

The Costs of Presidential Candor

Predictably, Donald Trump was attacked both by the establishment and the media as “crude,” “unpresidential,” and “gratuitous” for a recent series of blunt and graphic statements on a variety of current policies. Oddly, the implied charge this time around was not that Trump makes up stuff, but that he said things that were factual but should not be spoken.

Trump’s tweets and *ex tempore* editorials may have been indiscreet and politically unwise, but they were also mostly accurate assessments. That paradox revisits the perennial question that is the hallmark of the Trump presidency of what exactly is presidential crudity and what are the liabilities of presidential candor?

Concerning the catastrophic California Camp Fire (150,000 acres) and the Woolsey conflagration (100,000 acres), which in turn followed prior devastating California fires in spring and summer of 2018 (perhaps charring 1 million acres in all), [Trump tweeted](#): “There is no reason for these massive, deadly and costly forest fires in California except that forest management is so poor. Billions of dollars are given each year, with so many lives lost, all because of gross mismanagement of the forests. Remedy now, or no more Fed payments!”

Certainly, while flames were devouring homes and lives, it was unwise and crass to talk of withholding federal disaster assistance funding in the future—a realization apparently soon known to Trump himself. In short order, he began signaling his admiration for the rare courage of California response teams and visited the fires promising full federal cooperation with state officials.

No matter. A chorus of critics claimed that Trump was ignoring the human tragedy to score points, whether about reviving the logging industry to salvage dead trees or punishing blue California. Perhaps, but he did not quite serially milk the catastrophe in the manner of [California Governor Jerry Brown](#), who repeatedly warned that the disaster was a result of global warming rather than his own disastrous green agendas that have led to such destruction: “Managing all the forests in everywhere we can does not stop climate change. And tragedies that we’re now witnessing, and will continue to witness in the coming years.”

Both statements—Trump’s and Brown’s—may well have sounded crass in the midst of such lethal disasters, but there were a few differences. The likeliest immediate cause of the 2018 serial fires was the Brown administration’s continual failure on state lands to allow removal of millions of dead trees, lost in mountain and foothill forests during the four-year California drought, and to petition the federal government to do the same in national forests.

Instead, Brown throughout years of increasingly deadly forest fires has stayed wedded to the unyielding green orthodoxy that decaying trees were nearly sacrosanct and essential to the forest ecosystem (true perhaps in the long run, but absolutely a catastrophic short-term policy in a state of 40 million). Moreover, despite Brown’s diagnosis that that the fires rage because of a new normal era of hot and dry weather, 2016 had seen one of the wettest and snowiest years in California history, while 2017 had been a near normal year of temperature and precipitation. The point then was that Trump’s ill-timed admonishment was truthful, while Brown’s own politicking was either irrelevant, misleading—or abjectly dangerous for millions. And yet Trump’s candor was precisely the sort of bluntness that turns off suburban voters.

“Obama Judges”

Trump earned more furor, when in blunderbuss fashion he

responded to a ruling by Judge Jon S. Tigar of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California, a liberal Obama appointee, who had issued a temporary restraining order blocking the Trump administration from carrying out the president's November 9 directive that requests for asylum and refugee status would no longer be extended to any arriving in the United States illegally. Trump had criticized Tigar's decision as the ruling of an "Obama judge," and he added that he considered it a "disgrace."

That attack warranted a quick judicious reply from Supreme Court Justice John Roberts: "We do not have Obama judges or Trump judges, Bush judges or Clinton judges. What we have is an extraordinary group of dedicated judges doing their level best to do equal right to those appearing before them. That independent judiciary is something we should all be thankful for."

Yet, once again, if Trump was indiscreet and like Obama too prone to attack the courts, was he wrong in his analysis?

Certainly, lawyers and even the general public classify judges largely by the officials who appointed them. The politics of their selection is a good exegesis why they rule consistently either in progressive or traditionalist fashion. And there is a political reason why Trump's opponents prefer to press their cases in the federal courts of northern California.

Such stereotyping is not to say that justices are not independent, only that those who appoint them do so for a reason. If it were otherwise, why would there have been a fight over Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court in the first place? And why do progressives count on the court for radical social change and thus oppose constructionists?

In other words, while many liberal justices (think Brennan, Souter, Stevens) have been appointed by Republicans (who apparently wrongly assumed they were strict constructionists),

as a general rule, presidents try to reflect their own politics in their choices of justices. Roberts may have thought he was depoliticizing the court and ensuring its autonomy, but he did so in being far less accurate and candid than was Trump—while voicing the banalities that the majority of the public appreciates.

Moreover as Sen. Grassley noted, Roberts was being selective in attacking Trump in a manner that he had never in past done to Obama, who on many occasions likewise had attacked the court for decisions deemed antithetical to his own agendas. Or as Grassley put it,

– *ChuckGrassley (@ChuckGrassley) [November 21, 2018](#)*

It may not be wise for a president to offer a critique of a justice or a court for an unwelcome ruling (remember the paranoia with which FDR went after the courts). But it is even less advisable for a chief justice to go after a president, especially when the justice adopts the less convincing argument, while appearing to be selective in his condemnation of presidential editorializing.

Sounding Off on Saudi Arabia

Yet it was Trump's blunt realpolitik assessment of the recent likely Saudi Arabian state-ordered gruesome killing of American resident Jamal Khashoggi, a Muslim Brotherhood sympathizer, Saudi citizen, and both an intimate and critic of the royal family, that earned him the sharpest criticism.

His administration had already sanctioned 17 Saudi grandees likely involved in the hit, which no doubt was ordered by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the de facto head of the kingdom who is systematically and ruthlessly cleansing Saudi Arabia of his own personal critics and those deemed radical Islamist sympathizers. Ironically, the crown prince had been praised by some American observers, such as *New York*

Times columnist Thomas Friedman, for supposedly modernizing the kingdom (“a visionary”) and going after religious fundamentalists.

Trump has been under enormous pressure to extend the existing sanctions on the likely hit men and direct accessories to the gruesome assassination also to bin Salman in particular and in general the Saudi kingdom itself.

Yet Trump has called such calls “foolish” and instead limited his criticism to individual sanctioning. As a justification, Trump unapologetically and crassly cited his concerns over Saudi Arabia’s current role in pumping enough oil to keep the price reasonable: “Oil prices getting lower. Great! Like a big Tax Cut for America and the World. Enjoy! \$54, was just \$82. Thank you to Saudi Arabia, but let’s go lower!” And he also boasted of recent deals with Saudi Arabia to benefit the U.S.

Such reductionism can certainly be termed crude in its apparent dismissal of and seeming indifference to an ally’s culpability for a barbaric murder. But Trump’s implicit message, despite all his critics’ virtue signaling, is status quo American foreign policy: in a world of occasionally murderous U.S. allied regimes (e.g., Erdogan’s Turkey and Duterte’s Philippines) Middle East dictatorships, China, Russia, and assorted authoritarian Asian and Latin American governments, the U.S. government cannot always cut off relations for the sake on a single individual’s sanctity—a policy that Trump inherited from his predecessors. And it sometimes has less not more influence to improve human rights when it separates from an authoritarian ally completely. Trump’s difference from past presidents is that he defended his realist policy not so much on strategic grounds (e.g., the alliance against Iran), but on economic populist ones (i.e., low oil prices and sales promote economic vitality for the middle classes).

The usual deep state protocol is to lie about U.S. complicity

in things we regret or to ignore criticism. Obama's CIA Director John Brennan, for example, lied under oath when he claimed the Obama targeted assassination program had not led to collateral "damage" to bystanders.

When in September 2018 former Secretary of State John Kerry was cavorting in Paris with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, he was essentially both undermining the current administration policy toward Iran, and de facto continuing outreach to a theocracy responsible for murdering dissidents, religious apostates, and homosexuals.

When Hillary Clinton hit the plastic reset button in Geneva in 2009, she was likewise overlooking the Putin-ordered hits on Russian dissidents, as part of her rebuke of the sanctions ordered by George W. Bush after the Russian invasion of Ossetia.

China kills far more internal dissidents than does Saudi Arabia, but it is wise enough not to do so in its foreign embassies and in such medieval fashion. And certainly, Silicon Valley does not cancel too many deals when they learn that dissidents disappear in China or a million Muslims are systematically persecuted by the Chinese government.

If Saudi Arabia had no oil, or did not buy American products, or was not now anti-Iranian, we likely long ago would have cut relations. We are not supposed to say out loud that perceived national interests sometimes trump humanitarianism, but instead use diplomatic-speak, such as the United States has "grave concerns" and now considers our relationship with the Saudis as "problematic."

Blunt Assessments vs. Bureaucratic Obscurity

Trump's crude truth bothers the media, for example, far more than Obama's mellifluous quid-pro-quo self-interest, such as fake melodramatic red-line threats and indifference to thousands killed in Syria, or his creepy hot mic promise all

but to dismantle critical and agreed-on missile defense in Eastern Europe in exchange for Putin's good behavior abroad during Obama's 2012 reelection campaign. The media, recall, was not bothered that Obama arguably got caught relegating his nation's interests to his own political career.

The list of Trump's blunt assessments could be magnified, such as his talk of an "invasion" and a "caravan" of Central American would-be illegal border crossers, who plan to crash the border, and game immigration law on the mostly fraudulent claim that they are "refugees," rather than just impoverished foreigners who like millions seek to get into the United States to enjoy its greater prosperity, freedom, and security. Yet, when the residents of Tijuana, one of the proverbial transit points for Mexican illegal aliens to enter the United States unlawfully, complain about the "invasion" and the problems that such pseudo-refugees bring to Mexico, then it is difficult to find Trump wrong rather than just blunt.

What should have Trump done in all these cases in keeping with presidential decorum?

Mostly what most career politicians who become president do, and apparently what both the public and the media have grown accustomed to applaud: hedge, blather, and resort to euphemisms.

For example, the better political calculus would have been for Trump to have issued a statement, "We plan to explore all remedies for these devastating California fires, from the effects of climate change to the proper stewardship of our forests, in a manner that brings together private, local, state, and federal interests to find common ground and solutions."

Of the patently political ruling of Justice Tigar, Trump, if he were to comment at all, should have supposedly said something like, "We will now with all respect abide by, but

also appeal, the ruling of the federal court, convinced that our own interpretation of current immigration laws will eventually be found by the courts to be correct and necessary, both to ensure the safety of the migrants and the sovereignty of the United States.”

Of the Khashoggi mess, we all know what the proper presidential boilerplate should be, “Until we learn all the facts of this deplorable act, and can hold the responsible parties responsible, there will be inevitable repercussions to the Saudi-American relationship.”

In terms of Trump’s political liabilities—winning the independent and NeverTrump suburban voter—certainly it might be smarter for Trump to withhold comment or, for the interests of the presidency, to editorialize more delicately, through the group efforts of speechwriters and aides.

But an argument cannot be made in these instances that Trump’s commentaries are lies, or that he is less truthful than his critics. And that raises the question of how Trump became president in the first place: by employing the usual presidential euphemisms and “on the one hand/on the other hand” temporizing, or believing that candor—crass and crude that it can be—was what the people were thirsting for.

The question remains are they still—or do they weary of ill-timed truth, and yearn for the old days of good-mannered euphemisms and bureaucratic obscurity?

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