Trump~'s big lie wouldn't have worked without his thousands of little lies

(CNN~)

"We won this election and we won it by a landslide," at his "SaveAmerica~" rally on January6~, incited the assault on the Capitol~. This is Trump~'s "BigLie~," a brazen falsehood with momentous consequences.

Trump~'s accusation that "radical left" Democrats~ stole his victory is certainly a whopper. But the focus on his BigLie~ misses something fundamental about how propaganda works. A leader's BigLie~ has no power and makes little sense on its own. It has traction only if the public has been fed many, many smaller lies. It relies on a larger network of falsehoods told by the leader and reinforced by his government officials and compliant media.

The BigLie~ works because it is part of an established alternate belief system -- an edifice of lies, assembled piece by piece.

Trump~, a leader of authoritarian intentions and tendencies, had disadvantages with respect to the foreign autocrats he so admires. He had no state media, like China~'s XiJinping~. He could not rule by decree, like Hungary~'s ViktorOrbán~. He had to govern and run for reelection in an open society with a relatively robust free press. Moreover, although he succeeded in making journalists into for many of his followers, he could not revoke or destroy the FirstAmendment~.

So Trump~ took a different tack, unleashing a barrage of disinformation common in authoritarian states but without precedent in the history of the America~n~ presidency. He told morethan30000~ documented lies in public (), on Twitter~, at rallies and in interviews. If taken as an average, it would come out to 21~ lies per day over his four-year term.

Let's break down the smaller lies that prepared Trump~'s followers to accept the BigLie~. Each of these was highly damaging and consequential, and most were repeated endlessly by Trump~ and his co-conspirators in and out of government and replicated on social media, right-wing TV and radio, and more.

Some were not expressed directly by Trump~ but were connected to the personality cult he built -- though he did make overt claims that he would "save the UnitedStates~," and pronounced that "I alone" can fix the country's ills (an allegedly fraudulent election system among them). Personality cults enable the spread of propaganda by allowing an autocrat to forge a special bond with followers, one based on faith and emotion rather than reason. Put simply, they believe -- and help amplify -- his lies because they believe in him.

Indeed, Trump~'s claims to a unique competence to rescue America~ from a cadre of evangelical~ Christian~ preachers, authors, and government officials, former WhiteHouse~ press secretary among them, who contended that he ruled by divine benediction -- that God installed him to do His will. This encouraged followers to believe that Trump~'s destiny was to stay in office, priming them for the moment when Trump~'s asserted that a second term was rightfully his.

The events of January6~ cannot be understood without this structure of blind belief and all the small lies that supported it. For his supporters, Trump~ was a victim of the "DeepState~" and other enemies -- his reelection had been foiled by their treachery, so it was up to his believers to fight back, to fix a rigged system with the only tool left: direct action.

The BigLie~ seemed convincing because Trump~ had been lying about America~n~ elections for years. He started suspicion about rigged elections in 2016~, when it looked like he would lose to HillaryClinton~. The ensuing four years of relentless propaganda aimed to erase all confidence in this fundamental institution of democracy.

It's not surprising that Trump~'s lying had a uptick in 2020~, when he was campaigning for reelection during a pandemic that he mismanaged with lethal results. He needed to discredit the main thing that threatened his power -- the vote. He worked overtime to throw doubt on every single aspect of voting. He told lies about dead people voting, about fraudulent mail-in ballots, about votes illegally counted, not counted at all, or invented.

In his , he falsely accused Democrats~ of pulling "suitcases of ballots out from under a table." He lied that the news media had declared Biden~ the winner even though "they still don't have any idea what the votes are."

Focusing only on the BigLie~ misses the big picture. It fails to convey the scope and gravity of the institutionalized lying that was Trump~'s biggest weapon. And it obscures the way minds were worn down, day after day, by one lie after another after another. Trump~'s aim in his ceaseless lying was to get his followers to trust him alone as the arbiter of reality and to distrust everyone and everything else -- especially the democratic system that stood in the way of his amassing sufficient power to become untouchable.

It's the authoritarian way. While Trump~ is now gone from the WhiteHouse~, millions of his supporters still cling fiercely to his lies. Each lie deserves our attention as we seek to combat the mass disinformation that threatens our democracy.