

Trump: The First Ten Days

A whirlwind, in a divided country

By Conrad Black



The instant crisis over the 90-day ban of some categories of foreigners from the United States is a sideshow and will pass quickly. But, like the treatment of the Mexican-wall issue, it has had some ham-handed aspects. It will not be possible for a while to determine when the president is making a calculated lurching move or a startling utterance – one intended to put down a marker and disconcert opponents before he executes a tactical retreat to where he originally wished to end up – and when he has just been impetuous and has not prepared his initiative with adequate care, as apparently occurred with the executive order on immigration.

What Trump's foreign and domestic enemies have called "the Muslim ban" is, of course, nothing of the kind, and the administration has made it clear that it is not a sectarian

exclusion. About 10 percent of the absurd overreaction to the ban is sage comment that the administration really has to think these initiatives through and formulate them in ways that are less vulnerable to legitimate legal and policy challenge. Opening windows for such ferocious criticism, and Democratic mischief and insubordination by the Obama-appointed deputy attorney general while the confirmation of the attorney general-designate is delayed for partisan reasons, is very stressful for the president's supporters who fear that too much confrontation could imperil his legislative program. That program is so radical that it will require united and contented Republican congressional majorities and the odd reasonable Democrat as well. (This does not excuse Republican senators McCain and Graham from their irritating habit of masquerading as a judicious and urbane third party of two dispensing unctuous dissent like an oracle.)

The partial entry ban, as modified, is reasonably acceptable for 90 days. In the Mexican affair, the president apparently feels that Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto reneged on some of what he had promised when they met in July. But Mexico, an important country that has made great political and economic progress in the last 25 years, should be treated with more careful diplomacy, as the president effectively promised in his Friday press conference with the British prime minister, Theresa May. The correlation of forces between the two countries is almost as one-sided as it was when President Polk lifted 1 million square miles (about as much as both the Louisiana Purchase and the total territory of the original 13 colonies) on a flimsy legal basis in the war of 1846–48. The president made too much of the formula that the Mexicans would “pay for the wall” when what he meant, as he occasionally explained, was that the reduction in the trade deficit with that country would pay for it. Mexico should be treated more respectfully, but the more vocal Mexican supporters should not be allowed to get away with inciting the inference that Mexico has a perfect right to export unemployment to the United

States while depositing millions of its unskilled people in the American welfare, education, and justice systems.

The executive order on the 90-day ban was sufficiently sloppily formulated that it has brought all of Trump's foes snorting out of the undergrowth, from the far and soft left to the comparatively intellectual right; all are doing a Saint Vitus Dance, imputing the most fantastic incompetence and malice to the president. The administration has responded with a see-saw combination of placatory clarifications and defiance of critics, and seems to be holding a majority of domestic opinion. The main arguments have nothing to do with the textual contents of the order, and are just another fulmination of concern that Trump is a bigot, a madman, and a terminal vulgarian. (The first two concerns are unfounded and the last is an overstated matter of taste.) Critics, hyped by the desperate media, whom about 70 percent of Americans and 86 percent of Republicans don't trust, claim that the whole world is "nervous" and that this "is just the beginning" of Trump's dictatorial madness and that all Muslims in the world are about to be reactively transformed into becoming jihadist sympathizers. I don't think so.

On the night of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush said that the United States would make no distinction between terrorists and states that tolerated terrorism. That line has become blurred and the leaders of many Muslim countries, as well as the bulk of Islamic clergy, have to be shaken into taking sides on these issues. To a large degree, the Islamic terrorists are, in Maoist terminology, "swimming like fish in the sea of the people" in Muslim countries. Most of those governments are very inadequately scourging out extremists, though there has been some improvement since 9/11. The Pakistani sheltering of bin Laden was indicative of the fright and malice that induce ostensibly friendly Muslim governments to straddle this most crucial issue. The reduction of U.S. oil imports will undercut the activities of several terrorist-

sponsoring petro-states.

Islam is essentially a congregational religion, with no central authority, unlike most Christian churches, but the record of its elders is a checkered one. Anyone who thinks we are going to defeat terrorism by avoiding the use of the phrase “Islamic extremism” as President Obama and Hillary Clinton did, or by absurd, groveling apologies to the Muslim world such as Mrs. Clinton made on behalf of the United States to cover up the terrorist origins of the Benghazi tragedy, is mistaken. Such weakness only incites escalated outrages, as the under-reaction of the Clinton administration to the initial terrorist outrages (the first World Trade Center bombing, Khobar Towers, East African embassies, USS Cole) demonstrated.

The alarmists about the new regime should note that the most important public statement the president made about foreign policy last week was “A strong and independent Britain is a blessing to the world.” This replaces Obama’s threat to put “Britain at the back of the queue” if it left Europe, and is the beginning of rebuilding the Western Alliance on the great precedents of Roosevelt and Churchill (whose bust has returned to the Oval Office), and Reagan and Thatcher.

As usual in Trump matters, most observers have missed the point and contentedly assured the many millions of nodding and knowing heads that Trump has struck out in the White House after ten days. Some Trump critics have jubilantly announced that Trump has managed to shut down his own honeymoon. There has been no honeymoon and if there ever is one for this president, it will be some time coming. Trump declared war on the entire governing elite of the country – all factions of both parties, almost all the media, Hollywood, Wall Street, academia, the lobbyists, and the federal bureaucracy. He ran a populist campaign to take over one of the main political parties, a little like William Jennings Bryan and the bimetallicists in 1896. But he won the election with a campaign

that was both radical and in policy terms, conservative.

Though the Clintons, Obamas, and Bushes have gone from Washington, the national media, so accustomed to immense influence in creating and legitimizing and reassuring the groupthink that has governed in the post-Reagan era, remain in the front lines of a fierce defensive action as Donald Trump continues his war against the main body of the political elites, which he and his scores of millions of supporters regard as an anthill of corruption, hypocrisy, and cowardice. This battle will continue to escalate. The Democrats have promised scorched earth; they have no more been honeymooners than were Jackie Gleason and Audrey Meadows when Ralph Kramden punched his left hand with his right fist and shouted "Pow! To the moon, Alice!" The Democrats are trying to sandbag Trump's Cabinet nominees, especially those who have promised to promote charter schools, crack down on the abuses of labor organizations, strip all the bunk about global warming out of environmental policy, promote oil and gas production, incentivize job-creating economic growth, reform health care, and reactivate the Justice Department. The Democrats will probably not be able to stop confirmation of his Cabinet nominees, but he will have to engage in some degree of cajolery from the driver's seat of the Trump bulldozer to get his program through.

The level of antagonism of his opponents is obvious almost every day, and is not unrequited by the president and his supporters. Two of the most vivid examples last week were the *New York Times'* outright invention of the claim that Trump had banished the bust of Martin Luther King from the Oval Office, which, as he made clear, was not just false but an accusation of racism, which is also false. The mouthy late-night-talk-show hostess Chelsea Handler said she would not have Melania Trump on her program because "she can hardly speak English." Against such witless and compulsive animus, the president and his supporters should prevail, but he might like to be more

Careful and have occasional recourse to subtlety. The reason the country appears so divided is that it is divided. About half the country thinks the entire power structure is flabby, corrupt, and useless; and the other half, including the serried ranks of its members, think it is adequate to commendable and that it has been assaulted by a maniacal demagogue. Most of the Trump program will work if he can enact it, and then he will have his honeymoon.

We are witnessing a struggle for the heart and mind of America, and for the apparatus of its government, on a scale that has not been seen since the Civil War.

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