Opinion
NCR Voices



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The other day, I was making dinner, and because this time of year we all have too many tomatoes, I also started making a little puttanesca sauce for lunch the next day. At a certain point, I had to pay attention to the pots I was using to prepare dinner and forgot about the puttanesca sauce. The temperature was too high and it started to dry out. I caught it just before it would have been ruined. I was trying to do too many things at the same time.

President Donald Trump is in danger of letting the national puttanesca sauce burn.

Part of Trump's political genius is his ability to control the news cycle. Last autumn, during the campaign, while Democrats spent weeks debating whether and when and with whom Vice President Kamala Harris should do interviews, Trump was doing them every day. Voters saw him and they saw her staff. Guess which one led the news?

Since returning to the White House, there has been a manic quality to Trump's second term, from the flurry of executive orders to Elon Musk's DOGE inquisition to Trump's rantings on social media. Some nights, Trump's helter-skelter assault on the civil service, immigrants, foreign aid and democratic norms was the only thing on the news until the weather report.

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Many of us who value democracy, who appreciate the thankless but necessary work of bureaucrats, who see the human dignity and personal courage in immigrants, and who were proud of our country's efforts to alleviate suffering, disease and poverty around the world, were appalled. And we were appalled not only because of the effects of what was being done, but because of the seeming mindlessness and even cruelty of it all, the lack of concern for consequences, and the delight Trump and his team took at smashing things. It was like looking at an angry 5-year-old throwing a tantrum, except 5-year-olds can't threaten the rule of law or defund USAID.

People who voted for him view the president's manic behavior in a different light. They wanted him to shake things up. The fact that many in the establishment took issue with what he was doing only made the cheer the louder. With good reason,

working-class Americans believe that the establishment has sold them down the river. Reaganomics, NAFTA, the bank bailout of 2008-2009, lower wages and higher inflation, all have left working-class Americans angry and Trump has figured out how to channel their anger.

This summer, however, there was a change. Trump's entrance into the news cycle began to seem frantic, not deliberate. The Epstein files controversy pitted Trump against some in his base. The president's stonewalling reeks of precisely the kind of establishment privilege his base loathes and makes them think he must have something to hide. If going after immigrants fulfilled a campaign promise, and cutting foreign aid fit into Trump's America First agenda, now he is trying to dominate the news cycle with things that are merely performative.

His decision to rename the Department of Defense the Department of War hasn't gone over well with the Pentagon brass but it diverted the news away from Jeffrey Epstein.

Trump's hurriedly arranged summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin dominated the news for a few days but achieved precisely nothing.



U.S. President Donald Trump walks towards Russian President Vladimir Putin during a press conference following their meeting to negotiate an end to the war in Ukraine, at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, in Anchorage, Alaska, Aug. 15, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

Trump's decision to send the military into Washington, D.C., and threats to do the same to Chicago has made headlines, again moving the Epstein story below the fold or to page 4. It is possible he has a long game at work, and wants to get Americans accustomed to the idea of armed soldiers walking the streets of our cities, but it is also possible he is just trying to change the topic.

Trump defended Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert Kennedy Jr. and his insane undermining of confidence in vaccines, only to find out that the American people like vaccines a lot and don't want their kids being exposed to measles.

Meanwhile, the puttanesca is burning up. The problem with putting too many pots on the stove at once is that it is hard to keep track of all of them. And if you are the president, rather than a home cook, the stakes are higher than a burnt sauce. There really are good reasons to keep the name Department of Defense. The war in Ukraine really does need to be brought to a close. The only thing he achieved by sending the military to D.C. was to take a lot of fine young National Guard troops away from their homes and their jobs to go on an assignment that makes no sense to them. Vaccines really do keep the nation safe.

Trump may think that chaos allows him more room for maneuver. That may be true when negotiating to buy a golf course or a casino. When you are tasked with running the government, however, chaos is not your friend. It may help with the news cycle but it allows many things that need attention to spin out of control. Trump still dominates the news cycle, but he isn't rounding the corner on any of the nation's problems. As the president gets desperate, voters get exhausted.

There are situations in the life of nations — and of all human institutions — that become untenable, when something must give, when the internal contradictions of the status quo become too obvious and too obnoxious to ignore. Many are those who will make excuses for the status quo, who will try and explain away that which is intolerable, things that vitiate the very purposes for which the nation or institution stands. They flail in vain. Whatever becomes intolerable will give way, sooner or later, with violence or without, to a situation that is tolerable. There is no other way

for humankind to live with decency and self-respect.