

Signals from the Adult Day Care Center: Trump, Tillerson and Corker

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Featured image: Senator Bob Corker (Source: [FreedomWorks](#))

"I know for a fact that every single day at the White House, it's a situation of trying to contain him." – Senator Bob Corker on Donald Trump, New York Times, Oct 8, 2017

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson may well be pulling out what tender remains of his hair are left. With the North Korean-Trump spat now personalised to the point of caricature, the Secretary was hoping to soften the ground in hope for a constructive meeting with Pyongyang. He was, in other words, doing a Trump, a considering the unthinkable, wishing for the profane in US foreign policy to come good.

The US, claimed the secretary, had "lines of communication to Pyongyang," which shed little by way of news on a well-known situation that President Donald Trump seemed ignorant of.

"We're not in a dark situation, a blackout. We have a couple, three channels open to Pyongyang. We can talk to them. We do talk to them."

Comforting to know that the situation is not *entirely* hermetic, self-contained and delusional.

Trump's radar envisaged something quite different. To shock, and pretend to awe, seemed to remain in fashion. In truth, it seemed to be yet another tactic drawn from the arsenal of business bullying and hectoring: steady the blows, mock the proposal, and dismiss your opponent with calculated scorn. Diplomacy is a measure best left to the weak and the secretive.

For Trump, Tillerson misstated the position of calm and communication, being all too diplomatic when diplomacy had lost relevance.

"Being nice to Rocket Man hasn't worked for 25 years, why would it work now? Clinton failed, Bush failed, and Obama failed. I won't fail."

Misguided and petulant as ever, this is a recipe that burns manuals rather than writes them.

The diplomatic commentariat have been stunned by this display, though Trump remains entirely consistent in his erratic explosiveness. His "remarkable decision to rebuke his own secretary of state's attempt at pursuing diplomacy with North Korea last week was a dangerous move at a dangerous time," claimed Ankit Panda of *The Diplomat*.^[1] His behaviour had been "deterrence degrading" in its manner, the sort of language that betrays

on Panda's part an all too keen worship of a supposedly scripted art.

Over the weekend, the infant show continued with blustering menace, this time with a new addition. Senator Bob Corker, Republican chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, shot a few lines of his own on the Trump show.

"It's a shame the White House has become an adult day care center. Someone obviously missed their shift this morning." [2]

To the *New York Times*, Corker showed splenetic dismay, pointing out with some accuracy that the president had confused diplomacy with the savage format of *The Apprentice*. "He concerns me. He would have to concern anyone who cares about our nation." Such a "reality show" could well set Washington "on the path to World War III." [3] Corker's timing was opportune, given his obsession with tying in the budget deficit with a tax overhaul.

Trump's response, however, was not. "Bob Corker gave us the Iran Deal, & that's about it. We need HealthCare, we need Tax Cuts/Reform, we need people that can get the job done!" [4] The reason for adding a spear to the assault was, ever consistently, personal. Corker had "begged" the president "to endorse him for re-election in Tennessee. I said 'NO' and he dropped out (said he could not without my endorsement)." [5]

Republican leader, Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, was left scratching for an explanation.

"Under the normal, traditional rules of politics of the last 40 years of my life, a president would not poke a senator in the eye when he has a two-seat majority and a major legislative agenda needing to be accomplished." [6]

Former House Republican, Tom Davis of Virginia, was similarly consulting the thumb rule book of wise conduct in politics.

"There is an old saying in politics: Don't pick a fight with someone who has nothing to lose."

If there is one thing to be said in favour of the cantankerous president, poking the eyes of those who have shown a long record of opposing reforms, bills and measures in a country where political stagnation is the norm is precisely the counter-intuitive approach that might reap rewards. Under President Obama, Congress became a place where measures went to perish. Foot dragging, vacillation and delays became affairs of dull predictability.

Trump's singular approach can only ever be blunt. It would be a story steeped in irony that figures such as Kim Jong-un and the mullahs of Iran might end up undoing the White House on the domestic front.

While there is little to praise in terms of US approaches, be they Democrat or Republican administrations, to so-called trouble states, Trump is bearing witness to a gradual unraveling. His own party, which he cares little for, is unsheathing swords to do battle. Given the upcoming budget vote and a series of legislative measures, Trump is in short supply of allies from either side of the aisle. But he is bound to be relishing it. The show will

go on.

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Notes

- [1] <https://thediomat.com/2017/10/trumps-dangerous-twitter-rebuke-of-tillerson-may-make-diplomacy-impossible-with-north-korea/>
- [2] <https://twitter.com/SenBobCorker/status/917045348820049920>
- [3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/08/us/politics/trump-corker.html>
- [4] <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/917130468025348096>
- [5] <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/917026789188399105>
- [6] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/us/politics/corkers-blast-at-trump-has-other-republicans-nodding-in-agreement.html>

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