

"Trump Shuns Nobility of Public Life"

Michael Gerson, *The Morning Advocate*, February 14, 2018

For some years, the main political project of the right has been to take control of the government while denigrating the government. Donald Trump drew this strategy to its logical conclusion during his presidential campaign, asserting as a kind of refrain: "Our politicians are stupid."

Which came to mind following the revelation that chief of staff John Kelly had kept Rob Porter in a sensitive position (White House staff secretary) after being informed by the FBI that there was a protective order against him. As it came to mind when Michael Flynn was elevated to national security adviser following repeated FBI warnings that he might be compromised by the Russians. As it came to mind after the elevation of Anthony Scaramucci to, well, any position of public trust.

I have to admit that the Trump administration has acted with a certain consistency in these matters. Trump and his team accused the government of being corrupt - and have proved it beyond reasonable doubt. They alleged that the government was brimming with stupidity - and took it as a kind of recruiting challenge. Across the executive branch, it is a golden age for the unqualified and unfit. This is the natural outcome of contempt for professional experience, contempt for governing skill, contempt for government itself. Democrats seeking to take control of the House and deny re-election to the president will be sorely tempted to run with the theme: Trump and his political allies are stupid. This would be a variant of Trump's strategy to win power by promoting contempt for those who hold power. It might lead to a shift in partisan control. It would do little to recover our national spirit. Someone - from left or right - must restore respect for the enterprise of governing as a source of national unity and moral aspiration.

Is this even remotely possible in our fractured republic? As a homework assignment, prospective leaders might read the speeches of Robert F. Kennedy. The late 1960s were a time not only of division but of political violence. Kennedy accurately described Americans as inhabiting different, unconnected islands.

His response? During his (tragically brief) presidential campaign, Kennedy urged Americans to look beyond mere economic measures of national success and to focus on cultural and spiritual excellence on "the intelligence of our public debate," on the "integrity of our public officials," on our "courage," "compassion" and "devotion to our country." He

challenged traditional ideological divisions, calling for a "better liberalism" that "knows the answer to all problems is not spending money" and a "better conservatism" that "recognizes the urgent need to bring opportunity to all citizens." And he confronted a politics premised on conflict. "Some look for scapegoats," Kennedy said. "Others look for conspiracies, but this much is clear: Violence breeds violence, repression brings retaliation, and only a cleaning of our whole society can remove this sickness from our soul."

Kennedy talked of politics as the realm of urgency and necessity. At any given moment in a democracy, great issues of justice and morality are at stake. The claim that politics is dirty and irrelevant is an argument only comfortable people can make. If you were to live in a neighborhood plagued by poverty, dominated by gangs and served by failing schools, the effectiveness of government would matter greatly to you. Retreating from the cause of justice is only conceivable for those who have few needs for justice themselves. Kennedy also talked of politics as the realm of nobility. At its best, government is about the right ordering of our lives together. Political rhetoric and ideals can raise the moral sights of a nation and point men and women to responsibilities beyond the narrow bounds of self and family.

And Kennedy understood that criticizing the corruption and stupidity of those in power is not a politics sufficient to a great country. "Perhaps we can remember," he said, "if only for a time, that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short moment of life. ... Surely this bond of common faith, this bond of common goal, can begin to teach us something. Surely we can learn, at least, to look at those around us as fellow men, and surely we can begin to work a little harder to bind up the wounds among us and to become in our hearts brothers and countrymen once again."