack than is due for the brutal Kim Jong Un, Victor Orban and Vladimir Putin. He is currently making overtures to Ukraine's</p>
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<p><b>8. Rewriting History Through the Sleeper Effect</b></p>	<p>Unless you wish to submit to the strong leader’s view of the world, false information has to be challenged, corrected, and pounded back with equal vigor. No matter how outlandish the message — which the proponent may or may not even believe — narratives can be shaped through frequency of repetition rather than factual basis as the foundation of truth.</p>	<p>Sonnenfeld credits Trump with having mastered the big lie. Topics cited include the state of the economy, levels of illegal immigration, illegal immigrant crimes, events of January 6, stolen elections, the decline of Europe... it goes on and on.</p> <p>Of the big lie, he writes “That may also explain why Trump has long shown a willingness to accept revisionist history from others, such as Vladimir Putin’s account of who started the Ukrainian conflict.” By echoing Putin’s false narrative, whether knowingly or not, he legitimizes it through repetition. Each time the claim is made, it becomes slightly more plausible to those hearing it, regardless of the mountain of evidence contradicting it.”</p> <p>This reviewer’s take is that there is substance to most of the points Trump makes – but truth does not matter. Yes, illegals do commit far more robberies and rapes. So what? The Willie Horton story won</p>

		<p>George Bush an election in 1988. That's what is remembered.</p> <p>Because Trump can be counted on to say whatever is politically useful, whatever the truth, we the public are on our own to figure out the truth.</p> <p>The same is true, as Sonnenfeld will not whatsoever choose to mention, of the Democrats. Everybody lies all the time. That is the challenge. Trump's advantage is that he understands this truth.</p>
<p><b>9. Sultan of Insult</b></p>	<p>Reducing Complexity to Simplicity Insults are no laughing matter. They wound the victim, and the humor of the audience rarely conveys acceptance as much as their relief of stress at abusive rhetoric. Although insults can be effective, it is not a strategy for all. Responding to insults with insults puts both parties into the proverbial admonition about trying to wrestle a pig in mud. This doesn't mean taking the high road of not being confrontational at all;</p>	<p>Sonnenfeld is absolutely on target. Short quote: "When Megyn Kelly asked about his track record of disparagement of women, Trump glibly replied, 'Only Rosie O'Donnell,' to uproarious audience laughter."</p> <p>Others cited are "Crooked Hillary, Sleepy Joe Biden, Little Marco Rubio."</p> <p>They stick when they have some truth. Note that Rubio is now a faithful acolyte.</p>

	rather, it means picking fights selectively and pushing back against heated rhetoric with tactics that make sense for you rather than mirroring anyone else's. You pick the battlefield; it doesn't have to be on the home turf of the Sultan of Insult.	
<b>10. Donald the Great</b>	The Role of Grandeur, Image, and Heroic Aura Some of our greatest world leaders, including many former US presidents, turn to grandiosity; but the quest for heroic stature cannot overwhelm the quest for heroic mission, and heroic self-image cannot overpower the drive for genuine accomplishments and lasting contributions. Not all accomplished leaders need grandiosity for widespread acclaim and lasting impact.	Trump sees himself as larger than life. Robert Hormats writes: "When I asked Henry Kissinger, my lifelong mentor and confidant, after their first meeting following Trump's election what kind of president he thought Trump would be, he used exactly the same word Jeff Sonnenfeld used in his introduction to this book—'consequential.' He said he would leave it to historians to write about how and why."

Sonnenfeld concludes

These are the laws of leadership that Trump implicitly follows and that come closer to capturing his leadership style than anything else — more than Moses's Ten Commandments , the US Constitution , the Magna Carta , Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanack , Norman Vincent Peale's Power of Positive Thinking , Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence

People , Stephen Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People , Trump's own The Art of the Deal , or even Shepherd Mead's How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying , a satirical 1952 spoof of the self - help literature that Frank Loesser and Abe Burrows made into a hilarious musical , which critics might argue is an uncanny parallel to Trump's methods . Trump is not known for public piety or private spiritual devotion, but he does adhere to these Ten Commandments as his personal rules of thumb for gaining, wielding, and keeping power. Some have quipped that his guiding principle could be a warped version of the biblical Golden Rule — not “Do unto others” but rather “Those who have the gold make the rules.”

Sonnenfeld mentions Ukraine only twice, but it provides some insight

The bad news cycle catalyzed by Trump's domestic and foreign policy failures in 2019 provided Trump little relief as he was hit over and over again with reminders of his own missteps every time he turned on the TV for months.

It took another major scandal of Trump's own creation to shift the narrative, and once again, he was seemingly pouring fuel on his own fire. That scandal, of course, was Trump's call with then-newly elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, with Trump seemingly extorting Zelenskyy on the call to investigate Joe Biden, threatening to withhold hundreds of millions in congressionally appropriated and approved assistance for Ukraine.

Ukraine had long-established ties with the US Democrat Party at the time this reviewer arrived in 2007. Leading Jewish oligarchs controlled the press. Igor Kholomoisky owned the television network on which comedian Volodymyr Zelensky appeared playing the role of a country president. Vadim Rabinowitz owned English-language Jewish News One and several Ukrainian language outlets. Together Kholomoisky and Rabinowitz founded the European Jewish Union. Some of JN1's staff had come from George Soros' Open Society Foundation.

Jed Sunden, founder of the Kyiv Post, and his editor Brian Bonner were ardent Democrats. Oligarch Viktor Pinchuk had tight connection with the Kyiv Post and the Democrats.

The 2012 Democrats Abroad annual gathering at Kyiv's Obolon Park, hosted by a gregarious Reno Delmonico, was a glorious affair, beer and bonhomie flowing everywhere. In answer to the question as to where the Republicans held their event came the matter-of-fact answer that there was none. This was Democrat territory.

As became evident in the Maidan uprising of 2014, Democrat Neocons, among them Victoria Nuland, appeared to reign at the US Embassy. As Elon Musk of DOGE readily concluded, as had many before him as reported [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#), the USAID mission had become a slush fund. They apparently allowed some Republicans as well to approach the trough. There is a street named after John McCain.

USAID pushed the whole woke agenda. The metro was splashed with posters of men holding hands, advocating getting tested for AIDS. The embassy supported gay rights parades and flew the rainbow flag. Americans found it off-putting; Ukrainians simply ignored this America folly.

At the end of the day, one can conclude that a newly elected Jewish president could hardly bite the hand that fed him, the people who had put him in office, by investigating corruption at USAID. Zelensky had to refuse to help Trump. And Trump remembered.

Sonnenfeld attributes the blowup in the Oval Office as follows

This sensitivity to how he is addressed is the lesson that President Zelenskyy of Ukraine, however heroic he may be, never understood when he went to the Oval Office thinking he could fight it out with Trump. You can't lecture him or moralize at him—as Zelenskyy found out the hard way, thanks in part to the poor advice of his incompetent underlings. That's not how it works with Trump, ever. It inevitably backfires.

The roots are probably deeper.

In summary, accepting and recognizing the authors' leftward bias, this is an extremely valuable analysis of the unique and enigmatic, powerful, dangerous and capable psychopath(?) who now reigns in Washington. We have not seen his type before and will probably not for a long time to come. It is definitely a phenomenon worthy of study. I'll close with the last paragraph that Sonnenfeld himself chose:

In 1597, when Francis Bacon advised in *Meditationes Sacrae and Human Philosophy* that “knowledge itself is power,” he did not mean just scientific knowledge or technological prowess but also human insight. That human insight is crucial to understanding Trump, and a leader like Trump can be supported, criticized, learned from, leveraged, persuaded, and restrained only by grasping the levers he has made apparent to us.