
By Richard Cherwitz and Patrick Beach

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Is it possible the author of the now-notorious New York Times op-ed, perhaps with or without Trump’s prior knowledge and approval, is someone in the White House penning the essay in order to make sure voters don’t vote against Republicans in November — or Trump in 2020? This is more than a Washington parlor game, although it is very much that; it is worth considering what the author’s motives might have been in both the short- and long-term.

As a communication scholar and professional journalist, we believe that words help unearth motives. Consider: First, the op-ed explicitly states that concerned Americans shouldn’t worry about Trump’s behavior since there are and will be adults in the room. That suggests that voters who approve of Trump’s policies (e.g., deregulation, military spending, tax cuts and Supreme Court picks, all mentioned by the author) should not vote for Democrats in November simply because they are troubled by the alleged “craziness” inside the White House. It is also plain the author himself or herself at least broadly subscribes to much of the president’s agenda, even while expressing alarm at Trump’s temper, incuriousness and proclivity toward distraction.

Second, putting out the op-ed, like so many other dramatic events and Trump tweets, becomes another distraction. It keeps us from thinking about other less titillating but important issues — issues such as the Senate’s controversial hearing about Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, mounting information about special counsel Robert Mueller’s Russia investigation and whether Trump is implicated and the increasing speculation about a possible blue wave in the November election. Again, we must wonder what the author stands to gain by this move — and what he or she aims to thwart.

If Trump was not informed of the piece in advance of its publication — and if his and his administration’s days-long expressions of outrage should be sincerely taken for what they appear to be — it has angered the president. It gives oxygen to his habitual and arguably persuasive refrain that a partisan opposition is out to get him in any way they can. This, of course, energizes his base and may cause others to question the truthfulness of all the extraordinary stories about him. It also galvanizes his claim that the media, including “the failing New York Times,” are out to get him. If there is an eventual winner here, it’s not inconceivable it could be Trump.

It is worth noting that The Times has published anonymous opinion submissions in recent years a handful of times, without fail for justifiable reasons such as protecting a dissenting author’s safety. The
most recent instance was in June, when it published an account regarding conditions under which an immigrant mother from El Salvador and her six-year-old son were detained in 2014. (The author of that piece, according to The Times, is still seeking asylum.) Such measures are not undertaken lightly, and discussions such as the ones that led to this piece’s publication would have gone almost immediately to the publisher’s office, especially given its apparent urgency.

If Trump of his loyalists were really behind the anonymous op-ed, we should worry even more about the ability of this president and his staff to manipulate the citizenry through deceptive and confusing communication. The author offers meager reassurance that there are “adults in the room.” It is also possible that Mark Felt, aka “Deep Throat,” spoke the truth as expressed by Hal Holbrook, who played the still-then-unidentified Felt in the 1976 film adaptation of “All the President’s Men:” “The truth is, these are not very bright guys, and things got out of hand...”

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