

Trump's Only Real Weakness Is His Style

If the president can become a bit more presidential, his reelection will be all but assured.

by Conrad Black



This is the time for President Trump to deprive his enemies of the last weapon that could be employed against him that could cause him any harm: the largely false, but still troublesome, issue of his personality and routine behavior. Other lines of attack have come to naught: Collusion with Russia, accusations of racism provoking outbursts of mass murder (by uttering “racially charged statements,” in the inadvertently Orwellian words of CNN’s most witless talking head, Don Lemon), the verbal recession confected by the world-renowned economists of CNN and MSNBC, all of it has collapsed. Illegal border crossings are in sharp decline as the wall is steadily extended, and Mexico cooperates in arresting the flow of

illegal migrants to the United States, all within the framework of a new free-trade agreement and the steady relocation of manufacturing designed for the U.S. market from China to Mexico (and other countries). The only arguments left to the puling and squabbling Democrats are ever more implausible lurches to the left and the lingering sense that Donald Trump, though not the extremist or the incompetent that many had declaimed and predicted, is just not suitable to be president.

It does the president no favors to pretend that there are not still a significant number of people who have an uneasy feeling that although his administration is in policy terms quite successful, and the president has faithfully tried to carry out most of what he promised in the raucous 2016 election campaign, he is yet too bombastic and evidently egocentric to maintain the dignity of his great office. This is a widely held view, even among many who support the president for his policy successes and the well-conceived initiatives that are still in the balance, especially trade and other negotiations with China, and the attempted revival of nuclear non-proliferation in respect of Iran and North Korea.

The entirely admirable Peggy Noonan (*Wall Street Journal* and Fox News) seems to me illustrative of the best type of these people. She is effectively nonpartisan, extremely knowledgeable, and always very fair, and she wishes every U.S. president well and hopes that whoever is in that position does a good job for the country. Because she worked so closely with President Reagan, she may tend to measure presidents against him, and few in history can live up to his quality, as a man and as a leader. But there is nothing wrong with having high standards. It is clear from some of her columns that she finds the president's bellicosity toward his opponents, and his tendency to be nasty and personal toward them, disappointing and unsuitable to a president.

In Trump's defense, no president since Richard Nixon's last days in office has been subjected to such malicious and widespread hostility as this one, and while most of the obloquy directed against Nixon was based on a minor felony compounded by some more-serious obstructions of consequent investigations, all imputations of possibly illegal wrongdoing by our current president have collapsed and been exposed as malicious or negligent abuse of power by sections of the Justice Department and the intelligence agencies. History is finally beginning to record that Richard Nixon was an outstanding president who was overwhelmed by the propagation of public hysteria over trivial matters in which there is no evidence that he did anything illegal. But there was an illegal source of the problem, and, as Nixon himself acknowledged, he badly mishandled the investigation.

In general, while he could be awkward, Nixon handled a very difficult time with reasonable dignity and retired from the office with exquisite courtesy and, in horrible circumstances, considerable eloquence. FDR and JFK were always elegant; Truman, Eisenhower, and Obama never embarrassed anyone; President Clinton was marred only by the tawdriness of his peccadilloes; and LBJ, Ford, Carter, and the Bushes all had their verbal slips and minor gaucheries, but nothing seriously bothersome or embarrassing to the country. With President Trump, his astute and effective use of social media, the only way to compensate for the wall-to-wall hostility he faces from the traditional media, requires him to be directly in front of the country much more than any other president. Some combination of deliberate tactics and the unprecedented loathing of his opponents causes anything bombastic, silly, or overly self-centered to be played up and employed to reinforce the caricature of him as a blustering, narcissistic windbag. Anyone who knows him knows this is not a fair description of him. And any fair examination of his record in office shows that these infelicities aren't really relevant to a just evaluation of his performance.

There is also the problem of the president feeling it necessary to respond to almost every slight or insinuation, no matter how implausible or insignificant. No one cares if there was a possibility that Hurricane Dorian would reach Alabama, any more than anyone except his most churlish enemies really noticed that he meant "ports" rather than "airports" in his remarks about the Revolutionary War. The president has steadily improved his delivery, pursued his announced objectives, and discarded the appearance of chaos that arose in his early White House days. But there remains a somewhat ungracious tenor to this administration that could be excised, sloughed like something outgrown, with no loss of counter-fire. This would impress and probably rally about 10 percent of the people.

As the false attacks on the president have failed and the economy has soared, and the other policy initiatives are patiently and effectively addressed, the president's standing in the polls has inched upward by about ten points from its low in the mid-to-upper 30s. The biases of most of the polling organizations and the reticence of many Trump supporters are probably causing some underestimation of his strength, and 47 percent or so is probably enough to win, given large Democratic margins in California and New York. This leaves out the identity of the Democratic candidate, who will be carrying whatever legal backlash the special counsel brings down on the propagators of the Russian-collusion fraud and the illegal intelligence surveillance of the Trump campaign and transition team, as well as the harebrained climate, immigration, tax, and health-care measures the Democratic candidates have embraced.

His putative chief rival, Joe Biden, claims that Trump "inherited a good economy, as he has inherited everything in his life." He didn't inherit billions of dollars, though his father was a wealthy man. He didn't inherit a television audience of 25 million viewers every week for 14 years. He

didn't inherit a fine and attractive wife and family. And he did not inherit the presidency of the United States. (And the economy he did inherit was a flatlined "new normal" of 2 percent GDP growth, 1 percent per capita GDP growth, bought with annual increases in the accumulated national debt of 10 percent.) But if the president wants to put the election away now, all he has to do is be a bit more gracious: more of a chief of state of a great people and of the world's greatest power, and less of a backbiting, counter-sniping denizen of the nether political regions. To drain the swamp, he has to get clear of it. He has earned the ability to separate himself from the insalubrious stratum of an officeholder fighting for his life against historic calumnies and malfeasances. All but his most febrile enemies will concede his cunning, determination, and stamina, and, in a slightly rabble-rousing way, his panache. He has won every round in the toughest and highest league in the world. Now it's time to show some class. Those who know him know he is capable of it. The office sought the man, and the moment seeks the conduct.