

Combative, but not cruel, Mr. President

By **Hugh Hewitt** July 4 at 7:24 PM

What does it mean to “win” in Washington, or anywhere else in the country? I’ve long described “progress” as the ongoing, incremental expansion of liberty and literacy in stable regimes in or aligned with the West. By that definition, much of President Trump’s administration is “winning.” Still, I worry that Trump’s escalating battle with the media has gone from advancing to impeding efforts to achieve that goal.

About that winning: Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price and EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt have become the domestic policy stars of the Trump administration, joining Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, Homeland Security Secretary John F. Kelly and CIA Director Mike Pompeo as foreign policy counterparts off to successful starts. Each of the five brought to the task deep subject-matter expertise, strong communication skills and the discipline and passion to lead their agencies. (Full disclosure: My son works at the Environmental Protection Agency.)

The key, however, is that all five have sought and received buy-ins from the president and Vice President Pence on their policy directions and priorities — and, even more, that they pursue and defend their missions with little or no reference to the raging battle between the West Wing and the media elites. All five have mission sets that may require communicating through the mainstream media, but they are not competing to be loved by it. They recognize that love from the media elites may be for sale but never stays bought. Better never to seek it in the first place. Accomplishments bring their own accolades.

And therein is the secret sauce: The country isn’t the Beltway and Manhattan, Los Angeles and Silicon Valley. Self-reinforcing opinion elites get most of their cues from the collective consciousness of these vitally important but relatively small and isolated reserves of great power, wealth and fame.

Note that I believe almost everyone in those locations are patriots and for the most part moral and ethical. I think they are consistently wrong but rarely rotten.

But they are often isolated, and Trump’s sparring with them is deeply satisfying to the rest of the country — most of the time. But not after the attempted assassination of so many GOP legislators resulted in the severe wounding of House Majority Whip Steve Scalise (La.) and others. The outrage directed at Kathy Griffin and other celebrities making “jokes” about violence wasn’t

feigned — and neither is the dismay with which most of us viewed the president’s tweet of a video in which he punches out CNN.

The rest of the country doesn’t mind the jousting between the president and the media — again, most of the time. They understand exactly with whom Trump is battling, and it isn’t them. The amplification and monetization of outrage via the Web, talk radio and cable news consume airtime but solve none of the country’s challenges. The five appointees mentioned are doing the latter, and here may be the genius of the president’s bare-knuckle match with the media: He provides the central attraction, an all-consuming show, while the hard work of fixes gets done without much organized opposition, as the left seems incapable of organizing anything except marches against the president.

This exhausting battle is a giant diversion. But it does create space for major regulatory and agency reform and redirection. There is a limit, however, to how much good the president does by dominating media. The president reached and exceeded that limit with his escalation of this war with his tweets about Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski. The tweets were wrong because they were cruel. They don’t energize the base, except at its far fringes. They shrink it.

“This is the business we’ve chosen” is a line Hyman Roth made famous in “The Godfather : Part II .” We in the journalism business must remind ourselves of that frequently when critics become so vulgar or profane that muting is the only option. But no one signed up for personal abuse from the Oval Office.

There is, or should be, a clear distinction between combativeness and cruelty. All five of the big Cabinet-level winners in the first almost-six months of the Trump years are combative; three of them were genuine warriors. All five are scrappy and not afraid to mix it up. Good. The center-right in this country is tired of getting rolled and eager to do battle on the policy differences that divide the parties. Trump secured the nomination in large part because of his authentic combativeness and willingness to break the glass and pull the alarm on so many subjects.

But every major stumble that plagued the Trump campaign came from failing to recognize when combativeness edged into cruelty. Conservatives generally, and especially faith-based conservatives, recoil from cruelty because rejection of cruelty is the essence of Scripture. The great norm of America is civilization built on civility.

We do love contact sports. We swoon for heated rhetoric. Talk-radio and cable-news slugfests get ratings that PBS will never achieve. But there is a line. The president ignores it at his political peril in 2018 and 2020, and in the decades of biographies ahead. If Trump can resolve to stay combative but back off cruel, it won’t matter whether he tweets once or 100 times a day.

But Trump’s repeated crossings of the line won’t ever be erased or forgotten. No president is indifferent to history, and history will be a harsh judge if the president loses his momentum and his policy objectives because of his failure to distinguish between the imperative to be combative and the folly of being cruel.

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