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Waterboarding Washington



By Marty Kaplan



CARLOS BARRIA / REUTERS

President Trump feels waterboarding works.

If you knew what he knew, wouldn't you? He heard Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham say torture works with his own ears. He said it on Twitter, which means it must be true. Defense secretary James Mattis said he'd do better with a pack of cigarettes and a couple of beers, but hey, if the president feels something, it can't be wrong. "I happen to feel," Trump said yet again last week, "that it does work."

The problem with torture is that people will say anything to make it stop. If you're afraid you're going to die, you don't care what's true, you just care about surviving. There is abundant evidence of this behavior in Washington, where the fear of political death also makes people say anything.

Consider Team Trump. Only electoral torture — the threat of losing power — can account for the readiness of the White House and the Republican Congress to say anything, to act as though the infotainment freak show posing as our government were perfectly normal, to pretend that having a megalomaniac in charge of our nuclear arsenal isn't the kind of emergency the 25th amendment anticipates.

At one end of Pennsylvania Ave., Mike Pence, Kellyanne Conway and Sean Spicer give no hint onstage that they know full well backstage that the man they serve is a total disaster no longer waiting to happen. A million phantom inaugural attendees; three million imaginary illegal voters; the theft of health insurance from more than 20 million people; an animus toward Mexico that will steal billions from working Americans; a Muslim ban that reads right off ISIS's script — what fresh hell will their boss serve up for them to defend next? A de facto abortion ban? Looser libel laws to make the media, as Steve Bannon barked, "keep its mouth shut"? A sweetheart deal with Putin on sanctions?

At the other end of the avenue, the game faces that Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan wear hides their daily humiliation of humoring a tempestuous toddler; conceals their fear that their party is one golden shower away from disgrace and oblivion; masks their terror that their country is one dirty bomb away from martial law. The last best hope of the Republican leadership is an impeachment they couldn't be blamed for invoking, and a Pence presidency that would do the Tea Party proud.

Trump's behavior checks all the symptoms on the malignant narcissism tick list: sadism, aggressiveness, paranoia, hypomania, grandiosity, lack of impulse control, lack of empathy, you name it. His disorder is hiding in plain sight. Here's a clip from his interview last week with ABC's David Muir:

"That [CIA] speech was a home run.... I got a standing ovation. In fact, they said it was the biggest standing ovation since Peyton Manning had won the Super Bowl and they said it was equal. I got a standing ovation. It lasted for a long period of time.... That speech was a total home run. They loved it... People loved it. They loved it. They gave me a standing ovation for a long period of time. They never even sat down, most of them, during the speech. There was love in the room. You and other networks covered it very inaccurately... [T]urn on Fox and see how it was covered. And see how people respond to that speech. That speech was a good speech. And you and a couple of other networks tried to downplay that speech. And it was very, very unfortunate that you did. The people of the CIA loved the speech...."

It goes on.

This is scary. This is not how a president talks. It's not even how a normal person talks. But it explains how Trump's courtiers talk. Like the denizens of Wonderland, they fear the Red Queen, who "had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small. 'Off with his head!'" The Red Queen, Trump's doppelganger, is the mother of all narcissists, the waterboarder-in-chief. So, to save themselves from political execution, Trump's enablers, like the playing cards who paint the white roses red, confect "alternative facts." Like Humpty Dumpty, who makes words mean what he chooses, Bannon calls a free press that speaks truth to power "the opposition party." It's not. That's their job.

In his first news conference as president, Trump said that even though waterboarding "does work," he'll defer to his defense secretary's opposition. "He will override. I'm giving him that power." Here's some wishful thinking: If Mattis can get Trump to observe the Geneva Convention on torture, maybe he can get him to observe the Paris Agreement on climate change, too.

Or even — I can dream, can't I? — to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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