

Donald Trump and the ISIS Factor

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Ever straddling that fine line between the absurd and the puncturing revelation, Donald J. Trump's "ISIS" remarks about the Obama administration and the Democrat presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton, were vintage. "[Obama] was the founder of ISIS absolutely, the way he removed our troops. ... I call them [Obama and Hillary Clinton] co-founders."

In a political environment where sarcasm is set aside in favour of serious management and public relations choreography, stage managed with careful insertions for media effect, Trump has other ideas. These may be contemptuous of the archive of history, avoiding evidence like the plague, but every so often, he makes a point that stings.

Wednesday's comments about the provenance of ISIS – Washington as well-heated incubator, backer, and enthusiastic sponsor – become less absurd in the bloody tangle of Middle Eastern politics. Attempts to locate, always in vain, those goodly scented guys in a foreign conflict to back tend to end up badly. Wars have a tendency to do that.

The issue of supplying, to take one example, supposed Islamic moderates in the Syrian conflict was always daft to begin with, given that weapons will always find their way to the sides that are stronger. Fluid loyalties, questionable allegiances, and shifting interests, make notions of the elect impossible. The default tends to be brutal, stabilising authoritarianism imposing a murderous order.

Trump's response was less a back peddling than a repositioning of his stance. "Don't they get sarcasm?" he screamed on Twitter, with capitalised effect. "I love watching these poor, pathetic people (pundits) on television working so hard and so seriously to try and figure me out. They can't!"[1]

The broader commentary on the subject blows more air into the Trump act. Again, the fundamental error here is to idealise the office of the US president, to see it as unique and near omnipotent. To receive the electoral verdict is tantamount to a divine voice. Yet the domain of Camelot will not permit smudging and profanity at the hands of a Trump, even if it has individuals responsible for egregious breaches of laws domestic and foreign.

Trump's excuse for his ISIS remarks, suggests Tara Golshan atVox, is both "absurd" and "unnerving" but more so because they open the window on "how he'd fare as president." [2] Hardly. For Golshan, it is incumbent that the population of planet earth "take what the president of the United States says very seriously."

She obviously missed the choice bits of the Bush administration (shrub Dubya), which demonstrated that individuals of even modest intelligence and serious defects can climb the presidential mountain and wreak havoc, spread global unrest and sow the seeds for the next round of catastrophic retribution. "Presidents don't go about and constantly 'joke' about

invading countries, or about their economic policies, or about their political opponents being terrorists.” That may well be largely the problem.

Seriousness is again registered by Don Cassidy at the *New Yorker*. [3] For Cassidy, what mattered was that Trump had decided to avoid any nuance on the subject. To conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt, Trump was having nothing about suggestions that Obama “created the vacuum, he lost the peace.” What he truly meant was that “he’s the founder of ISIS” deserving of “the Most Valuable Player award.”

What Cassidy ponders is not the prospects of a Trump victory, which he sees as nigh impossible. Of greater concern was the notion of a punchy lingering “Trumpism”, the sort left to fester and thrive in the aftermath of its founder’s departure. “A nationalistic , nativist, protectionist, and authoritarian movement that will forever be associated with him, but which also has the capacity to survive beyond him.”

This is Trump as coherent founding father, devilish in going the way of the Know Nothing movement, or the isolationist bodies such as the America First Committee, keen to avoid a global conflagration by seeking the road of appeasement.

For the most part, the issue of temperament remains the common ground for his critics. To be the Commander in Chief comes with a certain, heavy resume. Never mind that the resume itself is stocked with flimsy assumptions about quality and capabilities.

No, the business of waging war, interfering in the sovereign affairs of other states, and the entire gamut of empire, is a serious matter that no joke could dissipate. The shock for those paying attention to Trump is that he cares to disturb and molest such shibboleths with regular abandon. The business of empire is certainly lots of fun for some people.

That US foreign policy has consequences is hardly the surprise, but the queasiness comes in the reminder as to how far those consequences really do go. ISIS may not be on the public pay roll of the US Treasury as a matter of direct attribution, but the Iraq invasion of 2003, led by the United States, was the very fillip for the *creation* of the group. Founding and causation are different in this case, but such subtleties are conveniently obliterated in the polemics of Election 2016.

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Notes

[1] https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/764064821000056832?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

[2] <http://www.vox.com/2016/8/12/12453452/trump-obama-founded-isis-sarcasm-serious>

[3] <http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/why-trumps-crazy--talk-about-obama-and-isis-matters>

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