Opinion



Stephen Miller speaks at a rally at Veterans Memorial Coliseum at the Arizona State Fairgrounds in Phoenix, Arizona, June 18, 2016. (Flickr/Gage Skidmore)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 10, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

If you did not watch Jake Tapper's interview with Stephen Miller, President Donald Trump's senior advisor for policy, take the 12.5 minutes to see it in its entirety. It is riveting television, the way watching the horror film "The Birds" was riveting: The first vile thing out of Miller's mouth is surprising, and by the end of the interview, you are exhausted from the lies and sycophancy just as Mitch and Melanie were exhausted from all the bird attacks.

The presidency commands a certain amount of respect, even deference. When the president walks into the room, everyone is expected to stand. When you get a Christmas card from the First Family, you call your mom to tell her about it. But never in our history have we seen public displays of sycophancy like this, displays that might have been appropriate in the Russia of the Romanovs but which are jarring, politically and psychologically, in a democracy.

Miller called the president a political genius not once but twice. Additionally, when Tapper referenced the president's tweets, in which Trump called himself a "stable, genius," Miller replied first, "that happens to be a true statement" and a second time that the tweet expressed "the plain truth." That makes for a total of four "genius" citations in 12 minutes. You half-expected him to refer to Trump as "dear leader" in the manner of North Korean references to Kim Jong-Il.

Tweet from U.S. President Donald Trump

Miller backed up his assessment of the president's genius not by pointing to an event such as Jimmy Carter's negotiation of the Camp David Accords, or Ronald Reagan's achievement of a treaty with the Soviet Union eliminating medium- and short-range nuclear missiles, but instead calling attention to the president's ability to spin the news cycle in advance of a campaign rally. "I saw a man who was a political genius, somebody who — we would be going down, landing, in descent, there would be a breaking news development. And in 20 minutes, he would dictate 10 paragraphs of new material to address that event. …"

Indeed, Miller liked that bit of evidence so much he tried to use it a second time until Tapper cut him off. (I wish Tapper had let him repeat the whole thing a second time

to highlight the "Stepford Wives" or I suppose it should be "Stepford Husbands" quality of Miller's performance.) In any event, it betrays a limited understanding of what constitutes political genius.

Like the boss he fawns over, Miller plays fast and loose with allegations. He denounced Steve Bannon's comments attacking Trump in the book *Fire and Fury* as "grotesque." CNN was trying to "stick a knife" into the president. He professed to have "no knowledge" of the meeting between Trump campaign officials and agents of the Russian government, but he knew enough to say that the allegations in the book about that meeting were "pure fiction" and "a pile of trash." Indeed the book is "a garbage book," the work of "a garbage author."

Advertisement

Miller also criticized CNN not only for attacking the president, but also for failing to spend anytime covering the issues that really matter to people, such as "people getting slaughtered in sanctuary cities." Chicago is a sanctuary city, and it has a very high murder rate, but New York is a sanctuary city, too, and its murder rate is quite low. This claim is, to borrow a word, garbage, but it was not delivered to prove anything. Like so much of this presidency, it was designed to incite, to demonize, to divide. It is the thing about this presidency that is most morally revolting.

It was hard to know how much Miller believes the cant coming out of his mouth. Throughout the interview, starting with the very first question, he could not maintain eye contact with Tapper, and kept looking down at his notes, except there were no notes. Such shifty body language usually denotes to me that someone is being less than honest and knows it. In the end, does it matter? Is being a collaborator that much better than being a principal? Pétain, the collaborator, was less culpable than Goebbels, the perpetrator, but you needed both to exterminate the Jews of France.

Corey Lewandowski, Trump's first campaign manager, also did an interview this weekend. On Fox News Sunday, Chris Wallace asked him about his own book and its portrayals of then-candidate Trump's rage. Lewandowski demurred. "Well, Chris, look, having your face ripped off by the president, as we describe it, is because we failed as a staff," he explained to Wallace. "This is a man who woke up every day and put 18 or 20 hours a day in every day on the campaign trail. And when something didn't go right, it wasn't because he wasn't giving 125 percent effort, it's

because the staff failed him. The microphone didn't work properly. Something that we should have had done for him wasn't right, and that's the accountability. He expects, demands and deserves the best, and he should have that."

It was like watching the historical reenactments of the Soviet show trials in which the dazed prisoners confessed to crimes they never committed.

Mercifully, Steve Bannon did not go on television to express his regret for his own comments, especially those about the president's not very bright son, Don Jr., whom Bannon accused of potential treason in the book but whom he now calls "a patriot and a good man." When the political landscape is so bleak, the prospect of a war between the Trumps and Bannon brought a smile to my face and lightness to my step. But the president has all the cards and Bannon correctly realized he had to fold into the same kind of obsequiousness as his former colleagues.

We saw some of this bizarre worshipful attitude towards the president before, at a Cabinet meeting during which the various Cabinet secretaries went around the table and vied with each other to say how honored they were to serve the president.

It is just icky.

Video on YouTube by the Associated Press: "Cabinet Members Gush Over Trump During Meeting"

Even if you continue to support the president, if you are not alarmed by his policies, if you do not see that this populist's one legislative success consisted of a tax break for the elites, if you believe that the Russia investigation is a bunch of hooey, surely this bowing and scraping in front of the leader must strike you as alarming. Americans are supposed to be boisterous, egalitarian, exercising a strong distaste for any cultural habits that smack of court life, taking pride in our ability to haul down the mighty from their thrones.

Watching these acolytes bestow their cringe-worthy compliments on the caudillo is surely going to take its toll over time, even on his supporters. This is not politics, it is psychology, and it is creepy. But, then you watch man-in-the-street interviews with Trump supporters and you realize that the people who love this man see nothing wrong with anything he does; their justifications the verbal equivalent of Twister, his lies excusable and the truth-telling of others dismissed as "fake news," and you

begin to get depressed. You pour yourself another drink and begin to wonder who will be the Gibbon to the American empire.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about the nexus between religion and politics.]

Editor's note: Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest: Sign up to receive free newsletters, and we'll notify you when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.