Win Bigly: Persuasion in a World Where Facts Don't Matter
(Scott Adams)
August 5, 2018

Would you like to read a book about Scott Adams? Then this is your book, especially if you want to hear Scott Adams talk about how awesome he is. Would you like to read a book about persuasion techniques? This book may shed a little light, maybe two pages' worth. Would you like to read a book about how Donald Trump got elected, which is what this book is supposed to be? You are mostly out of luck—unless you want to be told that Donald Trump got elected primarily because of Scott Adams, in which case you are again at the right place.

I came to this book expecting it to be notably insightful, which may be part of the problem—disappointment breeds resentment. I like *Dilbert*, Adams's cartoon creation—who doesn't? *Dilbert*, of course, is anti-political correctness without being conservative (Adams is very emphatically not a conservative). Then, during the 2016 campaign, I often saw references by sensible conservatives to Adams's prediction that Trump was going to win. I was predicting the same thing, so I assumed Adams was a genius, and thus I developed a vague feeling of goodwill toward Adams. More recently this feeling was reinforced by coming across his term "linguistic kill shots" for dishonest behavior in framing political issues (though he ignores that the impact of this depends on the media's cooperation, so it almost always only benefits the Left). My indefinite conclusion was that Adams likely had a lot to offer. He may, but not in this book. Stick to *Dilbert*.

Win Bigly is very padded; much is repetitive, and much is reprints of blog posts from 2016. There is a basic structure of five parts, but they're pretty much indistinguishable from each other. You can boil the whole book down to a few sentences: Facts don't matter if the speaker is adequately persuasive. The author can see this because he is a "trained persuader"; as such he recognizes the techniques Trump used. In any given happening, whether Trump's election or anything else, there is no way to tell what really caused it, because any answer depends on the filter one places on one's view of the world, and no filter can be shown correct (though some can be shown incorrect), because of confirmation

bias and other forms of intellectual defect, including the effects of persuasion. Hypnotism is cool and Scott Adams is an excellent hypnotist. (No, I don't know why this is relevant either.) Trump has a great "talent stack," in that he is not the best at any one thing, but excellent at very many things, from understanding publicity to public speaking to high energy to being tall. And Scott Adams made Trump the President, and you should therefore recognize his genius. The end.

So yes, Donald Trump gets mentioned a lot. I just don't think that this book tells the reader anything relevant about how Donald Trump won. Adams's basic claim about Trump is that he is a "master" or "weapons-grade" persuader, a deliberate or instinctual user of a range of persuasion techniques that Adams (or his sensei, one Robert Cialdini) tells us can be used to manipulate others. Adams only cites a few other "master persuaders" by name. Four, to be exact. Two seem unexceptional—Steve Jobs and Tony Robbins, though I am not sure about the latter, not having spent my days watching him (but he was hilarious in *Shallow Hal*). The other two are just bizarre—Madonna, and . . . Peggy Noonan? Huh? I can assure you that I've never felt myself being magically pulled to believe what Noonan has to say; she's merely a reasonably competent columnist. And Madonna may be good at surfing the cultural Zeitgeist, although now she's mostly just pathetic, but I can't fathom what exactly Adams thinks she's persuasive about. (It seems to me that a much better example would be Elizabeth Holmes of Theranos.) Probably these other famous people are mentioned to support the main point of this book, that Adams himself is an incredible persuader, responsible for Trump's election. Giving as examples people obviously not master persuaders makes Adams look better. (Adams refers to himself as only a "commercial-grade persuader"—but that is false modesty, since he very clearly doesn't think he's anything but world-class.)

As far as what the book has to say, it's pretty rambling. Adams outlines various persuasion techniques, such as "pacing and leading" (i.e., suckering your audience by agreeing with them on something unimportant so they trust you before you lead them in a fresh direction). Most of those techniques are basic variations of redirection and lying, which Adams tries to spin up into more than they are. He intermittently relates them all to Trump's actions during the campaign, though he's unable to tell us if Trump is deliberately or instinctively using them. To hold the

casual reader's attention, throughout are inset boxes with "Persuasion Tips," most of which are egregiously obvious, such as "When you identify as part of a group, your opinions tend to be biased toward the group consensus"; "Display confidence to improve your persuasiveness"; and "Persuasion is strongest when the messenger is credible." Like most self-help books, I suppose Adams offers something of value for some people, but as an explanation for Trump's success, it's all pretty weak.

Still, here and there are some modestly interesting thoughts. For example, Adams advises strongly against associating your brand with bad images, especially specific visual images, regardless of the reasoning behind it, because your actual message gets lost. Carly Fiorina erred by describing an aborted baby during a debate; it associated her with dead children (though Adams is eager to repeatedly assure us what a big abortion supporter he is). Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi erred by supporting Obamacare by appearing next to a giant sign, "Make America Sick Again." And Adams points out that excessive, or in some cases any, apologizing is bad, especially groveling—your message gets lost, and you look weak, so if you apologize, you should be vague while changing the context, and thus the topic, to something to your benefit (Steve Jobs was very good at this). But it's pretty clear Adams has nothing original to say; his thoughts are derivative and second-hand. For example, his breathlessly announced insight that we "make our decisions first and then create elaborate rationalizations for them after the fact" is merely cut-rate Jonathan Haidt (not that he mentions or cites Haidt). So I suspect Adams does not deserve any credit for what he presents as fresh insight.

And in any case those interesting thoughts are more than counterbalanced by errors and tedious detours into what Scott Adams thinks about irrelevant matters. Adams says, while spinning why he was repeatedly and totally wrong about who Trump's pick for vice president would be, that "Quayle didn't even stay on the ticket when Bush ran for reelection." That's wrong; Dan Quayle was Bush's running mate in both 1988 and 1992. We are repeatedly treated to slyly placed self-congratulation about Adams's success with women (he's sixty-one, not that we're told that, but we are to be clear that he is still virile). We hear Adams preen himself multiple times that he, and other men, should not be permitted to have an opinion about abortion (presumably neither now nor

earlier, when their mothers were deciding whether to kill them). We hear Adams tell us that he, and everyone else, "never has enough data to form competent opinions" about "complicated issues about economics and foreign affairs." I doubt very much if he really thinks that, and as a blanket principle, it's ludicrous. (He is on stronger ground on a sub-claim, which is that we can't trust what we are told about global warming because of the financial and other benefits those pushing it as a problem receive, while anybody who opposes the so-called consensus faces "a high degree of career and reputation risk," and thus climate "science" is most likely a mass delusion, a set of points I've made as well.)

Another annoying element of the book is Adams's repeated insistence that he would have killed Hitler or any "top Nazi." This is in the context of bleating about how unsafe he felt because people were mean to him on Twitter, such that for a time he endorsed Hillary Clinton, explicitly because he felt endangered. He had to do it, don't you see, because he lacked Secret Service protection, though a Very Important Man like Scott Adams certainly needed it. He's a "top-ten assassination target," you know, because he was perceived as Trump's Goebbels. Not only is this silly self-aggrandizement, it's not even true that he would have opposed Hitler. As Jordan Peterson notes (because it's been a fascination of his as a professor for decades), the reality is the vast majority of people in totalitarian regimes resist not at all—Peterson's point to his students is that they would almost certainly have eagerly participated with Hitler or Stalin or Mao, and to think otherwise is failure to think clearly and a distorting way of thinking. Adams, though, overtly believes he would be a hero. He probably keeps a cape in his closet. Satin, with gold trim.

The last chapter is wholly devoted to showing how Scott Adams was the key to Trump's election. Knowing he would be laughed at if he simply made the claim, Adams uses some of his own persuasion techniques to convince the reader, though all of them boil down to cherry picking anecdotes that suggest his desired conclusion and doing hand waving around them, along with enough demurrals that he can retreat to plausible deniability if directly challenged. "Moments ago I was doing a live stream on Periscope and asked my longtime readers if they thought I was the first person to bluntly say in 2015 that facts don't matter when it comes to picking a president. My audience on Periscope unanimously agreed they heard it from me first." Look at

that! An audience consisting exclusively of Scott Adams fans tells him what he wants to hear! Surprise, surprise. "I asked on Twitter [where he keeps telling us how big his following is] how many people decided to vote for Trump because of something I said. Thousands of respondents claimed I was the reason they voted the way they did. The Twitter poll only reached a tiny fraction of the people who were exposed to my Trump persuasion [Adams maintains that the entire media followed his lead by adopting all his terms and concepts]. That means I might have moved tens of thousands of votes. Maybe hundreds of thousands. There's no way to know." But we all know that we're supposed to conclude that there is a way to know.

Now, perhaps the joke is on us. One of the persuasion techniques Adams pushes is lying to associate oneself with someone famous, as in his own trying to associate his predictions with the pollster Nate Silver, though there was no actual connection. So maybe all his talk about how he elected Trump is just that, an attempt to hitch his wagon to Trump's star. Adams makes his money largely from speaking engagements, as we know from his complaining that his intermittent support for Trump harmed his livelihood, so maybe this is all just a sales technique, to convince buyers that even if Adams is responsible for the monster Trump, his power is so great that it's worth paying to hear what he has to say. I doubt if this will be successful, since I suspect the derangement that Trump incites is much more powerful than Adams's persuasion techniques. Either way, though, spending your money on this padded-out pamphlet is unlikely to give you a return on your money.