

Trump and “The Berkeley Incident”. Who is Threatening Free Speech?

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Why did President Donald Trump fire off an angry and threatening tweet early Thursday morning following the violent protests that had broken out the night before on UC Berkeley campus? Here's a copy of Trump's tweet:

If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view – NO FEDERAL FUNDS?

Maybe the impulsive President was just angry that a controversial, rightwing speaker like Milo Yiannopoulos was unable to deliver his presentation because masked agitators began to rampage across the campus breaking windows, burning signs and wreaking havoc. That's certainly one possibility, but there are other more intriguing explanations that seem equally likely.

Consider this: Like most Americans, Trump knows that these anarchist groups show up routinely at peaceful demonstrations with the intention of raising hell and discrediting the groups that peacefully assemble to express their opinion on one issue or another. In this case, the protestors had gathered in opposition to a man who seemingly advocates religious intolerance and Islamophobia. Trump was well aware of this.

He also knew that the UC Berkeley Chancellor and his staff did everything in their power to provide security to both the speaker and the groups that had gathered for the event. Check out this excerpt from an article at Bloomberg:

Some advocates for universities and education said they were surprised by Trump's tweet...

“I have never seen anything like this,” said John Walda, president of the National Association of College and Business Officers. “Why would you infer that you want to punish a university” when it was only trying to protect people. The university “did exactly the right thing,” he said...

The university said Chancellor Nicholas Dirks had made clear that Yiannopoulos' “views, tactics and rhetoric are profoundly contrary to those of the campus,” but that the university is committed to “enabling of free expression across the full spectrum of opinion and perspective” and condemned the violence.

Berkeley seems to have done everything it can to protect students' First Amendment rights, Cohn said.

([“Trump Threatens U.C. Berkeley Funding Over Violent Protests”](#), Bloomberg)

So if the Chancellor had already gone the extra mile to protect free speech, then why did Trump decide to lower the boom on him? Was he genuinely angry with the Chancellor’s performance or did he interject himself for political reasons? In other words, how did Trump stand to benefit from getting involved in this mess?

Isn’t his tweet crafted to win support from his red state base who identify Berkeley with the erratic behavior of the “loony left” that burn flags, spit on veterans, and hate America? Isn’t it designed to discredit the millions of liberal and progressive protestors who have peacefully participated in pro-immigration demonstrations or anti-Trump marches across the country? Isn’t Trump’s interference intended to make him look like a strong, decisive leader willing to defend free speech against hypocritical leftist thugs who violently oppose anyone who doesn’t share their narrow “librul” point of view. Isn’t the action part of a broader plan to reinforce a stereotypical view of liberals as sandal clad, fist pumping, Marxist firebrands who want to burn down the country so they can create their own Soviet Utopia?

Isn’t this really why Trump decided to parachute into the event, to enlarge and polish his own image while exacerbating existing political divisions within the country?

Trump’s reaction to the incident in Berkeley is worth paying attention to if only to grasp that –what we are seeing– is not the random act of an impulsive man, but a governing style that requires an identifiable threat to domestic security, “the left”. A divisive president only prevails when the country is divided, when Americans are at each others throats and split between Sunni and Shia. That’s the goal, driving a wedge between people of differing views, exacerbating historic animosities in order to enhance the authority of the executive and usurp greater control over the levers of state power.

Once again, we’re not excluding the possibility that Trump’s tweet may have been a “one off” by an impulsive man but, by the same token, it might be an indication of something more serious altogether.

Keep in mind, that Trump’s chief political strategist, Steve Bannon, is a man who produced documentary movies on Sarah Palin, Michelle Bachman, and Occupy (Wall Street). According to Salon:

Bannon does not hide his affinity for propaganda. He has cited as an inspiration Nazi propagandist and filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. She famously directed “Triumph of the Will,” a film commissioned by Adolf Hitler in 1933 that portrays Germany as a country returning to world power.
([“Three lessons we learned about Steve Bannon from this weekend’s New York Times and Boston Globe profiles”](#), Salon)

So at best Steve Bannon is a public relations magician and at worst an unapologetic propagandist. But what is so telling about Bannon is his position in the administration. Bannon occupies the seat closest to the throne which shows how much emphasis Trump places on image, public perception and narrative. Bannon is Trump’s most trusted ally, the spinmeister whose job it is to create the Great Leader who is admired and loved by his loyal base but feared and despised by his enemies. All of this fits seamlessly with Trump’s Berkeley tweet.

And it also fits with Trump's governing style which is geared to deepen divisions, increase social unrest, and create enemies, real or imagined. In this view, Berkeley was just a dry run, an experiment in perception management orchestrated to sharpen Trump's image as the hair-trigger Biblical father who will intercede whenever necessary and who is always ready to impose justice with an iron fist.

So the masked rioters actually did Trump a favor, didn't they? They created a justification for presidential intervention backed by the prospect of direct involvement. One can only wonder how many similar experiments will transpire before Trump puts his foot down and bans demonstrations altogether?

Of course, that may very well be the objective.

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