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Is Trump an Island?

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by Victor Davis Hanson // *National Review*

If Trump would let his deeds speak for themselves, he would quiet his enemies far more than he does with Twitter broadsides.

*No man is an island entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main . . .
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*
— John Donne

The pathological hatred of Donald Trump — from impeachment votes to the emoluments-clause suits to assassination chic to talk of invoking 25th Amendment to sexual-harassment writs — would grind down almost any 71-year-old man. Trump may be ego-driven and have a proverbially thin skin, but even a rhino would finally chafe under the 24/7 media detestation of his person, his family, and his presidency.

Someday soon now, we will look back at the Russian-collusion psychodrama, the strange transference of his transition team's emails to Robert Mueller, the Clinton role in the Steele-Fusion GPS dossier, the destruction of journalistic integrity, and the slant of the Mueller investigation team and appreciate that we were living through an effort to swing the 2016 election and, failing that, a veritable slow-motion effort to remove an elected presidency.

The ubiquitous Lisa Bloom, we learn, was attempting to arrange payments for, or at least merchandise the testimonies of, supposed Trump harassment victims in the waning days of the 2016 campaign. Both liberal and conservative surveys of the media reveal that at least 90 percent of Trump coverage has been negative. Those who once held positions now held by Trump disown them; what they used to oppose, they now embrace — the only constant being whatever Trump is against, they are for.

Fake news will not stop. The rewards among peers and the media profession for getting a whack to Trump are felt worth the costs of largely betraying the canons of journalism. A generation ago, a Brian Ross — twice now caught trafficking in untruths — would have been through as a journalist. Today, he is merely suspended as a temporary casualty in the noble war against Trump evil.

Some of Trump's current isolation is unavoidable, nearly half of the voting public backed a Steppenwolf Trump to do what he is doing: drop the Sunnybrook Farm rules of past failed Republican nominees, brawl with the identity-politics Democrats, and smack the swamp Republicans. The deplorables wanted strong chemotherapy to excise Washington malignancies and had no illusions that such medicine, to work, can always be pleasant.

In addition, voters may talk grandly of wanting change, but they recoil when it actually begins. And if once wanting the Obama agenda to fail was considered proof of near treason and racism, working to ensure that the entire Trump presidency is aborted just months after the election has been recalibrated as patriotic progressive activism.

The result is that Trump is now an island in Washington. Fewer Republican officeholders want on his team. In the past, even beleaguered presidents could turn to a network of stalwarts in and out of politics. Not Trump.

When George W. Bush's popularity dipped below 30 percent in most polls, he at least could count on the money and support of the diehard Republican congressional delegations, the traditional big donors of the Republican party, the conservative media — National Review, Commentary, The Weekly Standard, the Wall Street Journal — grassroots local and state politicians, senior Republican statesman, and “wise men” retired politicians.

Trump's Republican critics have cultural prejudices against the Trump phenomena or they recoil from Trump's behavior or they understandably enjoy belated nemesis repaying prior Trump hubris.

Trump has no party, no organized supporters. Depending on the polls, he hovers around favorability ratings of 39-40 percent.

His thin Republican majority in the Senate just got thinner with the defeat of Roy Moore in Alabama. Given four or five Republican senators who either hate Trump's guts or despise his agenda, he really cannot rely on the Senate to pass his legislation — at least, unless his popularity hits 45 percent, or senators find his agenda resonating in their states, or if, against the odds, he picks up more Senate seats in the 2018 midterm elections.

Many of the big Republican donors opposed Trump in the primary. While they privately applaud his Reaganesque menu, they do so in the shadows — given the social opprobrium that Trump still incurs in their country-club circles.

Never Trump Republicans, who heretofore could not sway voters, nonetheless still dominate conservative commentary — growing quiet during a week of good economic news, becoming loud when an especially embarrassing Trump tweet or a Roy Moore loss prompts another “I told you so” sermon. To have once opposed Trump, but now to serve in his administration for the good of the country earns the honorable the cheap smear “Vichy Republicans.”

Ex-Republican presidents and past failed presidential candidates want no part of Trump — in a fashion never seen before in modern political history. George H. W. Bush was proud that he voted for Hillary Clinton. George W. Bush did not vote for either major-party candidate in the last election. Mitt Romney was on record as not voting for Trump. It is likely that John McCain did not either.

Most of the Washington-New York Republican “swamp,” the establishment veterans of past State and Defense Departments and the National Security Council are not in Trump's corner at best. At worst, they pontificate in op-eds that Trump's brashness and crudity will destroy the 70-year post-war bipartisan foreign policy as we know it. Often, Republican senators come out against Trump legislation at the eleventh hour to play spoilers, still teeth-gnashing over their prior spats with candidate Trump.

In sum, Trump has no margin of error, no fallback support, not a single “give the president the benefit of the doubt” concession from anyone. “Just desserts,” “payback’s a b****,” “he had it coming” are the usual exegeses.

Trump, in response, tweets down. In abrasive Curtis LeMay or uncouth George S. Patton style, he is determined to allow his enemy’s stereotypes to warp appreciation of his record. In his defiant Promethean isolation, Trump will not let his accomplishments speak for themselves without duking it out with an ankle-biting Joe Scarborough or passive-aggressive Kirsten Gillibrand. In that sense, Trump is both the proverbial castle-builder and the intruding surf: His undeniable successes no sooner start to widen his 40 percent base than Trump’s killer waves of electronic feuding wash them away.

Nonetheless, an embattled Trump still retains his undeniable cunning, his superhuman energy, his insight into human nature, and an uncanny instinct that his bold agenda will strike a chord with 51 percent of the American people — if he will just let it resonate on its own merits. Fighting back against existential enemies ensures deterrence; but fighting empty suits does not.

What is ahead as we enter the 2018 midterms?

Trump will win support from his growing number of achievements on the home front: economic news on the upswing, illegal immigration down, superfluous regulations dropped, energy production up, unemployment and interest rates low, with consumer confidence and the stock market high.

Abroad, the Mattis-McMaster-Pompeo-Haley-Tillerson team has stabilized U.S. foreign policy and avoided both Obama recessional apologetics and optional warring and nation-building. ISIS is now in full retreat. Israel and the Gulf states are once again friends. China and North Korea are shocked that the U.S. is no longer appeasing.

Call it what you wish — “principled realism” or neo-Jacksonianism — the Trump doctrine fits the current mood of the country. Friends abroad believe the U.S. is now more reliable; enemies fear it is dangerously unpredictable.

The point is that Trump’s policies are mostly on the right track, both for the country and for his own political supporters. Never Trumpers quietly acknowledge that never has there been a more active and successful effort to appoint young, unapologetically conservative federal judges — absolutely inconceivable had Hillary Clinton been president.

Trump is also fortunate in his enemies. The Democratic party cannot calm its identity-politics frenzies. No sooner had Alabamian Doug Jones squeaked by than he began his victory speech by thanking his supporters by tribe — as if they were a series of hyphenated collectives rather than unique individuals.

Antifa, the take-a-knee embarrassment, the iconoclasm craziness, and the meltdown of progressive sexual harassers are reminders to purple-state America that there is no longer a Democratic worker party of Truman and JFK. Instead, the party is a collage of rich and poor zealots, who agree on despising the deplorable middle class. The Sanders agenda would result in slow, if any, economic growth, and endless French-style squabbling over thinning slices of a shrinking pie.

The Mueller investigators — drawn most from a pool of Obama and Clinton partisans and weighed heavily from Mueller’s own law firm — are reifying most Trump blunderbuss allegations of the last year.

The special legal team each week finds a new way to prove that its lawyers are not disinterested, but instead left-wing and pro-Clinton. The liberal-heralded “dream team” and “army” of “all stars” has proved so far

puerile in their text messaging and emailing, and arrogant in ignoring their own conflicts of interests. They increasingly are turning to the tentacles of the deep-state octopus to help strangle Trump.

Mueller himself apparently saw no ethical problem in hiding for months the fact that both Peter Strzok and Lisa Page had been taken off his investigation for professional improprieties. He thus left the misleading impression that their abrupt departures were instead more or less routine and certainly not connected.

The entire special-counsel agenda was flawed from the outset because it was based on two bogus assumptions: one, that the fraudulent Fusion GPS dossier was a key to opening the door to a dark room of collusion, and, two, that it was wise to round up Washington-New York liberal deep-state partisans to outmaneuver the novice Trump. In truth, the Steele binder was a toxic Tolkien ring that has corrupted everyone who sought to use it.

In a normal world of judging achievement, even with a biased media, Trump's popularity should be at least 50 percent

Yet the great enigma of our age is Trump himself. He no sooner in unorthodox fashion wins praise for against-the-odds boldness — exposing the media as ethically bankrupt, pulling out from the Paris climate accord, moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, taking on the entire NFL and revealing its absurdities — than he erodes his own very achievement with raging Twitter outbursts against non-entities or a needless slap at one of his own appointees or a thin-skin boast that he was really right after all.

How odd that Trump's achievements starve the anti-Trump media reptile and reduce it to hissing about his ice cream or soda consumption, even as Trump's tweets only give it a new exoskeleton.

The irony is that Trump need not shout his critics. He meets the press frequently and is far more candid and accessible than Barack Obama ever was. His inner team relies on more women — Conway, Sanders, Hicks — than did the prior administration. Trying to revive the forgotten cast-offs of globalization is far more moral than writing them off as losers, deplorables, and clingers.

His cabinet officers have far more authority and latitude than any in recent memory and are certainly more outspoken about their boss than were Obama's obsequious subordinates. Trump has mostly on substantive issues proved his Never Trump critics wrong (his agenda is more conservative than any since Reagan's) and left his liberal opponents unhinged, who rightly sense that he seeks to undo the entire eight-year Obama agenda in four years.

In sum, would Trump let his deeds speak for themselves, he would quiet his enemies far more than he does with Twitter broadsides.

In the prior eight years, Obama tried to invent achievement through soaring rhetoric about what he could never do. Trump seems just intent to diminish in tweets all that he has already accomplished in deeds.

But no man is an island, and to press on, Trump needs to allow allies of his agenda to become allies of himself.

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