



Will the Trump Fiasco Deprogram Presidential Cultists?

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Has Donald Trump been sent among us to demonstrate the foolishness of placing cult-like faith in the presidency?

I don't mean "sent" in the literal sense, of course. Maybe it's more like he slipped and fell among us, tumbling backwards down the escalator of history, to land on the presidency just in time to squish the hopes of a political also-ran who thought the office was hers.

Let's review just last week's parade of horrors (because this week's tales of poor judgment are coming too fast to keep up). There was the clumsy firing of James Comey, which managed to convert an FBI director about whom almost everybody harbored doubts into a martyr. He also left us to wonder whether it's worse that he thinks he originated the phrase, "prime the pump," or that he believes the Keynesian nostrum is a good idea. Then the White House apparently got pwned by a photographer for Russian state media, predictably feeding into the ongoing questions about the president's relationship with that country.

The overall impression was certainly not that of "a soul nourisher, a hope giver, a living American talisman against hurricanes, terrorism, economic downturns, and spiritual malaise," as Gene Healy of the Cato Institute described Americans' vision for the nation's chief executive in an article published nine years ago in *Reason* and even more relevant today.

Then again, Healy wasn't writing that Americans *should* view the presidency in that light—only that they've done so, to the detriment of the republic. Healy, who elaborated on his warnings in the 2008 book, *The Cult of the Presidency: America's Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power*, cautioned that Americans have piled impossible expectations on the office of the presidency, and increased its power to near-monarchical levels to match—but that authority is still unequal to the demands people place on the office.

"What makes presidents—usually aging, and not always physically fit, men—good models for action toys?" Vanderbilt University's Dana D. Nelson asked in *Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People*, published the same year as Healy's book. Pointing to the bizarre spectacle of presidents packaged as action figures and comic book characters like superheroes, she worried that Americans see the president "simultaneously as democracy's heart (he will unify the citizenry) and its avenging sword (he will protect us from all external threats)." Continuously granting the presidency authority to match such unrealistic perceptions, too many people attribute abuses to specific officeholders without recognizing that the problem is now the office itself.

The office itself is the problem, that is, because as each president inevitably fails to live up to empty promises to, say, micromanage the vast economy, eradicate international terrorism, reform failed states into functioning democracies, and design health systems that deliver top-notch care at low cost, he insists on more power to get the job done. But that accumulating power is never equal to the demands placed on the flawed humans who spend so much time and energy pursuing an opportunity to disappoint the country.

And Donald Trump does seem to be disappointing much of the country, with a job approval rating hovering at just above 40 percent, including eroding support among his base. His missteps are the source material for many yuks at the president's expense—and rightfully so. Making powerful officials the butt of jokes is the healthiest treatment we can give them. How could we *not* laugh? The current occupant of the White House seems deliberately cast to provide comedians with endless material. Trump: Making *Saturday Night Live* funny again!

But while Trump's flaws are readily apparent—he practically rubs them in our faces—his inability to live up to expectations isn't unique, it's just more obvious than that of his predecessors. Did he make a hash of health care reform, improbably claiming that "nobody knew that health care could be so complicated"? But so did the last guy. Have we forgotten that the Affordable Care Act was wildly unpopular with the American people and that the scheme continues its slow-motion collapse?

That's because, once again, the Americans want the president (and the legislators with whom the chief executive still has to work) to deliver the impossible. "Americans want widely contradictory things from health-care reform," health care expert Michael Tanner notes. "They want the highest-quality care for everyone, with no wait, from the doctor of their choice. And they want it as cheap as possible, preferably for free."

Does Trump's foreign policy seem a little incoherent and prone to make big promises that are unlikely to be met? Well, mission accomplished, as somebody once said. Last year, a majority of Americans told Pew pollsters that they want the president to focus on domestic affairs while simultaneously maintaining the country as the world's sole military superpower. Try to keep *that* audience happy!

Yes, Trump is profoundly and publicly unsuited for the demands of the presidency, but so is every human who might be elected to a post that has become more the object of cult-like veneration than an administrative office of limited and defined power. Trump is the turd we can't polish, but they're all turds. We just can't pretend otherwise with this guy.

So maybe Trump has stumbled into his perfect moment—to demonstrate that the president is very definitely not going to live up to people's hopes and dreams. He just may be the right guy to deprogram our country's presidential cultists.

Or maybe we'll just hope for the next president to do better, with a few more tools to sweep away obstacles, of course.