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Will Pence Pardon Trump?

07/17/2017 05:37 pm ET | Updated Jul 17, 2017

“Thank you, Mr. President,” Vice President Mike Pence tweeted on July 15, celebrating the one-year anniversary of candidate Donald Trump naming him to the 2016 ticket. Will ex-president Trump get to say the same thing to Pence when the new president pardons him?



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Despite the “I love it” salivated by Donald Trump Jr. at the prospect of Kremlin help with the campaign, his father’s impeachment still is a long shot. Unless Democrats retake Congress in 2018, the chance that elected Republicans will admit they’ve been enabling a “liar,” “idiot” and “asshole” — words that polled Americans call Trump — are just about nil. But I give even odds to Trump’s resigning “for health reasons.”

He’ll never admit to any of the crimes that congressional committees or special counsel Robert Mueller may fillet him for, and even if he fires Mueller, no amount of incriminating evidence uncovered by investigative journalists will awaken our man-baby-in-chief to grown-up skills like telling true from false, reality from delusion and news from Fox News.

But bullies like Trump are cowards at heart. However appealing he finds sliming his prosecutors like a stressed hagfish, the thought of running away to spend more time with his prostate (and his 9-iron) might prove irresistible. Would Pence trade the Oval Office for Trump’s holding his resignation hostage to a pardon?

Pence could use the same reason Gerald Ford gave for pardoning Richard Nixon in 1974: To write the ending of a nightmarish chapter in our history. When Ford lost the 1976 presidential election, he believed it was the pardon that doomed him, and most historians agree. You can imagine Pence wondering the same thing about his own fate in 2020.

Pence, though, may not have a choice. Trump has the goods on him.

Trump knows Pence lied when he claimed to be in the dark about the footsie former national security adviser Mike Flynn was playing with the Russians, the Turks and who knows who else. Trump also knows Pence knew how deep in the tank were Paul Manafort, Jared Kushner and Trump Jr. (and Ivanka? Steve Bannon? Bueller? Bueller?) with Russian hackers, oligarchs and Vladimir Putin himself. As Trump might put it, many people are saying that Pence is either “lying or wildly incompetent,” or “either a sucker and a dupe” or a liar. Trump knows it’s all of the above, leaving Pence no alternative to paying the ransom of a pardon.

I have to believe that Pence’s political rise, like Sarah Palin’s, has been powered at least in part by his looks. If Pence, a right-wing talk radio host for an Indiana station, had looked like Rush Limbaugh or Alex Jones, he might never have made it to Congress. In the 2016 vice presidential debate, Pence lied through his teeth, claiming Trump never had uttered the falsehoods Tim Kaine quoted. If Pence didn’t look like central casting’s idea of Midwestern rectitude, he would have been laughed off the stage. In May, at the U.S. Naval Academy graduation, Pence said the most important quality of leadership is being humble, a point he made again July 12 to high school students attending the National Student Leadership Conference at American University, where he went on, with no irony, to cite Donald Trump as a paragon of that very humility. Really. He actually said that. He invoked Trump to illustrate other leadership virtues, too: integrity (!), self-control (!!) and respect for authority (?). How did Pence get away with it? Tonsorial integrity, I’d venture — the proxy for honesty that his headful of snowy white hair absurdly confers on the blatant bull that comes out of his mouth.

Pence’s current priority, selling Mitch McConnell’s health care bill to wavering senators, isn’t going very well. The damage he did to his credibility by lying about Flynn, Russia and why Trump fired FBI Director James Comey is an anvil around his neck. His approval ratings, at plus-11 as recently as March, have fallen, like Trump’s, to all-time lows. No wonder he bombed at the National Governors Association’s meeting on July 14. When he lied about Medicaid — he said its expansion under the Affordable Care Act hurt developmentally disabled Americans and put “far too many able-bodied adults” on the program — he was nailed not by a Democrat, but by the Republican governor of Ohio, John Kasich. Pence also scored zero points with three other Republican governors whose states expanded Medicaid: Brian Sandoval of Nevada, Doug Ducey of Arizona and Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas. When Republican senators from those states vote on McConnell’s bill, they’ll take their lead from their governors, not from Pence.

If you’re dreaming of an abbreviated Trump administration, you need to reconcile yourself not only to a Pence presidency, but also to a Pence pardon. That would make Trump even more insufferable, but as many people are saying, at least Pence would be a normal Republican. You know, the garden variety Republican who wants to kill Planned Parenthood and end gay marriage, who calls global warming a myth and “longs for the day that *Roe v. Wade* is sent to the ash heap of history.”

We have to keep reminding ourselves not to get used to Trump, that he’s not normal. Pence may be normal, but so is poison ivy.