The Trump Effect: “Lights Out” on the Age of Enlightenment

Donald Klingner

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GUEST EDITORIAL

The Trump Effect: “Lights Out” on the Age of Enlightenment

Donald Klingner
University of Colorado Colorado Springs

President Trump’s one major 2017 policy victory was a tax cut for the 1%. His Republican Congress cagily balanced it against projected revenue increases that future leaders will be forced to generate by cutting Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security and other safety-net programs for the 99%. His administration attacks public lands, poisons our air and water, and ignores global warming. It has eroded the Western consensus on democracy, free trade and mutual self-defense that had characterized international relations since World War II by threatening the U.S.’s successful NAFTA trade agreement with two of its top three trading partners (Canada and Mexico), the UN, the NATO alliance, the Iran nuclear agreement and the Paris climate accord. He has stoked a schoolyard stand-off with North Korea’s Kim Jong-un over the relative size of their nuclear buttons. He dismisses African and Caribbean nations as “shithole countries.” Global confidence in U.S. leadership has plummeted everywhere except in Israel and Russia.

Trump also spent his first year in office weakening U.S. democratic values and institutions. He ignored the rule of law by pardoning convicted felon Joe Arpaio. He tried to suppress voting rights via a spurious “voter fraud” panel. He scorns Hispanics by avoiding the federal government’s responsibility for hurricane relief and rebuilding in Puerto Rico, and by cynically tying meaningful DACA reform proposals to xenophobic dog whistles like his border wall. He nominates unqualified racists, misogynists and homophobes for federal jobs, defends white supremacists in Charlottesville, and supports throwback Republicans like Roy Moore.

Trump lies constantly and doesn’t care. His White House ignores science, fires its scientists, spreads misinformation and dismisses inconvenient truths as “fake news.” He is mentally unstable, narcissistic, functionally illiterate, incurious, and incapable of learning or change. Like a Las Vegas blackjack dealer, he cavalierly tosses fresh cards each day to conceal the true...
nature of his game. Invariably, whenever his latest outrage is uncovered, he distracts us and pivots with another bluff designed to blanket the real news, manage the daily news cycle and reassure his base. But why, when he has far fewer supporters than he needs for re-election and his actions only increase the ranks of his opponents? What is he afraid of, and what is he hiding? What factors beyond money have created his apparent obligations to Putin and Russian oligarchs? Paul Manafort, Rick Gates and others face prison for their complicity. What’s the real story?

The business of politics is policy. Democratic policy-making depends on informed and engaged citizens who listen, evaluate alternative beliefs and policy preferences based on expert opinions and personal experience, and dialogue respectfully with others to reach policy consensus. Trump, however, considers all who disagree with him his enemies. Because Fox-Breitbart news informs his world view, he doesn’t understand reality. Since reality frustrates him, there is always the risk that he may turn – as have others before him – from trying to change the world to trying to destroy it.

Yet if we survive this threat, we face another – the cumulative effect of Trump’s behavior is to undermine the values of the Renaissance and the principles of the Enlightenment. Five centuries ago, the Renaissance glorified human intelligence, artistry and spirit of inquiry. It led to the Enlightenment, based on a scientific method that used fact-based deductive logic rather than belief-based inductive reasoning to discover the universe. These shifts led to the flowering of Western art, literature, music, science and philosophy we call humanism. Rousseau and Locke proposed a “social contract” by which people should cooperate based on mutual recognition that they could increase their chances of fulfilling their God-given right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” by giving up some personal freedoms for the common good. The U.S. evolved from an agrarian nation of immigrants into a beacon for democracy, an industrial powerhouse that curbed the Gilded Age’s excesses by redistributing income, fought the Great Depression by establishing the New Deal’s social safety net, and saved the world from fascism during World War II.

That was then. Now, we are distracted and exhausted by Trump’s unremitting late-night tweets and the right-wing media’s well-funded and orchestrated Goebbels-like efforts to dismantle our already dysfunctional national government. Instead, we must pay attention to and resist these underlying attacks on democratic governance and Western civilization. Many already recognize this threat – conservatives like Max Boot and Mitt Romney; liberal Democrats like Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris and Cory Booker; and democratic socialists like Bernie Sanders. Unless we respond, U.S. global leadership will pass to Russia, China and India. Just as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment led to the dominance of Western principles, their withering will mean at best the resurgence of regime-centered approaches to foreign relations. At worst, kleptocracy, parochialism, racism, patriarchy and tribalism will increasingly dominate a world already afflicted by bad governments, corruption, poverty, slavery, famine and genocide. Life will again become, as it once was in Europe and still is in much of the world, “nasty, brutish and short.”

There are only four legal solutions to the Trump tragedy that now afflicts the U.S. and the world:

1. Trump resigns. This will not happen because he is too narcissistic to admit failure or defeat.
2. *The House and Senate vote to impeach Trump.* Whether Mueller’s investigation eventually concludes that Trump’s campaign colluded with Putin, ample grounds for impeaching Trump are now imminent. Regardless, this won’t happen – the actions of the Republicans who control Congress demonstrate that they choose political expediency and value their careers over their constituents’ welfare or the survival of our democracy.

3. *The Cabinet invokes the 25th Amendment by declaring Trump unfit.* This won’t happen, because he picked them for their personal loyalty.

4. *The Democrats regain the majorities in Congress (House and Senate) in the November 2018 midterm elections.* They will then pursue the second option.

Thus, the best way to remove Trump is for the Democrats to retake Congress in the 2018 midterm elections. For this to happen, we must first *listen* to Trump and understand that he believes and means exactly what he says. Then, we must listen carefully and with discrimination through the constant clutter of media chatter, arguing and finger-pointing. Check facts outside your own political echo chamber. Ask questions and listen to the answers. Understand all sides of the one or two issues most important to you.

Then, *think* about what Trump represents for the future of the U.S. as a land of liberty and justice for all. Would-be dictators appeal to people’s deepest fears by identifying “enemies of the state” (internal and external) and whipping up sentiment against them. *Think* about how the Trump administration supports “alternative” news media propaganda and seeks to influence elections by corrupting and coopting social media platforms. *Think* about how it lets Russia threaten our civil discourse by using “bots” to increase internal discord and influence elections. *Think* about how mass shooters – and others who advocate carrying assault weapons in public – threaten our first amendment right to peaceably assemble and petition the government for a redress of grievances by invoking their second amendment “right to bear arms.” *Think* about how gerrymandering undercuts “one man one vote” by letting politicians pick their voters, and about how the Supreme Court’s 2010 “Citizens United” decision has led to the unlimited influence of “dark money” in local, state and federal elections by corporate entities that have Constitutional rights as persons, but no responsibilities as citizens.

Then, *act.* Be open. Learn about other people and places. If you can, travel. Stay strong. Care for yourself. Strengthen your bonds with family and friends. Be a source of love and light. Practice peace; be kind; quest for internal harmony. Be the change you want to see in the world. Be present. Commit yourself to those who share your values and aspirations. Stand with the victims and survivors of the Parkland massacre and other mass shootings. Use your time, talent and treasure to support political candidates and organizations that share your values, ideals and policy positions. Take informed, principled public stands on your bedrock issues. Light a candle instead of cursing the darkness. If you do, your grandchildren will thank you.

Most importantly, *remember* that your “silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented” (Elie Wiesel). *Remember* that “the hottest place in hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict” (Martin Luther King). *Remember* Martin Niemöller’s words on the U.S. Holocaust Museum:

> First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out –  
> Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.