Opinion



From left, Melania Trump and Donald Trump escort French President Emmanuel Macron and Brigitte Macron at the estate of U.S. President George Washington in Mount Vernon, Virginia, April 23. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Do you find yourself some nights, after the news, not only angry at all the wicked things President Donald Trump is doing — from threatening to separate immigrant parents from their children to ignoring the threat posed by climate change — but also simply exhausted from the seemingly endless cavalcade of drama surrounding this administration?

One day, no, one hour, it is some new scandal surrounding Environmental Protection Agency director Scott Pruitt, who seems utterly immune to his boss' pledge to "drain the swamp," behaving like some comic rendition of an entitled Pooh-bah. The next hour, there is breaking news about the firing of yet another administration official. Rachel Maddow keeps a tally and they had to add a whole new panel last week to accommodate the new names of departed officials. The next morning, there is a report about more creepy dealings with Russian oligarchs. By nightfall, we are all back to Stormy Daniels.

True, Michael Avenatti, the lawyer for adult film star Stormy Daniels, has an Agatha Christie-like knack for dribbling out evidence one morsel a time. And members of Team Trump are certainly not allergic to leaking damaging information about colleagues they do not like. Nonetheless, most of the drama comes from the president himself, a man who claims to thrive in chaotic situations and, so, creates chaos on a daily basis and with all the power our constitution bestows upon the executive branch at his disposal for mischief-making.

Every once in awhile, it all just exhausts me and I think to myself, "Surely the American people are going to tire of this. Surely, they will soon pine for the days of 'No drama Obama.' Surely the unseemly conflation of porn stars and hateful demagogues and sleezy officials and shady deals and coarse tweets from the man himself will cause the American people to say, 'Enough!' "

But Democrats and conscientious Republicans should disabuse themselves of this notion.

The people who like Trump are not repulsed by the drama: What they like about him is his attitude. Throughout the campaign, Trump would demean someone, sometimes a respected figure like Sen. John McCain and other times a person with a disability, or he would say something truly outrageous or false, and the pundits would predict that this time he had gone too far. But Trump knew his base. When he said he could walk out into the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and it would not cost him at the polls, he was right.

Why are people so tolerant of the drama?

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I have lived in three places in my life: rural Connecticut, Washington, D.C., and Little Rock, Arkansas. You can tell a lot about the culture of a place by checking out the magazine racks. In rural Connecticut, you find a lot of gardening and home restoration magazines. In Washington and its suburbs, there are a disproportionate number of public policy titles. In Little Rock? I never knew there were so many bridal magazines. But in all three locations, at the supermarket checkout, there is the National Enquirer.

We know the president has had a long relationship with the tabloid. And the Enquirer is linked to some of the more tawdry allegations about efforts by Trump or his lawyer Michael Cohen to pay hush money to women who allegedly had affairs with Trump. But the real contribution the Enquirer made to Trump was to keep a significant slice of the electorate credulous and titillated, to pave the way for the showman president. So far from tiring of the endless drama surrounding the president, they love it. If he and Melania did "Dancing with the Stars," he would win all 50 states!

The consequences are deeply problematic. Tuesday, after a game of "let's conduct governance as if this were a reality-TV show," Trump announced he was pulling the United States out of the multi-lateral Iran nuclear deal. No one really had cause to be surprised. He had said all along he was going to deep-six what had been seen as one of President Barack Obama's signature diplomatic successes, and he did so.

Indeed, it is more than a little likely that it was because Trump's predecessor had championed the deal that he was so opposed to it. In Trump's world, it is pretty

clear, personal psychology beats out policy stability or success every time. Better to damage the NATO alliance than to damage this pathetic man's ego.

But that night, CNN led with new allegations about Michael Cohen receiving huge sums of money from companies large and small, one with links to Russian President Vladimir Putin. And there was a spot about the EPA's Pruitt trying to cast aspersions on another member of Trump's Cabinet in order to get the spotlight of him. Midway through the hour, they got to the trashing of the Iran deal.

While all the drama is going on, the president is doing reckless and terrible things. We can't be distracted by the tabloid quality of this White House. We need to keep our wits about us and keep our focus on what matters. Let the Russia investigation take care of itself: The American people, and the media they need more than ever, need to focus on the executive orders and policy shifts the administration is pursuing. It is scarier than an Enquirer article about a UFO.

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

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