Send in the Clowns

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GUEST EDITORIAL

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Reality show host Donald Trump is now starring in the biggest show of his life. The whole world’s a circus. It’s YUGE, dwarfing Barnum & Bailey’s “Greatest Show on Earth!” It’s a real cliff-hanger. Unless the whole tent is destroyed by a wag-the-dog war starting in Syria or North Korea, there’s only two ways this show can play out. One is with the triumph of a business tycoon and con man who bends the world to his will. Or, more likely, it will end as a rerun of Greek and Shakespearean tragedies illustrating how blind ignorance, narcissism, and insecurity erode a would-be tyrant’s will to power, leading to his inevitable downfall.

To star in the “Greatest Show on Earth” is the biggest role of an entertainer’s career. Trump should be on top of the world, but he is not. His faux-news echo chamber brain, paranoid tweets, and unhinged policy rants seem more typical of a man on the edge of a meltdown than of a global leader in top form. It’s not hard to figure out why. For a control freak like Trump, being forced to star in a show he did not script and does not direct must be hell on earth.

And what a circus it is! There are fierce animals—Democratic donkeys; Republican elephants; Russian bears; Chinese dragons; British lions; Asian tigers; and Fox newscasters! High above, silhouetted against the big top, sequined trapeze-artist porn stars and moral tightrope walkers defy gravity. Outside on the midway, grinning barkers offer carnival rides, National Rifle Association–staffed shooting galleries, and games of chance like “pin the tail on the donkey.” There’s fabulous prizes for all, including MAGA [“Make America Great Again”] ball caps, celebrity golf tournaments, and dream vacations at Trump resorts.

It’s *Cirque du Soleil* on speed. Watch Constitutional contortionists defend gun rights over human rights! Watch politicians recuse themselves to escape perjury! See illusionists saw the Statue of Liberty in half, and magicians pull tax cuts out of their hats! But wait! There’s more!! See a defiant Paul Manafort risk prison for treason and fraud!! Gaze in awe at oil and gas lobbyist Scott Pruitt’s toxic antics as head of the Environmental Protection Agency, or

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watch Richard Zinke sell off public lands for the National Park Service!! See Paul Ryan carried from the ring as his fire-breathing act goes horribly wrong!! Marvel as Michael Cohen uses non-disclosure agreements to sidestep ethics and campaign finance laws!!! Such sleaze has not been seen since the Teapot Dome Scandal.

Trump’s in center ring, of course, roaring and pacing in front of Ringmaster/Special Counsel Robert Mueller. Trump’s campaign stooges worked like an inept gang of Peter Sellers’ “Pink Panther” clones to help Putin and Russian oligarchs rig the 2016 elections. Mueller’s collecting evidence of this. He is backed by Constitutional law; federal criminal law; the Department of Justice; and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Trump’s protected by horn-tooting clown cars filled with talk-show apologists; Hillary haters; deep-state wing nuts; and spin doctors for medical emergencies. Michael Cohen’s career as a civil litigator and political bagman certainly qualifies him to be the consigliere for a mafia don like “The Godfather.” But he is miscast as President Trump’s personal attorney because he lacks both gravitas and expertise in Constitutional and criminal law.

Trump’s White House staff is patterned after the Mad Queen’s garden party in Alice in Wonderland. He hires brown-noses, then abuses, demeans, and finally fires them. Or, they quit because even they cannot stomach working for him anymore. He demands loyalty, but they signed on for money, glory, and a limitless future. Now, as the ship lists and blood tints the sea, each is thinking more about their political careers and economic prospects than about loyalty to Trump or his Republican Party. Whiskers twitching and red eyes gleaming madly in the dark night of their souls, they think most about when and how best to jump ship before it takes them down too.

Mueller plays his investigative light on each ring in turn, using the sideshow dramas to build suspense. Then he once again plays his light on the lion with him in center ring. His textbook law enforcement investigative techniques keep Trump on edge. First, his investigators collect evidence of possible criminal conduct by “persons of interest.” Then, he offers them a deal. If they cooperate by providing legally admissible information that implicates higher-ups, he grants them immunity from prosecution, or at least a more lenient sentence if convicted. If they foot-drag, their potential bargaining power drops to zero if someone else flips first. Manafort is the object lesson here. As he continued to stonewall Mueller’s investigation, Mueller’s team instead got the needed information from Alex Van der Zwaan and Rick Gates. Now, Manafort’s a dead man walking. He is under house arrest as a flight risk because he has three U.S. passports and close ties to Russian oligarchs. He cannot make bail because the properties he has offered as collateral are tainted by income tax and bank fraud issues. He is looking at life in jail for money laundering; tax evasion; illegal diplomacy; and failing to register as a foreign agent when he acted on behalf of Ukraine’s former pro-Russian puppet strongman.

Trump has proven he will use his presidential power to pardon folks like Joe Arpaio and Scooter Libby, who as convicted felons could not otherwise run for office on his behalf. But by filing federal charges against suspects in states that have equally strong or stronger state laws against the same conduct, Ringmaster Mueller has cannily undercut the value of a Trump pardon for White House staffers eyeing his proffered “Get Out of Jail Free” card in return for their loyalty.

So, as the side shows play out and the ship founders, Trump must act to save himself. He can fire Mueller and probably will. He can fire Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein for
having appointed Mueller and probably will. In 1974, President Nixon fired Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Special Counsel Archibald Cox as a last-ditch effort to shut down the Watergate break-in investigation. It did not work for Nixon then. It will not work for Trump now.

Whether Mueller’s investigation eventually concludes that Trump’s campaign colluded with Putin to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, ample grounds for impeaching Trump are now evident—obstruction of justice and wholesale violations of federal income tax and campaign finance laws. Regardless, this will not happen. The actions of the Republicans who have controlled Congress since 2010 show that they favor political expediency and their careers over their constituents’ welfare or the survival of U.S. democracy. And because Trump picked his Cabinet members for personal loyalty, they will not invoke the 25th Amendment by declaring him unfit for office and advancing Vice President Mike Pence to that position. The only legal way forward is for the Democrats to regain majorities in both houses of Congress in the November 2018 midterm elections. If this happens, a Democratic House will impeach Trump and a Democratic Senate will confirm it. If it does not, who knows what’s next? So, until November 6, 2018 everyone will be on the edge of their seats. Get the kids some more lemonade, popcorn, and cotton candy. And send in the clowns; there ought to be clowns.