Opinion
News



President Donald Trump is seen at the White House in Washington Aug. 14, 2017. (CNS/Jonathan Ernst, Reuters)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

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There was a time when Christmas season damped out the noises of the mundane. Not now. Now there is a great deal more static in the United States than any number of celestial choirs can possibly hope to quell.

The disquiet arises, at least in part, from a growing sense of uncertainty in the American soul. Nothing seems normal anymore; everything feels split. Every day, we find ourselves in a new political quandary that threatens us, unsettles us, divides us rather than unifies us. And worse, the split emanates from the top down.

For the first time in modern American history, the presidency, the great stabilizer of American government, is being destabilized by the president himself. The White House itself has become a revolving door of Donald Trump advisers, fired, resigned or summarily replaced.

Some of these high-level ex-officials left under the specter of corruption; others were fired for giving the president advice and answers he did not want. A rare few left, it seems, for conscience reasons. Whatever the reason for the departures, they tempt a person to doubt the stability of presidential planning as one political team follows another in rapid succession.

Finally, the president's "policies"— rather than proposed thoughtfully — are tweeted compulsively. So much for programs shaped by discernment, discussion and thoughtful debate in Congresses before this one.

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But most important of all, perhaps, is the manner in which the government is being conducted: Presidential gravitas has been blown to the wind. So should we take him seriously or not? Presidential commitment to the welfare of the entire country, rather than the militarization of its particular parts, has been reduced to equal mixtures of party politics and gross racism. So is he a national president or a factional president? As a result, too much of what purports to be presidential leadership feels like presidential whim or, worse, presidential agitation. So is the country safe or not?

In any case, presidential perspective seems shaped now by six underlying characteristics that upend traditional confidence in presidential behavior.

Fear is the engine of U.S. policy now. Where, as a country, we once modeled idealism, justice and global good, we now preach fear of the unknown other. Xenophobia, a presidential policy in this administration, has unleashed a desire to pull up the drawbridge of American openness. We're busy becoming a world unto ourselves. Immigration, the mainstay of U.S. development, has become our enemy rather than our strength. We don't even want young Hispanic teenagers who are American born!

Instead, the United States, the nation built on the backs of whole peoples from other nations, is now being told that asylum-seekers bring gangs, drugs, rape, terrorism and social burden. Immigrants, just as our own ancestors who came seeking security within the last 200-plus years, are now our enemies.

But if fear is what drives us, how shall we deal with the paranoia that it breeds, which will, eventually, divide us even from ourselves?

Bravado, the strut that comes with being a white male, signals a message of archentitlement. And, it seems, we have the best and the smartest of them all. The one that has "the best ideas." The one that ignores professional experience and leads "from the guts," rather than with the guidance of American experts on the economy, the military or international aspects of modern government.

Totally self-centered, then, we are left to lurch through life a country alone, absent collective defense, disdainful of both allies and adversaries alike. A colossus astride the world garners up notions of the size, might — and fate — of the colossi before us, now long gone, long forgotten.

But if bluster is all we have to bring to people in search of new stability in an unsteady world, greatness is not what we are about. On the contrary, only one thing is clear. It is our narcissism that is really "the greatest." Of all time, indeed. Never before seen. While the rest of the world looks on. And laughs.

Bullying, the joy of intimidating, ridiculing and dismissing as worthless anyone who disregards our claim to superiority, is apparently designed to demand respect. Friends, average citizens, allies, especially competitors, are all subject to the smear, the sneer, the scorn to which, we assume, is our due.

But, ironically, that kind of thuggery actually demands new respect only for truly respectable leaders who can disagree without being disagreeable, whose considered judgement is more worth considering than simple bombast.

An imperious presidency in a democratic world is itself, an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. It denies the very ground of a truly democratic system that seeks simply to live well and justly with the rest of the world as well as within itself. Instead, imperial presidents do not bother to lead; they seek to rule. They resent and reject anyone who dares to confront their empty grandeur.

But the fruitless attempt to turn a democracy into a monarchy does not enhance the status of would-be emperors. It only deepens the resolution of the bullied and the sneered at to resist, to spend their efforts to recover the lost land of political equality before it can possibly be confused with the false empire in the making.

Meaninglessness substitutes for real national progress. Much ado is made about nothing: about building walls to rival the Great Wall of China as a substitute for immigration reform, for instance. About amending health care plans that are already established. About giving tax breaks to people who don't really need them, instead of providing programs to support the middle class who carry the dailiness of the country on their shoulders. About making photo ops with foreign dictators who exercise the total power to which imperial presidents aspire. Everyone else, we are told, is "weak." As in, the U.N. deserves to be scolded; NATO is useless; trading partners are cheats and thieves; foreigners are dangerous.

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But what are the effects of that kind of presidency? Clearly, we are reaping what we have sown in our attempt to be imperial rather than our same-old, dull, democratic selves. The government is losing the confidence of its own people, which is really the bedrock of a democracy. We are choosing national isolation to our peril, after decades of global peace through international cooperation. We have abdicated ethical and political leadership in a global world.

From where I stand, history is clear: The United States has been at its best and strongest and most effective self when it was its least disdainful of others, its carrier of the highest ideals of humanity, its greatest model of what it means to be a citizen

of the planet, rather than the emperor of a make-believe, standalone sovereignty.

The point is that we have always done best without a potentate, just as George Washington said we would when he left us his farewell address. Each of the segments of our government, he wrote, must "confine themselves within their respective constitutional spheres, avoiding in the exercise of the powers of one department to encroach upon another."

Maybe it's time to stop temporizing with the presidency, reassert the power of the citizen president, and banish the idea and the attitudes of an imperial one.

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