

Substantial Disruption



Rest in Peace, Sergeant Johnson

By Mike Tully

As the funeral procession crept along East Ft. Lowell Road toward Evergreen Cemetery, Tucson Police waved the priest by. He had presided over the Requiem Mass and ignored speed limits as he hurried to beat the procession to the cemetery. The priest had officiated many funerals and didn't care for all of them. "Some of the Mexicans get carried away," he told me, "hysterical and screaming. I even saw one of them jump onto the coffin." I was an altar boy at the time and remember the conversation after more than half a century. I respected the priest, but his comments troubled me, and not because of my Mexican-American background. I thought it inappropriate, even for a man of the cloth, to criticize the expression of grief. There is no handbook; not everybody does it well. I once was asked to represent an elderly couple in a minor dispute with their neighbor, who turned out to be an acquaintance from my broadcasting days. When I called him, he told me his 90-year-old Mother had just passed away. That caught me by surprise and I paused, thinking about what to say. After a few seconds, he said, "Well, I guess it's not important." If he could have seen my expression of shock and sorrow, he would have understood why I groped for words. Over the phone, I was just a silent jerk.

I thought about that interaction and the Priest's comments after President Trump's clumsy attempt to place a condolence call to the widow of [Sgt. LaDavid Johnson](#), who had been killed in Niger. The President is unskilled in empathy and, even though he was given a rough-cut script by his Chief of Staff, Retired General John Kelly, he was perceived as cold and disengaged by Myeshia Johnson, who [put the call on a speakerphone](#) to allow others to listen, including two relatives and a Congresswoman. Sgt. Johnson "knew what he was getting into," Trump told her, adding, "but I guess it hurts anyway." "It was horrible," [said](#) Frederica Wilson, the Congresswoman. "It was insensitive. It was absolutely crazy, unnecessary. I was livid." She said Trump suggested "that this is what happens, anyone who is signing up for military duty is signing up to die. That's the way we interpreted it." She said he made Myeshia Johnson cry.

Anybody who volunteers for military combat knows what they are getting into and, of course it hurts just as much. But Mrs. Johnson [said](#) she was "very angry at the tone of his voice," adding that Trump forgot to mention Sgt. Johnson's name and referred to him as, "your guy." Poor social skills are not the same as intentional cruelty. We need to cut the President some slack, as he was clearly outside his comfort zone. Since his comfort zone consists of anger, insults, defensiveness, lies, and rash judgments, it's healthy for him and the country when he steps outside of it.

But there is nothing healthy about the way Trump politicized combat deaths and the way he assailed Congresswoman Wilson, accusing her of eavesdropping on the call and lying about the content. While Wilson's role is questionable, she is a friend of Sgt. Johnson's family who had known him since he was a child. Her invited participation was not constituent relations, but a

family matter. I'm not excusing her behavior: just cutting her some slack. There is no handbook. Witnesses verified Congresswoman Wilson's account, and Kelly and the President's spokesperson did not deny it (although the President, a serial liar, did). When Trump was asked, before the phone call, why he never mentioned the Niger combat deaths, he became defensive and went into attack mode, irresponsibly accusing his predecessors, Presidents Bush and Obama, of not contacting the families of fallen service members. He falsely claimed that he reached out to the families of every service member lost in combat during his administration, an easily refuted lie. It was in the turbulent backwash of those comments that he called Myeshia Johnson.

When Trump accused Congresswoman Wilson of lying about the call, he was effectively calling Sgt. Johnson's widow, aunt, and Mother liars as well, since all of them confirmed her account. Trump's anger is sharp, but his aim is not. The Johnson family became collateral damage of his anger, as did Kelly, who tried to defend Trump by insulting Congresswoman Wilson and [lying](#) about comments she made during a dedication of an FBI Building. A [videotape](#) of her comments confirmed his lie.

The Trump stain is indelible. Donald Trump is the President and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, but his lack of discipline and immaturity affront Sgt. Johnson and all of the fallen. He spins the gold of their sacrifice into straw to burn in his internal furnace. Perhaps Congresswoman Wilson should not have denounced Trump's clumsiness, unless Sgt. Johnson's family asked her to. Whatever her intent, she is not the President. Trump is, and has not acted like it.

The coda to this story: Congresswoman Wilson should abandon her unproductive war of words with President Trump. General Kelly should resign and preserve what is left of his reputation. President Trump should be declared unfit to serve as Commander in Chief and removed from office. And Sgt. Johnson should be afforded the repose he so nobly and valiantly earned.