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Trump's Crocodile Contrition And The Cynicism Of A Political Pivot



By Marty Kaplan



CARLO ALLEGRI / REUTERS

If, like me, you think that a President Trump would be (not to coin a phrase) a total disaster, Hillary Clinton's widening lead in the polls gave you about five minutes to breathe easier, until Trump replaced his campaign chairman with honchos blunt enough to admit that his ugliness was killing him with undecided voters, and pushy enough to make him pretend to almost apologize for it.

Was last week a true turning point for Trump? Did it signal a transformation from the man-baby who won the Republican primaries to someone with the temperament to be president? In the word of the moment, is this the "pivot" that Clinton's supporters have most feared?

There are more strata of cynicism in the idea of a pivot than layers of pastry in a mille-feuille.

Start with the presumption of two kinds of Americans. Some of them — political insiders, media junkies, savvy citizens — know the score. They're hard-boiled enough to get that candidates can sometimes lie with impunity; that everything can come down to image and optics; that in an era of post-truth politics, narratives can matter more than facts.

The other Americans are the useful idiots whose gullibility is what pollsters measure. When a candidate pivots from one message in the primaries (e.g., Blacks are scary), to a contradictory message in the general (Blacks are suffering), or when a nominee torques from bullying (smearing a Gold Star mother, say) to sensitivity (I regret causing personal pain), his or her campaign calculates that the base and the undecideds will just roll with it. They'll bend themselves into pretzels, believe the character swings, dissolve the flip-flops in the solvent of amnesia.

So when insiders speculate whether the Trump pivot has at long last arrived, what they're really asking is whether Trump has the discipline to maintain the masquerade that he's changed. If he doesn't consistently act as though he can get his id under control, too many voters may conclude that the pathological liar and narcissist they saw in the primaries — whom the elite knows is the real Trump — is in fact the real Trump.

The cynicism of the pivot ploy came into sharp focus when Trump, under the tutelage of his new chieftans — Stephen Bannon and Kellyanne Conway — declared in Charlotte, N.C., "Sometimes, in the heat of debate and speaking on a multitude of issues, you don't choose the right words or you say the wrong thing. I have done that."

If you saw him say that, you couldn't mistake the meaning of the smirk on his face: "This is an act, people. I'm bluffing." No wonder the crowd laughed at the preposterousness of it. "And believe it or not," he continued, "I regret it." Trump's signature catchphrase is "believe me," so when he says "believe it or not," it's a tell, a hostage video. "Or not" is the equivalent of blinking "I'm lying" in Morse code. The only disclaimer missing was putting air quotes around "regret." No wonder his mea quasi culpa was met with even more laughter, and a Trump-Trump-Trump chant from the crowd; it was their way of saying they knew he was faking it.

Last Friday's *Morning Joe* on MSNBC epitomized the media response to the Trump shakeup. The question on the table wasn't whether Trump had truly changed; no one on the panel thought his pivot meant anything truthful about his temperament. Instead, it was all about performance, stagecraft, illusion - whether Trump's new minders can make him stick to the new script, whether they can market it with a straight face, whether the audience will buy it. Joe Scarborough called Conway's TV debut as campaign manager "the best pundit performance of the year." "It was quite a performance," agreed Andrea Mitchell, because "it didn't have performance written all about it - it was natural." Eugene Robinson thought Trump's attempting a pivot would "if not gladden the hearts of worried Republicans, at least calm their night sweats." Chris Cillizza wondered if Trump, a billionaire who managed to depict himself as a populist in the primaries, had already "damaged himself so badly, image-wise, that a change like this is not able to be sold to a skeptical electorate." Brand maven Donnie Deutsch said no, it wouldn't work, because "people are not stupid." The press needs to stop setting the bar so low, "to stop giving him presidential points because he can read off a teleprompter and he's not insulting anybody."

Within hours of his Charlotte speech, a Clinton ad collected video of Trump being asked if he regretted taking shots at the Khans ("I don't regret anything"); if he regretted denying that John McCain was a war hero ("I like not to regret anything"); if he regretted calling Mexicans rapists ("No, not at all); if he wanted to apologize for anything ("No, I don't apologize"). Will it work? Trump's tears may be crocodile contrition, but fact checking, even via video, sometimes can't keep a good charlatan down.

Nor, maybe, will Trump's message discipline stick any longer than after other reboots. Yesterday Conway tweeted that Trump "doesn't hurl personal insults." But during today's *Morning Joe*, Trump took to Twitter to call Scarborough and co-host Mika Brzezinski "two clowns," adding that she's "a neurotic and not very bright mess." So much for temperament transplants.

A political pivot is a con that wins wolf whistles from people who think they're too smart to fall for it. I wonder what it would take to motivate some connoisseurs of that fakery to volunteer a little time on the vice squad cleaning things up.

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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