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Trump's Single Stroke of Brilliance

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I've detested at least three-quarters of what the Trump administration has done so far, but it possesses one quality I can't help admiring: energy. I don't know which cliché to throw at you, but it is flooding the zone, firing on all cylinders, moving rapidly on all fronts at once. It is operating at a tremendous tempo, taking the initiative in one sphere after another.

A vitality gap has opened up. The Trump administration is like a supercar with 1,000 horsepower, and its opponents have been coasting around on mopeds. You'd have to go back to Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration in 1933 to find a presidency that has operated with such verve during its first 100 days.

Some of this is inherent in President Trump's nature. He is not a learned man, but he is a spirited man, an assertive man. The ancient Greeks would say he possesses a torrential thumos, a burning core of anger, a lust for recognition. All his life, he has moved forward with new projects and attempted new conquests, despite repeated failures and bankruptcies that would have humbled a nonnarcissist.

Initiative depends on motivation. The Trump administration is driven by some of the most atavistic and powerful of all human desires: resentment, the desire for power, the desire for retribution.

The administration is also driven by its own form of righteous rage. Its members tend to have a clear consuming hatred for the nation's establishment and a powerful conviction that for the nation to survive, it must be brought down. This clear purpose gives them the ability to see things simply, which is a tremendous advantage when you are trying to drive change. This clear purpose is combined with Trump's reckless audacity, his willingness to, say, declare a trade war against the entire globe, without any clue about how it will turn out.

I have come to think of the Trump team less as a presidential administration or even as representative of a political party and more as a revolutionary vanguard. History is filled with examples of passionate minorities seizing power over disorganized and

passive majorities: the Jacobins during the French Revolution, the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution, Mao's Communist Party in China, Castro's 26th of July Movement in Cuba. These movements did not always possess superior resources; they possessed superior boldness, decisiveness and clarity of purpose.

In 2016 the Trumpian vanguard imposed its will on the Republican Party. In 2025 it has managed to impose its will on the entire executive branch. With it, the vanguard is attempting to impose its will on the country.

To understand why taking the initiative is so important, it's best to read military grand strategists like Sun Tzu, Carl von Clausewitz, Martin van Creveld, B.H. Liddell Hart and John Boyd. I find it insane that it's now possible to graduate from a four-year college without having read any of these thinkers. Such students emerge unprepared for a frequently adversarial world.

You learn from these strategists that a leader who takes the initiative forces his opponents into a reactive mode. He forces his opponents to respond when they are not yet prepared. He destroys the enemy's planning by presenting them with situations they did not anticipate. The purpose of permanent offense is to produce in the minds of your opponents a sense of disorientation, defensiveness, disruption and mental overload. (Welcome to the modern Democratic Party.)

The leader who constantly initiates also understands that every moment you are not acting, you are closing off future options. You are allowing your opponents to shape the landscape in ways that will block alternative paths. Boyd, an ornery Air Force strategist, argued that aerial combat is not mainly about who has the most firepower but about who can maneuver with the greatest velocity and produce the most energy.

Trump's offensive style takes advantage of the unique weaknesses of America's existing leadership class. During his first term the social observer Chris Arnade joked that Trump's opponents were the kinds of kids who sat in the front row of class while Trump's supporters were the kids who sat at the back of the class. It's a gross generalization but not entirely wrong.

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The people who succeeded in the current meritocracy tend not to be spirited in the way Trump is spirited. The system weeds such people out and rewards those who can compliantly jump through the hoops their elders have put in front of them.

Members of the educated elite (guilty!) tend to operate by analysis, not instinct, which renders them slow-footed in comparison with the Trumps of the world. They tend to believe

that if they say something or write something (ahem), they have done something. The system breeds a fear of failure that the more audacious Trump largely lacks. Such elites sometimes assume that if they can persuade themselves that they are morally superior, then that in itself constitutes victory; it's all they need to do.

Fatally, America now has an establishment that is ambivalent about being an establishment. Back in the day, those WASP blue bloods like Roosevelt were utterly confident in their right to rule, utterly confident they could handle whatever the future might throw at them. But since the 1960s, successive generations, raised on everything from Woodstock to hip-hop, have been taught that the establishment is bad. They have been taught, in the words of those famous Apple commercials, to celebrate “the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels.”

When those people grew up and became the establishment — holding senior posts in law, government, universities, media, nonprofits and boardrooms — they became the kind of ambivalent souls who are unwilling to take their own side in a fight. They refuse to accept the fact that every society has a leadership class and that if you find yourself in it, your primary job is to defend its institutions, like the Constitution, objective journalism and scientific research centers, when the big bad wolf comes to blow it

all down. During this crisis, the “deep state” has been really disappointing. Where are all those Machiavellian “House of Cards” machinations that I was expecting?

When a revolutionary vanguard upends an establishment, the establishment rarely recovers. When the revolutionaries take a hammer to the ruling institutions, they often crumble like a plaster shell. Relatively few people were willing to fight for the czar once Lenin came to town. When Trump took on the Republican establishment in 2016, it turned out there was nobody home.

So I have three big questions. First, can the people who lead and defend America’s institutions work up élan vital? Can they summon the morale to fight back against the Trumpian onslaught? Second, do they have as much clarity of purpose as the Trump people possess? Third, do they have a strategy?

My answer to these questions is that progress is being made.

On morale: Trump’s behavior has aroused great moral indignation. It has aroused in people’s hearts a sense that something sacred is being trampled here — democracy, rule of law, intellectual freedom, compassion, pluralism and global exchange. These things are worth fighting for.

On clarity of purpose: Trump's opponents have still not produced the kind of one-sentence mission statement that he produces — that the elites have betrayed us, so we must destroy them. But I think more people are realizing that we are the beneficiaries of a precious inheritance. Our ancestors bequeathed to us a judicial system, great universities, compassionate aid organizations, great companies and scientific genius. My mission statement would be: America is great, and we will fight for what has made America great.

On strategy: Trump's greatest strength, his initiative, is his greatest weakness. Lacking any sense of prudence, he does not understand the difference between a risk and a gamble. He does daring and incredibly self-destructive stuff — now on a global scale. A revolutionary vanguard is only as strong as its weakest links, and the Trump administration is to weak links what the Rose Bowl parade is to flower petals.

I understand that Trump's opponents don't want to sit around passively waiting for him to implode. But they don't have to. Clausewitz argued that anybody who tries to do big things encounters "friction": unpleasant surprises, tension in the ranks, unforced errors, unlucky breaks. Trump opponents' main job now is to maximize the amount of friction he faces as he tries to initiate his plans — lawsuits, leaks, noncooperation, non-deal-making,

delays, getting inside his head with psychological warfare. He needs to wake up each day in such a storm of troubles that his cheeks get chapped.

Democrats will do the most good if they can stop sounding like Democrats for the time being, with all the tired rhetoric about the oligarchy and trickle-down economics. They will be at their best if they can defend the accomplishments of the past 250 years of American history — the Constitution, the postwar alliances, Medicare and Medicaid.

A passage from the 1909 edition of the British Army's Field Service Regulations seems like the right note to end on: "Success in war depends more on moral than on physical qualities. Skill cannot compensate for want of courage, energy and determination."

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