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Democracy of Hope



Trump's Clown Show Is Collapsing on Itself

Trump's damage is real, but his power is hollow. Lacking seriousness and respect, he breeds chaos while alienating allies. History shows persuasion, not bluster, sustains leadership.

DEMOCRACY OF HOPE

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By Jeremi Suri

“All great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice...the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”

- Karl Marx

“When a clown moves into a palace, he doesn’t become a sultan. The palace becomes a circus.”

- Turkish proverb

Donald Trump has done enormous damage to the world. He has closed American borders to refugees of all kinds, except white South Africans, and he has deported thousands of hardworking, tax-paying residents of the United States to dangerous places where they have no connection, including El Salvador, Uganda, and South Sudan. Trump has imposed high tariffs on trade, forcing businesses to close and consumers to pay more for basic goods. He has passed a massive tax break for the wealthiest Americans, his only major piece of legislation, and he has pardoned numerous convicted fraudsters, cheats, and tax evaders – his friends. At the same time, Trump has massively cut food, health care, unemployment, and education benefits for the poorest citizens. He has allied himself with the most

violent, aggressive dictators – Vladimir Putin, Mohammed bin Salman, and Nayib Bukele – as he has attacked defenders of democracy, including Lula da Silva, Volodymyr Zelensky, and the International Criminal Court. And this is just the beginning of a longer list...

Trump is a shouting whirlwind of destruction, an enemy of democracy, and a clear threat to peace and prosperity. His record, especially in the first year of his second term, makes these judgments undeniable. But he is also so undisciplined, narcissistic, and widely offensive that he alienates even his most craven kiss-ups. Christian nationalists have trouble justifying the pardons of pedophiles, the embrace of Islamic potentates, and the praise for Vladimir Putin. Business conservatives cannot promote exorbitant, arbitrary tariffs or severe restrictions on talent and labor recruitment. And patriots really cannot advocate the bulldozing of the White House, the firing of distinguished military leaders, and the bombing of fishing boats in the Caribbean without any clear strategy, other than a slide into another unwanted war.

Although Trump clearly abuses power in ways few presidents have before, his cartoonish stupidity denies him the most important and enduring power for a leader: respect. Almost no one respects him. Even his supporters spend much of their time rolling back or diverting attention from his words. Those who seek to work with him – from governors to business leaders – try every day to get around his unhinged pronouncements and unworkable dictates. When Trump speaks, most people avert their eyes and try to ignore whatever they can. That is not a recipe for effective leadership, but daily chaos – what we see with everything Trump touches.

The most effective and enduring presidents recognized that their greatest power came from their ability to persuade and motivate people. The unique stature of the office allows the president to reach more listeners and readers than almost anyone else. Theodore Roosevelt memorably called this the “bully pulpit,” but previous presidents had long understood the importance of their words. George Washington largely defined what it meant to be an American with his memorable defense of “union.” Abraham Lincoln did the same, and he connected that value to a wider vision of democracy: “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” Franklin Roosevelt applied that idea to the world, when he spoke of universal freedoms and a “united nations.”

In each of these cases, presidents spoke honestly, clearly, and soberly about how politics should change. They argued against partisanship, slavery, and fascism by showing that they had more attractive ideas – ideas they would advocate and

promote consistently, which they did. Presidential words persuaded listeners because they were not just words, but personal and national commitments. Presidents were selling something real and dear, something they would put full effort behind for benefits that were not just personal.

Presidential seriousness and commitment gave presidential vision credibility. Seriousness and commitment attracted devoted followers, not just opportunistic manipulators. Seriousness and commitment moved adversaries who knew they could not wait out or divert or buy-off the president. Jefferson Davis knew Lincoln would never make a “deal.” Adolf Hitler understood that Roosevelt could not be stalled or distracted, even as the United States fought on two global fronts. Presidents must show seriousness and commitment if they really want to change the world. Trump doesn’t even come close.

People all around the world have devised countless ways to ignore, divert, and resist Trump. The U.S. president is less powerful than at any time in recent history. He still does awful things. He hurts tens of thousands of people each day. But he has little respect, anywhere. He has little command. He is a bully whose targets shake when they are nearby, but disobey, condemn, and ridicule him when he is outside of earshot. His power is narrow and short-lived. It is farcical and often creates the opposite of its intended effect.

These observations do not diminish the very real damage that Trump is doing. A weak, disrespected bully can still draw blood, lots of blood. Clowns can be quite frightening.

At the end of this difficult year, we must play the long game. That is where hope remains strong. Trump’s power is diminishing as his stupidity alienates even his most craven supporters. We must all invest in building alternative institutions and visions to replace him when he is gone. He will leave a void, and serious people must be ready to fill it.

Beyond resistance, we must describe more clearly what a democracy with the rule of law and equal protection looks like. We must remind the world why multilateralism and international cooperation are so vital and how the United States can once again lead. Most of all, we must double down on kindness, humility, and seriousness, showing how much better they work than cruelty and narcissism.

Start by using your words for a worthwhile purpose close to home. Tell people why and how we can be better. Good behavior will endure when the clown leaves the palace (or destroys it around himself).

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