

Substantial Disruption



Boffo Numbers, Baby!

By Mike Tully

This column begins with a quiz. See if you can correctly answer the following multiple-choice question.

Q: If you have a group photograph of Mike Flynn, Reince Priebus, Sean Spicer, Anthony Scaramucci and Steve Bannon, you have a picture of:

- A. A basketball team that consistently loses to the [Washington Generals](#).
- B. The cast of the upcoming television reality series, “Big Brother: The Clown Car.”
- C. Five classified ads rejected by “Grindr.”
- D. Five examples of Donald Trump man-crushes that ended badly.
- E. All of the above.

If you answered “E, all of the above,” you are, of course, correct. But if your answer was “B” for the reality show, you get an honorable mention because you’ve focused on the central truth of the Trump Administration: it’s as much a reality show as a presidency. Staff members are not so much government officials as contestants, never certain of their tenure, striving to survive until the next episode. Jeb Bush predicted that Trump would give us a “[chaos presidency](#).” Chaos is good for ratings.

So is conflict. Nothing attracts eyeballs like competition. Who is on top? Who is going down? How will the season end? Who will return next season? Will the ratings be there? Will the show be renewed? Can you keep the audience involved and the sponsors happy? And, among all of these questions, perhaps the biggest: How do you feed the star’s ego and keep him engaged? The Trump White House is like a modern “[Your Show Of Shows](#),” except the writing is not as clever and Trump is no Sid Caesar -- although one right-wing website [compared him](#) to Julius Caesar. (Bonus question: Can you name another Caesar that might be a better fit? Extra credit if you haven’t seen “Gladiator.”)

Trump is frequently referred to as a “former reality TV star.” In fact, he still is one, focused on attention and ratings, jealous of any individual or subject that gets more attention than he does, and scrupulously following how the media covers him. Pundits have questioned why Trump is a deliberately divisive figure, separating the nation and world into simplistic “us versus them” categories as he caters to his base and nobody else. It’s bad politics, they complain. That’s beside the point. While approval in the mid-thirties is bad news in politics, a media rating in that range would have sponsors lined up with checkbooks in hand. A cable or network TV program with that large an audience would be a monster. Trump doesn’t realize, or just doesn’t care, that a similar number in an election usually spells defeat. He wants eyeballs more than votes. So, he foments conflict, catering to his rabid (and dwindling) base and declaring war on his perceived

enemies, including Democrats, most members of the media, scientists, scholars, immigrants and Muslims. You can't have a conflict without enemies and Trump makes sure he fosters sufficient enmity to perpetuate the chaos and keep viewers tuned in. Even progressives have a hard time looking away. It's like driving past the scene of a bridge collapse; you know you shouldn't stare, but you can't help yourself. (Don't hold your breath for an infrastructure bill!)

This column is being written the day of the Great American Eclipse, and I've been watching cable coverage of the event along the "path of totality," from Oregon to South Carolina. At every stop cable networks showed people bursting into celebration the moment the eclipse becomes total and covers all of the sun but the corona. It was fascinating to watch so many people cheer the darkness – a dead-on metaphor for the Trump Presidency and its impact on his base. The darker he gets, whether threatening North Korea with "fire and fury," musing about invading Venezuela, blaming all his woes on Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, defending white supremacists, or labeling the news media as "enemies of the people," the more they cheer. It might be questionable as a political strategy, but it brings in boffo numbers, baby, and that's what counts.

Trump survives, even as pundits repeatedly declare that, "this time he went too far." So far, there is no too far; the hero endures. With every cliff-hanger, he survives, stronger and bolder. It's like an old-time serial, "The Perils of Porcine." Will Porcine survive the attacks by the evil climate change believers, or unions, or Democrats? Will Porcine outwit the dark army led by Robert the Mueller? Will Porcine overcome the lawsuits over Emolument Clause violations? Tune in next week – or next news cycle – for the upcoming episode of "The Perils of Porcine!"

Or, you could avoid Porcine, his Perils and Politics and tune into a basketball game instead. If you miss the drama you can place a small wager on the outcome. Just don't bet against the Globetrotters.