Opinion
Editorial



FBI Director Robert Mueller in the Oval Office of the White House, July 20, 2012 (Wikimedia Commons/White House/Pete Souza)

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The Donald Trump administration, a maelstrom of deceit and amateurism from the very first day, appears to be in a new period of disintegration. Special counsel

Robert Mueller's rather ample net, already bulging with much of the cast of Trump's pathetic presidential reality show, is now closing in on the main characters.

Trump is increasingly portrayed in court filings as at the center of plots to conceal both his extramarital affairs in order to protect his presidential run and his associates' and family members' contacts with Russians intent on tilting the 2016 election his way.

It is reassuring that some of the most important pillars of a democratic society seem to be not only holding firm but robustly imposing the rule of law on members of an administration and a president who clearly viewed themselves — at least for a time — as well above it.

As quickly as adjectives pile up in attempts to describe Trump, they just as quickly become ineffective. Chaos in the moment lies beyond description, its elements scattered and indistinct, its form shifting and shapeless. It is only in the aftermath, as first responders approach, that the effects of chaos can be assessed. What they'll find in this case no one knows.

Diagnoses aplenty have been advanced for the cause of the chaos. Some of the most severe have come not from the natural antagonists among Democrats, but from long-time loyal Republicans and the most eloquent apologists for the conservative cause. A sampling:

Conservative Washington Post columnist and former George W. Bush speechwriter, Michael Gerson:

> Given what we know about the collusion — and there is no other word for it — between then-candidate Donald Trump's most senior advisers and what they thought was a Kremlin-tied lawyer offering dirt on Hillary Clinton, the most shocking thing is that no one on the Trump side was shocked. The most offensive thing is that no one took offense. … It is the banality of this corruption that makes it so appalling. The president and his men are incapable of feeling shame about shameful things. (PennLive, July 14, 2017)
>
> Trump's inner circle has always been a cesspool. And there is a reason for this — a reason Trump has traditionally employed unethical people to

> serve his purposes. It is because he has unethical jobs for them to do, involving schemes to remove political threats and gain electoral advantage. And there is every reason to believe that Trump has fully participated in such schemes. (The Washington Post, Nov. 29)

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Conservative columnist George Will:

> America's child president had a play date with a KGB alumnus, who surely enjoyed providing day care. … [J]ust as astronomers inferred, from anomalies in the orbits of the planet Uranus, the existence of Neptune before actually seeing it, Mueller might infer, and then find, still-hidden sources of the behavior of this sad, embarrassing wreck of a man. (The Washington Post, July 17)

Conservative columnist and board-certified psychiatrist, the late Charles Krauthammer:

> I used to think Trump was an 11-year-old, an undeveloped schoolyard bully. I was off by about 10 years. His needs are more primitive, an infantile hunger for approval and praise, a craving that can never be satisfied. He lives in a cocoon of solipsism where the world outside himself has value — indeed exists — only insofar as it sustains and inflates him. (The Washington Post, August 4, 2016)

Conservative New York Times columnist David Brooks:

> Trump's emotional makeup means he can hit only a few notes: fury and aggression. In some ways, his debate performances look like primate dominance displays — filled with chest beating and looming growls. But at least primates have bands to connect with, whereas Trump is so alone, if a tree fell in his emotional forest, it would not make a sound.
>
> It's all so pathetic. (The New York Times, Oct. 11, 2016)

> You're beginning to see a lot of Republicans who are looking seriously at 2019, with a lot of Fridays like this one, and Trump really hurting himself, and maybe not serving out the term. (Interview on the PBS NewsHour, Dec. 9)

The chaos of the bully is beginning to wear thin. According to The Washington Post, "A new CNN poll finds that Trump's approval rating is mired at 39 percent, and it shows that even as ongoing investigations involving Trump and his orbit are bearing fruit, the American people continue to support the probe and believe it is turning up evidence of wrongdoing."

Some of the numbers from that poll: 50 percent say Mueller's investigation is "very or somewhat" likely to implicate Trump in wrongdoing; 59 percent believe Russian interference is a serious matter; 54 percent said Trump's comments characterizing the investigation are completely or mostly false.

It appears a day of reckoning is approaching. And the religious community at large will eventually have its own reckoning and a lot of explaining to do to rationalize its complicity in so much fraudulence. Trump has been able to con Evangelicals, Catholic bishops and priests along with significant numbers of Catholics in the pews into believing that he somehow represents a pro-life view and is a defender of religion. He's great at selling himself, or limitless versions of himself. Mueller apparently isn't buying.

The contrast between the two men at the center of this struggle — Mueller and Trump — is so glaring as to be almost blinding. It also explains a great deal. Trump is unable to engage Mueller, as he has so many others, in his reality drama because Mueller doesn't play. He doesn't need to, doesn't need the notoriety or fame. An actual war hero with multiple decorations, he has not risen to the bait of Trump's cheap combat theatrics. Trump tweets tantrums and assertions most often untrue; Mueller issues documents pages long containing detailed and precisely articulated charges backed up by hours and hours of interrogations and exhaustive analysis of financial and other documents. He and his investigators give no interviews, and in a city where leaks are as common as breath, the Mueller team has been leakproof.

Trump blusters; Mueller indicts. Trump demeans the institutions of democratic governance; Mueller has not only respected but also worked through them for decades.



President George W. Bush announces Robert Mueller to be director of the FBI during an event in the Rose Garden, July 5, 2001. (Wikimedia Commons/White House/Eric Draper)

Trump, we increasingly know through disclosures of some of those documents, built a career on fraud, stiffing contractors, floods of Russian money and multiple bankruptcies. Truth, as perceived during his presidency, has been put on the critically endangered list. Mueller's career has been built on the pursuit of truth and the endorsements by two presidents from different parties and members of Congress from both sides of the aisle.

The most searing characterization of Trump is perhaps contained in his dismissal of the CIA's assessment of the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The briefing by CIA Director Gina Haspel was detailed and disturbing enough to convince a handful of senators, including influential Republicans, that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was directly involved in the gruesome assassination, including dismemberment, of the U.S. resident who wrote for The Washington Post.

Trump's is a life of transactions calculated only on the basis of personal benefit. He has perfected the creation of chaos to both distract from and call attention to himself, depending on the need of the moment. But the techniques that have served him well to this point have become useless and now serve to provide new, fresh

fodder to the investigators. The law is unmoved by temper tantrums, tweet storms and name calling.

Donald Trump keeps lashing out.

Robert Mueller keeps doing his work.

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