

For Donald Trump, it's about America's ego and his own

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Washington: Donald Trump was angry: A reporter had the gall to suggest that ego was behind his purchase of New York's famed Plaza Hotel.

Donald Trump

When he thought about it, though, he decided it was true - and admitted as much in a big, big way.

"Almost every deal I have ever done has been at least partly for my ego," the billionaire declared in a 1995 New York Times piece titled, "What My Ego Wants, My Ego Gets."

Two decades hence, and what 70-year-old Donald John Trump wants is the presidency. To understand why, consider the billionaire's ego not just as mere mortals might see it (an outsized allotment of conceit) but also as Trump himself understands it (an extraordinary drive for excitement, glamour and style that produces extraordinary success.)

As Trump once put it: "People need ego; whole nations need ego."

The race for the White House, then, may be Trump's ultimate ego trip, guided by the same instincts he's relied on in a lifetime of audacious self-promotion, ambition and risk-taking.

Those instincts allowed a fabulously wealthy businessman to pull off a mind meld with the economic anxieties of ordinary Americans, elbowing aside the Republican A-team and breaking every rule of modern politics to become the party's presumptive presidential nominee.

"I play to people's fantasies," Trump has acknowledged. And plenty of voters fantasize about bringing some of that Trump braggadocio to the American psyche.

Trump's candidacy has given rise to a whole nation of armchair analysts with their own theories to explain the man: He's a bully. He's a champion. He's insecure. He's a rebel. He's a narcissist. He's an optimist. He's calculating. He's unscripted. He lacks self-awareness. He's brimming with insight. He's a pathological liar. He sees a larger truth.

Trump himself usually shies away from self-analysis. But he's acknowledged that for much of his life, it's been all about the chase: Whatever the game, he's in it to win it.

"The same assets that excite me in the chase often, once they are acquired, leave me bored," he told an interviewer in 1990, as his boom years were sliding toward bust. "For me, you see, the important thing is the getting, not the having."

That mindset has generated plenty of speculation about whether Trump really wants to set aside his my-way lifestyle to shoulder the heavy demands of governing.

He bats away such talk. But his campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, has sketched out a limited level of presidential engagement for Trump in discussing a strong role for the candidate's vice presidential choice.

"He needs an experienced person to do the part of the job he doesn't want to do," Manafort told The Huffington Post in May. He said Trump sees himself as chairman of the board, not the CEO and certainly not chief operating officer.

As a presidential candidate, Trump has a straightforward pitch.

"The country has been great to me and I want to give back," he says. "And if people want me to do that, I think I'll do a fantastic job for them."

Not just fantastic. Perhaps even celestial.

"I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created," Trump said in his announcement speech.

Trump's unbounded confidence - and obsession with winning - has been a lifelong constant, evident in ways small and large.

Growing up as one of five children in a well-to-do Queens real estate family, Donald was the brash one, a fighter from the start.

"We gotta calm him down," his father would say, as Trump recalls it. "Son, take the lumps out."

For good or ill, it's advice Trump never really embraced.

Military school helped channel his energy, but Trump's rebellious streak remained.

Trump followed his father into real estate, but chafed within the confines of Fred Trump's realm in New York's outer boroughs.

Manhattan's skyline beckoned; He crossed the East River and never looked back.

"He's gone way beyond me, absolutely," an admiring Fred marveled. His son had made it big in Manhattan well before he hit 40.

So successful at such a young age, Trump never did have to smooth out those lumps his father had warned about.

"He was at the top of his own pyramid," says Stanley Renshon, a political psychologist at the City University of New York who is writing a book about Trump. "Nobody was going to say, 'Donald, tone it down.'"

Trump, who stresses his Ivy League education, revels in juvenile jabs, labeling his adversaries "stupid," "dumb" and "bad."

"I know words," he declared at a December campaign rally where he criticized the Obama administration. "I have the best words. But there's no better word than stupid, right?"

With no one to shush or second-guess him, brashness has been Trump's way, along with his trademark glitz and flash. (Flash, in Trump's lexicon, registers a level below glitz.)

Through years of boom, bust and more than a decade of reality-TV celebrity on "The Apprentice," the deals kept coming and the price tags (and, often, the debt) kept growing - as did the hype. Always the hype.

- AP