

Things going wrong in Donald Trump's White House? No problem, blame the media



JANET DALEY

18 FEBRUARY 2017 • 7:00PM



President Donald Trump holds a news conference in the East Room at the White House in Washington, D.C. on February 16, 2017 CREDIT: UPI/BARCROFT MEDIA

It's time to stop laughing. The hilarity died for me weeks ago, but there are still some among us who [regard The Orange Person in the White House](#) as priceless comic material.

Understandable though this may be, the whole situation is now too dangerous for levity. At his [joint press conference with Benjamin Netanyahu last week, Donald Trump](#) effectively undid decades of agreed US policy on the Middle East with remarks that made it clear he knew nothing at all about the problems of the region. His statement (if it can be called that) on a potentially incendiary global flashpoint was absurd.

Asked if [he now favoured a two-state or a one-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict](#), he threw out his reflections with the know-nothing insouciance of a man who is not even aware of the extent to which he is out of his depth. Incredibly, this is what he actually said: “I’m looking at two-state and at one-state and I like the one that both parties like.”

He went on: “I can live with either one... I thought for a while the two-state looked like it may be the easier of the two, but honestly... if Israel and the Palestinians are happy, I’m happy with the one they like best.”

Could he actually not be aware that there is no solution yet to be mooted that would make both Israel and the Palestinians “happy”? Neither of the parties, let alone both of them at once, “like” any proposal made thus far by any peace-negotiation process. That’s the whole point. That’s where American leadership is supposed to come in. US presidents are not expected to say: “You guys sort it out between yourselves and I’ll accept whatever makes you happy.”

Of course, the Israel-Palestine conflict was not really at the top of Mr Trump’s mind. What he was much more concerned about was the [forced departure of his head of national security, Michael Flynn](#), who had been removed from office after a breathtakingly short tenure.

So obsessed was the President with this matter that he made observations about it in response to utterly unconnected questions on Israeli settlements or Iranian sanctions. And those spontaneous observations directly contradicted the official White House position on the Flynn imbroglio.

The hapless administration press spokesman, Sean Spicer (who is still funny), had endlessly reiterated the mantra at a press briefing only the day before: Mr Flynn had to go, not because of any legal impropriety in his conversation with the Russian ambassador but because he had lost the trust of the President by deceiving Vice President Mike Pence, over the content of that conversation.

Have you got that? He had to go because he had lost the President’s trust. How exactly does that fit with Mr Trump’s comments at the joint press conference with Mr Netanyahu where he described Mr Flynn as “a wonderful man” who had been “treated very, very unfairly by the media” (or “the fake media”, as he later called it).

Which is it? Did Mike Flynn have to go because the President could no longer trust him to tell the truth, or was he hounded out of office unnecessarily by the vicious media?

To get to the point which he was to reiterate endlessly in his memorable solo press conference the next day: that those media outlets (in Trump’s Twitter terminology, “the failing New York Times and Washington Post”) had been fed “illegal” leaks by conspiring security services which were determined to undermine the Trump presidency.

And, if they had, then that is the big story here, Trump claimed over and over again: not his shambolic White House, but a plot by Washington insiders and the intelligence agencies to undermine a democratically elected president.

The press briefing with Mr Netanyahu – however dramatic it may have been in actual foreign policy consequences – turned out to be just a warm-up act for the spectacular event that came 24 hours later.

As we saw – those of us who watched goggle-eyed through that entire 75-minute performance – the second press conference was almost beyond belief. It was certainly the most shocking public display of unhinged, out-of-control, buffoonish aggression by a US president in living memory.

There are two equally alarming possibilities: either his relentless outpouring of accusation, self-contradiction and on-the-hoof pronouncements does reflect his view of reality, or it was an almost hysterically defensive fusillade designed to bolster his own confidence in the face of a string of unexpected setbacks.

The most serious of the concerns about his presidency is the one he would not deal with for the longest time: at least two attempts were made to get him to give a “yes” or “no” answer to the question of whether members of his election team were in touch with Russian officials during the campaign.

On each occasion, he threw out vague accusations about the Russian connection story being a “ruse”: a sham designed by Hillary Clinton’s people to conceal the mistakes they made in her campaign. On what I believe was the third request, he finally replied that “nobody I know of” had held conversations with Russian agents.

Nobody he knows of? There is enough deniability there to cover a number of eventualities. Where he left no room for doubt was in another statement about Russian associations.

He was adamant that he personally had nothing to do with Russia – no loans, no deals, no financial arrangements of any kind. Should this categorical denial prove to be false in any respect, it would be grounds for impeachment.

Trump’s elaboration on the future of US-Russia relations was peculiarly guarded. He repeated what he has said a number of times: that it would be a good thing if the two countries could cooperate to defeat Islamist terrorism, but that might not be possible if he and Putin do not “get along”.

But he added a further caveat, obviously designed to relieve him of responsibility if this attempted alliance fails. If he does not manage to achieve a bond of mutual cooperation with Putin, it will be because the media have made such a venture untenable.

He could well imagine, he said, Putin sitting behind his desk in Moscow, thinking there was no hope of such a détente with the Trump administration because the political pressure, whipped up by a hostile media, would make it impossible. So, if he doesn’t succeed in making a deal with Russia which might have made the US – and the world – safer, it will be the fault of the “dishonest media”.

By a bizarre coincidence, Trump’s secretary of defence, General James Mattis, appearing at a Nato summit, was making some pretty definitive judgments about Russia, stating that “we are not in a position... to collaborate on a military level”, and further that there was very little doubt “that [the Russians] have either interfered... or attempted to interfere in a number of elections in the democracies.” (You may recall that Mr Trump invited them to do just that in the US presidential election when he suggested that they investigate and expose Hillary Clinton’s secret emails.)

Mr Trump and some of his apologists are trying, with some success, to create a diversion to draw attention from the chaos (or, as he would have it, “the finely tuned

machine”) of his White House by insisting that the real outrage is “illegal leaking” from the security services, who wish to discredit a president they dislike.

Under ordinary circumstances, this is an argument with which I would have some sympathy. I believe in the sanctity of the democratic process with every fibre of my being. But these are not ordinary circumstances. Enough said.