Opinion



President Donald Trump speaks during the National Prayer Breakfast Feb. 8 in Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Like a hurricane unleashed in all its fury, the Trump presidency continues to carve its own desultory, destructive path through our nation's laws, through our social fabric, and through our sense of moral decency. But there is a method to the madness, and the true horror of what he is doing to the country is often obscured by the president's relentless, and successful, knack for driving the news cycle.

One night last week, when I went to The Washington Post's website, three headlines pertaining to the president were "above the fold" on the homepage. The first said: "For Trump and his generals, 'victory' has different meanings." The article was a deep dive into differences of perspective between the president and his senior military advisors, differences that lead to different policy objectives.

As in most articles about Trump, the central focus was not so much which policy options are most justified by experience, or how conflicting political realities on the ground require hedges here or there, or even how the vagaries of alliances with foreign countries play into the decision-making in the West Wing. Nope. The central focus was Trump's personality. "Trump's words, both in public and private, describe a view that wars should be brutal and swift, waged with overwhelming firepower and, in some cases, with little regard for civilian casualties," the article stated. "Victory over America's enemies for the president is often a matter of bombing 'the s--- out of them,' as he said on the campaign trail."

The second headline said, "Trump says he didn't know his attorney paid $130,000 to porn star Stormy Daniels." I can't bring myself to master the sexual intricacies of this story, but the legal issue was clear: The president inadvertently conceded what Daniels' attorney was trying to prove, namely, that there was no contract. And, the president did this while throwing his own lawyer under the bus. Why would you publicly throw one lawyer under the bus when you are trying to hire others to cope with the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election?

The third headline stated: "Trump says he wants to send 2,000 to 4,000 National Guard troops to Mexican border." As in the first article about the generals, this one balanced an analysis of policy options with the president's personality and the politics that his personality seems to demand. Whenever his poll numbers are low, and they are pretty low most of the time these days, he returns to immigrant-

bashing to keep his base in line.

A fourth headline focused on the scandals surrounding the Environmental Protection Agency's Scott Pruitt, and read, "Scott Pruitt's defenses are crumbling." The EPA administrator has first class tastes that run afoul of the populist mantras coming from the White House. Trump himself, and his family, are exempt from such considerations because of their personal wealth. But living high on the hog at taxpayer expense is usually a quick way to an early retirement in official Washington. Conservative Republicans like the corrupt public policies Pruitt pursues, so they are only too willing to overlook corruption in his personal conduct. Problem is that the two are intertwined.

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On a sidebar was a fifth headline: "Trump conjures yet another immigrant rape epidemic." Again, fantastic rhetoric mixes with policy analysis, the key being the president's need to stoke racial animus and his bully-like willingness to do so by lying about people who are very vulnerable.

This was a typical day in the nation's politics. Back when George W. "When I was young and irresponsible, I was young and irresponsible" Bush was president, any one of these headlines would have consumed the nation's attention for a week or more. Bush's eight years were followed by eight more in which the country was led by President Barack "No drama" Obama, in which most of these headlines were not even conceivable, except the third: Obama also deployed National Guard troops to the southern border. But, with Trump, this kind of onslaught is the norm. Many a night, one of the cable news hosts starts by saying they had the whole show planned to cover all the breaking news, but 10 minutes before airtime, that plan was blown up by yet more breaking news.

As Michael Gerson pointed out last month, the chaos that surrounds this presidency, the multiple story lines, the glaring conflicts, the various brushes with the law, all reflect the president's confidence in his own judgment. He knows better than the generals — and he told us so during the campaign. He knows better than the diplomats, which is why the only thing his first Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, was permitted to accomplish was a hollowing out of the State Department. He knows what is going on at the border, or at least what he wants his base to think is going

on at the border.

In reality — remember that, reality? — the generals learned the limits of violent methods in Vietnam, a war Trump dodged, and the generals re-learned that lesson in the mountains of Afghanistan and along the banks of the Euphrates. In reality, the diplomats who serve all presidents know much about the countries with which all presidents have business, even if our current president doesn't want to bother to read their briefing materials. In reality, as the Commission on Migration of the Diocese of El Paso, Texas, that is, people who live on the border, said April 4, "Today's decision by the Trump administration to deploy the National Guard to the border is morally irresponsible and dangerously ineffective. It is a hurtful attack on migrants, our welcoming border culture, and our shared values as Americans."

President Trump is involved in a high stakes information Ponzi scheme. He is betting that so long as news about him saturates the air waves, and the barrage contains a variety of different issues, no one will be able to focus on any one issue long enough to realize how morally bankrupt his politics are, how solipsistic his world view, how ill-considered his policies. That instinct about the short attention span of Americans got him this far, and it is doubtful he is going to change strategies now even if he could.

As Gerson wrote, "Trump's guiding principles are a disdain for precedent, a preference for institutional chaos and an invincible trust in his own instincts." I read that sentence and another comes to mind: "Their success influenced entire political systems, giving them a more intense and aggressive tone and legitimating open expressions of extreme nationalism, Left-baiting, and racism." The "their" refers back to "The early ragtag outsiders [who] transformed themselves into serious political forces capable of competing on equal terms with longer-established parties or movements." These words are found in Chapter 3, "Taking Root," in Robert O. Paxton's *The Anatomy of Fascism*.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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