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Shameless in America

By Barbara Nimri Aziz
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Jonathan Freedland of the Guardian newspaper writes what some may consider a virtuous and urgent charge. In his newspaper's May 12th edition opining that the US president is shameless, Freedland may be correct. But I disagree with his suggestion that Donald Trump's behavior is particularly unique and that this shamelessness is immoral. While Trump is acting and speaking in a shocking manner, he is, in fact, giving voice to (a hitherto whispered, backroom) an American tradition.

When will Americans who enjoy huge benefits of citizenship in the world's strongest economy and in the globe's pre-eminent cultural, political, and military power realize that its glorious 'empire' is itself a shameless beast? Empire is largely effectively above morality. Moreover, isn't this an integral part of what is called exceptionalism?

Whether we like (to admit) it or not USA is an empire. As such it can be shameless. Just as it can be arrogant; just as it can police the whole world; just as it demands others adhere to its declared standard of human rights; just as its military cannot be criminally responsible for excesses and atrocities abroad; just as its negotiators can coerce weaker nations to follow its dictate.

Several American presidents in living memory (Eisenhower, Kennedy, Reagan, Carter, Clinton, and Obama) provided a veneer of morality with their grace and political intelligence. Trump does not follow that script. In his bumbling, ungracious way, he is the ugly face of empire,

exhibiting all the righteousness of what Americans –only Americans– boast is the ‘most powerful person on earth’. The president, like the empire, is almost above law: he can disregard convention; he can fire the head of intelligence; he can sign edicts to wipe out years of development and progress; he can refuse to submit his tax returns; he can retain his businesses while serving in office; and his flippant tweets can hurl personal insults and instigate political chaos.

American foreign policy flaunts norms in the international arena; why not the head of state in regards to domestic issues? Not unreasonably, if a nation is shameless, its leader too can behave without shame. Donald Trump is shameless enough to challenge the norm. (Although in his arrogance he may inadvertently overstep some solid and sacred law, and be assured that hoards of opposition lawyers are closely following his every step to clutch a tangible legal breach.)

Perhaps what so disturbs our distraught liberal class who Freedland speaks for is that Trump is directing this arrogance onto domestic issues and the privileges of Americans. As long as US bullying is focused outside, whether towards friends or enemies, it’s ignored or tolerated. Take the spurious principle of ‘mutual respect’ and the verbiage about members’ ‘equality’ within the United Nations. In its embargo wars against Cuba, Iran, Iraq and Vietnam, Washington successfully coerces and threatens others to comply. Even the U.N. cannot withstand US intimidation. A cursory review of reports emerging from infinite U.N. committee meetings around the globe would either shock you or make you ask if anything noble is ever accomplished there, anything except what’s determined by Washington.

(One recent climate change meeting offers an example of what can be accessed by Third World Network.) These daily displays of American prowess are buried in hard-to-comprehend reports laden with mysterious acronyms and a maze of subcommittee reviews. Their itineraries are so imponderable; easier to browse multi-pages of our esteemed press with their doctrines on Kurdish factions, sectarian strife in Muslim lands, or the drama of a dismissed FBI chief than to study how America bullies and obstructs the agendas of others, whether powers like India, or weak or impoverished nations, or respectable European friends.

True, not every American leader acts as boldly or as oafishly as Donald Trump does. Certainly his immediate predecessor behaved differently...most of the time. But recall one of President Obama’s foreign speeches—in Havana a year ago and the former Cuba leader’s knowing response. Fidel Castro’s reply notwithstanding, the American’s imperial message, albeit proffered in a handsome velvet cloak, is clear. Barack Obama, like many American leaders (whether trade negotiators, press aides, human rights advocates, or military officers) may speak and act more discreetly than his successor. It’s just that Trump openly exhibits his nation’s arrogance. Combined with his personal tactlessness, mixed with a degree of bald ignorance, it’s, well, embarrassing.

But Freedland and doubtless many others in our liberal class, symbolized by the self righteous New York Times, do not dare admit America’s own long history of shamelessness and how Mr. Trump merely epitomizes this.

In today's comments by US historians on how the 45th president compares so unfavorably with past occupants of the White House, there is a highly selective process underway. Since the November election and US intellectual's misjudgment of its outcome, liberals have jumped onto the moral high ground with their remaking of Mr. Obama's tenure. As if the last administration were free of responsibility for destabilizing other nations, of gross, illegal surveillance, of unlawful bombings and runaway profiteering by banks.

Trump's behavior is 'difficult' no doubt. Perhaps it's because when a leader lies, he reminds us all of the national lies, of the shame (or sham) that American democracy has become, at least of its weaknesses. How can US negotiators and diplomats force human rights standards on others; how can the US insist on democratic principles in countries whose politics are at odds with Washington?

Today Mr. Trump is bullying the hallowed institutions of America. That's what is insufferable. This is where we recognize shame.