

Maga fans don't just believe Trump — they believe in him

BY 10.30am, the Make America Great Again (Maga) movement is in full flow. Thousands of them are snaking around the erected crash barriers, waiting for the Bryce Jordan Center to open. Donald J Trump is scheduled to appear at 4pm in this university town in central Pennsylvania.



Trump's rallies are like church services or perhaps a Munster final: The surge of people leaving early don't need to hang around as they are happy to have borne witness and been in communion with their man. Mick Clifford talks to Maga devotees in Pennsylvania

As it is to turn out, he won't make it until after 5.30pm. But these are the faithful, and they arrived in the early morning to ensure admittance. Conversations with some among them indicate that they don't consider the queuing and long waiting as a sacrifice, or even an inconvenience. It's all part of the day out. They haven't just come to see Trump. They have come to be together, insulated from a world that they don't recognise or appreciate.

"I was just saying to a friend of mine here that it's like when you go to church," Jonathan Watson says. "You hang out with like-minded people who believe the same things you do."

"Every person here, I would say, well, 98%, are true-blue conservative, Christian-values type of people. And we all like hanging out with people like that."

Jonathan wears an air of friendly hospitality as he talks and simultaneously directs parking cars on a voluntary basis. He has on a Maga hat, a tie of American flags, and a red shirt. He is far removed from the Maga caricature of angry man railing against the world.

Maga is the movement that represents Trump's base. His appeal has broadened, particularly in recent years, but these are the people who set him on his way. They don't venerate him in a traditional sense, but they do consider him their voice, their leader, their hope of rolling back the years to some imaginary past.

Steve Carwick digs the vibe that permeates the crowd under a strong autumn sun. "We're just like-minded people hanging around," he says. "It feels just like family." Asked about Trump, he replies quickly: "He will make America great again."

Further probing will see Steve grow a little animated about the media and "hark forces" that are work in America and beyond.

Everybody is in fine form. A knot of good ole boys are sharing a few beers at the

rear of a flatbed truck done up in Trump images and painted flags and guns. Loud music that is somewhere south of rap is booming out from large attached speakers with the word "Trump" detectable now and again.

Nearby, two women have set up a stall to register voters. A man is approaching people to sign a petition about the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, the right to bear arms. There is a woman handing out free bottles of water to those in the long queue. Practically everybody is wearing red.

Practically everybody is white, although there are a smattering of Asian faces. Two protestors circle the crowd. One has a loud-hailer through which he proclaims Jesus's displeasure at Trump and all his works. The other carries a placard and every now and again sneaks around behind a few people holding a large Maga banner. When the faithful take pictures of the banner, our friend photobombs the occasion, grinning as he raises his placard which bears the legend "Fellow Republicans Defend America. Reject all Maga candidates." It's fair to say nobody pays him a blind bit of notice.

Everywhere there are cops wearing various hues of blue, green, and black. Local cops, state cops, cops on horseback, cops from Homeland Security, and more from the Secret Service. Following the attempt on Trump's life in Butler, which is also in Pennsylvania, security has been ramped up for the rallies.

There is a long list of the items that will not make it past screening to get into the venue. "Toasters" are listed as being prohibited. Who would bring a toaster to a political rally? You will also have a problem if you show up with "drones and other unmanned aircraft systems" or "explosives of any kind" or "Greasers". Even umbrellas are banned.

The rally is taking place on the campus of Penn State University, with its neat thoroughfares and red brick



accommodation centres. A strong breeze pushes crinkly leaves the colour of rust down the street in the wake of the crowds heading for the Bryce Jordan Center which is the home of the college's basketball teams. Decked out in Maga red, they could be after parking up en route to a GAA Munster final.

The rally was called at three days' notice, which is unusual, but a push is on in Pennsylvania, a crucial state in the election. While the university town is blue — as in Democratic — it is surrounded by a sea of red. And both candidates know that getting out the vote in this state will be one of the biggest determinants in who gets to the White House.

Dave and Vicky are toggled out head-to-toe in Maga gear, and they're here with their three small dogs. They won't be joining the queue though. "We're just watching all the people," Dave says. "We're too old to stand for six hours. We're going to go home and watch it on TV."

So why Trump, why again? "He's smarter than me around," Dave says. "We saw the destruction that four years of Biden has done and we're ready to see things right again."

And what's wrong with America that it needs to be made great again? "Gas prices," Dave says, "Greasy prices, inflation." Vicky says, "The national debt, all the illegal immigrants." Dave says, "They are very welcoming and give the impression they'd nearly

bring you back to their place to watch the spectacle with a few beers.

Maga came together largely on cultural, and particularly immigration, issues, but the economy is to the fore right now. "Prices are high, inflation is high, food is high, gas is high," Steve Carwick says. "We can't keep spending money and giving money away and survive," he says, referencing what he perceives as the policy of the outgoing Biden administration.

"We can't have other countries selling us stuff. We have to be self-sufficient." Patti Stover is here with her friend Bella Morrison. The economy is Patti's number one issue. "Eight years ago he [Trump] took office and things were substantially cheaper. Food was cheaper. He got things done. He knows what to do and how to do it. He was a businessman and he makes things happen by his actions."

She does not accept that Trump inherited an upswing economy from his predecessor, Barack Obama. Nor that much of the inflation had to do with factors beyond Joe Biden's control. Michael Peoples came all the way from Ohio. He is a regular at Trump rallies, including the recent one in Butler, when Trump returned to the scene where he was shot last June.

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"The cost of everything has tripled," he says. "I run a business and materials I used to get for \$12 a load are now \$25. When Trump gets in, he's going to bring the prices back down, inflation is going to go back down. The first thing Biden did was give out free money. Then nobody wants to work. They gave out covid money and covid wasn't around anymore but they just gave it out anyway."

INFLATION is definitely one of the main issues in this election and it doesn't matter who or what is responsible. Perception is reality in politics, and prices took off while Biden was in office and Harris his vice president.

In Trump they trust. They see a businessman who became very wealthy and is now turning his talent to politics. They hear a man who talks for them, not at them. They don't look too closely at his record in business and they view any negative analysis as an attack on the man who will lead them out of perdition.

All who spoke to the Irish Examiner dismiss the contention that January 6 was an assault on democracy. "Exaggerated" is a common word used. Only Jonathan Watson, with his openly religious sensibility, has some minor qualifications.

Tony walks on with his Maga hat, waving at the crowd, in a threat to democracy. "Wait a minute," she says. "Isn't that an insurrection or something? And they say we are a threat to democracy."

The episode which she describes has absolutely no basis in fact, but is now, no doubt, imprinted on the psyche of Maga.

The crowd grows impatient when 4pm comes and goes and then 5pm passes and still no sign of the saviour.



Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump dances as he leaves the stage after his campaign rally at the Bryce Jordan Center in State College, Pennsylvania, on Saturday. Picture: Charly Triballeau/AF/Getty

in a world where they believe the same dark forces are also ranged against them.

Inside the centre, the place has all the feel of a big match day. The auditorium holds around 15,000, but the upper tier is cordoned off, reducing capacity to 10,000. There has been some publicity in recent months over large swathes of empty seats at Trump rallies so maybe that's a factor at play. In any event, the whole place looks a lot smaller than it does on TV.

At 2.30pm, things kick off with various speakers, including a pastor with a prayer and a student to sing

the pledge of allegiance. Then the PA announces the next speaker. "Please welcome to the stage, Hunter Biden's former business partner, Tony Bobulinski."

"I heard that some people who were very close to the story," he says. "The investigation was all one-sided." When pushed that it was openly and obviously a violent assault on the seat of government, he does offer a minor concession.

"Four years ago I came out to tell the world about the Biden crime family and their corruption," he says. After that, he has very little of interest to add. In Maga world, terms like "the Biden crime family" is totally acceptable, as if some mafioso outfit was being referenced.

Taylor Green also comes on stage. She is, even in unbiased circles, often referred to as a nutjob. At one point she suggests that on the day in 2017 that Trump was being inaugurated, Democrats came onto the streets of Washington "and nearly burnt the place down."

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Eventually, he appears at 5.38pm to wild applause. He walks on and sways to the music for a few minutes before stepping up to the microphone.

"I begin with a simple question," he says. "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?"

The question is entirely legitimate. As are any questions about the outgoing administration's record on immigration and particularly in Pennsylvania. Kamala Harris's previous assertion that she was opposed to fracking, which is big business in the state. But that's

not what Trump does. Instead he reverts to denigration and allegations which are demonstrably lies. It's the same routine that has been seen across the world over the last six months. He rambles between "savagely criminal immigrants" and touches each subject, including issues like gender dysphoria. In a manner that is designed to belittle and denigrate.

Some of it is beyond silly. Asserting his ability to stop wars, he says that he will end the war in Ukraine very quickly.

And he says that the Taliban would never have got away with what they did under his watch.

"I said to Abdullah [he doesn't give a surname],

do not do it Abdullah, and he didn't do it."

All of the domestic and international issues he touches on are infused with his self-proclaimed ability to negotiate and strike a deal.

Above all, he is a superlative huckster.

After 10 minutes, a steady stream of punters began traipsing up the aisles towards the exits. It thickens as the rambling speech wends on.

The exodus is not reflective of disgust or even boredom at Trump's general diatribe. Instead, it's as if the day is now done, the result and rhetoric known, and better to beat the match traffic. They had a good day out

with their brethren. They saw Trump in the flesh and cheered him on stage. They want him to make America great again, but they don't want to have to listen to him for too long.

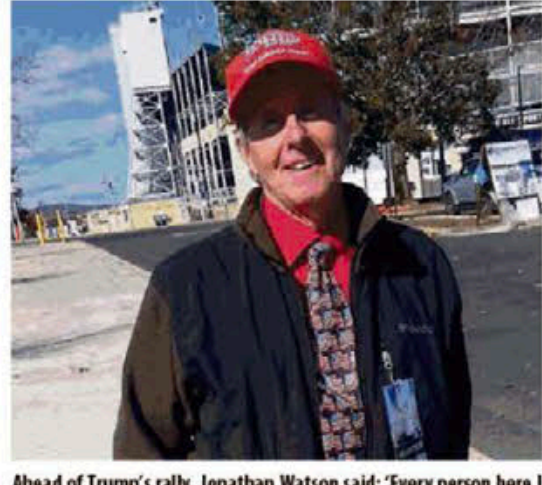
Trump rambles on, cutting now and again to one of the attack ads that play on big screens. He says he will fix everything and the crowd appear to believe him, or perhaps believe in him.

After an hour and 20 minutes, he steps back to more loud cheering and exits with waves and a raised fist.

He is, without doubt, the most consequential politician in the USA in recent decades, and if he wins on November 5, his power and influence will spread wider than ever before.



Having queued since mid-morning, Trump supporters eventually got to see their man in the Bryce Jordan Center after 5.30pm.



Ahead of Trump's rally, Jonathan Watson said: 'Every person here I would say, well, 98%, are true-blue conservative, Christian-values type of people. And we all like hanging out with people like that.'



Bella Morrison and Patti Stover. Ms Stover tells Mick Clifford: '[Trump] knows what to do and how to do it. He was a businessman and he makes things happen by his actions.'



Dave and Vicky told Mick Clifford they were heading home to watch the rally on TV. They blame Joe Biden for runaway inflation.



Supporters arriving for Donald Trump's rally in Pennsylvania. They haven't just come to see Trump. They have come to be together, insulated from a world that they don't recognise or appreciate.'



People queuing outside Donald Trump's rally in Pennsylvania were greeted with posters for Maga hats and other pro-Trump products.

