



Trump's Weaknesses Are on Full Display in Cleveland

Michael Tanner

July 19, 2016

We're barely 24 hours into the Republican National Convention. Donald Trump isn't yet the official Republican nominee for president. And already, he has managed to reinforce many of the most serious concerns about his candidacy.

First there was the authoritarian and bullying way in which Trump supporters suppressed dissenters' attempts to force a vote on party rules. Rather than allow the vote — which Trump forces would have won anyway — his backers twisted arms and played fast and loose with convention procedures. Microphones were shut off. Delegates were forced off the floor. Threats were made. It was ugly.

Even in his moment of victory, Trump remains obsessed with settling scores and attacking perceived enemies. Yesterday, the Trump campaign made a point of criticizing Ohio governor John Kasich, calling him an "embarrassment" for declining to attend the convention or endorse Trump. No doubt Trump considers Kasich's behavior disloyal. But Ohio is a vital battleground state, and not only is Kasich extremely popular in the state (his favorability ratings top 60 percent, a number Trump can only dream of), but as governor he controls much of its Republican electoral machinery. What possible advantage could there be for Trump in continuing to antagonize him?

Then again, no one has gone broke overestimating Trump's self-involvement over the last year. This is, after all, a candidate who could not be bothered to stick around for his own vice presidential choice's remarks at the campaign's introductory press conference last Saturday. Perhaps the most compelling speech of the convention's first night was by Patricia Smith, the mother of Navy SEAL Sean Smith, who died at Benghazi. But some portion of the American viewing public missed hearing it because they were watching Trump, who chose to phone in an interview to Fox News while Smith spoke.

When asked whether it was a mistake for Trump to step on such a powerful message, his campaign manager, Paul Manafort, shrugged and said, "It was something Donald Trump wanted to do, so he did it." That, more than anything else, sums up the animating logic of Trump's campaign and his very existence.

We have come to expect big egos from our politicians. We chuckle when Trump enters the convention hall amid a rock-star spectacle that puts Barack Obama's Greek columns to shame.

But Trump's self-aggrandizement is cause for concern, since it is abundantly clear that he is not going to "surround himself with the best people," all his protestations to the contrary.

#share#Time and again, Trump's supporters have attempted to soothe his critics by telling us that, while he may know little about the details of public policy, he will rely on smart people to fill in those gaps. So far there has been little evidence of that. Take the matter of Melania Trump's apparently plagiarized speech last night. It is hardly the crime of the century, as some in the media are attempting to frame it. But a competent campaign would not let such a thing happen, and would have admitted its mistake and put the controversy to rest if it did happen. Instead, Trump's campaign hunkered down and refused to take responsibility, allowing an unfortunate but minor error to dominate the news cycle.

Authoritarianism, ego, incompetence, and a casual attitude toward bigotry are not really a winning formula.

From the confusion and last-minute backpedaling that surrounded the choice of Indiana governor Mike Pence as running mate to its lack of campaign infrastructure in key states, Trump's team has struggled to do the most basic work of a national campaign. It didn't hurt them in the primaries, because it was offset by Trump's ability to earn free publicity at the drop of a hat and the enthusiasm of his supporters. But a candidate's handling of his campaign is a fair proxy for how he will handle the White House. And by that metric, the Trump campaign has hardly been reassuring.

On top of which, there is the simple fact that Trump continues to play coy with the voices of bigotry and intolerance. When Iowa representative Steve King, a Trump surrogate, went on television yesterday to wonder whether any other "subgroup of people" has "contribute[d] to civilization" as much as whites have, he was widely and rightly condemned. The Trump campaign stayed silent. One could generously assume that they are simply distracted by the work of the convention, or by other controversies. But it can't be denied that their silence fits a disturbing pattern of arms-length complicity.

Authoritarianism, ego, incompetence, and a casual attitude toward bigotry are not really a winning formula.

#related#On the other hand, the convention has also highlighted one of the biggest advantages that Trump has going for him: Hillary Clinton. As speaker after speaker has shown, Clinton's campaign is what one might refer to as "a target-rich environment." Her dishonesty, radicalism, and policy failures are obvious and easy to attack.

At this point, polls generally show Clinton with around a four-point lead. They also show that both Clinton and Trump are among the most unpopular candidates in history. As one pollster recently summed up voter attitudes, "They hate them both."

So far, nothing we've seen is going to change that.

*Michael Tanner is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author of **Going for Broke: Deficits, Debt, and the Entitlement Crisis**. You can follow him on Twitter @mtannercato, or on his blog, TannerOnPolicy.com.*