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Trump May Not be a Dictator, But He Has a Despot's Sense of Impunity

Now that President Trump has been “acquitted” in a sham trial by the Republican-controlled Senate and given unfettered license to act as he pleases, is there a real danger that he will become a dictator?

According to Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee and one of the House impeachment managers, the president already was a dictator, even before his unshackling by the Senate’s spineless discharge.

From here in Chile, a country that suffered 17 years under the boot of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, Nadler’s accusation seems far-fetched and perhaps even absurd. Trump has not, as Pinochet did, engaged in widespread human rights violations. He has not jailed and tortured dissidents, exiled opponents or caused them to disappear, closed Congress, persecuted professors and students or censored and closed adversarial media outlets. It is true that the American president has caused grievous harm to his country and the world through policies that target the environment and the rights of workers, women, minorities and immigrants. He has waged a war on science, truth and civil discourse, used his office corruptly to enrich himself and his family, and carried out reckless foreign misadventures. One could also argue that his policies at the border (sending asylum seekers to countries where they are endangered and separating migrant families seeking safety in the United States) constitute serious abuses of human rights, and they have been condemned by many international organizations as contrary to existing treaties. None of that, however, qualifies as dictatorial.

But there is one aspect of Nadler's indictment that recognizably resonates in Chile and signals further perils ahead. Trump shares with Pinochet an overriding sense of impunity: the belief that he is above the law. So many other strongmen that the president appears to admire — Russian President Vladimir Putin, North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi and President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil — have this warped form of confidence, too. Authoritarians such as Trump or Pinochet cannot imagine a future where they will be held accountable. They proceed as if in a void, as if their critics don't exist or, worse still, as if any dissident voice should be crushed. Pinochet, like Trump, would go on narcissistic and paranoid rampages, projecting himself as the savior of humanity (remember when Trump said he was "the chosen one"?), the last bulwark of Western civilization, someone singled out for malicious attacks by "elites" and "intellectuals." And Trump, like Pinochet, thinks that executive power is not subject to checks and balances or the typical norms and standards of democracy: He believes that he can pardon himself, that the Constitution gives him the right "to do whatever I want," that he can illegally withhold funds that Congress has appropriated for a foreign country and obstruct any investigation into possible wrongdoings by denying access to documents and testimony.

So Trump may not be a dictator, but he certainly acts like somebody who feels that he can do whatever he wants.

This attitude predated Trump's presidency, of course. He had already grown used to avoiding the consequences of repeated misconduct, undeterred by bankruptcies and allegations of sexual assaults, shady deals and scandals. If Trump's life experience — confirmed during his tenure in the White House — is that he can repeatedly misbehave and get away with it, what will his unbridled conduct look like in the near future? How can you restrain and contain someone who, now given free rein, falsely considers himself vindicated? Could his joke that he would not lose support if he shot someone on Fifth Avenue come terrifyingly true?

From here in Chile, though, there's a little bit of good news hidden in that parallel. Dictators — and would-be dictators — often prepare their own collapse. They fall in love with themselves and their presumed omnipotence and, infected with impunity, tend to overreach and make mistakes. Because Pinochet had unmitigated license to visit whatever

wild outrages he wanted on his opponents, he could not tolerate any voice that did not murmur endless praise. Confusing his totalitarian ascendancy with total popularity, he ended up calling a plebiscite that he was certain he would win, 15 years after the 1973 U.S.-backed coup that put him in power, that would have kept him in office for another eight years. And why not call a vote: Did he not control all of the organs of state and all the instruments of fear? In October 1988, nevertheless, he lost resoundingly, and by 1990, he was no longer president. His pernicious legacy still persists, though, and it has triggered a massive popular rebellion that is trying, 30 years later, to confront and overcome how he twisted and ravaged the country. One can only pray that Trump, whose assault on American institutions hasn't lasted as long or been as grievous as Pinochet's reign of terror in Chile, may not cast as long a shadow.

Chileans were able to defeat the dictator and his delusions of grandeur because of what I called at the time the "Rabbit Strategy of Resistance." This admittedly bizarre name for an assault on a tyrant came from a children's story, "La Rebelión de los Conejos Mágicos," that I wrote over 40 years ago while I was in exile from Pinochet's Chile. In that fable, a megalomaniac and egocentric Wolf-King conquers the land of the rabbits and decrees that the former inhabitants no longer exist. Despite an unrelenting repression against these creatures, the rabbits keep invading the realm of the bombastic, incompetent, thuggish autocrat, entering the photos taken by a timorous monkey photographer, until his Wolfhood's throne is thunderously brought down by nibbling and incessant teeth. From the distance of my banishment in Holland, I prophesied that the spirit of the Chilean people could not be eternally suppressed, that they would emerge from the shadows and bring down the despot who was thwarting their dreams. The tale of those rabbits circulated clandestinely in Chile and, I hope, had some effect on those who read it as they refused to submit to tyranny.

Can the same story, conceived by an outcast emigre so many years ago and made true by the sacrifice and determination of the citizens of Chile to take their fate into their own hands, find an echo in the United States today? As it foreshadowed Pinochet's ouster, could it also eerily predict the eventual downfall of Trump, who may be blind to how ultimately weak he really is and engage in ever more outrageous and illegal criminal acts?

Whether Trump will be defeated like the Wolf-King, like Pinochet, like so many authoritarian leaders who thought they were invincible and invulnerable, depends on the people of the United States. Will they be accomplices of a man who scandalously

destroys their country, shreds their Constitution, imperils the future of the planet? Or will the citizens rebel like the rabbits and the fearless men and women of Chile and, in November, resoundingly dethrone this man — and teach him that the most powerful man on earth must answer to the more powerful majority of we the people?

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