

2017 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Essay Category

Second Place: “Hidden Hands and Butter Fingers” by Dawson Malloy

Perhaps this last election’s October Surprise was nothing more than the actual choice of candidates. Few people, whether for or against Trump, were predicting that he would be the next United States president, but we are now quickly approaching the end of his first 100 days in office. His rise through the Republican ranks during the primaries was surprising enough. Trump was an outsider, to the Republican Party and to politics in general, and his presence was consistently felt like the proverbial elephant in the room, even in a room full of elephants. Trump’s position as an outsider was ideal for his message of reform and complete change of the status quo, and his dogged resolve to shake things up has bought him both support and opposition.

In the featured *TIME Magazine* article, “Chaos Theory,” Philip Elliott considers the political cost of Trump’s adherence to a disruptive policy as president. Trump, Elliott notes, seems to be adept at disruption, and has used it to his advantage as a candidate. However, now that the campaigning is over and the real work has begun, Elliott points out that fulfilling an agenda is bound to be an uphill battle when one tears apart the very machine that one hopes to use to reach their goals.

The Republican Party itself seems to be divided on Trump (Elliott). This will make passing legislature difficult even in the early phases of Trump’s presidency, which Elliott says are often the easiest months for a president. Elliott recounts multiple instances of confusion among the ranks of the Trump administration, and of conflicting reports from several of Trump’s aids, representatives, spokespeople, and friends. Elliott also notes that Michael Flynn, now fired from his position as national security advisor for making misleading statements, was one major source of confusion. Trump’s advisor Kellyanne Conway stated that Flynn had the president’s support, while other officials said that was not the case (Elliott). Many others in the White House, according to Elliott, are afraid of being fired for much less, if Trump runs the government like an episode of *The Apprentice*. This fear, Elliott says, has a paralytic effect as well as creating an environment of fierce competition and one-upmanship similar to that in Trump’s businesses. The term limit only exacerbating the level of rivalry (Elliott).

One other major issue Elliott addresses is the ability of Reince Priebus, White House Chief of Staff, to conduct his job when he is seemingly overridden or ignored by both the president and subordinates. Another point of confusion and conflicting narrative, Priebus is painted as anything from the perfect man for the job to the weakest link in the chain (Elliott).

Priebus is kept busy just trying to smooth out Trump’s meeting schedule, which Elliott holds to be a very important job, as Trump seems to be easily swayed by conversation rather than adherence to ideology (Elliott). This really is the crux of the concerns that Elliott raises; with an administration in disarray and Trump himself appearing

unpredictable, how can anything get done? How can the US brave the storm around itself and in itself? Can Trump sustain any forward momentum without changing tack? Elliott concludes that there is currently no end in sight to all the chaos.

Gary Wasserman describes the typical relationship between a president and the bureaucracy as one of simultaneous reliance and frustration. Without the bureaucracy, nothing could be accomplished by the president, since there would be nobody to enact the policies that he sets (Wasserman). However, due to the nature of bureaucracy as being large and complex it often moves slowly, and personal goals can derail or detract from a bureaucrat's willingness to cooperate (Wasserman). The relationship between the average Joe and the bureaucracy is often more strained. Wasserman states that the public's irritation with bureaucratic red tape, paperwork, and the appearance of idiocy can often propel an anti-government candidate into a position of power. This is certainly true of Trump, and his rhetoric is known to be strongly anti-government (Elliott). Elliott's observation of Trump's administration being in a state of contention is in keeping with Wasserman's assertion that such a president as one elected on anti-bureaucratic grounds will wrestle with the quandary of challenging bureaucrats and needing to charm them at the same time.

Elliott does admit that Trump's accomplishments within his first thirty days in office are noteworthy, and he goes on to list some of these achievements, such as resuscitating pipelines, halting trade deals, scratching out unpopular banking rules and regulations, making progress on border wall designs, and getting tough on undocumented workers as he promised to do. Wasserman discusses three types of presidents. There are presidents that history remembers for their hesitancy and lack of decisive leadership, such as Buchanan. There are some remembered as true leaders, for good or ill, who were very active in shaping events or responding to them, like Lincoln. Finally, there are a few who take a quietly active approach, pulling strings and levers from behind the scenes, as did Eisenhower. Our most recent presidents have all had a more or less active bent (Wasserman), and at a glance it seems obvious that Trump is no exception.

It seems worth noting, however, that certain of Trump's current chaotic circumstances appear to do him some amount of good, in relation to a few of his espoused goals. Some of these may be happenstance side-effects, but it's always worth considering whether the actual outcomes of a thing were intentional or not. First of all, Elliott asserts that Trump is the one person with the power to quell the chaos in the White House, so if he is able to do this and the chaos continues, we can assume that it suits either his tastes or his purposes. I am inclined to assume the latter. The fact that the political circus may distract from Trump's accomplishments possibly means the opposite of what one would think. Perhaps this intentionally obscures some of his actions. Feasibly, even hyperbole could be used to downplay one's achievements, just as a false modesty attracts attention where desired.

An Eisenhower type president would usually want to appear uninvolved while actually accomplishing a great deal (Wasserman). Contrariwise, it isn't unreasonable to observe Trump and conclude that he may hope to have the best of both an active president's reputation and a "hidden hand" president's effectiveness (Wasserman 57). Wasserman himself states that a president doesn't always fall into one category. The bluster and show may help to focus opposition and controversy onto specific issues, while freeing up other quieter areas for an otherwise visual administration to operate largely unseen and unnoticed.

The brief list of Trump's early achievements provided by Elliott would indicate that at least portions of the bureaucracy are operating efficiently (as bureaucracies go), but this appears to conflict with the narrative of disruption and disorder. Taking into consideration

what Wasserman says about the dynamics between an anti-bureaucratic president and the bureaucracy. However, it actually makes perfect sense. It especially makes sense if one assumes that Trump desires to maintain his anti-bureaucracy stance and also be a successful president. An anti-bureaucracy president would naturally want the bureaucratic system to look bad, but enough of the bureaucracy has to function nicely in order for the president to achieve political victories in other arenas.

What makes this hard to believe is the fact that a poorly running administration tends to reflect negatively on the president himself and lowers his credibility, which presidents typically want to avoid. Also, hidden hand leadership is usually used to appear beyond the reach of petty politics (Wasserman). Trump's façade, nonetheless, is one neither of solemnity nor poise, nor does he avoid getting into any manner of scrape with either the media or other politicians, or even celebrities (Elliott). But Trump has something that the typical Eisenhower type lacks, which is his well-known immunity to embarrassment. Trump's "honey badger" mentality (Von Drehle 27). Also, his disregard for saving face in any conventional sense of the idea, allow him to stir up attention on whichever issue he wishes, even if it requires him to use himself or his staff as bait. This isn't new in politics, though the dosage may be unprecedented. One good example is former Vice-President Joe Biden, who was often portrayed during his career as an endearing old gaffer, in more ways than one, but that reputation actually serves to protect an otherwise shrewd politician from too much scrutiny.

Trump, taking a related tack, doesn't shy away from scrutiny, but instead bids to direct the flow of that scrutiny.

Elliott holds that Trump may have to give up his disrupting ways or else endanger his effectiveness, and perhaps that is the case. But if the disruption is really obfuscation then Trump is playing a deeper game, and his critics are the ones taking risks where saving face is concerned. Challenging Trump on peripheral issues wastes energy and is a poor allocation of political currency. Predicting failure where it seems obvious to many isn't overly impressive. If Trump succeeds in those areas then his critics lose a certain amount of their own credibility, much like those who said he could never win the presidency.

It was interesting to compare Elliott's coverage of the Trump administration to his portrayal of Trump as an individual. While Elliott had little praise for either Trump or his staff, Elliott did not show Trump to be in any sort of discomfort or dismay. Even the magazine cover photo for the piece depicted Trump as sitting calmly in the middle of a storm (in the oval office), taking no notice of the wind and rain beating down on him, hands held neatly on his desk like a man in control. The two-page spread for the article's title page is a photograph of Trump walking through the White House on his way to a meeting. There's not a staff member in sight. Trump's only company being the large portrait of Ronald Reagan hanging directly behind him. The placement, and the quietness of the scene, seem contrary to the rest of the article's tone. So while Elliott conveys an image of the White House staff as being weak and in turmoil, Trump himself is depicted, intentionally or accidentally, as being unshakeable.

Currently, according to Elliott, it appears that the White House is functioning like a house of cards in a hurricane, with Trump existing as the eye of the storm; lacking information, misinformation, contrary information, kinks in the chain of command, pressures from without, pressures from within, confusion from below, uncertainty from above, unpredictable at the top. The question being asked here is what kind of president is President Trump going to be?

It may be that what looks like clumsiness and failure from the outside is actually success by Trump's standards. To someone who values certain things a certain way, it is

easy to ascribe a parallel framework of thought to another, but it is often the case that dissimilar people have differing parameters of success. Knowing how another person defines success, and knowing how they think it can be gained, is the key to predicting their behaviour. Elliott asks whether Trump will choose chaos or a more effective approach to success. My question is whether Trump will be able to simultaneously shrink the bureaucracy and efficiently achieve his other goals, because that, I believe, is certainly what he wants to do. Only time will tell what kind of a challenge the bureaucracy, or portions of it, will be able to pose. That could determine the shape of the executive branch for years to come, apart from also being of some amusement to political analysts.

Works Cited

Elliott, Philip. "Chaos Theory." *TIME* 27 Feb. / 6 Mar. 2017: 32-37. Print.

Van Drehle, "The Second Most Powerful Man in the World?" *TIME* 13 Feb. 2017: 24-31.

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Wasserman, Gary. *The Basics of American Politics*. New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2008.

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JUDGE'S COMMENTS:

This political analysis of the first hundred days of Donald Trump's presidency avoids many of the pitfalls of the genre. It doesn't betray an overt bias on the author's part, it doesn't make unsupported generalizations, and it doesn't speculate. Rather, it employs expert testimony from current publications and one recent scholarly work to explain that what appeared to be a chaotic climate in the Trump White House may have been a consciously chosen strategy, consistent with or in contrast with strategies adopted by previous residents. At the moment this analysis was written, it would have provided insight into possible motives for the President's seemingly erratic behavior.

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