

Trump's Talk

by James Como



Chaos seems to be the concept *du jour* and our president its avatar. Of course, anti-Trumpsters think it all – his election, his utterances, his decisions – accidental: there is no “policy” behind what he does, no thought-out strategy, merely ganglia beyond the control of intellect and will, such as *they* are. Alas, Donald Trump is neither the fraudulent-but-savvy Obama nor the elegant and authentically unself-regarding Reagan, who never mugged it up and who did say, “there’s no telling what a man can achieve if he’s willing to forego credit.” Central casting has sent our fourth consecutive fun-loving adolescent president.

On his own he is incapable of deploying our customary presidential oratory. Obama tried but largely failed except when purveying epideictic (praise or blame) oratory, which was almost always his Plan A; yet even his many failed attempts at other types (programmatic, factual) were recognizably within a tradition. Trump’s efforts are literally trumperry. (There are exceptions, e.g. his European speech and the recent State of

the Union address). *But this doesn't mean that DJT doesn't know what he's doing.*

Identity is complex, each of us neither just this or that but a mix. Included in this president's recipe is a genius for building with the understanding that, often, a building must be razed before something new and much better can replace it. In Spanish the useful phrase is *romper el esquema*, "break the pattern"; that is, violate expectations, unknot settled assumptions, discern that other patterns are possible. That's where the chaos comes in.

"Turning over the apple cart" is one way of saying this, "drain the swamp" another, and so far with respect to this project the president – many say narcissistically, some say cluelessly, I say both and add fearlessly, unrelentingly and with unfathomable energy and focus – is succeeding, at least programmatically, which is what matters most. And notice: for all his self-referential gloating about the *now*, he has not once mentioned that which so obsessed the insufferable Obama, namely his *legacy*.

Rhetorical efficacy, though, is another story: diminished returns come early, so early, in fact, that a baseline of mockery, sarcasm, name-calling, exaggeration, bluster and sheer belligerence become style, and style is the man, inviting responses in kind: you get what you give (Como's second law of communication). The sausage-making shows, credibility suffers, and 'noise' (rather than real information, that is, news of epoch-making achievements) takes up too much oxygen.

He simply does not understand that communication is like a song, having *both* words *and* music. The only tunes he can carry – and he is tone-deaf – are cacophonous ones, with too much base (so o speak). That's at home. His domestic accomplishments are remarkable, from the number of judges confirmed, to tax cuts, a rising GDP, lower unemployment, and

de-regularization; but the price of his rhetoric may be Republican control of Congress.

On the other hand, this new normal is easy to rise above in a statesmen-like manner, or close enough, and the president has done that. Even given his tone-deafness, he can flatter with the best of them. Moreover, abroad the impact of coercive tough-talk plays differently than at home: for all the news of diminished respect from the “international community” such talk works, like in the schoolyard – an infelicitous analogy, maybe, but human nature is what it is. Threaten sanctions, China blinks; talk war, North Korea comes to the table; float the possibility of leaving NATO, members start coughing up their 2%.

This scheme-breaking requires a big picture. Any given nation-state is an information system arranged like a pyramid with five strata, but often bloated and distended here and there. From the top down these are: Government (offices and functions are prescribed by some founding charter; functionaries come and go), State (bureaucracies, police power, the military; here, alas, functionaries abide like swamp-dwelling denizens: it is our bureaucrats that need term limits), Society (party politics, political debate, communication media, patterns of work and habitation, civil institutions that mediate among the various levels, and constellations of beliefs that regulate all of these), Nation (schooling, arts, letters, popular culture, manners, customs, mores, knowledge of history and geography; with Society, Nation describes quotidian life), and Culture (attitudes towards law, duty and morality, as well as language, religious beliefs and ritual, reverence for iconic people, places and things, folklore and myth). Culture is “a sodded place fit for tilling and providing for growth” – a teleological expression of seed and root.

Public figures attempt to wield influence at various levels, the best ones (Ronald Reagan, Pope St. John Paul II, Margaret Thatcher), after achieving some position at the top, proceed

to influence *from the bottom up*. They take on ‘incorrigibles’ (embedded assumptions) and, especially, they alter figure-ground relationships. Obama, et al., thought to do this with bathroom use – it became a priority – and Isis – it was the “JV”. But he did not bother with that one function so beautifully accomplished by the great figures. *He would not condescend to explanation*. He failed to *educate*. So to this president I suggest: decide upon the level of the nation-state you wish to influence (do not confuse domains, even if you think some people will “get it” because you do: *your base is only one audience*), then sit, study, confer, learn, and *explain*. Sure, use the right words, but also *make the right music*.

And decide on the sort of rhetoric you will deploy. Your options are 1/ *confirmational* (keep smoking but change brands), 2/ *utilitarian* (stop smoking), and 3/ *syntactical* (stigmatize smoking). Each of these (think of the use of safety belts in a car, or the requirement that people clean up after their dogs, both unthinkable fifty years ago) requires a *campaign*