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Was Trump’s Muslim Ban his “Shock Event” Diversion?

By Michael J. Sainato
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President Trump’s recent immigration ban on Muslims entering the United States for 90 days incited an uproar and protests at airports around the country. Outrage unified the left in the common goal of opposing the ban. Several Democrats capitalized on the outrage to gain some political points. The ACLU quickly maneuvered their attorneys together to receive a federal court order in their favor, granting a nationwide stay, temporarily placing the ban on hold. But some political theorists have conveyed skepticism over whether the ban was just a diversion for the Trump Administration to achieve an alternative goal that normally would’ve received greater opposition and outrage.

“What Bannon is doing, most dramatically with last night’s ban on immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries— is creating what is known as a “shock event.” Such an event is unexpected and confusing and throws a society into chaos,” theorized Political History Professor

at Boston College, Heather Cox Richardson, in a FacebookPost. “People scramble to react to the event, usually along some fault line that those responsible for the event can widen by claiming that they alone know how to restore order. When opponents speak out, the authors of the shock event call them enemies. As society reels and tempers run high, those responsible for the shock event perform a sleight of hand to achieve their real goal, a goal they know to be hugely unpopular, but from which everyone has been distracted as they fight over the initial event. There is no longer concerted opposition to the real goal; opposition divides along the partisan lines established by the shock event.”

Richardson explained the Muslim Travel ban fit within the parameters of what could be described as a shock event because, “it was not reviewed by any governmental agencies or lawyers before it was released, and counterterrorismexperts insist they did not ask for it. People charged with enforcing it got no instructions about how to do so. Courts immediately have declared parts of it unconstitutional, but border police in some airports are refusing to stop enforcing it.”

The Hill reported Republican party leaders and top committee heads were not notified in advance of Trump’s executive order, further inflaming the chaos provoked by it. Richardson added, “My point today is this: unless you are the person setting it up, it is in no one’s interest to play the shock event game. It is designed explicitly to divide people who might otherwise come together so they cannot stand against something its authors think they won’t like. I don’t know what Bannon is up to— although I have some guesses— but because I know Bannon’s ideas well, I am positive that there is not a single person whom I consider a friend on either side of the aisle— and my friends range pretty widely— who will benefit from whatever it is.”

The Observer’s John Schindler explained in an op-ed that during the hysteria over the Muslim Travel Ban, “accomplished what may have been its actual purpose—distracting everyone from the White House’s far more consequential changes to the National Security Council.” Those changes included removing the he Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of National Intelligence from the National Security Council, and adding Trump’sChief Council Steve Bannon to the Committee. This provides Bannon and General Michael Flynn, two wholly unqualified persons whose hiring have no congressional oversight, significant authority over the National Security Council.

A blog post published on Medium by Google Engineer Yonatan Zunger offered a similar theory. “Trump is likely to want his own intelligence service disjoint from existing ones and reporting directly to him; given the current staffing and roles of his inner circle, Bannon is the natural choice for them to report through. (Having neither a large existing staff, nor any Congressional or Constitutional restrictions on his role as most other Cabinet-level appointees do),” wrote Zunger, explaining his theory that Trump’s recent reshuffling is an attempt to consolidate power within the executive branch. “Especially if combined with the DHS and the FBI, which appear to have remained loyal to the President throughout the recent transition, this creates the armature of a shadow government: intelligence and police services which are not accountable through any of the normal means, answerable only to the President.”

Given Trump's ability and tendency during the 2016 elections to garner explosive mainstream media attention with outrageous, often hyperbolic or false statements, it wouldn't be surprising if he employed similar tactics throughout his administration to achieve political goals that would otherwise be fiercely opposed.