

# The Crisis Mounts

(Or, It Couldn't Be Happening to a Nicer Bunch of Guys)

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The recent failure of President Donald Trump and his Republican allies to “repeal and replace” Obamacare (or even to put their hastily-produced “replace” proposal to a vote) reveals the depth and extent of the political crisis that is engulfing the Trump administration, the Republican Party, and the US ruling elite as a whole. It also suggests that the crisis is likely to escalate.

Up until the last couple of weeks, the crisis centered on three issues:

1. The ties that Trump, his family, his campaign staff, and his business associates have had with the Russian government and oligarchy, and particularly whether they colluded with Russian intelligence agencies to influence the presidential election to facilitate Trump's victory.
2. Trump's failure to divest his business ventures sufficiently to enable him to evade prosecution under the US constitution's “emoluments clause,” which prohibits presidents from receiving gifts from representatives of foreign governments and citizens of foreign countries.
3. Trump's mental state, particularly whether his psychological issues might prevent him from functioning effectively as the chief executive of the United States, head of the Republican Party, and leader of the “Free World.”

In the somewhat more than two months that have passed since Trump's inauguration (and even before the healthcare meltdown), it was obvious that these issues were not going to go away any time soon. In fact, they have become more salient and, from the point of view of Trump, his allies, and his supporters, more dangerous.

The ties between the Russians and the Trump campaign have already led to the resignation of Trump's national security advisor, Michael Flynn, and the recusal of Trump's attorney general, Jeff Sessions, from the Justice Department's investigation of the issue, both steps resulting from Flynn and Sessions lying about their past contacts with representatives and agents of the Russian government. In addition, committees of both the House of Representatives and the Senate are carrying on investigations into the issue, while the FBI and other agencies of the “intelligence community” are engaging in their own probes. To add to all this, there is increasing support

among both the voting public and prominent political figures for the appointment of a non-partisan commission led by an independent prosecutor to carry out a thorough and unbiased investigation, lest the Republicans utilize their power in Congress to prevent the unearthing of information likely to embarrass the administration and the Republican Party as a whole.

The intelligence agencies seem convinced that the Russia government did intervene in the US electoral process (among other things, by hacking the computers of the Democratic National Committee) to help Trump, who, perhaps tactlessly, made clear both during the campaign and after that he greatly admires Russian strongman Vladimir Putin and wishes to reduce on-going tensions between Russia and the United States. I see no reason to doubt the agencies' conclusion. It has also been established that members of Trump's family, campaign staff, business associates, supporters, and even Trump himself had periodic contact with representatives and/or agents of the Russian government during the campaign. The crucial question is whether there was actual collusion between the Trump camp and the Russians. Unfortunately, collusion ("conspiracy") is very difficult to prove, especially since the Russian agents, many of whom came up through the Russian intelligence apparatus and were thus aware that their conversations were likely to be recorded, were probably smart enough not to say anything explicit to the Trump people. To put this more colloquially, investigators need to come up with a "smoking gun," and it is not yet clear whether this is possible. At the very least, then, the issue will continue to be in the news for some time, and if anything, to increase in prominence. Already, California Democratic congressman Adam Schiff has indicated that the House Intelligence Committee, of which he is a ranking member, has come up with evidence that he described as "more than circumstantial."

More recently, the Republican chairman of the committee, Devin Nunes, met privately (and secretly) with White House staff members, supposedly to review evidence in the case, before he shared this with other members of the committee. It now appears that this was part of a clumsy plot orchestrated by members of Trump's staff, including Steve Bannon, to add credence to Trump's already debunked claim that the Obama administration illegally subjected his transition team to surveillance. This bizarre episode has led to calls for Nunes to recuse himself from the investigation on the grounds that his participation in the Trump transition team and his recent actions suggest that he is not interested in pursuing a bi-partisan investigation but is instead acting as an agent of the administration. Because of the uproar over this, the House committee's investigation has been essentially shut down, and the Senate committee is taking the lead. Even more intriguing, Michael Flynn has offered to testify if he is offered immunity from prosecution. (Innocent people do not usually ask for immunity.) For now, Senate investigators have put him on hold.

The question of Trump's continued ties to his business interests has dropped out of the spotlight recently, but it may increase in prominence if the Russian issue and other controversies gain momentum. (Along with the questions about his other business interests, Trump recently raised membership dues for his Mar-a-Lago club, in effect, selling access.) It is worth remembering, in this context, that Chicago mobster Al Capone was eventually tried and convicted, not for the bootlegging, murders, beatings, the bribing of cops, judges, and politicians, the intimidation of witnesses and jury-tampering, and the other outrages he committed, but for "tax evasion." If the demand for Trump's removal from office ever reaches an intense enough level but no "smoking gun" re the Russians is ever found, the "emoluments clause" of the constitution may well come in handy.

While the question of Trump's potential conflicts of interest has receded from view, the issue of Trump's mental state has not. I have few doubts that Trump is a reasonably intelligent man (how else could he have survived in the dog-eat-dog business world as long as he has, even if he did have to declare bankruptcy six times?), but it should be blazingly obvious by now that his psychological issues are serious, so much so that they have greatly hampered his effectiveness, even from the standpoint of his own interests. This was revealed in the aftermath of the inauguration, when he would not let go of his contention that the crowd at his inauguration was much larger than the ones at the two inaugurations of Barack Obama, even after published photographs of the three inaugurations graphically proved that he was wrong. A deft politician (and a man with all of his faculties intact) would have immediately "pivoted away" from the issue, realizing that making his case was a lost cause, but, no, Trump doubled down on it, and kept it up for days. The same thing happened when he insisted that the reason Hillary Clinton won nearly three million more popular votes than he did was because "millions" of undocumented people illegally voted for her. Like the inauguration crowds, this is a checkable fact, and without bothering to verify whether his claim was true before he spoke, Trump just shot his mouth off and wouldn't let go. Trump responded similarly with his charge that President Obama ordered Trump Tower to be wiretapped and maintained it even after it had been officially refuted. All of this might help him with his hardcore base, but in the eyes of everybody else, it makes him look like a liar, a lunatic or both. (While I believe Trump is a pathological liar, I suspect that, in many of these instances, he really is delusional: he just can't believe that he isn't as popular as Obama, won fewer popular votes than Hillary Clinton, and isn't one the greatest politicians of all time, right up there with Vladimir Putin.)

This is not the behavior of a clever political operator, one who thinks ahead, calculates his moves, puts the various pieces of his plan in place, lines up his allies, etc. Rather, these seem to be the actions of a man who can't control himself. It appears increasingly clear that Donald Trump, the president of the United States, cannot control when and how he reacts, what he says and how he says it, such control being the quintessential trait of a successful political person. Instead, Trump just lashes out, defensively and thoughtlessly. This, apparently, served him well as a child and throughout his business career, and he had enough money and clout in the arenas in which he was engaged so that his reflexive bullying, blustering, lying, and threatening worked. (It also got him elected president.) But he is now engaging in a much bigger arena, and he is facing players who have a lot more knowledge, a lot more experience, and a lot more guile than he has.

Beyond his poor impulse control, Donald Trump is someone who cannot understand how he is perceived by others and thus cannot calculate how his actions will be received. He is, quite apparently, self-centered and self-involved in the extreme. Everything anyone says or does is immediately and uncontrollably perceived only in terms of himself. One aspect of this narcissism is a refusal to take any responsibility for his actions. When things go wrong, it is never his fault; it's always someone else's. Trump, the would-be strong-man, sees himself as a victim. Yet another side of Trump's obsessive self-involvement is what appears to be a complete lack of empathy, let alone, compassion, for anyone else. The things he said during the election campaign, his attacks on and slanders against entire ethnic and religious groups, his revolting and gratuitous insults of women, his cruel mocking of people with disabilities, along with his lies/delusions suggest that Trump is, or is very close to being, a sociopath, someone without a conscience. This impression is reinforced by the fact that, while these actions may have helped him during the election campaign, they have shown themselves to be serious liabilities since he's been in office.

After his inauguration, Trump's chief strategic task was, while holding on to his base, to win over the "center," that is, those who voted for him largely as a protest against Hillary Clinton, those who voted half-heartedly for Clinton, and those who did not vote at all. Instead, virtually all his actions have worked to alienate these people, indeed, to frighten them out of their wits, so much so that Trump's approval ratings, most recently at 36%, are the lowest of any incoming president since modern polling began. They also led to the emergence a militant "resistance" movement, involving vast numbers of people mobilizing to oppose his policies. (A clever feint to the center, around the theme of "I want to be the president of all the people," might have avoided this.) It's as if Donald Trump has reversed Teddy Roosevelt's adage: "Speak softly and carry a big stick." Instead, Trump speaks loudly (yells, in fact) and carries what appears to be an ever-smaller stick.

Another strategic task, if Trump really wanted to get something done while in office, was to make nice to the various individuals and groups who make up the institutions of the American government. Instead, Trump ridiculed and insulted the intelligence establishment, the top brass of the military, the federal bureaucracy, the entire judiciary branch, and the governors of many states, attacking their competence and impugning their integrity. This is not the way to "win friends and influence people" (or, for that matter, to carry out an authoritarian coup, if that indeed was Trump's intention, which I doubt).

It would give me considerable pleasure to go on in this vein, since it pertains to a truly putrid human being, but I believe the point is clear. Because of his psychological characteristics, in somewhat over two months in office, President Donald Trump has continually shot himself in the foot.

It is in the context of these aspects of the Trump-ian crisis that the Republicans' recent health-care catastrophe occurred. The debacle shows all the signs of Trump's deficits. During the election campaign, Trump vowed to "repeal and replace" the Affordable Care Act (ACA), otherwise known as Obamacare. Of course, it was easy to come up with this as a campaign slogan, but much more difficult to actually carry it out. Ever since it was presented to Congress, the Republicans have been denouncing the ACA. In fact, as we all know, the act, both in its conception and in its implementation, has had a lot of problems. But in the years since it was passed and despite the ruckus they raised, the Republicans never managed to come up with their own alternative. Now, here they are, in control of both houses of congress and with their man in the White House. According to their own promises, it was their job to come up with a healthcare plan that was better than Obamacare, and they couldn't do it. Their proposal, the American Health Care Act, was a disaster, both in terms of its content and in terms of its political fall-out. Without going into the details, it is enough to know: (1) the plan would have involved a huge tax break for rich people; (2) it would have raised the healthcare costs of many middle-aged lower-income Americans; (3) according to the neutral Congressional Budget Office (CBO), it would likely have resulted in 24 million people losing their health insurance; and (4) also according to the CBO, it would have saved the government a lot less than the Republicans initially claimed. Meanwhile, on the political side, it pleased nobody, panicked huge numbers of voters (many of whom showed up, irate, at "town halls" called by Republican congresspersons) and could not generate enough support in Congress even to have it put to a vote in the Republican-dominated House of Representatives. Most tellingly, it revealed stark fissures in the Republican Party. The right-wing Freedom Caucus in the House refused to support it because it was too much like Obamacare, another "entitlement," which they abhor, while more moderate Republicans, especially those from swing states,

opposed it because it would have cost millions of people, including many of their constituents, their healthcare. Typical for this administration, the plan was poorly conceived, hastily prepared (Trump discovered that healthcare was “more complicated” than he had thought), and insufficiently vetted, even among Republican members of Congress. To make matters worse for Trump and the rest of the Republicans, the ACA, for all its faults, has managed to convince the vast majority of Americans, including Republican voters, that affordable healthcare is a right. Most of those who supported “repeal and replace” wanted the Republicans to come up with something better than Obamacare, not something worse.

Beyond all this, the healthcare screw-up revealed that Trump’s much-vaunted deal-making skills were not up to the job. (What happened to “The Closer,” “The Art of the Deal,” the “Only I Can Fix It”?) Even Trump’s bullying, his threats that he would mobilize his supporters to deny Republican opponents of the plan their seats in Congress, didn’t work. And since intimidation seems to be one the very few arrows in Trump’s quiver, it, along with the gaping splits in the Republican Party, calls into question the ability of the administration to pursue the rest of its reactionary agenda. This, plus the fact that Trump’s voting bloc appears to be eroding – in a recent poll, a whopping 60% of those questioned consider Donald Trump to be dishonest – gives a hint of what may happen down the road.

The entire situation raises several broader questions: (1) Does the Republican Party have the ability to govern? Can it lead, rather than just oppose? (2) If it can’t lead, does it have a future? (3) How will the current situation be resolved?

In the 2016 primary season, Donald Trump stole enough of the Republican base to win the nomination. Despite their initial opposition to and distrust of Trump (who, for many years, was a supporter of the Democratic Party and whose views were not consistent with Republican positions), the Republican Establishment, out of a combination of desperation and opportunism, abandoned the few principles it had and embraced Donald Trump as their candidate. It was a deal with the devil. The Republicans hoped to get the tax cuts, the cuts in environmental and health and safety regulations, a seat on the Supreme Court and some other things they’ve always wanted, while hindering Trump from pursuing those aspects of his program they oppose and doing too much damage to the country’s foreign relations. On the other side, the Democratic Establishment was also asleep at the wheel, acceding to the nomination of an unappealing candidate who carried a lot of political baggage and who could not come up with even one inspiring reason why people should vote for her. Running a poor campaign – among other things, she took for granted the white working class voters in the swing states (she didn’t visit Wisconsin even once) – Hillary Clinton allowed Trump to sneak by her and win a majority of votes in the Electoral College. The result of the arrogance and laziness of the political elite(s) of both parties was the victory of an outsider – a rogue member of the ruling class, a political novice, an ignoramus, a boor, a leech, and a likely psychopath – to occupy the most powerful political office in the country and, in fact, in the world.

At this point, it appears that Trump and his Republican allies will next attempt to work out a deal on tax reform. This issue is likely to be even more contentious than healthcare. Leaving aside the distance between the Republicans and the Democrats, the Republicans are divided into opposing groupings. Trump wants to cut both corporate and personal income taxes, especially for individuals in the top brackets. But he has also insisted that he will not cut “entitlements,” that is, Social Security and Medicare, which has long been part of the Republican program. This, plus a large military build-up and an ambitious infrastructure program, will lead to an explosion of

the government's budget deficit and long-term indebtedness, which is anathema to the "Freedom Caucus." Another bone of contention will be Trump's proposed tax on imports, which will elicit vehement opposition from large sectors of the business elite (including executives of Walmart, by some measures the largest corporation in the country) and congressional Republicans. In this context, it is important to note that in the fight over healthcare, Trump's attempts to bully the Republican opponents of his plan backfired. They stood up to him and the world didn't come to an end. These people now realize that Trump is increasingly vulnerable and his threats increasingly hollow. Most people, even Republicans, do not like being bullied. If Trump's base continues to erode, however slowly, will the Republican knives, along with those of the Democrats, start to come out?

In the meantime, Trump continues on his campaign to undo the achievements of the Obama administration, most recently, those designed to combat climate change. But, for all his hot air, Trump will not bring back coal or even seriously slow the death of the industry. More than environmental regulations, coal has been dealt a mortal blow by economic forces, particularly by the fact that natural gas is cheaper, more efficient, and cleaner. Moreover, renewable energy, particularly solar and wind power, is now a big business, with its own growing and increasingly powerful constituencies (among them, investors, entrepreneurs, workers, consumers, and ranchers leasing their land for wind farms), including in many of the states (such as Texas and Iowa) that went for Trump in the election. Even now, many state governments are investigating their legal strategies to fight Trump's anti-climate initiatives, and they and many cities around the country are moving ahead with their own programs to combat global warming. At the same time, while US automakers might appreciate not having to meet the stringent regulations on efficiency and emissions that were mandated by the Obama administration, how will they react when foreign auto companies, particularly those of Japan and South Korea, continue to move ahead in these areas? A considerable majority of people in the United States, including Republicans, now believe that human-induced climate change is a serious problem. Is it likely that they will continue to buy US cars if the competition is offering considerably cleaner and more fuel-efficient vehicles at competitive prices? More broadly, China is already the global leader in the development and production of renewable energy, the energy of the future. Trump's actions will only increase its advantage and cede American political leadership on this crucial issue.

To top all this off, the administration is in deep disarray. Trump's cabinet and advisors are divided into several mutually hostile factions (among them, members of the Republican Establishment, supporters of the Koch Brothers, white nationalists, and a group known as the "Democrats"). For its part, the White House staff is in a state of virtually complete demoralization, terrified of the boss's wrath and paranoid about being blamed for leaks and administration setbacks. This does not sound like a winning team. At the moment, Trump has only two things going for him. One is the fact that, at least so far, his core supporters have remained loyal to him, enough to intimidate many Republican congresspersons (who loathe him) from publicly opposing him. However, as I mentioned, the Trump base is showing signs of fraying at the edges, and already, as the vote on Trump's healthcare proposal demonstrated, some Republicans may be finding their courage.

The other asset Trump has is the economy, which continues to chug along at a reasonable rate. But how long will this last? While a short-term upswing is possible, I see little sign that a Reagan-style boom, such as we saw in the 1980s, is in the cards, even if Trump does manage to get his entire program passed, which, at this point, seems extremely doubtful. So, what happens

when it becomes apparent that Trump cannot deliver on his campaign promises? While much of Trump's base will undoubtedly whine and blame Washington/the Establishment for not letting their leader carry out his program, will all of them be so dull as to not realize that they've been conned? (Of course, with human beings, anything is possible.) In any case, it will be interesting to see how it all works out.

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