

A Presidency Under Siege

by Bill Herbst

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Last week (August 20-24) was not good for President Donald Trump. The wheels of justice, which grind so slowly as to sometimes seem to be not moving at all, lurched ahead. Because Robert Mueller's Special Investigation was given a broad mandate to investigate crimes, which Mueller has been unearthing and frequently handing off to state sectors of the Justice Department, the emphasis shifted from Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election to the more general topic of financial corruption. This past week provided significant movement in that direction.

Paul Manafort's trial for monetary fraud resulted in guilty verdicts on eight of the 18 counts (with the other ten indictments undecided by a hung jury because of the "reasonable doubt" resistance of a single juror who refused to find the defendant guilty). Manafort now faces another imminent trial that has more serious implications for the Trump campaign organization. In addition, Trump's longtime lawyer/fixer/consigliere Michael Cohen finally caved to pressure and agreed to a plea bargain, admitting guilt to eight felony counts. Even further, news surfaced that two higher-up members of Trump World have been granted immunity in exchange for their cooperation in Cohen's case and perhaps other matters of Trumpian misdeeds. One is David Pecker, Chairman and CEO of American Media, which publishes the National Enquirer (the supermarket tabloid rag "newspaper" that was effectively a propaganda outlet for Trump during the 2016 election campaign), and the other is Allen Weisselberg, longstanding CFO of the Trump Organization, who oversaw most of Trump's financial business dealings.

Trump's Mafia-like ship is taking on water, and the rats are fleeing the sinking vessel, scurrying for safety. The trickle of defections has become a stream and may eventually turn into a flood.

Not everyone is celebrating, however. Republican members of Congress are still almost entirely silent, cowed as they are by terror of Trump and his still-fervent base. Their abject surrender to and willful defense of the President is stunning to behold. Some among the public on both the right and the left are also dubious, seeing what's happening as confirmation of the Deep State's intention to remove Trump from office.

There is, I think, much to be said for the view that the Mueller investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential campaign was — from the start and at least in part — a convenient vehicle for digging into Donald Trump's smarmy

business history, which is a virtual cesspool of barely-concealed corruption and illegalities. The old phrase, *"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not really out to get you,"* applies in this case. Trump's endless denunciation via Twitter and in interviews of the justice Department and labeling of the Mueller investigation as a "witch hunt" is a little over the top, but it's essentially correct. Trump is the Wicked Witch of the West with his cabinet of flying monkey minions — the whole sleazy crew of them — and Mueller is Dorothy, who longs to get home to Auntie Em in Kansas.

Was Robert Mueller (a dutiful Boy Scout and faithful soldier of the empire if ever there were one) out to get Trump from the get-go? Probably not, but it was inevitable that Mueller would end up with Trump directly in his sights. By running for President, Donald Trump activated his own private Peter Principle (rising in stature until reaching the level of his incompetence). Having initially succeeded but then failed spectacularly as a New York real estate developer, Trump found the personal celebrity he so craved as a Reality TV star and a marketer of his own ego-brand. He would have been smart to remain content with those ill-gotten gains and lurid life.

A snake-oil salesman must never, ever come to believe his own lying spiel. By overreaching into politics, Trump fell victim to his own grandiosity and narcissism. Having gotten away with damn near everything, including finally his unlikely election as President, Trump assumed that he was bullet-proof and became even more emboldened as an unapologetic egomaniac and general shit-disturber. He didn't realize that the fishbowl of the Presidency put him under infinitely greater scrutiny than just doing business in New York or Hollywood.

Trump's improbable victory and ascension to the White House effectively sealed his downfall. We're only in the middle of that melodrama, of course, and I don't claim to know the steps of how it will play out, but I'm inclined to think that it will involve his family, since that's the biggest chink in his ego-armor.

I'm divided in my reaction to the past week's events. I regard Trump as a reprehensible scumbag, a pathological liar, and an incorrigible criminal, so in part I'm pleased to see these developments. On the other hand, I consider Trump to be merely a symptom of America's illness, not the cause. Trump's Presidency is evidence of the deep malignancy that has afflicted this nation for a long time, a malady that is twisted, toxic, and potentially terminal. Removing Trump from office (however that might be achieved, whether by impeachment, forced resignation, or his defeat in the 2020 election) will not by itself cure what ails us.

Is taking Trump out of the game and sending him to the showers a good idea? Of course. It is, however, only a first step.

Getting rid of Donald Trump will not rid us of the oligarchy — government by the wealthy, of the wealthy, and for the wealthy. Nor will it end the empire, which grows ever more ghastly with each passing decade. It will not banish our greed, arrogance, megalomania, and insensitivity to suffering. It will not cause those in the ruling class to care about the welfare of human beings or the biosphere. It

will not end wars or stop catastrophic climate change. All of these horrors will continue to confront us.

But first things first. At the top of the agenda is taking back government — local, state, and federal — from the scourge of Republican misrule.

That brings us to elections and voting. An oft-repeated saying among cynics (or perhaps realists?) is that if elections really mattered, they'd be outlawed. Certain pundits, particularly some of those on the far left, feel that the exercise of public voting in elections is so corrupt that it's pointless. They suggest that our going to the polls and casting a ballot every two or four years is merely a meaningless façade of civic duty that keeps the public stuck in the illusion of "representative democracy." Elections, they hold, are now effectively staged performances rigged by big money and the marketing manipulations of advertising, where the political duopoly controls the ballot and offers only the dubious choice between Coke and Pepsi. I understand those views and am saddened to admit that they make some sense to me, but I don't agree with the conclusion that we should show our contempt by not voting.

The midterm elections coming up in November are our chance to take back Congress from the Republicans by flipping the House of Representatives (the Senate is less likely). Yes, I understand that the Democratic Party is as beholden to wealthy donors and megacorporations as the Republicans. Yes, I'm aware that, while not quite as repugnant as Republican neoliberalism, Democrats also support endless economic growth. Yes, I fully realize that returning control of the House to the Democrats won't magically turn the tide and save America and the world from further ruin.

What it will do, however, is stop the Republicans from passing any more legislative outrages like the unconscionable tax bill that contributed billions to the coffers of corporations (which used the money mainly to buy back their own stock) and the pockets of the super-duper rich 1% (making our already obscene wealth inequality even worse). The tax cut also upped the national debt by another trillion and a half bucks, thus giving the Repugs a convenient excuse to gut Medicare and Social Security as soon as possible. If allowed to remain in charge, Republicans will drive us all right over a cliff with their love of elitist wealth and unfettered predatory capitalism, their disdain for the well being of everyone else, and their insane denial of climate disruption.

So that is task #1: Send the Republicans a clear message that they can take their entire agenda and stick it where the sun don't shine. As an added bonus, flipping the House will help constrain the lunatic in the Oval Office.

In short, that means vote for Democrats. That's what's needed in 2018. It may not be true at all in the years ahead. Quite possibly, we might have to throw out the Dems as well, but right now, they're the best hope we've got.