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In Trump World - The Responsibility of Just Saying "No"

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

January 31, 2017

The first several days of the Donald Trump administration caused me great worry. Not about the substance of his presidency, but about its form; not about the product, but about the process. Based on his first week it looks like the worst instincts of President Trump may be erupting to the surface and there appears to be no one around him who can stop the Mount Trump eruptions. It seems that the President has surrounded himself with enablers, not counselors.

That became even clearer when the President started signing Executive Orders before the cameras with great flourish. What showmanship - like a reality show in the Oval Office. Only it was the public's business. Turns out these Executive Orders were internally written without proper legal, policy and administrative vetting. His departments, cabinet secretaries and Congressional leaders have been taken by surprise.

This "reality show surprise" created real world consequences as lives were impacted -- from refugee families already vetted for two years to green card holders who had long been part of the American fabric to agency personnel who were asked to enforce directives that had never been seen by their superiors and were at best confusing and at worst unlawful.

There appears to be a very small, select and governmentally-inexperienced team of insiders close to the President who believe they know all there is to know about these complicated and serious matters. He has enabled them and they enabled him as they proceeded to put together Executive Orders that reflected only their thinking and that of their proudly spontaneous boss.

Where around the President are those voices of responsibility telling him to properly vet these ideas? Look at pictures of those surrounding and applauding President Trump as grandly signs un-vetted Executive Orders. Don't you wonder which of them is willing to look him in the eye and tell him "NO." Or "do it right."

I know it's not easy to tell a publically-elected official that he should not do what he is instinctively excited to do. I know that it's not easy to speak truth to power, especially when that "power" signs your paycheck. I know because I have been there.

No, I've not been in the Oval Office. But over 35 years since 1969 I have worked here in Montana for three governors, a congressman and a senator; managed congressional and senate campaigns and was a top political party leader working with elected officials.

In virtually all those positions I contributed to policy and political decision-making and public and private communication strategies.

When one is put in a position like that, one has the responsibility to help the elected official to do the smart thing, do the right thing. That means sometimes telling a supremely confident elected official that the idea being advanced or the course being pursued is wrong, or counter-productive, or needs more review. It means sometimes saying that a pending decision might be wrong, or ill-advised, or dangerous.

Good elected officials welcome internal discussion and debate and seek the best advice from a broad range of responsible parties while leading up to and making those decisions. They seek perspective from many; they do not make all decisions with a small, narrow group of partisan supporters. They are eager and willing to more broadly pre-test their ideas in terms of policy, politics and legality.

When you work for elected officials, it's not easy to say "NO." But in accepting a public role to do what's best for the voter/citizens, you take on the responsibility that comes with power. It's not easy to tell the truth to power. But when you give the best advice you can – wanted or unwanted – you can get up in the morning, look in the mirror and know you did the right and responsible thing.

So far, President Trump does not appear open to have such people around him. So look at the photos of the Trump team and ask yourself which of them will be the one who will dare to say "NO." Which of them will honor the public that placed them there. Which of them will do the tough, but right, thing -- the responsible thing? Which of them?

Evan Barrett, who lives in historic Uptown Butte, just retired after 47 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 commentaries and occasionally teaches Montana history.

(700 words in the body)