

The Virtues of Saying Anything: Donald Trump and Torture

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It might be torture. It might be immigration. It might be race. These issues only matter in the context of tactics and positioning for Donald Trump. To get elected, the man will literally say anything. It is a tactic that just might work.

He has no genuine, developed sense of the awareness about the topics he discusses. The reality television show reduces everything to just that: a show that sucks cerebral capacity as it turns the viewer into vegetable matter. The show is all consuming, and similarly reductionist.

Former Massachusetts governor and failed presidential contender Mitt Romney found that out all too clearly when he decided to level a salvo at Trump this week, claiming him to lack “the temperament of a stable, thoughtful leader”.^[1] Trump’s bitchy response was that Romney had “chickened out”. Besides, he had “made so much more money than Mitt.”

Shifting positions is something Trump does and continues to do. This tendency seems to surprise those news outlets who have taken such an interest in The Donald. “His position [on torture],” comes a CNN headline, “seems to have shifted dramatically in less than 24 hours.”

The initial position, assuming that Trump ever had a formulated one, was outlined on Thursday. It was true Fox News magic, indifferent to distinctions between fact and fiction. “We should go for waterboarding,” he insisted, “and we should go tougher than waterboarding.” It was perfectly legitimate, he argued, given what “those animals, over in the Middle East” were capable of.

Gone was the hypocritical mask of the decent American soldier or CIA operative who believe that consulting a book of regulations somehow heals your ghastly mission – here was a potential commander-in-chief willing to embrace what had been decried yet employed simultaneously. True, cruel Realpolitik.

Trump, proving to be on a blistering roll, decided to go one step further. Reality television – again, a true Fox special – kicked in, with Trump suggesting that families of terrorists be targeted for their associations. “When a family flies into the World Trade Centre, a man flies into the World Trade Centre and his family gets sent back to where they were going... They knew what was happening.”^[2]

That gesture, purely for reasons of grabbing the headlines, worked. Individuals expressed predictable outrage. Free Trump coverage poured in, much of it coming from the rattled GOP itself.

An open letter signed by various GOP national security experts (count among them the pro-imperial Max Boot, Eliot Cohen, Robert Kagan and Michael Chertoff) was Trump's singular achievement. It has all the problems you would expect from a rather delusional perspective of power that has lost sight of itself. The only thing all the names on the list have in common is a united "opposition to a Donald Trump presidency," which constitutes something like manna for the campaign.

The authors proceed to swallow whole the Trump technique. He is berated for being "wildly inconsistent and unmoored in principle" on his vision of "American influence and power in the world". They particularly tut tut him on trade. "His advocacy for aggressively waging trade wars in a recipe for economic disaster in a globally connected world." Then there is the issue of torture. "His embrace of the expansive use of torture is inexcusable." [3]

In what must amount to a good deal of disingenuousness, the authors go on to suggest that Trump's "expansive view of how presidential power should be wielded against his detractors poses a distinct threat to civil liberty in the United States."

So epileptically terrifying has Trump become for those on the Republican side that the very reality of US executive power wielded by the likes of George W. Bush has somehow eluded them. The hyper surveillance state, the historical context of rendition and extensive use of black sites - all these suddenly become things that never happened under any previous president. Amnesia has truly taken hold.

In rather clever fashion, Trump has actually made the GOP his own free publicity machine, harnessing criticism to boost his coverage, however infamous. His lack of predictability entails a slipperiness that his detractors cannot pin down. Sharp insight (since when was the US relationship with its allies not one of racketeering rather than genuine security?) is mixed with buffoonish stumbling.

Nothing in this is particularly stunning, and simply goes to show that Trump will play the nice card if he needs to, hoping to net those voters that might otherwise fall to Sanders or Clinton or for that matter anybody else. It is the show that matters, not any facts it necessarily entails.

In a statement released on Friday, he claimed an understanding that the United States "is bound by laws and treaties". Nor would he "order our military or other officials to violate those laws and will seek their advice on such matters." This was touted as a reversal.

The importance here lies in the issue who is giving the advice. The various torture memoranda spun by the likes of John Yoo, Alberto Gonzales and their legal associates for the Bush administration conformed to a certain need. If the emergency demands it, the advisors will duly follow, however abusive that outcome. The result is enhanced interrogation and the inapplicability of the Geneva Conventions in certain spurious cases. The problem in that case will not be Trump but the torture complex that continues to lurk with unhealthy disdain in the corridors of US power, yet another by-product of empire.

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Notes

[1]

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/999a7f499006448a9068f19130050428/gop-sees-options-stopping-trump-not-good-ones>

[2] <http://time.com/4247397/donald-trump-waterboarding-torture/>

[3]

<http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders/>

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