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Trickle-down Authoritarianism & “Plaid Shirt Guy”

A Column by Evan Barrett

September 12, 2018

The removal of “plaid shirt guy” - Billings high school senior Tyler Linfesty - from the Trump rally in Billings, is a small example of Trump’s staff going to extremes in validating the president’s authoritarian instincts. History has shown that authoritarianism at the top becomes more pervasive and more dangerous when staff, supporters and other leaders, out of fear, enthusiasm or love of political power, act in support of the autocrat’s behavior. In essence, authoritarianism becomes an increasing threat when it trickles-down from the leader to and through staffers, supporters and officials.

You will recall the Billings [story](#) that went viral on the internet. Linfesty applied for tickets to the Trump event, was alerted he’d be given VIP treatment and seated in the crowd behind the President. Linfesty wanted to bring two other high schoolers, friends since they met as sophomores in speech and debate, and three seats were reserved for them.

Turns out that those seats were right behind President Trump, making the plaid-shirted Linfesty highly visible on television as the President addressed the crowd. Linfesty says he’d been told that “You guys have to keep clapping, you have to smile, you have to look enthusiastic.” Linfesty instead listened to what the president said and honestly reacted with simple facial expressions like raising an eye brow or looking quizzical. Occasionally he silently mouthed a reaction (for example, you could see him skeptically mouth the word “what?” in reaction to something Trump said). While Linfesty was visibly skeptical at times, he was not disruptive. And although the reactions of all three of these thoughtful young people seemed to lack enthusiasm, all of them clapped at times during the speech.

In the middle of the speech a Trump staffer slid into the crowd and asked Linfesty to leave, taking his place so she’d be on camera exhibiting the proper amount of enthusiasm for the President’s assertions. Linfesty was later completely removed from the building. Trump staffers then replaced the other two high school seniors and the staffers became, as was required, “super-enthusiastic” as the President continued.

Heaven forbid that someone challenge the authoritarian President by doubting anything he says, although the Washington Post has documented that he’d [made 4229 false and misleading claims in 558 days as President, an astounding 7.6 times a day](#). While raising an eye brow over something the President says, like Tyler Linfesty did, was likely justified, such expressions are not allowed under this president who demands, in true authoritarian style, total and complete personal loyalty. That is not loyalty to the Constitution, the nation, laws, or norms. It is not loyalty to your own values. It is loyalty to Trump himself, [who has proclaimed “I need loyalty, I expect loyalty.”](#)

The removal of “plaid-shirt guy” may seem like a small thing, but it is an example of Trump’s supporters performing whatever egregious behavior they think will make the leader happy. Someone raises an eye brow, remove him. Someone questions Trump’s leadership in writing, join the President in suggesting [subversion and treason](#). Dare to write something the leader doesn’t like, you are declared by Trump to be an [“enemy of the people,” a phrase that in the 20th Century “was adopted by dictators](#) from [Josef] Stalin to Mao, and Nazi propagandists”. And in the thrall of trickle-down authoritarianism, the Trump zealots roar their support.

In the face of extreme behavior from the authoritarian wannabee Trump, disagreement is not countenanced. Blind support of the authoritarian by an enthusiastic “base,” complicit silence from Trump’s Congressional allies, and removal of non-disruptive skeptics from events by loyal staffers, all evidence a slippery slope toward authoritarianism that pleases the President. When layered upon Oval Office autocracy, the reality of trickle-down authoritarianism may be even worse than the myth of trickle-down economics.

Thankfully, it hasn’t trickled-down to the majority of Americans, who can still look at what happened to Tyler Linfesty and cringe. However, if we ever find the majority applauding such authoritarian behavior to the glee of their leader, our nation will be in even more serious danger.

Evan Barrett, who lives in historic Uptown Butte, retired in 2017 after 48 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history films who continues to write columns and occasionally teaches Montana history and contributes to community and economic development projects.

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