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## SPEECHLESS: THE TRUMP EFFECT

By Jeffrey Frank January 31, 2017

*It's possible to view Donald Trump's first days as an exercise in meta-bullying, as if his purpose were to torment those who voted against him*

If you're trying to talk to someone who doesn't seem to be listening, or to be fully coherent, or who switches premises in mid-conversation, or who even conjures up falsehoods without shame, there comes a point when you're inclined to give up. If the dialogue approaches the Full Orwell ("War is peace," "Freedom is slavery," and all that), your instinctive reaction might be as simple as speechlessness.

At least for the moment—if we're lucky, a relatively fleeting moment in the course of human history—something close to disbelief may define the reaction to the nation's newest President, Donald J. Trump. After less than two weeks of making stuff up (about crowd size, the popular-vote count); of trying to haphazardly shatter complex, imperfect legislation such as the Affordable Care Act; of scaring the bejesus out of America's European friends while pushing around Mexico, a regional ally (the shoving of Mexico may be a favorite Trump negotiation ploy); of upending America's essential foreign policy, while insulting the Muslim world; of vandalizing the legacy of the Truman Administration, by adding his ideological stamp to the attendance of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; of altering the dynamic of the National Security Council; of giving the president of the Central Intelligence Agency, respectful attention was already difficult. Trump does not speak by tweet, or gives an interview to Sean Hannity or the Today Show, or uses the expressive phrase "rendered speechless," which captures

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something inexpressible. It's an idea conveyed particularly well in Victorian prose, as in (a real quotation, from a forgotten Englishman of that era) "At first he was appalled and rendered speechless by her sudden appearance—now his emotion was of a suffocating nature—he felt as though he should choke unless he could utter a cry."

Maybe that's all that can be expected from someone whose background is in being a sharp, bullying real-estate guy and reality-TV personality, a man with just enough training in the wiles of cable news to know that talking fast, and talking loud, often counts for a lot more than talking sense. Speechlessness seems to have affected even some of Trump's professionally glib de-facto supporters, such as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker Paul Ryan, though their behavior, as they smile, simper, affirm, and obey, is closer to gutlessness. Do they really want to help Trump come up with the twelve billion to fifteen billion dollars it will cost taxpayers to build a border wall that, if it's ever actually constructed, is bound to be a useless eyesore? Is that the Trumpian-Republican idea of budgetary responsibility and investment in infrastructure? One is rendered speechless at the thought.

America has a tradition of electing Presidents and then, in short order, turning on them, for reasons good and bad—sometimes for domestic policies that seem misguided, or for faraway conflicts that would have been better unfought. That's true even for those who become loved and admired—among them, in modern times, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan—as well as for those who remain widely loathed, among them Lyndon B. Johnson, whose mendacity during the escalation of the Vietnam War led to his virtual abdication, and Richard Nixon, whose lies and flouting of the law disgraced his office. But Trump, in so many ways so unlike any of his predecessors, may already have provoked the same recoiling reaction, a

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v Trump's first days as an exercise in meta-bullying, as if cest advisers, were to torment those who voted against onment (building the Keystone Pipeline and rejecting such as abortion rights (although Vice-President Mike covered); and, perhaps above all, in the case of executive tion of the values and traditions that actually made, and

make, America great. The country got a startling glimpse of Trump's ability to harangue, and the joy he appeared to take in it, during his recent interview with ABC's David Muir, who was game enough but was soon surrounded by the Trumpian wall of sound:

MUIR: But three to five million illegal votes?

TRUMP: Well, we're going to find out. But it could very well be that much. Absolutely.

MUIR: But . . .

TRUMP: But we're going to find out.

(OVERTALK)

TRUMP: You have people that are registered who are dead, who are illegals, who are in two states. You have people registered in two states. They're registered in a New York and a New Jersey. They vote twice. There are millions of votes, in my opinion. Now—

DAVID MUIR: But again—

PRESIDENT TRUMP: I'm doing an—

(OVERTALK)

TRUMP: . . . investigation. David, David, David . . .

MUIR: You're now, you're now President of the United States. When you say—

(OVERTALK)

TRUMP: Of course, and I want the voting process to be legitimate.

DAVID MUIR: But what I'm asking—

TRUMP: The people that—

When you say in your opinion millions of illegal votes, that is something  
 ur functioning democracy, a fair and free election.

nch an investigation.

resented so far has been debunked. It's been called—

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(OVERTALK)

MUIR: . . . false.

TRUMP: No, it hasn't. Take a look at the Pew reports.

MUIR: I called the author of the Pew report last night. And he told me that they found no evidence of voter—

(OVERTALK)

MUIR: . . . fraud.

TRUMP: Really? Then why did he write the report?

MUIR: He said no evidence of voter fraud.

TRUMP: Excuse me, then why did he write the report?

(OVERTALK)

TRUMP: According to Pew report, then he's—then he's grovelling again. You know, I always talk about the reporters that grovel when they want to write something that you want to hear but not necessarily millions of people want to hear or have to hear.

*Speechless.* But then, to render Americans speechless is not the same as rendering them helpless, or hopeless, or silent, or grovelling. At the dawn of the Trump era—launched with a distortion of American ideals and an obfuscation of the nation's honorable past—the Republic still works because citizens believe in the idea, as the Declaration put it, of governments “deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” But what if, as the early nationwide protests have been signalling, this consent were to be angrily withheld? As a nation, we've been through that, too, and it isn't pretty.

*Jeffrey Frank, a former senior editor of The New Yorker and the author of “Ike and Dick: Portrait of a Strange Political Marriage,” is working on a book about the Truman era.*

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