

If Trump Feels Cornered, Watch Out!



The *Hollywood Reporter* has just published an [article](#) on the background story behind the new book by Michael Wolff on the Trump White House. It is not a morally uplifting tale, but perhaps precisely for this reason it deserves close attention.

Never mind the issues of politics or even vulgarity, the story Wolff tells illustrates the theme of the great 1920 silent movie, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, “the inmates have taken over the asylum.”

Mr. Wolff focuses on the inmates. That, of course, sells books. But I think he misses what you and I must read into the story: the mortal danger that events in the White House pose for us.

What we read is bad enough. But, it seems to me more terrifying might be the sequel. If Mr. Trump begins, as the story Mr. Wolff tells implies that he must, to fear the closing of legal net (the charge of money laundering and perhaps other crimes) and as his colleagues, friends and supporters, like Mr. Bannon, begin to distance themselves from him) he may strike out.

He would not be the first embattled leader to do so.

History gives many examples, and America’s Founding Fathers, who were well read in history, were well aware of the practice of rulers using armies and provoking war to prolong their powers or to save themselves from popular revulsion.

Franklin, Hamilton, Madison and those other statesmen to whom we owe so much tried to protect the republic they were founding. They sought to limit the man to whom they gave executive powers. That is what they wrote into the Constitution (Article one, Section Eight § 11 & 14 and Article Two, Section Two, § 1). The representative government they devised has proven to be one of the most remarkable political “experiments” of all time. By dividing power, they sought to keep it but to tame it.

However, today the system they devised has become at least temporarily inoperable. The three divisions of government, the legislature, the judiciary and the executive, have been effectively reunited. They are today under the influence or control of the chief executive. That this has happened is not, of course, a criticism of Mr. Trump although he is the beneficiary. It is a criticism of us, the electorate.

We elected him and his cohorts in the legislature and have made it possible for him to control the Supreme Court. Or, perhaps to refine that judgment, I should say that by losing touch with enough of the electorate by a display of crass commercialism and political insensitivity. his opposition, the Democratic Party failed to offer a viable alternative.

A “Trump,” as Mr. Wolff describes him, is always on offer in every political system. As our Founding Father James Madison tellingly wrote in his essay, *The Federalist* (Number 10): “Men of factious tempers, of local prejudices or of sinister designs, may, by intrigue, by corruption, or by other means first obtain the suffrages, and then betray the interests of the people.”

The perquisites of power attract ambitious men like candles attract moths. American history records a number of them. Just take two: In recent times, Richard Nixon sought to prolong the Vietnam war in order to win the presidency, urging the government of South Vietnam not to take part in negotiations. As a consequence, the war continued and many thousands of young Americans and tens of thousands of Vietnamese died. Nixon was caught in the act, and President Johnson charged him (privately) with treason. A few years later, Ronald Reagan or his team, probably including George Bush, senior, sought to delay the release of American hostages being held in Iran in order to win his election. These were certainly “high crimes and misdemeanors” as cited in the Constitution. Mr. Bush has, so far, escaped although evidence of his involvement or at least of invalidation of his alibi is accumulating. Driven by ambition, as Madison warned, some men will sell out the country for private gain. The film *Wag the Dog*, which portrayed the corruption of the political process by the threat of war is closer to being a documentary than fiction.

And war is almost always a sure thing in politics. Against its threat the writers of our Constitution tried but have failed to protect us. Of course, they could not reckon with the supreme danger that a chief executive of the government and its army could precipitate a major — much less a nuclear — war. During the time they gathered to plot and plan in that sweltering little room in Philadelphia, the total armed forces of the about-to-be-established little United States aggregated 718 men.

Today, not only the numbers but the elan, the “doctrine,” and the scope of the military is far beyond what the Founding Fathers could have imagined. And today, what was once just a small cloud of militarism on the distant horizon has grown into the atmosphere that permeates our society and economy. It has become what President Eisenhower called “The Military-Industrial Complex.” Indeed, it is far more formative of our society than Eisenhower identified. It now includes the structures of our political system, its means of selection of those who write our laws, our economic functioning and indeed the emotions and ideology by which we all live. In sum, it has become a pervasive system that embodies American action and thought. War, whether hot or cold, hangs heavy over our heads.

So, where do the episodes laid out by Mr. Wolff impact on the pattern of life we have adopted?

The answer is manifold, but the most pressing, I argue, is the issue of war or peace. How might the malaise he describes in the *White House* decide our destiny?

If he felt endangered would Mr. Trump try to save himself by plunging the world into war? We cannot answer that question; all we can be sure of is that he could.

Today, a president acting on his sole authority, without recourse to any other person and unrestrained by any institution or authority, can legally and effectively order the nation into a nuclear war.

“Fail-safe” is not an operational procedure but only the name of a dream — in the real world, within minutes, irretrievable action would follow a presidential order/ It might happen while almost everyone was asleep. And could happen while the president was in a foul mood, depressed, drunk or sick. The system was designed to be essentially automatic. It is so today. Those who designed it wanted it to be “assured.” Only if it were so, they argued, would a potential attacker be deterred. The order would be given; no one could stop it. And, if some or even most of the tens of thousands required to fire the missiles refused to perform, so that just a few missiles were fired, they would trigger responses that would obliterate the world as we know it.

As I have suggested, slogans are dangerous, but the one coined for this action is apposite: mutual assured destruction — MAD.

So, whether or not what Mr. Wolff writes, that Mr. Trump is virtually out of control of himself and the organs of government is exaggerated, the danger we face, to borrow Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’s phrase, is “clear and present.”

Regardless of how one feels about Mr. Trump, we all share the absolute need to avoid Armageddon.

With these thoughts in mind, I come to a paradoxical position: Because the danger of war is clear and present — with North Korea, with Iran and perhaps even with China — I think we need for Mr. Trump to find or be given a means to survive at least long enough to get safely out of office.

How might this happen? The only way I see is if he follows the precedent of Richard Nixon: that is, if he sees (as I believe he may in the coming months) that the damage to him personally in trying to hold on to office is too great to be sustained, he will discover that he can escape the threat of punishment by arranging a prospective pardon.

I argue that we all have a perhaps even vital interest in making such an accommodation attractive to him. It would be against our best interest, indeed perhaps against our chance to survive in the world we now have, to be blinded by any desire to punish his transgressions. We must not corner him.

Then, if we are wise, we can set about restoring the delicate balance of powers that our Founding Fathers hoped would “establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”

William R. Polk,
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