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Dysfunction in the White House

By Lawrence Davidson
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There is something both horrifying and fascinating about the behavior of President Trump, as we watch him fail to cope with – or perhaps even recognize – the differences between the no-holds-barred world he created for his campaign and the much more polite and temperate world expected of leaders of a constitutional government.

As a result, the present White House appears to be a dysfunctional place. Apparently neither President Trump, nor most of his staff, have considered that there are real differences, different rules of behavior, between private and public life. Maintaining the model of the abusive boss, the know-it-all CEO (Trump's preferred modus operandi), has, in quick order, proved both inappropriate and self-defeating. Here then are some of the consequences:

— The president has refused to stop being the avaricious businessman and relinquish control of his assets. As a result he will soon be facing an increasing number of lawsuits brought by various ethics organizations charging that his refusal to place his holdings in a blind trust violates the “emoluments clause” of the Constitution. The contention is that this can only lead to “scandal, corruption and illegitimacy.”

— The rush to impose a ban on immigration into the United States from seven predominantly Muslim countries – imposed by executive order within ten days of inauguration – proved a sloppy piece of work. Trump simply assumed public opinion to be on his side and that that opinion could stand in for legal legitimacy. It didn’t work. The ban caused chaos and hardship, and quickly the courts temporarily set it aside as unconstitutional. The Justice Department lawyers, who had largely been kept out of the loop by the White House, did not have evidence that there was any real danger, historically or immediate, from immigrants of the countries cited in the ban. Pending a “total rewrite” or an appeal to the Supreme Court, Trump’s immigration ban is at a dead end.

— In the meantime, Trump has, in a manner that has become typical for him, attempted to delegitimize judicial opposition – opposition that anyone who is constitutionally savvy knows is solidly lawful. Thus his “so-called judge” statement. It may be an indication of the president’s enduring immaturity that he believes that anyone who stands in his way is a target for bullying and slander. And, indeed, in the private sphere where Donald Trump has been able to use his money to make his own rules, this tactic, apparently, did sometimes work. So, as if by habit, he has carried it over to the public sphere, where it is completely out of place and only makes him look like childish. Except to those adoring fans who were so visible on the campaign trail, his loose verbiage also makes Trump look like a “loser.” Trump’s own nominee for the Supreme Court, Neil Gorsuch, has described the president’s bad-mouthing the appeals court judge who suspended the immigration ban as “disheartening” and “discouraging.”

There is one other point that is to be made about this “so-called judge” episode. It has turned the judge involved, James Robart (who is himself a “mainstream” Republican), into a potential target for violence. Having used abusive language throughout his campaign and seen the emotions it aroused, Trump is very likely to be aware that he is risking incitement to violence.

— There are many other moments of Trumpian bluster, such as his yelling at the Australian Prime Minister during an official phone call, or his threatening to send troops across the Mexican border during a call to the president of Mexico. All of this might reinforce his image as a tough guy, but in the political and diplomatic world that now holds him in a spotlight, he starts to remind people of other past cases of bullies in power, most of whom happen to be fascists of the 1920s and ‘30s.

A Shift in Protest Personnel

As a result of Trump’s bravado, there has been a rapid shift in public activism from Right to what in the U.S. passes for the Left. Just as is the case with the populist Republicans, there is a segment of the Democratic Party base that feels disenfranchised. Some of them tried to do something about this by backing Bernie Sanders. But that was unsuccessful. However, with

Trump's victory, rightwing populism abated, and almost immediately, it was replaced by the inchoate mass of "Left" populists you see hitting the streets today. It is the Sanders folks plus a whole array of special interest groups who feel very threatened by an empowered Right. There is no reason to believe that the anti-Trump array is going to be intimidated and give up. Indeed, the Left activists' challenge is to coalesce into a real united front.

That should be made easier if Trump stays true to form, lurching from one outrageous move to another. And all the signs point down that road. The "so-called president" has ratcheted up his deportation efforts, allowing individual immigration officials discretion to go after any immigrant without proper documentation no matter of what age or the length of time they have been here. This is the equivalent of giving an army open-ended marching orders, and it is bound to result in abuses of power. He has begun his wall project for the southern border – an effort modeled after Israel's infamous and illegal "separation (aka apartheid) wall." He has begun the gutting of environmental and consumer safety regulations, a move which will poison the air and water for the sake of greater corporate profit. He has started to deregulate the banks – a strategy that, historically, has always eventually led to economic crisis. And, of course, attacking abortion and LGBT rights is also on his agenda. There is enough here to keep millions agitated for at least the next four years.

Opportunities and Risks

Thus, even though we are still early in his administration, there is no sign that anyone can control the President's addiction to gaffes. He is an immature, thin-skinned egotist, and in the end, this may well cost the Republicans dearly.

However, one does have to give President Trump his due. He has a really exceptional ability to stir up the American political scene. For progressives such agitation creates opportunities and risks. There is now an opportunity for a truly united front of progressives that can reform the Democratic Party and give us, in the near term, a viable alternative to the manic CEO and rightwing radicals now occupying the White House.

On the other hand, there is the risk that the apparatchiks who now control the Democratic Party will misread their situation. They might well fail to understand the meaning of the Tea Party movement's capture of the Republican Party, and resist meaningful reform of their own party. If they can get away with this, it will leave the progressives without a political home. That will make reclaiming a progressive future much harder and the reign of the Right much longer. We will have to wait and see.