

# Conceptual Blending in Presidential Politics: How *The Great Gatsby* Explained Donald Trump, 2015-2018

E. FLETCHER MCCLELLAN AND KAYLA GRUBER

When people confront new or unfamiliar phenomena, cognitive studies suggest the importance of metaphors to aid comprehension. Seeking to understand Donald Trump's political appeal, political and cultural commentators found *The Great Gatsby* to be a useful metaphor and framework for discussion. Sympathetic treatments of Trump compared the mogul to Jay Gatsby, whom they interpreted as a self-made, rags-to-riches wonder. Trump opponents saw Trump and Gatsby as fellow con men. Moreover, they likened the Republican candidate to Tom Buchanan, Gatsby's antagonist and the personification of white privilege.

Applying the conceptual blending theory of cognition (Fauconnier and Turner), our study examined the nature and number of references to *Gatsby* in stories about Donald Trump as catalogued in Google from June 2015, when Trump formally announced his candidacy for the Republican Party presidential nomination, until the end of 2018, the midpoint of his presidency. We found that favorable Trump-*Gatsby* comparisons were prevalent in 2015 and most of 2016. However, after Trump's election in November 2016, the *Gatsby* connections to Trump became strongly unfavorable. We attributed the increase in negative references to competition from political rivals for control of the narrative and Trump's controversial behavior as candidate and president.

Contributing to the weaponization of literary references was the polarized political climate. The "broadening of the culture wars" (Grunwald) under Trump meant that virtually everything in popular culture, from classic literature to the latest TikTok trend, was politicized. Thus, instead of promoting shared understanding among political elites and citizens, metaphors in political rhetoric may instead reinforce divisions between Red and Blue America.

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## The Theoretical Approach of the Study

To understand how cultural references were used to explain a prominent political figure, a discussion of cognitive heuristics and, specifically, the role of metaphor is needed. Under conditions of “low-information rationality,” citizens navigate the political domain by drawing from simplified “information shortcuts and rules of thumb” (Bougher 145). Analogy, which involves applying previous knowledge toward understanding a new or unfamiliar target, is one such heuristic device. Inferences are drawn from the familiar or source to fill gaps in knowledge about the target (Fauconnier and Turner; Lakoff and Johnson).

Metaphoric reasoning is a type of analogy, using knowledge from one domain, such as sports, to understand unknown, abstract, or conceptual targets in another domain, such as politics, e.g., “Biden is the front-runner in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination.” People employ metaphors to process information efficiently and creatively, such as to achieve compression (Fauconnier and Turner). For instance, “Rosebud” may or may not have told us very much about the life of Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane*, but it represented a cognitive need to compress a multitude of facts or observations about an object into a simple word, phrase, or idea.

Metaphors shape and constrain understanding by framing it within previous knowledge structures. Pre-existing frames in thought, or *conceptual metaphors*, may aid or inhibit cognitive discernment. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that conceptual metaphors unconsciously or implicitly influence the way we think and act. For example, the phrase “argument is war” induces us to think of argument more in win-or-lose terms than as a process for mutual understanding. *Framing metaphors* like “war on terror” or “anchor baby” have influenced attitudes on high-profile issues (Boeynaems et al. 126; Lederer), while the “corporation-as-person” image is embedded in the law (Lakoff and Johnson 17).

As Lori Bougher explains, the more abstract, complex, or unfamiliar the topic, the more likely metaphors will be employed. For that reason, metaphors are used extensively in academic writing and for educated audiences. Relatedly, most research on the political uses of metaphors focuses on their use by elites rather than by ordinary citizens. The influence that metaphor has upon public opinion depends on such factors as the credibility of the author, extent of deliberation, and the absence or presence of political competition (Bougher).

In our study, we analyze how a landmark in the cultural domain – F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* – was used to help leaders and citizens understand a newcomer to the political domain – Donald Trump. The structure of this metaphor is somewhat unusual, compared to classic studies in cognitive reasoning. As a literary work, *Gatsby* is familiar to a wide audience. However, the novel and its characters hold multiple meanings, as the next section explains. Thus, the source is familiar but its meaning is indeterminate.

As a target, Donald Trump is more recognizable to people than *Gatsby*. However, Trump’s announcement of his presidential candidacy in June 2015 led many observers to take a second look, asking whether Trump was a serious candidate and what kind of president he might be. In this new context, the familiar target was a political unknown.

To comprehend the cognitive process through which metaphors are joined, we turn to conceptual blending theory. According to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, new or revised concepts are created by an integration network of small conceptual containers called mental spaces. At least two mental spaces are inputs, or specific situations or ideas, and a third container is a generic space, which comprises a structure common to the inputs. Then, the spaces are combined to create a fourth, blended space that is a new or emergent structure representing a new composition or frame. Thus, new meanings are made from old ones.

Applying the model to our study, we examine how two inputs (*Gatsby* and Donald Trump, the business tycoon and celebrity) occupying an overlapping or generic space (reinvention of personas to achieve personal goals) generate a blended space (Donald Trump the politician and president). When we “run the blend” or imagine various outcomes of the interaction among input and generic spaces, different composites of Trump the political leader emerge. We will show what these assorted blends looked like during the 2015-18 period.

## The Composition of Mental Spaces

*Input I: Donald Trump, Business Mogul and Showman.* The first input to be discussed is Donald Trump. Prior to entering the political arena, Trump gained fame as a businessperson and showman (Calmes). Beginning in the 1970s, he has consistently been in the public eye for his properties, resorts, bankruptcies, marriages, publicity stunts, controversial opinions, and decade-long stint as star of the reality television show, *The Apprentice*.

Born to a successful real estate developer, Trump grew up without working class connections or challenges. He benefited from an elite education and avoided military service in Vietnam (D'Antonio, *Never Enough* 35-54). He attained billionaire status through high-profile projects, ruthless company practices, alliances with shady business partners, and aggressive marketing of a brand name associated with luxury and success (Swanson).

Furthermore, Trump appeared to have no guiding political philosophy. Early in his career, he donated to Democrats, expressing liberal issue positions (Murse). As Trump's political ambition grew, he became a Republican. Never known as a progressive on race (Itkowitz and Brice-Saddler), he staked strong positions opposing free trade and immigration reform and voiced doubts about President Obama's U.S. citizenship status (Barbaro).

During the 2016 campaign, Trump was aware that his personal narrative might not appeal to ordinary people. Repeatedly, he stated he built an empire by himself with the help of a \$1 million loan from his father, Fred Trump (Mosbergen). At a February 26, 2016, news conference, he said:

He [Marco Rubio] also said I got \$200 million from my father. I wish. I wish. I got a very, very small loan from my father many years ago. I built that into a massive empire and I paid my father back that loan. [...] The number is wrong by a factor of hundreds of – I mean, by a fortune. I got a small loan. I started a business. (Kessler)

Trump's claim did not go unchallenged while he ran for president. About a week after the press conference, the *The Washington Post Fact Checker* found that Fred Trump guaranteed a \$70 million bank loan for construction of the Grand Hyatt in 1978, his son's first major project in Manhattan. Donald Trump obtained additional loans and loan guarantees and could borrow millions from his inheritance before his father died, the *Post* revealed. Trump was assigned "Four Pinocchios," the Fact Checker's maximum grade for falsity (Kessler).<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, candidate Trump had an image problem. Reputed to be a strong business leader, he needed to show that he could transfer his CEO skills to the political sphere. Furthermore, Trump had to convince people he understood their problems. If he could, Trump would benefit politically. An analysis of polls in August 2016, October 2017, and June 2018 showed one-half of those sampled did

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<sup>1</sup> In fall 2018, the *The New York Times* revealed that, starting when he was a toddler, Trump inherited over \$400 million from artful (and possibly illegal) tax avoidance schemes (Barstow et al.).

not know Trump came from a wealthy family. Those who were misinformed about Trump's background were more likely to say he was empathetic and a skilled businessperson (see McDonald et al.).

*Input II: The Great Gatsby, American Dreamer.* Serving as the second input, the story and characters of *The Great Gatsby* reflected on Donald Trump's self-made claims. Why *Gatsby*? First, the novel appeals to both elites and a larger audience. The Fitzgerald masterpiece is one of the top ten titles assigned in high school English classes (second only to *The Crucible* as most required for 11th graders) (Stotsky) and has sold nearly 30 million copies worldwide (Italie). In 1998, the editorial board of *Modern Library* voted the book second to James Joyce's *Ulysses* as the finest English-language novel published in the 20th century (Corrigan 210).

Second, *The Great Gatsby* is a perennial. Each generation seems to experience a *Gatsby* revival, beginning with the World War II soldiers who received thousands of Armed Services Edition *Gatsby* paperbacks (Corrigan 234). The novel has produced five film adaptations, multiple plays and readings, a ballet, an opera, and countless artistic homages (Corrigan 266-70). Though the 2013 film version directed by Baz Luhrmann divided critics, it earned \$353 million at the box office, ranking among the top 20 grossing movies in the U.S. and globally that year.<sup>2</sup>

Third, *Gatsby* became a useful tool by which political and cultural elites could understand Trump's appeal to less-educated voters. Comparing Trump, the reputed wheeler-dealer, to Jay Gatsby, the dreamer and achiever, Trump's promoters and admirers wanted voters to believe that Trump was the vehicle by which they too could achieve the American Dream. To many, the transformation of James Gatz, born to a poor farm family in North Dakota, into Gatsby, big shot and social magnet to the beautiful people of New York City, is a tribute to individual enterprise and the power of reinvention.<sup>3</sup>

However, Jay Gatsby was also an impostor who became rich through bootlegging and connections with organized crime. Similarly, mobsters allegedly helped Trump acquire and build his properties in Manhattan and Atlantic City

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<sup>2</sup> Per [www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/2013](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/2013).

<sup>3</sup> Another facet of the rags-to-riches narrative of the book is that, for all his wealth, Gatsby remained an outsider to New York high society. Even if Gatsby's financial dealings were above board, he was new money and not to the manor born. This fit the Trump saga of the striver from Queens who sought to gain acceptance from but was rejected by the Manhattan establishment, which disdained his crudity, ostentatiousness, and hunger for publicity (Coppins).

(Johnston). Russian connections enabled him to survive bankruptcy and, as some suspected, win the presidential election (see Jamieson). Thus, unflattering links between Trump and Gatsby-the-phony could emerge

A more obvious *Gatsby* association that Trump opponents could make is with Tom Buchanan, the brute reactionary who represents old wealth and white privilege. Buchanan is enamored of “scientific” racism, believing that whites are superior to blacks. He disparages the upstart Gatsby (Fitzgerald 130), who is trying to take away his wife Daisy, on whom Tom cheats frequently. Given Trump’s multiple marriages and affairs, statements and programs targeting immigrants and persons of color (Scherer), and policies that rewarded the rich, it wouldn’t be hard for Trump detractors to make the connection with Buchanan.

On the other hand, the attributes of Buchanan that appall many people may appeal to others. One third of adult Americans favored Trump’s harsh characterizations of persons arriving to the U.S. illegally or seeking asylum (Langer). Many shared Trump’s derisive attitude toward political correctness (Montanaro). Trump backers believed they were themselves victims of policies favoring the disadvantaged, such as affirmative action. More than a few supported the welfare state, except for those parts perceived to benefit the “undeserving” (Brownstein).<sup>4</sup>

*The Generic Space: Reinvention, Fortune, and Fame.* Each input – Donald Trump and *The Great Gatsby* – was widely known to many if not most Americans when Trump launched his quest for the presidency. Trump and James Gatz attempted to reinvent themselves into new characters, leveraging their fame and fortune to help them achieve their respective goals. For Trump, it was winning the presidential election or, if he lost, strengthening his brand and profit potential. For Gatz, it was winning the hand of Daisy Buchanan, despite time and social distance, by becoming Jay Gatsby. However, both personas contained complexities of character, motivation, and action, so that blending the two mental spaces was likely to produce multiple and conflicting images of the new or emergent space, Trump the political candidate and leader. This sets the stage for our study.

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<sup>4</sup> An additional Gatsby-Trump connection reflects the current culture. The story’s narrator, Nick Carraway, is the moral center of the book (Corrigan 172-5). However, he, like Gatsby, is Midwestern and a cultural outsider. Originally unimpressed, Nick becomes attached to his mysterious neighbor. By taking sides, Nick abandons objectivity and forces us to decide whether to trust his observations, much as citizens today must choose between different versions of reality presented by the polarized media.

## Methodology And Expectations

This analysis examined the number and nature of references to *The Great Gatsby* in stories about Donald Trump as catalogued in Google from June 2015, when Trump formally announced his candidacy for the Republican Party presidential nomination, until the end of 2018, the midpoint of his first term in office. The combined search terms, “Trump” and “Gatsby,” were used. Excluded from the findings were paid postings, such as ads inviting vacationers to spend “*Great Gatsby* weekends” at a Trump resort.<sup>5</sup> We separated Trump-and-*Gatsby* mentions into “Blogs,” which were mostly posts by individual scholars, and “Online Publications,” which included news services, online magazines, and scholarly journals.

In all, 35 stories or posts, collected mainly in November 2018, connected Trump to *Gatsby*. Many of these articles came from prominent columnists and literary scholars. Some come from outlets like *The Atlantic* and the *The New York Times*, while others appeared in widely circulated blogs. It is important to note that this study explored only articles or posts on the Google search engine. Not examined were Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and other forums, each of which may have contained postings on Trump and *Gatsby*. Consequently, we may have missed messages from specific pro- or anti-Trump groups or *Gatsby* fan colonies. We chose Google for its capacity to identify postings with broad appeal.

Applying content analysis to the selected items, we categorized Trump-*Gatsby* relationships in the media as positive or negative. A “positive” reference meant that a *Gatsby* character, plotline, or quote was applied to reveal a favorable trait about Trump or to explain Trump’s appeal to the general or working class public (billionaire, deal-maker, entertainer, “tells it like it is,” disruptor, charismatic, etc.). A “negative” reference indicated that an author used a *Gatsby* figure or phrase to describe an unfavorable Trump trait or analyze why the public did not support the

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<sup>5</sup> Not directly related to the novel, the “Great Gatsby Curve” states that the more unequal a society’s distribution of incomes, the less intergenerational social mobility exists (Corak). The name describes the extent to which, in a given society or community, succeeding generations can climb the economic ladder as Jay Gatsby did. Mentions of the Gatsby Curve, most of which were found in academic sources, are not included in the analysis. Immediately after the election, supporters praised Trump for understanding the decline of social mobility among the working class (Dubner). After Trump took office, critics assailed him for pushing policies that worsened inequality and placed the U.S. on the wrong end of the curve (Krugman).

president (bankruptcies, racist views, misogynist, “doesn’t care about folks like me,” policies favor the rich, profiteer, etc.).

Entering the study, our general expectation was that the mixture of Trump-*Gatsby* references in the media would begin positively. We anticipated seeing mostly favorable connections between candidate Trump and Jay Gatsby as Trump supporters aligned The Donald with working-class interests. Then, through the 2016 delegate selection process and the general election campaign, we expected that negative *Gatsby* mentions – either Trump-as-Buchanan or Trump-as-Jay-Gatsby-the-impostor – would increase. This reflected reactions from the campaigns of rival candidates in the Republican Party and Trump’s Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, in the general election.

After Trump’s election, most allusions to *Great Gatsby* figures, either Jay Gatsby or Tom Buchanan, were predicted to be negative, based on his inflammatory behavior and policies. We anticipated a strong response to the Trump presidency from academics to the extent that Trump affronted certain values that scholars share, such as tolerance for difference and respect for expertise. As the following account of the process up to the 2018 midterm elections will show, the data largely confirmed our hunches.

## Running The Blend: Findings and Analysis

*Stage One, 2015: Introducing the Candidate.* When Donald Trump announced his presidential candidacy in June 2015, it did not take long for *Gatsby* references to appear. When *The Atlantic* questioned supporters that summer about why they aligned with Trump, one reader replied, “Donald Trump personifies a modern-day, extremely brash Jay Gatsby, clawing feverishly for that elusive ‘green light’ at the end of Daisy Buchanan’s beckoning dock.” He added, “Those of us who buy into Trump’s vision, nearly to the point of blind trust, are loudly professing our disgust with the current immoral situations that taint and threaten our blueprint of the American dream” (Friedersdorf).

Writing for CNN in September 2015, Trump biographer Michael D’Antonio argued that the Republican candidate had the “charm of a rascal.” Like Jay Gatsby, Harold Hill (the flim-flammer of *The Music Man*), and outrageous bigot Archie Bunker, Trump possessed “mischievous traits that Americans find irresistible.” In a group interview with other Trump biographers in fall 2015, D’Antonio shared how Trump resembled the subject of Fitzgerald’s novel:

The first thing I think that you credit him with is this creation of himself, which is very American, this idea that I'm going to imagine what I'm going to be, I'm going to tell the world that I'm it before I am it, and then the world is going to help me become it. And he did it. (Glasser and Kruse)

Trump used charisma and his looks to achieve unimaginable wealth, D'Antonio gushed, "seek[ing] every advantage and exert[ing] a special influence over women" (D'Antonio).

*Stage Two, 2016: The Republican Nominee for President.* Some of Trump's critics viewed him as a pale imitation of Gatsby. Writing in spring 2016, as Trump was closing in on the Republican presidential nomination, Dana Allin of the International Institute of Strategic Studies wondered whether the Trump show was a "reality-TV version of *The Great Gatsby* – except that F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* was truly, if shadily, self-made, not the mediocre steward of an inherited fortune..." (Allin 222).

Long before *The Apprentice*, Trump was a celebrity figure who flirted with politics. Around the time of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, where Trump became the Republican nominee, Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche and Christian Kloeckner of the University of Bonn noted that celebrity culture is "a unique manifestation of our sense of American social mobility: they provide the illusion that material wealth is possible for anyone." Trump has "long fulfilled the role of demonstrating that the rise to wealth does not need to be preconditioned by good taste or manners." They continued:

Despite his privileged background, Trump has always styled himself as the brutish nouveau riche, a Gatsby figure of the late 20th century with parties that are always too big and loud, with an appearance that appears to be too shrill. Trump's anti-intellectualism and peddling of conspiracy theories has long served for him to cultivate a mediated fan community deeply distrustful of the elite he has always been a part of. (Schäfer-Wünsche and Kloeckner)

As the 2016 election approached, *Great Gatsby* mentions in print and online media became more negative. English professors compared Trump to literary villains such as Tom Buchanan. Daniel Torday, professor of creative writing at Bryn Mawr, drew a darker parallel:

What [Buchanan] ultimately does over the course of that novel is manipulate people in the goal of his self-interest. Myrtle's death and Gatsby's death – both events are the result of Tom's having run rampant

over people’s lives. It’s hard to imagine a character that overlaps more clearly with this year’s GOP candidate. (Dunn “Migrants ‘Harm UK’”) Unfortunately for Trump, these antagonistic comparisons would continue into his presidency.

*Findings for Stages One and Two, 2015-16.* The results of Google searches for 2015 and 2016, presented in Table 1, showed five positive references for Trump as Jay Gatsby in 2015, after Trump announced his candidacy and before the 2016 primaries and caucuses. When Trump emerged as the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, negative connections between Trump and *Gatsby* characters arose. Trump and Jay Gatsby were described in unflattering ways, or Trump was compared to Tom Buchanan. Negative mentions continued through the fall 2016 campaign. At the same time, positive linkages between Trump and Jay Gatsby persisted. For all of 2016, there were five positive Trump-*Gatsby* associations made and eight negative *Gatsby* references.

	2015			2016		
	Blog	Online Pub	Total	Blog	Online Pub	Total
<b>Trump-Gatsby</b>						
Positive	0	5	5	1	4	5
Negative	0	0	0	1	4	5
<b>Trump-Buchanan</b>						
Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0
Negative	0	0	0	2	1	3
<b>Total +/- References, 2015</b>				<b>Total +/- References, 2016</b>		
Positive	0	5	5	Positive	1	4
Negative	0	0	0	Negative	3	5

Table 1. Trump-*Gatsby* references in blogs and online publications, 2015-16

*Stage Three, December 2016-April 2017: The President-Elect and the First 100 Days.* Following Trump’s surprising election victory and efforts to form a government, the unfavorable *Gatsby* allusions continued. Commenting on the extreme wealth of the members of the Trump Cabinet, *Guardian* columnist Nomi Prins said, “Trump’s *Great Gatsby* government will be a gift to the rich” (Prins). Georgetown professor Maureen Corrigan, author of a book on *Gatsby*’s lasting

popularity, contended that Jay Gatsby would never have voted for Trump, though the two have much in common:

After all, Jay Gatsby and Donald Trump share so much: a brazen flair for con artistry, a nouveau riche taste in home décor [...] and even a skewed vision of a lost golden age. ‘Make America Great Again’ is but a blunter iteration of Gatsby’s signal line: ‘Can’t repeat the past, why of course you can!’. (2paragraphs)

However, Gatsby would also recognize the Buchanan in Trump, Corrigan claimed, and Gatsby loathes everything Tom Buchanan stands for:

Swollen with arrogance, proud of his unearned authority, Tom strides around spouting half-chewed climate change theories<sup>6</sup> and racist ideologies. [...] Tom, like Trump, can’t keep his hands off women; in fact his meaty paws do more than grope. Recall Daisy’s broken pinky finger; Myrtle’s broken nose. Contrast those images with Gatsby’s hands stretching out in aspiration toward that green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. Because Jay Gatsby is above all else a dreamer he could never endorse an ignorant brute like Tom Buchanan/Donald Trump. (2paragraphs)

Commenting 100 days into the Trump administration, Noreen Herzfeld of Saint John’s University and College of St. Benedict saw Trump as both Gatsby and Buchanan but believed the latter was the more controlling figure. Like Gatsby, who changed his name, Trump recast the family heritage from German to Swedish. Though he downplayed his privileged upbringing, Herzfeld notes, Trump echoed Gatsby’s display of conspicuous wealth in service of a curated image of himself (Hayes et al.).

At the same time, Trump’s slogan, “Make America Great Again,” and his inaugural address, in which he spoke of “American carnage,” reminded us of Tom’s gloom about the future. Reading a book called *The Rise of the Coloured Empires*, Buchanan declared, “Civilization is going to pieces.” He tells Nick Carraway, “The idea is, if we don’t look out the white race will be – will be utterly submerged” (Fitzgerald 12-1). The president’s invocation of Mexicans bringing crime and drugs, the need for a border wall, the ban on immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, and the alleged three million illegals who voted fraudulently formed a pattern of racial animosity that resonated with Tom’s fear (Hayes et al.).

Finally, Herzfeld retrieved Nick’s judgment about the Buchanans:

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<sup>6</sup> “It seems that pretty soon the earth’s going to fall into the sun – or wait a minute – it’s just the opposite – the sun’s getting colder every year” (Fitzgerald 118).

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they made... (Fitzgerald 179)

Observing the bankruptcies that left investors and workers holding the bag and the constant flow of lies that Trump's advisors must rationalize, Herzfeld noted how the president's survival came at the cost of the lives and reputations of the people who served him. She hoped his supporters, as well as the rest of the nation, would not become the next victims of his carelessness (Hayes et al.).

*Stage Four, 2017-18: The Next 600 Days and the Run-Up to the 2018 Midterm Elections.* As the Trump presidency unfolded in the succeeding months, *Gatsby* references exhibited several patterns, nearly all of which were critical of the president. A Resistance movement emerged as Trump took office. Resistance protestors expressed hope that Trump's leadership project would fail. A *Time* op-ed posted after the January 21, 2017, Women's March included Trump among the great con men of fiction and non-fiction, including Bernie Madoff, the Wizard of Oz, and *Gatsby*. Impostors such as these take us in, but, eventually, we regain our capacity for disbelief, the column argued. The tricksters are exposed and meet an inglorious end. The unstated hope was that Trump would meet a similar fate (Jones and de Jong).

In May 2017, the essayist Rebecca Solnit characterized Trump as a grifter and buffoon with insatiable appetites who, to his surprise, got his wish to become the most powerful man in the world. Like the privileged Buchanans, there was no one to tell him when he was wrong, foolish, or cruel. However, Trump is finding out that the presidency is not all-powerful, Solnit argued. Commands to build a border wall, repeal Obamacare, or shut down an inquiry into his campaign's collusion with the Russians were not obeyed. Instead, Solnit states, Trump is the "most mocked man in the world." One way or another, like the fisherman's wife who wished for everything, he will end up with nothing (Solnit).

The second pattern of post-2016 Trump-*Gatsby* connections reflected fear that President Trump might deliver for his culturally conservative followers and the U.S. would pursue a meaner, more Buchananized path. Historian Sarah Churchwell explained that when the original *Great Gatsby* was published, the America First movement surfaced as not only a desire for the U.S. to free itself from foreign entanglements but also a racist version of Americanism. Churchwell did not believe Trump's adoption of the slogan "America First" was a coincidence. It revealed that

the true purpose of Trump's leadership project was ethnic purity. As she put it, Trump is what Tom Buchanan would be if he ruled the world – another Mussolini (Churchwell).

Another scenario imagined during the Trump years was that Trump would enrich himself, his business cronies, and the gilded elements of the Republican coalition, disillusioning his working class supporters. The yearlong effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act and the passage of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act in December 2017, the latter heavily weighted to reward corporations and the rich, exposed the extent to which Trump duped the white working class, Trump critics asserted. To one literature professor, Trump was a slicker Gatsby, profiting from selling the American Dream to a nation of suckers who invested in his failed business ventures and enrolled in Trump University. Under his presidency, a “long and painful disillusionment” was inevitable (Bates).

According to *The Atlantic* editor Rosa Inocencio Smith, an animating goal for Trump was the negation of Barack Obama's presidency. Trump's story is Buchanan's, Smith argued, a cautionary tale about power under threat, “and of how that power, lashing out, can make truth irrelevant” (Smith). When Gatsby threatened Tom's comfortable existence with Daisy, Buchanan attacked Gatsby's origins much as Trump questioned Barack Obama's birth certificate. Referencing scholarship suggesting that Fitzgerald intended Gatsby to be a light-skinned black pretending to be white, Smith amplified Trump's need as president to erase the legacy of his predecessor (Smith).

An alternative prospect that appeared in the first half of the Trump presidency was that, regardless of whether Trump succeeded or failed, his relentless assault on truth (Kessler et al.) will deepen the loss of faith in institutions, diminish respect for the rule of law, and destroy norms of civility and decency toward one another. In her book *The Death of Truth*, the former *The New York Times* chief book critic Michiko Kakutani claimed a “new nihilism” had infected American politics and culture. The “sense that life is random and devoid of meaning, combined with a carelessness about consequences” – illustrated by the rise of fake news – was predicted by the reckless behavior of the Buchanans (Kakutani 155).

Americans have always had a tremendous capacity for make-believe, observed the *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks. Jay Gatsby is a classic American hero, said Brooks, because “he constructed a fantasy version of himself and attempted to live it” (Brooks). Considering Trump's talent for concocting fantasies, Brooks asserted that the danger to democracy is when the president “build[s] an

alternate virtual reality and sucker[s] us into co-creating it.” Living in the Trumpian soap opera made it “less likely we are to know where we are or what we should do” (Brooks).

One of the president’s biggest cheerleaders was his former White House Director of Communications (for all of 11 days), Anthony Scaramucci. Born in Port Washington on Long Island, just minutes from the East Egg location of Tom and Daisy’s mansion, Scaramucci intertwined his rags-to-riches story with that of the president and Gatsby in his book, *Trump: The Blue-Collar President*, published just before the 2018 midterm elections (Scaramucci).

Growing up middle class, Scaramucci graduated from Harvard Law School and was a successful investor and financial consultant on Wall Street. However, his life changed when, at the age of 32, he met Trump, whom he idolized. “For a blue-collar guy, working in finance, who wanted to rise through the economic classes and reach for the Gold Ring,” Scaramucci said, “Mr. Trump was the Great Gatsby” (153). Eager to show that Trump was self-made, he cited Trump’s multiple bankruptcies as evidence of the president’s brilliance and toughness (155).<sup>7</sup>

Scaramucci’s hero worship was a useful reminder that, for all the controversy surrounding Trump, the president retained the support of 40-45% of the electorate throughout his first two years in office (A. Dunn). White, less-educated workers, more likely to be male, remained the core of his political support (Harris), even as Democrats swept the midterm contests and took control of the U.S. House of Representatives (Duffy et al.).

*Findings for Stages Three and Four, 2017-18.* The 2017 and 2018 findings of links between Donald Trump and *The Great Gatsby* took a decidedly unfavorable turn, as displayed in Table 2. Only two positive *Gatsby* references, one in each year, appeared. Fifteen negative mentions, split nearly evenly between 2017 and 2018, materialized. Overall, as Table 3 shows, positive linkages between the president and *Gatsby* were most frequent early in his candidacy. More negative than positive connections registered as the 2016 elections approached. Most references to *Gatsby* took place in 2016. Since Trump became president, nearly all *Gatsby* references with Trump were negative.

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<sup>7</sup> By summer 2019, Scaramucci said he could no longer support the president (Helmore).

	2017			2018			
	Blog	Online Pub	Total		Blog	Online Pub	Total
<b>Trump-Gatsby</b>							
Positive	0	1	1		0	1	1
Negative	2	3	5		0	3	3
<b>Trump-Buchanan</b>							
Positive	0	0	0		0	0	0
Negative	0	3	3		0	4	4
<b>Total +/- References, 2017</b>				<b>Total +/- References, 2018</b>			
Positive	0	1	1	Positive	0	1	1
Negative	2	6	8	Negative	0	7	7

Table 2. Trump-Gatsby references in blogs and online publications, 2017-18

<b>Total +/- References, 2015-16 Positive</b>	10	<b>Total +/- References, 2017-18 Positive</b>	2	<b>Total +/-References, 2015-18 Positive</b>	12
<b>Negative</b>	8	<b>Negative</b>	15	<b>Negative</b>	23

Table 3. Total positive and negative Trump-Gatsby references, 2015-18

## Discussion

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it provides an illustration of conceptual blending theory. In this case, the source input was an acclaimed novel and the target was a tycoon/celebrity known for injecting himself into political controversies. Both the protagonist of *The Great Gatsby* and Donald Trump attempted to reinvent themselves in order to achieve challenging goals. Using *Gatsby*, a literary work with multiple meanings, to understand a notorious figure such as Trump yielded a multitude of blends for Trump the aspiring political leader and president. This is what Fauconnier and Turner call elaboration, in which we explore, often playfully, the possibilities of blending inputs.

Second, conceptual blending is itself a metaphor for how the mind makes meaning of the unfamiliar. Broadly speaking, it was a metaphor for the process by which voters attempted to make sense of Donald Trump as possible and actual President of the United States. Those involved in the business of political

persuasion understood this process and constructed colorful adjectives, analogies, metaphors, memes, and other linguistic devices to forge emotional connections, positive or negative, with the Republican (Tiffany). Linking Trump to *Gatsby* was one way to influence people's attitudes about Trump's character, connections to common people, his approach to problem-solving, and how he would conduct himself as president.

Third, we saw how the blending process is highly selective and contingent. Different sides of the political and culture wars chose different interpretations of the novel to suit their arguments about the would-be and actual president. The conceptual blends of Trump multiplied and changed as he assumed different roles. When Trump began his quest for the presidency, Trump-*Gatsby* connections reflected favorably on him. Promoters and supporters cast Trump as a self-made man, man of the people, anti-establishment upstart, and a charming rascal, all of which could be applied to Jay Gatsby.

As Bougher suggests, political competition, aided by Trump's confrontational behavior as candidate and president, added new, negative frames to the Trump brand (149). After Trump began his presidency with provocative policies toward immigrants, references to Jay Gatsby's shadowy rise to prominence and Tom Buchanan appeared. During the first two years of the Trump presidency and the run-up to the 2018 midterm elections, *Gatsby* allusions from Trump opponents framed Trump as a wannabe dictator, white supremacist, tool of the .01 percent, corrupt profiteer, Obama legacy eraser, gaslighter, and destroyer of truth and morality.

Fourth, it is important to note that the escalation of *Gatsby*-Trump references took place in the context of increased political and cultural polarization in the U.S. Developing since the 1960s, a sharp public divide on values and issues such as abortion, gay rights, and church-state issues formed by 1990 (see Hunter). After the 2000 Bush-Gore election, the idea of a partisan Red State-Blue State split was cemented in the public consciousness. During the Bush II and Obama presidencies, there materialized a 60-70% partisan difference in presidential approval. During the Trump administration, nearly 90% of Republicans endorsed Trump's performance in office, while less than 10% of Democrats approved (A. Dunn).

According to Michael Grunwald, Trump broadened the culture war by scanning current events for issues that would aggravate cultural resentment. Racial issues were often at the forefront. Thus, illegal immigration, NFL athlete kneeling, and political correctness became interconnected. Previously nonpolitical happenings,

such as the importance of science and expertise, the value of a college education, and, more recently, vaccinations were politicized (Grunwald).

In this political vortex, accelerated by social media, it was only natural that popular culture items and icons such as *Gatsby* would be consumed.<sup>8</sup> During the 2016 presidential campaign, Internet memes connected Bernie Sanders with wise old men from the *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter* franchises. *Game of Thrones* heroes and villains framed images of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Both before and after the election, Trump was frequently associated with the *Batman* sociopath Joker (Hunting). The award-winning musical *Hamilton*, with its diverse casting of the American Founders and its celebration of immigrants (“We get the job done”), symbolized the contrast between the Obama and Trump approaches to race relations (Lind). A summer 2017 production of *Julius Caesar* in Central Park, featuring a Trump lookalike as the assassinated dictator, sent the conservative media into a frenzy (Shapiro 204-21).

The appropriation of *Gatsby* by pro- and anti-Trump forces was notable for its focus on social class, particularly blue-collar whites. Also significant was the profound shift, at least in the mainstream media, from positive to negative *Gatsby*-Trump connections as Trump’s role shifted from candidate to president. As Trump’s image became more fixed in the public mind, we found slightly fewer references to *Gatsby* as the 2018 midterm elections approached. It may be that a particular metaphor’s use is more frequent and impactful when the target is most unfamiliar, such as Trump before the election and during his first year as president.

Use of *Gatsby* metaphors illuminated but also constrained the debate over Trump. The president was framed as an avatar of the American Dream, a scam artist, or a racist and sexist thug, with little subtlety in between. Furthermore, it is fair to say that discussion of the applicability of *Gatsby* references to the Trump phenomenon was conducted mainly among political and cultural elites, given the widespread but nevertheless limited public awareness of the novel. Significantly, unlike the activation of fan communities during the 2016 campaign (Booth et al. 59), we did not come across mobilization of a *Gatsby* fan base for or against Trump during the period examined.

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<sup>8</sup> Literary scholars anticipating the worst of Trump turned to dystopian novels such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *1984*. Trump enthusiasts imagined the president as Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*. Recognized for their prophetic qualities were Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* and Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (Bethune). Appropriation of cultural texts for political purposes is nothing new. For example, Shapiro notes how Shakespeare’s plays were at the center of debates over slavery in the U.S. (Shapiro).

Interestingly, *Gatsby* had the potential to unite competing political factions. All the writings we found appeared to accept the book as a mainstay in the American literary canon, despite the culture war in the humanities and the emergence of identifiable Red and Blue popular cultures (Poniewozik). However, the contemporary interpretations of *Gatsby* entered well-defined fault lines, reinforcing rather than transcending the Red-Blue divide. This was true not only for Trump, but also for *Gatsby*-Obama linkages during the presidency (Freeman-Coppadge) and post-presidency (Dowd) of Trump's predecessor.

Limitations to the study's design and analysis exist. The findings depend on Google's algorithms and approved websites. Our research did not examine social media platforms where out-of-the-mainstream sites might be more likely to reside. To the extent that humanities professors are not Trump-friendly, it is likely that the paper reflected anti-Trump bias. Individual blogs by academics tended to publish more negative references (83% negative) than did online publications (62% negative), presumably edited by third parties. In addition, the empirical analysis is suggestive and not conclusive, due to the relatively low overall number of Trump-*Gatsby* linkages. Still, the results should encourage scholars to explore further how literary and popular culture references are used to shape political narratives.

Furthermore, the metaphorical approach to political rhetoric and, in particular, conceptual blending theory have limitations. Conceiving cognitive processes in terms of an input-output network, as the conceptual blending model defines, is a crude simplification of how the human mind operates (Ritchie 39-40). For example, knowing how long an individual will dwell on the meanings of a figure of speech is difficult to gauge. Some may dismiss a metaphor quickly or not understand it at all. On the other hand, an image of, say, a girl in a white dress with a white parasol getting off a ferry may haunt someone for a lifetime (Chin).

Just interpreting one metaphor or blend could take up a volume of description, depending on who is doing the interpreting and the discourse context (Coulson and Oakley 178). In our analysis of *The Great Gatsby*, there is rich material for further exploration of contemporary politics, economics, and culture. For instance, *Gatsby* is set in the Roaring Twenties, inviting comparisons with the opulence and inequality of the 2000s.

Or take the central question of the novel – is it possible to repeat the past? To many, Jay Gatsby was a tragic figure who died chasing a dream. To others, his quest was a fool's errand. Trump's project to Make America Great Again raises similar, profound issues. Can America repeat the past? What part of the past is

worth repeating? At what cost? And, after Trump is finished, whenever that time will be, what will be left of America's promise to her people, "the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us" (Fitzgerald 180)? Putting it metaphorically, will Trump be remembered as Jay Gatsby the tragic hero, Gatsby the fraud, Tom Buchanan, or a unique blend?

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