When Donald J. Trump announced that he was running for President, many believed he was joking. Once it became clear he was embarking on the campaign trail, most supposed his campaign would quickly flounder. To everyone’s surprise, supposed gaffes garnered further support for Trump and landed him in the center of each Republican debate stage; a loud-mouthed businessman was the primary contender. Now the President of the United States of America, Trump ran a surprising, yet in-character, campaign filled with outrageous claims and offensive arguments.

Trump’s rhetoric is characterized in the media as simply bombastic and inane; however, in this essay I suggest that despite some modern vulgarities and “tweet”-style communication, Trump’s rhetoric closely follows the rhetorical style of Puritan ministers. Though many factors contributed to Trump’s meteoric yet confusing rise in popularity, I argue that the key factor is his reliance on the Puritan rhetorical tradition. In a country that reveres its founders and heritage, Trump tapped into elements that were both familiar and refreshing to his audience. To uncover how Trump deployed elements of the Puritan rhetorical tradition, I first unpack three key elements of Puritan rhetorical style: the belief that they were a chosen people; the use of fear appeals and threats to maintain the sanctity of the group; and authoritarian leadership. I then examine how Trump used these elements of the Puritan rhetorical tradition to facilitate his successful campaign.

Trump constitutes his identity as the Persecuted Redeemer, and his followers as The Chosen. By inciting fear and situating himself and his followers as the “true believers” who were threatened by internal and external dangers, he allowed himself to fill the role of Persecuted
Redeemer, with unquestioning support from those who heard his speeches and voted for him. These “patriots” have been selected, through their unwavering support of Trump’s campaign, to be victorious. Fear appeals and attacks on “others” allow him to justify that removing groups who threaten The Chosen will cleanse the community and “Make America Great Again.”

Trump’s rhetoric mimics successful Puritan rhetoric and calls for a strong group identity, and identification and expulsion of threats, to maintain the sanctity of the group. Electing Trump represents a turning back toward the right(eous) way, and it signifies that Americans are aligned with Trump in ridding themselves of “evil.” Though Trump’s style is viewed as inept by pundits, he actually carefully deploys successful rhetorical strategies that unify his followers and paint a familiar picture of in-group and out-group dynamics. Such a move has devastating consequences on communities and on the United States as a whole.